

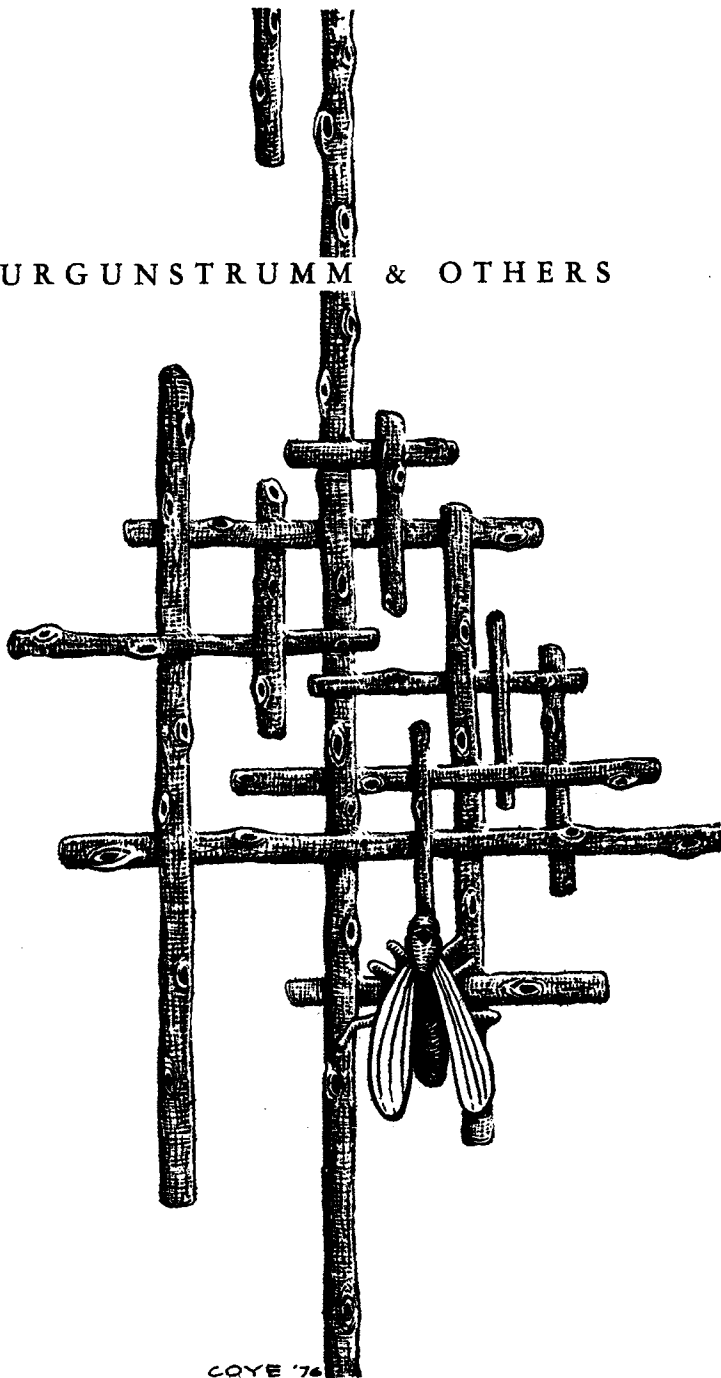


MURGUNSTRUMM
& others

HUGH B. CAVE

ILLUSTRATED BY LEE BROWN COYE

MURGUNSTRUM & OTHERS



Other Books by Hugh B. Cave:

Fiction

FISHERMEN FOUR
DRUMS OF REVOLT
THE CROSS ON THE DRUM
BLACK SUN
THE MISSION
THE WITCHING LANDS
RUN SHADOW RUN
LARKS WILL SING

Nonfiction

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THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP
(with Lt. C. G. Morris, USNR)
WE BUILD, WE FIGHT
WINGS ACROSS THE WORLD
I TOOK THE SKY ROAD
(with Comdr. Norman M. Miller, USN)
HAITI: HIGHROAD TO ADVENTURE
FOUR PATHS TO PARADISE

MURGUNSTRUMM and OTHERS

HUGH B. CAVE

Illustrated by Lee Brown Coye



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Foreword

This book was conceived back in January, 1972, when its editor, Karl Edward Wagner, happened to see a story of mine in *Good Housekeeping*. Karl wrote to the magazine, asking whether the Hugh Cave whose name appeared on the story might be the Hugh B. Cave who used to write for the pulps. For years I had written for *The Saturday Evening Post*, *American*, *Redbook*, *Country Gentleman* and other slickpaper magazines under the old name, but for reasons known only to themselves, *Good Housekeeping's* editors had dropped the middle initial. (The "B" by the way, in case you're curious, stands for "Barnett".)

Good Housekeeping replied to Karl's letter saying yes, their Cave was indeed the pulp-writer from way back when, and Karl wrote to me at the address they gave him. After a pleasant exchange of letters he inquired whether anyone had ever put together a volume of my old pulp stories, especially those from such magazines as *Weird Tales*, *Strange Tales*, and the many shudder publications. If not, would I look with favor on such a venture or was I one of those writers who, having moved from the pulps into the slicks and books, preferred not to remember the old days of work done in too big a hurry for low, low rates.

I was in an awkward position. When I was writing those pulp stories back in the thirties and early forties—under various names I must have done about 800 of them—I had proudly saved a copy of every story. But in the early sixties I lost every one of those copies in a fire. Every *one* of them, God's truth. I couldn't, therefore, read some of them over and decide from my reaction to them what to say in reply to Karl's suggestion. I could only explain my position and ask him what he thought of the stories.

He came back with: "You wrote some excellent weird-fantasy stories. A good example is *Murgunstrumm*, which you did for the last issue of *Strange Tales*. I doubt if many readers today have read this, and yet I would consider it a classic . . . paced with a relentless ferocity that few writers have ever brought off." And in another letter: "Your stories were head and shoulders over the bulk of the weird-menace field; considering how fast you must have turned them out, it's astonishing how well crafted they were. Stories like *Death Stalks the Night* are classic examples of the pulp formula, and display far superior writing than was usually given this type of story."

(You see what I'm doing here, Karl, old boy? Passing the buck to you, just

in case.) Justin Case, by the way, was a pen-name of mine in the old pulp days. Ah, we had fun then with pen-names and sly jokes.

So . . . after a further exchange of letters, Karl Wagner and I reached an understanding as follows: He, not I, would select the best of my old weird-fantasy stories. (I hadn't any copies of them anyway.) Lee Brown Coye would illustrate them. (Wonderful!) "Turning Coye loose on something like this is like giving a straight razor to a psychopath," Karl wrote. "This is going to be quite a book. For sheer unrestrained horror, I don't think there's ever been anything like it. You and Coye together ought to flood the coronary care units all across the country!"

From Lee Brown Coye himself came some marvelous letters including one that contained a remark about rabbits. "Your stuff really turns me on, and I wish I could do nothing else. I bought two black rabbits a few weeks ago and named them Mulvahey's Ghost and Jum Peters from your *Dead Man's Belt*, which I was making drawings for at the time. They are fine rabbits."

As I said above, we had fun in the old pulp days. It seems we still can. And to me, after a writing career that began in high school and is still going on at age 66, the enjoyment part is important.

One final word, please. When Karl Wagner first suggested this volume, I made up my mind that I would not be persuaded to change these old stories in order to "improve" them. Being a writer himself (a mighty good one) Karl did not even suggest that I do so, bless him. I am convinced that if stories such as these have any lasting value, it is in revealing the kind of work we young pulp-writers were doing in those days when rates were low and one had to make a typewriter smoke in order to keep eating. I was just out of high school when I sold my first pulp story, and about thirty when I moved on to books and the slicks. Perhaps I could make some of these stories more readable by reworking them today. But they wouldn't be authentic then, would they?

I recently began doing this kind of story again, by the way. First loves die hard. *Ladies in Waiting* is one of the new ones. If you can't tell the difference, it must mean . . . well, never mind.

Have fun, anyway.

Hugh B. Cave
Pompano Beach, Florida
May, 1976

MURGUNSTRUMM
M and **OTHERS**

Murgunstrumm

1. 3 A. M.

THE NIGHT HOURS ARE TERRIFYING in that part of the country, away from traveled roads and the voices of sane men. They bring the moan of lost winds, the furtive whisper of swaying trees, the agony wail of frequent storms. They bring madness to men already mad, and fear and gibbering and horrible screams of torment. And sometimes peals of wild hideous laughter a thousand times worse.

And with the dread of darkness, that night, came other fears more acute and more terrifying, to clutch viciously at the man who sought to escape. Macabre horrors of the past, breeding anew in the slough of his memory. Visions of the future, huge and black before him. Grim dread of detection!

The square clock at the end of the long corridor, radium-dialed for the guard's benefit, told him silently that the hour was 3 A.M. The hour when darkness deepens before groping dawn; when man is so close to that other-world of mystery that a mere closing of his eyes, a mere clutching of the subconscious, brings contact with nameless shapeless entities of abhorrent magnitude. The hour when the night watch in this grim gray structure, and the solitary guard on the outer walls, would be least alert. *His* hour, for which he had waited seven months of eternity!

His eyes were wide, staring, fearful. He crept like a cat along the corridor, listening for every separate sound. Somewhere in the tiers above him a man was screeching violently, thumping on a locked door with frenzied fists. That would be Kennery, whom they had dragged in only a week ago. They had warned him to be still at night, poor devil. In the morning he would learn the awful loneliness and silence of solitary confinement. God! And men like that had to go on living, had to wait for death, slowly!

He prowled forward again, trembling, hugging the wall with thin fingers. Three more corridors now and he would be in the yard. He clutched the key feverishly, looking down at it with hungry eyes. The yard, then the last great gate to freedom, and then . . .

His groping hands touched a closed door. He stopped abruptly. Over his head hung the number 23. The V. D. ward. And he shuddered. Someone was

mumbling, laughing, inside—Halsey, the poor diseased idiot who had been here eighteen endless years. He would be on hands and knees, crawling over the floor, searching for beetles. He would seek and seek; and then, triumphant at last, he would sit for hours on his cot, holding a terrified insect cupped in his huge hands while he laughed gleefully at its frantic struggles.

Sickness surged over the fugitive's crouching body. He slunk on again quickly. God, he was glad when that mad caterwauling was smothered by a bend in the corridor! It clung in his brain as he tiptoed to the end of the passage. He fingered the key savagely. Eagerness glared in his eyes.

That key was his. His own! His own cunning had won it. During the past month he had obtained an impression of every separate lock between him and escape. Furtively, secretly, he had taken chewing-gum forms of every infernal slot. And no one knew. No one but Martin LeGeurn, Ruth's brother, who had come once each week, on visiting day, and carried the impressions back to the city, and had a master key made. A master key! Not successful at first. But he himself, with a steel nail file, had scraped and scraped at the thing until it fitted. And now, tonight

He descended the staircase warily, feeling his way every step. It was 3:10 now. The emergency ward would be open, with its stink of ether and its ghastly white tables on wheels. He could hide there until the guard passed. Every move according to schedule!

The door was open. He crept toward it, reached it, and stopped to peer anxiously behind him. Then he darted over the threshold and clung silently to the wall, and waited.

Hours passed. Frantic hours of doubt and uncertainty. Strange shapes came out of nowhere, out of his distorted mind, to leer and point at him. God! Would those memories never die? Would the horrors of that hour of madness, seven months gone, torment him forever, night after night, bringing back visions of those hideous creatures of living death and the awful limping thing of the inn? Was it not enough that they had already made a soul-twisted wreck of him and sent him to this black house of dread? Would they—

Footsteps! They were audible now, approaching down the corridor outside. They came closer, closer. They scuffed past with an ominous *shf-shf-shf*, whispering their way. With them came the muffled clink of keys, dangling from a great ring at the guard's belt. And the sounds died away.

The fugitive straightened up and stepped forward jerkily. And then he was running wildly down the passage in the opposite direction. A massive door loomed before him. He flung himself upon it, thrusting his own key into the lock. The door swung open. Cold, sweet air rushed into his face. Outside lay the yard, bleak, empty, and the towering walls that barred the world beyond.

His terror was gone now. His movements were mechanical and precise. Silently he locked the barrier behind him and slunk sideways along the wall of the building. If he made the slightest sound, the slightest false move, those glaring,

accusing, penetrating searchlights would clank on and sweep the enclosure from one end to the other. The great siren would scream a lurid warning for miles and miles around, howling fiendishly that Paul Hill had escaped.

But if he went cautiously, noiselessly, he would be only a part of the darkness. There was no moon. The night was like pitch. The guard on the wall would not see.

A step at a time he moved along the stone, hesitating before each venture. Now a hundred feet lay between him and the gate. Now fifty; and the guard had not heard. Now twenty

His breath caught in his throat as he darted across the final ten feet. Flat against the last barrier of all, he fumbled with the huge lock. His fingers turned the key with maddening slowness, to muffle any fatal thud. Then, putting his shoulder to the mass, he pushed. The big gate inched outward.

Without a sound he squeezed through the narrow aperture. His teeth were clenched; his lips tasted of blood. But he was out, outside! No one had seen him! Feverishly he pushed the great block of iron back into place. On hands and knees he crawled along the base of the wall, crawled and crawled, until the guard's turret was only a grim gray blur against the black sky. Then, rising abruptly to his feet, he stumbled into the well of darkness beyond.

"Thank God!" he whispered hoarsely. And then he was hacking, slashing his way through tangled black underbrush, with huge trees massed all about him and the inky sky blotted out overhead.

2. *Armand LeGeurn*

No one, that night, saw the disheveled gray-clad figure that stumbled blindly from the woods and slunk silently, furtively down the state road. No one saw the unholy lust for freedom in his eyes, or the thin whiteness of his compressed lips.

He was violently afraid. He turned continually to glance behind him. But his fists were clenched viciously. If that hideous siren sounded now, when he was so close to ultimate freedom, they would never take him back there alive. Never! Once before, during his seven hellish months of confinement, the siren had screamed. That was the time Jenson—foolish, idiotic Jenson, mad as a hatter—had scaled the walls. The bloodhounds had uncovered his hiding place in the heart of the woods, and he had been dragged back, whimpering, broken.

But not this time! This time the escaped fugitive was no madman. Horror, not madness, had thrust him into that den of cackling idiots and screeching imbeciles. Stark horror, born of an experience beyond the minds of men. Horror of another world, a world of death and undead demons. And to-night, at four o'clock, Martin LeGeurn would be waiting at the crossroads, with a car. Martin would not be late.

Paul Hill began to run. On and on he ran. Once he turned abruptly and

plunged into the edge of the woods as a passing bus roared up behind him. Then, as the bus bellowed past, he leaped to the shoulder of the road again, racing frantically.

A sob of relief souged through his lips as he rounded the last sharp bend and saw, far ahead, a pair of stationary headlights glaring dimly toward him. He stumbled, caught himself. His legs were dead and heavy and aching sullenly, but he lurched on. And then he was gripping the side of the car with white nerveless hands, and Martin LeGeurn was dragging him into the seat.

There was no delay now. Everything had been arranged! The motor roared sharply. The roadster jerked forward and gathered momentum. The clock on the dash said five minutes past four. By five o'clock they would be in the city. The city, and Ruth, and—and then he would be free to finish it in his own way. Free to fight!

He fumbled with the leather bag under his feet.

"Why didn't Ruth come to see me?"

"Listen!" Martin LeGeurn said sibilantly.

Paul stiffened. He heard it. The sound was a moaning mutter, trembling on the still air, somehow audible above the drone of the motor. It rose higher, clearer, vibrating like a living voice. Paul's fingers dug cruelly into the leather seat cushion. The color seeped out of his face.

He knew that sound. It was a lurid screaming now, filling the night with shrill significance. The night watch had discovered his absence. He had blundered somewhere. Some door left open; some twist of unforeseen fate—and now, up there in the tower, a black-faced fiend was whirling the handle of the great siren faster and faster, gloating over its hellish voice. The same awful wail had seared the countryside when Jensen had fled into the woods, four months ago.

A terrible shudder shook Paul's body. He cringed against his companion. Courage left him. Incoherent mumblings came from his mouth.

"They know," Martin said jerkily. "In ten minutes the road will be patrolled. Every car will be stopped. Get into your clothes. Quick!"

Paul stiffened. Suddenly he sat erect, fists clenched savagely.

"They'll never take me back! I'll kill them! Do you hear? I'll kill them all!"

Then he was tearing at the leather bag between his knees. He got it open, dragged out the light brown suit and tan shirt, the necktie and shoes. Feverishly, as the car rushed on at reckless speed with Martin LeGeurn hunched over the wheel, he ripped off his asylum garb and struggled into the other. Deliberately he stuffed the gray clothes into the bag, and snapped the lock.

"Get off this road. Take the first right."

Martin glanced at him quickly, frowning.

"It's madness. If we hurry, they may not—"

"We can't make it. The state police will—"

"But if we turn off—"

"I know the way, I tell you! Let me drive!"

Martin's foot jammed on the brake. Even before the car had trembled to a stop, Paul snapped his door open and leaped out. And he was no longer a ghastly spectre in gaunt gray as he stumbled in the glare of the headlights. He was a lean, powerful young man, decently dressed, resolute and determined and fighting viciously to overcome his own natural terror. He slid behind the wheel without a word. The car shot forward again under more expert hands. Roaring over the crest of the hill, it swerved suddenly to the right and lumbered into a narrow sub-highway of dirt and gravel.

And the siren screeched behind it. The whole of creation was vibrant with that infernal moan. It would throb and throb all through the night, flinging its message over an unbelievable radius. It would never stop!

But Paul paid no attention to it. He said curtly: "Heave that bag out. They'll never find it in here." And later, when Martin had obeyed, he said abruptly, scowling: "Why didn't Ruth come to see me?"

"She—she just couldn't, Paul."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"She's waiting for me now. Is she?"

"I"—Martin stared straight at the windshield, biting his lips—"I don't know, Paul."

"She never tried to help me," Paul said bitterly. "Good God, she knew why I was in there! She could have gone to Kermeff and Allenby and made them listen."

"They left the city," Martin mumbled.

"That's a lie."

"She—"

"I know," Paul said heavily. "She went to them and they wouldn't listen. They're not supposed to listen. Doctor Anton Kermeff and Doctor Franklin Allenby,"—the words were bitter as acid—"that's who they are. Too big to believe the truth. Their job was to put me away and sign a statement that I was mad. That's all they cared."

"I don't think Ruth went to see them, Paul."

Paul's hands tightened on the wheel. The stiffening of his body was visible, so visible that Martin said abruptly, as the car lurched dangerously to the side of the road and jerked back again:

"You—you don't understand, Paul. Please! Wait until you've talked to Father."

"Father?" And the voice was tinged with sudden suspicion. "Why not Ruth?"

"You'll know everything soon, Paul. Please."

Paul was silent. He did not look at his companion again. A vague dread caught at him. Something was wrong. He knew it. He could feel it, like a lurking shape leering and grinning beside him. Like those other lurking undead demons of seven months ago. But Martin LeGeurn could not tell him. Martin was his friend.

Someone else would have to blurt out the truth.

The big roadster droned on through the night.

It was daylight when they reached the city. Murky, sodden daylight, choked with drizzling rain. Street lights still smirked above drooling sidewalks. The elevated trestle loomed overhead, a gleaming, sweating mastodon of steel. Silence, which had held sway for the past hour over black country roads, gave way to a rumble of sound.

"Better let me take the wheel," Martin LeGeurn said dully. And when Paul had swung the car to the curb: "We're safe now. They won't look for you here. Not yet."

Not yet! Paul's laugh was mockery. Before the day was over, the news of his escape would be in every headline, glaring over town. Newsboys would be shrilling it. News flashes on the radio would blurt it to millions of listeners. "Special Journal Dispatch! At an early hour this morning, Paul Hill, twenty-three-year-old inmate of the State Insane Asylum, escaped . . ."

The car moved on again through slanting rain. The windshield wiper clicked monotonously, muttering endless words to the beat of Paul's brain. "Police of this state and neighboring states are conducting an unceasing search for the escaped madman who eluded the dragnet last night . . ."

"You want to go straight to the house?" Martin LeGeurn said suddenly.

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"I'm not going in with you."

"Why?"

"I've got something to do. Got to go to Morrisdale, and get there before night. But Father's waiting for you. You can talk to him."

He drove on. The streets were deserted, here in the lower downtown sector. The roadster picked its way through intricate short cuts and sideways, and emerged presently on the South Side, to purr softly along glistening boulevards.

"You're going to Morrisdale?" Paul frowned.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"For—Ruth," Martin said grimly. "It's your own idea, Paul. Your method of escape. Just what I couldn't think of myself, though I sat up night after night, half mad."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you—when it's over," Martin muttered. He was staring through the crescent of gleaming glass before him. His lips were tight, bloodless. "We're almost there," he said abruptly.

They were entering the residential sector of the South Side. The car groped its way more slowly. Paul stared on both sides, remembering the houses, the great church on the corner, the rows of stores: things he had forgotten during the past months. And presently Martin swung the wheel. The roadster skidded

into a tree-lined road. Lovely homes with immaculate driveways and wide lawns loomed gray in the drizzle. The car slowed to an awkward stop. Martin turned abruptly, thrusting out his hand.

"Good-by, Paul. Don't worry."

"But—"

"I've got to go. Got to reach Morrisdale on time to-night. Talk to Father, Paul. And trust me."

Paul gripped the outstretched hand. Then he was out of the car, hurrying up the drive. And the car was roaring down the road again, into the murk, like a great greyhound.

Paul's fingers pressed the bell. He waited, nervously. The door opened. Old Armand LeGeurn, Ruth's father, stood there on the sill, arms outthrust.

After that, things blurred. The door closed, and Paul was pacing down the thick carpet with LeGeurn's arm around him. Then he was in the luxurious library, slumped in a huge chair, folding and unfolding his hands, while Old LeGeurn talked slowly, softly.

"She couldn't come to see you, Paul. They've sent her away. The same two physicians, Kermeff and Allenby. Less than a week after they sent you. Mad, they said. They're big men, Paul. Too big. She never returned here after leaving the hospital at Marszen. They took her straight from there to Morrisdale."

"Morrisdale," Paul muttered feebly. Suddenly he was on his feet, eyes wide and body tense. "That's where Martin's gone!"

"He's been often, Paul. That's how you got your letters. He mailed them from here. She didn't want you to know."

"But there *must* be some way of getting her out."

"No, Paul. Not yet. We've tried. Tried everything—money, influence, threats. Kermeff and Allenby are bigger than that, boy. They put their names to the paper. No power on earth can convince them they're wrong. No power on this earth—yet."

"Then she's got to stay?" Paul pleaded. "She's got to . . ." He relaxed again with a heavy shudder. "It's not right, Mr. LeGeurn! It's horrible! Why, those places are—are . . ."

"I know what they are, boy. We're doing all we can. But we must wait. She still remembers those other things: Murgunstrumm and the awful creatures of the inn. They rush upon her. They affect her—queerly. You understand, boy. You know what it means. Until she's forgotten all that, we can only wait. No physician in the country would disagree with Kermeff and Allenby. Not with such evidence. In time she'll forget."

"She'll never forget, in there!" Paul cried harshly. "At night, in the dark, the whole thing comes back. It's awful. Night after night it haunted me. I could hear that horrible laughter, and the screams. And those inhuman shapes would come out of nowhere, grinning and pointing and leering. She'll never forget. If we don't get her away . . ."

"Escape, son?"

"Yes! Escape!"

"It won't do. She couldn't face it. She's not strong enough to be hunted down as you'll be."

Paul stood up savagely, pushing his fingers through his hair. He stared mutely at the man before him. Then his nerves gave way. He buried his face in his hands, sobbing.

"You'll stay here to-night, Paul?" he heard Armand LeGeurn asking.

Paul shook his head heavily. No, he couldn't stay here. The first place they'd look for him would be here in Ruth's home. As soon as they discovered that he had wriggled through their unholy dragnet, they'd come here and question, and search, and watch.

"I want to think," he said wearily. "It's all so tangled. I want to be alone."

"I know, son." Armand LeGeurn rose quietly and offered his hand. "Let me know where you are, always. If you need money or help, come here for it. We believe in you."

Paul nodded. He didn't need money. There was a wallet in the pocket of the coat Martin had given him. He could go and get a room somewhere, and think the thing out alone. More than anything else he wanted to be by himself.

"I'll go to the North End," he said, "and—"

But Armand LeGeurn was pacing to the door. When he returned, he carried a small suit-case in his hand.

"Take this," he advised. "It won't do for you to go prowling about the stores, getting what you need. Everything is here. And—be careful, Paul."

Paul took the suit-case silently. Abruptly he thrust out his hand. Then he hurried down the hall and went out the front door.

3. "To Rebobeth"

Paul found lodgings in a third-rate rooming house, deep in the twisted cobblestoned streets of the North End slums. There, late in the afternoon, he sat on the slovenly bed and stared fixedly at the single window. The suit-case, open but not unpacked, lay between his feet; and on top, grinning up at him like a black beetle nestling in the clean white folds of the shirt beneath it, lay a loaded revolver. Armand LeGeurn, acting evidently on the spur of the minute, had dropped it there just before clicking the bag shut.

It was raining. A drooling porous mist fogged the window pane. The room was a chill, dark, secluded retreat high above the muttering side street below. A radio, somewhere in the bowels of the house, mumbled dance music and crooning voices.

Paul sat motionless. He was not afraid of realities any more. It was not fear of tangible things that kept the color out of his face and made him sit rigid. The police would never look here for him, at least not until they had combed the

rest of the city first. He was in no immediate danger. He had money, clothes, and friends if he needed them.

But the torment had returned—torment a hundred times more vicious than fear of capture. Macabre shadows stalked the room. Nameless voices laughed horribly. Fingers pointed at him. Red, red lips, set fiendishly in chalk-colored dead-alive faces, curled back over protruding teeth to grin malignantly. A significant malicious name hissed back and forth, back and forth, never ceasing. *Murgunstrumm! Murgunstrumm!*

Ruth was in the asylum at Morrisdale. Martin LeGeurn had gone there. Something was wrong. Martin had seemed preoccupied, mysterious. He hadn't wanted to talk. Now he was gone. Only Armand LeGeurn was left, and Armand had tried every method possible; had tried to convince Kermeff and Allenby that she was not mad.

Paul's fists clenched. He mouthed the two names over and over, twisting them bitterly. Kermeff and Allenby. It was their fault! He jerked to his feet, clutching at the wooden bed-post with both hands, cursing loudly, violently.

Then he sat down again, staring at the black revolver which leered up at him. A truck rumbled over the cobblestones, far below. Someone was turning the dials of the radio, bringing in snatches of deep-throated music and jangling voices. Paul reached down slowly and took the revolver in his hands. He fingered it silently, turning it over and over. Then he sat very still, looking at it.

Ten minutes later, without a word, he stood up and put the revolver in his pocket. He bent over the suit-case. Very quietly he walked to the door. His lips were thin and tight, and his eyes glaring.

He paced noiselessly down the narrow stairs to the lower hall. The street door opened and closed. He hurried out into the rain, along the sidewalk.

Suit-case in hand, he groped his way through the maze of gleaming streets, avoiding the lighted thoroughfares as much as possible, yet bearing ever toward the uptown sector. He glanced neither to right nor left, but strode along without hesitating, carried forward recklessly by the hate in his heart and the sudden resolution which had come to him. Not until he reached the outskirts of the slums did he consider his own peril again. Then he stopped, stepped quickly into a black doorway, and stared furtively about him.

He was mad, walking through the streets like this. What if the police down here had been given his description? What if they were even now looking for him? Probably they had and they were. If he stepped on a bus or boarded a street car, or even hailed a cab, he would be playing squarely into their hands. He couldn't reach the LeGeurn home that way. And he couldn't go on walking, like a blind fool, waiting for some stranger to peer suddenly into his face and scream an alarm.

He studied the street in both directions. A hundred yards distant, on the corner, a red-and-white electric sign, blinking in the drizzle, designated a drug-store. Warily Paul crept out of the doorway and moved along the sidewalk. He

was afraid again now, and nervous. He kept his face hidden when hurrying men and women brushed past him. Reaching the drugstore, he slipped inside without attracting attention and looked quickly for a telephone booth. An instant later, with a little gasp of relief, he swung the booth door behind him and groped in his pockets for a coin.

The nickel jangled noisily. With stiff fingers Paul dialed the LeGeurn number and waited fretfully until the resultant hum clicked off.

A masculine voice, Armand LeGeurn's, answered almost inaudibly.

"Mr. LeGeurn," Paul said slowly, fumbling for the right thing to say. "I want to—"

His words had a surprising effect. LeGeurn, instead of waiting for him to finish, interrupted with a hearty laugh and sputtered quickly:

"Hello, Frank, hello! By the Lord, man, it's a downright joy to hear that voice of yours. I'm all tied up here. Police watching the house, and the phone wires tapped in the bargain. Damned inconvenient, I'm telling you! What's up? What d'you want?"

Paul's reply choked on his lips. He stiffened, and his fingers tightened on the receiver. Phone wires tapped! Police at the house! Then abruptly he understood Armand LeGeurn's ruse. Regaining his composure, he answered with assumed astonishment:

"Police? Why, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong! Don't you read the papers?"

"You don't mean," Paul said, frowning, "it's about that chap who got away from the nut house? Good Lord, what's that got to do with you?"

"Plenty. Tell you later, when you're sober."

"I'm sober now. That is, almost."

"What's on your mind then?"

"Nothing much." Then Paul added quickly: "That is, nothing but the fact that I'm getting thoroughly soaked and I'm stranded in the slums without a sou in my pocket, old man. I was going to demand your car to escort me home, if your pugilistic chauffeur isn't asleep or something. But if you're tied up . . ."

"The car, eh? Where'd you say you were?"

"Down in the heart of the most miserable, sloppy, filthy section of this con-founded city, my boy." Paul flung back desperately. "And not enjoying it a bit."

"Really? Well, you can have the car. Welcome to it. Where'll I send it?"

Paul named the streets hurriedly. As an afterthought he said as carelessly as he could: "Tell Jeremy to pull up at the dinky little drugstore just around the corner of Haviland. Yeah, I'll be in there getting my feet dry. And say—thanks, mister. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it."

The telephone clicked ominously. Releasing it, Paul leaned against the side of the booth, limp, frightened, with cold sweat trickling down his face. It was another moment before he could steel himself to open the door and step out.

Then, with a forced slouch, he picked up his bag, pushed the door wide, and strode across the tile floor.

He couldn't wait in the store. That would be dangerous. The police might see fit to check the call and send someone to investigate. But he could wait outside, in some convenient doorway a short distance up the street. And then, when he saw the car coming, he could walk casually toward it without being seen.

Outside, with the rain beating in his face, he sought a suitable niche and found one. Huddled there, he wondered if his plan was plausible. It wasn't. The element of risk was too great. If the police came to the drugstore, seeking him, they would be suspicious when they found him gone. They too would wait for the car. Then, if he stepped out . . .

But the car, coming from the suburbs, would have to pass along the avenue before turning into Haviland Street. That was it! Paul knew the machine by sight—a long low black roadster, inconspicuous among others, but easily discerned by one who knew it intimately. And it would have to cross the avenue intersection, have to pass the lights.

Very quickly Paul slipped out of the doorway and hurried into the rain.

He had to wait long when he reached the square. While he waited, leaning against the wall of a building, with his coat collar pulled high above his neck and face, he watched the lights blink from red to green and green to red, endlessly. Slow lights they were, and the corner was a dangerous one, choked with traffic and scurrying pedestrians. The cars that snaked past, scintillating and gleaming, were like huge moving gems as they groped their way with sluggish caution.

The whole square was bright with illumination. Brilliant store windows threw out walls of color. Sparkling electric signs twinkled overhead. Street-lamps glared accusingly, sullenly, striving to penetrate the rain. It was maddening to stand there, waiting and waiting . . .

Once a policeman, in rustling rubber coat, swung past with mechanical steps. Paul stiffened and watched him. But pedestrians were waiting at the same time for the traffic lights to become red and yellow; and the policeman paid no attention. He passed on idly, and Paul relaxed with a shudder.

Five minutes passed, and ten. And then the car came. The lights were against it. It slowed cautiously as it approached; and as it stopped, Paul darted forward across the gleaming avenue. Skirting two intervening machines, he leaped to the running-board and clawed the door open. And then he was in the seat beside the lean, wiry form of Matt Jeremy, and muttering harshly:

"I prayed for that light, Jeremy, prayed it would be red when you came. If you hadn't stopped . . ."

Jeremy glanced at him quickly, bewildered.

"What's wrong, sir? I was going to the drugstore, like you told Mr. LeGeurn. I thought you wanted—"

The light changed. Paul clutched the man's arm and said abruptly, thickly:

"Turn right. Get out of here quickly!"

Jeremy grunted. The car jerked forward, hesitated an instant to nose its way through cross traffic, and swung sharply off the avenue. Gaining speed, it droned on through the rain, leaving the clamor and congestion of the main thoroughfare behind.

"You'll have to get home the best way you can," Paul said evenly, a little later. "I've got to have the machine."

"That's what Mr. LeGeurn said, sir," Jeremy nodded.

"He'll understand. That's why I phoned."

"Yes, sir. He understands all right. He said for me to go with you."

"What?"

"I'm to stick with you, sir. That's what he said. If you want me."

Paul drew a deep breath and stared squarely into the man's grinning face.

"Want you! Jeremy, I—"

"I might come in handy, maybe," Jeremy shrugged. "Trouble's my middle name, sir. Where to?"

"To Rehobeth," Paul said grimly. "To Rehobeth and the Gray Toad Inn. And the rest is up to God, if there is a God in that unholy place."

4. *"They Don't Come Out, Sir."*

For years, old Henry Gates had squeezed a meager existence out of the ancient Rehobeth Hotel. For years he had scuffed quietly about the village, minding his own affairs and seldom intruding, but wise in his knowledge of what went on about him. For years he had lived in silent dread of what might some day happen.

To-night he stood silently on his veranda, gazing down into the deepening dusk of the valley below. The air was cold and sweet with the smell of rain-soaked earth. Darkness was creeping in on all sides, hovering deep and restless above the village.

Across the way a light blinked, announcing that Tom Horrigan's boy was working in the stables. Other lights, feeble and futile, winked on either side. Beyond them the woods were still and dark, and the leaden sky hung low with threatening rain.

"A night of evil," Gates mumbled, sucking his pipe. "There'll be doin's to-night. There'll be laughin' and screamin' on the Marssen Road."

The light across the way went out suddenly. A boy appeared, framed in the stable doorway. The door creaked on rusty wheels, jarring shut. The boy turned, glanced toward the hotel, waved his hand.

"Hi there, Mr. Gates! A fair black night it'll be, hey? I was walkin' to town."

"Ye've changed your mind, I'm thinkin'," Gates retorted.

"That I have. I'll be goin' home and to bed, and lockin' my windows this night."

The boy hurried away. Other lights blinked out. Henry Gates gazed into the valley again, muttering to himself.

"There'll be screamin' and laughin' in the old inn to-night."

He turned and hobbled inside. The door closed; the bolt thudded noisily. The village of Rehobeth was dormant, slumbering, huddled and afraid, waiting for daylight to arouse it.

An hour later the black roadster purred softly out of the darkness. The car was a dusty gaunt shape now, after three hours travel over sixty-odd miles of paved highways and black, deserted country roads. Matt Jeremy hung wearily over the wheel. Paul Hill, slumped beside him, stretched arms and legs with a grumble of complaint, and opened the door.

Shadows filled the valley below. Here the road, after climbing steadily for five miles, rested in the uncouth little hamlet before venturing the last mile or so over the ridge into the next state. And Rehobeth had not changed since that day, more than seven months past, when Paul Hill had stood in this same spot—stood here with Ruth LeGeurn and laughed, because they were marooned with a broken-down car and had to spend the night in the ancient hotel beside them.

No, Rehobeth had not altered. It was still the same lonely isolated village, looking down upon a world all its own—a shadowed gray world, blanketed with bleak snow during the long winter months, swathed in murky sunlight through the summer. Only sixty miles from the big city, only twenty-odd miles from civilization, but in reality a million miles from anywhere, sordid, aloof, forgotten.

"Well, what do you think?" Paul said with a shrug. "Like the place?"

"Not much, sir," Jeremy confessed. "Still, I reckon it's a pretty good hide-away, and it ain't so far you can't keep track of things."

"I'm not hiding, Jeremy."

"No? Then what are we doin' here, sir? I thought"—Jeremy released the wheel and slid out—"I thought we were just goin' to lay low and wait."

Paul climbed the hotel steps slowly. The door was locked. Evidently it was bolted on the inside, and the inmates of the place had gone to bed.

"Old Gates," Paul smiled, "must be upstairs. They don't expect visitors at this hour."

He hammered loudly. "Gates!" he called out. "Henry Gates!"

A long interval passed, and presently a *scuff-scuff* of footsteps was audible inside. But the door did not open immediately. A face was suddenly framed in the window at the right, and a groping glare of lamplight illuminated the veranda. Then the face and the light vanished, and the bolt rattled. The door opened cautiously.

"Ye're lookin' for me, sir?"

"You're Gates?" Paul said, knowing that he was.

"Yes, sir. I am that."

"Good. We're staying here a day or two, Gates. You've two good rooms vacant?"

"Ye're stayin' here, sir? Here?"

"Yes. Why not? Full up, are you?"

"No, no, sir. I've got rooms. Sure I've got 'em. Only the likes of you, with an automobile like that un, don't generally—"

Paul forced a laugh. He knew what Gates was thinking.

"That's all right," he shrugged. "Quite all right. We want to do a bit of looking around. Might even decide to set up a hunting camp around here somewhere. Just show us the rooms and never mind about the car."

Old Gates was willing enough, once his fears were allayed. He held the door wide. Paul and Jeremy passed inside casually and gazed about them.

There was nothing inspiring. Bare, cracked walls leered down as if resenting the intrusion. A musty lounge, long unused, leaned on scarred legs. A squat table, bearing the flickering oil lamp which Gates had first held, stood in the middle of the floor. Beyond, a flight of stairs angled up into darkness.

"D'ye mind tellin' me your names, sir?" Gates said hesitantly. "I'll show ye to your rooms, and then I'll be makin' out the register."

"Mr. James Potter will do," Paul nodded. "James Potter and chauffeur. And by the way, Gates, have you a typewriter?"

"Typewriter, sir?" Gates hobbled behind the desk and took down a key. "Afraid not, sir. I used to have, but you see business ain't what it used to be." He wheezed up the stairs with Paul and Jeremy following him. "Rehobeth be such an out-of-the-way place, sir, and nobody comes this way very often lately, and . . ."

The rooms were at the end of the upper corridor, adjoining each other and connected by an open door. Paul inspected them quietly and smiled, and pressed a bill into the old man's hand. And presently, alone in Paul's chamber with the hall door shut, the two newcomers stared at each other and nodded grimly. That much was over with.

"Didn't recognize me," Paul said evenly.

"Recognize you, sir?" Jeremy frowned.

"This is the place, Jeremy, where Miss Ruth and I stopped that night. You don't know the details. You were in Florida with Mr. LeGeurm."

"Oh. I see, sir. And you thought he might—"

"Remember me? Yes. But seven months is a long time. The madhouse can change a man in less time than that. Open the bag, Jeremy, will you?"

Jeremy did so, putting his knee to the leather and jerking the straps loose. Lifting the suit-case to the bed, Paul fumbled a moment with the contents, then stepped to the old-fashioned desk and sat down with paper and fountain pen in hand.

And he wrote two letters, one to Doctor Anton Kerneff, the other to Doctor Franklin Allenby, addressing both to the State Hospital in the city he had just

left. The letter to Kermeff read:

My dear Kermeff:

You will, I am sure, consider this note most carefully and act upon it as soon as possible. Mr. Paul Hill, the young man whom you and Allenby declared insane some seven months ago, and who escaped only very recently from confinement, is now at the Rebobeth Hotel in a state of most complete and mystifying coma. Fortunately I am on my vacation and was passing through Rebobeth at the time of his attack, and I am now attending him.

The case, I assure you, is worth your gravest attention. It is the most unusual condition I have ever had the fortune to stumble upon. Of course, I am remaining here incognito. The name is James Potter. I suggest that you come at once, saying nothing to arouse undue attention to yourselves or to me. Later, of course, the patient must be returned to confinement; but meanwhile I believe I have something worthy of your esteemed consideration.

A copy of this letter I am also sending to Allenby, since you are both equally interested in the case.

*Yours in haste,
Hendrick Von Heller, M.D.*

The letter to Allenby was an exact duplicate. Paul sat very still, staring at what he had created. He was gambling, of course. Only one thing he was sure of: that Von Heller, the very noted specialist, was actually somewhere in this part of the state, on vacation. Von Heller had discussed that with the doctors at the asylum, on one of his regular visits.

As for the rest, Von Heller was known, by reputation at least, to both Kermeff and Allenby. But would the handwriting of the letters prove fatal? That was the risk. It might; it might not. Possibly Kermeff and Allenby had never seen, or never particularly noticed, Von Heller's script. Perhaps—and it was very likely, considering the man's importance and prestige—he had employed a secretary. At any rate, the element of chance was there. A typewriter would have lessened it, and could easily have been purchased on the way here. But old Gates had none, and it was too late now.

"We'll have to face it," Paul shrugged. "We can't be sure."

"If it means a scrap, sir . . ."

"It might, Jeremy. Part of it might. But we'll need minds, as well. *Wills.*"

"Well now—"

"Never mind," Paul said. "It's getting late. Come."

He shoved the door open. Henry Gates had lighted the oil burners in the corridor, filling the upper part of the inn with a furtive, uneasy, yellowish glare. Probably those burners had not been ignited in months past. Perhaps not for seven months. And the lower lobby, illuminated only by the oil lamp on the desk, was deep with moving shadows, gaunt and repelling.

Gates was writing in the register when Paul and Jeremy descended. He looked up and grunted, obviously startled. Holding his pen at an awkward angle, he said hurriedly:

"Just puttin' your names down, sir, I was. Be ye goin' out?"

"For a short drive," Paul nodded.

"M-m-m. It be a dark night, sir. Not a star in the sky when I looked out the window just now. And no moon at all to speak of. These be lonely roads about here."

Paul smiled bitterly. Lord, what mockery! Gates, huddled here, mumbling to him—to *him*—about the loneliness of the surrounding roads! As if he didn't know! As if he hadn't learned every conceivable horror there was to learn, seven months ago!

"You've a mail box here?" he questioned curtly.

"I'll take it, sir," Gates replied, eyeing the white oblongs in Paul's hand. "Two of 'em, hey? Ain't often the postman gets anythin' here, sir. He'll be comin' by in the mornin', on his route."

"They'll get to the city before night?"

"Well, sir, the postman takes 'em to Marssen in his tin lizzie."

"That's quite all right, then. Come, Jeremy."

"Be ye goin' anywheres in particular, sir?" Gates blinked, raising his eyebrows.

"I thought we might turn down the old road that cuts in a mile or so below here. Looked rather interesting when we came through. Leads to Marssen, doesn't it?"

"It does that."

"Hm-m. I think I've been over it before. Vaguely familiar, somehow. If I'm right, there ought to be an old inn about two miles down. The Gray Goose, or the Gray Gull, or—"

"Ye mean the Gray Toad?"

"That's it, I guess. Closed up, is it?"

"No, sir," Gates' voice was a whisper as he came out from behind his barlike desk and scuffed forward ominously. "It ain't closed, sir. And if I was you—"

"Who runs the place, I wonder? Do you know?"

"I know, sir. Yus, I know. It's a queer cripple as runs it, sir. A queer foreigner what never goes nowhere nor comes into the village, nor ever does anythin' but limp around inside his own dwellin'. Murgunstrumm is his name, sir. Murgunstrumm."

"Strange name," Paul mused, keeping his voice level with an effort. "And what's so wrong about the place, Gates?"

"I dunno, sir. Only I've heard noises which ain't the kind I like to hear. I've seen automobiles stop there, sir—fine automobiles, too—and ladies and gentlemen go inside, all dressed up in fine clothes. But I ain't never seen 'em again. They don't come out, sir. And I know one thing, as I'm certain of."

"Yes?"

"About seven months ago it happened, sir. I'm sittin' here behind my desk one night along about evenin', and a young couple comes walkin' down the road from the woods. A pretty girl she was, if ever there was one; and the young man was about your height and looks, only not-excusin' me, sir—so kind of pale-lookin' and thin. They said as how their car was broke down about a mile up the road, and could they use my telephone to call a garage feller in Marssen. And then—"

Gates peered furtively about him and came a step nearer. He was rubbing his hands together with an unpleasant sucking sound, as if he feared the consequences of saying too much.

"They had supper here, sir, the two of them, and then they went out for a walk. Said they might walk down the valley, seein' as how it was such a fine night. But they didn't get there, sir. No, sir, they didn't ever get there."

"They got lost?" Jeremy said curtly.

"I'm not knowin'. All I know is, I'm sittin' here about one o'clock in the mornin', havin' a bite to eat with the garage man after he'd got their automobile fixed up and waitin' for them to come back for it—and we sudden hear footsteps stumblin' up the steps. There's a shout, and we run out. And it's the young man, sir, walkin' like one in a dream and white as a ghost. And he's carryin' the girl in his arms, like she's dead; only she ain't dead, sir, because she's moanin' and mumblin' like she's gone clean mad . . ."

Gates' voice choked off to a faltering hiss, leaving only a feeble echo to chase fretfully around the room. Jeremy was staring at him with wide eyes. Paul stood very stiff, white and silent.

"And what happened then?" Jeremy whispered.

"Well, the young man fell down on the floor here like a dead one for sure, and he never moved a muscle when me and the garage feller bent over him. The girl, she lay here twitchin' and sobbin' and talkin' a lot of words which didn't make sense. Then the garage man and me, we got both of 'em into the young man's car, and the garage feller he drove 'em as quick as he could to Marssen, to the hospital there. They called up the city for some real good doctors, and"—Gates shuddered violently and peered around him again—"and both the young man and his lady friend was put away in the insane-house," he finished fearfully.

There was silence for an instant. An unnatural, ugly silence, broken only by the sound of men breathing and the *pft-pft-pft* of the oil lamp on the desk. Then Paul laughed softly, queerly.

"The insane-house, eh?" he shrugged. "A good story, Gates. Not bad at all. And they're still there?"

"It's the God's honest truth, sir. I swear it is. And the young people are still locked up, they are. I'm tellin' ye, sir, I think of it even now on dark nights, sir, and I fair get the horrors from it!"

"Thanks. I guess we'll be moving along, Gates. We'll have a look

at your ghastly inn."

"But nobody goes along that road no more, sir. Not after nightfall!"

"All right, old man," Paul shrugged, knowing that his voice faltered slightly and his assumed indifference lacked the sincerity he strove to stuff into it. "Don't sit up and worry about us. We won't come back the way the others did. I'd have a hard job carrying you, eh, Jeremy?"

Jeremy's laugh, too, was vaguely harsh. But he turned and followed to the door. And an instant later, leaving Gates stiff-legged and staring in the middle of the unclean floor, with the sputtering oil lamp casting spider-shadows on the wall behind him, Paul and Jeremy stepped over the threshold. The door creaked shut behind them. They descended the wooden steps slowly.

5. Murgunstrumm

The lonely untraveled road between Rehobeth and the buried little town of Marssen, twelve miles distant, was particularly black and abandoned that night. Leaving the main dirt highway a mile or so below the last of Rehobeth's straggling houses, it plunged immediately into sullen unbroken woods, where all sounds died to nothingness and the light was a dim, uneven, flickering gloom.

The mud-crusted black roadster, with Jeremy at the wheel, careened recklessly down the main road, boring its way with twin beams of bright light. At the intersection, it slowed to a crawl, and Jeremy swung the wheel. Then, more slowly, the car proceeded down the Marssen road; and presently it was moving at snail-speed, groping along a snake track of deep ruts and loose, damp sand.

"It ain't," Jeremy said laconically, "what you'd want to call a pleasure drive, sir. Fair gives me the creeps, it does, after the old guy's talk."

Paul nodded. He said nothing. He was thinking again, and remembering, in spite of himself. What Gates had narrated back at the hotel was true, and the old man's words had awakened memories which were better a thousand times dead.

Paul's face was strained, colorless now. His hands were clenched defensively. He stared straight ahead of him through the dirty windshield, watching every sudden twist of the way, every looming shadow. Once he touched the revolver in his pocket and felt suddenly relieved. But he remembered again, and knew that the weapon would mean nothing. And presently, after ten minutes of slow, cautious progress, he said quietly:

"Stop the car here, Jeremy."

"Here, sir?"

"We'll walk the rest. It isn't far. They mustn't see us."

Jeremy grunted. The roadster turned to the side of the road, scraped noisily against the thick bushes, and came to a jerky stop.

"Will I lock it, sir?"

"Yes. And keep the key in your hand. We may need it quickly."

Jeremy glanced at him quizzically. Then, with a shrug, he turned the ignition

key, removed it, and slid out of his seat. In a moment Paul was beside him, gripping his arm.

"Sure you want to come, Jeremy?"

"Why not, sir? I'm pretty handy with my fists, ain't I?"

"That won't help, Jeremy. Nothing will help, if we're seen."

"Well then, we won't be seen. You're shiverin', sir!"

"Am I?" Paul's laugh was harsh, toneless. "That's bad. I shouldn't be. Not after what happened before. Shivering won't help, either. Come on."

They passed down the narrow road, leaving the roadster half hidden, black and silent, behind them. Paul, thinking again, peered furtively on either side, fighting back his fear of the darkness. Shadows leaped at him from matted walls of gloom. Faint whispers sucked down from above as the night breeze whimpered and muttered through rustling leaves. The horrors of the madhouse came back, vivid and close. Supernatural voices laughed hideously and screamed, and everywhere ahead, in the gloom, a limping shape seemed to be waiting and leering and pointing triumphantly.

Jeremy, more or less indifferent to intangible terror, plodded along with a set frown on his square features. Shadows and whispers did not trouble him. He did not know. And Paul, pressing close to him, found relief in the man's presence, and courage in his stolidness.

So they walked on and on, until presently out of the darkness ahead of them, on the right, a gray mass took form with maddening slowness. Paul stood quite still, drawing his companion close.

"That's the place," he said almost inaudibly.

"There's a light, sir," Jeremy observed.

Yes, there was a light. But it was a feeble thing, a mere oblong slit of illumination, visible faintly through a cracked shutter. And the house itself, upstairs and down, was sinister with darkness. Like an enormous humpbacked toad it squatted just off the road, isolated in its own desolate clearing, hemmed in on three sides by unbroken walls of gloom and silence.

Not a lovely place, the Gray Toad Inn. Not any more. At one time, Paul reflected, it had been a roadhouse of gay repute, situated pleasantly on an out-of-the-way road between semi-dead villages, with desirable seclusion a strong point in its favor. Here, night after night, had come revelers from the nearby city and even nearer towns, to laugh and drink and fill the big house with youthful clamor.

But not any more. All that had changed. The inn had grown cold and lonely. The road itself had fallen more and more into disuse and obscurity. That very isolation which had made the place a popular resort had now buried it in abject solitude and left it dark and dismal, hoary with interred memories, sinking into slow rot.

Yet a light glowed now in the lower level, winking out into the darkness. A wan yellow light, filtered through a cracked blind, clutching outward like a thin



bony finger, as if pleading for old times to return. And Paul and Jeremy, staring at it, crept slowly, noiselessly, through the deep grass of the overgrown clearing toward it.

And there was something else, which the inn had never known in its days of laughter and gaiety—something which even Jeremy, who lacked imagination and feared no foe but of flesh and form, noticed furtively.

“There’s somethin’,” he whispered, reaching out to grasp Paul’s coat, “there’s somethin’ awful queer here, sir. The air . . .”

Paul stiffened. Fifty yards before him, the humpbacked structure bulged sullenly against the crawling sky above. Deep grass rustled against his legs. He stared suddenly into Jeremy’s set face.

“What do you mean?” he said thickly. But to himself, in his mind, he muttered triumphantly: “He’s noticed it too! He’s noticed it too! Ruth wouldn’t believe me when we came here before, but it’s true, it’s true!”

“The air has a funny smell, sir,” Jeremy said slowly. “Like—like earth, or dirt. Like a mushroom cellar or somethin’. I must be crazy, sir, but it seems to hang all around here, heavy-like.”

Crazy? Paul choked out a jangling laugh, full of triumph. No, not crazy. Not yet. Jeremy was right. This place—this ancient abode of infernal silence and monstrous horror—was alive within itself. It breathed and felt. It was no part of the woods around it.

But Jeremy wouldn’t understand. The explanation was far too intricate and vague and impossible for him. Yet it was true. The atmosphere surrounding this structure before them, the air that clung tenaciously to the entire clearing, was a living entity, a dull leaden *thing*, visible to eyes that dared seek it out. It was a part of the inn itself, having no connection, no acquaintance, with the air about it. It reeked up out of the very earth, and from the decaying walls of the building, and from the bodies of the dead-alive creatures who inhabited the place.

But to Jeremy it was simply a creepy sensation, vaguely inexplicable and unpleasant. And so Paul moved on, more and more slowly, cautioning his companion to complete silence.

Thus they reached the side of the inn itself, and Paul crouched there in utter darkness, with the great structure hunched over him, mastodonic and gaunt, enveloped in its pall of dull, moving, viscous exhalation.

For an instant Paul clung there, unable to put down his deepening dread. All the ancient horrors rushed upon him viciously, striving to shatter the walls of his mind and send him back, back down the road, reeling and laughing and screaming in madness, as they had done on that other night seven months ago. And then, slowly, he stood erect until he could peer through the cracked shutter. And hung there, rigid and flat-pressed against the window-ledge, staring.

Only a vague semicircle of illumination was visible inside through the filthy window glass. There at a small square table against the farther wall, unaware of Paul’s presence, sat a long figure. The oil lamp on the table, peculiarly shaded

with an agate cup-shaped globe, cast a restless, unreal glow into the man's face.

An ugly face it was, in the full horrible significance of the word. A sunken savage gargoyle, frog-like in shape, with narrow close-set eyes blinking continually beneath beetled brows that crawled together, like thick hairy fingers, in the center. The broad nose, twisted hookwise, seemed stuck on, like a squatting toad with bunched legs. And the mouth was wide, thick, sensuous, half leering as if it could assume no other expression.

The man made no movement. Apparently in a state of semi-stupor, he leaned on the table in the near gloom. Beyond him the feeble light played up and down the cream-colored wall and over the worn green carpet, revealing shadowed shapes of other tables and other chairs and objects without definite form.

Paul stared, utterly fascinated and terrified, clutching the window-sill with white hands, standing stiff and unalive in the darkness. He might have clung there indefinitely, remembering every separate fear of his last visit here, had not Jeremy's guarded voice hissed suddenly behind him:

"Somethin's comin', sir! A car!"

Paul turned. A faint purring sound came to his ears from somewhere down the road. He stepped forward violently and seized Jeremy's arm.

"Down!" he cried sharply. "Get down, man!" And then he was flat in the deep grass, heaving, breathing heavily, with Jeremy prone beside him, so close that their bodies fused together.

"What is it, sir?" Jeremy whispered.

"Be still!"

In the road, the purring became an audible drone, as of a motor. Nearer and nearer it came, and then, just once, a muted horn shrilled out, sending a muffled blast through the night. Twin headlights took form and grew into glaring, accusing orbs.

At that moment the door of the inn opened, creaking back softly. A lantern swung in the aperture, dangling from an uplifted hand; and the man with the toad face scuffed slowly over the threshold, muttering to himself and blinking his eyes. Bent, twisted grotesquely, he limped down the stone flagging a dozen paces and stood still, holding the lantern high.

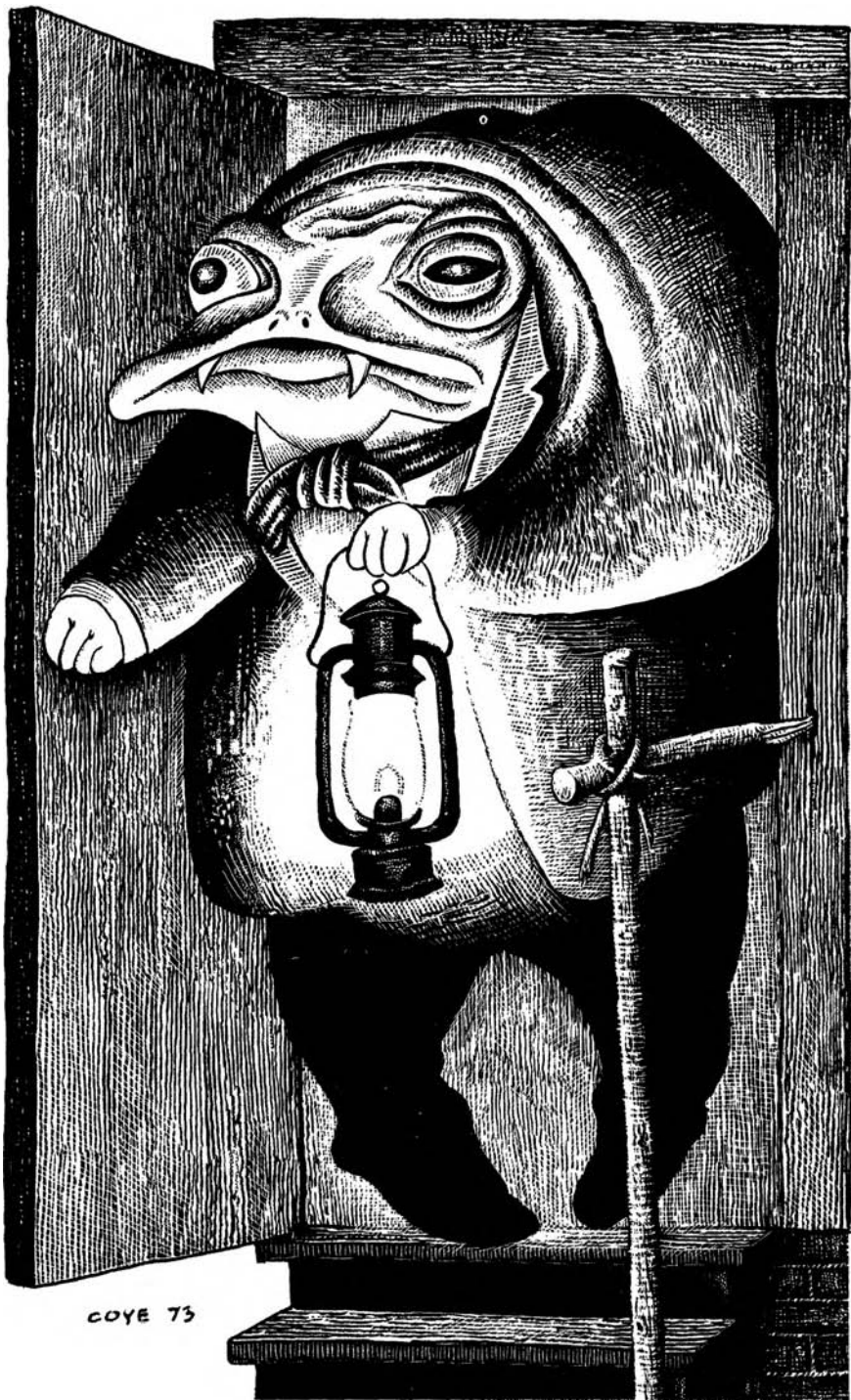
The headlights of the oncoming car became brilliant bowls of fire, cutting slantwise through the unearthly mist of the grounds. They slowed and stopped, and the drone of the engine became suddenly still. The lights were extinguished. The car door clicked and swung open. A voice—a girl's voice, vaguely timid and afraid and fantastically out of place in such sordid surroundings—said:

"This—this is the place you are bringing me?"

And the voice that answered her was somehow packed with subtlety, gloating and possessive in spite of its quite smoothness.

"Certainly, my dear. You will enjoy yourself."

Two shapes materialized. Shadows in the gloom, nothing more, they moved down the path to where the lantern swayed before them. Then the outer rays



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of the light encompassed them, and Paul stared mutely with every ounce of color ebbed from his face.

A man and a girl. Man-and-a-girl. It surged over and over in his brain. God! After seven months, the horror was still going on, still happening! The man—the man was like all the others, tall, straight, smiling, attired in immaculate evening clothes. The girl was young and lovely and radiant in a trailing white gown and flame-colored velvet wrap. But she was not happy; she was not a willing guest. She was afraid and helpless, and her oval face was pathetically pale in the lantern glow—pale as alabaster; the face of one who was very close to death, and knew it, and had no resistance left in body or soul to fight against it.

She walked mechanically, staring straight ahead of her. And then the glare of the lantern swept full over her, revealing a mark—but no one would have seen it who did not look closely. Jeremy did not notice it, certainly. Only Paul discerned it—Paul, who was praying that the mark would not be there.

A mere patch of whiteness, where the girl had tried in vain to cover, with powder, a pair of ghastly crimson incisions, fiendishly significant. And the marks themselves were faintly visible as she came closer in the accusing halo of the uplifted lantern.

She stopped very abruptly then, and peered at the hideous face behind the upraised arm. She trembled and shrank away from it, and a subdued frightened whisper came involuntarily from her lips. Her companion put his arm about her and laughed, glanced indifferently at the man with the lantern, and laughed again, mockingly.

"It's only Murgunstrumm, my dear. He wouldn't harm a fly. He wouldn't know how, really. Come."

The girl paced on, walking like one already dead, like one who had been so long in the clutch of fear that nothing more mattered. The lantern cast a long gaunt shadow on the walk as she stepped in front of it. One long shadow—only one. The man in evening clothes, pacing just behind his lovely comrade, left nothing. Nothing but empty glaring whiteness . . .

They went inside; and Murgunstrumm, scuffing over the sill behind them, reached out an abnormally long arm to swing the heavy door shut. The last thing Paul saw, as the lantern light died behind the closing barrier, was the unholy grin which transfigured that toadlike face. Then—then something possessed him.

He was on his feet blindly, fists clenched until the palms of his hands stabbed with pain.

"Great God, don't let them do it! Don't—"

He stumbled forward, thrashing through the deep grass, retching with the sudden turmoil which roared within him. Frantically he staggered toward the door of the inn; mad, unreasoning, knowing only that he could not stand still and let the horror continue.

He would have rushed to the door, then, and hammered upon it, screaming

to the heavens above him; would have slashed his way into the house and fought—fought with hands and teeth and feet in a mad attempt to drag the girl from that foul embrace; would have continued until they overwhelmed him, killed him. All to no purpose!

But luck saved him. His blundering foot twisted beneath him as it cracked against an immovable something in the grass. Agony welled up through his leg, letting him down. He pitched violently forward and plunged headlong.

And the madness left him as he lay there, gasping. Ahead of him he heard the door of the inn creak open. A probing shaft of lantern light swept the clearing, and Murgunstrumm stood there on the threshold, peering out. Then the inn-keeper muttered something inaudible, and the door closed again. The light vanished. The clearing was very dark and still.

What a fool he was! In the fury of a moment's insanity he had come within an inch of condemning Ruth forever to the asylum. He had come within an instant of awful death, when life was the most necessary possession in the world.

The girl in the flame-colored wrap was beyond his power to save. Beyond any power, except of a merciful God. The mark of the vampire was already imprinted in her throat. She was a slave of the demon who had stolen her soul. Nothing could help her now.

Paul's hands dug savagely into his face. A snarl came from his throat as he lay there in the deep grass. And then another sound, behind him, took his attention as something wriggled close. Jeremy's voice said in a thick whisper:

"You—you're all right, sir?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"You ain't hurt, sir?"

"No. Not—hurt."

"Will we try to break into the place? That girl, she looked as if they might mean to do some damage—"

"No. It's too late."

Paul reached out and gripped the big man's arm. He lay still for a moment then, waiting for strength to return. Then, with a warning whisper, he began to crawl backward through the grass. Not once did he take his gaze from that closed barrier. Inch by inch he retreated until at last the deep grass gave way to underbrush and crackling bushes, and sheltering black trees loomed over him. Rising, he stood in the darkness until Jeremy joined him. Then together they crept silently back to the road.

"Listen," Jeremy cautioned him suddenly.

They stood quite still. A burst of laughter—feminine laughter, wild and shrill and vaguely mad—pursued them. Paul shuddered, took a step forward. Then, with an effort, he turned and hurried on again. He said nothing until the road-house, with its pall of evanescent vapor, was buried again in the gloom behind them. Then he muttered grimly:

"Did you see, clearly, the man in evening clothes?"

Jeremy's big body twitched as if something had jostled him. He turned a white, frightened face.

"That feller, sir," he whispered huskily, "there was somethin' creepy about him. When he stepped in front of the lantern back there——"

"You saw it too?"

"I don't know what it was, sir, but he didn't seem natural."

"I know," Paul said.

"Who is he, sir?"

"I don't know. I only know what he is."

"And the cripple, sir. He's the same Murgunstrumm feller the hotel man was tellin' us about?"

"The cripple." Paul replied, and his voice was low and vibrant and full of hate, "is Murgunstrumm."

They paced on in silence after that. Reaching the car, they got in quickly. Jeremy stuck the key in the slot and turned it. The motor coughed, purred softly. The black roadster jerked backward, swung fretfully about, reversed again, and straightened with a lunge.

"Back to the hotel, sir?" Jeremy said sharply.

Paul answered, almost inaudibly: "Yes. Back to the hotel."

6. Kermeff and Allenby

At seven o'clock the following evening a large gray touring car, smeared and panting from sixty miles of fast travel, crunched to a stop before the Rehobeth Hotel. Twilight had already swooped down on the little community. A murky gloom welled up from the valley below. Lights blinked in the shadows, and the village lay silent and peaceful in the lassitude of coming night.

The car door clicked open. A gray-coated figure slid from the chauffeur's seat and moved quietly to the rear, glancing queerly, frowningly at the hotel. Mechanically he pulled open the rear door.

The two men who descended after him were, it was evident, somehow ill at ease and vaguely apprehensive. For an instant they clung close to the car, scowling unpleasantly and impatiently. They exchanged glances and comments. Then, with a word to the driver, they advanced to the steps.

Old Gates, aroused by the sound of the machine's arrival, met them in the doorway. Squinting at them, he asked hesitantly:

"Be ye lookin' for someone, sirs?"

"For Mr. James Potter," the larger of the two said distinctly. "He expects us. We should like to go directly to his rooms, if you please."

"To be sure, sir," Gates grimaced. "I'll take ye right up now, I will. Come this way, sir."

"Er—it will perhaps be better if we go up alone. Will you direct us?"

Gates blinked, and stared more intently than, as if distrustful. But he turned

with a shrug and said, rather stiffly:

"Of course, sir. Walk right through the lobby here and up the stairs, and turn right and go straight down the hall to the last door."

"Thank you."

Kermeff and Allenby ascended the stairs slowly, with Kermeff in the lead. They were strange companions, these two. Of different nationalities, they differed also in face and form, and obviously in temperament. Kermeff, the larger, was a bull-shouldered, aggressive man with huge hands that gripped the railing viciously. He possessed a sensitive mouth and keen eyes that declared him fiery, alert, possibly headstrong, and as stubborn as stone.

Allenby, trailing behind him, was smaller, wiry in stature, stern and deliberate of movement. Sullen, aloof, he climbed without a word and without a backward glance.

Together they strode along the upper landing to the door of James Potter's room. Kermeff knocked sharply. The door opened, framing Matt Jeremy on the threshold.

"Mr. Potter?" Kermeff said gutturally.

"Yes, sir," Jeremy nodded. "Come right in."

Kermeff stepped over the sill. Allenby, hesitating an instant, peered up and down the corridor, shrugged and followed him closely. Very quietly, unobtrusively, Jeremy closed the door as he had been told to do.

A single lamp, not too efficient, burned on the desk in the corner. Beside it Paul Hill leaned silently against the wall, waiting. Kermeff and Allenby, pacing into the room, saw him each at the same moment.

The big man stiffened as if a wire had been drawn taut within him. He flung up his head and stared. He wet his lips and sucked a long noisy breath into them. Allenby took a sudden step forward, stopped abruptly and stood quite still.

"You!" Kermeff rasped violently. "Where is Doctor Von Heller?"

"Sit down, gentlemen," Paul said evenly.

"Where is Von Heller?"

"Von Heller is not here."

"What? What are you saying? Are you . . .?"

"I wrote the letters myself, gentlemen," Paul shrugged, "to bring you here."

Kermeff realized the truth. He had been trapped. He had gulped the bait completely. His one desire now was to spit it out again, to leave before the madman before him became violent. Kermeff swung about with a lurid growl.

But the exit was barred, and the physician stiffened again. The door was closed; Jeremy leaned against it. Kermeff stood on braced legs, swaying. He gathered himself. With a great oath he flung himself forward.

He stopped almost in the same movement. Jeremy's hand, sliding out of a bulging pocket, gripped a leveled revolver. Kermeff glared at it with animal hate. Turning again, very slowly and deliberately, he faced Paul.

"Sit down," Paul ordered.

"You are mad!"

"Sit down, I said."

Kermeff sank into a chair. He was trembling not with fear, but with rage. He sat like a coiled spring, ready to leap erect. He glared sullenly at his colleague, as if expecting Allenby to work the impossible.

Instead, Allenby glanced furtively from the rigid revolver to Paul's set face, and sat down also. Not until then did Paul move away from the wall. He, too, drew a revolver from his pocket.

"It is your car outside, I suppose?" he said quietly, addressing Kermeff. "Yes?"

"Yes."

"Come with me, then. At once, please."

Kermeff stood up, watching every move with smoldering eyes that threatened to blaze any moment into flame. He said harshly, gutturally:

"Why did you summon us here?"

"You will see, in time."

"It is an outrage! I demand—"

"Demanding will do you no good," Paul said crisply. "You are here and you will stay here. There will be no argument."

"I will have you arrested for forgery!"

"You are going downstairs with me and instruct your driver to return to town. You will tell him, very simply, that you have no further need for him. And you will make no false move, Kermeff. I didn't bring you here for pleasure or for any petty hate. If you attempt in any way to trick me, I will kill you."

Kermeff faltered. For an instant it seemed that he would give way to his violent anger and rush forward blindly, despite the twin revolvers that covered him. Then, trembling from head to foot, he turned to the door.

Jeremy held the door open as the physician strode into the hall. Paul followed silently, close enough behind to keep his protruding coat pocket, with his revolver buried in it, on a direct unwavering line with the man's back.

And Kermeff tried no tricks. Obviously he realized the grim severity of his position. He walked deliberately down the corridor, descended the stairs, and strode across the lobby. Gates, glancing at him from behind the desk, mumbled an inaudible greeting. Kermeff, without replying, went directly to the door and stepped out on the veranda, with Paul only inches behind him.

The chauffeur stood there, leaning indifferently against the rail. Kermeff looked squarely at him and said distinctly:

"We are staying here, Peter. You may go back to the city. We shall not need you."

"You won't want me, sir?"

"When we do, I will send for you."

The chauffeur touched his hand to his cap and turned to the steps. Kermeff, swinging on his heel, re-entered the hotel. He climbed the stairs with methodical

precision. He said nothing. With Paul still behind him, very close and silent, he returned to the room he had just left.

And there, with the door closed again, Paul said evenly:

"That is all, gentlemen. I must ask you to remain here quietly until it is dark. Then . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

Allenby, peering at him sharply, said in a thick voice:

"Then what?"

"I don't know. Perhaps we shall go mad."

Paul sat down, toying with the revolver. Kermeff and Allenby glared at him, then glanced significantly at each other. Jeremy, stolid and silent, remained standing at the door.

That occurred at seven-thirty o'clock. At nine, Paul glanced at his watch, stirred impatiently in his chair, and stood up. Crossing quickly to the window, he drew the shade and peered out. It was very dark outside. The village was a thing of brooding silence and blackness. The sky held no twinkling points of light, no visible moon. There was no need to wait longer.

He stepped to the bed and drew back the covers, exposing the white sheets beneath. Methodically he pulled the top sheet free and tore it into inch-wide strips and ripped the strips into sections. Jeremy was watching queerly. Kermeff and Allenby stared and said nothing. Perhaps they thought he was mad.

And perhaps he was! Certainly it was a mad thing he was doing—a crazy, fantastic idea which had crept into his mind while he sat there in the chair, thinking of what the night might hold. And now, as he pulled his suit-case from the corner and rummaged through it in search of the needle and thread which Armand LeGeum had stowed there, a thin smile played on his lips. Without a doubt they would think him mad in another moment.

He found what he sought. Crossing quietly to the door, he put his revolver into Jeremy's hand and said simply: "Be careful." To do what he intended, he would have to bend over within reach of Kermeff's thick arms and then within reach of Allenby's. It would not do to leave the gun unguarded in his pocket, for a groping hand to seize.

He turned and gathered up the strips of white cloth. To Kermeff he said evenly:

"Put your hands behind you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing to hurt you. Perhaps something that may save you from harm later. Put them behind you."

With a shrug, as if to imply that insane men must be humored, the big man complied.

Paul bent over him. Across the front of the man's vest he stretched a twelve-inch strip of cloth and sewed it quickly into place. A second strip, somewhat shorter, he sewed across the first, forming a large gleaming cross. The stitching

was crude and clumsy, but it would hold. Unless clutching fingers or teeth tore the sheeting loose, the thing would remain in place.

Kermeff, meanwhile, was watching with hostile eyes. When the operation was finished he relaxed and held his coat open, studying the cross as if he could not quite believe. Then he scowled unpleasantly and peered again into Paul's face.

"In God's name, what is this for?"

"For your protection," Paul said grimly. "And you are right. Protection in God's name."

Kermeff laughed—a strained unnatural laugh that was more animal than human. But Paul was already at work upon Allenby, and presently he was attaching a third cross to his own body, in such a position that a single outward fling of his coat would reveal it to anyone who stood before him. Finally, pacing to the door, he took the two revolvers from Jeremy's hand and said quietly:

"Do the same to yourself, Jeremy. I'll stand guard. As soon as you've finished, we'll be leaving."

7. *The Innkeeper*

The Gray Toad Inn was half a mile ahead. Paul, huddled over the wheel of the roadster, glanced quickly into the face of the man beside him and wondered if Anton Kermeff were afraid. But there was no trace of fear in the big man's features. They were fixed and tense; the thick brows were knitted together in a set frown, the eyes focused straight ahead, unblinking. If anything, Kermeff was violently angry.

But he was also helpless. He was unarmed, and the door-pocket under his right hand contained nothing which might serve as a weapon. Paul had seen to that before leaving the hotel. And Paul's own hand, resting carelessly on the rim of the wheel, hovered only a few inches above the revolver in his coat pocket. If Kermeff made a single treacherous move, that hand could sweep down in a scant second and lash up again.

Moreover, the roadster's convertible top was down; and Matt Jeremy, in the spacious rumble-seat beside the huddled form of Franklin Allenby, commanded a view of the front. If Kermeff moved, Jeremy had orders to strike first. As for Allenby, the very presence of the powerful Jeremy beside him seemed to have driven all thought of resistance from his mind.

The car purred on, eating its way with twin shafts of light drilling the uncanny darkness. The Gray Toad Inn was just ahead.

This time Paul did not stop the car. Approaching on foot, under cover, would avail nothing to-night. The car was part of the plan. Paul clung to the wheel and drove steadily along the unused road, until at last the massive grotesquery of the inn materialized in the gloom on the right.

As before, a light glowed on the lower floor, struggling feebly to grope through the atmosphere of abomination that hung over the entire building. The

car slowed to a groping pace, approaching almost noiselessly. Kermeff was staring. Paul looked at him, smiled thinly, and said in a low voice:

"The Gray Toad, Kermeff. You've heard of it before?"

The physician said nothing. He sat very stiff, his hands clenching and unclenching nervously. Obviously he was beginning to realize the peril of his position, the danger of being hauled blindly through the night, on a strange mission, by a madman who presumably sought revenge.

Ahead, the light winked suddenly as if an obstruction inside the grim walls had stepped momentarily in front of it. Then it glowed again. The door of the inn swung back.

Instinctively Paul's foot touched the brake. The car stopped with a tremor. With sudden dread Paul waited for whatever would emerge.

At first he saw nothing. He was looking for the wrong thing. He expected a human shape—the hunched body of Murgunstrumm or perhaps one of the immaculate evening-attired inhabitants. But it was no human form that slunk over the threshold into the night. It was an indistinct creature of low-slung belly and short legs. It crept forth, hugging the ground, and broke into a loping run straight for the road. A long thin howl rose on the still air. The howl of a wolf.

Paul shuddered, still staring. Wolves, here in Murgunstrumm's house, meant only one thing! They were not flesh and blood, but—

Kermeff cried aloud. The loping thing ahead had reached the road and stopped quite still. Crouching, it swung about to face the car, as if seeing the machine for the first time. The twin lights fell full upon it as it bellied forward, revealing a sleek black body and glittering eyes of fire.

There was an instant of emptiness, of stiffening inaction, while the thing's eyes glared balefully. Then, all at once, it rushed forward with amazing speed, hurtling through the intervening space so quickly that it seemed to lose form as it came.

And it had no form! Even as it swept the last few yards it became a shapeless blur and vanished utterly; and in its place, swooping up before the headlight, came a flapping winged thing which drove straight at Paul's face.

Just once it struck. An unearthly stench invaded Paul's nostrils. The smell of the grave enveloped him, choking him. Then the creature was high above, hanging like a painted shape against the sky, with wings swaying slowly. And Kermeff was laughing in a peculiarly cracked shrill voice:

"It's a bat! It's only a bat!"

Paul's foot hit the accelerator sharply. The car jerked forward, careening down the road. But even as it groaned to a stop again before the driveway of the inn, Paul looked up again apprehensively, muttering to himself. And the bat still hovered near, seeming to eye the occupants of the room with a malicious hungry glare of hate.

"Come," Paul said sharply, climbing out. "Hurry!"

He strode toward the door. Somehow the thought that Kermeff and Allenby might choose this moment to chance an attack, or to attempt escape, seemed insignificant. The other peril was so much greater and closer that he could consider nothing else.

He was a fool—that was it! No sane man would be deliberately walking into the horrors of this diabolical place after once having had the luck to escape. Yet he was doing precisely that. He was risking something more than life, more than the lives of his three companions—for Ruth.

Still he advanced, not daring to hesitate or look above him. He knew, without looking, that the same significant shape hovered there—the thing which had once been a wolf and now was a bat, and in reality was neither. And it was there for a reason. Pangs of hunger had driven it out into the night, to prowl the countryside or perhaps to pay a visit to one of the nearby villages. And here—here at hand was a means of satiating that hunger, in the shape of four unwary visitors to the abode of evil. Four humans of flesh and blood. Flesh which meant nothing; blood which meant everything!

But it was too late to turn back. The door creaked open in Paul's face. A glare of light blinded him. A lantern swung before him, and behind it gleamed a pair of penetrating, searching eyes. Paul gazed fearfully into the eyes, into the contorted frowning mask of features in which they were set at incredible depth. With an effort he smothered his increasing fear and said in an uneven voice:

“You—you're still open, my good man?”

The repulsive face shook sideways. The thick lips parted soundlessly, mouth-
ing an unspoken negative.

“Oh, come,” Paul insisted, forcing something like a careless laugh. “We're hungry. We've come a long way and have even farther to go. Can't you stretch it a bit and scrape up something for us to eat and drink?”

Again Murgunstrumm shook his head without answering. The lantern swayed directly in front of Paul's face, vivid and repelling.

“We'll make it worth your while,” Paul argued desperately. “We'll pay you—”

He did not finish. That same nauseating stench assailed him abruptly and a distorted black thing flopped past his head to careen against the lantern and lurch sideways into Murgunstrumm's face. Paul recoiled with an involuntary cry. But the thing had no evil intentions; it merely circled Murgunstrumm's shoulders erratically, uttering queer whispering sounds. And then all at once it darted away.

“We'll pay you double,” Paul said again, recovering himself and stepping forward crisply. “We'll—” He stopped. Murgunstrumm was no longer scowling. The twisted face was fixed in a hungry grin. The sunken eyes were riveted, like the eyes of a starved animal, squarely in Paul's face. Murgunstrumm lifted the lantern higher and said thickly:

“You come in.”

Paul stepped forward, knowing only that he felt suddenly weak and very afraid. Mechanically he crossed the sill. Kermeff followed him, and Allenby, and Jeremy entered last. Then the door swung shut and Murgunstrumm was leaning against it, the lantern dangling in his hand. His lips were spread in a huge idiotic grin. His eyes were twin sloes of fire, fixed and unmoving.

It was a queer room. The only two sources of light, the lantern and the slender-necked oil lamp on the table, were feeble and flickering, filling the entire chamber with a faltering, dancing yellow glow and uncouth crawling shadows. A bare floor, evidently once a polished dance surface, but now merely a layer of blackened boards, extended away into unlimited gloom. The walls were mere suggestions of shapes in the semidark, visible only when the fitful lamps were generous enough to spurt into restive brilliance.

There were tables—three, four of them. Round squat tables of dark color, holding candle stumps with black dejected wicks set in green glass holders, which threw out tiny jeweled facets of light.

And it was the light—lamplight and lanternlight—which put the room in motion and lent it that restless, quivering sensation of being furtively alive. First the lamp flare, sputtering and winking, fighting against stray drafts which came out of cracked walls and loose windows. And then, more particularly, the glare of the lantern in Murgunstrumm's hanging fist, jerking slowly into the center of the room as the cripple limped forward.

"Sit down, sirs," Murgunstrumm leered. "We be all alone here to-night."

He scuffed past, seeming to sink into the floor each time his twisted right foot came in contact. His guests stared at him, fascinated utterly, as he hobbled to the farther wall. There, grinning at them indifferently, he raised the lantern face high and clawed up its globe with crooked fingers, and peered fixedly at the burning wick as if it were a thing of evil significance.

And his face was full in the realm of it—a gargoyle of malicious expectation. A contorted mass of shapeless features, assembled by some unholy chance or perhaps developed by some unholy habit. And then the lips protruded, the cheeks bloated for an instant. The thick tongue licked out, directing a gust of air into the lantern. The flame expired.

After that, Paul and his companions retreated to an out-of-the-way table, as near the door as possible, and sat very close together, in silence.

Murgunstrumm vanished, to reappear a moment later with a cloth, ghastly white in the contrasting gloom, slung over his stiffened arm. Grinning, he bent over the table, lifted the lamp, and spread the cloth in place. Lowering the lamp again, he said gutturally:

"Ye'll be wantin' food, huh?"

"Anything," Paul said, cringing from the hovering face. "Anything will do."

"Uh-uh. I'll find somethin', I will."

"And—er—"

"Yus?"



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"Can't we have a bit more light here? It's—it's ghastly."

The innkeeper hesitated. It seemed to Paul for an instant that the man's lips tightened almost imperceptibly and the dull sheen of his eyes brightened as if some nerve, buried in that venomous head, had been short-circuited. Then with a shrug the fellow nodded and said:

"Yus, sir. We don't generally have much light here. I'll touch up the candles, I will."

He groped to the other tables and bent over them, one after another, scratching matches and holding his deformed, cupped hands over the cold candle wicks. And presently four tiny flames burned in the thick gloom, like tiny moving eyes, animal eyes glowing through fog.

"Who"—it was Anton Kermeff speaking for the first time—"who is that man?"

"Murgunstrumm," Paul said dully.

"He is horrible. Horrible!"

"He is more than that," Paul replied bitterly.

"I refuse to remain here. I shall go—"

"No." Paul bent over the table, gazing straight into the physician's face. "You will not leave so easily, Kermeff."

"You have no right!"

"I have nothing to do with it."

Kermeff's mouth tightened in the midst of a guttural exclamation. He said very sharply: "What?"

"You would never leave here alive. Wait, and watch."

Kermeff's face whitened. Allenby, sitting just opposite him, looked sharply, furtively, at Paul and trembled visibly. He licked his lips. He said falteringly, in a whisper:

"Why did we come here?"

"To wait—and watch."

"But it is madness! That man—"

"That man is all you imagine," Paul said, "and more. You will see, before the night is over."

His voice choked off. He was aware of no sound behind him, no scuff of feet or suck of breath; only of a ghastly sensation that something, someone, was very close and gloating over him. He could feel eyes, boring through and through, with the awful penetrating power of acid.

Abruptly he swung in his chair. He found himself staring straight into Murgunstrumm's prognathous countenance, and the man's mouth was lengthened in a mocking grin. Not of humor, but of mocking hate. And the eyes were boring, unblinking, unmoving.

An instant passed while Paul returned the glare. Then Allenby cracked under the strain. Half rising, he said in a sharp, childish shrill voice:

"What do you want? Don't glare like that, man!"

The grinning lips opened. Murgunstrumm laughed. It seemed no laugh at all; it was soundless, merely a trembling of the man's breath.

"I bring wine now, or later? Huh?"

Allenby relaxed, white, trembling. Paul turned, released from the binding clutch of that unholy stare, and looked mechanically, mutely, at his companions. Kermeff nodded slowly. Jeremy, with fists clenched on the table, said raspingly:

"Tell him to bring some wine, sir. We need it."

Murgunstrumm, without a word, limped back into the gloom. His boots scraped ominously, accenting every second beat as his crooked leg thumped under him. There was no other sound.

And the silence persisted for many maddening minutes. The massive structure seemed to have stopped breathing. Paul's voice, when he spoke at last, was a sibilant hiss, whispering into the shadows and back again like a thing of separate being.

"Your watch, Kermeff. What time is it?"

"Eleven," Kermeff said lifelessly.

"Seven hours," Paul muttered. "Seven hours until daylight. They will soon be returning."

"They?"

"The others. The inhabitants. The awful—"

Paul's voice died. He twitched convulsively, as if a hand had been clapped across his mouth. But it was no hand; it was a sound—a sound that jangled down from far above, from the blackness beyond the cracked ceiling, seemingly from the very depths of the night; a mocking, muffled laugh that hung endlessly in the still air, like the vibrating twang of a loose violin string. Then silence, dead, stifling. And then, very suddenly, a thin scream of utter terror.

There was nothing else. The sound lived and died and was not reborn. Silence, as of the grave, possessed the room. Then, violently, Kermeff flung back his chair and lurched to his feet.

"What was that?"

No one answered him. Jeremy was without motion, gripping the table with huge hands. Allenby sat like a man dead, stark white, eyes horribly wide and ivory-hued. The lamp's flame gutted the dark. Paul said mechanically:

"Sit down."

"What was it?"

"I was wrong," Paul mumbled. "The inhabitants have not all left. One—at least one—is here still."

"That scream! It was a girl! A girl!"

"A girl," Paul said in a monotone. "A girl in a flame-colored wrap. But we can do nothing. It is too late. It was too late last night, when she came here. It is always too late, here."

"What do you mean?"

"Sit down, Kermeff."

Kermeff floundered into his chair and hunched there, quivering. Muttering aloud, he clawed at his throat and loosened his shirt collar. His hands slid down jerkily, fumbling with the buttons of his coat.

But Paul's hand, darting forward with incredible swiftness, closed over the man's wrists, holding them rigid.

"No, Kermeff."

"What?"

"Keep your coat buttoned, if you love life. Have you forgotten what we did at the hotel?"

Kermeff faced him without understanding. His hands unclenched and fell away.

"It is hot in here," he choked. "Too hot. I was going to—"

But another voice, soft and persuasive, interrupted him. Something scraped against the back of his chair. A long, deformed arm reached over his shoulder to place a tray with four glasses—thick greenish glasses, filled with brilliant carmine liquid—on the white cloth before him. And the voice, Murgunstrumm's voice, announced quietly:

"It be good wine. Very good wine. The meat'll be near ready, sirs."

Something snapped in Kermeff's brain. Perhaps it was the shock of that naked arm, gliding so unexpected before his face. Perhaps it was the sight of the red liquid, thick and sweet smelling and deep with color. Whatever it was, he swung about savagely and seized the cripple's arm in both hands.

"That scream!" he shouted luridly. "You heard it! What was it?"

"Scream?"

"You heard it! Don't deny it!"

The innkeeper's mouth writhed slowly into a smile, a significant, guarded smile. And his lips were wet and crimson—crimson with a liquid which had only recently passed through them.

"It was the night, sir," he said, bending forward a little. "Only the night, outside. These be lonely roads. No one comes or goes."

"You are lying! That sound came from upstairs!"

But Murgunstrumm released his arm from the clutching fingers and slid backward. He was grinning hideously. Without a word he retreated into the shadows of the doorway and vanished.

And Kermeff, turning again in his chair, sat quite without motion for more than a minute. He gazed at the glasses of red wine before him. Then, as if remembering something, he lifted both his hands, palms up, stared fixedly at them, and mumbled slowly, almost inaudibly:

"His arm—his arm was cold and flabby—cold like dead tissue . . ."

8. *The Winged Thing*

Murgunstrumm did not return. The four guests sat alone at their table,

waiting. The room, with its pin points of groping, wavering, uncertain candle-light, was otherwise empty and very still. Paul, bending forward quietly, abnormally calm and self-contained now that the moment of action had arrived, said in a low voice:

"It is time to do what we came here to do."

Kermeff studied him intently, as if remembering all at once that they had come here for a reason. Allenby remained motionless, remembering other things more close at hand and more Tartarean. Matt Jeremy's fists knotted, eager to take something in their powerful grip and crush it.

"What do you mean?" Kermeff said warily.

"We must overpower him."

"But—"

"If I once get that filthy neck in my fingers," Jeremy flared, "I'll break it!"

"There are four of us," Paul said evenly. "We can handle him. Then, before the others return, we can explore this house from top to bottom."

"It won't take four, sir," Jeremy growled. "I'm just itchin' to show that dirty toad what two good human hands can do to him."

"Human hands?" It was Allenby interrupting in a cracked mumble. "Do you mean . . .?"

"I mean he ain't human, that's what! But when he comes back here, I'll—" Jeremy gulped a mouthful of red wine and laughed ominously in his throat—"I'll strangle him until he thinks he is!"

"Not when he first returns," Paul commanded sharply. "He suspects us already. He'll be on guard."

"Well, then—"

"Let him bring food. Then I'll ask him for—"

A sudden hissing sound came from Allenby's tight lips. Paul turned quickly. The door of the inner room had opened, and Murgunstrumm stood there, watching wolfishly, listening. He glared a moment, then vanished again. And presently, carrying a tray in his malformed hands, he limped into view again.

He said nothing as he lowered the tray to the table and slid the dishes onto the white cloth. Methodically he reached out with his long arms and placed four cracked plates in their proper positions. Knives and forks and spoons, black and lustreless, as if removed from some dark drawer for the first time in years, clinked dully as he pushed them before each of his guests. Then he stood back, his fists flat and bony on the cloth.

"It ain't often we have visitors here no more," he said curtly, looking from one face to another with intent eyes. "But the meat's fresh. Good and fresh. And I'll be askin' you to hurry with it. Near midnight it is, and I'm wantin' to be closin' up for the night."

Kermeff lifted his knife and touched the stuff on his plate. It was steak of some sort, red and rare in brown gravy. The vegetables piled about it were thick and sodden and obviously very old.

Paul said abruptly: "You're expecting visitors?"

"Huh?"

"You're expecting someone to come here?"

The innkeeper glared. His eyes seemed to draw together and become a single penetrating shaft of ochre-hued luminosity.

"No one comes here, I told you."

"Oh, I see. Well, we'll hurry and let you go to bed. Fetch some bread, will you?"

Murgunstrumm swept the table with his eyes. Mumbling, he limped away; and as he reached the doorway leading to the other room he turned and looked sharply back. Then he disappeared, and Paul said viciously, crowding over his plate:

"This time, Jeremy. As soon as he returns. If we fail—"

"Listen!"

There was a sound outside. The sound of a motor. It seeped into the room with a dull vibrant hum, growing louder. Out there in the road a car was approaching. Paul's hands clenched. If it were coming here—

He heard something else then. The shrill blast of a horn, just once. And then, from the inner room, Murgunstrumm came limping, one-two, one-two, one-two, with quick steps. He seized the lantern from its hook on the wall. He lit it and proceeded to the door, without a glance at the table.

Jeremy clutched the cloth spasmodically, ready to rise.

"No!" Paul cried in a whisper. "No! Not now!"

The door creaked open. Murgunstrumm scraped over the threshold. A breath of cold sweet air swept into the room, rustling the table cloth. The four men at the table sat quite still, silent, waiting.

There were voices outside, and the drone of the car's engine was suddenly still. Then footsteps crunched on the gravel walk and clicked on the stone flagging as they neared the door. An accusing, resentful voice, low yet audible, said thickly:

"That other car, Murgunstrumm? You have visitors?"

The innkeeper's reply was a whisper. Then, in a shrill feminine voice, lifted in mock horror, so typical of character that Paul could almost see the dainty eyebrows go up in assumed consternation:

"Goodness, what an odd hangout! I shan't stay here long. Why, I'd be thoroughly frightened to death."

Laughter—and then the door opened wider, revealing two figures very close together, and behind them the restive halo of Murgunstrumm's bobbing lantern.

The man was in evening clothes, straight, smiling, surveying the room with slightly narrowed eyes. Certainly he seemed out of place here, where every separate thing reeked of age and decay. Yet something about him was not so incongruous. His eyes glittered queerly, with a phosphorescent force that suggested ancient lust and wisdom. And his lips were thick, too thick, curled back

in a sinister scowl as he peered suddenly at the four men at the table, and nodded. Then, whispering something to his companion, he moved toward the flickering candle-points in the misty gloom.

The woman was younger, perhaps twenty, perhaps less. A mere girl, Paul decided, watching her covertly. The sort of girl who would go anywhere in the spirit of reckless adventure, who ridiculed conventions and sought everlasting excitement, fearing nothing and conquering all doubts with ready laughter.

And she was lovely. Her gown was of deep restless black, trailing the crude floor as she moved into the shadows. Her white wrap—ermine, it must be—was a blob of dazzling brilliance in the well of semidarkness which leaped out to engulf her.

To a remote table near the wall they went together, and their conversation was merely a murmur, containing no audible words. They leaned there close to each other, their hands meeting between them. And Murgunstrumm, flat against the closed door with the lantern fuming in his dangling hand, followed their movements with eyes of abhorrent anticipation—sloe eyes that seemed to be no part of the man himself, but separate twin orbs of malice.

Then it was that Jeremy, bending close over the table, said almost inaudibly: "Shall I go for him, sir? Them others won't interfere."

"No," Paul said quickly. "Wait."

Jeremy subsided, muttering. His hands knotted and unclenched significantly. Then he stiffened, for Murgunstrumm was groping over the floor toward them, swinging the lantern. Stopping just behind Paul's chair, the proprietor blinked sullenly into each man's face, and said harshly, nervously:

"Ye'll have to go."

"But we've only just been served. We haven't had time to—"

"Ye'll have to go. Now."

"Look here," Paul said impatiently. "We're not bothering your guests. We're . . ."

He stopped. Gazing at Murgunstrumm, he saw something in the far part of the room that caused the words to die on his lips and made him recoil involuntarily. His hands gripped the table. Murgunstrumm, seeing the sudden intentness of his gaze, turned slowly and peered in the same direction.

There in the near darkness a door had opened noiselessly. It hung open now, and the threshold was filled with a silent, erect human figure. Even as the four men at the table watched it fearfully, the figure moved out of the aperture and advanced with slow, mechanical steps.

The man was in black and white, the contrasting black and white of evening attire. But there was nothing immaculate about him. His hair was rumpled, crawling crudely about his flat forehead. His chalk-colored face was a mask, fixed and expressionless. He walked with the exaggerated stride of a man seeped, saturated with liquor. His eyes were wide open, gleaming. His lips were wet and red.

And there was something else, visible in ghastly detail as the lantern light fell upon it. A stain marred the crumpled whiteness of his stiff shirt-front—a fresh glistening stain of bright scarlet, which was blood.

He stood quite still, staring. For an instant there was no other movement in the room. Then, mumbling throaty words, Murgunstrumm placed the lantern on the table and cautiously advanced to meet him.

And then Paul and the others heard words—guarded, strangely vague words that for all their lack of meaning were nevertheless hideously suggestive, significant and, to Paul, who alone understood them, the ultimate of horror.

“You have finished?” Murgunstrumm demanded eagerly.

The other nodded heavily, searching the cripple’s face with his eyes.

“I am finished. It is your turn now.”

Trembling violently, Murgunstrumm reached out an unsteady hand to claw the man’s arm.

“Now?” he cried hungrily, sucking his lips. “I can go now?”

“In a moment. First I would talk to you. These strangers here . . .”

But Paul heard no more. The table quivered under his hands and lurched suddenly into him, hurling him backward. A harsh, growling cry came from the other side of it; and then, all at once, someone was racing to the door. It was Allenby, utterly unnerved by what he had just seen, and seeking desperately to escape.

And he was quick, amazingly quick. The door clattered back on its hinges before any other inmate of the room moved. Arms outflung, Allenby clawed his way through the aperture, shouting incoherently. And then Paul was on his feet, lurching forward.

“Stay here!” he cried to Jeremy, who would have followed him. “Hold Kermeff!”

The threshold was empty when he reached it. He stopped, bewildered by the vast darkness before him. Vaguely he saw that Murgunstrumm and the creature in black and white, standing in the middle of the room, were quite motionless, watching every move. Then he stumbled over the sill, into the gloom of the path.

Nothing moved. The clearing was a silent black expanse of shadow, flat and empty under its pall of decayed atmosphere. The air was cold, pungent, sweeping into Paul’s face as he swayed there. High above, feeble stars were visible.

Blindly Paul ran down the driveway, staring on either side. He stopped again, muttering. There was no movement anywhere, no sign of the man who had fled. Nothing but night and cold darkness. And a low-hanging winding-sheet of shallow vapor, swirling lazily between earth and heaven.

But Allenby had to be found. If he escaped and got back to the Rehobeth Hotel, he would use Henry Gates’ phone to summon help. He would call the police at Marsden. He would lead a searching party here. And then everything that mattered would be over. The madhouse again. And Ruth would never be released from the asylum at Morrisdale.

Savagely Paul slashed on through the deep grass, moving farther and farther from the open door of the inn. Allenby had not reached the road; that was certain. He was hiding, waiting for an opportunity to creep away unobserved.

Paul's lips whitened. He glanced toward the car. The car—that was it. The key was still in the lock. Allenby knew it was. Paul stood stock still, watching. Then, smiling grimly, he deliberately turned his back and moved in the opposite direction.

Without hesitating, he blundered on, as if searching the reeds for a prone figure which might be lying there. A long moment dragged by, and another. There was no sound.

And then it came. A scurrying of feet on the gravel walk, as a crouching figure darted from the shadows under the very wall of the house. An instant of scraping, scuttling desperation, as the man flung himself across that narrow stretch of intervening space. Then a sharp thud, as the car door was flung back.

Paul whirled. Like a hound he leaped forward, racing toward the road. The motor roared violently, just ahead of him. The car door was still open. Allenby was hunched over the wheel, struggling with the unfamiliar instruments.

And he was fiendishly quick, even then. Too quick. The car jerked forward, bounding over the uneven surface. Like a great black beast it swept past the man who ran toward it, even as he reached the edge of the road. Then, with a triumphant roar, it was clear.

Clear! Paul stumbled to a stop. A dry moan came from his lips as his prey screamed beyond reach. He stood helpless—for a fraction of an instant.

Then, out of his pocket, his revolver leaped into his fist. He spun about. Twin spurts of flame burned toward the fleeing shape which was already careening from side to side in wild sweeps. There was an explosion, sharp and bellowing. The car lurched drunkenly, whirled sideways. Brakes screeched. Like a blundering mastodon the machine shot into the deep grass as the bursting tire threw it out of Allenby's feeble control.

And Paul was running again. He was beside the groaning shape before the driver could get out from behind the wheel. The revolver dug viciously into Allenby's ribs.

"Get out!"

Allenby hesitated, then obeyed, trembling.

"I—I won't go back there!"

The gun pressed deeper. Allenby stared suddenly into Paul's face. What he saw there made him shudder. He stood quite still. Then, pushing the revolver away nervously, he mumbled.

"You—you are not as mad as I thought."

"You should have known that before you tried to get away."

"Perhaps I should have."

"You're going back with me."

Allenby's voice trembled. "I have no alternative?"

"None."

With a shrug of defeat, the physician walked very quietly, very slowly, back toward the house.

The Gray Toad Inn had not changed. At one table Kermeff sat stiff and silent, under Jeremy's cold scrutiny. In the corner, among the shadows, sat the girl of the ermine wrap with her escort, only vaguely interested in what had happened.

Murgunstrumm still stood in the center of the floor, staring. The creature who had come, only a few moments before, from the bowels of the house, now sat alone at a nearby table. He glanced up as the door closed behind Paul and the physician. Then he looked down again, indifferently. And then, eagerly, Murgunstrumm approached him.

"Can I go now?" the cripple demanded.

"Yes. Get out."

Murgunstrumm rubbed thick hands together in anticipation. Breathing harshly, noisily, he wheeled about and limped quickly back to the table where his four guests were once again sitting quietly. His mouth was moving as he swept the lantern away and turned again.

He had forgotten, now, the presence of his undesirable guests. He did not look at them. His eyes, stark with want, were visioning something else—something he had waited for for hours. And he was trembling, as if in the grip of fever, as he started toward the door where the strange gentleman had first appeared.

But he did not reach it. Before he had covered half the intervening distance he stopped very abruptly and wheeled with a snarl of impatience, glaring at one of the covered windows. He stood rigid, listening.

Whatever he heard, it was a sound so inaudible and slight that only his own ears, attuned to it by long habit, caught its vibrations. The men at the table, turning jerkily to peer in the same direction, at the same window, saw nothing, heard nothing. But Murgunstrumm was scraping hurriedly toward the aperture, swinging his lantern resentfully.

He twisted the shade noisily. As it careened up, exposing the bleak oblong of unclean glass, the lantern light fell squarely upon the opening, revealing a fluttering shape outside. More than that the watching men did not discover, for the innkeeper's hands clawed at the window latch and heaved the barrier up quickly.

It was a winged thing that swooped through the opening into the room. The same hairy obscene creature that had whispered to Murgunstrumm, more than an hour ago, to admit the four unsuspecting guests! Rushing through the aperture now, it flopped erratically about the lantern, then darted to the ceiling and momentarily hung there, as if eyeing the occupants of the inn with satisfaction. Murgunstrumm closed the window hurriedly and drew the shade again. And the bat—for bat it was—dropped suddenly, plummet-like, to the table where sat the man who had recently come from the inner rooms.

It happened very quickly. At one moment, as Paul and his companions gazed in sudden dread, the winged thing was fluttering blindly about the ghastly white face of the man who sat there. Next moment there was no winged thing. It had vanished utterly, disintegrated into nothingness; and there at the table, instead of a solitary red-lipped man in evening clothes, sat two men. Two men strangely alike, similarly dressed, with the same colorless masks of faces.

They spoke in whispers for a moment, then turned, both of them, to glance at the four men near them. And one—the one who had appeared from the mysterious internals of the inn—said casually:

“We have visitors to-night, eh, Costillan?”

The answer was a triumphant gloating voice, obviously meant to be overhead.

“Ay, and why not? They were coming here as I was leaving. Our fool of an innkeeper would have refused them admission.”

“So? But he was afraid. He is always afraid that he will one day be discovered. We must cure that, Costillan. Even now he has told your guests to leave.”

The man called Costillan—he who had an instant before been something more than a man—turned sharply in his chair. Paul, staring at him mutely, saw a face suddenly distorted with passion. And the man’s voice, flung suddenly into the silence, was vibrant with anger.

“Murgunstrumm!”

Hesitantly, furtively, the cripple limped toward him.

“What—what is it, sir?”

“You would have allowed our guests to depart, my pretty?”

“I—I was—”

“Afraid they would learn things, eh?” The man’s fingers closed savagely over Murgunstrumm’s wrist. He made no attempt to guard his voice. Obviously he held only contempt for the men who were listening. “Have we not promised you protection?”

“Yes, but—”

“But you would have let them leave! Did I not order you to keep them here? Did I not whisper to you that I might return—hungry?”

Murgunstrumm licked his lips, cringing. And suddenly, with a snarl, the creature flung him back.

“Go down to your foul den and stay there!”

At that Murgunstrumm scuttled away.

No sound came from Paul’s lips. He sat without stirring, fascinated and afraid. And then a hand closed over his arm, and Jeremy’s voice said thickly, harshly:

“I’m goin’ to get out of here. This place ain’t human!”

Paul clutched at the fingers and held them. Escape was impossible; he knew that. It meant death, now. But he had only two hands: he could not also hold Kermeff and the physician’s terrified companion. Lurching to his feet,

Kermeff snarled viciously:

"If we stay here another instant, those fiends will—"

"You cannot leave," Paul countered dully.

"We shall see!" And Kermeff kicked back his chair violently as he reeled away from the table. Allenby, rising after him, clung very close.

A revolver lay in Paul's pocket. His hand slid down and closed over it, then relaxed. Jeremy, frowning into his face, muttered thickly. The two physicians stumbled toward the door.

Sensing what was coming, Paul sat quite still and peered at the nearby table. The two men in evening attire had stopped talking. They were watching with hungry, triumphant eyes. They followed every movement as Kermeff and Allenby groped to the door. And then, silent as shadows, they rose from the table.

The two fleeing men saw them each at the same instant. Both stood suddenly still. Kermeff's face lost every trace of color, even in the yellow hue of the lamp. Allenby cried aloud and trembled violently. The two creatures advanced with slow, deliberate steps, gliding steps, from such an angle that retreat to the door was cut off.

And then, abruptly, Paul saw something else, something infinitely more horrible.

The remaining two inhabitants of this place of evil—the man and woman who had entered together but a short time ago—were rising silently from their table near the wall. The man's face, swathed in the glow of the candlelight beneath it, was a thing of triumph, smiling hideously. The girl—the girl in the white ermine wrap—stood facing him like one in the grip of deep sleep. No expression marred her features; no light glowed in her eyes.

The candle flame flickered on the table between them. The man spoke. Spoke softly, persuasively, as one speaks to a mindless hypnotic. And then, taking her arm, he led her very quietly toward the door through which Murgunstrumm had vanished.

And, as on that other occasion when he had lain in the deep grass of the clearing outside, Paul's mind broke with sudden madness.

"No, no!" he shrieked. "Don't go with him!"

He rushed forward blindly, tumbling a chair out of his path. At the other end of the room, the creature turned to look at him, and laughed softly. And then the man and the girl were gone. The door swung silently shut. A lock clicked. Even as Paul's hands seized the knob, a vibrant laugh echoed through the heavy panels. And the door was fast.

Savagely Paul turned.

"Jeremy! Jeremy, help me! We can't let her go—"

The cry choked on his lips. Across the room, Jeremy was standing transfixed, staring. Kermeff and Allenby huddled together, rigid with fear. And the two macabre demons in evening clothes were advancing with arms outthrust.

9. *A Strange Procession*

They were no longer men. Like twin vultures they slunk forward, an unholy metamorphosis already taking place in their appearance. A misty bluish haze enveloped them, originating it seemed from the very pores of their obscene bodies, growing thicker and deeper until it was in itself a thing of motion, writhing about them like heavy opaque fog moved by an unseen breeze. More and more pungent it grew, until only a single feature of those original loathsome forms was visible—until only *eyes* glowed through it.

Kermeff and Allenby retreated before those eyes in stark terror. They were stabbing pits of swirling green flame, deep beyond human knowledge of depth, ghastly wide, hungry. They came on relentlessly, two separate awful pairs of them, glittering through dimly human shapes of sluggish, evil-smelling vapor.

As they came, those twin shapes of abomination, uncouth hands extended before them. Misty, distorted fingers curled forth to grope toward the two cringing victims. Allenby and Kermeff fell away from them like men already dead: Kermeff stiff, mechanical, frozen to a fear-wracked carcass of robotlike motion; Allenby mumbling, ghastly gray with terror.

Back, step by step, the two physicians retreated, until at last the wall pressed into their bodies, ending their flight. And still the twin forms of malevolence came on, vibrant with evil.

Not until then did reason return to the remaining two men in the room. Jeremy flung himself forward so violently that his careening hips sent the table skidding sideways with a clink of jumping china. Paul, rushing past him, flung out a rasping command.

“The cross! The cross under your coats!”

Perhaps it was the stark torment of the words, perhaps the very sound of his voice, as shrill as cutting steel. Something, at any rate, penetrated the fear that held Kermeff and Allenby helpless. Something drove into Kermeff’s brain and gave him life, movement, power of thought. The physician’s big hands clawed up and ripped down again. And there, gleaming white and livid on his chest hung the cross-shaped strips of cloth which Paul had sewn there.

Its effect was instantaneous. The advancing shapes of repugnance became suddenly quite still, then recoiled as if the cross were a thing of flame searing into them. Kermeff shouted luridly, madly. He stumbled a step forward, ripping his coat still farther apart. The shapes retreated with uncanny quickness, avoiding him.

But the eyes were pools of absolute hate. They drilled deep into Kermeff’s soul, stopping him. He could not face them. And as he stood there, flat-pressed against the wall, the uncouth fiends before him began once again to assume their former shape. The bluish haze thinned. Outlines of black, blurred with the white of shirt-fronts, glowed through the swirling vapor. When Paul looked again the shapes were men: and the men stood close together, eyeing Kermeff

and Allenby—and the cross—with desperate diabolical eyes.

Suddenly one of them, the one called Costillan, moved away. Swiftly he walked across the floor—was it walking or floating or some unearthly condition halfway between?—and vanished through the doorway which led to the mysterious rear rooms. The other, retreating slowly to the outside door, flattened there with both arms outflung, batlike, and waited, glaring with bottomless green orbs at the four men who confronted him.

And then Paul moved. Shrill words leaped to his lips: "That girl—we've got to get to her before—"

But the cry was drowned in another voice, Jeremy's. Stumbling erect, Jeremy said hoarsely:

"Come on. I'm gettin' out of here."

"Look out! You can't—"

But Jeremy was already across the intervening space, confronting the creature who barred the barrier.

"Get out of the way!" he bellowed. "I've had enough of this."

There was no answer. The vulture simply stood there, smiling a little in anticipation. And suddenly, viciously, a revolver leaped into Jeremy's fist.

"Get out of the way!"

The creature laughed. His boring eyes fixed themselves in Jeremy's face. They deepened in color, became luminous, virulent, flaming again. And Jeremy, staggering from the force of them, reeled backward.

"I'll kill you!" he screeched. "I'll—"

He lost control. Panic-stricken, he flung up the revolver and pulled the trigger again and again. The room trembled with the roar of the reports. And then the gun hung limp in Jeremy's fingers. He stood quite still, licking his lips, staring. Amazed, he stepped backward into the table, upsetting a glass of red liquid over the white cloth.

For the man in evening clothes, despite the bullets which had burned through him, still stood motionless against the closed door, and still laughed with that leering, abhorrent expression of triumph.

There was silence after that for many minutes, broken finally by the familiar *shf-shf-shf* of limping feet. Into the room, glaring from one still form to another, came Murgunstrumm, and behind him the companion of the undead fiend at the door.

Costillan pointed with a long thin arm at Kermeff, and at the white cross which hung on the physician's breast.

"Remove it," he said simply.

Murgunstrumm's lips curled. His huge hands lifted, as if only too eager to make contact with the cross and the human flesh beneath it. Slowly, malignantly, he advanced upon Kermeff's still form, arms outstretched, mouth twisted back over protruding teeth. And the mouth was fresh with blood—blood which had not come from the cripple's own lips.

But Paul was before him, and a revolver lay in Paul's fingers. The muzzle of the gun pointed squarely into the innkeeper's face.

"Stand back," Paul ordered curtly.

Murgunstrumm hesitated. He took another step forward.

"Back! Do you want to die?"

Fear showed in the cripple's features. He came no closer. And a thin breath of relief sobbed from Paul's lips as he realized the truth. He had not known, had not been sure, whether Murgunstrumm was a member of the ghoulish clan that inhabited this place, or was a mere servant, a mere confederate.

"Jeremy," Paul's voice was level again with resolution.

"What—what do you want, sir?"

"Lock every window and door in this room except the one behind me."

"But, sir—"

"Do as I say! We've got to find that girl before any harm comes to her—if it's not already too late. When you've locked the exits, take— You have a pencil?"

Jeremy groped in his pockets, frowning. Fumbling with what he drew out, he said falteringly:

"I've a square of chalk, sir. It's only cue chalk, from the master's billiard room."

"Good. When you've locked the doors and windows, make a cross on each one as clear and sharp as you can. Quickly!"

Jeremy stared, then moved away. The other occupants of the room watched him furtively. Only one moved—Costillan. And Costillan, snarling with sudden vehemence, stepped furtively to the door and flattened there.

One by one Jeremy secured the windows and marked them with a greenish cross, including the locked door in the farther shadows, through which the girl in the white wrap had vanished. When he turned at last to the final barrier, which led to the gravel walk outside, his way was blocked by the threatening shape which clung there, glowering at him, waiting for him to come within reach.

"One side," Jeremy blurted. "One side or I'll—"

"Not that way!" Paul cried sharply. "The cross on your chest, man. Show it."

Jeremy faltered, then laughed grimly. Deliberately he unbuttoned his jacket and advanced. The creature's eyes widened, glowing most strangely. Unflinching, Jeremy strode straight toward them.

Just once, as if fighting back an unconquerable dread, Costillan lifted his arms to strike. Then, cringing, he slunk sideways. And at the same moment, seeing the barrier unguarded, Kermeff lurched forward.

"I'm getting out of here!"

"You're staying, Kermeff."

The physician jerked around, glaring. Paul's revolver shifted very slightly away from Murgunstrumm's tense body to include Kermeff in its range of control. Kermeff's forehead contracted with hate.

"I tell you I won't stay!"

But he made no attempt to reach the door, and Paul said evenly to Jeremy:

"Lock it."

Jeremy locked it and made the sign of the cross. And then Paul's finger curled tighter on the trigger of the gun. The muzzle was still on a line with Murgunstrumm's cowering carcass. Paul said roughly:

"Allenby!"

"Yes?"

"You are remaining here, to make sure nothing attempts to enter from the outside. Do you understand? And if the girl in the white wrap comes back through that door"—Paul pointed quickly to the locked barrier which had baffled him only an instant before—"or if that fiend comes back alone, lock the door on this side and keep the key!"

"I can't stay here alone!"

"Nothing will harm you, man. Keep your coat open, or strip it off. They can't come near the cross. Sit at the table and don't move. We're going."

"You're going? Where?" Allenby croaked.

"To find that girl, you fool! And you"—Paul glared into Murgunstrumm's bloated face—"are going to lead us."

A bestial growl issued from the innkeeper's lips. He fell back, rumbling. But the revolver followed him and menaced him with dire meaning, and he thought better of his refusal. Silently he scuffed backward toward the inner door.

"For your life, Allenby," Paul snapped, "don't lose your head and try to escape." He took the chalk from Jeremy's hand and dropped it on the table. "As soon as we've passed through this door, mark it with the sign of the cross, then stay here on pain of death. You're safe here, and with the door sanctified, and locked on the outside, these—these blood-hungry ghouls cannot escape. Do you hear?"

"I'll stay," Allenby muttered. "For the love of Heaven, come back soon. And—and give me a gun!"

"A gun is no good to you."

"But if I've got to stay here alone, I—"

Paul glared at the man suspiciously. But there was no sign of treachery in Allenby's white face. No sign that he perhaps wanted the revolver for another reason, to use on the men who had brought him here. And a gun might really prove valuable. It would give the man courage, at any rate.

But Paul took no chances. "Put your revolver on the table, Jeremy," he said curtly. "If you touch it before we're out of this room, Allenby, I'll shoot you. Do you understand?"

"I—I only want it for protection, I tell you!"

Jeremy slid the weapon within reach of the man's hand. Allenby stood stiff, staring at it. And then Paul's revolver pressed again into the thick flabbiness of Murgunstrumm's shrunken body, forcing the cripple over the threshold.

"Take the lantern, Jeremy."

The door closed then, shutting out the last view of the chamber—the last view of two thwarted demons in evening clothes, standing motionless, staring; and Allenby, close to the table, reaching for the revolver and flinging back his coat at the same time, to expose the stern white mark of protection on his chest.

The lantern sputtered eerily in Jeremy's hand. He turned, locked the door carefully, removed the key. Murgunstrumm watched silently.

"Now." Paul's weapon dug viciously into the cripple's abdomen. "Where is she? Quickly!"

"I—I ain't sure where they went. Maybe—"

"You know!"

"I tell you they might've gone anywhere. I ain't never sure."

"Then you'll show us every last room and corner of this devilish house until we find her. Cellar and all."

"Cellar?" The repeated word was a quick, passionate whisper. "No, no, there be no cellar here!"

"And if you try any tricks, I'll kill you."

It was a strange procession filing silently through the musty rooms and corridors of the ancient structure. Murgunstrumm, a contorted, malformed monkey swathed in dancing lantern light, led the way with limping steps, scraping resentfully over the bare floors. Very close behind him strode Paul, leveled revolver ready to cut short any move the man might make to escape or turn on his captors. Jeremy came next, huge and silent; and last of all, Kermeff, in whom all thought of rebellion had seemingly been replaced by deepening dread and his acute realization that here were things beyond the minds of men.

Room after room they hurried through—empty, dead rooms, with all windows locked and curtained, and every shutter closed. In one, obviously the kitchen, an oil stove was still warm and a large platter of fresh meat lay on the unclean table.

Room after room. Empty, all of them, of life and laughter. In some stood beds, stripped to bare springs; bare tables; chairs coated with dust. Like cells of a sunken dungeon the chambers extended deeper and deeper into the bowels of the house. From one to another the strange procession moved, eating its anxious way with the clutching glare of the lantern.

"There is nothing here," Kermeff said at last, scowling impatiently. "We are fools to go farther."

"There is something, somewhere."

Murgunstrumm, leering crookedly, said:

"They might've gone outdoors. I ain't never sure where."

"We have not yet explored upstairs."

"Huh?"

"Or down."

"Down? No, no! There be no downstairs! I told you—"

"We'll see. Here; here's something." Paul stopped as the advancing lantern rays touched a flight of black stairs winding up into complete darkness. "Lead on, Murgunstrumm. No tricks."

Murgunstrumm scuffed to the bottom of the steps and moved up with maddening slowness, gripping the rail. And suddenly, then, the man behind him hesitated. A single word, "Listen!" whispered softly through Paul's lips.

"What is it?" Kerneff said thickly.

"I heard—"

"No, no!" Murgunstrumm's cry was vibrant with fear. "There be no one up here!"

"Be still!"

The cracked voice subsided gutturally. Another sound was audible above it. A strange nameless sound, vaguely akin to the noise of sucking lips or the hiss of gusty air through a narrow tube. A grotesque sound, half human, half bestial.

"An animal," Kerneff declared in a low voice. "An animal of some sort, feeding—"

But Paul's shrill voice interrupted.

"Up, Murgunstrumm! Up quickly!"

"There be nothin', I tell you!"

"Be quiet!"

The cripple advanced again, moving reluctantly, as if some inner bonds held him back. His face was convulsed. He climbed morosely, slowly hesitatingly before each step. And his move, when it came, was utterly unexpected.

He whirled abruptly, confronting his captors. Luridly he cried out, so that his voice carried into every corner of the landing above:

"I tell you there be no one! I tell you—"

Paul's hand clapped savagely over his mouth, crushing the outcry into a gurgling hiss. Jeremy and Kerneff stood taut, dismayed. Then Paul's gun rammed into the cripple's back, prodding him on. No mistaking the meaning of that grim muzzle. One more sound would bring a bullet.

Groping again, Murgunstrumm at last reached the end of the climb, where the railing twisted sharply back on itself and the upper landing lay straight and level and empty before him. The sucking sounds had ceased. The corridor lay in absolute uncanny silence, nerve-wracking and repelling.

"That noise," Paul said curtly, "came from one of these rooms. We've got to locate it."

"What—what was it?"

There was no answer. The reply in Paul's mind could not be uttered aloud. Kerneff did not know, and the truth would make a gibbering idiot of him. Kerneff, for all his medical knowledge, was an ignorant blind fool in matters macabre.

And another array of gloomy rooms extended before them, waiting to be examined. With Murgunstrumm probing the way, the four men stole forward and

visited each chamber, one after another. There was nothing. These rooms were like those below, abandoned, sinister with memories of long-dead laughter, dust-choked, broodingly still.

"Something," Kermeff gasped suddenly, "is watching us. I can feel it!"

The others glanced at him, and Jeremy forced a dry laugh. Half the corridor lay behind them; the remaining doors stretched ahead beyond the restless circle of light. Paul muttered fretfully and pushed the innkeeper before him over the next threshold. His companions blundered close behind. The lantern light flooded the chamber, disclosing a blackened window and yellowish time-scarred walls. A four-poster bed stood against the wall, covered with mattress and crumpled blanket.

And Paul, too, as he bent over the bed examining the peculiar brownish stains there, felt eyes upon him. He whirled about bitterly, facing the doorway—and stood as if a hand of ice had suddenly gripped his throat, forcing a frosty breath from his open mouth.

A man stood there, garbed meticulously in black evening clothes, smiling vindictively. He was the same creature who earlier in the evening had escorted the girl in the white ermine wrap into the inn. The same, but somehow different; for the man's eyes were glowing now with that hellish green light, and his lips were full, thick and very red.

He said nothing. His gaze passed from Paul's colorless face to Murgunstrumm's, and the cripple answered it with a triumphant step forward. Kermeff shrank back until the bed post crushed in to his back and held him rigid. Jeremy crouched, waiting. The creature stirred slightly and advanced.

But Paul did not wait. He dared not. In one move he wrenched his coat open, baring the white sign beneath, and staggered forward. The intruder hesitated. The green eyes contracted desperately to slits of fire. The face writhed into a mask of hate. Violently the man spun back, recoiling with arms upflung. And the doorway, all at once, was empty.

For an instant Paul was limp, overcome. Then he was across the threshold, lurching into the hall in time to see a shape—a tawny, four-legged shape, wolfish in contour—race down the corridor and bound into darkness, to land soundlessly upon the stairs and vanish into lower gloom.

There was nothing else. Nothing but Kermeff, dragging at his arm and saying violently:

"He'll overpower Allenby downstairs!"

"Allenby's safe," Paul said dully, mechanically. "He has the cross."

He remembered the revolver in his hand and raised it quickly, swinging back to face Murgunstrumm. But the cripple was helpless, held in Jeremy's big hands, in the doorway.

And so they continued their investigation, and at the end of the long passage-way, in the final room of all, found what Paul in the bottom of his heart had expected. There, on the white sheets of an enameled bed, lay the lady of the



ermine wrap, arms outflung, head lolling over the side, lifeless hair trailing the floor.

Murgunstrumm, seeing her there, rushed forward to stand above her, glaring down, working his lips, muttering incoherent words. He would have dropped to his knees beside her, clawing at her fiendishly, had not Jeremy flung him back.

For she was dead. Kermeff, bending above her, announced that without hesitation. Her gown had been torn at the breast, exposing soft flesh as delicately white as fine-grained gypsum. An ethereal smile of bewilderment marred her lips. And upon her throat, vivid in the ochre glare of the lantern, were two blots of blood, two cruel incisions in the jugular vein.

Paul stepped back mutely, turning away. He waited at the door until Kermeff, examining the marks, stood up at last and came to him.

"I don't understand," the physician was saying stiffly. "Such marks—I have never encountered them before."

"The marks of the vampire," Paul muttered.

"What?"

"You wouldn't understand, Kermeff." And then Paul seized the man's arm abruptly, jerking him around. "Listen to me, Kermeff. I didn't force you to come to this horrible place for revenge. I only wanted to prove to you that I'm not mad. But we've got to destroy these fiends. It doesn't matter why we came here. We've got to make sure no one else ever comes. Do you understand?"

Kermeff hesitated, biting his lips nervously. Then he stiffened.

"Whatever you say," he said thickly, "I will do."

Paul swung about then, and called quickly to Jeremy. And Jeremy, looking up from the limp figure on the bed, had to drag Murgunstrumm with him in order to make the innkeeper move away. A fantastic hunger gleamed in Murgunstrumm's sunken eyes. His hands twitched convulsively. He peered back and continued to peer back until Jeremy shoved him roughly over the threshold and kicked the door shut.

"Lead the way, Murgunstrumm," Paul snapped. "We have not yet seen the cellars."

The cripple's lips twisted open.

"No, no! There be no cellars. I have told you—"

"Lead the way!"

10. A Girl's Voice

The cellars of the Gray Toad Inn were sunken pits of gloom and silence, deep below the last level of rotted timbers and plastered walls. From the obscurity of the lower corridor a flight of wooden steps plunged sharply into nothingness; and Murgunstrumm, groping down them, was forced to bend almost double lest a low-hanging beam crush his great malformed head.

No amount of prodding or whispered threats could induce the captured

innkeeper to hurry. He probed each step with his clublike feet before descending. And there was that in his eyes, in the whole convulsed mask of his features, which spoke of virulent dread. The revolver in Paul's hand did not for an instant relax its vigil.

Like a trapped beast, lips moving soundlessly and huge hands twisting at his sides, the cripple reached the bottom and crouched, there against the damp wall, while his captors crowded about him, peering into surrounding darkness.

"Well," Paul said curtly, "what are you waiting for?"

A mutter was Murgunstrumm's only response. Sluggishly he felt his way; and the lantern light, hovering over him, revealed erratic lines of footprints, old and new, in the thick dust of the stone floor. Footprints, all of them, which harmonized with the shape and size of the cripple's own feet. He alone had visited these pits, or else the other visitors had left no marks! And the signs in the dust led deeper and deeper into a labyrinth of impossible gloom, luring the intruders onward.

And here, presently, as in the central square of some medieval, subterranean city, the floor was crossed and recrossed with many lines of footprints, and chambers gaped on all sides, chambers small and square, with irregular walls of stone and high ceilings of beams and plaster.

Broken chairs, tables, choked every corner, for these rooms had been used, in the years when the house above had been a place of merrymaking and laughter, as storage vaults. Now they were vaults of decay and impregnable gloom. Spiderwebs dangled in every dark corner; and the spiders themselves, brown and bloated and asleep, were the only living inhabitants.

And with each successive chamber Murgunstrumm's features contracted more noticeably to a mask of animal fear. Not fear of the revolver, but the dread of a caged beast that something dear to him—food, perhaps, or some object upon which he loved to feast his eyes—would be taken from him. As he approached a certain doorway, at last, he drew back, muttering.

"There be nothing more. I have told you there be nothing here."

Only the pressure of the revolver forced him on, and he seemed to shrivel into himself with apprehension as he clawed through the aperture and the lantern light revealed the chamber's contents.

There was a reason for his reluctance. The room was large enough to have been at one time two separate enclosures, made into a whole by the removal of the partition. And it was a display gallery of horrible possessions. The three men who entered behind Murgunstrumm, keeping close together, stood as if transfixed, while utter awe and abhorrence welled over them.

It was a vault, choked with things white and gleaming. Things moldy with the death that clung to them. And there was no sound, no intruding breeze to rustle the huge shapeless heap. It was death and mockery flung together in horror. And the men who looked upon it were for an interminable moment stricken mute with the fiendishness of it.



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Then at last Kermeff stepped forward and cried involuntarily:

"Horrible! It is too horrible!"

Jeremy, turning in a slow circle, began to mumble to himself, as if clutching eagerly at something sane, something ordinary, to kill the throbbing of his heart.

"Bones! God, sir, it looks like a slaughterhouse!"

The lantern in Paul's hand was trembling violently, casting jiggling shadows over the array, throwing laughter and hate and passion into gaping faces which would never again, in reality, assume any expression other than the sunken empty glare of death. And Murgunstrumm was in the center of the floor, huddled into himself like a thing without shape. And Kermeff was pacing slowly about, inspecting the stack of disjointed things around him, poking at them professionally and scowling to himself.

"Women, all of them," he announced gutturally. "Young women. Impossible to estimate the number—"

"Let's get out of here!" Jeremy snarled.

Kermeff turned, nodded. And so, jerking Murgunstrumm's shoulder, Paul forced the cripple once again to lead the way. And the inspection continued.

Other chambers revealed nothing. The horror was not repeated. As the procession moved from doorway to doorway, Jeremy said bitterly, touching Paul's arm:

"Why don't you ask him what those things are, sir? He knows."

"I know, too," Paul said heavily.

Jeremy stared at him. The big man fell back, then, as Murgunstrumm, taking advantage of their lack of attention, attempted to scuff past a certain doorway without entering. Fresh footprints led into that particular aperture. And Kermeff was alert. Ignoring the cripple, Kermeff strode into the chamber alone, and suddenly cried aloud in a cracked voice.

There, upon a table, lay a thing infinitely more horrible than any heap of decayed human bones. Murgunstrumm, forced into the room by Paul, strove with a sharp cry to fall back from it, until he was caught up in Jeremy's arms and hurled forward again. And the three intruders stood mute, staring.

A sheet of canvas, ancient and very dirty, partly covered what lay there. A long, bone-handled knife was stuck upright beside it, in the table.

The operation, if such a fiendish process could be so termed, was half completed. Kermeff, faltering to the table, lifted the blanket halfway and let it drop again with a convulsive twitch. Jeremy looked only once. Then, twisting with insane rage, he seized Murgunstrumm's throat in his big hands.

"You did this!" he thundered. "You came down here when that rat came up and told you—told you he was finished. You came down here and—"

"Jeremy." Paul's voice was mechanical, lifeless. "Do you recognize her?"

Jeremy stiffened and looked again. And then a glint of mingled rage and horror and pity came into his eyes. He released the cripple abruptly and stood quite still.



"It's—it's the girl who came in here last night, sir!" he whispered hoarsely. "When you and I was outside alone, in the grass, watchin'—"

"God in Heaven!" Kermeff cried suddenly, reached up with both hands.

Paul had had enough. He swung about to grope to the door, and froze like a paralytic in his tracks.

There in the doorway a revolver was leveled at him in the hands of a leering creature in evening clothes. The revolver was Allenby's; and the man behind it, Costillan, was standing very still, very straight, with parted lips and penetrating eyes that were hypnotic.

Paul acted blindly, desperately, without thinking. Flinging up his own gun, he fired. An answering burst of flame roared in his face. Something razor-sharp and hot lashed into his shoulder, tearing the flesh. He stumbled back, falling across the table where lay that mutilated body. The gun slipped from his fingers; and the creature in the doorway was still there, still smiling, unharmed.

It was Jeremy who leaped for the fallen gun, and Murgunstrumm who fell upon it with the agility of a snake. The man in evening clothes, advancing very slowly, pointed his own weapon squarely at Jeremy's threatening face and said distinctly:

"Back, or you will taste death."

Then Murgunstrumm was up, to his knees, to his feet, clutching the retrieved gun in quivering fingers. Like an ape he stood there, peering first into the stark white faces of Paul's companions, then into the drilling eyes of his master. And Paul, at the same instant, staggered erect and stood swaying, clutching at his shoulder where blood was beginning to seep through the coat.

At sight of the blood, the creature's eyes widened hungrily. He glided forward, lips wide. Then he stopped, as if realizing what he had forgotten. To Murgunstrumm he said harshly:

"Remove that—that abomination! Tear down the cross and rip it to shreds!"

And Murgunstrumm did so. Protected by the menacing revolver in Costillan's hand, and the gun in his own fist, he tore the white cross from Paul's chest and ripped it apart. To Kermeff and Jeremy he did the same. And when he had finished, when the rags lay limp at his feet, the creature in black and white said, smiling:

"Upstairs it will be more pleasant. Come, my friends. This is Murgunstrumm's abattoir, unfit for the business of fastidious men. Come."

Outside, two more of the macabre demons were waiting. They came close as the three victims filed out of the chamber. One of them was the man who had fled from the upper room where lay that other half-naked body with twin punctures in its crushed throat. The other was the companion of the smiling Costillan—the second of the two who had been left in the central room under Allenby's guard.

In grim silence the three horribles led their victims out of the pits, with Murgunstrumm limping triumphantly behind.

Cold dread clawed at Paul's soul during that short journey out of one world of horror into another; dread combined with a hopelessness that left him weak, shuddering. Somehow, now, the resistance had been drawn out of him. Further agony of mind and spirit could drag no more response from flesh and muscle.

He had been so close to success! He had learned every secret of this grim house of hell, and had shown Kermeff the same.

But the truth would avail nothing now. Paul, climbing the stairs slowly, mutely, glanced at Kermeff and moaned inwardly. Kermeff was convinced. Kermeff would have freed Ruth, signed a statement that the girl, after escaping from this house of evil seven months ago, had been not mad but horrified and delirious. But now Kermeff himself would never leave; there would be no statement. Ruth would remain indefinitely in the asylum.

A sound rose above the scrape of footsteps—a sudden hammering on some distant door, and the muffled vibration of a man's voice demanding entrance. The creatures beside Paul glanced at each other quickly. One said, in a low voice:

"It is Maronaine, returning from the city."

"With good fortune, probably. Trust Maronaine."

"Murgunstrumm, go and open the door to him. Wait. One of these fools has the key."

"This one has it," the cripple growled, prodding Jeremy.

"Then take it."

Jeremy stood stiff as the innkeeper's hands groped in his pockets. For an instant it seemed that he would clutch that thick neck in his grip and twist it, despite the danger that threatened. But he held himself rigid. Murgunstrumm, key in hand, stepped back and turned quickly into the dark, swinging the lantern as he limped away.

The revolver pressed again into Paul's back. His captor said quietly, in a voice soft with subtlety:

"And we go in the same direction, my friend, to pay a visit to your friend Allenby."

Allenby! What had happened to him? How had the vampires escaped from the prison chamber where he had been left to guard them? Pacing through the gloom, Paul found the problem almost a relief from the dread of what was coming. In some way the monsters had overcome Allenby. Somehow they had forced him to open one of the doors, or the windows . . .

"Did you hear that, my friend?"

Paul stopped and peered into the colorless features of his persecutor. Kermeff and Jeremy were standing quite still.

"Hear what?"

"Listen."

It came again, the sound that had at first been so soft and muffled that Paul had not heard it. A girl's voice, pleading, uttering broken words. And as he heard

it, a slow, terrible fear crept into Paul's face. The muscles of his body tightened to the breaking point. That voice, it was—

The gun touched him. Mechanically he moved forward again. Darkness hung all about him. Once, turning covertly, he saw that the gloom was so opaque that the moving shapes behind him were invisible. Only the sound of men breathing, and the scrape of feet; only the sight of three pairs of greenish eyes, like glowing balls of phosphorus. There was nothing else.

But resistance was madness. The demons behind him were ghouls born of darkness, vampires of the night, with the eyes of cats.

And so, presently, with deepening dread, he stumbled through the last black room and arrived at the threshold of the central chamber. And there, as his eyes became accustomed again to the glare of the lantern which stood on the table, he saw Allenby lying lifeless on the floor, just beyond the sill. The door closed behind him and he was forced forward; and suddenly the room seemed choked with moving forms. Kermeff and Jeremy were close beside him. The three macabre demons hovered near. Allenby lay there, silent and prone. Murgunstrumm—

Murgunstrumm was standing, bat-like, against the opposite barrier which led to the night outside, glaring, peering invidiously at two people who were visible at a nearby table. These were the guests whom the innkeeper had just admitted. Man and woman. The man, like all the others, was standing now beside the table with arms folded on his chest, lips curled in a hungry smile. The girl stared in mute horror straight into Paul's frozen face.

The girl was Ruth LeGeurn.

11. Compelling Eyes . . .

"You see, your friend possessed a weakling's mind."

The man with the gun kicked Allenby's dead body dispassionately, grinning.

"He had no courage. He was bound with fear and unable to combat the force of two pairs of eyes upon him. He became—hypnotized, shall we say? And obedient, very obedient. Soon you will understand how it was done."

Paul hardly heard the words. He still stared at the girl, and she at him. For seven mad months he had longed for that face, moaned for it at night, screamed for it. Now his prayers were answered, and he would have given his very soul, his life, to have them recalled. Yet she was lovely, even in such surroundings, lovely despite the ghastly whiteness of her skin and the awful fear in her wide eyes.

And her companion, gloating over her, was telling triumphantly how he had obtained her.

"There were three of them," he leered, "in a machine, moving slowly along the road just below here. I met them and I was hungry, for nothing had come to me this night. There in the road I became human for their benefit, and held

up my hand as befitting one who wishes to ask directions. They stopped. And then—then it was over very quickly, eh, my lovely bride? The boy, he lies beside the road even now. When he awakes, he will wonder and be very sad. Oh, so sad! The older man hangs over the door of the car, dead or alive I know not. And here—here is what I have brought home with me!”

“And look at her, Maronaine!”

“Look at her? Have I not looked?”

“Fool!” It was another of the vampires who spoke. “Look closely, and then examine this one!”

Eyes, frowning, penetrating eyes which seemed bottomless, examined Paul’s features intently and turned to inspect the girl.

“What mean you, Francisco?”

“These are the two who came here before, so long ago, and escaped. Look at them, together!”

“Ah!” The exclamation was vibrant with understanding.

“These are the two, Maronaine.”

A white hand gripped Paul’s shoulder savagely. The face that came close to his was no longer leering with patient anticipation of satisfaction to come, but choked with hate and bestial fury.

“You will learn what it means to escape this house. You have come back to find out, eh? You and she, both. No others have ever departed from here, or ever will.”

“They should be shown together, Francisco. No?”

“Together? Ah, because they are lovers and should be alone, eh?” The laugh was satanic.

“Up there”—an angry arm flung toward the ceiling—“where it is very quiet. You, Maronaine, and you, Costillan, it is your privilege. Francisco and I will amuse ourselves here with these other guests of ours.”

A grunt of agreement muttered from Maronaine’s lips. His fingers clasped the girl’s arm, lifting her from the chair where she cringed in terror. Ugly hands dragged her forward.

“Paul—Paul! Oh, help!”

But Paul himself was helpless, caught in a savage grip from which there was no escape. His captor swung him toward the door. Struggling vainly, he was hauled over the threshold into the darkness beyond, and the girl was dragged after him.

The door rasped shut. The last Paul saw, as it closed, was a blurred vision of Jeremy and Kermeff flattened desperately against the wall, staring at the two remaining vampires; and Murgunstrumm, crouching against the opposite barrier, cutting off any possibility of retreat.

Then a voice growled curtly:

“Go back to your feast, Murgunstrumm. We have no use for you here. Go!”

And as the two victims were prodded up the twisting stairs to the upper

reaches of the inn, the door below them opened and closed again. And Murgunstrumm scurried along the lower corridor, mumbling to himself, clawing his way fretfully toward the stairway that led down into the buried pits.

It was a cruel room into which they were thrust. Situated on the upper landing, directly across the hall from where that pitiful feminine figure lay on the musty bed, it was no larger than a dungeon cell, and illuminated only by a stump of candle which lay in a pool of its own gray wax on the window sill.

Here, forced into separate chairs by their captors, Paul and Ruth stared at each other—Ruth sobbing, with horror-filled eyes wide open; Paul sitting with unnatural stiffness, waiting.

Powerful hands groped over Paul's shoulders and held him motionless, as if knowing that he would soon be straining in torment. At the same time, the door clicked shut. The candlelight wavered and became smooth again. The second vampire advanced slowly toward Ruth.

A scream started from the girl's lips as she saw that face. The eyes were green again. The features were voluptuous, bloated beyond belief.

"We will show them what it means to escape this house. Her blood will be warm, Costillan. Warm and sweet. I will share it with you."

The girl struggled up, staring horribly, throwing out her hands to ward off the arms she expected to crush her. But those arms did not move. It was the eyes that changed, even as she cringed back half erect against the wall. The eyes followed her, boring, drilling, eating into her soul. She stood quite still. Then, moaning softly, she took a step forward, and another, faltering, and slumped again into the chair.

The creature bent over her triumphantly. Fingers caressed her hair, her cheeks, her mouth—the fingers of a slave buyer, appraising a prospective purchase. Very slowly, gently, they thrust the girl's limp head back, exposing the white, tender, lovely throat. And then the creature's lips came lower. His eyes were points of vivid fire. His mouth parted, his tongue curled over a protruding lower lip. Teeth gleamed.

Paul's voice pierced the room with a roar of animal fury. Violently he wrenched himself forward, only to be dragged back again by the amazingly powerful hands on his shoulders. But the demon beside Ruth straightened quickly, angrily, and glared.

"Can you not keep that fool still? Am I to be disturbed with his discordant voice while—"

"Listen, Maronaine."

The room was deathly still. Suddenly the man called Costillan strode to the door and whipped it open. Standing there, he was motionless, alert. And there was no sound anywhere, no sound audible to human ears.

But those ears were not human. Costillan said curtly:

"Someone is outside the house, prowling. Come!"

"But these two here . . .?"

"The door, Maronaine, locks on the outside. They will be here when we return, and all the sweeter for having thought of us."

The chamber was suddenly empty of those macabre forms, and the door closed. A key turned in the slot outside. And then Paul was out of his chair with a bound. Out of it, and clawing frantically at the barrier.

A mocking laugh from the end of the corridor was the only answer.

No amount of straining would break that lock. An eternity passed while Paul struggled there. Time and again he flung himself against the panels. But one shoulder was already a limp, bleeding thing from that bullet wound, and the other could not work alone. And presently came the voice of Ruth LeGeurn behind him, very faint and far away.

"They said . . . someone outside, Paul. If it is Martin and Von Heller . . ."

"Who?"

"I escaped from Morrisdale last night, Paul. Martin told me how to do it. He met me outside the walls. We drove straight to the city, to find you. You were gone."

Paul was leaning against the door, gasping. Wildly he stared about the room, seeking something to use as a bludgeon.

"Martin went to the hospital, to plead with Kermeff and Allenby for both of us, Paul. Your letters were there. He knew the handwriting. We traced you to Rehobeth to-night and—and we were on our way here when that horrible man in the road—"

"But Von Heller!" Paul raved. "Where does he come into it?"

"He was at the Rehobeth Hotel. He—he read the account of your escape and said he knew you would return there."

"He'll be no help now," Paul said bitterly, fighting again at the door. "I can't open this."

Ruth was suddenly beside him, tugging at him.

"If we can find some kind of protection from them, Paul, even for a little while, to hold them off until Martin and Von Heller find a way to help us! Von Heller will know a way!"

Protection! Paul stared about him with smoldering eyes. What protection could there be? The vampires had torn away his cross. There was nothing left.

Suddenly he swept past Ruth and fell on his knees beside the bed. The bed had blankets, sheets, covers! White sheets! Feverishly he tore at them, ripping them to shreds. When he turned again his eyes were aglow with fanatical light. He thrust a gleaming thing into Ruth's hands—a crudely fashioned cross, formed of two strips knotted in the center.

"Back to your chair!" he cried. "Quickly!"

Footsteps were audible in the corridor, outside the door. And muffled voices:

"You were hearing sounds which did not exist, Costillan."

"I tell you I heard—"

"Hold the cross before you," Paul ordered tersely, dragging his own chair

close beside Ruth's. "Sit very still. For your life don't drop it from fear of anything you may see. Have courage, beloved."

The door was opening. Whether it was Costillan or Maronaine who entered first it was impossible to say. Those ghastly colorless faces, undead and abhorrent, contained no differentiating points strong enough to be so suddenly discernible in flickering candlelight. But whichever it was, the creature advanced quickly, hungrily, straight toward Ruth. And, close enough to see the white bars which she thrust out abruptly, he recoiled with sibilant hiss, to lurch into his companion behind him.

"The cross! They have found the cross! Ah!"

Nightmare came then. The door was shut. The candle glow revealed two crouching creeping figures; two gaunt, haggard, vicious faces; two pairs of glittering eyes. Like savage beasts fascinated by a feared and hated object, yet afraid to make contact, the vampires advanced with rigid arms outthrust, fingers curled.

"Back!" Paul cried. "Back!"

He was on his feet with the cross clutched before him. Ruth, trembling against him, did as he did. The two horrors retreated abruptly, snarling.

And then the transformation came. The twin bodies lost their definite outline and became blurred. Bluish vapor emanated from them, misty and swirling, becoming thicker and thicker with the passing seconds. And presently nothing remained but lurking shapes of phosphorescence, punctured by four glaring unblinking eyes of awful green.

Eyes!

Paul realized with a shudder what they were striving to do. He fought against them.

"Don't look at them," he muttered. "Don't!"

But he had to look at them. Despite the horror in his heart, his own gaze returned to those advancing bottomless pits of vivid green as if they possessed the power of lodestone. He found himself peering into them, and knew that Ruth too was staring.

Ages went by, then, while he fought against the subtle numbness that crept into his brain. He knew then what Allenby had gone through before merciful death. Another will was fighting his, crushing and smothering him. Other thoughts than his own were finding a way into his mind, no matter how he struggled to shut them out. And a voice—his own voice, coming from his own lips—was saying heavily, dully:

"Nothing will harm us. These are our friends. There is no need to hold the cross any longer. Throw down the cross . . ."

Somehow, in desperation, he realized what he was doing, what he was saying. He lurched to his feet, shouting hoarsely:

"No, no, don't let them do it! Ruth, they are fiends, vampires! They are the undead, living on blood!"

His careening body struck the window ledge, crushing the last remnant of candle that clung there. The room was all at once in darkness, and the two mad shapes of bluish light were a thousand times more real and horrible and close. Completely unnerved, Paul flung out his hand and clawed at the window shade. It rattled up with the report of an explosion. His fingers clutched at the glass. He saw that the darkness outside had become a sodden gray murk.

Then he laughed madly, harshly, because he knew that escape was impossible. Death was the only way out of this chamber of torment. The window was high above the ground, overlooking the stone flagging of the walk. And the eyes were coming nearer. And Ruth was screeching luridly as two shapeless hands hovered over her throat.

Somewhere in the bowels of the house, under the floor, a revolver roared twice in quick succession. A voice—Jeremy's voice—bellowed in triumph. A long shrill scream vibrated high above everything else. There was a splintering crash as of a door breaking from its hinges—and footsteps on the stairs, running.

Paul hurled himself upon the bluish monstrosity which hung over Ruth's limp body. Wildly, desperately, he leaped forward, thrusting the cross straight into those boring eyes.

Something foul and fetid assailed his nostrils as he tripped and fell to the floor. He rolled over frantically, groping for the bits of white rag which had been torn from his hands on the bedpost as he fell. He knew that Ruth was flat against the wall, holding out both arms to embrace the earth-born fiend which advanced toward her. Her hands were empty. She had let the cross fall. She was no longer a woman, but a human without a will, utterly hypnotized by the eyes.

Paul's fingers found the bit of white rag. Instinctively he twisted backward over the floor, avoiding the uncouth hands that sought his throat. Then he was on his feet, leaping to Ruth's side. Even as that ghoulish mouth lowered to fasten on the girl's throat, the cross intervened. The mouth recoiled with a snarl of awful rage.

"Back!" Paul screamed. "Look, it is daylight!"

The snarling shape stiffened abruptly, as if unseen fingers had snatched at it.

"Daylight!" The word was a thin frightened whisper, lashing through the room and echoing sibilantly. The green eyes filled with apprehension. Suddenly, where the distorted shapes of swirling mist had stood, appeared men—the same men, Costillan and Maronaine, with faces of utter hate. The candlelight was not needed to reveal them now. The room was dim and cold with a thin gray glare from the window.

"Daylight," Costillan muttered, staring fixedly at the aperture. "We have only a moment, Maronaine. Come quickly."

His companion was standing with clenched hands, confronting the two prisoners.

"You have not won," he was saying harshly. "You will never escape. To the ends of hell we will follow you for what you have done this night."

"Come, Maronaine. Quickly!"

"Yours will be the most horrible of all deaths. I warn you—"

A mighty crash shook the door, and another. With sharp cries the two undead creatures whirled about. Triumphantly, Paul knew the thoughts in their malignant minds. They were demons of the night, these fiends. Their hours of existence endured only from sunset to sunrise. If they were not back in their graves . . .

And now they were trapped, as the barrier clattered inward, torn and splintered from its hinges. A battering ram of human flesh—Jeremy—hurtled over the threshold. Other figures crowded in the doorway.

And suddenly the two vampires were gone. Even as the men in the corridor rushed forward, the twin shapes of black and white vanished. And only Paul saw the method of it. Only Paul saw the black-winged things that swirled with lightning speed through the aperture, into the gloom of the corridor beyond.

12. *The Vault*

Strong hands held Paul up then. Jeremy and Martin LeGeurn stood beside him, supporting him. Kermeff was on his knees beside the limp unconscious form on the floor. And a stranger, a huge man with bearded face and great thick shoulders, was standing like a mastodon in the center of the room, glaring about him—Von Heller, the mightiest brain in medical circles; the man who understood what other men merely feared.

"Where are they?" he roared, whirling upon Paul. "Stand up, man. You're not hurt. Where did they go?"

"It was daylight," Paul whispered weakly. "They—"

"Daylight?" Von Heller swung savagely to face the window. "My God, what a fool I— Where are the cellars? Hurry. Take me to the cellars."

To Paul it was a blurred dream. He knew that strong hands gripped him and led him rapidly to the door. He heard Von Heller's booming voice commanding Kermeff to remain with the girl. Then moving shapes were all about him. Jeremy was close on one side. Martin LeGeurn was supporting him on the other, talking to him in a low voice of encouragement. Von Heller was striding furiously down the corridor.

The darkness here was as opaque as before, as thick and deep as the gloom of sunken dungeons. But there was no sound in the house; no sound anywhere, except Paul's own voice, muttering jerkily:

"Thank God, Martin, you came in time. If those demons had hurt Ruth or killed Jeremy and Kermeff . . ."

The answer was a guttural laugh from Jeremy. And in the dark Paul saw on Jeremy's breast a gleaming green cross, glittering with its own fire. He stared mutely at it, then turned and looked back toward the room they had just left, as if visualizing the same on Kermeff's kneeling body. And he knew, then, why

his companions were still alive; why they were not now lying lifeless and bloodless on the floor of the downstairs chamber.

One of them—Jeremy, probably—had rushed to Allenby's dead body and seized the square of chalk in the pocket of the corpse. And the pantomime of the upper room had been reenacted in the lower room, the same way, until Martin LeGeurn and Von Heller had battered down the outside door.

The revolver shots—Martin had fired them, more than likely. Martin did not know that bullets were useless.

"Thank God," Paul muttered again. And then he was descending the stairs to the lower floor, and descending more stairs, black and creaking, to the pits.

"Which way?" Von Heller demanded harshly. "We must find the coffins."

"Coffins?" It was Jeremy frowning. "There ain't no coffins down here, sir. We looked in every single room. Besides"—vicously—"them two fiends upstairs won't never need coffins any more. When you leaped on 'em sir, and made that cross mark over their filthy hearts with the chalk, they just folded up. Shriveled away to dust, they did. Lord, what a stench! I'll never forget—"

"Never mind that. Where is the burial vault?"

"But there ain't any burial vault. We were just—"

Jeremy's words ended abruptly. He stood still, one hand gripping the lower end of the railing, the other uplifted.

"Listen to that!"

There was a sound, emanating from somewhere deep in the gloom of the cellar—a sucking, grinding sound, utterly revolting, mingled with the mumbling and gurgling of a man's voice.

"An animal, eating," Von Heller said in a whisper.

"It ain't an animal, sir."

"My God! Murgunstrumm. Well, he'll be able to show us where the coffins are."

Von Heller groped forward, eyes burning with terrible eagerness. He was a man no longer, but a hound on a hot scent which meant to him more than life and death. Crouching, he advanced noiselessly through the pits, staring straight ahead, ignoring the chambers on all sides of him as he went deeper and deeper into the maze. And the others followed right at his heels in a group.

And the sight that met the eyes of the intruders, when they reached at last the threshold of the slaughter room, soured the blood in their veins and made them rigid. The lantern flared there, on the floor against the wall. The sodden canvas sheet had been torn from its former position and lay now in an ugly gray heap on the floor.

Murgunstrumm crouched there, unaware of the eyes that watched him.

Von Heller was upon him before he knew it. With awful rage the physician hurled him back from the table. Like a madman Von Heller stood over him, hurling frightful words upon the cripple's malformed head.

And the result was electrifying. Murgunstrumm's face whipped up. His

sunken eyes, now completely mad with mingled fear and venom, glared into Von Heller's writhing countenance and into the masks of the men in the doorway. Then, with a great suck of breath, Murgunstrumm stiffened.

The jangling words which spewed from his lips were not English. They were guttural, thick Serbian. And even as they echoed and re-echoed through the chamber, through the entire cellar, the cripple sprang forward.

There was no stopping him. His move was too sudden and savage. Hurling Von Heller aside, he lunged to the table, grabbed the huge knife, then was at the threshold, tearing and slashing his way clear. And with a last violent scream he vanished into the outer dark.

A moment passed. No man moved. Then Von Heller seized the lantern and rushed forward.

"After him!"

"What did he say?"

"He thinks his masters betrayed him. Thinks they sent us here. He will destroy them, and I want them alive for research. After him, I say!"

Footprints led the way—footprints in the dust, twisting along the wall where other prints were not intermingled. With the lantern swaying crazily in his outflung hand, Von Heller ran forward. Straight to the smallest of the cell-like chambers the trail led him; and when the others reached his side he was standing in the center of the stone vault, glaring hungrily at a tall, rectangular opening in the wall.

Seeing it, Paul gasped. Jeremy said hoarsely:

"We looked in here before. There wasn't no—"

"You were blind!"

And Von Heller was striding forward again, through the aperture. It was a narrow doorway; the barrier hung open, fashioned of stone, on concealed hinges. Little wonder that in the gloom Paul and Jeremy and Kermeff had not discovered it before. Every chamber had been alike then.

But not now. Now they were pacing onward through a blind tunnel. The stone walls were no longer stone, but thick boards on both sides and above and below, to hold out the earth behind them. This was not the cellar of the inn, but a cunningly contrived extension, leading into subterranean gloom.

Strange realizations came into Paul's mind. The Gray Toad had not always been an inn of death. At one time it had prospered with gaiety and life. Then the decay had come. Murgunstrumm had come here to live. And these creatures of the night had discovered the place and come here, too, and made Murgunstrumm their slave, promising him the remains of their grim feasts. They had brought their grave earth here

For twenty yards the passage continued, penetrating deeper and deeper at a sharp incline. And then it came to an end, and the lantern light revealed a buried chamber where every sound, every shred of light, was withheld by walls of unbroken earth. A tomb, sunk deep beneath the surface of the clearing above.

And the lantern disclosed other things. Long wooden boxes lay side by side in the center of the vault. Seven of them. Seven gaunt ancient coffins.

They were open, all but one. The lids were flung back. The corpses had been hauled out savagely, madly, and hurled upon the floor. They lay there now like sodden heaps of flesh in a slaughterhouse, covered with strips and shreds of evening clothes. Great pools of blood welled beneath them. The lantern glare revealed sunken shriveled faces, hideous in decay, already beginning to disintegrate. Gaunt bones protruded from rotting flesh.

And Murgunstrumm was there. He was no longer human, but a grave robber, a resurrection man with hideous intentions, as he crouched over the lid of the last oblong box, tearing it loose. Even as the men watched him, stricken motionless by the fiendishness of it, he leaped catlike upon the enclosed body and dragged it into the open. The man was Maronaine. And there, with inarticulate cries of hate, Murgunstrumm fell upon it, driving his knife again and again into the creature's heart, laughing horribly. Then he stumbled erect, and a discordant cackle jangled from his thick lips.

"Betrayed me! Betrayed me, did yer! Turned on old Murgunstrumm, which served yer for 'most twenty-eight years! Yer won't never betray no one else! I'll tear every limb of yer rotten bodies—"

He looked up then, and saw that he was not alone. His rasping voice stopped abruptly. He lurched back with uncanny quickness. His hands jerked up like claws. His convulsed face glared, masklike, between curled fingers. A screech of madness burned through his lips. For an instant he crouched there, twisting back into the wall. Then, with a cry tearing upward through his throat, he hurled himself forward.

In his madness he saw only Von Heller. Von Heller was the central object of his hate. Von Heller was the first to step forward to meet him.

It was horror, then. It was a shambles, executed in the gloom of a sunken burial vault with only the sputtering, dancing glow of the lantern to reveal it. Four men fought to overpower a mad beast gone amuck. Four lunging desperate shapes blundered about in the treacherous semidark, clawing, slashing, striking at the horribly swift creature in their midst.

For Murgunstrumm was human no longer. Madness made a bestial mask of his features. His thick, flailing arms possessed the strength of twenty men. His heaving, leaping body was a thing of unbound fury. His eyes were wells of gleaming white, pupil-less. His drooling mouth, curled back over protruding teeth, whined and whimpered and screamed sounds which had no human significance.

He had flung the knife away in that first vicious rush. Always, as he battled, his attention was centered on Von Heller. The others did not matter. They were only objects of interference to be hurled aside. And hurl them aside he did, at last, with the sheer savagery of his attack.

For a split second, alone in the center of the chamber, he crouched with arms



and head outthrust, fingers writhing. He glared straight into Von Heller's face, as the physician flattened against the wall. And then, oblivious of the revolver which came into Von Heller's hand, the cripple leaped.

Von Heller's revolver belched flame directly in his path, again and again.

In mid-air, Murgunstrumm stiffened. His twisted foot struck the edge of the open coffin before him. He tripped, lunged forward. His writhing body sprawled in a shapeless mass.

A long rattling moan welled through his parted lips. He struggled again to his knees and swayed there, shrieking. His hands flailed empty air, clawed at nothingness. And then, with a great shudder, he collapsed.

His broken body crashed across the coffin lid. His head snapped down, burying itself in Maronaine's upturned features. And then he lay quite still, staring with wide dead eyes at the ceiling.

It was Von Heller who spoke first, after many minutes of complete silence. With a last glance at the scene, the physician turned very quietly and motioned to the doorway.

"Come."

Thus, with the lantern finding the way, the four men left the cellar of horror and returned to the upstairs room where Kermeff and Ruth LeGeurn awaited them. Kermeff, standing quickly erect, said in a husky voice:

"You found them?"

"It is over," Von Heller shrugged. "Quite over. As soon as Miss LeGeurn is better, we shall leave here and return—"

"To Morrisdale?" Paul cried, seizing the man's arm.

"To Miss LeGeurn's home, where Doctor Kermeff will sign the necessary papers. Kermeff made a very natural mistake, my boy. But he will rectify it."

"I was ignorant," Kermeff muttered. "I did not know."

"There was only one way to know, to learn the truth. Paul has shown you. Now we shall leave and . . ."

But Paul was not listening. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the girl's hands. The room was sweet and clean with daylight, and he was whispering words which he wished no one but Ruth to hear.

And later, as the big car droned through sun-streaked country roads toward the distant city, Ruth LeGeurn lay in the back seat, with her head in Paul's arms, and listened to the same whispered words over again. And she smiled, for the first time in months.

The Watcher in the Green Room

THE PLUMP, STUMPY MAN in the double-breasted gray coat was quite obviously drunk. He walked with an exaggerated shuffle which carried him perilously close to the edge of the high curbing, whereupon he stopped short, drew his fat hands from their respective pockets, and gravely regarded the drooling gutter beneath him. Proceeding sluggishly in this manner, he successfully navigated three blocks of gleaming sidewalk, turned left into Peterboro Street, and arrived before a red-brick apartment building whose square front frowned down upon him with disapproving solemnity.

He stood staring, apparently unaware that the hour was midnight and that the rain which had fallen steadily since early evening had made of him a drenched, dishevelled street-walker. Before him, as he stood thus contemplating the wide entrance, the door opened and a man and a woman descended the stone steps. They gazed at him queerly. The man spoke.

"Drunk again, Kolitt?"

"Still," the drunken one replied, grinning.

"You'd better let Frank help you," the woman advised. "You'll be invading the wrong apartment again."

The plump man raised one hand up and out in a clumsy salute.

"A camel," he said, "never forgets."

The man and woman hesitated. In an undertone the man muttered:

"Poor devil! It's too bad. I suppose it's the easiest way to forget."

The drunken one did not hear. He grinned idiotically as the man and woman went their way, leaving him to ascend the steps alone. In the lobby he groped in the pockets of his coat and produced a key-ring. Mechanically he thrust two fingers into the brass mail-box marked ANTHONY KOLITT. Then, opening the heavy inner door with a key proportionately large, he marched down the corridor, climbed two flights of rubber-carpeted stairs, and let himself into apartment number thirty-one.

"Five days gone," he mumbled, closing the door behind him. "If they haven't found out by now, they never will."

The thought sobered him, but he was still drunk enough to fumble awkwardly for the light-switch. The bright light blinded him. Blinking, he groped down the short hall to the living-room and lowered himself heavily, coat and all, into

an overstuffed chair close to the radio. Reaching out, he lit the lamp on the end-table beside him; then he stretched himself, relaxed, and gazed intently at a large gray photograph which stared at him serenely from atop the radio.

The photograph was of a woman—attractive, straight-haired, somber-eyed, perhaps thirty years of age. It stood formally in a square silver frame, bare of ornamentation or inscription. The plump man studied it without emotion, as if he had studied it precisely the same way a great many times before. Presently he rose, removed his wet garments and shoes, and walked near-naked into the adjoining room. When he returned, he held a bottle and glass in his hands. He filled the glass, raised it toward the photograph, and said quietly:

“Pleasant dreams.”

Then he turned out the light and paced unsteadily into the bedroom.

The bedroom was small and square, boasting a wooden three-quarter bed, a squat table, a massive old-fashioned bureau, and a single yellow-curtained window. The plump man sat on the bed and removed his socks. He stared at the bureau, grinned cruelly and said:

“Too big, eh? Old style, is it? Well, it’s a good thing it *was* big; otherwise you’d be kind of cramped for room, sweetheart. For once you won’t complain, eh?”

The bed was unmade. He climbed into it and shaped the pillow with his fists, then lay on his back and gazed at the ceiling. The room was not quite dark. Its single window was high above the street outside and level with the roof of a building across the way. The wet window-pane exuded a green glow, reflecting the pale glare of a neon sign on the near-by roof. The glow was pleasant; the plump man enjoyed looking at it. It made fantastic, green-edged shapes on the walls of the room and transformed the huge bureau in the corner into a monstrous four-legged beast. He liked the beast. It was something to talk to.

“So you got her at last, eh?” he said drunkenly. “Ate her right up and swallowed her.” His laugh was a low gurgle. “Serves her right, that does, for getting silly notions. She’d have found fault with anything, *she* would! I’m glad you got her—glad your insides were big enough to hold her. Yes, sir, that’s poetic justice.”

The bureau was half in shadow. Even the visible portions of it were shadowed, ill-defined, so that no separate details were distinct. It was more massive than usual tonight, because the green light was dimmed by the drizzling rain. Last night, when there had been no rain, the hulk had been a huge, staring hound. The night before that it had been a fantastic horse with many malformed heads. Well, there was nothing strange about that. Almost any object of furniture could assume changing shapes in semidarkness. The extent of the shapes depended entirely on the strength of the observer’s imagination.

The plump man chuckled to himself. *He* had a good enough imagination. It had come in handy, too, not so very long ago. And right now it was a blessing. It kept him from thinking too much about certain unpleasant things which

had occurred recently.

He studied the bureau lazily. It had assumed a different shape tonight, probably because of the rain. It had eyes, several of them—they were the protruding knobs on the drawers. It had thick, misshapen legs, too, and a bloated torso. What would Bellini, the goggle-eyed chap downstairs, say to that? Most likely he'd look with wide eyes, and shudder, and whisper warnings in his thin, womanish voice. Bellini was like a lot of other superstitious fools; he made too much out of nothing. Sentimental idiot! If he *knew* what that bureau contained, he'd run screaming back to his stuffy apartment at the back of the building, and hide himself there!

"Well, he won't know," the plump man said indifferently. "That's our secret, eh, old boy? When we move out of here in a few days more, we'll take it with us. *Then* let 'em learn the truth, if they can!"

Still drunk, he saluted the bulging shape in the corner. Then he dragged the bedclothes around him and hunched his knees into his stomach, and went to sleep.

Pale sunlight was streaking the walls of the room when he woke. He lay motionless many minutes, aware that his mouth was dry and swollen and his head aching. Some day, he reflected wearily, somebody would discover a way to take the hangover out of hard liquor.

He put both hands to his forehead and pressed hard, then rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. What time was it? About ten o'clock, probably; it was hard to tell, because the sunlight in the room was so feeble.

Stiffly he climbed out of bed and groped for a pair of slippers, then scuffed noisily into the kitchenette and opened the ice-box door. While he was thumbing the cork out of a gin bottle, the door at the end of the hall rattled. Scowling, he paced back along the corridor and fumbled with the knob.

"Who is it?"

"Me. Welks," said the man outside.

The plump man opened the door slowly and stood there with the gin bottle dangling in his fist. The other man—the same who had offered to assist him last night—said hesitantly:

"Thought I'd see if everything was all right, Kolitt. You were in pretty bad shape last night."

"I was drunk, eh?"

"You weren't exactly sober."

The plump one scowled, then stepped aside, grinning.

"Come in. Have a drink," he said. "Scuse the attire. I just got up."

He closed the door and led his visitor down the hall, then motioned the man to a chair and went into the kitchen for two glasses. Returning, he said:

"I guess your wife was shocked, eh?"

"Not at all." The other man accepted the full glass and turned it idly in his

fingers. He seemed unsure of himself. "She knows what you're going through. We all do. Can't blame a chap for hitting the bottle under such circumstances." He hesitated, stared at the plump man's bleary eyes. "But aren't you overdoing it, Kolitt? What'll your wife say when she does come back?"

"She won't come back."

"Why so sure?"

"I'm no fool." He upended the glass in his mouth and swallowed noisily. "When a man's wife walks out on him, Welks, there's a reason. She doesn't just go for a hike."

"You mean there's another man?"

"If there is, good luck to him."

"You're taking it hard, old boy."

"I'm no fool," Anthony Kolitt repeated. "When a man comes home and finds his wife's clothes and her bags gone, and the house empty, and a good-bye note on the bureau . . . You asked me yesterday why I didn't notify the police and have them find her. That's why."

The man named Welks put down his glass and stood erect.

"Sorry, old man," he said. "I didn't know."

He paced into the hall, stopped, turned again.

"Anything I can do—" he mumbled.

He closed the hall door after him.

Anthony Kolitt poured himself another drink. A little while later he put on a lavender dressing-gown and paced to the door. Stooping, he picked up the morning paper, then returned to the living-room, sat in the overstuffed chair, placed the gin bottle, a glass, and a pack of cigarettes within reach on the smoke-stand, and leisurely began to read the sporting pages.

He was quite drunk again when Mr. Cesare Bellini, from downstairs, called upon him two hours later; so drunk, in fact, that he shook Bellini's hand warmly and said with a large grin:

"Well, well! Come right in!"

Mr. Bellini was not usually welcome. He was a tall, painfully slender young man with ascetic features and untrimmed raven hair. He was a student—though what particular kind of student he was, Anthony Kolitt had never troubled to find out. Mr. Bellini was one of those "queer, artistic" chaps. It was believed that he gave readings, or something of the sort, to people who came professionally to see him.

"I have come to see if there is anything, no matter how insignificant, I can do for you," he said jerkily.

He sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair, leaning forward toward Anthony Kolitt with his lean hands flat upon his knees. His trousers needed pressing, Mr. Kolitt observed. He also needed instructions on how to knot a necktie. The one acceptable thing about him was the pale blue silk handkerchief protruding from

his breast pocket; it gave him an almost feminine air of daintiness.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Kolitt shrugged. "You think you can find *her* for me?"

"If I could," Bellini murmured, "I would."

"Well, why can't you? You're a spiritualist or something, aren't you?"

"A spiritualist? No, no. I am not that, Mr. Kolitt."

"Well, what about the people who come to see you? They come to get readings, and that sort of business, don't they?"

"No. You are mistaken. They come for advice. They come with troubles in their hearts. Me, I look in their minds and tell them what they should do."

"Oh. You're a psychologist, eh?" Mr. Kolitt grinned.

"Psychopathist, rather, Mr. Kolitt."

"Well," Mr. Kolitt said drunkenly, "go ahead. Do your stuff. I'm drunk; I ought to be easy."

"It is a strange thing, drink," Bellini murmured, moving his head sideways over its protruding Adam's apple. "Some men, they drink to celebrate. They are happy; they wish to be happier. Others drink like you, to forget a sadness. You are lonely, no?"

"Oh, I got a pal," Mr. Kolitt declared warmly.

"A pal? Here?"

"Right in the next room, young feller. Come along." He stood up, swaying in an attempt to balance himself. "I'll show you."

Bellini did not understand. He frowned, and the frown darkened his already dark eyes and bunched his brows together over his hooked nose. He suspected, apparently, that Mr. Kolitt's pal was an ephemeral being born of gin fumes. Silently he followed Mr. Kolitt into the bedroom.

"There," said Mr. Kolitt, pointing.

"But I see nothing."

"Not now you don't. Of course not. It's only there at night."

"At night?" Bellini frowned. "I am afraid I do not—"

"Then le' me explain, and you *will* understand."

Mr. Kolitt sat importantly on the unmade bed and hooked the heels of his slippers on the wooden bed-frame. Folding his arms around his upthrust knees, he grinned into his guest's face and hiccuped noisily. Then, without haste, he slyly proceeded to inform the thin young man of the nightly visitor which, created by a combination of green light, shadow, and applied imagination, emanated from the massive bureau in the corner. And, having finished this prolonged dissertation, he released his knees and sprawled back upon the bed, expecting to be amused no end by Bellini's outburst of horror.

The outburst was not forthcoming. Bellini peered at him thoughtfully a moment, as if wondering how much of the speech could justly be attributed to a belly full of liquor. He then turned and studied the window, the bureau, and the respective arrangement of each to the other. Finally he said, frowning:

"That is a most dangerous game, my friend."

Mr. Kolitt was disappointed. Obviously so. He sat up, blinking. He said petulantly:

"Eh? Dangerous?"

"You are—how do you say it?—flirting with fire," Bellini declared.

"You mean I'll be scaring myself?"

"Perhaps. But it is not so simple. This thing which you are making out of nothing—this monster which is one night a large dog, and another night a many-headed horse, and another night a horrific portent unlike any named beast—it is, perhaps, only a thing of lights and shadows, as you have told me. But you are playing foolishly with profound metaphysics, my friend. With ontology. With the essence of all being. You are a blind man, walking treacherous ways of darkness."

"Eh?" Mr. Kolitt said again. "I'm what?"

"You are a fool," Bellini said simply. "You do not comprehend. The imagination, it is a powerful force. It is a productive faculty, seeking everywhere for truth. If there is no truth, it creates truth. This thing you are creating for your amusement, it is unreal, perhaps. But if you are too persistent, you will make it real."

"Sure," Mr. Kolitt agreed pleasantly. "Then I could get it drunk, like me, eh? We'd be pals."

"Very well. It is good to joke, my friend. It is good to be unafraid. That is because you do not understand. Yesterday a woman came to me and said: 'I had a dream, and in my dream my son came to me and bent over me and spoke to me. How is that? He is dead. Can the dead return?' And I said to her: 'Yes, the dead do sometimes return. But the man who came to you was a real man. You created him by thinking of him. He spoke the words you, yourself, put into his mouth. If you had willed him to kiss you, he would have kissed you.' That is what I told her, and it is true. The same is true with you. When you create this strange portent in your mind, it is a reality. It is what you make it. It does what you will it."

"Suppose I willed it to get me a drink," Mr. Kolitt murmured gently.

"Very well. You are making a fool of me. I will go. But *you* are the fool, my friend. You are toying with the very essence of life. I hope you are not so drunk one night that you mistake life for death."

Apparently it was not difficult to anger Bellini's Latin temperament. His dark eyes burned. He turned deliberately and stared at the huge bureau.

"If I were you," he said bluntly, "I would move that where lights and shadows and your fertile imagination"—he spoke the word with significant emphasis—"would no longer transform it into something other than what it is. Good day, my friend."

Mr. Kolitt swayed forward, protesting.

"Now wait a minute. I didn't mean to poke fun at you. I—"

"Good day," Bellini repeated coldly. "I do not enjoy being made the idiot. To a man so drunk as you, all wisdom is a waste of time. I will come again, perhaps, when you are more sober."

The hall door clicked shut behind him.

Mr. Kolitt sat on the bed, blinked foolishly at the bureau a moment, and said gravely:

"Now see what you've done. You've scared the nice man away."

Mr. Kolitt was neither drunk nor quite sober when he let himself into his apartment that night. He had spent most of the evening at the theater around the corner, and the offering there had been unpleasantly sinister. The silver screen, reflected Mr. Kolitt, was a peril sadly in need of censorship. It should be against the law to show certain pictures to certain people. Tonight's presentation had made him shudder.

He did not recall the name of the picture, but the majority of its scenes had been of a strikingly weird nature. One in particular was so vivid in his mind, even now, that it made him uneasy.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "I can see it yet, that damned thing!"

The thing which bothered him had been a monster, a manufactured monster, to be sure—created by experts out of immense sheets of rubberized cloth and animated by internal gears and levers—but horrible, nevertheless. He had visions of it advancing toward him, as it had advanced upon the unfortunate villain in the picture. Such things, he decided, should be outlawed.

The hour, now, was eleven o'clock. After leaving the theater, he had visited the Business Men's Club and vainly attempted to drive away his morbidity by batting a small white ping-pong ball across a table in the game-room. Tiring of that, he had won seven dollars playing poker, and had spent the seven dollars on a quart of excellent rye whisky. He needed the whisky. It would steady his nerves. For the past several days his nerves had needed constant attention and lubrication.

He took the bottle from his pocket and placed it gently on the radio, beside his wife's photograph. Methodically he removed his tie, shirt, trousers, and shoes, and went to the bedroom for his dressing-gown. Then he turned on the radio and sat in the overstuffed chair, with a book in his lap.

He opened the book. It was a mystery story. He liked mystery stories. This one would take his mind off his own troubles and make him forget himself. He reached for the bottle and looked about for a glass. Finding none, he shrugged his hunched-up shoulders and upended the bottle in his mouth, drinking noisily. Then, grinning, he began to read.

Reading, he became aware presently that the dance music emanating from the radio had become something less pleasant. Voices rasped at him. He listened a moment, scowling, then leaned forward abruptly to turn the dial; but instead of turning it, he listened again. It was one of those things you just had to listen to.

There was a sound of wind howling, and rain beating eerily against shut windows. There were voices whispering. The voices ceased. Into the strange silence came the ominous tread of slow footsteps: *clump . . . clump . . . clump . . .*

Mr. Kolitt grunted and turned the radio off. He leaned back in his chair, trembling. For a while he stared with wide eyes at the photograph of his wife; then, with an obvious effort, he focused his attention on the book in his lap. Before he had read half a page more, he snapped the book shut and dropped it on the floor.

"Damnation!" he said. "Everywhere I turn there's murder and horror! There ought to be a law against such things! It's uncivilized!"

He stood up and drank deeply from the bottle. Snarling, he strode into the bedroom and switched on the light. His gaze wandered to the bureau in the corner. He said viciously:

"Blast him and his big talk! It's his fault! He's the one who started this business!"

He was thinking of Bellini. Bellini's smoldering eyes and deliberate words plagued him.

The single window was again wet with rain, and its drooling glass winked with many green eyes, derisively. The glass was pretty, Mr. Kolitt thought. It was like a large, moving tray in a jeweler's store. Each green-edged drop of water was a tiny precious emerald.

"And I suppose if I sat down and imagined 'em to be emeralds," he grunted, "they'd *be* emeralds. Yes they would not!"

He smiled crookedly then, as if relieved at thus finding a flaw in Bellini's reasoning. Quietly he removed the rest of his clothes and went to the bureau. Opening the top drawer, he took out clean pajamas; then he looked down at the lower drawers and tapped the bottom one with his naked foot.

"Comfortable?" he said quietly.

He unfolded the pajamas. They were green, with white stripes. Methodically he got into them and stood idly before the bureau, his elbows angling outward as he buttoned the green jacket-front. The room was warm. Frowning, he walked to the radiator and turned the small handle on the side of it. Then he stood at the window, looking out. Across the way, the green neon sign was like giant handwriting in the drizzle.

"Tonight's the last night I'll be looking at you," he said. "We're moving out of here tomorrow—me and the hope chest here." He turned his head drunkenly to peer at the bureau. "Yep. It's safe enough for us to clear out now. The neighbors won't be suspicious. They'll think I'm just a poor lonely devil trying to forget."

He was aware suddenly that the odor of his own breath, tainted with liquor fumes, was not the only odor in the room. There was another smell, less pleasant and more significant—a sour emanation suggesting decay, as of spoiled meat. Eyes narrowed and lips puckered slightly, he strode quickly to the bureau and

stooped to bring his nostrils close to the lower drawers. When he straightened again he stood staring, his hands pressing hard against his hips.

"We'll be leaving tomorrow, all right," he muttered. "It won't be too soon, at that. I'll have to burn incense in here before the moving-men come."

He went into the living-room, then, and took the bottle he had left there on the smoke-stand. Quietly he turned out the light, and the hall light, too, and paced back to the bedroom. He opened the window six inches at the bottom, to let out that offensive odor. Then he went to bed.

He did not sleep. The room was too warm, and that unpleasant smell of pollution was too much in evidence. He lay with his thoughts, and they were morbid thoughts, parading rapidly across the bed. First marched the memories of that night not so long ago, when he had knelt on the floor of this very room, with a keen-edged kitchen-knife in one hand and a hack-saw . . . but it was better to forget those things. Then came the neighbors, finding him drunk, asking him questions, offering their sympathies. "Oh, but she'll come back, Mr. Kolitt! Women are strange creatures. They do strange things, but they are just women after all. She'll come back." And again: "Don't worry, old boy. She hasn't walked out on you for good. We all have our little family troubles. You and she—well, you've been going it pretty hot and heavy for quite a while. We've all known it. But she'll get over it."

And then Bellini. Damn Bellini!

Mr. Kolitt drained the contents of his bottle and leaned over to place the empty container on the floor. He lay back, enjoying the pleasant sensation of warmth that crept through him as the liquor found its way into his internals. Bellini was a superstitious young idiot, nothing else! His ideas were soap-bubbles filled with hot air. How could you bring something to life just by imagining it?

He turned suddenly on his side and peered at the bureau. The room was darker than usual, because the rain outside was a cold rain, and the combination of cold outside and warmth inside had fogged the window-pane. The huge bureau in the corner was a mastodonic shape of gloom, cloaked at one end in a winding-sheet of changing green light. It was neither hound nor horse tonight, Mr. Kolitt reflected. It was merely a swollen hulk with protruding eyes. What would Bellini say to that?

"Well, I won't look at the damned thing," he thought drunkenly. "I'll pack off to sleep and forget it."

But he looked, because the thing was fixed firmly in his mind, and his eyes refused to remain closed. Again and again he cursed himself for looking; but when he was not looking he was wondering what new shape the thing in the corner had assumed, and then his eyes opened again to find out.

This was foolish, too, because the thing had not changed shape since he had first peered at it. It was still a huge, bloated monstrosity with short, stumpy protuberances for legs, and a balloon-like excrescence for a head. "Like the thing in the movies tonight," he thought suddenly, and shuddered.

The thing in the movies had been a gigantic abhorrence supposedly called into being by obscene incantations. In the end, it had deliberately and awfully devoured its creator. Recalling those things, Mr. Kolitt gazed with renewed interest at the similar monster in his own room; then he shut his eyes and mumbled aloud:

"Ugh! I'll be giving myself D.T.s!"

For a while, this time, he succeeded in keeping his eyes closed, but he did not sleep. His thoughts were too vivid and his mind too alert to permit sleep. He wanted a drink, but was secretly glad that the bottle was empty. He had already drunk too much. The liquor was keeping him awake instead of making him drowsy. It was keeping alive the unpleasant parade of thoughts which persisted in marching through his mind. Especially was it keeping alive that annoying vision of Bellini, and the words that went with it.

Again Mr. Kolitt looked at the monster, and again shuddered violently.

"My God!" he muttered aloud. "I'd hate to bring *you* to life!"

The thought, expressed thus in blunt syllables, alarmed him infinitely more than when he had kept it to himself. He wanted all at once to recall it, lest the monster should take it seriously and heed the suggestion. He wanted, too, to get out of bed and turn on the light, thereby transforming the monster into its original form. But the light-switch was terrifyingly far away, and to reach it he would have to pass within a yard of the beast's bloated head. There were several other things he wanted to do, too. He wanted to shriek at the thing to stop glaring at him, and he wanted to go into the next room and look at the clock, to see how long it would be before daylight filtered through the green-glowing window. Fearfully he considered the wisdom of tiptoeing to the window and drawing the shade, to shut out that green glare; but if he did that, the room would be in total darkness, and the horror would still be there even though invisible.

He no longer thought about Bellini, or about the other thing which lay in the bureau's lower drawers. He thought only of himself, and of his increasing terror. It was foolish terror, he knew. It was the result of going to the wrong kind of a movie, and listening to a mystery play on the radio, and reading a weird detective story, and guzzling too much liquor. But those things were done now, and could not be amended. And the monster was here, threatening him.

"But it's only wood," he mumbled. "It's not real."

If he got up and walked toward it, and touched it, his fear would be gone and he would be laughing at himself for being a drunken fool. That would be the end of *that*, and he could turn on the light and go to sleep in security. But if the thing *were* real—if it were not made of wood—and he walked toward it—

Another thought came then, and caused him to cringe back into the wall. *She* had sent it. She had created it, just as the man in the movies had created *his* monster. The thing hated him for what he had done to her. It meant to kill him.

He lay rigid, staring at it. Yes, it was moving, and it was moving of its own

accord—not because of the mist on the window-pane. Its hideous head was swaying from side to side, not much, but enough to be noticeable. Its small eyes were glaring maliciously. It was getting ready to attack him.

The blood ebbed from Mr. Kolitt's face. Slowly, with caution born of the fear which ate voraciously into him, he drew aside, inch by inch, the bed-clothes which covered him. Fearfully he worked his legs toward the edge of the bed, and lowered them until his bare feet touched the floor. Not once did his wide eyes blink or his fixed gaze leave the greenish shape in the corner. If he could reach the threshold and slam the door shut behind him, there might be a possibility of escape. The hall door was but a few strides distant, and once in the hall he could run with all his might, shouting for help.

Warily he rose to a sitting position and put his hands behind him, pushing himself up. An eternity passed while his trembling body straightened and stood erect. Then he hesitated again, stifling the groan that welled to his lips.

The thing was eyeing him malevolently. It was not a creature of his imagination. It was real; he knew it was real. Its horrible head had stopped swaying; its bloated, swollen body was slowly expanding and contracting. It was waiting—waiting for him to make the first move. If he attempted to escape, if he took a single forward step, it would fall upon him.

Frantically he wrenched his gaze away from it and glanced toward the doorway. The door was open. His only chance lay in that direction. If he waited any longer—

He hurled himself forward. Three steps he took, and on the fourth he stood rigid, paralyzed by the sucking, scraping sound which rose behind him. He turned, terrified, and the thing seized him as he recoiled from it. The impact flung him to the floor. For a single horrific instant he stared up into the loathsome, undulating countenance above him. A scream jangled from his throat. Then his eyes and nose and mouth were smothered under an emanation of putrescent vileness, and that cavernous maw engulfed him.

Eight hours later the janitor discovered him there. The janitor, a red-faced, large-stomached Swede of more than middle age, shuffled past Mr. Kolitt's door with a garbage pail in his one hand and a mound of newspapers in his other. He had reached the mid-point in his daily round of collections. He wondered why Mr. Kolitt had failed to put out a waste-basket. Then he became aware of a most unpleasant and nauseating odor which filled the corridor. And, because the stench seemed to emanate from Mr. Kolitt's apartment, he knocked on Mr. Kolitt's door.

A moment later he let himself in with his own key.

He found Mr. Kolitt in the bedroom, midway between bed and doorway. Mr. Kolitt was dead. His legs and torso lay in a pool of dark red blood, and the entire upper portion of his plump body had been devoured. Those parts of him which remained were shapeless and unrecognizable beneath a pall of viscous

green slime; and this foul excrescence, whose unbearable stench had first attracted the janitor's attention, extended from Mr. Kolitt's mutilated body to the bedroom window, where the sill was likewise coated with it.

These things the janitor saw and at first failed to assimilate. Unable to comprehend such horror, he merely stood staring. Then, believing his eyes at last, he shouted incoherent words in a guttural voice and leaned back against the wall, retching.

Later, a sober-faced Frenchwoman, who was a modiste, sat in Mr. Kolitt's living-room and said to the policemen who were questioning her:

"I have told you all I know. There I was, sitting in my apartment across the court from this one, and I heard a man screaming. I put down my needle and thread and hurried to the window, and I saw the thing coming out of this man's window. I do not know what it was. There was rain falling, and I saw only what the green light from the advertising sign showed me. It was large and it was greenish; that is all I am sure of. So large was it that it seemed to fold together as it flowed over his window-sill, and then stretched itself out like a big fat slug when it crawled over the edge of the roof up above. That is all I know."

"But what in thunder *was* it?" one of the policemen demanded irritably.

Mr. Bellini, the ascetic-faced young man from downstairs, said quietly: "If you will come again into the bedroom, gentlemen, I will show you what it was." And when they had followed him there, he pointed unemotionally to the huge bureau in the corner, and said: "It was a monster he made out of this. It destroyed him because he learned somehow to fear it, and fearing it, he willed it to do what it did."

"Huh?" mumbled one policeman. "Feared it? Why?"

"That I do not know."

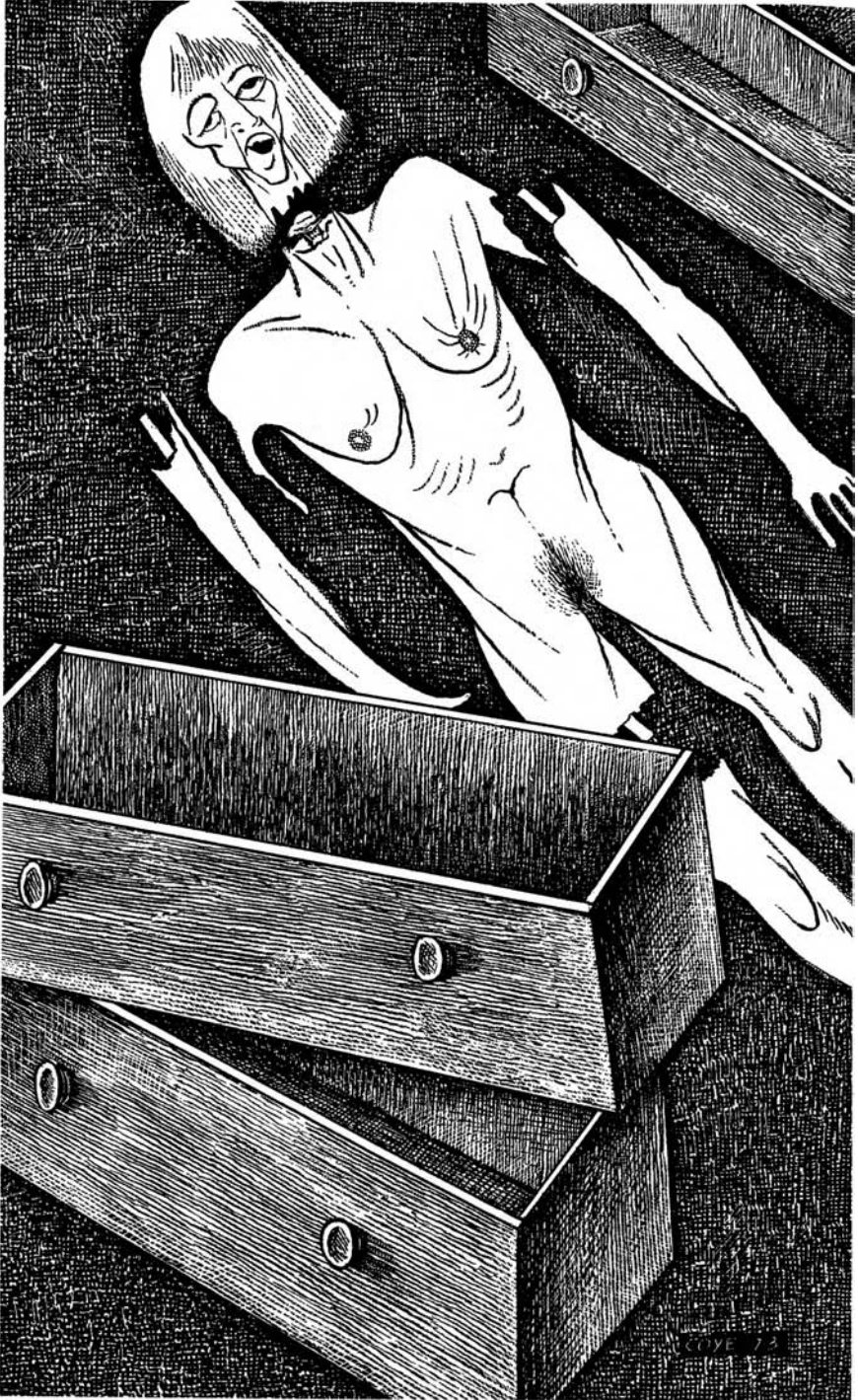
"Well, we'll damned soon find out," the policeman snapped. "Give me a hand here, Jenkins."

Beginning with the top drawer, the two policemen removed the bureau's contents. They did so carefully, inspecting each item before dropping it to the floor. In the third drawer from the bottom they found, wedged far back and buried beneath heavy articles of wearing-apparel, a woman's arm, wrapped in an oblong of torn sheeting which was caked with congealed blood.

In the next drawer they found four more blood-caked packages, which they unwrapped with increasing horror. In the last drawer of all they found a single large bundle which contained a woman's head.

Mr. Bellini, standing as near them as they would permit, gazed calmly into the woman's rigid features and said without emotion:

"It is his wife."



The Prophecy

CONSIDER FOR A MOMENT the five persons who are in Peter's apartment tonight. They are, in substance, any five persons in any apartment.

Swede Corler, whose large body extends from one end of the sofa to the other, with his head in Emma's lap, is an electrician of sorts. His face is an even-sided geometric figure full of stubborn practicality. He drives and repairs his own three-year-old sedan; he reads the morning paper at noon over a metal lunch-box; his fingernails are crescents of sullen black because he considers it a waste of time to clean them after each day's labor. His ideas are the spawn of a matter-of-fact existence, and he is imposing enough in appearance to enforce them.

Emma Morrisey, who supports Swede's heavy head in her lavender skirt, is twenty-two years old, three years younger than he. She is engaged to marry him. Her cheeks are too much rouged in the center; she is short of stature and inclined to obesity; she is a school-teacher in the primary grades.

Godfrey Langdon, who stands gawkily in the doorway with both arms encircling the portieres behind him, is a junior at the State College. He is tall to absurdity, underweight and smooth of face. He says little; he has a religious mother at home who, he feels, would not approve of the conversational trends now in evidence. He considers himself here to look out for his sister.

His sister, Meg Langdon, sits grotesquely in the single stuffed chair behind the sofa. She is tall, but not, like her brother, ridiculously so. She has a straight, clear, good-looking face and a body which is beautiful to the hips and over-large from the hips down. She is in love with Peter, but too obsessed with her own importance to admit it. She will uphold Peter's arguments against the others, unconsciously echoing Peter's own voice and believing herself to be strikingly original. Alone with Peter, she will deny his slightest statement blindly and bitterly.

Peter Hughes, the fifth member of the group, leans against the phonograph and is sorting records from the cabinet below. He is slightly shorter than Meg, but exceedingly thin in face and frame. He is dark and wears square-topped glasses which emphasize his over-long features. He smokes continually. Peter writes stories—not good stories—and sells enough of them to pay the rent a month or three months after it is due.

Now listen to their conversation. Swede, who speaks in a heavy, not-to-be

denied monotone, without lifting his head from Emma's lap, is saying:

"You write so much fiction, Peter, you're beginning to believe anything is the truth. Don't be a sucker for it."

Peter shrugs indifferently. He has learned not to let himself be excited. "It isn't a case of believing or not believing. I simply say there are things we don't and can't understand, and I'm willing to be shown. I've an open mind."

"We really don't know whether there's any truth in it or not," Meg echoes importantly. "You've got to admit that, Swede. Take some of our most learned men. Take Clarence Darrow, for instance, and—well, Conan Doyle. Those men have brains, and they didn't arrive at their conclusions without plenty of deep study; and yet their conclusions are entirely different. Conan Doyle believed in life after death—"

"That's nothing but pure rot!" Godfrey Langdon scowls. "Cheap spiritualism, that's all it is. You know very well, Meg—"

"Godfrey's right," Swede declares caustically. "This spirit business is nothing more or less than exaggerated fortune-telling. What do they do? They get you in a room with a lot of other people, and douse the lights, and then some old hag tells you that your great-great-grandfather is here, wanting to talk to you. Hell, nobody but a grammar-school kid would fall for that kind of horse-play. Still, a man is entitled to his own opinions, and if Peter here wants to believe that the dead come back and deliver ghost-messages—"

"I'm not arguing," Peter shrugs. "I'm merely telling what I've seen and what I've heard. If you're so thick-skulled and practical that you won't believe anything you can't understand, then I can't help it. I say there are millions of things we don't comprehend, and death is one of them."

"Then you believe in spiritualism?"

"Well—"

"Do you or don't you?"

"I do."

"Rot!"

"If it's rot," Meg interrupts angrily, "perhaps you can explain this: Peter and I went to a negro place down on Raymond Street about a week ago. We were the first ones there, and while we were waiting for it to begin we exchanged rings, just for something to do. Then the others came in and the affair got under way, and at the very end of the evening a young colored woman got up and pointed to Peter and asked him if he had given me a ring recently, or if he was going to. She said she saw a ring around us."

"Why not?" Swede grins, his long legs over the edge of the sofa. "You're both young. She probably figured that any young couple who went to a place like that are either engaged or going to be. It's just the same as fortune-tellers. They're clever, but they don't actually do anything. They tell you a lot of generalities and you supply the details subconsciously; then you think they're revealing secrets for you."

"I don't think so," Meg retorts stubbornly.

"You shouldn't go to those places anyhow!" This from Godfrey Langdon, who looks at his sister angrily. "You know very well that spiritualism in all its forms is wicked. It's sinful nonsense without a germ of truth in it! If mother knew—"

"Oh, mother knows all about it. Peter and I have been there a dozen times, and every time I tell mother about anything that happens she goes off on a wild discourse about the devil. She'll never understand the way Peter and I do. All her life she's lived between the covers of a Bible, and she never wants to learn anything else. She won't even read books; can you imagine that, Emma? Anyway, Peter and I go to listen to the singing. Don't we, Peter?"

Peter shrugs his shoulders. He feels that there is no use arguing, because the argument is getting nowhere. He knows what he himself believes, and has always believed, in things that these others are too stubbornly practical and unimaginative to understand. He turns to the phonograph and puts on a noisy record. He likes loud music.

"Where is this place you go to?" Emma asks.

"Down in the negro section." This from Meg, who frowns at the music. "Shut the doors on that thing, Peter."

"You can't hear the music if you shut the doors," Peter grumbles. He is sore.

"What do they do? Do they produce all that bunk about table-rapping and ghost voices?" Emma asks.

"That's just the trouble with you!" Peter says savagely. "You've never seen any of the real thing. You condemn it and you don't know anything about it. No, they don't rap on tables and make ghosts. It's a regular church service, after a fashion, and they sing and—"

"Peter loves to hear them sing. He joins right in with them as loud as he can," Meg volunteers.

"And I suppose you do, too!" Godfrey Langdon declares accusingly. "You'll get in trouble down there some night. It will serve you right. It's all stuff and nonsense, every single bit of it, and the devil rules it."

"Oh, go home with the devil! You and your stiff-necked religion. You're just like mother."

"I'd rather be like mother than like you! At least, she doesn't believe in a mess of idiotic tripe! There's no good in those dives you go to!"

"Do many white people go, Meg?" Emma asks hesitantly.

"No, not many."

"Do they like people to go?"

"You just walk in," Meg explains, "and take a seat, and act as if you're one of them. Don't let them get the idea you don't believe in their work."

"What happens if they think that?"

"You'll be put out."

"They wouldn't put me out," Swede says defiantly. "I'd like to see a gang

of niggers put me out of any place!”

“You’d go, all right. When these people get worked up, they’re on the verge of madness. They’d kill you!”

“*When’s the next meeting?*” Swede challenges.

Peter shuts off the phonograph and says seriously: “There’s one tonight. Do you want to go?”

“Don’t go with him!” Godfrey Langdon cries. “It’s stuff and nonsense, that’s all it is. Meg, you’re not going!”

“I’m going if Peter goes,” Meg declares quietly.

“Do you want to go?” Peter asks Swede.

“How about it, Em? Shall we see the dive? It’ll be as good as a movie, anyhow.” Swede grins.

“I’m afraid of those places, Swede. But if you want to go—”

“What time does it start, Peter?”

“Eleven.”

“All right—”

“Well, *I’m* not going!” Godfrey Langdon says bitterly. “These kind of places weren’t meant for white people. They’re just circus sideshows, full of lies and mummery.”

“No one asked you to come,” Meg retorts.

“No, and you’re not going either! You’ll get into trouble. Just as sure as you’re my sister, you’ll get into trouble—and *worse*. I’m telling you now! I’ve got a queer feeling—”

This amuses Peter. He smiles tolerantly and says: “I thought you didn’t believe in hunches.”

“I don’t! I don’t believe in any of the idiotic rot that *you* do. But if you go there tonight, something awful will happen! I’m telling you!”

“Hooey,” Peter grins. “You give the horse-laugh to forebodings and omens and premonitions, yet you’re the only cuss in this crowd shooting off your mouth about forebodings of evil. Kind of back-firing on yourself, aren’t you?” Peter dripped sarcasm. “You can wait here for us. We’ll be back about one o’clock. And don’t do any floor-walking, because nothing’s going to happen to us. Not a damned thing.”

“*I tell you—something terrible—*”

Raymond Street, in the slums of this city, is a thin gloomy thoroughfare, poorly illuminated at night, separating a leering array of black buildings. It has ancient car-tracks and high curbings; the store windows on each side are gray with soot, and old newspapers mask the glass panes on the inner surfaces to hide nefarious interiors.

You may purchase forbidden items in quantity in this section if you have been informed the proper doorways; you may visit illicit upper rooms or procure positions at roulette tables and seatings at confidential gambling layouts if you

are aware of the proper ascents of black stairways. Raymond Street is not too frequently patrolled by policemen, who prefer always to walk in pairs when they make the circuit.

Three doors down from an unsavory sideway you will find the Omega Lunch. Here, too, if you are known by sight or properly introduced, you may obtain a variety of extraneous contrabands; but if you walk through, ignoring the unclean white-topped tables and opening the door beside the wash-stand, you will discover a flight of unlighted stairs which seem to extend upward for ever and ever into obscurity. Counting the steps as you ascend, you will reach the number twenty-seven and arrive upon a flat landing, from which the stairway continues upward even beyond. Opening the door beside you on your right, you will enter the meeting room.

It is ten minutes after eleven o'clock when Peter opens this door. He stands aside, allowing Meg, Emma, and Swede to go in before him; and he says to Swede in an undertone:

"Keep your mouth shut in here, Swede. If you want to argue, wait until we're outside again."

Then he enters behind them.

It is a small room. Meg has been here before and does not pay any particular attention to the surrounding discrepancies. Emma is timid; she feels the repelling atmosphere of the place but cannot force herself to be conscious of its details. Swede, however, stands wide-legged just inside the door, which Peter has quietly closed behind him, and gives the interior what he would call "the once over." He ignores deliberately the stares of the people who have turned curiously to inspect. His lips are pursed in a tolerant, unconsciously sneering curve. He looks around him as a skeptic would examine the interior of a "chamber of horrors" at an amusement resort.

The entry in which Swede stands is at the rear of the room. He looks left at the back wall; the wall is fashioned of plaster, the plaster painted brownish yellow and cracked pitifully, and the entire surface repaired in four places with sheets of blackened tin. He looks right and sees a double row of unpainted wooden benches, twelve in each row, divided by a single aisle of floor. The floor is black and gritty; it has the appearance of an improperly cured and very ancient layer of human skin.

The aisle leads straightaway to a platform, whereupon stands a thin-bellied table supporting an open Bible of huge proportions and a glass of milky white liquid. The platform terminates in a semi-circular wall with three windows which overlook the street below. These windows are closed; cotton curtains, stiff with dirt, are drawn over them. Left is a piano. Right are three plain chairs.

A colored woman is scuffing the length of the aisle. It is her intent, evidently, to find seats for the four white folk who have just come in. She takes Peter's arm and leads him toward the front. There are two vacant places in the front bench on the left side. There are two more vacancies in the right side,

close to the rear.

Peter hesitates. He says to Emma, who is walking timidly behind him: "You and Swede better sit up front; you'll see more. We've already seen it."

Swede says, "O.K." He and Emma follow the colored woman to the first row of benches. They crowd into the two empty spaces, Emma next against the wall and Swede beside her. The piano is directly in front of them on the platform. They were very close to the Bible table.

"A regular box seat," Swede grins. Emma says, "Sh!"

Peter and Meg occupy the only other vacant places. The two seats are on the aisle, at the rear. Meg silently motions Peter to take the inner one, because it is next to a very old and very wretched colored man whose face suggests the presence of venereal disease. Peter tries to avoid rubbing against him, which is impossible. Meg sits stiffly upright next to the aisle.

This has occupied about two minutes. There is a silent wait of five minutes now, interrupted by occasional whisperings and a scraping of benches. Men and women are still turning to stare at Peter and Meg and still watching Swede and Emma at the front of the room. Other white folk are here, but not of the same type. In all, three other whites were present: a sallow-featured, scrawny youth who slouches in the last bench and glares straight ahead of him out of wide-open, unmoving eyes; and two muttering women who sit close to the wall, under a large, very dirty American flag.

There are twenty-two colored people here also. The youngest of them is perhaps eighteen years old; the oldest is the man who huddles on the piano stool in front of Swede and Emma. This one is extremely old. He wears a green sweater and two ragged overcoats; he is peering at a song-book through two pairs of metal-rimmed glasses, both of which are held together with brown string and hang from his ears. He wears also a cap which is torn at the brim.

It is time now for something to begin. The people are restless. In the front row, across the aisle from Swede, a middle-aged colored woman has struggled to her feet, holding hard to her side. She paces down the aisle, talking to herself, and bends over the white boy who slouches in the last bench. The white boy nods indifferently. He goes with her to the open space in the back of the room. There he slumps to his knees. The woman stands stiff and inflexible beside him. His nervous fingers follow up and down her clothing, at first sluggishly, then erratically quick. The boy's face becomes as rigid as the woman's body. His eyes dilate; he begins to tremble, to quiver, to twitch violently. Spitting sounds come from his lips; he hisses through his teeth. The woman screams. She runs forward again, the length of the aisle. The boy gets mechanically to his feet and returns to his place.

The woman sits down stiffly. Beside her a younger woman, also colored, reaches out to clutch her hand and says:

"Feelin' better, honey?"

"Uh."

"Dat Mister Johnson can sho' fix you up if anyone can. Missus Davis was tellin' me only yestidday how she done sent fer him when she got feelin' turrible pains in her haid. He jus' put his hands on her fer a minute an' de pains went clear gone. Dat man has de healin' touch sho'."

Swede is staring at this in bewilderment. He hears it; he does not understand. He nudges Emma to listen. At the same time, a man has risen from the rear row right and is coming with heavy steps toward the platform. He is huge of stature, taller even than Swede, and heavier. His shoulders are rectangular, as if lined with a carpenter's square. He walks with his head down. He walks with his legs; his body does not move.

He stands behind the thin-bellied table, facing the people in the benches, and turns the brown pages of the big book. He reads from it slowly, faltering many times and repeating himself, and mispronouncing a number of words. Then he closes the book and says:

"Friends, we are heuh tonight because the spirit wills ut. The spirit brings us togedder so come we will furder unnerstan' the workin's of Almighty God. Let us be thankful fer bein' able ter be heuh, an' fer havin' our health, an' fer havin' unnerstandin' of the works of God. We thank God fer revealing unter us the secruts of his glorious ways, an' we thank God fer bringin' us heuh tonight. Our Father Who art in heaven, hulled—"

The people join him reverently, loudly or softly as individual minds seem to desire. Swede says nothing. Emma whispers the words of the Lord's Prayer because she feels the penetrating eyes of the old man at the piano focused on her, and she is uncomfortable.

The prayer ends. Swede reaches down automatically and picks up a song-book. It is grimy and so worn that the title page is illegible. He reads the list of prices on the last leaf and notices that one hundred of these books may be purchased for twenty dollars. The man at the piano hammers a sudden penetrating chord; it is a chord, but three of the notes in it are notably flat, because the piano is cracked. Swede grins at this. He notices, too, that the piano has not been dusted for a long time, and the unpolished brass bowl on top of it contains blackened roses which were once alive but which are now very dead.

"Bufore we begins the readin's," the big negro was saying, "let's us sing togedder one er two hymns. Has anybody heuh a perticaler hymn which him er her wants us to sing?"

The woman beside Swede gets to her feet and says:

"I wish y'all 'ud sing nummer sixty-foah, Revrun Dall. Nummer sixty-foah was my husban's mos' fav'rite hymn an' if'n he heuhs it tonight might-be he'll come ter me an' say somethin' ter comfort me."

The big man repeats the number. Swede mechanically turns the pages of the song-book until he finds it. He stares at the piano while the old negro pounds out a discordant introduction. But he does not sing.

He listens, however, to the others. He even turns to look at them, especially

at the woman who requested the hymn, because she is wailing the words shrilly, her voice rising bitter high above all other voices. Emma touches Swede's arm nervously and whispers: "Sing it, Swede. They might say something."

Swede laughs. The man at the piano hears him and glares at him through double lenses. Swede returns the glare with equal intensity, wondering if he can stare hard enough to make the old man turn away. But the old man does not turn; he glares and glares throughout four verses of the simple melody. Swede is tempted to twist the man's ugly head the other way. He knows that this one, at least, cannot fight him; a single push would crumble the skeletal frame into itself and topple it off the stool.

But Swede is disappointed in the singing. He turns full around to catch Peter's eye and let Peter know what he thinks; but Peter is singing loudly, standing very straight and holding the book on a level with his eyes. Peter likes loud music.

Swede leans over and says to Emma in an undertone:

"If this is what Peter calls wild singing—"

"Keep still, Swede. Please!"

The singing goes on for another five minutes. When it is over, the last verse is repeated increasingly soft. As the words drone out and become a hum, Swede watches the big man on the platform. He is pacing back and forth with regular steps, rubbing his face with his fat hands, staring intently at the ceiling.

Swede, too, looks at the ceiling. He sees nothing there of particular interest. The top of the room is covered with white squares of oil-cloth which have begun to turn yellow.

"I would like to ask," the big man says after a moment's silence, "if there is someone in the room heuh who can place a liddle boy baby what passed out of this expression of life not more than t'ree weeks er t'ree mont's ago. It would be a boy baby about five yeuhs of age, with curly hauh and dark eyes, an' it seems ter me I feel a sharp pain heuh in my ches' like I passed out er this expression of life wid my lungs hurtin' somepin awful. It seems ter me I'm lookin' over the lef' side of the room heuh, an' I'm reachin' out fer ter hold onto somepin same as I reached out w'en I entered the spirit world. Can some 'un unnerstan' what I'm sayin'?"

There is quiet for an instant. Swede grins and turns to look at the left benches. A woman gets to her feet suddenly with eyes alight and hands clawing: a youngish colored woman who wears a black, sack-fitting dress with white lace collar which needs washing.

"Tha's *my* baby!" she screeches. "Tha's my Baby Paul! He's come back tuh me! He's got somepin tuh say tuh me!"

The big man on the platform stands still now, and leans on the Bible table, covering his face in his hands. He remains in this position for some time. The woman who is standing up is watching him with wide, glittering, expectant eyes; she is silent again.

The big man pushes himself up and looks toward her.

"This baby boy is a-tuggin' at me an' tellin' me not to worry no more," he says. "He says he's gwine be a-waitin' fer me w'en I comes inter the spirit expression. I got pains in my haid, he says, which come at me of a sudden an' most drive me crazy wil hurtin'. He says don' worry 'bout 'em no mo'; just take a glass er wahter like dis glass heuh in front er me on dis table, an' look inter it until the pains go out'n my haid and dissol' 'emselves in 'at water. Does you unnerstan' dis message I'm tryin' ter convey ter you?"

"Yes, suh. Does he say I won' get dem pains no mo'? Does he say dat?"

"He says you lissen fer him an' he come ter you often. He says he don' come ter you now 'cause you don' listen. Does you unnerstan'?"

"Yes, yes. What else he say?"

"He don' say nothin' else 'ceptin' he be waitin' fer you w'en you comes. An' I wants ter say ter you, mysel', not ter worry no mo', sister. Does you unnerstan' dis work?"

"I unnerstan' some; not much."

"Den you do like dis message says. Don't worry none. You is downcas' mos' all de time, isn't you? What I wan' ter say is, you is all de time thinkin' what other peoples is tryin' ter do ter you. Ain't dat right?"

"Yes, suh. Dem odder peoples all time tryin' ter—"

"Dey ain't gwine hurt you. Dey jus' thinks an' talks foolish. Dey can' do nuttin', can dey? You jus' stop worryin' over 'em. An' I wants ter tell yer, everythin' is gwine turn out all right befo' t'ree weeks more has done gone by. Would you unnerstan' dat?"

"Yes, suh. I sho' would."

"Den I leaves you in de hands er de devine spirit, an' I hopes you do all He tells yer. May de blessin' er God be upon yer."

"Thank yer, suh. Thank yer—"

The woman sits down. She is smiling; her face is not the same face she possessed when she stood up a moment ago. It is alive now; it was dead before.

The big man paces again, back and forth across the platform. He stops before the table, fumbling with the pages of the book. He slides a cloth out from under the heavy cover and wipes the perspiration from his forehead with it. He drinks from the glass of milky water and continues his walking.

Swede is regarding him vigilantly, trying to discover whether this morose pacing is an intentional scheme to create suspense, or whether it is mechanical. He cannot fully comprehend that the people in this room with him are sympathetic believers of what is going on. He is eager to have it over with, so that he may tear the big negro's words bit for bit and prove to Peter that they are strictly generalities. Meanwhile he is slightly amused at the entire proceedings and has forgotten that Emma, beside him, is very still with a very real terror.

At the rear of the room the aged black beside Peter has suddenly lurched to his feet. His eyes are unnaturally wide and intensely white; the pupils are not visible. He is thrashing the air with erratic jerks of his arms and torso; he mutters

continually; his mouth is flecked with spittle. As Swede turns to look the old man stumbles past Peter and Meg into the aisle, where he writhes to the floor upon his face with a prolonged screech of agony.

His fingers scratch frantically at the dirty wood. His legs and body are thrashing from side to side as the extended coils of a snake might lash if impaled through the middle. Peter cringes from him. Meg watches him with a steady, fixed, horrified gaze.

The diseased white boy stands up from the last bench and steps forward. He bends over, seizing the prostrate man by the shoulders, and jerks him upright. Swede realizes, at this moment, that the other people in the room are not staring and are evidently not even interested; they have seen this same thing occur many times before.

The Reverend Dall is speaking again now, as the white boy leads the pitiful old man to the rear bench and helps him to be quiet. The big negro on the platform is pointing directly at Peter, and saying:

"I'm comin' to the gennleman heuh. Whilst I been talkin' to the lady up front, I felt a chokin' condition come inter my throat an' a achin' go acrost my eyes. I would like to ask the gennleman does he smoke much an' does he read a whole lot? Yes, the gennleman righ heuh; you I'm talkin' to."

"Why—yes," Peter says.

"You does. I knows it because I'm feelin' all de time like I wan' fer a breat' er fersh air. An' I wan' ter say, 'Don' do it! Don' smoke all de time. Git out in de air an' move aroun' more'n you is doin'!' Because I'm feelin' dat sickness is certain gwine git hold er me bufore long, less'n I git some breat'. Does you unnerstan' what I'm tryin' ter bring ter you?"

"Yes," Peter says.

"Does you think much, especially at night?"

Peter does not answer. He knows that he does think at night, because he writes his stories at night, when his apartment is quiet. But he cannot comprehend what the big man is thinking. He cannot understand . . . "Trouble—*and worse* . . ." Godfrey Langdon's menacing prophecy crowds his ears. ". . . something terrible . . ."

One of the two white women says, in a shrill piercing voice: "Don't hold him! Speak up! If you doesn't understand, say so!"

Peter says quickly: "Yes, I guess I do."

"Because I'm feelin' dat I needs mo' sleep. I'm gettin' tire' out all de time, an' when I does go ter bed I'm thinkin' an' thinkin' an' thinkin' an' it seems like I just can't make dem thoughts go 'way an' leave me be. Would you unnerstan' dat feelin'?"

"Yes."

"Does you worry 'bout gittin' money?"

"Yes."

"You gits it t'rough letters what comes ter you, an' dere ain't no letters

come fer a long time. Is dat right?"

"Yes."

"Den I says ter you, don' worry no mo'. I feels mysel' usin' my fingers an' thinkin' an' usin' my fingers an' thinkin' all de time. Does you inven' things er does you write lots of letters er what?"

"I—write stories," Peter says.

"Yus. I can feel mysel' doin' it an' thinkin' about it so it near makes me crazy from thinkin'. I says ter you, don' think so much an' don't worry. Dere's letters a-comin' with money in 'em. Lots 'n lots er money; more'n you ever think fer. Would you unnerstan' dat, what I'm sayin' ter you?"

"Yes. I—I think so."

"Den I'm leavin' you in de hands er de divine spirit, an' I'm hopin' when his heuh money comes ter you, you won' forgit dis little church which is needin' money so bad. I'm comin' now to der—"

The big man closes his eyes and shakes his head from side to side. He stands very still over the table, reading the large print of the Bible desperately, as if the words there would have the power to drive away what was pursuing him. Suddenly he raises his head and sings and after the first few words the others join him.

"Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside, down by de ribberside, down by de ribberside. Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside I ain' gwine study war no mo'. I ain' gwine study war no mo', I ain' gwine study war—no—mo'. Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside, I ain' gwine study war no mo'."

The words come one after the other so swiftly that Swede cannot learn them. He makes no attempt to join in the singing, although the big man is standing rigid and staring straight at him. Emma sings feebly; she is afraid that the emotions of these people will become uncontrollable.

The song continues through verse after verse. Remembering what Peter said, Swede glances quickly at his watch. It is a quarter after twelve o'clock. The people in the benches are standing up now, one after another; they hold no song books; their arms are swaying and their bodies are swaying and their voices are not in harmony. One woman is singing in a monotone in a high, screaming voice that makes Swede's ears throb. She seems never to breathe, this woman, but carries her single note over every pause without faltering. It is a weird, uncanny note that fills the entire room.

The song continues. At the termination of each verse some single voice begins another, and all voices carry along. These people love to sing, Swede decides. They sing passionately, to hurl out their feelings. They sing for glory. Peter is singing with them, as loud as the rest. He, too, loves to sing!

It goes on without end. There will never be an end to it, Swede thinks. It will persist forever, until these folks are drunk with the madness of it. They are drunk now. Many of them are swinging their bodies with the music. They are in

the aisle, pushing and straining against one another. One man is kneeling; another is standing at the rear wall, hammering the rhythm with his clenched fists, another is crawling on the floor up the aisle and being trodden on. Swede and Emma are the only ones not standing. At the rear, Meg is cringing against Peter and holding his arm fearfully, and Peter is not noticing her.

On the platform, the big man is trembling violently, spinning like a top, spitting and hissing through his lips. He falls suddenly and lies very still; and the two white women run to him and raise him up. They assist him to one of the chairs. One of them gets water from the rusty iron sink in the back of the room. The singing has ended abruptly, as if a phonograph reproducer had been lifted all at once from the groove of a record.

Swede stands up and grabs at Emma's hand.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he says curtly. "I've had enough of this stuff."

She pulls him down again, whispering: "We can't go now, Swede! They might kill us! Oh, do be quiet!"

Swede sits tense. In the chair on the platform, the big negro is stirring pitifully. His features are obliterated with sweat; his clothing is drenched with it; his eyes are blood-shot and dilated horribly. He pushes the two white women away from him and stumbles up to his feet, where he takes hold of the table and sways drunkenly. His gaze is once again fastened, tentacle-like, upon Swede.

"It's him!" he screams. "It's him I'm feelin'! I'm chokin' an' stranglin' with him. The spirits come ter me an' took hold er me, an' he brung 'em heuh! He ain' sayin' nuttin'—he ain' singin' ter drive the spirits out'n us—he jus' grinnin' an' laughin' an' makin' mock er us. Lissen ter me, I'm tellin' yer! He done brung de debble heuh tonight ter kill all'n us daid! He done brung—"

The big man is pointing, pointing, pointing. Swede stands up and makes for the aisle, dragging Emma with him. The big man's face is livid with anger; he screams with an intensity that smothers every other sound in the room. And the aisle is blocked with surging men and women, muttering and yelling and hissing in answer.

"Something terrible . . . will happen!" Godfrey Langdon's words now din in Swede's head.

They close about Swede, allowing Emma to stumble and lurch toward the door at the rear. They claw and clutch and fling themselves upon Swede's big bulk as he stands alone. The aisle to the door is filled and choked with them, and they are like demons in their emotional rage.

Swede strikes out with his fists. He tears himself loose and lays about him. One old woman he hurts badly; he knows it because after he hurls her into the benches she rolls upon the floor and stares up at him, and her face is shapeless. Swede is growling now. He wants to fight. Ever since he came he has wanted to fight, to hammer his fists into these rotten faces. He batters his way through.

Emma is clear of clawing hands and Peter is coming to Swede's assistance,

leaving Meg and Emma near the door. Peter reaches Swede's side and mutters words of advice; then Swede sets himself and plunges. He crushes these clawing screaming hissing shapes aside and Peter comes after him. They reach the door.

The door is closed. Meg is lying on the floor in front of it, with her face to the ceiling. Her clothes are torn and her eyes are horribly wide open. The diseased white boy is standing above her with a knife in his hand. Emma is standing flat against the door, screaming.

Emma's lavender dress is slashed and bloody. It is obvious that the diseased white boy attacked her first in his frenzy to destroy an unbeliever. It is obvious that Meg went to Emma's assistance, and that the white boy, in terrible rage at being interfered with, turned his attack upon Meg.

Meg is dead. The diseased white boy has dragged her down and killed her in his madness. Now he is again trying to reach Emma with the bloody knife that is clutched in his fist.

But he is weak. Swede twists the knife away from him at the first thrust and throws him across the room. Swede flings the door open and pushes Emma across the threshold; then he turns and seizes Peter's shoulder. Peter is on his knees sobbing, shaking Meg to bring her back to life, but she is dead. She has been stabbed many times.

"Oh, God," Peter moans. "Oh God, oh God."

Swede looks and sees that Meg cannot hear him. He says curtly: "Get up! You can't do anything for her! Get up. She's beyond help. We better get out while we can."

But Peter will not get up. His soul is in Meg's body. He cannot leave her here, with these people. He cannot think of anything except that she is dead.

Swede picks him up bodily and carries him. Emma is already descending the outer stairs to the Omega Lunch, and Swede tumbles down after her. Men in the lunch room are standing up and staring, but they do not interfere as Swede carries Peter out to the sidewalk.

Swede's battered sedan is standing at the curb, straight ahead, and Peter's car is a little lower down, near the corner. Between them now stands a third car, and beside the third car Godfrey Langdon, Meg's brother, is waiting. He rushes forward as Swede emerges from the doorway. He ignores Emma; he ignores Swede. He takes hold of Peter's arm frantically as Swede allows Peter to stand.

"Where's Meg?" he says hoarsely. "Where is she!"

Peter says nothing. He cannot look into the boy's face, and so he stares at the sidewalk. He still cannot think of anything except that Meg is dead. Godfrey goes to Swede and to Emma and repeats his demand, becoming hysterical. He gets no reply from any of them.

He seizes Peter again and shakes him.

"Where is she?" he pleads. He is crying.

"They—they killed her," Peter says heavily.



Godfrey cannot believe it. He has never faced death. He can think only of Meg sprawled in the chair at Peter's apartment where there is no suggestion of death or anything related to death. He stands foolishly on the sidewalk, staring into Swede's face and then into Peter's face. His own face is limp and empty.

"Is it true?" he cries suddenly. "Is it true what you're saying?"

"She's dead," Swede says. "We—we couldn't help it. We didn't know."

Godfrey does not move. His feet are paralyzed on the pavement. He stares long and intently at Peter, and then he cries out wildly:

"It's your fault! You brought her here! I'll kill you for it!"

He rushes at Peter. Peter stiffens and reaches out to hold him away. Godfrey claws at him the way the others clawed, up there in the room above the Omega Lunch.

"Get hold of him, Swede," Peter mutters. "He'll make himself sick."

But Swede cannot drag him away. He will not be dragged away. He forces Peter against the wall of the building, and his fingers scratch at Peter's neck.

Peter is afraid. He tries again to push Godfrey away from him, but he is not powerful enough. Godfrey's fingers are already locked in his neck and hurting him, and the boy's breath is coming in animal-like grunts of fury. The religious boy means to kill.

Peter brings up his fist and drives it home. There is no defense against it and the blow is a hard one. Godfrey releases his hold and staggers back across the sidewalk. He crashes headlong into the fender of Swede's car, and drops to the gutter and lies very still.

Swede picks him up and says quickly, as Peter comes forward:

"You've hurt him, Peter. Look."

Peter looks and says, "Oh God." The fender of the car had slashed Godfrey's head and blood is spurting.

"Look here," Peter says fearfully. "Take him home, will you? I—I've got to think."

"You're going back up there to get Meg?"

"I don't know! I don't know what to do!"

"You'll get into trouble."

"All right, all right. But get him home. Go on! Don't stand there like a—"

"He's not hurt much," Swede says vaguely, as if the words do not mean anything to him. "I'll take him home if you say so, but he's not hurt much. You drive the car, Em, and I'll hold him so he won't get everything all blood."

They get into the car and Peter watches it jerk away from the curb. He stands there after it had gone. The number on the rear plate is 1313. Peter does not know what to do. He wants to go up and take Meg out and carry her home, but he is afraid. He tries to tell himself that she is not dead—that she is only unconscious. But he is afraid to look at her again and learn the truth.

He sees two policemen pacing toward him under a street lamp a block distant. It frightens him. He turns and runs wildly. He runs on and on down Raymond

Street. He leaves his car standing at the curb.

He wants to get out of here and go into the city proper, where there are bright lights and people talking; but he is afraid people will talk to him and ask questions. He is afraid he will meet more policemen, and they will stare at him. He finds refuge in a doorway far down Raymond Street from the Omega Lunch, and he waits there for an hour. A woman stops and asks him for money. He shakes his head and tells her he has none; and she sneers at him. The door behind him opens and a middle-aged man slouches out. He glances at Peter curiously, but says nothing. Peter presses his hands to his face and says over and over, "Oh God, oh God, oh God!" Then he steps out of the doorway and walks back toward the Omega Lunch.

The street is deserted now. In front of the Omega Lunch Peter's car is still standing. Obviously the police have not yet learned what happened. Peter approaches the car timidly. He sees that there is no longer a light in the lunchroom. Furtively he tries the door, and finds it locked. He tells himself that the room above is empty and the people have fled. Perhaps they have taken Meg with them; perhaps they have left her lying there, alone in the darkness.

Peter is horribly afraid. The thought of her lying in darkness drives all resolution from him, and he turns, trembling. Quickly he jerks open the door of his car and slides into the seat. He starts the motor. The machine lurches away from the curb. The Omega Lunch is gulped in gloom behind.

Peter drives desperately. He drives down Raymond Street and into the city. Mechanically he guides the car through a maze of other cars, in and out of streets and past signal lights, and out onto the State road. Here occasional cars pass him, droning toward him with glaring, accusing lights and falling away behind him with roaring whines. He drives faster. He wants to go very fast, to make him forget.

He sees something, now, and stiffens at the wheel. Fright numbs his senses. Then a fever as of delirium burns him. Directly in front of him outside the windshield floats a white, indistinct form. It hovers over the cowl, seeming to glide along with effortless ease. It is a woman in white, with arms outstretched gently.

"Meg—" Peter whispers. Then he shrieks aloud, "Meg!"

The woman's face is very close, looking in at him. All else is darkness, blurring past as the car speeds onward. The face is Meg's face, smiling. Peter can see the lips move. Subconsciously he realizes what they are saying to him.

"Poor boy. Poor Peter."

"Meg . . . Meg . . ."

"Poor, poor Peter. You are so sad, so lonely. You should be happy now."

"Oh, God, come back to me!" Peter pleads. "Come back to me, Meg! I'm so afraid!"

"Do you love me, Peter?"

"Love you—oh, God, I do!" More now than ever in life, he knows, for there

is now the guilt on his soul for bringing death on her.

"Then come to me, Peter. Come to me now. The others, they can never come; they do not believe. But you, Peter—you have always believed, in your heart. You taught *me* to believe, Peter. Come to me."

Peter stares mutely, pitifully. He does not understand. It is very strange. He, who believed, had known nothing of the mad things that would happen tonight. Known nothing, nothing at all. Godfrey Langdon had said: "There will be death . . . there will be trouble . . ." And yet Godfrey Langdon was an unbeliever. Godfrey, incubated in religion that shouted Peter's beliefs in evil omens sinful, had warned of the evil whose signs he denied!

Strange . . . so strange . . . that an unbeliever should be the one to whom the whisperers in the dark beyond had sent their message. The unbeliever, the scoffer, had heard and delivered their whisperings . . . and the believer had scoffed . . .

Peter stares, and there is no floating shape beyond the windshield now. It has come closer and closer with a silent, gliding movement, and it is inside the car with him. The woman in white is close to him, very close, with her hand resting gently on his arm.

"Will you come, Peter?" she whispers, and her voice is silvery soft with pure love for him.

"Yes!" he cries. "Yes!"

"Drive fast, Peter."

Peter's foot presses to the floor. The road is straight as an endless tube, terminating far away in darkness. The car leaps along it like an unleashed hound. Peter drives with one hand and puts his arm gently about the woman beside him. She is warm and soft; she drops her head to his shoulder and smiles up at him. She is lovelier than ever before. She is lovelier than any woman he has ever seen before.

"Faster, Peter."

Peter forces the accelerator to its limit. He does not care now what happens to him. He sees a huge truck ahead, creeping toward him with red and green lights on its side, and a single baleful yellow eye of headlight. But he does not care.

The truck's light sweeps onward, glowing in the dark. Peter's right hand clutches the wheel. He does not lift his foot from the floor. There is no need to slow, because the road is straight and wide and otherwise deserted. Peter draws the white lady very close to him and is strangely happy.

He does not care when the white lady reaches over and grips the wheel in her slender fingers. Nothing matters any more, except that he is happy. The wheel turns sharply as the woman in white guides it.

The car swerves frantically to the left, into the path of the oncoming headlight. Peter screams. He cannot lift his foot from the accelerator because it is glued there by physical terror.

He lets go the wheel and covers his face with his hands. He hears brakes screaming. They are not his own; they belong to the monster with one light out. The single eye of illumination rushes headlong forward. Peter suddenly feels arms around him and lips touching his own.

"Come to me, Peter."

He crushes the woman in white against him.

There is a grinding crash of steel against steel, and fingers are tearing him asunder like the fingers in the room above the Omega Lunch.

"Don't be afraid, Peter. Kiss me."

Darkness roars into him, bringing sudden agony.



The Strange Death of Ivan Gromleigh

FOR WEEKS PHILIP ODEN had worked on the hideous little clay figures, and now they were finished. He had only to group them, photograph them, and the illustrations for Gromleigh's horror-novel would be complete.

The clock on the dining-room mantel read one-thirty, and every muscle of Philip Oden's body ached. For two days and two nights he had lived on black coffee and sandwiches. No rest, no sleep. Gromleigh had phoned from New Orleans that the illustrations must be mailed to his New York publishers tomorrow.

Outside, the rain was still whispering down. Ellen, returning from the spiritualist meeting, would have to walk from the end of the bus line, through red, sticky mud. That was the curse of living in the sticks.

One-thirty! God, how slowly the hours had dragged! But the rest of the job would be easy, now, and . . .

Hearing footsteps, Oden jerked around and glanced into the living-room, toward the front door. His nerves were jumpy. He had been alone too long with those ugly clay figures. The mutter of the rain, the tick of the tin clock, had done something to his brain.

"It's only Ellen," he muttered.

It was Ellen, his wife, and something was wrong. He knew something was wrong, even though he and Ellen had been married only three weeks and as yet he really knew nothing about her.

She was drenched and shivering, and her face was white. Not pale, but white. It was an attractive face, with large, dark eyes and alluring lips—but something had drained all the blood out of it.

"What's wrong?" Oden demanded.

She closed the door and leaned against it, staring at him with those dark eyes. The rain had soaked through her lightweight coat, and when she shrugged herself out of the coat her young body flowed out against the wet, clinging silk of her dress. She was breathing hard, and her arrogant breasts swelled and collapsed, swelled and collapsed as if worked with a bellows, and suddenly she was in her husband's arms, sobbing.

"Oh, God, I'm scared, Phil!"

"Scared? Of what?"

"Something followed me all the way from the bus! I heard footsteps behind me, and when I turned to see who was making them, nothing was there. Nothing was there, Phil! The road was deserted. But the footsteps kept after me. When I stopped, *they* did, and when I ran, *they* ran! And nothing was *there*! Oh, God, it was horrible!"

Oden held her close to him and told her she was crazy. "You shouldn't go to those spook meetings," he said gently. "It's too hard on the nerves."

He didn't tell her that *he* had heard queer sounds tonight, as of someone prowling around the house. He didn't mention the fact that he had seen an ugly, twisted face peering in at one of the dining-room windows, watching him work, or that he had taken a revolver from the bureau upstairs and gone out into the rain—and found no sign of a prowler.

Not so long ago, *his* flesh had crawled the way hers was crawling now. But he didn't tell her so. It would only add to her terror.

He said, "I've been lonesome, honey," and pressed his lips gently against hers, and stroked her hair. Lonesome wasn't exactly the word for it. This woman, when close to him, inevitably aroused him to a feverish longing for her, and when she went away, a maddening hunger gnawed at him, giving him no peace.

It wasn't *her* fault, of course. It was just that she was all woman, every tantalizing, alluring inch of her, and he was so keenly aware of her charms. He wanted her near him, even though the nearness induced agony.

"You'd better get that wet dress off," he said softly. "You'll be catching cold."

She slipped the dress over her head and draped it over a chair. Then, like a woman, she stood before the mirror and did things to her hair, oblivious to the fact that her mature young body, nearly nude, was a lodestone for her husband's gaze. It was always that way. She never seemed to realize . . .

Oden's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. He licked his lips. The impulse to seize her in his arms was almost unbearable but he had to fight it, conquer it, because his work with those damnable clay figures was not yet finished. But God, how beautiful his wife was! How soft and full and creamy those half-covered breasts! How flawless the graceful curve of her back . . .

He grabbed a lounging-robe off the divan and thrust it toward her. "Put this on," he muttered. "You'll catch cold. You ought to take a hot bath and go straight to bed."

She turned, her body gleaming in the lamplight. "Is your work finished, Philip?"

"Nearly."

She pulled the robe around her and walked into the dining-room to look at the clay figures. There were eight of them, each about ten inches high, and each figure was really two figures, representing a beast and a woman in ghastly embrace.

"How horrible!" Ellen whispered.

"They're supposed to be horrible," Oden said simply.

Yes, they were supposed to be horrible. They represented scenes from Gromleigh's book, *The Ghastly Thing*, and the book itself was the most gruesome thing Oden had ever read. The manuscript was upstairs on the bureau, and he had refused to let his wife read it.

In the first place, Ivan Gromleigh was not a professional author. He was an eminent psychiatrist and a firm believer in the theory that every human being, male or female, possessed a secret other self which was constantly struggling for separate existence. The book, a Jekyll and Hyde sort of thing, was based on that theory.

It was the life story of one Herbert Grove, and described in detail the growth and development of Grove's other self, which Gromleigh called *The Beast*. Huge and hairless, the Beast prowled through the book's three hundred pages on missions of indescribable evil, murdering innocent victims, attacking women, and plunging half a continent into nightmare panic. Gromleigh, in his narration, left nothing to the reader's imagination.

It was real because Gromleigh knew enough about his subject to make it real. And the book ended on a note of horror, with the innocent Herbert Grove committed to an asylum for the criminally insane while his monstrous other self, unfettered, roamed forth to revel in more sin.

No, it wasn't safe to let Ellen read such stuff. It was bad enough for her to see these hideous clay figures which, when photographed, would vividly illustrate certain episodes in the Beast's sadistic career.

"In a couple hours," Oden said, "I'll be all through—thank God! Now you run upstairs and get into that hot bath."

Her arms coiled gently about his neck, and she put her mouth up to be kissed. He forgot about the clay figures then. To hell with them! The woman in his arms was warm and real; her body melted willingly against his, and his hands slid swiftly to the delicious hollow of her arched back.

"I wish you were through now," she whispered. "I've been lonely, too, Phil. You've worked so hard at this awful job . . ."

Reluctantly he released her. If he quit work now the job would not be finished tonight. And it had to be.

"You get into that bath," he muttered, and watched her hungrily as she left the room.

Working with camera and tripod, he wondered about the footsteps which had followed Ellen home from the end of the bus line. Imagination? Perhaps so. But the face at the window had been real enough, and—

He stared at the clay figures, and shuddered. They, of course, were the reason for his fears. They linked him with that damned manuscript upstairs, and something about that manuscript was disturbingly evil.

He arranged the clay figures against painted cardboard backgrounds and spent the next hour photographing them from various angles. The pictures had

to be good. Two other artists, with reputations far exceeding his own, had attempted this job and given it up. He, Philip Oden, *bad* to succeed.

Queer about those other two chaps. One of them, Ingershaw, was noted for his ability at this sort of thing; yet the task had apparently been too much for him. After receiving the order, he had retired to his Maine woods studio with a copy of the manuscript. Two weeks later he'd come out of the woods, haggard and ill and half insane, and had plunged into the heart of New York, swearing never again to live in solitude.

A syndicated column in last night's paper had mentioned him. "It is a curious fact that since returning from the Maine woods, Grayson Ingershaw, the artist, has never been seen without a companion. Rumor has it that he dreads being alone and has hired a bodyguard to accompany him day and night. A queer reversal of form, surely, for Ingershaw formerly raved about his love of solitude."

Well . . . the book had done something to Ingershaw; that was certain. And it had done something to Edmund Yago, the illustrator who had taken over the job after Ingershaw's failure. Yago had finished four of the required eight pictures and then, without a word to his wife or daughter, had walked out of his studio apartment one night, never to return. His body had been found two days later in the East River, apparently a suicide.

So there *might* be something to those footsteps . . .

Working methodically over the last of the clay figures, Oden realized that the house was eerily quiet. There had been a sound of running water upstairs, in the bathroom, but that had ceased. He straightened and stood listening.

The stillness troubled him. The ticking of the clock and the low murmur of the rain still continued, but his frayed nerves no longer catalogued those sounds as anything other than a ceaseless background. What he wanted to hear was some sound made by his wife—something to assure him she was safe.

He thrust the tripod aside and went upstairs. The bathroom door was closed and no thread of light crept from under it. He knocked and said anxiously: "Ellen!"

There was no answer.

Oden's heart sledged against his ribs as he turned the knob and thrust the door open. Automatically his glance sped to the bath. Ellen was not in it. Then, stepping over the threshold, he saw her.

She stood at the window, her back toward him, and in the darkness she was like a pale wax figure without life. The room was hot and moist; the shade was up and the window-glass was sweating. When Oden whispered his wife's name, she turned like a startled deer and her eyes were wide with terror.

"What's wrong?" he asked hoarsely.

She stared at him without answering. Except for a bit of pink silk that clung tightly to her curving hips, she was nude. Her bare breasts, pale and lovely in the darkness, heaved tumultuously, and the sleek slope of her stomach moved

violently as she breathed.

"What's *wrong*?" Oden demanded again. "What's the matter, honey?"

"It's out there!" she sobbed.

He strode to the window and wiped the rain off it with his fist. He knew genuine terror when he saw it, and the terror in his wife's eyes frightened him. For a moment he stared down at the yard.

It was dark out there. Rain drummed hollowly on the metal roof of the garage, and on the cement walk. But nothing moved. Nothing was out there.

He turned to his wife. She had backed away from him and the wall had stopped her, and she was breathing so hard that her breasts seemed about to burst. "I heard the footsteps again!" she sobbed. "Then I heard a voice, Phil—a horrible voice, slobbering and chuckling out there! I swear I did!"

Oden forced a grin to his lips. He didn't feel like grinning; he was thinking at that moment of Yago and Ingershaw and of the face which had leered at him through the window, a while ago. He was scared. But the grin worked its way to his mouth and he said banteringly: "Young lady, I'm going to raise proper hell if you go to any more of those spiritualist meetings. It's getting you down."

Then he drew his wife toward him. Her arms clung tightly to his neck and her face was wet and hot on his chest. "I—I *did* hear something out there, Phil!" she moaned.

"Nonsense, honey," he said softly.

Her satin-sleek flesh quivered against him and he was acutely aware of the nearness of her. He hadn't lit the light; he liked the intimacy of the darkness. Somehow or other his lips discovered those of the woman in his arms, and the heat of that limp, snuggling body worked its way deep into him. He didn't want to put his burden down. He wanted to hold it and caress it and kiss it . . . kiss away its fears . . .

When he did release her, she grabbed at his arm and said anxiously: "You're not going downstairs again, Phil? Please!"

"I've got to finish that job, honey."

"Oh God, don't leave me alone! I'm afraid!"

Her hand was cold in his, ice-cold, and she really was afraid. He knew that. He himself was a bit shaky, though he had tried hard not to show it. Well then—the job could be finished in the morning, couldn't it? The clay figures were all done. He had only to take a few more photographs and make some enlargements, and the stuff could be mailed before tomorrow noon.

"I'll let it go, honey," he said. "You take your bath and come to bed. I'll be waiting."

He set the electric alarm-clock in the bedroom for six the next morning. That would get him up in plenty of time. He stretched his aching body and then sat on the edge of the big four-poster bed, thinking.

Queer about that face at the window. Had he really seen it, or had he been suffering from a case of diseased nerves? Queer, too, about the footsteps. Ellen

was usually pretty level-headed about that sort of thing, and not easily scared.

He wondered suddenly if she had been reading Gromleigh's manuscript. It lay on the bureau, in a box which had originally held typewriting paper. He lit the light over the pillows and dumped the manuscript out of its box and scuffed through some of the pages.

Even when quite sure that they had not been disturbed, he continued to paw through them. Here and there, vivid lines of description trapped his attention.

The street was a narrow canyon of gloom winding through the slums of the city, and the girl's high heels drummed out an eerie click-clack, click-clack, as she hurried homeward. It was not safe for young women to walk alone after dark. The police had said that. One never knew when that horrible monster would appear, seeking another victim.

Something was approaching. Something pale and huge had stepped from the darkness of an ill-smelling doorway and was striding forward. The girl stopped. A hand flew to her mouth and she stifled a scream of terror, turned to flee. Too late! Slobbering like a hungry animal, the Beast swooped down on her.

Thick, hairless arms coiled about the girl's struggling body. A gnarled hand ripped the front of her dress, baring the soft, white swells of her immature breasts. She screamed, and the scream went wailing down the deserted street, and the creature's mouth glued itself to hers, silencing her.

Thick fingers caressed her quivering flesh. Hot, moist lips slobbered against her eyes, her throat, her bare shoulders. She fought, but her struggles merely aroused the Beast's rage. One huge arm bent her backward, remorselessly; her frantic struggles grew weaker . . . weaker . . . ceased finally, with a pitiful sob of helpless surrender. Tossing her over his shoulder, he raced with great bounds into the night.

Oden shuddered. "Gromleigh must have a queer streak in him somewhere, to write stuff like that," he muttered. "If his Jekyll and Hyde theory were a fact, I'll wager his other self would come pretty close to being the original of this Beast he writes about."

But the manuscript fascinated him. He read other passages.

"I tell you, Herr Professor, every man has a double nature. Every one of us! And these horrible things of which they are accusing me—I didn't do them! I didn't, I tell you! My other self did them, and over that other self I have no control! My God, why must I pay the penalty for crimes I have not committed?"

"Because no one believes you, my son. Even I, who have an understanding of such things, cannot bring myself to believe the all of it."

"But you must believe!" Frantically Grove clutched at the older man's hands and clung to them. Footsteps were audible in the corridor as the attendant came to put an end to the Herr Professor's visit.

"My God, Herr Professor, they will not solve this horrible problem by keeping me locked up in this awful asylum! The Beast will still go forth to find new victims."

"If that is so, my son, there is only one solution. While you live, it lives, because it is a part of you. If I were you, I think I would find a way to destroy myself, for the sake of humanity."

"No, no! My God, no!"

The attendant's ring of keys scraped hollowly against the iron bars of the door. The Herr Professor turned away, murmuring a prayer. The prisoner sat like a dead man, staring, staring . . .

Oden replaced the manuscript in the box and put the box back on the bureau. It was not good to read that sort of thing before retiring. Gromleigh, damn him, might enjoy writing it, but few persons would enjoy reading it. There must be something wrong with Gromleigh.

There must be something wrong with the novel, too. Something evil. Otherwise, why had Ingershaw and Yago acted so queerly after attempting to do the illustrations for it?

"There's a beast in Gromleigh, all right," Oden muttered, "like the Beast in the story."

He had just put the light out when he heard the door open. He forgot about the book then, and smiled to himself when he heard the soft whisper of his wife's bare feet as she entered the room.

"Are you awake, Phil?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He waited until she was beside him; then, murmuring her name, he drew her close to him and thrilled to the warm, sweet nearness of her.

To hell with Gromleigh's Beast! To hell with footsteps and leering faces and all the rest of it! Soft flesh quivered deliciously to his caress, and Ellen's lips were moist against his throat as she snuggled up to him. She was a warm-blooded little creature, every inch of her alive and vibrant. Day or night, she was always responsive to his love.

It was a long time since he had been as close to her as this. Those damned clay figures had claimed all his attention, but tonight, at this moment, he could think of nothing but Ellen, his own little wife.

His mouth found hers and he kissed her until she was gasping for breath. She liked it. Her soft young breasts swelled against him and her heart throbbed out a wild song of delight. The warm pressure of her, the intoxicating fragrance of her hair and skin and breath, drove from Oden's mind all the vague fears that had gathered there . . .

It was after two o'clock when Philip Oden awoke. A hand was on his stomach, pulling at him, and his wife's voice was hoarsely whispering his name.

He opened his eyes. The room was pitch dark, and rain was still murmuring against the windows. "What is it?" he mumbled. "What's the matter?"

His wife was sitting up in bed, her slender body a pale, stiff figure in the dark. "Listen, Phil!" she whispered. "Listen! I—I heard footsteps!"

Oden listened. Not fully awake, he found it hard to keep his eyes open, and

suspected that his wife had been dreaming. Then he heard what she had heard. Someone, or something, was slowly ascending the stairs from the living-room. Footsteps were distinctly audible.

Oden's mouth curled in a snarl. He had slept soundly for the first time in almost a week, and his mind was still sluggish with sleep. He did not immediately associate the footsteps with anything that had gone before. They were merely footsteps.

"Some thief, looking for trouble," he muttered, and swung his feet to the floor, intending to get the gun that was in the top drawer of the bureau.

But there was something wrong with those footsteps, and he realized it while pushing himself off the bed. They were unmistakably being made by *naked* feet.

He swayed on wide-spread legs and stared at the door. He was not frightened—not yet—but maggots of uneasiness crawled in his brain, and his heart began to swell against his chest. *Naked* feet! And the sound they made was a weirdly terrible *shf . . . shf . . . shf . . .* that was like nothing else he had ever heard.

A sob of abject terror welled from Ellen's lips as the footsteps came nearer. They were in the hall now, advancing toward the bedroom door. Never once taking his gaze from that yawning black aperture, Oden sidled toward the bureau.

"Oh God, it's coming!" his wife moaned. "Do something, Phil!"

There was another sound then—a sound that chilled the blood in Oden's veins and caused beads of cold sweat to stand out on his ridged forehead. It seemed to have no beginning but was suddenly loud enough to sweep like a living thing along the hall, through darkness, and smother even the suck of his own labored breathing. It was an uncouth slobbering, a ghastly, half human out-pouring of grisly mirth.

A madman with impaired vocal cords might have uttered such a sound. A madman or a hungry animal. And the footsteps whispered through it, *shf . . . shf . . . shf . . .* continuing their awful advance.

Suddenly the doorway was no longer empty.

Oden uttered a hoarse cry of horror. His wife screamed. The thing in the doorway leered at both of them, and made slobbering sounds with its drooling lips, and took a lumbering step forward.

Numb with fear, Oden staggered back until the wall slammed into him, stopping him. Then, with both arms outthrust and low whispering sounds sobbing from his gaping mouth, he stared.

The thing was one of his own clay figures, come to life. It was the Beast out of Gromleigh's horror-book. Huge and hairless and hideous, it loomed like a great white giant in the room's darkness, and the room was full of the squalid, sluttish jargon that spewed from its flabby mouth.

He had brought the thing to life! He had done what Ingershaw and Yago must have done! And it was hungrily advancing upon his wife, just as in Gromleigh's



book it had seized every defenseless woman that aroused it!

Oden lurched away from the wall and flung himself forward. He forgot about the gun in the top drawer of the bureau. He saw only the hideous monster lumbering toward the bed, and heard only the terror-screams of the helpless girl who cringed there. The girl was his wife. He loved her. It was his job to protect her.

He charged blindly, and the beast whirled to meet him. Hairless, slippery flesh slid under Oden's clawing hands. Shrilling incoherent words, he struggled to hurl the monster back. No one had ever called him a coward or a weakling, and he was not weak now. Fear had given him superhuman strength.

It was not enough. Huge hands took hold of him and lifted him off the floor. The sledge-hammer blows of his fists had no effect. Held at arm's length, he snarled and writhed to free himself, and drove his feet savagely into the monster's flabby body—but the awful leer did not fade from that hideous face, and the beast was impervious to pain.

Turning, the beast flung Oden aside—flung him easily and without apparent effort, yet with such force that the room itself shuddered to the impact as Oden's contorted body crashed to the floor.

Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth as he struggled to hands and knees. Agony streaked through him, and his left leg was a crushed, throbbing weight that held him down. He tried to rise, but crumpled and lay groaning. As if from a great distance he heard his wife screaming for help, and saw the monster leaning over her.

Horribly conscious of what was happening, but helpless to prevent it, Oden lay in a twisted heap on the floor, his own blood forming a wet, sticky pool under his hands. The room was still dark, but not dark enough to blind him. He saw every ghastly detail.

The same huge hands which had hurled him aside were now dragging Ellen from the bed. They were clutching the soft white flesh of her body, tearing the filmy nightgown which was her only protection. She struggled the way he had struggled, and with the same lack of success. It was foolish to fight . . .

Through Oden's frenzied mind flashed passages from the horror-book which in some hellish manner had brought this uncouth monster into being. God, how vividly real were those passages now! Time and again this beast had attacked women. Some he had dragged to his lair and devoured. Others he had mauled and mutilated and cast aside.

And now Ellen was to be one of his victims! His mouth was glued to hers, and her half-nude body was a fragile toy in his powerful paws. Her beauty had aroused in him a strange sort of madness. He was not hurting her—much. Not intentionally. Animal sounds of delight gibbered from his lips as he caressed his new plaything.

And Ellen had stopped screaming. Her hands were no longer tearing frantically at the monster's face. She lay limp in his arms, unaware of his clumsy caresses.

Phil Oden tried again to stagger erect, and again fell back, groaning, when his crushed leg refused to support him. The monster turned to peer at him, and voiced a vicious snarl of hate.

Then, while Oden stared with horrified eyes, the beast gathered Ellen's limp body in its huge arms and lumbered to the door. Unable to follow, Oden swayed on hands and knees and moaned in torment.

He knew what would happen now. It was all in the book. The monster would go lurching out into the night, back to its foul den. There, for hours on end, it would gloat over its newly acquired plaything, gurgling and laughing and chuckling . . .

Finally it would tire of the game and then . . .

The hollow thump of the beast's receding footsteps died to silence. Downstairs, the front door closed with a resounding crash, and then there was only the muted whisper of the rain and the rasp of Oden's own harsh breathing. The beast had gone, taking Ellen with him.

"Oh, my God," Oden groaned.

He began crawling. Agony raged within him, and hot sweat dripped from his contorted face, but he crawled over the threshold and along the corridor to the head of the stairs.

The stairs were steep and sloped down, down, into a darkness that had no bottom. Swaying there, he fought for strength.

Like a crippled dog he descended, bracing himself with his hands and dragging his crushed leg behind him. Unending waves of pain shot through him. The agony in his head was a raging fire, destroying his mind. But he kept going.

That monstrous thing was not real. It *couldn't* be real. It was an invention of Ivan Gromleigh, who believed that every human being possessed a dual personality; and he, Philip Oden, had brought the thing to life by modeling it in clay. That was the answer. *He* was responsible.

His warped brain fastened on that thought to the exclusion of all else. Groaning through clenched teeth, he crawled across the living-room floor, dragged himself into the dining-room. The clay figures were still there on the table.

He pulled himself erect by clutching the legs of the tripod, lurching to his knees and grabbing the table-edge. The table tipped and he hung his weight on it, pulling it over.

The clay figures thudded to the carpet.

Sobbing wildly, he flung himself upon them, seized them. *They* had brought the monster to life. They must be destroyed!

Like a child playing with toys, he gathered them in a heap. Out there in the night, in the rain, the monster was fleeing with Ellen. Perhaps it had already reached its lair—

The thought lashed him to an insane frenzy. Savagely he ground the clay figures into the carpet, crushing them, pulverizing them. They represented endless hours of painstaking toil, but he chuckled insanely as he smashed them.

And then suddenly he jerked back on his knees, listening.

The sound that rocked the very walls around him was no human sound. Nothing of human proportions could have uttered a scream so laden with awful agony. Like thunder it bellowed through the night, shaking everything in its giant path.

Back in the dark sloughs of a primeval world, a wounded mastodon might have screamed that way in the final agonies of dying.

The monstrous din came from somewhere nearby. Like the wail of a thousand sirens it ripped and slashed through space, and the torment of a slaughtered army was packed into that one Gargantuan voice.

It lived and died, and left in its wake a silence that was earsplitting.

Moaning softly, Phil Oden crawled to a telephone.

They found his wife an hour later and brought her back to him, nearly naked and shivering but unharmed. They listened patiently to his story, those grim, hard-boiled officers of the law, and one of them said vaguely: "Well, maybe it's like you say, Oden. You're ill, of course, and I guess we won't take you too seriously. But if there *was* a monster such as you describe, he got away and left no trace behind him. We found your wife alongside Haley's Brook, about a mile from here, and there wasn't no one else in the vicinity."

Phil Oden did not argue. He merely thanked them. But the following day's newspapers carried more than just a garbled account of the search for Ellen. They carried a General Press dispatch of which he read every word.

New Orleans, Mar. 14 (GP)—The police of this city are today investigating what appears to be one of the strangest murder cases ever encountered here. At a late hour last night, screams of agony were heard by tenants of a suburban apartment house and were traced to the apartment occupied by Ivan Gromleigh, eminent psychiatrist. Led by the manager, a group of anxious tenants entered the apartment and discovered Gromleigh in bed, dead.

The man's body was torn and mangled almost beyond recognition. Literally every inch of it was pulverized as if in the jaws of a giant press.

Because the apartment itself reveals no trace of a struggle, police are of the opinion that the psychiatrist was attacked while asleep and murdered in his bed. Yet the bedclothes surrounding the body were in no way torn or damaged by the weapon that reduced the victim to a bloody pulp.

Police are investigating all angles . . .

Phil Oden showed the GP dispatch to his wife and held her in his arms while she read it. When the clipping fell from her trembling fingers, he put his lips against her cheek and whispered, "Easy, darling, easy," and held her hard against him until her slim, soft body had stopped quivering.

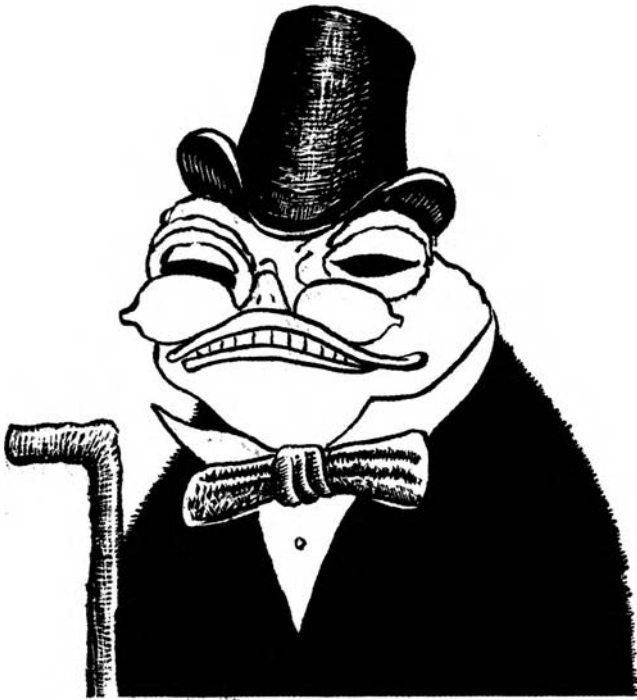
"What—what does it mean?" she asked fearfully.

"It means Gromleigh was right. He wasn't guessing. He had first-hand knowledge of the stuff he put in that book. It means we can wash our hands of the

job and forget it—and we're going to."

He put his lips against hers, and the heat from her body crept into him, warming him.

"There'll be no more footsteps," he said softly.



The Affair of the Clutching Hand

“SIR GORDON NULL’S PLACE?”

The station agent at West Sussex shuffled a step nearer to me, glancing furtively into my face. Evidently a passenger on the late train was not a common occurrence and was open to suspicion. “Null’s place? You’ll be meanin’—‘The Turrets?’ ”

I nodded quietly, angered by the cautious manner in which he kept his distance.

“I’ll tell you the road,” he said slowly. “Mind you, I ain’t takin’ you, not in person I ain’t. There be a fearful heavy storm comin’ up, an’ the moor be a lonely place with the wailin’ an’ screamin’ o’ the wind. But you’ll be leavin’ the main highway over there by them two trees—”

He pointed into the dark, to the left of the station. “There’ll be a dirt path leadin’ off the road, an’ you’ll be followin’ it straight out across the moor. Straight out, mind you, an’ no turns or you’ll be findin’ yourself back where you started from! You follow that path, an’ if it ain’t too dark you’ll be seein’ the place ahead, like a prison.”

As I groped along the path, following it with great difficulty, for the sky overhead was jet black and heavy with storm, I became more and more conscious of the madness of my journey. Hardly more than an hour past, I had been secure in my own study, in London; then, through the fog and drizzle, had come a message from Null, handed to me by a blue-coated street runner.

“Come at once, Hale,” it had said. “After thirty years of searching, I have found the mightiest thing in creation. I must tell some one. The others will not believe. Come by to-night’s train!”

And I had come—by to-night’s train. We had been together at Cambridge, Null much older than I. I remembered him as a gaunt man, tall, and wasted. His hair had always been black as pitchblende, twisting down over bitter eyes, and his face the face of a hawk.

I had reached the open moor now, where the sky was a heavy, moving void, unbroken by any sign of light. Great storm clouds, gathering intensity with every sluggish movement, formed a solid mass of darkness above me. In an hour, perhaps even less, they would come together with a sinister roar; and hell itself, in the dismal blackness of an English night, would envelope my path.

And now, ahead of me as I picked my steps cautiously through the stubble, I could make out the black outlines of my destination. Like a spider-shaped shadow it hung before me, looming fearfully close. The gravel walk crunched beneath my feet as I turned into the half-open gate. A moment later, standing in the shadow of the massive doorway, I lifted the iron knocker and let it drop with a resounding thud.

The sound was startlingly loud: I heard it echo and re-echo through the inner rooms; and as I stood there, with the thud of it dying in my ears, the great door fell away from me with a sullen rumble. I stepped over the sill, conscious that a pair of expressionless Oriental eyes were following my every movement. The door closed behind me with a heavy rasping sound. A hand fell on my arm.

“You—Doctor Hale?”

I nodded. The Oriental stood aside very quietly. His gaunt face harmonized strangely with the utter loneliness of his surroundings: He was a Burman—tall, thick-set, unemotional.

“Sir Gordon tell me he send for you,” he said evenly. “You get his letter, you come, eh? Now you follow me. I take you to missy.”

He led me silently down the long corridor, underneath a single sputtering gas jet that burned in the wall. A glance impressed those surroundings indelibly on my mind. The dark, repelling atmosphere of the place seemed to thrust me back with mute warning; and the faint halo of illumination, cast by that single light, seemed to beckon me forward; I was between the two forces, standing rigid in momentary hesitation, with the Burman waiting stolidly for me to follow him.

Follow him I did, through a winding series of black corridors that led me deep into the recesses of the old house. There was no light; the passages extended before me like the labyrinthine tunnels of a buried vault, until the figure ahead of me stopped suddenly and pushed open an unpretentious door that hung in the gloom of the wall.

Without waiting for me to speak, he entered. A match gleamed for an instant in his cupped hands, and as he straightened up I saw, by the increasing light of the lamp, that the room was Null's study. The light was dim, hardly reaching to the ends of the chamber, revealing a massive, wooden table in the center, with claw-legged chair beside it, and row upon row of dusty volumes against the farther wall. I sensed, from the musty odor that filled the enclosure, that the room had been closed for some time—probably for a number of days—and had been opened solely for my accommodation.

The Burman turned silently and retraced his steps to the door. With one hand on the knob, he faced me, “You wait here. Missy come see you very soon.”

I picked a cigarette from the open case on the table, and lighted it, nodding to him. When I looked up again, the doorway was empty. I was completely alone.

It was curiosity, or at least a fervent desire to be doing something, that made me glance down at the pile of scattered books and papers that lay on the table.



The books were singularly alike—all of them advanced text books on the subject of poisons and their effects on the blood.

One of them—a tiny, pocket-sized thing in red leather cover, its pages well-thumbed and marked—lay opened to a hideous picture of a mad gorilla. Another had been torn apart ruthlessly and cast aside, with the torn section carefully bound and preserved. I glanced at it in wonder, without picking it up, and found myself reading a very technical analysis of venomous snakes, with special attention to that deadly poisonous reptile known as the *Bitis arietans*, or Puff Adder.

And then, as I glanced across the table in half-interest for what lay there, my eyes fell upon something else. It was my own name that caught my attention, scrawled in pencil across the front of a sealed envelope. Below it, in heavy letters, appeared the word "Personal!"

I broke the seal carefully, removing the sheaf of papers that lay inside. In amazement I studied them, dropping them one by one back into the container. They were scribbled formulas, most of them, meaningless to the casual man of medicine. But one—and here I bent suddenly forward, staring intently at the writing before me—was singularly interesting.

I shall quote from it exactly as it was written, in the sharp, scrawling hand of the man who had summoned me, the man who had, to all intent, left these papers in my care:

October 9. I am nearing the end of my research. The combination of serums seems to contain all of the elements necessary for my purpose. I should have completed my task months ago, but England does not contain the fluids that I sought. To-night, after I have examined the serum once more, I shall experiment. If I succeed, milady Margot's darling hound will be deathless!

October 10. The worst has passed. Less than an hour past I treated the dog with a very small amount of my new discovery. For a moment he showed no reaction; then, with a great shriek, he bolted from the laboratory. There has been no sign of him since. Every effort to locate him has been of no avail. I am convinced that my secret is worthy of a human test.

October 11. Nine A.M. I have become firm in my resolution. Margot would not understand my motives and would hinder me to the utmost; therefore I must have another witness. Perhaps it would be best to send for Hale. He, of all men alive, would understand and sympathize. I shall call him.

Four P.M. I have sent for Hale. As soon as he arrives, I shall go through with my plans. Meanwhile, there are several slight changes which must be made in the serum before it is ready for the final test. These will keep me occupied until Hale's coming—and then we shall see! The intense work of the last week has left me weak and nervous. I fear a return of the damnable heart-sickness that has threatened me for the last ten years. But Hale will know how to pull me together.

Those are the words of Gordon Null, exactly as he had set them down. What

fiendish fluid he had found—what mad concoction he had discovered that would prolong human and animal life to eternity—I could not know. For many years he had been working to complete this unholy scheme. Many times during the early days of our acquaintance, he had discussed it with me. The secret of existence had become an obsession with him. And now—

I dropped the papers with a shudder of apprehension. Would I find a madman here in this place of shadows? Would I find, amid the whisperings and murmurings of these grim halls, a man who had solved the mystery of life and death? Would I be forced to stand by and help him experiment—upon *himself*?

It was another question, spoken in a half-whisper of fear, that jerked me about with a start, jerked me about, I say, to find a pair of soft, staring eyes watching me, and a slender arm outstretched toward me.

“You—you are Ronald Hale?”

I stepped toward her. The thought came instantly to me that this was Margot. This was Null’s daughter, the girl who had cared for him and humored him since the death of his wife, four years ago.

She was almost beautiful as she came toward me in the dim light of the lamp. Black hair, as dark as her father’s—half-parted lips that trembled as she spoke, a lithe, supple body that moved without motion. Beautiful, I say, and yet for all that, gripped with something that might have been terror.

“I am so glad,” she whispered. “You don’t know—Oh, it is good to have some one here!”

“Something has happened?” I asked quickly.

Her fingers touched my arm. I could feel the tremor of her body and of her voice, as she stood close to me. “Father—is dead,” she said slowly. “Something horrible—something we cannot fight against—has murdered him! The strain of the last few days weakened his—heart. And then—he was *frightened* to death!”

There must be something of the scientist in me—something cold and mechanical. I believe I stared at the girl before me, but I was thinking of the diary I had just finished reading. And I am positive that my first reaction to Margot’s statement was the feeling of irritation that Null should have succumbed before explaining the secret of his serum to me—before even putting it to a test. Then, through my unreasonable thoughts, I heard the words of the girl who faced me.

“It happened about nine o’clock,” she was saying. “Father came from his laboratory and went straight to his own room, after giving me these papers for you—” she indicated the documents which I had already discovered and read. “He complained of terrible pains, but he would not let me come near him. I have never seen him so pale and thin.”

She hesitated. The terror had returned to her face, and her fingers tightened on my arm as she went on, “At half past nine, Mrs. May, the old housekeeper, went upstairs with some strong coffee. Then, I heard a scream—a horrible scream. When I reached the room—his room—I found him there, on the bed. And—and also—” Margot’s voice dropped to a hushed whisper— “Mrs. May

was there, lying on the floor, beside the bed. They—they were both *dead!*”

A sob broke through the girl's lips. A single glance at her pale, frightened features convinced me that she was telling a direct story, with no attempt at drama. And yet—

“You are sure?” I asked her, as she stood facing me. “You are sure that the housekeeper was dead? She had not fainted from the shock of finding your father dead?”

“No, I am sure. I have been a nurse, Dr. Hale. Both father and she were terribly contorted, as if—as if some huge animal had killed them. Father's body was twisted horribly; and Mrs. May's neck was broken in a dreadful way.”

“Her neck was *broken?*” I repeated. “By what?”

“I do not know. Whatever it was, she saw it before she was overpowered. Father saw it, too, It—it is—ghostly!”

“I must ask you to take me to his room,” I said hoarsely. “There was a reason for his death, and a reason for hers. Whatever it is, we must find it before the thing repeats itself.”

She moved away silently. I hesitated only long enough to pick up the diary that I had been reading; then, with the sheaf of papers hidden securely in my coat pocket, I followed her to the upper part of the house.

It was a small, musty room that we entered at last—very much like the study on the floor below. My first impression was of a flickering candle that burned on the table against the wall; and then, as I became used to the yellow glow, I made out a form on a bed—and another distorted shape that lay on the floor beside it.

I thrust Margot back from entering that room of double death. I advanced alone; she stood by the door, watching me with fearful eyes; I went directly to the bed. The candle had been placed so that its halo of light fell precisely over Gordon Null's face, throwing every detail of the man's features into an almost living reality. And the eyes were a mask of agony—they were dead, horribly dead, and yet positively glaring in their intensity; they were magnetic, drawing me closer and closer; and as I bent over them I found something else—a positive gleam in those fear-filled eyes.

The cause of this man's death had been fright; fear had stopped the beating of his weak heart. Whatever he had seen—whatever had swooped down upon him—had killed him even before it reached him. But the thing, whatever it was, had twisted his body horribly.

He lay rigid, curled like a gnarled length of wire. I can think of nothing better to say than to compare him with a huge, half-coiled spider. His left arm lay outstretched, reaching almost to his knees—stiff. His right arm was bent at the elbow. The upper half lay straight; the lower section, from elbow to hand, extended almost perpendicularly into the air, terminating in half-open, curled hand. Nothing supported it. It hung there as if the intruder had propped it up and wrenched the bones into position.

I had completely forgotten my surroundings. As I turned away from the bed,

my foot struck that other dead body and, with a start, I glanced down. For a moment I could see nothing distinctly; the shadows of the bed concealed what lay there. Then that face of terror burned through the gloom into mine, and I recoiled with a shudder.

Doctor I am, but never in my years of practise have I seen a woman's face so utterly convulsed with horror. The neck was broken—I could judge instantly from the lolling position of the head. But the thing that had brought death to this old woman had been something frightful and unbelievable. She had been flung aside, killed in a single blow, and left there.

As I stood over her, a hand touched my arm. I turned slowly to face the girl who had led me through the corridors.

"You—see?" she whispered.

I nodded quietly. With a final glance at Null's body, I drew her aside to the safety of the door.

"Are we alone here?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"There is the Burman—the man who let you in."

I turned suddenly to stare at the silent form by the bed. In a flash the thought struck me—were those frightful gashes at her throat the marks of Oriental fingers? There are few people in the world who can kill with a single twist of the hand, and the Orientals have learned the secret. With their infernal ju-jitsu, their uncanny holds and tortures—

But Margot read my thoughts.

"He has been here for years," she said. "He was father's trusted servant. At times he even helped father in the laboratory."

"Will you call him, please?" I asked her. "If he has worked with Sir Gordon, he may know more than either of us. I should like to question him—alone."

She moved silently away. When she had gone, I heard her footsteps echoing softly down the long hall, becoming fainter and fainter. Then, with a shrug, I turned once again to that room of horror.

I must have stumbled back—must have cried aloud. I can recall even now the numbing sense of helpless fear that overwhelmed me, in spite of the fact that the thing I saw had a logical explanation. But I am not ashamed of such a terror, for the sight that lay before me would have brought fear to many a braver man.

Gordon Null's body lay in the same rigid position, unmoved. The face still stared with that ghastly glare of triumph. But the man's arm—that forearm which had been propped up in a perpendicular position—lay full length across his chest, pointing directly into my face!

I am a doctor of some repute; I have seen more than one touch of horror; I have watched a patient overcome the grip of ether and wake up in the midst of a major operation; I have seen a man supposedly dead for two days stand up and scream; and yet those things are to be expected in hospital routine—they are part of the grim business of surgery. But here, in this house of whispers and

darkness, this sudden fear was more than I could stand.

I left the room with staggering steps, my whole body twitching with an uncontrollable sense of the supernatural. There was an explanation for this ghastly thing, I knew full well: the dead man's hand had been paralyzed in an upright position. In pacing about the room I had caused sufficient vibration of the bed to jar the tense muscles loose again—and the arm had fallen.

And yet I groped through the gloom of the outer passage like a man who has seen some ghastly ghost. Only with an effort did I find my way to the head of the great stairs.

And there, with one hand on the carved banister, I stopped, for the Oriental stood before me, waiting for me to speak. He had come soundlessly, with footsteps that made no tread on the heavy carpet. Now, with that expressionless stare masking his eyes, he faced me. It was the sight of his indifference, I believe, that took the fear from my own heart and thrust me back into the reality of the situation.

If Null had taken this fellow into his confidence, the Burman could tell me something; perhaps, by cautious questioning—I had had some experience with Orientals before—I might learn the secret of Sir Gordon's death and the nature of the unnamed thing which had murdered both him and the housekeeper.

I drew the servant to one side, where the rays of an overhead gas jet fell on his face. "You knew Sir Gordon intimately?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I work with him sometimes."

"You assisted him?"

"Sometimes."

"Can you tell me what he was working with just before—this happened?"

The Burman's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. For a moment I thought he would shake his head; then he said quietly: "He make some serum, he call it. He tell me maybe he give me some. Make me live long time, maybe never die."

"And did he?"

"No. First he give it to— No. I do not know."

He was deliberately evading me. My fingers closed firmly over his arm, and I stared directly at him. "First," I repeated, "he gave it to the dog. Now tell me!"

His eyes shifted quickly to mine, and fell again. I felt him start. Then: "He give it to dog. The dog go away, screaming. That was last night—late."

"Do you know where the dog is?" I demanded.

He hesitated. Then, leaning toward me, he whispered the words, "You come!" Without waiting for my reply, he turned abruptly and went silently down the passage. At the head of the stairs he stopped once to see that I was following. A moment later he moved down into the shadows of the lower hall. Our journey was but a short one, ending in the farther corner of the stone vault. And here, as the Oriental stepped aside, I saw a thing which will forever haunt my memory!

It was a dog—a huge black hound common enough throughout the moors. He was dead; that much I am certain of. But his head, with glassy, sightless eyes, and mouth covered with dry foam, was twisted in a horrible position of contortion.

I dropped to my knees beside the creature. My fingers passed over his body, and found nothing but a cold, stiff carcass. The animal was no longer alive; not a semblance of life inhabited his rigid form. And then, as I bent closer, my hand fell accidentally against that twisted head.

Even as I touched it—and *the thing was deathly cold to my touch*—the fearful thing swung toward my hand with a rapid, silent thrust of fury. Had I stayed there, without leaping back, my hand would have been severed at the wrist—*by a pair of dead jaws!*

I faced the Oriental with as much composure as I could muster. “Tell me,” I said, “how Sir Gordon treated this animal! Just how did he force the serum into it?”

The Burman advanced cautiously and pointed with rigid finger to the dog’s throat. The creature’s head turned slowly, following his hand with malicious evil, and as the head came up I saw a faint purple mark under its lower jaw.

This, then, was where Null had injected his murderous fluid; and this horrible monstrosity that lay sprawled on the stone at my feet was the result of his fiendish experiment. I could only think that it was by the mercy of God that Null had died before using the hideous serum *on himself*.

“You see?” The Burman moved to my side. “When the master stab him with needle, dog screech and claw like devil himself. An hour ago, maybe more, I come down here to make sure all doors are close. I find him here, like that. He make no move for me *until I touch his head*. Then he fight me, like that.”

I looked again toward that ghastly corpse-thing on the floor. The dog’s head had dropped again in a lifeless heap, hanging down over its dead paws. I stepped back. The thing made no move to follow me. It was dead. Evidently, then, its sudden surge of horrible life came only after some disturbing element had awakened it. Left alone, it would stay passive until some chance intruder touched that head of living death. I recalled the fearful gashes in the old house-keeper’s throat—the uncanny position of Null’s twisted body, and I stared at the hound at my feet. But I could not face my own thoughts: they were too horrible.

“Show me the way back,” I said, “back to Sir Gordon’s study.”

The events that I had been through—the horror and terror of a double death and this dead thing with its awful living head—these were merely a suggestion of what was to come. As I paced slowly behind the Oriental, groping out of the lower recesses of the house, I did not suspect the things that lay in wait of me. Had I done so, I should have fled that place as quickly as my numbed body could crawl away.

At length, after some time, we reached the main halls, and there, in the room

to which I had first been introduced, I found Lady Margot. She sat by the table, the same on which I had found Null's diary, with the light of the lamp cast slantwise over her face. The face itself, after the horror of the last few hours, was strangely calm; and once again I was struck with the Madonna-like beauty of it. There was courage in her quiet bearing—more courage than I could find in my own heart, after such a series of ordeals.

"You have found something?" she said, rising to meet me.

I glanced about the room cautiously. The Oriental, having led me here, had disappeared like a shadow. We were alone—alone with the ancient table and the disorderly pile of papers that lay scattered over its surface.

"I will tell you what I know," I said quietly. "Sir Gordon had been experimenting with a serum which would procure eternal life. It was his hobby, his obsession."

She nodded. "I know. He has spoken to me of it."

"He found it," I went on, "from the books and papers there—" I indicated the table beside us—"it is evident that the serums he used were obtained from two most singular creatures: a mad gorilla and a venomous puff-adder. He combined the two in some ingenious manner, and tried his secret on the hound."

"The hound?" She started visibly, as if a sudden memory had returned to her. "It was he then that I heard scream?"

"The dog," I told her slowly, "is dead, in the cellar of the house. His body—his whole body—is cold and rigid; *but his head is horribly alive*. There is but one solution: Sir Gordon injected the serum into the creature's throat; the poison entered the blood and was carried directly to the heart in a matter of seconds; the poison paralyzed the heart, and the circulation stopped at once; but not before the poison, in the immediate region of the wound, found time to move through the tiny outlets of the main blood vessels—to take effect upon the dog's head."

She nodded. Evidently she understood what I was attempting to tell her—that Sir Gordon's serum had been powerful enough to kill the heart, but not powerful enough to affect the blood vessels which had carried it to the heart; and that, in the fleeting instant before it had deadened the circulatory system, it had made the tissues of the dog's head deathless—with awful effect.

"The head," I concluded, "is *alive*. The rest of the body is positively *dead*. I am willing to wager that the head will never die—that nothing could kill it, unless it be crushed and demolished—*disintegrated as an entity*."

Margot had been following my reasoning intently. When I had finished, she stepped closer to me and touched my hand. Her words were hardly more than a whisper.

"You have not told me yet, who killed my father—"

I had no answer. I could not tell her what I believed, because the things I believed were not logical—not possible. I had just finished telling her that the dog had died immediately. How, then, could I explain to her my fantastic theory

that the creature had remained alive and had taken vengeance on the man who had tortured him?

"It would be merciful," she said softly, "to close the lower windows in his room. The storm is fearful."

I nodded. When I thought of the tempest screaming through the open windows in that upstairs room, and the rush of rain that would sweep through that gruesome enclosure, I could not repress a shudder. I stepped toward her, with the intention of drawing her back to the safety of our retreat.

"It is no place for a girl—up there, in this night of madness." I said softly.

"There is still the Burman," she murmured. "And he is still a trusted servant, even in this time of horror."

I saw her step quickly to the wall of the study. Her finger pressed a half-concealed button, and from somewhere beyond, over the wail of the storm, came the almost inaudible sound of a bell.

From the shadow of the doorway, a monotonous voice asked, "You call me, missy?"

Margot spoke without leaving my side, "You will close the windows upstairs in all the rooms," she said. "Especially in Sir Gordon's room. Be careful. Do not touch anything."

No sign of fear crossed the Burman's expressionless face. He nodded silently and stepped back. The gloom of the open doorway swallowed him.

Margot turned again to face me. Her first words revealed the trend of her thoughts and startled me with their suddenness.

"You say the dog is dead." It was not a question; she was thinking aloud.

"The dog is dead," I replied. "The dog's head—is alive."

"It is hard to understand," she said. "I am not much of a scientist, Dr. Hale. Tell me—has the nature of this serum any effect on the thing treated? I mean by that, has the dog's head, which you say is alive, because of the serum injected into it, any of the frightful savageness of the serpent and the mad gorilla from which this serum was obtained?"

I must have started with the sudden memory that her words thrust upon me—the memory of that snarling thing in the cellars below us.

She smiled heavily and took my hand. "I am sorry," she said softly. "I see I have shocked you."

"Shocked me! You have stumbled on the most important phase of this horrible thing," I told her. "Tell me, was this dog, as you knew it, a beast—a fiend?"

She shook her head. "He was my companion, my pet," she said. "I have never heard him growl."

"And now—" I spoke slowly, so that the portent of my words might carry full weight—"he is the fiend incarnate. His living head is a thing gone mad. You understand: it does not move—it is not alive—until some disturbing element touches it. Then it becomes a snarling, ferocious thing. To say that it is endowed with the treachery and strength of a snake and a gorilla would be too much, too

fantastic, but the symptoms are there. What I say is God's truth!"

"And father knew this?"

"Your father probably did not realize what the effect of the serum would be," I explained. "I am sure he would not have used it on the hound, if he had known. And I am sure of something else, Margot."

"Yes?"

I had to say it, then. I had blurted so much of it out that I could not refrain from telling the rest: "I am convinced that the dog killed your father—and the housekeeper. Don't ask me how! I do not know. But, good God in heaven, what other explanation is there to offer? Those ghastly marks—those expressions of terror on both of their faces—"

My voice died into silence. From the darkness above us the scream of the storm took it up in a thousand echoes, hurling them down to us with fury. This fearful house, ancient and dead—could it be possible that these buried vaults were inhabited by creatures of another world? For centuries, strange men and women had paced through these musty rooms and passages. The burial vaults were somewhere in the underground corridors, I knew. Could it be possible that Sir Gordon's irreverent play of life and death had angered the very dead themselves? The sound of that wailing wind in the upper towers—the uncanny creaking of the very room in which we stood—these things were surely not natural occurrences! My God, could the dead be walking with us?

Then I saw Margot standing rigid before me, one hand upraised.

"Listen!" she gasped.

And then I heard it—faintly at first, then bursting shrilly through the sound of the storm, to echo again and again through the corridors of the house—a human voice, it was, lifted in a scream of utter terror, shrill and piercing—then silence.

With a hoarse cry, I burst from the room; I was vaguely conscious that Margot followed me; then I was in the outer corridor, stumbling through the dark along that dimly remembered passage and up the stairs to the open door of Gordon Null's room. There, with both hands clutching the door frame, I stopped abruptly, for the thing before me froze every muscle in my body:

The scream had come from the Burman's twisted lips; he was leaning over the bed now, bent grotesquely over the rigid body that lay there, and both his hands were clawing weakly at the terrible fingers, which, like merciless talons of steel, had fastened themselves in the Burman's throat and were *deliberately strangling him to death*.

As I crossed the room, the picture of Lady Margot's hound burned itself into me: I saw once again the dead hound's head, snarling with awful hate, lunging toward me after I had touched it; and in that single moment, as I fought back the fear that overwhelmed me, I knew the horrible secret of Null's death, for the savage, bestial hand that tore at the Burman's throat *was the hand of the man who lay dead before me!*

Even as I reached the side of the bed, those fiendish fingers released their hold with a sudden, rending twist; I heard a crack of bone; and the Burman slumped heavily to the floor—dead.

As he fell, and as that terrible clutching hand writhed toward *me* over the bed, the dead Burman's face twisted to the light and I saw an expression there that I shall never forget—the same stare of horror that disfigured the face of the old housekeeper—the same torn throat, the same—dreadful—death!

I reeled backwards. On the bed, still groping blindly toward me with a triumphant gesture of hate, lay that fearful living arm.

I knew now why it had changed position when I had stood here before; I knew now what had strangled the old housekeeper when she had first bent over the dead man's body—she had fallen against it, as I had fallen against the living head of that dead hound, and it had gripped her with the same malice, after her touch had excited it to savage action; the thing was terribly alive—would *always* be terribly alive—and would always be a thing of murder and savage fiendishness.

And then I knew! Sir Gordon had used that mad serum on himself. It was the serum, working through his body, that had contorted him into that spider-like shape; it was the terrible effect of the fluid, burning through his veins, that had convulsed his face. Good—God—

I saw one thing more, as I reached the open doorway of that room of living death. The awful hand had twisted suddenly upward, following my movements. For a fleeting instant the light fell upon it, and there, just below the elbow, at the joint of the ulna, I saw that same purple mark that had discoloured the throat of Lady Margot's hound.

This, then, was the reason for the living death: Null had thrust the needle into his arm at the elbow joint; it had killed him instantly, fighting its way through the veins directly to the heart; but before the circulation had ceased, that deadly fluid had found a way into the tissues of the arm, leaving it horribly alive!

I left that room with the steps of a man who has seen beyond the grave. I believe that Margot stood in the entrance as I groped past; but I am not sure. I remember her footsteps as she followed me; and above them, like a voice from hell, rose the wail of the storm.

Together we groped through the black vaults of the old house. Together, with her hand on my arm, we wrenched open the outer door of that place of horror and death—and stumbled out into the storm.

It lashed about us in fury. A great wall of blinding rain hurled us forward into the desolation of the moor. Behind us, swung shut by the force of the wind, the huge door of "The Turrets" clanged into place, barring its horrible secret.

I do not know how we reached the little railroad station that cringed on the edge of the moor. I do know that my heart was still black with horror when I battered in the aged door and drew Margot into the cold, unlighted interior. And there we crouched, until the first gleam of light penetrated the

chinks of the walls.

And that, I believe, is all. Except that the authorities sat in solemn inquest on the triple death without any specific findings aside from the familiar formula—"at the hands of person or persons unknown." I have never returned to "The Turrets," nor has Margot. Nor do we want to. Indeed, the place is shunned by everybody, and Time and Decay are already busy on its proper dissolution.



C 75

The Strange Case of No. 7

"IN THE INTERESTS OF SCIENCE, come at once to number seven After Street. I promise you an evening of supreme entertainment.

M. Brand."

There was nothing else. The note was penned in a small, compact script, and bore at the top, engraved in black, a tiny death's head. I found it under the door of my study on the evening of October fifteenth, after returning from a most peculiar series of events at The Turrets, in West Sussex. It was small—light gray in color—and bore no stamp or postmark of any description. I shuddered at the sight of it, for that grinning skull, simple and meaningless in itself, was the most horrible character disclosure of the entire letter.

I had known Michael Brand in the course of my studies at Cambridge. It was there, in the laboratories, that I first encountered him—a big, surly fellow. His limbs were out of proportion and gave him a gaunt, gangling appearance as he slouched from one place to another. A brute of a man with a morose face and an ugly temper.

We had little in common—certainly none of those deeper bonds of intimacy which bring friendship. I saw him occasionally, spoke to him seldom, and watched him—from a distance—with a certain amount of interest. His lust for knowledge fascinated me; that was all. When I left the university to take professional rooms in Cheney Lane, the man's name was nothing more to me than a vague recollection.

Now, years later, he had turned up again. But I decided not to heed his call. I threw the card on my desk. As if he knew what I had done, the door opened slowly an hour or so later to reveal the man himself!

Michael Brand had become, to all appearances, an old man. His face, still twisted in that surly snarl, was thin and dry, with a narrow, bitter line of mouth cutting into the lower part of it.

"Didn't expect to see me, Hale?" he laughed. "I've come to take you with me whether you want to go or not. I have something to show you—that will appeal to you as a medical man."

He offered no further explanation of his visit. Merely stood there with his hands in his pockets, waiting for me to pull on my coat and follow him. I yielded.

His rooms were in the most distant part of the city, fully an hour's ride from my own. We traversed the entire route in silence, nor did the silence seem in the least bit unusual. For my part, I was deep in the memory of our previous acquaintance, and of his former experiments in which I had taken part. For his part, he was probably meditating on the thing which lay before us, gloating, no doubt, on the surprise he had planned for my benefit.

We reached Brand's rooms at about twelve o'clock. The street was dark and deserted. The rain, as we stepped from the cab, had settled to a steady, penetrating drizzle.

As I closed the lower door and followed him up the gloomy stairs (he had chosen an apartment on the second floor of the house), he spoke to me.

"Know anything of the inner side of death, Hale?" he asked.

"Of death? I know very little," I told him, evading his question as much as possible until I had learned the cause of it.

"Tell me," he said—at the same time opening the door of his apartment—"do you believe death, and life for that matter, to be spiritual or physical? I mean by that, does God control it—if there is a God—or does science?"

"If I could answer that," I said simply, "I should be the mightiest physician in the world."

"When you have left this room, Hale," he said, "you will know the answer."

The statement was so blunt, so unexpected, that it left me silent. In the meantime, while I groped for a reply, Brand had closed the door of his room and dropped into a chair. Mechanically I took the seat facing him.

"Hale—" Brand leaned forward in his chair and looked piercingly into my eyes. His voice was masked with triumph. "I am forty years old. For the last twenty years I've been looking for the solution of death. Not eternal life—life does not interest me, simply because I don't want to live forever. But before I die, I want to know what death is. I want to die and *come back*—to tell the rest of this damned ignorant world what they have never had the courage to discover."

I laughed weakly—a half-hearted laugh that contained no semblance of humor. I realized, or was beginning to realize, that he was leading me on merely for his own amusement, and even as he replied to my laugh I sensed the termination of his jest.

"You don't believe me, doctor?" he said quietly. "You don't believe that I can die *and be fully conscious of death*—that I can return to tell you about it?"

"I should not like to see you do it!" I replied.

"You are lying."

"Lying?" I stared at him.

"When you say that you would not like to see me do it—that you do not want to know the secret of death. If I were to tell you, Hale, that *behind that door*—" Brand pointed suddenly to the closed door at the far end of the room, half concealed by shadows—"you would find a machine which has taken me six

years to perfect—you would find a half-human thing ready for the experiment—you would—” He stopped abruptly. A slow smile disfigured his mouth. “What *would* you do, Hale?” he finished.

I turned impulsively to stare at the door behind me. With a shudder I fell back from my seat and faced the man before me. His face was convulsed with triumph.

“I brought you here for a reason, Hale,” he said slowly. “My experiment is ready. Before I can perfect the—the machine, we will call it—enough to place a human under its influence, I must first try its power on an animal. The patient will die, probably, since my work is not complete; but whatever the result, I must have a witness.”

I nodded slowly. Brand got to his feet and advanced toward me, towering over me in his savage eagerness.

“In that room, Hale,” he cried, “you will find a gorilla. A gorilla, you know, is the nearest thing to human life. This one is a monster, a fiend. At the risk of my life I have kept him here, starving him so that his horrible strength would not be too difficult to overcome. This morning, with my bare hands, I forced him into submission. Now—the experiment is ready.”

He pronounced the word “ready” with a maliciousness that brought cold fear to my heart. As I sat there, staring at him, his hand closed over my shoulder.

“Open the door, Hale,” he said softly. “I promise you, you will never forget what you see there!”

With an effort I rose from the chair, one hand gripping the edge of the table to steady me. My footsteps dragged as I went across the room. My hand, resting on the knob of that fatal door, moved with the sluggishness of death.

Then, with a great effort to overcome my fear, I flung the barrier open. For a single instant I stood framed in the entrance—long enough to see that the enclosure before me was a narrow, windowless room flooded with dull red light that came from an overhead lamp. There, chained to the farther wall by a heavy band of metal that encircled his chest, stood the most horrible monstrosity of man that I have ever beheld. The thing was huge—hideously huge. Its body was covered with a black, shaggy hair. Its lips were heavy, pendulous, writhing back over yellow fangs. Its eyes were pools of bloody white, with no sign of pupils. Its nostrils were thick and flat, dilating with each successive intake of breath.

As I stood there, the creature lunged toward me with a mighty snarl. I saw its muscles—coils of living metal—strain into rigidity. I heard the protesting creak of the chain as it was wrenched forward. And then, in startling contrast, came Brand’s soft voice from behind me.

“Very much like a man, is it not, Hale? I went to some pains to get a creature which was rather far advanced, mentally and physically. Even now the thing hates me with a ferocity which is greater than any human emotion!”

I turned slowly, still fascinated by that distorted face before me. Without a word Brand took my arm, dragging me into his room of horrors; and there, with

the careless poise of a studio-artist, he pointed out the details of his "machine."

The light was deceptive—so deceptive that for a moment I could see nothing but that snarling gorilla-thing chained to the far wall. Then, with an effort, I distinguished the apparatus which surrounded me. I have said the room was narrow. For the most part it was filled with a litter of unlabeled jars and bottles, supported by crude shelves which Brand had evidently constructed himself. A huge work-bench extended across the left wall and out into the middle of the floor like a great trestle; and there, poised on the extreme end of it, hardly more than ten feet from the victim, lay the thing toward which my companion was slowly leading me.

At first glance it was like a great bowl of metal—a disc-like affair, showing a tubular apparatus, with the convex side facing the far wall. From the base of it ran a tangle of wires extending to a vat of black liquid. At the edge of the work-bench the wires ran through a heavy switch, worked by both button and lever, to make and break the circuit; and above the whole thing, enveloping the "machine" in a flood of red glow, hung that fantastic lamp.

"Pretty, is it not?" said my companion quietly. "The acid, Hale, is a combination of rare chemicals. It is the only imperfect element of the experiment, but until I have put it to the test, I cannot correct it. If this test fails, I shall separate that vat of liquid into its component parts, connecting each part to the main circuit with an individual wire. The metal disc, of course, is made of copper—and is merely used to hurl the concentrated light directly upon the victim's head."

I was still staring at his death machine when he went to the door of the room and closed it. As he returned to my side he pointed casually to the red lamp above me.

"The red light," he said, "is point number two. I use it because—" He glanced at the ape-thing before us, which had now become strangely quiet—"I should hate to face that thing in the dark. But I fear that the glow of it will interfere with the death ray. If it fails, I shall conduct my second experiment in total darkness."

He moved away from me. Like an automaton I followed his movements, watching him as he approached the horrible thing which was to be his victim. Deliberately he strode toward the snarling face, holding himself cautiously out of reach of those hairy claws. As I stared at him, I could not repress a feeling of sheer admiration for a man who possessed such fearless courage. At my right, half-hidden by the twist of the wall, I could see the iron cage in which Brand had kept the demon. And from that cage, with his own hands, he had dragged the monster forth—had battled with him, subdued him, and chained him into position for the experiment. There was no other solution. No third person had been in this room of mystery, for my host guarded his secrets with almost insane jealousy. Alone, he had overpowered this thing which was the physical equal of three strong men! What demon courage was this!

He faced it now, examining it, evidently, to be sure that the creature had not

shifted from that marked section of the wall. Once, as the beast lunged toward him with open fangs, he spoke to it with a sudden rasping command. An expression of fear crossed the gorilla's face. The snarl died in its throat, and it shrank back against the wall, glaring into the scientist's face with narrowed eyes.

A suggestion of a smile hung on Brand's lips as he turned away. For an instant he hesitated, glancing rapidly about the room in a final survey. Then, stepping to the end of the bench, he bent over that great metal disc.

"When I throw the switch, Hale," he said, "you will see a slow light—a green, sulphurous glow—emanating from the center. It will concentrate on the head of the patient. If it is successful, the gorilla will die. He will *die*, you understand, and his body will hang in the chains—*cold*. There will be no circulation, no function of the heart, *no sign of life*. But when he dies, his mind will remain alive through the influence of—that." He pointed to the vat of black chemical at his feet. "And when this switch is turned again, the body will regain its power of living. You follow me?"

I glanced down at the vat of acid.

"What is this chemical?" I replied. "What is it formed of—what combinations?"

He smiled very slowly. For a long while he looked directly at me; then, with a dull laugh he reached for the black switch-handle.

"You are amusing, Hale," he answered. "Are you ready?"

He did not wait for my reply. I saw him lean forward, his eyes intent on the gorilla-thing that stood against the wall. His fingers closed over the switch. With a sudden wrench he jerked it down.

And then—God help me!—I am still half-mad when I make an attempt to remember—a mighty crash of white light flooded the room. Whirling, slashing in its intensity, it shot in a livid cone, straight toward that rigid form against the wall. Every feature of the gorilla's writhing countenance was thrown into hideous detail. A great snarl of fear, of horror, of rage, twisted over the monster's lips. A maddened growl of hate came through the twisted jaws. There was a sound of a chain breaking!

I saw Brand leap back—saw the look on his face. He was afraid—afraid of the nightmare into which he had precipitated himself. The machine before him had gone mad. Each separate wire of that confused tangle writhed over the floor, seething crimson fire. The great metal disc glowed white-hot. The entire chamber of horror had become a hell of choking white smoke.

And then, as I stumbled back to the door, a sound of splintered wood burst through the din. I saw a mighty black shape lunging across the floor toward me. A great hairy hand swept me aside.

As I fell back, choking for breath, I saw the door of the room wrenched open. For a single instant a shaggy, snarling thing was silhouetted against the outer darkness—and then the sill was empty.

Across the room, not more than ten paces from me, Brand was groping

forward. As he reached my side, a bitter laugh broke through his lips, and he stood motionless, staring at me.

"I have failed," he said sullenly. "Failed—horribly. It means another experiment."

His cold words, coming as they did with a slight shrug of his heavy shoulders, drove me away from him. Then, as if a hand had suddenly gripped me, the terror of that unholy room overwhelmed me. I rushed to the door. In fear, absolute fear, I descended the stairs. The lower door slammed shut behind me, hurled to by the draught from the upper corridor. I stumbled on, through the rain, until I reached the smooth surface of the roadway—and there, at the edge of a great pool of water, I saw the impression of a naked foot—a huge, ape-like thing that gleamed up at me from the street.

A moment later I had reached the flickering glare of an arc-lamp, leaving behind that horrible house forever—as I hoped.

But no! The very next evening, returning to my study from a short dinner engagement, I found his tiny visiting card, marked with the same death's head, under my door, begging me to visit him again that night.

As the memory of the previous encounter returned to me, I was half of a mind to ignore Brand's summons and keep to the safety of my own conventional study, where a pipe and tobacco awaited me. But the spirit of adventure, and the insatiable power of curiosity, are never quite dead. As I stood looking down at his card with something of a shudder, the tiny death's head engraved on the corner of the page, grinned up at me in mockery. Once again I was to be drawn into this madman's net of mystery! I knew, before I had taken a dozen steps, that I should not return until I had found either death or disappointment.

I walked slowly, and it was quite late when I reached the open end of After Street, where a single street-lamp, bearing the name of the lane, sputtered overhead. There was no other light. After I had advanced beyond the lone circle of illumination, the darkness before me was unbroken. The time, I judged, was about eleven o'clock. Not a glow of light appeared in any of the ghost-like houses on either side of the street.

Not a sound, save the echo of my own steps on the stone, penetrated the unholy silence that seemed to hold the old house in its grip.

I let the knocker fall with a heavy clatter, relieved by the sudden burst of sound that reverberated through the inner halls. Then, as I stood there with one hand on the door, I heard the scuff of slow footsteps, and the door was pulled slowly out of my reach.

Before me stood Brand. "Come in, Hale," he said eagerly. "You've had my card."

It was not a question, and I ventured no answer. Quietly, I closed the door and followed him down the gloomy passage. Ahead of us, at the bottom of a wide stairway, burned a single flickering gas-jet.

We were alone in the house—unless Brand had some other horrible creature in captivity. The loneliness and unbroken silence of the place were depressing. Had the man been a bit more generous with his light, or even spoken to me as we paced in silence to the foot of the long stairs—but no, he led the way like some cowed monk of the Inquisition, and the sound of his shuffling steps merely served to accentuate the stillness of our surroundings.

In this manner I followed him up the circular ramp to the landing above, where he turned to me with a muttered warning:

“It is dark up here. Be careful.”

And then he was gone again, with me groping behind him. Here, in the upper recesses of the house, the darkness was even more impenetrable. No sign of illumination was visible. The windows themselves were closed tight and masked with drawn curtains, which, in order to hold back the light, *had been painted dead black!*

But my observations were short lived, for I was suddenly aware that Brand stood by a closed door waiting for me. I stepped to his side in the darkness. His hand fell heavily on my arm.

“I must caution you, Hale—when you enter this room, you will find it in complete darkness. You must make no attempt to provide light. A single match flame would destroy everything.”

He drew the door open slowly, allowing me to enter. Behind me, as I stood just over the sill, waiting for him to direct me, I heard the door click shut. Then, once again, my companion’s hand clutched my arm and dragged me forward.

It is a certain fact that a man’s eyes, after being in the dark for a certain time, accustom themselves to the surroundings and actually see through the gloom. I had been in Brand’s experiment room hardly more than a few moments before I was able, with an effort, to distinguish things that lay about me. I saw the long low table stretching along the entire rear wall of the room—a table covered with test tube racks and distillation apparatus, with acid jars and broken glass—in short, with a motley collection of nondescript scientific apparatus. The opposite wall of the room was unbroken, except for the door by which we had entered. The two side walls were completely covered with black draperies, intended, I presume, to absorb any light that might have found entrance.

I recount this merely to establish the setting of what is to come. In itself it is of little importance, for the apparatus over which Brand was working feverishly lay not at the sides of the room, but in the direct center of the floor. I could make out the form of an upright table, about three feet square, containing that same metallic disc. The familiar profusion of wires extended from its base—this time to a row of huge glass jars (filled with the same unknown combinations of acids) which lay on the floor beneath the table. The disc itself was directed precisely toward a second stand—a long, narrow structure, built almost exactly on the model of a hospital operating table.

It was to this table that Brand summoned me. I moved toward him with slow

steps, hardly ready to put myself at the mercy of those fiendish hands. But I had come thus far in the adventure; to retreat now would be to show myself a coward.

"We are ready to-night," he said suddenly, "for a human test. Don't shrink, Hale. I am to be the victim; not you."

I stared at him steadily. This time I did not flinch as he pointed to his machine.

"You will notice that the acid has been decomposed and separated," he said. "That was one of the reasons for our failure last night. The red light, too, did not help."

His words brought a strange thought to my mind. I looked up abruptly and stepped toward him.

"The gorilla," I said. "What happened to him?"

Brand laughed softly. Was it my imagination that the laugh was forced—that it contained a suggestion of fear?

"The beast was captured last night," he told me. "About half a mile from here." Brand glanced at me quietly, as if waiting for the effect of his words upon me. "But it escaped again. I have called the police twice. No sign of it has been reported."

"Possibly," I began, intending to say that the gorilla might have sought the open country, but Brand interrupted in the same soft voice of carelessness.

"Possibly," he said, "the thing is returning—for vengeance. I should not be surprised."

He laughed harshly. Then, almost savagely, he pulled me forward to the metallic thing on the table.

"Hale, I am going to show you this time, without failure, how science can control life! I'm going to show you how to keep the mind alive—to keep it alive through every stage of death, so that you can die *and be conscious of every stage of the process.*"

I did not laugh. Did not answer. This time, the utter triumph of his words convinced me that he had perfected the horrible device through which he could do just as he claimed. He would play with me first, probably, as he had played with me the night before. And then—

But this time he thrust aside all preliminaries. His eagerness to go on with the test had overcome that fiendish tendency to toy with his victim. He dragged me suddenly to the gleaming disc before him and pointed to it maliciously.

"When I turn this double switch—" His fingers fumbled with a tiny black switch and a button at the rim of the table—almost a replica of the one I had seen before—"this room will be flooded with light," he cried. "Where it comes from, you need not know. I will tell you this much: the acids in those jars are chemicals which you will find nowhere in the realm of ordinary science. They are combinations of fluids which have taken years to perfect. They were nearly ready last night. To-night they are perfected. When this switch is thrown, the

charge from those acids surges through a wiring system into the coil of this disc. You will see a light—not a white light, as you saw before, but a yellow glare, very much like the glow of common phosphorus. It will center—mark this!—on the table here, directly on the head of the man who lies there. You understand me, Hale?”

I nodded. In the dark I could see his eyes burn with a strange glitter as he released my arm and stepped to the operating table. Without a glance in my direction he set himself in position, lying on the surface of the table, with his head and shoulders in a direct line with the metal disc that glowered down on him. Then, on a sudden impulse, he turned his head to shout a warning to me.

“Remember, Hale, for God’s sake remember—if a single ray of false light enters this room while that switch is thrown, no power on earth could ever bring my body back to life. I should die a horrible death. They would bury me, with my mind alive to every stage of burial. There would be no way—no way for me to tell them that I live; and I should be alive for eternity, in the grave. Remember, if those acids are destroyed while I lie here, my mind will *never die*.”

“You mean,” I said, “that if the door of this room should open—”

“If the door of this room should open,” he replied savagely, “the faintest light from the windows of the outer corridor would make a seething hell out of the table you are standing beside. It would be like the other time, only in this case the experiment is complete—and the horror of it would be complete.”

I nodded again, to show him that I understood the danger. For the first time, I understood in full why this mysterious place lay in utter darkness.

“When you have thrown the switch, Hale,” he said, “make a mental record of everything you see. And when you have thrown it, step back from the table, out of the light. You can do nothing more. The set is arranged so that the coils, reaching a certain heat, break the circuit. The light will fade out of its own accord once that circuit is broken, and a moment later I shall be the ordinary man of science, returned from the grave.”

He looked at me quietly. I saw a spark of the old indifference to conventionality—the old triumph—return to his eyes.

“I am ready,” he said. “Don’t bungle it.”

My hands crept toward the switch and button. Crept, I say, because I was groping blindly for them, with my eyes fastened immovably on Brand’s face. My left hand closed over the black handle, while my right forefinger sought the button. With a sudden move I pushed the switch and pressed the button.

For the space of ten seconds, no visible change took place in the darkness of the room. I could still see the black hangings, the long table of materials, the closed door—could still see the inert form of my companion, stretched at full length on the stand. Nothing else was visible.

And then, with a strange slowness of motion, a dull yellow glow filled the room. Brighter and brighter it grew, increasing with tremendous speed, flooding every detail of the room into grotesque reality. I could see color, brilliance, in

the dulllest of common objects—could see an unholy, *supernatural* quality of light over the entire room.

The metallic disc at my side was a cone of glowing silver. The tangle of wires was a livid, crawling thing. The jars of acid beneath the table seemed *alive*.

I stepped forward with a sharp intake of breath. In the next instant I had forgotten the room, forgotten my surroundings, forgotten everything except the twisted face of the man before me. His head lay in the very center of that whirling chaos of light. Every line of it was thrown into frightful detail. I saw the mouth twist apart in a half-suppressed groan. I saw the eyes open in a stare of strange, far-away recognition.

I bent over him in horror.

“Speak to me!” I cried. “Speak to me! Tell me how to shut this mad thing off!”

Not a movement stirred his body. With a heavy twitch of dead muscles his eyes flickered shut. His lips closed silently. A great tremor shook him, and he lay rigid.

I groped backwards, struggling to throw off the fear that had seized me. My fingers clawed at the switch, clawed at it in madness. No power of human hand could have lifted it.

With a great sob I staggered across the room. In a moment I should have reached the door, flung it open. In a moment I should have fled from that place of torment and never returned. But the moment did not come. I did not reach the barrier.

I heard a dull thud, as the switch was hurled back. Instantly the hellish glow subsided. As I turned, bewildered, I saw only a dull phosphorescent illumination that hovered about the central table; and that, as I returned toward it, slowly faded into darkness.

Once again I bent over the prostrate form of my companion. My eyes, thrown suddenly from utter brilliance to a realm of gloom, were half-blinded. I could see nothing.

I felt him move with a sudden twisting motion. His hand touched my shoulder, gripping me with great strength. Then, through the stillness that hung over the room, came the sound of his voice.

“Wonderful, Hale. For a moment you frightened me. I was afraid you would reach the door in your terror, and open it. Had you done so—”

He lowered himself from the table with an effort. I stared at him, and my eyes, once again accustomed to the gloom, noted a strange sight. His face was as white as the face of a corpse. His voice, too, had the peculiar quality of something deeper than life; it was the voice of a man who has seen *death*.

“Look queer, do I, Hale?” he laughed. “I have died, man. Don’t laugh! When you bent over me in horror, a moment since, I was dead. I saw you—saw every move you went through—but I could make no protest. My *eyes* didn’t see you; my *mind* did. The eyes were dead. The body was dead. My mind—that was

magnificently *alive!*”

I heard him with a half-smile of wonder. He noticed it. For the first time in our association, I saw a savage light of anger in his narrowed eyes.

“You disbelieve?” he cried. “You think it is a hoax—the whole experiment? Get up there, man. Put yourself in position. When you leave this room—and leave it you will; I promise you—you will leave it without that veil of doubt. Come!”

There was no resisting him. To be truthful, I offered no particular resistance. The whole thing had fascinated and terrified me; but, after all, there is a certain portion of adventure in the blood of every man of science. I am no coward. I *wanted* to go through with his mad experiment, even though it brought me the same fate as Brand’s previous experiment had brought to that shaggy monster of the jungle.

I drew myself quietly into position, lying easily on the surface of the long table. Brand said nothing. I saw him smile softly as he crossed to the second table and bent over the black switch.

“Are you ready?” he said, very casually.

“Ready,” I answered.

I saw him throw the switch. Then, closing my eyes, I waited. I did not see the strange glow flood over the room, but the glare of it penetrated my closed eyelids, burning them as if I had been staring into the direct force of the sun. I felt a warm, indescribable something clutch me, forcing me into rigidity, and I *saw*—though my eyes were still closed—the gaunt form of Michael Brand advancing toward me. I made an effort to lift my head, to speak to him, and to my horror I was unable to move a single portion of my body. My limbs were no longer alive, no longer able to conform to my will. The will was there; I could exert it, could *wish* to move my body; but the body itself was dead, completely dead. My eyes, too, were sightless. The picture I saw, of the room, of my companion, of that eerie glare of light was a mental image—a small, distorted image of what was actually happening. You have looked at some familiar object through a poorly constructed reducing lens? The thing I saw was like that.

And I did see it, through the horror that surged over me. Helpless as I was, immovable as I was, I saw in startling detail every move that Brand made. I was conscious of his bending over me, conscious of the twisted smile of triumph that curled his lips, conscious of the fiendish bitterness of his eyes. He did not hate me; I could analyze his thoughts almost as easily as I could distinguish his features. He was a child—a mere child who had proved something that his playmate had obstinately refused to believe.

Proved it! As I lay there, overcome by the frightful helplessness of my condition, I would have given most of my remaining life to have been alive again. I was *dead*. Oh, you will not believe it. You will make no effort to understand. But the fact remains. *I was dead! My body, my physical being was no longer alive. And yet I was fearfully conscious of what was transpiring about me!* It

was living death—a horrible, uncanny fate. I was the victim of Brand's mad mockery of life!

And then, with a frenzied effort, I struggled to move. A stifled sob broke through my lips as I struggled into a sitting position, and found myself in a room of utter darkness. Brand stood beside me, laughing softly.

"You still doubt my statements, Hale?" he questioned. "Still disbelieve?"

I felt carefully of my arms and legs, while he stood there with a grim smile on his lips. When I had lowered myself from the table, with the help of his supporting arm, he looked directly at me.

"I am going to detain you a few moments longer, doctor," he said quietly. "This time, when you have thrown the switch, do not bring terror to a dead man's soul by rushing madly to the door. You would be a murderer, man, though the world would never know it. You would be sending a living man to the grave. The faintest light in that outer corridor—"

I offered no protest. In truth, since I had entered this room of artificial death, I had lost all sense of passing time. The hour was in all probability somewhere near midnight. It did not matter.

But Brand had lowered himself into position once more. As I stepped around him to reach the switch, he spoke to me.

"You may wonder why I have gone to the labor of constructing this death machine, Hale," he said without emotion. "I will tell you. Science, of course, is the premier reason, and then— There is a fellow in a little country village up in Chester—a chap with wife and children, I believe—whom I should very much like to kill. He came to me four years ago and loved the girl I had wanted. She married him. This machine was perfected precisely for his benefit, so that he may die a living death and live forever after he has been buried, thinking of my revenge. That is why I am trying the test twice. First success may be merely luck. When a thing succeeds twice, on the same person, it is not a question of chance."

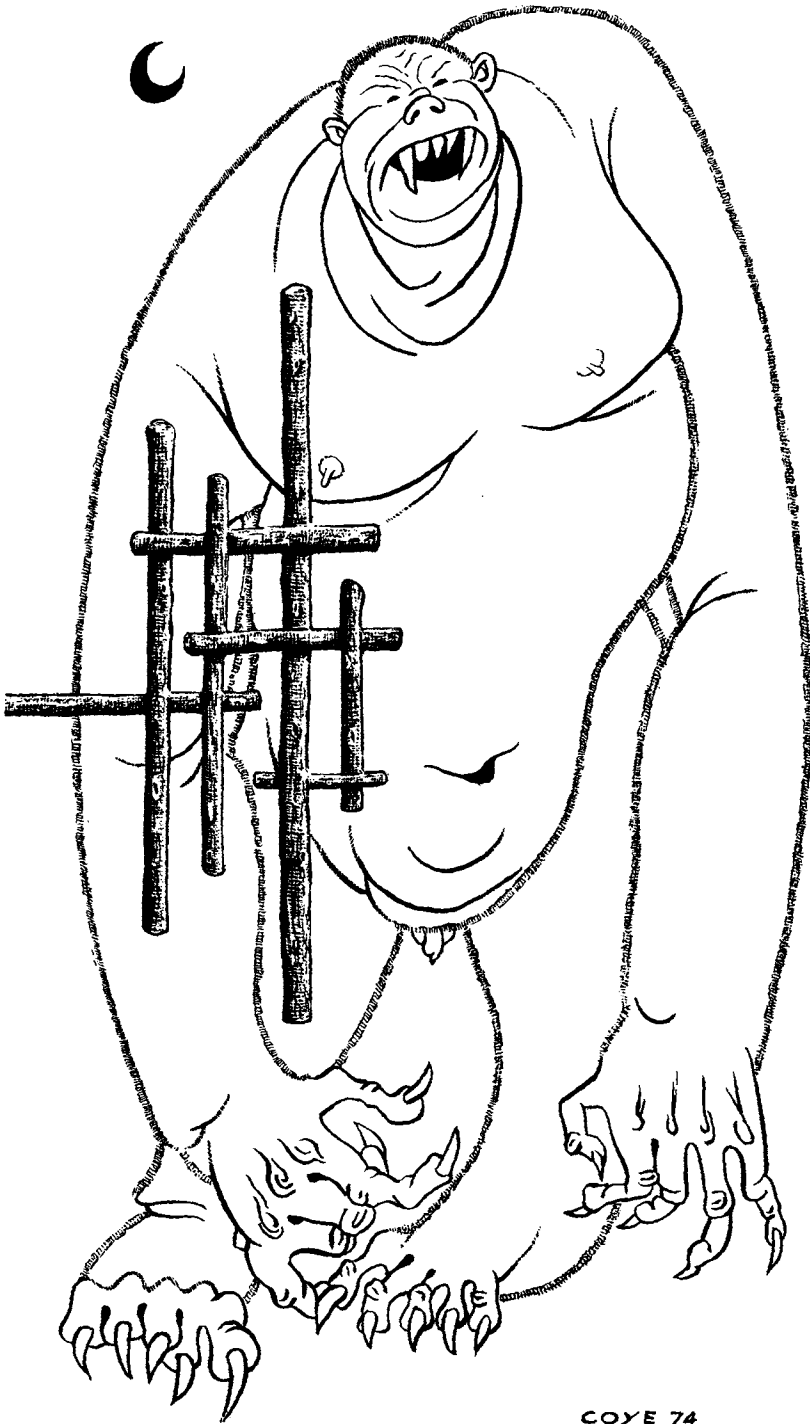
I shuddered at the diabolical hate of his words. Truly, this man was a monster; and yet, though his very name was repulsive to me, the very majesty of his super-mind dragged me to him. He fascinated me. I knew then that though he completed his fiendish plans, though I should read of their culmination in the daily news, I should never reveal his secret. I knew it; and he knew that I knew it!

"I am ready," he said. "Remember—no lapse of terror!"

I threw the switch. Once again there was that supreme moment of expectancy. Once again, when the first ten seconds had passed, that unholy glow filtered over the room, terminating in a dazzle of brilliance.

This time I felt no horror. I stood by the table without a tremor, staring at my companion. That same shudder passed over him. His eyes closed. His hands, which had been clenched, opened spasmodically.

The room was in dead silence. Not a sound came up from the street below.



Not a sound penetrated the dead stillness of the old house. And then—then—God, how clearly it returns to my memory—I was drawn about by some unearthly power until my eyes were riveted upon the door of the room. Slowly, slowly, under the pressure of some invisible hand, the knob was being turned from without!

I screamed in horror. The very scream brought the door open with a sudden jerk; and there, framed in the entrance, *enveloped by the faint glow of light from the blinded windows of the outer corridor*, stood that snarling incarnation of hell that I had seen last night.

The thing's arms hung almost to the floor, dragging as he sidled forward. Its bestial face was a livid mask of hate—hate for the man who lay helpless before me on the table. I saw its foaming lips curl back over yellow fangs—saw its bloody eyes narrow to slits—heard the mighty scream of victory, the scream of blood-lust, that rang from its throat. Then—

The scream was smothered in a blinding crash of light. A single deafening roar shook the room in which we stood, hurling the black switch out of my grasp. I saw a cone of livid flame envelop the metallic disc as it hurtled to the floor—saw a mad streak of fire burn down the tangle of wires and terminate with a bolt of distorted crimson light in the jars beneath the table. A great cloud of bluish smoke, sickly sweet and horribly sticky, drifted over the room, concealing the prostrate body of the man who lay dead on the table.

Dead? I do not know. The grip of that place tore any sense of reason from me. I hurtled forward, lunging past the gorilla with a shriek of fear. My last vision of that room was the sight of the thing who had brought death, stumbling into the table with a horrible cone of liquid fire burning into its face. I believe it was dead, even as it lunged to the floor, for no sound came from the black, twisted lips.

Then, without thought of direction, I rushed through the black passages of the old house, until, with staggering steps, I reached the lower hall. Here I stopped. A sudden reaction seized me, and I laughed madly. As the laugh trailed into silence, I turned to listen. Not a sound disturbed the stillness of the upper corridors.

Very quietly, then, I opened the heavy door and stepped into the outer darkness of After Street.

The Isle of Dark Magic

CAPTAIN BRUK, master of the *Bella Gale*, was the man who brought Peter Mace to Faikana; and since I did not meet the boy until his arrival, I must tell the first part of this tale as it was seen through Captain Bruk's eyes. So, then, I must go back a little.

Bruk was "on the beach," as the saying is, when the Joransen Trading Company, in Papeete, offered him the *Bella Gale*. The Joransen Company, like most of Papeete's smaller concerns, operated a fleet of second-rate tramps which were schooner-rigged and sailed under their own spread. No captain of repute would have accepted command of even the best of them. But Bruk was desperate.

His orders were to touch Faaite, sail north to Fakarava and Taou, and wind up at Rarioa, bartering for as much copra as the schooner would hold. He was to be back in Papeete inside the month, if possible. And he was to carry one passenger, a white man, as far as Rarioa.

The white man was Peter Mace, and, given his choice, Bruk would have picked more promising company or none at all. Peter Mace was a thin, worried-looking youth possessed of a pair of eyes which missed nothing. He could not have been more than twenty-five, and he had been in Papeete, so he said, only three weeks.

He came aboard an hour before the schooner sailed, and he brought with him a large wooden packing-case which he insisted on storing in his own cabin. And for two days he kept entirely to himself, offering not a word of explanation to any one.

Later, however, he found time and the desire to ask questions. Before the *Bella Gale* reached Faaite, he had demanded the name of every atoll in Paumotu. He had questioned Bruk concerning the habits of the islanders, how they treated white men, what atolls were the least populated, and whether Bruk knew any small motu off the schooner routes where a man might be entirely alone. A thousand things he insisted on knowing, but not one word did he speak of himself or of his work or of his reason for going to Rarioa. And not once did he mention the meaning of the packing-case in his cabin.

Then one day, out of a clear sky, he said:

"If I give you five hundred dollars, Captain, will you go out of your way

to put me ashore at Faikana?"

"Five hundred dollars!" Bruk echoed.

"Is that too little?"

"In the name of all that's holy," Bruk demanded, "what do you want with Faikana? If I put you down there, you'll wait half your life for a tub to take you off!"

"If five hundred dollars is too little," Peter Mace smiled, "we'll double it."

And that was all Bruk got out of him. Five hundred dollars, doubled, and Faikana. Faikana, the end of all creation, a forgotten island inhabited by a mere handful of Marquesan natives and a missionary with queer ideas!

So Peter Mace came to Faikana. And I, Father Jason, the "missionary with queer ideas," met him for the first time and wondered about that strange wooden packing-case which he brought with him.

Within a week, the boy had established himself. He first found an abandoned native shack and moved into it, taking his belongings with him. Then, with a methodical lack of haste which brought amazing results, he obtained native assistance and began building for himself a permanent residence, more than three miles from the little settlement of which my house was the center. Apparently he preferred to be alone with whatever business had brought him to our island. Yet he came several times to visit me, and politely invited me to spend the first evening with him in his new home, when it was completed.

This I did, and was mildly surprised. Though I had heard whispers from the natives, I had discreetly remained away from the scene of the boy's operations until implicitly invited there by him. I found the house to be practically isolated in a natural clearing in the midst of that belt of desolation which covers the northernmost tip of Faikana. Its only means of communication with the village was a narrow, perilous trail through dense jungle, which entailed more than an hour of the hardest kind of walking. Surely Peter Mace had no desire for casual visitors!

The house itself, however, was complete in every detail—an elaborate two-roomed native dwelling with an additional small chamber upstairs. We sat there that evening, he and I, sipping native brandy and playing chess. Our conversation never once touched on personalities. Neither he nor I asked questions, nor did he offer to show me what lay in the upstairs room. When the time came for me to go, he wished me a pleasant good-night and instructed his newly acquired native boy, Menegai, to accompany me back to the village. And for two weeks, that was all I saw of him!

But native curiosity, you know, is a thing easily aroused; and I heard many strange stories during those two weeks. "Peteme," the Marquesans called the boy, and Peteme, so they said, was a devil incarnate. During the daytime they heard him working in the upstairs room of his house, and when he was not working he was striding about like a caged animal, muttering and grumbling to

himself. Several times, when they had crept close to the downstairs window and peered in, they had seen him sitting at the table, hunched over a pile of books, with whisky bottles stacked in front of him. He was drunk, they said. His eyes were distended and bloodshot, and his hands shook as they held the books. But what he had in that upstairs chamber they did not know, for it was impossible to peer in the window and find out.

All these stories I knew to be greatly exaggerated, because my people were superstitious children at best. But I knew, too, that there must be some truth in them, for natives are not deliberate liars unless they can, by lying, gain material things for themselves. And so, thinking to invite the boy to my home and there talk to him about himself, I went one afternoon to his house.

He was not there when I arrived. I knocked, and received no answer, and, on opening the door, found no one within. It was strange, I thought, that he should go away and leave the door open, for I saw that he had fitted it with a patent lock. I called his name aloud, and then, bewildered, looked about me.

The table was piled high with books, and with cardboard-covered manuscripts. Curiously I looked at these, and then intently I studied them. I shuddered, then, and felt suddenly as if I were in an unhallowed place. If a fire had been burning, I should have thrown those books into it, despite the boy's certain anger on discovering my act. For the books were forbidden books, each and every one of them; and I say forbidden, not because I come of a religious calling, but because such volumes have been condemned by truth and science alike. One of them was the *Black Cults* of Von Heller. Another, in manuscript form, inscribed in Latin, was the unexpurgated edition of what is now *The Veil Unseen*. A third I believed to be—and I now know that my belief was correct—the missing portion of that perilous treatise, *Le Culte des Morts*, of whose missing portion only four copies are reputed to exist! Merciful God, these were no books for the soul of a twenty-five-year-old boy who lived alone with his thoughts!

Utterly confounded, I turned from the table and sat for some time in a chair near the open door, waiting impatiently for Peter Mace to return. When he did not come, I rose and paced the floor, and suddenly recalled what the natives had whispered about the room above me. Was it possible, I thought, that the books on the table beside me had some connection with the contents of the chamber above? Could it be that Peter Mace had gone deeper into these matters than the mere study of them?

I hesitated. This was not my home; I had no right to climb the narrow ladder which hung so invitingly in the shadowed corner of the room where I stood. Yet I had a right, as a religious adviser, to know what sins the boy was guilty of, so that I might instruct him accordingly. Deliberately, therefore, I strode across the floor.

The ladder was a flimsy one, solid enough, perhaps, to bear the weight of the boy's lean body, but not so solid that I felt comfortable in ascending it. I groped

upward slowly and cautiously, testing each rung before trusting my weight upon it. Then I reached above me and pushed aside the atap mat which covered the aperture in the ceiling; and with a sigh of relief I thrust my arms through the hole. And then two things happened. Behind and below me, the door of the house clattered back against the wall, as Peter Mace came over the threshold. And before me, on a level with my eyes, I saw a thing sitting Buddha-fashion on the floor of that upstairs room.

I saw the thing only for an instant, before the boy's drunken hands clawed at my legs and dragged me down. I saw it, too, in semi-darkness, which accounts for the mistake of my first impression—which impression I carried with me for weeks afterward, believing it to be truth. For the thing I saw was a woman, naked and staring at me. A young and lovely girl, sitting utterly without motion on a pedestal made of boards covered with cloth. Beside her stood the packing-case in which she had been transported to Faikana. In her hands, extended toward me, was a large metal bowl in which some chemical, or combination of chemicals, burned with an odor as sweet as the smell of ether.

That was all I saw. The rung of the ladder broke under me as Peter Mace hurled himself upon me. I fell sideways against the wall. The fall stunned me. The next thing I knew, Peter Mace was standing wide-legged before me, and my back was against the table, and my hands were rigidly outflung to keep the boy's contorted face from thrusting itself into mine.

At that moment Peter Mace did not know me. He was insane with rage. His face was drained of all color, and the veins on his forehead protruded like ancient scars. Animal hate was in his eyes. Guttural words uncouth and terrible, snarled from his lips. He would have battered me to unconsciousness, perhaps to death, if I had not stumbled backward and groped my way to the door.

Then I ran, knowing better than to remain and try to reason with a man so fiendishly angry. I had no desire to fight him; nor could I, at that time, explain the reason for my investigation of that forbidden room. I ran, as fast as my legs would take me; and when I looked back, after plowing blindly through the deep cogon grass to the edge of the small clearing, I saw him standing rigid in the doorway of the house, his hands clutching the door-frame and his legs spread wide beneath him.

And with that picture engraved in my mind, I turned and plunged down the trail to the village.

That was the beginning of what I may rightly call a reign of terror—not for me, but for the natives. From that day on they were not safe in going near Peter Mace's house, and yet, despite the danger, their curiosity continued to take them there. More than one tale reached me of the boy's insane fury—of how, on discovering some luckless native inside the forbidden boundary, he had rushed out like a man gone mad, pursuing the native even into the jungle. True, these tales reached me after many recountings, and were certainly magnified for

my benefit; but they were nevertheless significant. I did not go again to Peter Mace's domain.

And then one day he came to me! Alone he came, in the heat of noonday, bare-headed and bare-footed. Gazing at him, no man could ever have guessed that this dishevelled degenerate had been, less than three weeks ago, a young and well-to-do adventurer. He faced me unsteadily. His eyes were black-rimmed, blood-streaked. His breath was foul with liquor fumes. And yet he came triumphantly. He glared at me! His wet lips, set in a facial mask which had not felt the touch of a razor for days, curled upward at the corners and grinned at me viciously.

"Well," he sneered, "are you still curious?"

I stood on the veranda of my house and stared at him, half afraid of him and half pitying him. But he wanted no pity. His filthy hands gripped the railing, and his bare feet were planted firmly on the steps. He returned my stare.

"Well, can't you speak?" he said. "Am I so drunk I can't be spoken to?"

"You are," I answered coldly. "You're too drunk to know what you're doing."

"That's what you think," he said, thrusting his face forward. "But I'm not doing anything, see? It's done. If you want to satisfy your damned curiosity, you can come back with me and *satisfy* it! And don't worry; I won't kick you out this time. I won't need to!"

Why I went with him, after such an outburst, I am not sure. Curiosity? Certainly, to a limited extent. But it was more than that. The boy was ill. He was mentally ill, morally ill. He needed help. It was my duty to go with him.

And I went. Assailed by doubts and by no little physical fear, I followed him into the jungle. Had he wished to murder me in safety and secrecy, he could have done so easily, in that labyrinth of gloom. The trail underfoot was slimy and uncertain after a night's rain. Not once did the sun beat down upon us through the ceiling of interlaced branches and drooling aroidinæ which hung above us at every step. On all sides the eternal drip, drip, drip of moisture accompanied our slow progress. No word passed between us.

He could have murdered me, I say; but he did nothing but trudge along like an automaton, slopping through pools of black mud and staring straight ahead of him. The physical effort of that unpleasant journey was doing something to him. When we reached the clearing where his house stood, he turned to look at me with bewildered eyes, as if he had forgotten why I had accompanied him. And, in truth, he had forgotten!

"What do you want?" he demanded sullenly.

I hesitated. I tried desperately to read what lay behind his challenging stare. I told myself that his bewilderment was genuine; that the knowledge of what he had done while in the grip of liquor and near-madness had, in reality, gone from him. So I said, very quietly, as we stood there on the steps of his house:

"You asked me to help you."

"Help me?" he frowned. "How?"

"You had something to tell me, to show me. Some trouble that was hurting you. You came to me because it is my duty to hear other men's troubles and show them, if I can, a way out."

For quite some time he studied me, as if he were studying some printed puzzle in a book and wondering if the given solution were the correct one. He raised one hand to push the mop of hair out of his eyes, and then he chewed on the knuckles of that hand, gazing at me all the while like a small child trying very hard to recall certain things which had been forgotten. Finally he smiled and led the way into the house.

From that moment on, he was not the same. He turned to Menegai, his house-boy, who was standing near us, and told the native to go away and leave us alone. Then he motioned me silently to a chair, and drew up another chair facing me. He leaned forward, peered steadily at me, and finally said:

"Do you know who I am, Father?"

"Truthfully," I replied, "I do not."

"No, no, I don't mean that. Peter Mace is my real name. I mean, do you know *who* I am? *What* I am?"

"I should like to," I told him. "Then I might be able to help you."

"Yes, you might. But I'm not religious, Father. I don't believe in a God, that way. I know too much that is different."

"Tell me," I suggested softly.

And he told me.

His name was Peter Mace. Had I ever heard that name? Did I know what it meant in New York, Philadelphia? No? Well, names did not mean much in the South Seas, anyway—and he smiled wearily as he said that. What did it matter? *His* part of the name was unimportant, after all. He had been only a student at a well-known New York medical school—an honor student, until his fourth year, when he had been expelled in disgrace for certain lectures and experiments which were better left undescribed.

There had been a girl. A lovely girl, but a creature of the streets. Maureen Kennedy was her name. She had loved him.

"She was clean, pure," he told me. "We loved each other the way your God meant a boy and a girl to love. Nothing else in the world was worth thinking about. And—your God took her from me."

He, Peter Mace, had been living a life of secrecy at the time, reluctant to face his family after being expelled from the university. He had cast his lot with a likable young fellow who kept small and unpretentious rooms in the Village. This fellow, Jean Lanier, studied art. No! Created art!

"They laughed at him, Father, just as they laughed at everything beyond their understanding."

But *she* had died. Death had stalked those shadowed rooms, leering and screaming in derision, until—

"I went mad, Father. Sometimes I am still mad, when I think of it, of her. There she lay, in my arms, *dead*. A woman of the streets, they said. An unclean woman. But she was not! She was beautiful! For two days I sat beside her dead body, caressing her, staring at her, until my eyes could cry no more and I had no voice left for sobbing. All that while Jean Lanier kept silence, bringing me food and drink, respecting my anguish, never once condemning me. And then, in my madness, I conceived the idea of keeping her with me for ever!"

For ever? Peter Mace must have seen the horror that came into my eyes as I stared at him. He smiled and leaned forward to place his hand gently on my arm.

"Not that way, Father," he said, shaking his head. "You misunderstand. Jean Lanier, he was an artist, a sculptor. We stole money, he and I, and for a week he worked day and night, without sleeping, to make for me what I wanted. When it was finished, we covered her poor dead body and took it far from the city, where every single thing was quiet and peaceful. There, at night, we buried her. No one missed her; no one asked questions. She was only a woman of the streets; and who cares when a woman of the streets disappears?"

He stared at me, and at the floor, and for a long time he did not speak again. Then he said heavily:

"I should never have done it, Father. I should never have made Jean Lanier do what he did. It drove me insane. It filled my mind with hate for Almighty God. And because I had studied these"—he pointed bitterly to the pile of forbidden books on the table beside us—"there was only one way for me to turn. I studied more and more. I *learned* things. Jean Lanier turned me out and would have no more of me. Wherever I went with the thing Jean had made for me, people whispered and called me mad."

"And so," I said, "you came here to Faikana."

He nodded. "That, too, was part of the madness," he confessed. "It was no separate insanity in itself; it was a part of the whole. I had to get away from every living person. I had to be alone, with her. Do you understand?—I had to be alone with *her*! I had to finish what I had started! And I have! I *have*!"

All at once he was on his feet before me, laughing shrilly. I shrank from him, realizing the horror of the transformation that had taken place in him. I knew, then, the condition of his mind. When he had come for me, at my house, his mind had been full of this strange triumph which was burning within him, and he had been at least partly mad. Then, on that long, silent journey through the jungle, the fires within him had burned low; he had even forgotten the cause of his madness. And now he had slowly, terribly, talked himself into being once more a savage beast with but one idea. Certainly it was no sane man that I cringed from.

"I'll show her to you!" he bellowed, beating the air in front of my face with his clenched fists. "You sneaked upstairs once, damn you, and all you saw was a chunk of dead marble! Come up with me, *now*! I'll show you something your religion-stuffed brain won't dare believe!"

He gripped my arms and hauled me out of my chair. His wide eyes were close to my face, finding fiendish satisfaction in every expression that twisted my features. He shook me as a grown man shakes a terrified child.

"You think your idiotic religion is the answer to everything in life; don't you?" he flung out. "You think you know all there is to know! Well, I'll show you! I'll teach you something!"

He pushed me past the table, where those obscene volumes were piled. Savagely he held my arm and forced me toward the ladder which led to that shadowed chamber above. Had I been able to get past him, to reach the door, I should have fled from that place without hesitation, just as I have fled once before. But escape was not possible. He would have followed me—I am sure of it—and dragged me back. God alone knows what might have happened then.

The ladder swayed perilously as I climbed it. I had no time to ascend cautiously. Had I paused, he might have thrust me forcibly up those slender rungs, precipitating both of us to the floor below. Strange that I should have feared physical harm, when I should have been dreading a thousand times more intently the probable mental horror into which I was stumbling! But I did not see that horror at first, even after clambering through the aperture in the ceiling and groping to my feet on the floor of the room beyond. That room was a domain of shadow, and the sudden flare of a match in Peter Mace's uplifted hand did not at first reveal the thing that faced me.

Then I saw, and stepped backward with such violence that my rigid body was lashed by the nipa uprights in the wall behind me. Peter Mace had paced forward to a small table and ignited a candle which sat there; and the candle—a crude, home-made thing which burned with ghastly brilliance—sputtered and hissed as it flooded the chamber with illumination.

That room was a garret, small and bare and uninviting. Standing erect in it, a man of ordinary height could have reached up, without effort, and touched the ceiling. Walls and floor were of the crudest construction, fashioned of huhu wood and overlaid with coarsely woven atap mats. Only one window was in evidence, and that masked by a strip of unclean cotton cloth. And there, against the far wall, staring straight at me, sat the thing which I had once before dared to look at. There, in the restless glare of the candle, the thing confronted me—and this time I saw every separate, single detail of it.

I have said before that the thing was a woman. It was. Now, as I advanced fearfully toward it, fascinated by the almost life-like manner in which it studied me, I could not repress amazement at the uncanny perfection of it. If Jean Lanier had made this, then Jean Lanier had been truly an artist! For the woman was a creature of marble, so delicately and expertly sculptured that every portion of her exquisite form could have been mistaken, even at close range, for living reality. Naked she was, and sitting in an attitude of meditation, with her extended hands holding the metal dish which I had seen before. And I knew intuitively, even as I wondered at the uncanny loveliness of her, that there

was something terrible, something wrong, in the way she was sitting there.

"This," I said slowly to Peter Mace, "is the woman you loved? This is Maureen Kennedy?"

He laughed—not wildly or triumphantly, but so softly that I turned abruptly to peer at him, and found him smiling at me as a man smiles who knows more, much more, than his victim.

"She *will* be the woman I love, when I am finished," he replied; and he walked to the marble figure and put his hands on her shoulders, and looked down into her face as if she could understand him.

And then I made a mistake. I believed him to be less mad than when he had forced me up the ladder a moment ago. I put my hand on his arm and said quietly:

"My boy, this is not good. Your friend should never have made such an idol for you to worship. The commandment tells us: Thou shalt have none other God but me."

He flung my hand away. Savagely he whirled on me, glared at me. I thought his clenched fist would crash into my face. Then he stepped back, smiling. Deliberately he walked past me to the opening in the floor, and stooped, and dragged a heavy wooden square over the aperture, securing the square in place with thongs which were attached to it. With equal deliberation he paced to the opposite wall, grasped a chair which leaned there, and set the chair down in the center of the room. Standing behind it, he said evenly:

"Come here and sit down."

"I have no wish to remain in this room," I retorted.

"Come here and sit down."

"Why?"

"Because I say so! And if your idiotic God were here, he would sit beside you. If either of you refused, I would kill you both."

I hesitated, and he stood motionless, waiting. Slowly, then, I obeyed him, and my hands trembled on my knees as I lowered myself into the chair.

"Now you will sit here and watch," he ordered, "and you will say nothing. I have work to do. I must not be interrupted. And if your foolish God does not strike you down for looking at forbidden things, you will soon know why I asked Jean Lanier to make this woman for me!"

And now I must recount truths which were perhaps better left untold. Probably I shall be condemned severely for the words which I here set down. Perhaps I shall be more than condemned—and you, also, for reading them. But these things *must* be told, for the salvation of those who may some day be mad enough to walk in Peter Mace's footsteps!

There I sat, in a small chamber filled with leaping shadows. There, facing me, sat that marble image of a too-lovely woman. The exit was closed, the single window shut and masked. We were alone, Peter Mace, the woman, and I, in a room cursed with sinister thoughts and evil machinations. And, disregarding my

presence entirely, the boy proceeded with his unhallowed labors.

He went first to a small compartment in the wall and took therefrom a number of bound volumes, one of which he carried to the table. Poring over this, and deliberately turning its pages, he found what he sought and began to read silently to himself. I saw his lips move with the words. I saw the terrible eagerness in his eyes as they stared unblinkingly at the page. Rigid and motionless he stood there, full in the candle's glare, his shoulders hunched forward, his head down-thrust, his hands clenched white on the table-top. Then he straightened, turned slowly, and walked toward the woman.

From a soft leather pouch which lay there at the woman's feet, he took something small and black and touched it to the woman's marble lips. I thought at first that it was a crucifix; then I saw my error and shuddered, for it was an *inverted* crucifix and the face upon it was the face of a leering demon. Carefully he placed it in the metal dish which the woman's lifeless hands extended toward him. With the same deliberate care he took a small phial in his hands, and poured into the dish a viscous dark liquid which gleamed dully in the dim light. Then I saw a match blaze brightly, and the dish was suddenly alive with pale blue flame.

Slowly, then, the boy sank to his knees. He did not turn to look at me. I doubt if he even realized my presence. He knelt, and stared into the woman's face, and raised his arms in supplication. From his lips came an almost inaudible low monotone, as if he were praying.

In truth, I thought he was praying, and my heart was filled with pity for him. I respected his torment; I understood his loneliness. Then I heard the *words* he was muttering—I knew them for what they were—and it was I who prayed to a merciful God to forgive us both!

You have heard of the Black Mass? You are aware of its hideous significance? Then you know the extent of the madness in Peter Mace's soul, and you know to whom he was muttering his maledictions.

But it was more than that. Dimly I realized the enormity of his intent, and slowly but surely, as I listened, I became prey to utter terror. A thousand times since that day I have reviled myself for not finding courage enough to stop him. Had I leaped out of my chair and flung myself upon him, he might have thanked me for it later. Even had I been forced to seize the very chair in which I sat, and strike him with it, I could not have been condemned for such violence. For the boy was mad. He was inviting annihilation.

Yet I sat there, staring at him. I sat rigid, eyes wide and blood pounding in my temples. I was terrified and fascinated, and, God help me, I let him have his way.

Those words, I can hear them yet, whenever I sit alone in a shadowed room. They mutter at me in the same singsong chant. They are in my brain:

"This is the night, O Bethmoora. This is the night, though it be day and the sun be shining without our sanctuary. Hear me, while I walk by the black lake

of Hali, O Nyarlathotep. Hear me what I say . . . word for word . . . as the earth-born must say to command the presence of the Black King. Hear me . . . heaven in art . . . heaven in art . . . and the Yellow Sign is burning on the altar of my desire, that She may open her eyes and be mine again. Who father our name, thy be hallowed! Words for you, O Yuggoth, O Yian, O Hastur, O Prince of Evil! Give her to me, I say, and command your price. And in the name of the Great One who must not be named . . . through the wells of night where the crawling ones lurk unseen, waiting for wings to raise them . . . and in the name of the headless ones born in the red foulness of the limitless pit . . . give her to me in life, O Hastur. Give her to my arms, O Yuggoth! Hear me, O Lord of Lords, Nyarlathotep!"

These words, born of madmen's minds and filled with hideous suggestions of horrors forbidden to men, tumbled from the lips of the boy who knelt in that vile room with me! These words and more; but the others I did not hear, for I had become like a man impaled, sitting as straight and stiff as a marble statue. No, no—not as a marble statue! *That* statue was no longer straight and stiff! Into the chamber with us had come darkness—a living, evil darkness which threatened to smother the other glare of the candle. And before me the pale statue of the woman was in motion, swaying slowly, awfully, from side to side, while its outstretched hands carried the metal dish to and fro like a pendulum and the blue flame in that dish became a weaving, living tongue of fire.

Peter Mace had stopped muttering. *Other* voices had become audible, low and vibrant and speaking words which had no beginning or end. As if uttered through long, deep tubes, those syllables droned into being. As if moaned aloud by some dark-robed priest of an uncouth cult, they singsonged into every niche of that foul room.

We were no longer alone. The darkness all about us was peopled with shadows, with nameless things which had no shape, no form, no substance, and yet were there! It was a time for prayer and supplication; yet I knew no prayer mighty enough to afford protection. We had forfeited the right to pray! Peter Mace, with his evil machinations, had summoned elements from the deeper pits of darkness. His blasphemies had established communion with entities more powerful than any who might listen to prayers from human lips. And it is I, Father Jason, a missionary, who say that!

I went to my knees with my hands uplifted before me. But no words came from my lips. I spoke them, but they died unborn. On all sides of me that hell-dark was in motion, those hell-shapes were gathering closer. Before me the boy had risen unsteadily to his feet and stood like a man drunk, as if stunned by the enormity of his sin. But what I saw most of all, and what I remembered with awful clarity for nights afterward, was the transformation which was taking place in the marble woman!

God help me for ever looking into that face! The eyes, which had been open only to natural dimensions, had widened in agony. The lips were shapeless, the

face a gray-white mask twisted beyond recognition. Every inch of the woman's body was in motion, struggling hideously, pitifully, to be free of its marble bonds. She was no longer dead! She was no longer a thing of stone! Life had been poured into her rigid body. And she was fighting now, in a hell of physical torment, to assimilate that cursed power and become *all* alive!

You have seen a victim of epilepsy suddenly seized by that dread disease? This woman was like that. She strove to rise. She fought to free her hands from the metal dish to which they clung, so that she might embrace the boy who stood before her. Slowly, horribly, with a paroxysmal jerking of her hips and breasts, she turned toward him. In agony she stared into his face, begging his assistance. She was trying to speak, but could not!

And the boy returned her stare. He had become like a man standing erect in sleep. He seemed not to realize her agony, or to be aware of the hideous darkness which hung all about him like a winding-sheet. Slowly, mechanically, as if obeying orders over which he had no command, he advanced toward her. Mutely he peered into her face. Then I heard him say quietly, evenly, as if he were reciting the words:

"It is not yet. No, it is not yet. This is the fifth time, O Hastur. Only the fifth time, O Lord of Lords. Each time the agony is greater and the life is stronger. You have promised that on the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. I am content to wait. All things come to him who waits."

Deliberately he extended his arms. His hands came together and pressed downward upon the metal dish. I saw his eyes close and his lips whiten as the blue flame ate into his palms. But no sound came from him as he stood there; and in a moment, when he stepped back, the blue fire was a living thing no longer. Then, as if performing a ritual, the boy sank slowly to his knees and placed his hands upon the body of the living-dead woman before him. The agony went out of her face; her struggles ceased. She became as before, a creature of stone, inanimate and lifeless. He—he knelt with bowed head at the feet of his shrine. Knelt and prayed, not to the God of men, but to the obscene gods who possessed his soul. While he knelt there in supplication, the room emptied itself of shadow and sound, and he and I and the woman were alone together, as we had been. And I, knowing only that my heart was black with horror and my eyes blinded by the forbidden things they had looked upon, crept quietly to the aperture in the floor, and drew aside the square of wood which covered it, and lowered myself slowly, cautiously, down the ladder to the room below.

No sound was audible in that chamber of mystery above me as I paced noiselessly to the door. No sound accompanied my escape from Peter Mace's house. When I reached the rim of the jungle, and looked back, I saw only a glow of yellow light behind the masked window of that upstairs room; and I knew that Peter Mace was still there, still kneeling in prayer, while the crude candle

on the table cast its innocent light over the chamber's unholy contents.

Slowly, and with my heart heavy within me, I went away.

From that day until the day of the final accounting, I did not see Peter Mace. In truth, I did not want to. Hours passed before the color crept back into my face and my hands stopped shaking. After reaching my home that night, sick and weary from tramping through the jungle, I closed and barred my door and sat like a dead man, staring at the floor. My mind was full of the monstrous things I had participated in. I dreaded the penalty. Worse—I knew that those horrors were not yet complete. Over and over in my brain rang the boy's words: "On the seventh time the agony will destroy the death and the life will be complete. I am patient. All things come to him who waits."

No, I did not return to Peter Mace's house in the jungle. I feared to. I feared *him*, and the denizens of darkness who inhabited that horror-house with him. And this time, when the natives came to me with stories of the boy's madness, I knew better than to condemn those stories as exaggerations.

Menegai came, finally. Wide-eyed and terrified he hammered on my door and begged to be admitted. It was the evening of the ninth day, and the sight of the Marquesan's face brought to the surface all the fears which had lain dormant within me. I opened the door to him, and closed it quickly, and then listened to the shrill words which chattered from his betel-stained mouth.

"*I teienei!*" he wailed. "God almighty!" And then, in his own tongue, he screamed and muttered and whispered his story, with such genuine fear in his eyes that I knew his words to be truth.

Less than an hour ago, he, Menegai, had been sitting on an atap mat on the floor of his master's house. Peteme (Peter Mace) had been studying books, as usual, with his elbows on the table and his head bent over the printed pages. Then, suddenly, without a word, Peteme had pushed back his chair, risen to his feet, and paced toward the ladder which led to the upstairs room.

Menegai had begun to be afraid, then. Always when his master retired to that secret attic, strange things happened. Peteme was never the same after returning from that chamber. He became *heva*—wrong in the head. He became like a man drunk with tuak, or like a man who had watched the *titi e te epo*, the dance of love, so long that his mind went mad with desire.

And this time was no exception. Soon, from the room overhead, came sounds without meaning. Voices muttered, and other voices chanted in unison. Louder and louder the sounds grew, until, after an eternity, they were climaxed in a woman's scream—a horrible scream, as if some poor girl were being torn apart while yet alive. And then had come Peteme's shrill voice, bellowing in triumph, shouting over and over:

"The seventh time draws near! The sixth ordeal is finished! Hear me, O Hastur! The sixth ordeal is finished!"

Menegai had crouched near the door, trembling and afraid. Never before had

his master thundered in a voice so full of triumph. Never before had the woman in that dread room screamed in such agony. Never before had she screamed at all. How could she? He, Menegai, had seen her with his own eyes, one afternoon when he had dared to look into his master's secret, forbidden chamber. She was a stone woman. *How could a stone woman scream?*

Terrified, Menegai had waited for his master to come down the ladder; and after a while Peteme had come, reeling and staggering and muttering to himself. Menegai had backed away from him and stared at him. Peteme had stood rigid, returning that stare with eyes full of red madness. Then, all at once, the white man had become like a devil crazed with *atae*—like a monster in the grip of *rea moeruru*, the drug which makes men commit murder. Snarling horribly, he had flung himself forward.

"Damn you!" he had roared. "You're like every one else on this blasted island! You think I'm mad! You came to spy on me, to laugh at me! By God, I'll show you what happens to curiosity-seekers! I'll show them all!"

Only by a miracle had Menegai escaped. The edge of the atap mat, curling under Peteme's feet, had caused the white man to stumble. Menegai had flung the door open and raced over the threshold, screaming. Peteme had lurched after him. But Menegai had reached the jungle first; and in the jungle the Marquesan had fled to hiding-places where the white man dared not follow.

And now Menegai was here in my house, begging protection, and in my heart I knew that before another twenty-four hours had passed, the whole hideous affair of Peter Mace and the stone woman would reach its awful conclusion. And I was right—but before the twenty-four hours were up, something else occurred.

I was standing on the veranda of my house, and it was morning again, and the sun was a crimson ball of blood ascending from the blue waters of the lagoon. Menegai, the Marquesan, had crept away to his hut in the village. I was alone.

At first the thing I saw was merely a gray speck on the far horizon, so small that it might have been no speck at all, but merely my imagination. I put both hands to my eyes and peered out from under them; but my eyes were blinded from staring into the red sun, and presently I could see nothing but a glare of crimson. Yet that speck was there, and I knew it for what it was—a ship.

Later I saw it again, and while I stood staring at it, Menegai came running up the path, pointing and gesticulating excitedly.

"A schooner, Tavana!" he cried. "A schooner come here!"

Yes, a schooner was coming. But why? What could any tramp trader want with Faikana? In four years only one ship had visited our secluded island, and that ship had brought Peter Mace. It had brought unhappiness and horror, a madman and a woman of stone. Could this one be bringing a similar cargo?

I said nothing in answer to Menegai's eager questions. In my heart I dreaded the coming of this new messenger from the outside. Menegai, peering up into my face, read my thoughts and ceased his chatter. Bewildered, he left me and hurried down to the beach. Long after he had gone, I stood staring, hoping

against hope that the approaching vessel would somehow, at the last moment, change its course and depart again, leaving us to ourselves.

Two hours later the schooner dropped anchor outside the reef, close enough to shore so that we on the beach were able to discern its name. It was the *Bella Gale*—the same *Bella Gale* which had brought Peter Mace to Faikana. Even while we stared, a small boat swept through the reef's opening and came slowly toward us; and a moment later I was peering into the bearded face of Captain Bruk and shaking the grimy hand which he thrust into mine. And I was wondering, even then, what terrible event or chain of events had happened to put that haunted, desperate glare in Captain Bruk's eyes.

I soon learned. Without preamble Bruk said bluntly: "I want to talk with you, Father. Alone."

Together we went to my house, and closed the door upon the inquisitive natives who gathered outside. There, with the table between us, Bruk told his story.

"I've got a woman on board, Father," he scowled. "Go on, tell me I'm crazy. I know it. Tell *her* she's crazy! Any woman fool enough to trust herself to a roach-infested scow like the *Bella Gale* ought to be put in an asylum. This one ought to be there anyway. She's queer."

He pulled a bottle from his pocket, offered it to me, and then drank from it. Choking, he rammed the cork back viciously and leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table.

"She was waiting in Papeete when I got back after marooning the boy here," he grumbled. "Harlan—that's the Papeete manager—brought her aboard soon as we dropped anchor. He introduced me and gave me a good looking-over to make sure I was sober; then he said: 'All right, Bruk. You're going back to Rarioa. This woman wants to find the young fellow you put ashore there.'"

"Well, I took her. I had to. But, by heaven, she was an odd one. You'll see for yourself, when I go back after her. She dresses like a funeral; wears black every damned minute of the day, and a black veil to boot. What does she look like? Don't ask me! I've been on board the same rotten schooner with her for almost ten days, coming straight here from Papeete, and I don't know yet what kind of face she has! She don't speak unless she has to, and then she don't say more than three words at a time, so help me! And she's queer. She's uncanny. I tell you—"

Bruk put his hand on my arm and leaned even farther over the table, speaking in a whisper as if he were afraid of being overheard. I looked into his eyes and saw fear in them. Real fear, which had been there a long time.

"It's about this Rarioa buisness, Father," he mumbled. "Harlan thought I took the boy there, and told me to take the woman there, too. He didn't know I marooned the boy on Faikana. I didn't tell him that. If I had, he'd have claimed the money the boy paid me; and I wanted that money for myself. So when I left Papeete this last time, I headed for Rarioa. That's what he told me, wasn't

it? Take the woman to Rarioa. But we hadn't been out more than three days when she came to me and said: 'You're not taking me to Peter.' Just like that, Father! How in the name of all that's holy did *she* know where Peter was?"

I stared at him. Some of the fear in his eyes must have found its way into my eyes as well. He returned my stare triumphantly.

"She's not human, I tell you!" he blurted. "She's not human even to look at! She walks around like she was asleep. She talks in the same tone of voice all the time, like she was tired. By heaven, I won't have any more to do with her, Father! I brought her here, and I'm leaving her here! It's up to you, now. You know more about this kind of business than I do."

"You brought her here," I said slowly, "because you were afraid not to?"

"Afraid?" he bellowed. "I tell you, when she looked at me with those eyes of hers and said, 'You're not taking me to Peter,' I knew better than to double-cross her! I *brought* her to Peter!"

That was all. Bruk heaved himself up and stood swaying, while he drank again from the bottle of whisky. He glared at me, then laughed drunkenly as he pulled open the door.

"You can have her," he said. "I'll put her ashore like I was told to. You're welcome to her."

Then he went out.

It was with mingled feelings of fear and apprehension that I awaited his return. Somehow I could not bring myself to go down to the beach. I chose to remain behind the closed door of my house, alone with my thoughts, though I might better have taken myself out of that shadowed room, into sunshine and open air, where my mind would have created visions less morbid.

Who could she be, this woman? A sister, perhaps, of the boy who had established himself in that house of sin in the jungle? A relative, perhaps, of the dead sweetheart whom he had left behind him? I wondered; and wondering, found myself drawing mental pictures of her. Subconsciously, Bruk's descriptions influenced those pictures. The woman of my imagination was a black-robed nun, uncouth and ungainly, eccentric of speech and action, not at all like the woman who confronted me less than ten minutes later.

Bruk's throaty hullo startled me out of my revery, and I drew the door open with a nervous jerk. And there she was—tall and graceful and utterly lovely, in direct contrast to my mental image of her. Quietly she followed him up the steps. Without embarrassment she stood facing me, while Bruk said curtly:

"This is Father Jason, ma'am. He runs the place here."

The woman nodded. Her eyes, behind an opaque veil which entirely concealed her features, regarded me intently. She was perhaps twenty-five years old, certainly not more. Deliberately she stared about the room. Almost mechanically she stepped past me and sank into a chair. In a peculiarly dull voice she said:

"I am tired. I have come a long way."

She *was* tired. Though her face was hidden from me, I could sense the exhaustion in it. She seemed suddenly to have lost the power of movement—almost the power of life itself. She sat perfectly still, staring straight before her. I thought, strangely, that she was on the verge of death.

“You—you wish to go to Peter?” I said gently.

“Peter?” she whispered, and raised her head slowly to look at me. “Peter? Yes. In a little while.”

I studied her. Surely this woman loved Peter Mace, or she would not have gone to such trouble to find him. If so, she could help him. He needed help. He needed some one near and dear to him, to talk to him, to convince him that his horrible research was wicked. If this woman could do that, her coming would not be in vain.

“When you are rested,” I said quietly, “I will take you to him. You had better sleep first. It is a long way.”

She smiled, as if she were pitying me for not knowing something I ought to know.

“Yes,” she said. “It is a long way, through the jungle. I know.”

Then she slept.

Darkness had fallen when we began that journey to Peter Mace’s house. We were alone. Captain Bruk had departed more than an hour ago, vowing that he wanted no more of her, and that so far as he was concerned he didn’t care if he “never set foot on Faikana’s blasted beach again.” The natives, tired of hanging about the house in hopes of satisfying their childish curiosities, had returned to the village. No one saw us begin that journey which was to have such a terrible end.

But I had no premonition of the end, then. I thought of Peter Mace, living alone in his isolated abode in the jungle, and I thanked God for sending the woman to aid him. Mysterious she was, to be sure—and not once had she given herself a name—but my hopes were high, and a queer confidence possessed me as I led her along the jungle trail. Even the jungle itself, black as death and full of sinister shapes and sounds, could not kill the song in my heart. I refused to consider the possible peril on all sides of us. I refused to be afraid. A merciful God had sent this woman to Faikana, and the same merciful God would conduct her safely to the end of her quest.

She, too, was unafraid. She followed boldly, deliberately, in my steps. She did not speak. Several times, when I turned to assist her through stretches of black morass, or over huge fallen stumps of aoa trees, she merely smiled and accepted my hand without comment.

So, finally, we reached the end of the trail and entered the clearing where Peter Mace’s house loomed high before us. And for the first time, doubt assailed me.

Only one light burned in that grim structure—one light, pale and yellow

behind the masked window of the upstairs room. Slowly we walked toward it, and even more slowly we ascended the veranda steps. I knocked hesitantly, and there was no answer. My hand trembled on the latch. The door swung open, and silently we entered.

There in the dark we stood side by side, the woman and I, and neither of us spoke. In the far corner of the room a feeble shaft of light descended from the ceiling, revealing the top rungs of the ladder and the uneven surface of the wall beside it. The aperture was closed. From the chamber above us came the deep, singsong voice of Peter Mace, uttering words which brought sudden terror to my heart.

There is no need to repeat those words here. Already I have described in detail the ritual for which that room of horror was designed. Enough to say that the horror, this time, was nearing its climax—that *other* voices, born of lips which had no human form, were slowly and terribly rising in a shrill crescendo, smothering the blasphemies which poured from the boy's throat. Even while the veiled woman and I stood motionless, those sounds rose to a mighty roar, screaming their triumph. And with them came the shrill, awful outcry of a woman in mortal anguish.

I wish now that I had yielded to the fear in my soul and fled from that evil place. I wish I had seized my companion's arm and dragged her back across the threshold. Instead, I remained rooted to the floor. I stood rigid, listening to the medley of mad voices that bellowed above me.

The whole house echoed those wild vibrations. Words of terrible significance, of frightful suggestiveness, were flung out of monstrous throats, to wail and scream into the deepest depths of my consciousness. Again and again I heard names hurled out which bore sufficient significance to spike my soul with nameless and uncontrollable dread. And above them all, *within* them all, shrilled that wild screech of physical agony which tocsined from a woman's lips!

The awful din reached its climax while I stood there. For a long moment the walls around me, the ceiling above, the floor below, trembled as if in the grip of a great wind. Then, slowly, the sounds subsided. Slowly they died to a sinister whispering and muttering in which I could distinguish no individual words. And finally only one audible sound remained—the low, passionate voice of Peter Mace, speaking in triumphant tones which were, in themselves, all too significant.

Then I moved. Mechanically I turned from the woman beside me and paced toward the ladder in the corner. Fearfully I ascended the wooden rungs, holding myself erect with hands that shook violently as they groped upward at a snail's pace. From the chamber above me, the boy's voice came in fitful exclamations, uttering words of triumph, of endearment. Wildly he was saying:

"It is finished! Beloved, it is finished! The agony has destroyed the death; the life is complete! They promised me it would be so, and they have fulfilled their promise. Oh, my beloved, come to me!"

I shuddered, and for a long time clung motionless to my perch, fearing to

ascend higher. Had I been aware of the scene which would meet my gaze when I reached up to drag the wooden covering from the aperture above me, I would have flung myself back down the ladder and left that evil chamber for ever undisturbed. But I did not know. I slid aside the barrier. I heaved myself to the floor above. And I saw.

The room was a well of darkness, illuminated only by the sputtering candle on the table. Before me stood Peter Mace, disheveled and ragged, his head flung back and his bare feet planted on the crude atop mat which covered the floor. In his arms, pressed close against his emaciated body, clung a naked woman—a woman whose skin was as white and as smooth as fine-grained gypsum. Lovely she was. Too lovely. And then I realized the truth.

Abruptly I turned and stared at the cloth-covered pedestal in the corner—the pedestal where the marble woman had sat. Then, in horror, I stared again at the creature in Peter Mace's embrace. And she was the same woman. God help me, she was the same! Those horrors of outer darkness had given her the power of life! The woman in Peter Mace's arms, clinging to him, was a woman of living stone!

I stared, unable to believe what I knew to be true. The very frightfulness of it prevented me from assimilating its whole significance. I merely stared, and heard words issuing from her lips, and heard him answering them. Then, after an eternity, I stood erect and said aloud:

"A woman is here to see you, Peter."

Peter Mace turned, very slowly, releasing the naked thing in his arms. He looked at me steadily, as if bewildered by my presence. He peered all around him, as if puzzled even by the room in which he stood. Then he said quietly:

"A woman? To see me?"

"Yes," I nodded. "She's waiting."

He came toward me. He did not understand. His forehead was creased and his lips frowning. Leaving his companion where she was, he stepped past me and slowly descended the ladder. The stone woman said nothing; she stood very still, watching him. Silently I followed him down the creaking rungs to the room below, where the other woman was waiting. And then it was my turn to be bewildered.

Peter Mace and the woman in black stared at each other. Neither moved. For a full moment, neither spoke. The very intensity of their stares—the very completeness of their silence—indicated a climactic something which I did not fully comprehend. I felt that when the woman did speak, she would scream. But she did not. She said calmly:

"You sent for me, Peter. I'm here."

He moved toward her. Behind and above him a muffled creaking sound came from the wooden ladder, but none of us turned. The boy was still gazing with horribly wide eyes. He said falteringly:

"You—you are not dead? You're here? How can that be?"

"I was dead, Peter."

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"I was dead, but you gave me life. I came to you."

The boy seemed not to understand. Not until she raised her hands and drew the veil from her face—not until then did he realize the hideous results of the sins he had committed. And I realized them, too. The woman before me was Peter Mace's loved one. She was walking in death! She had been raised from the grave by the hellish rituals performed by him! This—this woman before me—was the flesh and blood reality from whom he and his artist companion had designed that stone creature in the room above us! The likeness was unmistakable!

But there was a difference. The face of this corpse-woman was lovely only because she had *made* it lovely. Beneath the mask of powder which covered it, death had written with an indelible pencil, leaving certain signs which could never be erased. Little wonder she had worn a veil! Little wonder she had refused to reveal herself to me, or to Captain Bruk, or to any of the people who had come in contact with her! Yet Peter Mace, her lover, failed to see what the grave had done. He was blinded to all but her loveliness. He reached out his arms and stepped toward her, and with terrible eagerness he crushed her against him.

I stood close to them, unable to move away. Again I heard the creaking of the ladder behind me, but still I did not turn. Nothing mattered but the pitiful thing which was occurring before me. I saw only this wild-eyed, sobbing boy, holding in his arms the woman who had been returned to him—the woman who, resurrected from her distant grave by the far-reaching powers of his unholy rites, had found her way across half the earth to reach his arms. Again and again he cried her name aloud. Over and over he sobbed words of endearment. All his loneliness and longing poured through his lips, and his soul was bare for her to look at.

And then some sixth sense made me turn—or perhaps it was the thud of heavy feet striking the floor behind me. I swung slowly about, and stood transfixed. There, at the foot of the ladder, stood the stone woman whom Peter Mace had created.

As long as I live, the expression of her face will haunt me. Her eyes were as dark and deep as midnight pits. Her lips were drawn back over parted teeth, in a snarl of animal hate. She had heard the boy's every word. She had witnessed his every act. And now her once-beautiful face was contorted. She was a savage beast whose mate had deserted her. She meant murder.

Slowly, with awful deliberation, she advanced across the floor. She did not see me, did not consider my presence. She had eyes only for Peter Mace and the woman who clung to him. Straight past me she walked, so close that I might have reached out and touched her. And I—God help me!—I stood like a graven image, utterly unable to move or to shriek a warning.

I did not see all of what happened. Her back was toward me, and she was between me and her victims. But I saw and heard enough to blast my soul.



COYE 74

Peter Mace was whispering to his loved one, uttering low words of love and happiness. His voice suddenly ceased, then screamed aloud in terror. He leaped backward, then flung himself forward again. He might have escaped, had he not hurled himself upon that relentless stone figure in a futile attempt to protect his beloved. Those hideous fingers had already gripped the other woman's throat. Peter Mace tore at them madly, in an effort to dislodge them.

He might better have thought of his own safety. Slowly and surely those stone fingers committed murder. The corpse-woman sank backward to the floor, staring with dead eyes at the ceiling. The fingers released their grip.

Not until then did the boy realize the futility of resistance. Not until then did he seek to escape. Then it was too late. Those infernal hands buried themselves in the flesh of his neck. His lips opened to release a prolonged shriek of agony. The shriek became a bloody gurgle. He hung suspended, his feet beating a terrible tattoo on the floor. When she released him, he fell across the body of the woman beneath him; and he, like her, was dead.

The room, then, was filled with the silence of death. The stone woman stood over her victims, gazing down at them. An eternity passed. Slowly, and still without speaking, the woman turned and paced to the door. Her groping hand raised the latch; the door creaked inward. Staring straight ahead of her, she walked across the veranda and descended the steps. Stiffly, and with that same hideous deliberation, she paced toward the jungle. The darkness of the outer night claimed her, and she was gone.

That is all. That is why I, Father Jason, went away from Faikana the next day, taking my native people with me. Risking death in clumsy pahi, we paddled for two days and a night on the open sea, to reach the sparsely inhabited atoll of Mehu, where we might begin life over again. That is why, in the clearing on Faikana where Peter Mace's horror-house stands, you will find a crude slab of tou wood planted for men to look upon; and you will read the words: "*Inei Teavi o te mata epoa o Faikana*"—which mean, literally: "Here lie the bodies of the lovers of Faikana."

But Faikana is inhabited by one living person only—a woman created for love, out of sin. And she is a stone woman who may not die, who may not find peace, until those unnamable horrors of the world of darkness take pity on her and relieve her of the life they gave her.

The Whisperers

IT WAS A VERY OLD, very forlorn house. To reach it we had to climb a broken-down gate on which hung a FOR SALE sign, and then wade through a sea of grass which had grown rampant.

"Darling," Anne said, "this is *it!* Let's buy it!"

I stared at her. We had been married a week, but I still could not even glance at her without wanting to crush her in my arms, to feel the warm and wonderful response of her slim body against mine. She wanted this house. We could fix it up, she said, and come here week-ends.

An hour later we were in the village, talking to Jedney Prentiss, whose name was on the sign.

He wanted twenty-five hundred for the place. "Been empty for six years," he declared, "but it's still a mighty fine house." I argued him down to eighteen hundred, and we drove to Harkness to arrange the transfer.

That afternoon the honeymoon ended. We lit a fire in the big fireplace and burned the road-maps, abandoning our plans to tour the Gaspee Peninsula. Then we picked out the room we wanted for our bedroom and went to work, determined to have at least that much done by nightfall. Anne had bought bedding and furniture in Harkness, and the store people had promised to deliver them at once.

It was fun. To save her dress, Anne peeled down to shorts and a halter, and there she was, running around in the almost-nude with mops and brooms, dusters, and buckets of water. I watched her out of one eye and realized how lucky I was. Pretty? She had the sweetest, slimmest legs in the world! She had soft white shoulders and jaunty little breasts that jiggled every time her high heels tapped the floor. And she was more than willing, about every half hour, to take time out and slip into my arms for a minute or two of relaxation—if you could call it that.

It was about six o'clock when our "company" arrived. I was neck-deep in bedroom debris. Anne had gone out into the yard for some birch twigs to make an auxiliary broom. Suddenly, from the doorway at my back, a voice said, "You ain't goin' to *live* here, are you, mister?"

I swung about, startled half out of my skin. There on the threshold stood a sickly, emaciated little girl about twelve years old. Pity for the poor creature

overwhelmed me, and I stood up slowly for fear of frightening her. "And who are you?" I asked. "A neighbor of ours?"

"I used to live here. I'm Susie Callister."

I stared. Jedney Prentiss had mentioned the Callisters. They were local people who had rented the place for a time. With the death of Jim Callister, his wife and little girl had moved out.

"You people must be crazy, movin' into this place," the girl said. "My ma says it's haunted!"

"Really?"

"She'd lick the tar out of me if she knew I was here!"

"And do you come here often?" I asked.

"Yep. My pa died here. My pa was swell. I come here to talk to him."

"To—what?"

"Well," she said defiantly, "maybe I don't talk to him like me and you are talkin', but I talk and he listens. I sit on a box down in the cellar and tell him how ma won't let me come here. He whispers back, sometimes. He died in the cellar, from a heart attack."

"Peter!" That was Anne's voice from downstairs. "I've made coffee and sandwiches. It's after six and I'm starved!"

"Gee!" Susie Callister whispered. "Is it that late? I'll get kilt!" She turned like a frightened rabbit, then stopped. In a slow, pleading voice she added, "Can I—can I come here sometimes to talk to pa? Can I, please?"

I told her she could come as often as she liked. Something told me I ought to know more about her. She fled downstairs and out the front door, slamming it behind her, and when I got downstairs Anne was standing in the hall-shadows, a queer look on her face.

"Who—who was that, Peter?"

I told her and she seemed relieved. We sat down to our supper in the kitchen. Anne was oddly quiet.

She was tired, I supposed. Her lovely shoulders drooped, and her halter had slipped down a little to reveal the pale tired curves of her breasts. I walked around the table and took her in my arms. "You've worked too hard," I said.

She smiled a little and relaxed against me, warm and soft. But she was trembling. I could feel little erratic movements under the deliciously smooth velvet of her skin. Suddenly she looked at me.

"Peter—before we do anything else after supper, will you go down cellar and—and look around? I was down there a while ago and I think we have rats. I heard the strangest whispering sounds over near an old work-bench . . ."

"I'll exterminate the vipers," I said lightly. But Anne was afraid. I knew by the way she clung to me, the way her body trembled against mine in search of protection. She was terrified.

I didn't go down cellar right away. Our purchases arrived from the store and we had to arrange furniture. Night was upon us in earnest before I got

around to the rats.

Clutching an antique oil-lamp, I groped down the steep, treacherous cellar stairs, put the lamp on the work-bench and looked around.

It was a huge room with floor and walls of rough concrete, the floor unfinished, or long ago torn up for some reason, in the corner under the bench. My mind played with a distressing mental picture of Susie Callister, poor child, sitting here alone in the dark, pouring out her sorrows to her dead father. Something would have to be done about Susie Callister. And about the rats whose whisperings she believed to be her father's voice!

The rats! Seated on an upturned box, I waited. Presently I, too, heard a furtive whispering, emanating, it seemed, from that section of the cellar where the floor had been torn up.

Noiselessly I stalked the sounds. Rats? I was not so sure! This odd, subtle whispering was too human, too seductive! I could have sworn it was trying evilly to tell me something!

On hands and knees I crept toward the corner where the floor was bare. The whisperings ceased. Unaccountably angry, I explored every inch of the packed brown earth and found nothing. Had the rats bored a tunnel beneath this part of the cellar?

I took a step toward the lamp, and stopped. Something unbelievably cold, yet soft—soft as the touch of a woman's lips!—caught at my left ankle. My heart missed a beat. A thrill swept through me—the kind of thrill that would seethe in my blood if a beautiful, undraped woman were to appear suddenly before me in some totally unexpected place!

I looked down and could have sworn, *though nothing was there*, that something like a human hand had hold of my foot! Then a dull creaking noise stiffened me. I jerked loose, raised my head, and saw that the bulkhead at the far end of the cellar was being raised. There was the explanation of my "clutching hand"—simply an inrush of cold air from the night outside!

I stared. Framed in the aperture was a face, a woman's face. It grew larger. A groping hand appeared, and the woman furtively descended the rotting wooden steps to the cellar floor.

She did not see me—and that was strange, for the lamp still burned. Slowly she advanced. Her dress was a cheap black rag that accented the unbelievable whiteness of her face and throat. Her body gleamed through the gaps in it. I saw a bare shoulder, the sleek curve of a half-bare breast. I saw the too-white flow of a shapely feminine leg.

She prowled past the bench, stopped. Her voice, a sibilant whisper, beat against the cellar walls.

"She's been here again, Jim Callister. I know it! I could tell by the look in her eye when she got home. She comes here more often than I know, and you talk to her, you put ideas into her head. But you ain't going to get her! I'll take her so far away you won't never get your hellish hairy hands on her! You hear? I'm

defying you! I stood up to you once and I'm doin' it again!"

She shook her fist. Her calcimine face was shapeless with hate. I swear I could hear the machine-gun beat of her heart beneath that white, bare breast! Sharply I said, "Wait, Mrs. Callister!"

She stopped as though stabbed. Her glittering eyes found me, focused slowly. I realized then why she had not seen me before. She was half blind.

"It's quite all right, Mrs. Callister," I said. "I'm Peter Winslow. I've bought this house. I'd like to talk to you and——"

She flung herself backward, whirled toward the bulkhead. The darkness outside had swallowed her before I could make a move to stop her. Bewildered and afraid, I went upstairs.

That night we heard the rats. Anne trembled in my arms and huddled against me, her sweet young body hot with terror. I tried to comfort her. Gently, gently I kissed her quivering lips, her eyes, the soft warm hollow of her throat. Deliberately I made love to her, seeking artfully to arouse other emotions that would force her fears into the background. But even as my efforts won a delicious response, even as she melted against me and put her arms hungrily about my neck—even as her parted lips shaped themselves to mine in a kiss that was all love and left no room for fear—I thought darkly, "*The rats are in the cellar. Susie Callister's father died there. Susie is queer. Her mother is queer. No ordinary rats ever whispered like that . . .*"

And when I slept at last, exhausted, and should have dreamed of the warm and wondrous nearness of the woman I loved, I dreamed instead of the whispers. I heard them in my brain. Strange dreams for a bridegroom!

In the morning I drove alone to the village, to buy traps. The proprietor of the general store was a thin, bony man. "You're the feller who bought the old Prentiss place, ain't you?" he asked. "Like it there, do you?"

"I think we might," I said. "When the place is fixed up."

He gave me an oblique look. "Paint and repairs will help a heap, but they won't alter what happened to Jim Callister. I'm the undertaker here, and I fixed Jim up for buryin'. You can't tell *me* he died natural, and I said so till I was hoarse, but no one'd listen!"

"What do you mean?" I asked uneasily.

"Well, he was workin' down in the cellar the night he died. Seems he spent most of his spare time workin' down there. So this night it was mighty quiet down there and his wife got worried, and went down and found him layin' there. Heart attack it was, accordin' to old Doc Digby. But I took care of the body. I ain't no learned medical man and don't pretend to be, but I never see a heart attack grow hair on a man. Did you?"

"Hair?"

"Outside of his face, there wasn't an inch of Jim Callister that didn't have hair on it. Hair like you'd see on a monkey!"

I gave him a long stare, trying to figure him out.

"Another thing," he said. "When I pumped Jim Callister clean, I didn't like what I took out of him. I still think it was poison!"

I had plenty to think about on the ride back. One thing was certain, I was going to have a talk with Dr. Digby. And I was going to have a more thorough look at that cellar.

A car of rather ancient vintage was parked at our gate when I got there, and by its doctor's emblem I knew at once that our visitor was a medical man. He was. His name was Everett Digby. He was a bald little man in his sixties, whom I disliked immediately. The hand he offered me was like a wet rubber glove.

"Thought I'd drop in," he said with a mechanical smile, "to say hello."

"*You thought you'd drop in,*" I mused, "*to see if I intend to reside here permanently. You've found out I'm a doctor, and you're afraid of competition!*"

We talked for half an hour about nothing. Finally, after a cautious build-up, I said, "The fellow at the store seems to think there was something strange about Jim Callister's death."

Digby laughed. "I wouldn't pay too much attention to Ben if I were you. He makes his own liquor and it does queer things to him."

I thought: "*One of you is lying!*" Anne excused herself and went to prepare lunch. Then Digby changed his manner.

Leaning forward, he said pointedly, in a low voice, "You were crazy to buy this place, Winslow. What Ben Nevins told you is right, or partly right, anyhow. There *was* something odd about Callister's death, and this house was the cause of it! If I were you, I'd clear out!"

"Why?"

He shot another glance at the door. "I'll tell you what I know, and leave out what I think. Jim Callister came here to live eight years ago. At first everything went fine. Then he built a work-bench down in the cellar, and things began happening. He got thin and worried. His wife begged me to look at him and I did—and it stumped me. There wasn't a thing wrong with him that I could discover, yet his skin was turning soft and white, and little clumps of hair were growing out of it. And he was changing mentally. Jim used to be a fine fellow with a big, hearty laugh. Now he was grim as a grave, sort of sly and stealthy."

"He got worse," I asked, "before his death?"

"I wouldn't know about the condition of his body. After that first examination he wouldn't ever let me look at him again. Mentally he got more surly by the hour. His wife and girl went through hell."

"And you think this house had something to do with it?"

Digby looked away, moistening his lips. "*Something* changed him. I don't know what. All I say is, you ought to clear out of here. There's things in this world we don't understand, Winslow. I don't *know* what turned Jim Callister into a vicious, hairy beast, but—" He caught himself, but it was too late. Anne was there in the doorway.

Digby stood up, little lines of sweat forming on his bald head. "Got to be going," he mumbled. "Said more than I meant to." He hurried down the steps to his car.

When he had gone, Anne said quietly, "What did he mean about Jim Callister, Peter?"

"Nothing, darling."

"I want you to tell me."

I told her, selecting with care the words I used. "Chances are," I concluded, "Digby doesn't relish the thought of having another doctor in this town, and is trying to frighten us out." I put my arms around her and shaped my mouth to hers. Yet even then, now that I think back on it—even with Anne's delectable body trembling eagerly in my embrace, and her soft, warm, willing lips thrilling me with a kiss—I was thinking of something else. Of the whispers!

That evening while knocking down some old shelves in the kitchen, I felt a sharp, shooting pain in my ankle. It disappeared almost at once, but at the first opportunity I went upstairs, shut the bedroom door behind me and removed my sock.

A patch of grayish white skin, peculiarly soft, extended from my instep to a point an inch or so above the shin bone. Thoroughly scared, I smeared it with salve and bound it, replacing shoe and sock. Then I began thinking of the cellar again. I had to go down there! Furtively I began seeking some excuse for leaving Anne upstairs, so that I might shut myself up down there and wait. Wait for the whispers.

The opportunity came just before bedtime. Anne had undressed and slipped into her pajamas. We were having a nightcap in the kitchen. I was staring at my wife, at the loose neck of her pajama jacket. As a bridegroom, I should have been marveling at the youthful beauty of her—the seductive shadows that played about her half exposed breasts; the alluring flow of her slim legs. I should have been saying, "This, all this, is mine to have and to hold, to love and to caress!" But I said, instead: "You go on upstairs, darling. I'll set those traps in the cellar."

She looked at me queerly. She took a step toward me, her arms half extended. I was thrillingly aware of the warm, sweet scent of her, of her smooth white skin, of her eagerness to be loved. But I turned and went down the cellar stairs, closing the door behind me.

Unerringly my feet took me to that patch of brown earth near the work bench. I waited. Ten, fifteen minutes I waited. Then—the whispers again! Out of the earth they came, or out of the walls—sibilant, seductive sounds that seemed to be words but were not.

My hands trembled. My whole body quivered with excitement. I crawled toward the source of the sounds, and suddenly my hands were claws, frantically digging in the earth!

Now the whispers mocked me. They beat against my brain, tormenting me,

spurring me on to greater efforts. I clawed like an animal. Before long I had dug a hole some eighteen inches deep and encountered wood.

It was a cistern cover. I could not budge it. But I found a crowbar back of the furnace and worked like a madman, with sweat rolling down my face and arms, until slowly, bit by bit, I broke the seal of mortar that held the cover in place. And then, using all my strength, I pried it up and managed to move it to one side.

There in the black depths of the cellar I dropped to my hands and knees to peer into the yawning pit, and from the depths of it issued a human-like sigh, a sigh as caressing as the touch of a lover's hand.

I seized my flashlight and aimed it into the pit. Now the walls leaped into frightening prominence. Gray, wet walls they were, covered with a fungus growth that seemed to writhe in agony as the light laved it. But the depths of the cistern held their secret tenaciously. Powerful as was the light, it revealed only gray walls vanishing into a deep, impenetrable darkness. A whispering darkness. A darkness full of nameless rustlings that called to me!

The cellar had grown unbearably cold. My flesh crawled. I retreated in dismay from the pit's mouth, but the dank, freezing chill enveloped me, as though invisible hands had stripped me naked and were rubbing me with ice!

Sharp, biting pains attacked my chest and arms. Then came the fear, fear of the dark, of the pit, of the crowding cellar walls! Sobbing out my terror, I swung the cistern cover back into place and clawed the earth over it. Then I ran.

When I entered the bedroom, Anne knew at once that something was wrong. She was lying there in bed with a magazine, waiting for me. "Peter!" she cried. "You're so pale! What's wrong?"

I crept into bed and huddled against her, seeking relief in the warm, sweet closeness of her body. I was afraid! My hands clutched at her, desperately, and I buried my face against the satin warmth of her shoulder. I crushed her against me, afraid that something might come between us and destroy me.

"Darling," she whispered without complaint—though God knows I must have been brutally hurting her!—"Darling, you're upset." Then her lips found mine; her slim body lay limp and yielding in my embrace. My fears subsided.

In the morning Anne rose quietly, so not to wake me. But I was awake. I lay with one eye half open, watching her dress. I thought of the whispers, and of what they had commanded me to do. My furtive gaze explored the lovely lines of her body, the rounded fullness of her exquisite breasts, the curve of her throat, the soft, sweet beauty of her face. In her innocence, she thought I was asleep!

She had planned to drive to Harkness this morning for curtain material and a few other things we badly needed. I heard her go. Then, stealthily, I slipped out of bed, peeled off my pajamas and studied myself, naked, in the mirror.

I liked what I saw.

I dressed and went downstairs. Anne had left breakfast on the table. I ate slowly, filled with thoughts of her, of what was going to happen—*bad* to happen—when she returned. Suddenly I heard the front door open, and the voice of Susie Callister calling anxiously, “Is—is anybody home?”

I smiled at that. The voice with which I answered her was not *my* voice. Oh, no. *They* told me what to say! They told me to invite the child in, to humor her.

I called to her and she came timidly into the sitting-room, and stood staring at me. “You—you said I could come sometimes,” she reminded me. “You said I could talk to pa.”

“My dear child . . . of course!”

“If—if I go downstairs, you won’t tell ma I done it, will you?” Her deep-set eyes were pleading with me, and her lips trembled. “She licked me somethin’ awful the last time. She—she says we’re goin’ to move away from here. Tomorrow, maybe. And I—I want to say goodbye to pa.”

I smiled and took her arm. I led her down the hall to the cellar door and opened it, and stood there at the top of the treacherous cellar stairs, watching her while she slowly descended into the darkness. She was young, of course. Her frail little body was not very attractive. Still, her skin was white and clear; she had arms and legs and the beginnings of breasts. She was better than nothing.

I heard the whispers, and they were evil. Never before had they been so loud, so commanding. They told me what to do.

I closed the door softly and turned the key. Then I went back to the sitting-room and sat down to wait.

To—wait.

It came at last, and every expectant nerve in my body thrilled to it, as a lover to the subtle caress of his beloved’s lips. A scream of terror pulsed up from the dark cellar walls. A sudden rush of footfalls sounded on the stairs. Frantic fists beat against the locked door!

Then the scream again, this time a rising ululation of agony, a wailing, tenuous cry that fluttered for a moment in space, then died. And I sat there smiling, with my twisted mind and sated senses soaking up every last lingering echo, until the house was still again.

The cellar was a vast vault of silence when I opened the door. There were no whispers. Descending, I looked about me. My little friend had said farewell to more than her dead father. She had vanished.

“There will be another soon,” I said softly. “Just be patient.”

The woman came about an hour later. Angrily she strode up the porch steps and banged on the front door, and when I opened the door to her she thrust her contorted face at me and said shrilly, “Susie came here, didn’t she? Where is she?”

“My dear Mrs. Callister,” I murmured, “what on earth makes you think—”

“Don’t lie to me! I know that child like a book!”

“Come in, Mrs. Callister,” I invited, “and look for yourself.”

She stormed into the house, stabbed a quick look into the sitting-room, the dining-room, then strode down the hall to the kitchen. "Susie! Susie! Are you hiding from me, you little she-devil? Susie! Where are you?"

I followed her from room to room, slyly watching her. *She* would please them. She was shapely. Her legs were nicely rounded. Her mature body gleamed white as snow through the gaps in her worn-out dress. The front of her dress was tight, and her breasts thrust hard against the thin fabric. She was a woman, and in her own indelicate way she was desirable.

Upstairs we went, down again, and finally to the cellar door. There she hesitated. For one brief instant the anger on her wretched face was supplanted by fear. I opened the door.

"I—I ain't goin' down there!" she whispered.

"My dear Mrs. Callister, why not?"

"I just ain't!" Her voice rose to a screech. "Susie! Are you down there?"

It seemed strange to me that she could not hear the whispers. *I* heard them. I knew what they wanted me to do. Very carefully I stepped back. Mrs. Callister did not notice. I looked at my hands and raised them. Slowly, slowly . . . until they were poised only a few inches from her shoulders.

One savage thrust, and Susie Callister's mother would go screaming down the stairs! Then I would wrench the door shut, turn the key again, and—

But at that instant I heard the front door open, and my wife's voice called, "Peter! Will you help get the stuff out of the car, please? It's more than I can manage."

I closed the cellar door and went down the hall. Mrs. Callister followed me. Anne, her arms laden, stopped short.

"This is Mrs. Callister, Anne. She—er—is under the mistaken impression that her daughter is here. I've been having a difficult time trying to convince her otherwise."

Mrs. Callister said something under her breath and went past us to the door. Then she stopped. Too late I saw the tiny, frayed handkerchief lying there on the hall table.

She snatched it up and looked at it, turned slowly. Her eyes were slits, yellow with venom. "I know," she whispered. "I know what you've done! You've turned into one of *them*, like Jim did!" Then, with a shriek, she fled.

"The woman is mad," I said to Anne. "This is the damnedest village, full of the queerest people. Well, she's gone. That's something to be thankful for."

Anne was silent, but the look she gave me was strange. All morning she kept an eye on me. In the afternoon she said, "Peter, why don't you lie down and rest? You've worked so—so hard."

"I think I will."

"Please. You're not yourself, Peter. You—frighten me a little."

I went upstairs and shut the door. To sleep? Ah, no. I lay on the bed, thinking of the promise I had made. Tonight . . . tonight!

Night came so slowly! I watched the room grow dark. I lay there scheming. I thought my wife would never stop puttering around. Hungrily I listened to every sound she made downstairs, the soft tap-tap of her high heels as she went from room to room, the murmur of the portable radio on the fireplace mantel . . . and I cursed her for being so slow.

When she entered the bedroom at last, I was in bed, pretending to be asleep. She set a lamp on the bureau and turned the wick low, so not to wake me. Obliquely I watched her undress.

Pretty! Ah, so pretty! Such flawless legs. Such sweet, curving hips. So white and round and lovely her young breasts. So smooth and soft her shoulders! Did she know I was watching? Once, just once, she turned abruptly to look at me, and for a moment stood absolutely motionless, as though my furtive gaze had actually chilled her slim body. Then she put out the lamp and groped toward me in the dark . . .

By the sound of her breathing I knew that her back was toward me, her face to the wall. I became aware of the warmth that emanated from her, of the subtle fragrance of her body. And I waited with devilish patience until I was certain she slept.

Then I seized her.

She screamed only once as my hands closed about her lovely throat. Her eyes opened and I saw the whites of them staring up at me in the dark. Her lips whispered my name as I tore the jacket of her pajamas open.

I dragged her from the bed, gathered her in my arms and prowled to the door, leaving the torn remnants of her night-garb in a pitiful pile on the floor. If I kissed her mouth and crushed her against me in a wild, hungry embrace, it was not for love—for by that time I was laughing, and the low, bestial laughter that poured from my throat was like nothing human.

My fingers bit deeply into the soft flesh of her limp body. My face was low over hers, my mouth drooling. "*They* want you!" I shrieked.

Down the dark stairs I carried her to the lower hall, and now the old house was alive with whispers urging me on. Down the hall toward the cellar stairs I went. Then I heard voices. I heard heavy footsteps on the porch. I stopped, and a snarl curled my lips. Lowering my limp burden, I prowled stealthily through the sitting-room to a window and crouched there, peering out.

There were many of them and they carried every conceivable kind of weapon. Up from the village they had come, led by the mother of the girl I had locked in the cellar, and by Everett Digby, the doctor who knew more about this house than he had admitted.

Even as I watched, Digby hammered the door with his fist and demanded admittance, while the others crowded closer, their faces grim and gaunt in the glow of flashlights and torches.

"Open the door or we'll break it down!"

I slunk from the window. For a moment I thought wildly of defiantly

confronting them, but the beast in me was afraid. And yet, there might still be time to thwart them! If I could reach the cellar . . .

Trembling and afraid, I crept into the hall. There lay my wife, mercifully unaware of my intentions, her sweet body a white, soft heap on the floor. And the whispers were thunder in my brain, lashing me, driving me on. I stooped to seize Anne's arms, to drag her. But it was too late.

The door crashed inward, and I whirled in a crouch, snarling like a predatory beast driven from its prey. For one terrible moment I faced the mob, faced the awful accusation in the eyes of Everett Digby and the burning hatred in the stare of Mrs. Callister. Then a rifle cracked, a bullet splintered the ancient timbers of the cellar door behind me. I whirled and ran, leaving my wife there on the floor.

With a beast's strength and cunning I sped through the kitchen, tore open the rear door and fled into the night. The darkness closed around me. At top speed I fled through the rank grass of the yard, to the vast black shelter of the woods, easily escaping the frenzied swing of their searchlights.

There, exhausted, I lay snarling—and watched.

That night will live long in the memory of those people. Half the men of the village were abroad, hunting me. Torches burned in the dark. Flashlights were glittering fireflies swarming in the night. Men's voices rose on the wind, and heavy feet tramped every path within a mile of the house.

But they were hunting a beast too cunning for them.

I waited. "*They will give up soon,*" I thought. "*Then I can go back!*" But in that I was mistaken. For as the first dull gray of dawn appeared, a crimson glow sprang up to rival it. Flames rose to the sky, devouring the ancient timbers of my honeymoon house. Huge clouds of smoke billowed up from the inferno.

I crept as close as I dared, and from the fringe of the woods I cursed the flames and the grim-faced men who stood by, watching the house burn. I cursed the truck that came when the blackened foundations had cooled. I cursed the men who sweated there in the dawn, mixing concrete with which to fill the cistern in the cellar!

When it was finished, I crept into the woods again, bitterly cursing my fate. For this I knew: In the cellar of our honeymoon house had existed a means of ingress to another existence. I was sure—and I still am sure!—that there are worlds, or shadow-worlds, closer to this life of ours than men dare to admit, and there are connecting passageways through which the nameless denizens of those other worlds may reach. Their taint was on me.

Their taint had touched Jim Callister, too. How clearly I understood these things now! Callister had tracked the whispers to their source. Slowly, hideously, he had fallen prey to the whisperers. That his wife poisoned him I am certain, as I am equally certain that Dr. Digby knows of her guilt and is shielding her. There was no other way to protect herself and her child, no other way to save Jim Callister from a fate more hideous than death!

And so, this letter, this manuscript, this confession or whatever you may

choose to call it. I have written it, laboriously, upon scraps of paper picked up along the roads where at night I prowl in search of food. I shall find a way to mail it, and then I shall vanish. Where? God alone knows. The world of the whisperers is forever closed to me, and in the world of men I do not belong.

Day by day the lines of my face change, my lips recede over teeth that are slowly protruding, my eyes grow smaller, my growing head shrinks into the bulge of my shoulders. Day by day the cold white skin of my twisted body grows more hairy.

What next?

COYE 75



Horror in Wax

THE SMILE OF MARIO CELLANTI was a mockery. Aloud he said: "I shall be delighted, my friend, to spend the evening with one who has so charming a wife. It will be a very great honor indeed!"

Behind the innocent stare of his dark eyes, he thought silently: "The big-bellied fool! If he knew his charming wife as well as I do, he would quickly stop pawing her!"

Yes, some men were ignorant fools, knowing nothing of women—not even of the women they married. Luigi DiMucci was the biggest fool of all. Luigi was but a large-bodied middling-old idiot who believed that because a woman married him and because he was a good husband to her, nothing could come between them.

For such ignorance there could be no excuse. Luigi was an Italian, was he not? Therefore he should know at least a small something about a woman's heart. He should know, surely, that no creature as young and lovely as Angelina could ever be content to love an old man with a fat belly. Money was not everything.

This Luigi had money, but what else? Romance? Glamour? Not one small bit of either! To him, such essentials were foolishness, unbecoming an educated Italian who had made his way in the world, acquired a lovely wife, and settled into a life of leisure.

Ah, but Angelina *was* lovely! Mario Cellanti gazed at her across the table and caught the smile on her carmine lips, and sighed. The smile said so plainly: "When this fat husband of mine leaves us alone, I shall be in your arms, my Mario, where I belong!"

And her big-bellied idiot of a husband? He was saying in his sublime innocence: "Well, Cellanti, how about it?"

He did not mean the woman, of course. He meant the wine which glowed dark amber in the glasses on the table—the large mahogany table in the magnificent dining-room of Luigi DiMucci's luxurious home, where days ago, Mario Cellanti had come at the woman's red-lipped invitation, to begin the pleasure of transferring her dark-skinned loveliness to a life-sized canvas which would grace the room's paneled wall. That canvas, now, was near to completion.

"It is easily seen," Mario murmured, sipping his wine, "how the great Luigi

has become so wealthy and can afford so beautiful a wife. When a man creates such a wine as this—”

“He must also learn to be a business man,” Luigi smiled. “The wine was created by Luigi DiMucci, the Sicilian. It is sold to these Americans by Luigi DiMucci, the American. Is that not so, Angelina?”

“And who is it,” the woman asked, reaching a slender arm about his neck, “that I married, Luigi?”

“Can citizenship-papers change a man’s heart-blood?”

“No, Luigi!” And she looked across the table at Mario, shutting her eyes and opening them again in mock pain, as if to say: “Listen to him, Mario! ‘Can citizenship-papers change a man’s heart-blood!’ It is time he knew that the creeping years have changed the size of his waistline and put unsightly rings around his eyes, and made him lazy as a fat pig! The fool is so sure of me, Mario! I should almost like to tell him to his face what happened yesterday and the day before and the day before that, when he left you and me alone here!”

Luigi said, placing his emptied glass on the table: “You are a lover of good wine, Mario?”

“Always,” Mario murmured, placing a hand to his heart.

“Then it shall be my pleasure to share the best with you. What we are tasting is nothing; it is commercial; it is for pigs of Americans who would not appreciate the blood of saints. Come with me.”

Mario looked at the woman and saw her smiling, as if to say: “Go with him, my beloved. He has taken a fancy to you. Humor him, and when you have made a close friend of him our love-making will be that much easier!”

Mario smiled, too, and went with his host. And while the woman stood alone, smiling, Luigi linked an arm with his guest and the two men proceeded through room after room.

Luigi said: “Many persons have admired the beauty of my home, Mario, but few know the pleasant secrets of my wine-cellar, or even that such a cellar exists.”

“I am honored,” Mario murmured.

“Not at all. It is *my* honor to be privileged to reveal my secrets to *so* eminent an artist, and so handsome a one!”

Mario thought: “His wife has found me handsome, too. He would think twice before showing me his secrets if he knew that I have already, for myself, discovered the secrets of his wife’s heart.”

But he went with Luigi down a dim flight of stairs and through a game-room in the cellar, and then into a labyrinth of uncarpeted passageways where stone walls leaned toward him and pale lights burned in shoulder-high niches, stirring the shadows.

Far into the maze Luigi showed the way, until Mario came to realize that they were pacing beneath a remote portion of the house where even Angelina had never led him. Cold and damp it was here, and the sound of boot-soles

scraping on the stone floor was a sound of rats gnawing, or of millipeds scurrying through darkness.

So, arriving at last before a padlocked door of iron, Luigi produced keys and said gently: "Here in this vault lie wines which have been dust-covered and untapped since before our grandfathers were born, my friend." And Mario, pacing over the threshold, stared about him with widening eyes and saw that this was true.

Moreover, the vault was large and Luigi's treasures were in no stingy quantity. Thinking in terms of dollars, Marion regarded his host with new respect, even lowered his voice to a whisper of new reverence as he declared: "Amazing! Glorious!"

"This is nothing," Luigi shrugged.

"*Nothing*, you say!"

"I have created a wine-room even greater—for my wife. You shall see it. But first—" Luigi leaned forward from his plump waist to slide one of the many bottles from a shelf facing him— "first we must drink to your art, and to our friendship."

The wine was red and good, and sent a glow through Mario. Staring over the rim of his glass, he murmured in liquid tones: "We should drink, my friend, to the loveliness of your wife!"

"She *is* lovely, Mario?"

"Never has there been one so lovely!"

"So I have always known. She is like rare wine, Mario. Sometimes I have looked at her and thought: 'Like rare wine she will one day run from the glass and be no longer mine'."

"No woman so lovely could be ever unfaithful, my friend."

"You comfort me."

"One who possesses such a gem should need no comforting."

At this, Luigi smiled proudly and refilled his companion's glass.

"Come," he said. "Let me show you the wine-room I have built in her honor. Even she has not yet seen it, but I would have your opinion of it. You are an artist, Mario."

Luigi took his friend's arm, leading him into the deep end of the vault where an iron door of narrow dimensions broke the stone wall and gave ingress to a chamber beyond.

Here no lights burned. But Luigi struck a match, holding the flame to twin candles on the right of the door. Then, standing aside, he watched with unblinking eyes as Mario stepped past him to examine the room's contents.

Four steps Mario took and stood motionless, frowning with bewilderment. Turning slowly in his tracks, he said: "But this room is merely a bare vault, Luigi. It is a cell. It contains only shadows and darkness and—"

The words stuck in his throat and died there, but he opened his eyes very wide to stare at the small black pistol which lay in Luigi's unmoving hand.

Wider and wider Mario's eyes went, until they were white-rimmed and protruding from their sockets. His feet rooted themselves in the stone floor and his slender body swayed on stiff legs. Facing him, Luigi was smiling—if the sinister downward curve of his thin lips could be called a smile.

"This *was* a wine-room, my friend." Luigi said softly, "One in which I kept my most precious vintages. But yesterday, in secret, I came here alone and stripped it bare of everything except the two candles you see burning there. I did that, my friend, while you and my wife were making love in her bedchamber upstairs."

Slowly Luigi stepped backward to the threshold, reaching a hand to grasp the open door. The weapon in his leveled hand held Mario at bay.

"Now, my friend, this chamber shall be yours. None but I shall know you are here. In solitude you shall be allowed to remember my wife's warm caresses and the soft words of affection which she murmured against your cheek. Because a man is old, my friend, and inclined to plumpness about the middle, is no proof that his powers of observation are dimmed—nor that he is a fool!"

The door closed slowly, blotting out Luigi's smiling face. Like a man impaled, Mario stood staring at it, his slender body trembling, his dark eyes bulging in a face grey as the dripping wax of the twin candles niched in the wall before him.

Not until the grating click of the heavy padlock reached his ears did he move. Then, he lunged forward with both arms outflung, hurled himself against the door, beat upon it with his fists.

"No, no!" he screamed. "You are mistaken, Luigi! You are horribly mistaken! Your wife and I—"

A sound of receding footsteps silenced him. And as the sound diminished in volume Mario wept and wailed against the iron barrier, shrieking admissions of his guilt and pleading for mercy. When at last he was silent, leaning limp against the door with salt tears staining his face and his hands afire from their futile pounding, no sound but the sob of his own hoarse breathing came to him.

Slowly he retreated into the middle of the chamber and gazed about with blood-shot eyes—knowing that Luigi had carefully planned and executed his entire program of revenge.

In truth, the man's cunning mind had conceived a vengeance complete in every detail. The room was a sunken vault possessing no windows, no means of ventilation. All too soon the damp air would grow foul with Mario's own exhalations, choking him, sapping the strength from his lean body. For light, there was nothing but the flickering dimness of two candle-flames which, judging from the length of the half-burned stumps supporting them, would endure no longer than a few hours. After which he would be plunged in a darkness like death.

No sound from his frenzied lips could reach far beyond these grim walls. Penetrating perhaps as far as the monstrous cellar beyond, any shriek from his throat would die at least there, amid mocking echoes, reaching no part of the house above.

Death then, was the answer—slow, hideous death, with none even to watch the agony of it. Knowing this, Mario lowered his aching body to the cold floor, his back against a wall, and, staring at the two wavering candle-flames, sobbed until his throat refused to give out more than weak, stifling gasps.

Slumped there, sagging, he wondered what hour it was—and knew that the time of day or night would never again be of importance to him. The candles burned lower, and he swayed erect, thinking to put one of them out, to save it. Then he thought: "I'll put both out, and if the hard floor will let me, I'll sleep a while. There is a way of escape. There *must* be. But I am too weary now, too terrified, to ponder over it."

He searched the pockets of his clothing for matches. But that soon he was again terrified. He had but one match!

Trembling, he placed that tiny sliver in the candle-niche where the dampness of the floor might not reach it, pinched the candle-flames between the thumb and forefinger, stretched his aching body on the stone floor, and slept.

When he awoke, he used his last match to light one of the candles. For hours then he paced the floor of the vault, passing his hands over every inch of the walls, as high as his fingertips would reach. The door he gave even closer attention, thereby discovering, in the base of it, a thin crack outlining what seemed to be a small square door built into the barrier itself.

But no amount of pushing nor kicking served to jar the iron block loose from its parent-mass of metal. In the end, exhausted to the point of collapse, Mario sat again on the floor and stared with gaunt eyes into a leering face of Death.

How many hours passed he did not know. Hours were eternities. When at last he heard slow footsteps approaching from the labyrinthine passage of the cellar, he groped erect and stood swaying, his hands clenched desperately. Must he face once more the taunts and jeers of the man who had imprisoned him?

But when the footsteps ceased near the barrier, the voice that came through the iron portal was dispassionate, seemingly empty of gloating. It was Luigi's voice.

"I have brought you food and candles. Tomorrow I shall bring you something to keep you company during the long days that confront you."

There was a sound, then, of metal scratching on metal at the base of the door. A thin shaft of light leaped into the room as the small block of iron swung outward, leaving a square aperture barely large enough for Luigi's hand to reach through.

The hand held two white candles and an uncovered aluminum pot from which rose an aroma of warm stew. That aroma, assailing Mario's nostrils, gave him strength to stumble forward. But the hand—leaving the pot—was gone before his clutching fingers could grasp it.

On hands and knees he clawed at the unyielding barrier, pleading again for mercy. No answer came, except the sound of receding footsteps.

Frantically Mario hammered upon the door, screamed:

"Give me matches, Luigi. I have none, and if the candles burn out while I sleep—"

The footsteps paused. The voice of Luigi answered calmly: "I shall give you no matches. The darkness is your enemy, not mine. You have candles and a flame; see that you keep the flame alive. If it dies, I shall bring no other."

But not until Luigi's footsteps had once more died in the distance, leaving a death-like silence in their wake, did the doomed man realize the full horror of what had been so calmly said to him.

Candles he had, and a single flickering flame which must be guarded against expiration. Perhaps Luigi would bring more candles on the morrow; perhaps not. That was Luigi's secret and a part of his sinister program of torment.

But now, when Mario slept, the precious flame must be left burning, eating away those inches of white wax which meant more than gold! And if he slept too long, allowing that solitary flame to expire before he awoke, he would be doomed to eternal darkness—to a cold, damp darkness as of death.

Mario pondered these things as he stood staring with enormous eyes at the door which barred his way to freedom. Then, sobbing anew, he sat on the floor and dragged the aluminum pot of stew toward him. With the wooden ladle which lay therein, he ate ravenously and noisily, in an effort to stuff strength into his trembling body, in an effort to fight the madness slowly creeping into his soul.

From then on he slept not at all, but remained awake and watched the ocher flame as it sank lower and lower on its small stump of dripping wax. Long before it was in danger of dying, he went to it and stood over it, holding in his fist one of the new candles Luigi had supplied him.

And when at last it was time to light a fresh cylinder, he did so with shaking fingers, while a convulsive sob racked his quivering body.

After that, he again lay on the damp floor and dozed. But his slumber, now, was filled with fitful visions of the candle-flame wavering in a dance of death, so that each time he awoke he lunged erect and stumbled wildly toward the niche, shrieking prayers to a merciful God to save him from dreadful darkness.

In time the candle did burn itself out, but not before he had transferred the flame to the last remaining stick. And he wondered, as he peered with gaunt eyes at that precious finger of flame, if Luigi would come again before the flame died. He wondered, too, what manner of thing Luigi was bringing to "keep him company."

Hours passed, however, before the husband of Angelina came again with food and candles. And when he did come, Mario knew it not. Sunk deep in a sleep of utter exhaustion, the prisoner lay full length on the floor at the far end of the vault, head curled in the hook of his arm, mouth agape and full of a sound of hoarse breathing. He had awaited his captor's coming until nerves and

body could stand the strain no longer.

He knew it not when Luigi came at last, stumbling and staggering through the maze of passages, and stood without the vault door, holding in his arms a tall, stiff object wrapped around with a winding-sheet of white linen. Resting this burden on the floor, Luigi pressed close to the door and listened. Then he spoke aloud, in a whisper, the name of the man within. But there was no reply.

There was no reply . . . and Luigi, smiling a thin smile of satisfaction, removed the massive padlock. Slowly, very slowly, he inched the iron door open. Pausing on the threshold, he stared silently at the contorted sleeping form of his victim.

Making no more noise than a velvet-pawed cat, he gathered up the thing he had brought to keep Mario company, and carried it into the vault. And as he went quietly away from the prison-room, he wore that lingering smile born of a nether-most hell; a leer which clung to his face as if moulded there in cold wax, to remain forever.

But still Mario Cellanti slept. He awoke hours later, to peer through blood-shot eyes at the flickering flame of the niched candle, and at the strange, tall object which stood propped against the wall near the door.

How had that come there? And what was it? Mario frowned his bewilderment and knew only that in some unholy manner this was but another of Luigi's fiendish torments. He stood erect and moved slowly forward—only to stand rigid as the irony of its presence struck him.

Luigi had brought this thing—this corpse-like thing wrapped in its white winding-sheet! Luigi had opened the door and carried this thing over the threshold, then had crept from the room and re-locked the barrier after him. And he, Mario, had slept through that opportunity to escape!

A sob shuddered from his pale lips, he groaned aloud in mortal anguish. The chance to escape had come and he had missed it. There might never be another.

Tears came to his eyes and he rocked back and forth on his aching legs, moaning dully. Still moaning, he stared again at the linen-wrapped shape before him. He even took a faltering step toward it.

The thing was tall, shaped like a human being. It was stiff and cold, and at the hesitant touch of his hands it swayed as if in danger of falling. Was it a corpse? *Was it the corpse of Luigi's lovely wife?*

Beads of sweat gleamed on Mario's high forehead as his trembling hands unwound the endless strip of white cloth. Then he stood back and stared. For the thing before him was neither a corpse nor a living being, but an object fashioned of delicately tinted wax. The ocher glow of unsteady candle-light imbued that waxen form with such false reality that Mario's eyes widened with amazement and his arms went half out to embrace it.

This—this was Angelina! Not the warm, clinging woman to whom he had made ardent love, but a waxen image so near to perfection that his lips opened to voice a gasp of admiration. None but a master craftsman could have conceived

such an image! None but a master artist could have endowed that unclad form with such lifelike color!

Stark naked and darkly beautiful, the image stood before him, returning his rapt gaze. And only after he had caressed that strange form with his trembling hands, and pressed his quivering lips to it, sobbing with unsuppressed emotion, did he stand back and narrow his eyes and begin to think.

He thought: "Luigi brought this, intending to drive me mad with it. I love her; he knows it; he has given her to me in mockery. But he has defeated his own purpose! This *is* Angelina. I can make myself believe it is really she. I can kiss her and caress her and talk to her. Luigi thought to drive me mad, but instead he has saved me from madness!"

A strange comfort came to him in these thoughts. And the comfort lingered with him for many hours, while he sat at the waxen feet of his new-found companion and gazed passionately at the pale loveliness of her nude body. In the niche, the last remaining candle burned lower . . . lower . . . and tiny stalagmites of grey wax formed on the stone shelf.

And then he realized, and lurched to his feet, reviling his tormentor. When this candle burned itself to a black stump, the tomb would be in darkness! No longer would he be able to feast his eyes upon the form of his loved one. Blackness would take her from him!

Luigi had known that. Luigi would bring no more candles.

Staggering in his rage, Mario went to the door and hammered upon it, screaming words of abuse. Blindly he lurched to the niche and stood there, gripping the tiny ledge with his thin fingers while his frantic gaze clung to the pale flame which so soon would die and take from him the thing Luigi had so cunningly, so fiendishly brought.

Then, whimpering and sobbing, he returned to the waxen image, flung himself down beside it, clung to its naked thighs, pressed his tear-wet face against its cold body. And while he moaned there in torment, a sound of footsteps came to him from the labyrinthine tunnels of the cellar . . . and the footsteps slowly approached the door and there came to a halt.

Wide-eyed, Mario stared past the image of Angelina and groped to his knees. In the base of the barrier the tiny square door opened. A hand and arm appeared, thrusting into the tomb a pair of white candles, a tin plate filled with meat and cooked greens, a tin cup filled with liquid. Quickly the door closed again, and again came a scraping sound of slow footsteps, this time going away.

On his feet, Mario staggered to the door and clung there, shouting in a cracked voice for the maker of the footsteps to stop and listen. When he had ceased screaming and pounding, the receding footbeats were still audible. Fainter they grew, in another instant were lost altogether. And again he was alone.

Yet he had food and drink and candles—and the woman he loved. Surely, if Luigi intended to kill him, the deed would have been done before now!

"He is merely making me suffer," Mario said aloud in a faltering whisper.

"That is it. He wishes me to suffer for my sin. When I have endured sufficient torment to satisfy him, he will release me. Surely that is it."

Yes . . . surely that was it. There could be no other answer.

But he was not sure. In a little while, as he sat cross-legged on the stone floor holding the tin plate of food on his lap, he gazed again into the waxen face of the woman above him and wondered what diabolical scheme Luigi would next think of. Surely Luigi had not fashioned that strange image merely as a gesture of friendship. There would be some subtle motive

"He thinks I shall go mad," Mario mumbled, "having her so near to me and yet so terribly far away. But in that he is wrong. I am an artist; I have imagination. I can bring myself to believe that this is really she, and in believing that, I shall find comfort!"

For hours he sat at the feet of his loved one, leaned his head against her thighs, stroked that strangely naked body with his fingers, all the while murmuring soft words of endearment. And before many hours had passed, he found himself talking to her as if in truth she could hear the words that spilled from his lips.

"How long do you think he will keep us here, my beloved? A few days more, perhaps. Yes, only a few days more. After all, he must know that you can never love *him*, therefore why should he destroy *me*? Despising him as you do, you would be certain in the end to turn to some other love. What difference whether you turn to me or to another? You are lost to him, in any case."

Gazing at her body, he found it beautiful. And it was as if the very caress of his sensitive fingers imbued her waxen flesh with a lifelike warmth. Hour by hour she became more alive, more real, so that when he slept at last, after a prolonged conversation with her, he was strangely content with his lot, found himself less in dread of his predicament than at any previous time.

While he slept, curled there on the stone floor with his head resting on the warm bare feet of his beloved, Luigi came again with food and candles.

Many times Luigi came after that, as hours lengthened into days. Never a word passed his lips in answer to the hoarse demands of his prisoner. Never once did he reply to the question, "When may I go free, Luigi?" Yet Mario was less terrified than before, despite this new silence. Surely if Luigi intended to murder him, that deed would have been done before now!

"I am less a fool than he thinks," Mario said, smiling into the face of his loved one. "I shall not go mad, nor shall I let the passing of time affect me. In time he will tire of this child's play and release me, and when I walk through that door, my dearest, I shall be no nearer madness than I am now! You and I together, we shall fool him!"

Then one day he frowned and said aloud: "But how long *have* we been here, my sweet? I should have kept count of the days. When Luigi comes again I shall ask him, and thereafter make a mark on the wall for every passing day. It is not good for us to lose all track of time."

But when he asked the question of Luigi, growling his demand through the iron portal while Luigi stood without, no answer came. There came only a sound of receding footsteps.

"So we are to suffer the torments of silence," Mario smiled. "Truly, my dear, this fat-bellied husband of yours is a mere child in his methods. He has no imagination. Were I in his place and he in mine, I should devise far better methods of inflicting torture. Silence is a terrible thing, to be sure; but he forgets that I have *you* to talk to." And he took her unclad body in his arms and pressed his lips against hers.

Days passed and became weeks, and Mario lived in silence and solitude with the strange woman who listened so attentively to the sound of his voice. Uncomplaining she was, even when he stood before her with bloated chest and made fists of his pale hands and snarled denunciations upon the soul of her large-bellied husband. And if, when his fits of rage died and he made ardent love to her, she seemed vaguely to smile with delight—was that any sign that his mind was slowly beginning to break under the strain of confinement?

Certainly not. "No, certainly not!" Mario declared, grinning at her. "You may smile all you wish, my dear. You may even scowl at me when I am morose and unpleasant. For know this: without you I should perhaps have gone mad long ago. Were it not for your nearness and your understanding, and the loveliness of your pale body, time would hang heavy as lead on my hands!"

One day a square of paper lay folded in the handle of the tin cup that Luigi pushed through the small opening in the door. Unfolding the paper, Mario read the letters that marched across it. And the message said simply: "The end draws near, my friend."

"Now what does he mean by that?" Mario scowled. "See this, Angelina." And he held the paper so that those sightless eyes might gaze upon it. "'The end draws near,' he says. Does that mean he is tired of his little game and will soon release us?"

He wondered, thought of many things that the message might mean. Gazing at his beloved, he said scowling: "Perhaps he intends to separate us, taking you away and leaving me here alone. If he does that, I shall go mad. Or perhaps he will offer to let *me* go free, leaving *you* here alone. But have no fear. I should refuse such an offer. My love for you is greater than that."

So he talked to her, coming at last to a philosophical frame of mind that made him indifferent to Luigi's veiled threat, made him tear the offending paper into bits. After which he curled up at the feet of his loved one and slept.

But the next time he awoke, it was to a strange feeling of uneasiness, a knowledge that something was not as it had been in the room around him.

Narrowing his eyes in perplexity, he sat up and peered into all corners of the cell, but saw no change. A candle still burned in the niche, casting uncertain light over floor and walls and ceiling. The iron door and its

infant aperture were still closed. The waxen image of his beloved stood undisturbed.

Yet something was changed. And a subtle dread crept into Mario's mind, so that he stood erect while his eyes widened with apprehension. Stumbling to the side of his silent companion, he put an arm about her and stared anxiously into every corner.

"What is it?" he muttered. "What has happened?"

Then he knew, and breathed a sigh of relief. For the thing was neither ominous nor evil, but was indeed a change for the better. The room was merely less cold and damp than before.

"Luigi fears that the continued dampness might make us ill unto death," he said, pursing his lips to a smile. "Should we die, he would be blamed and punished. He is but attending to his own safety."

Yet the words were lighter than his heart, and he went slowly about the room, peering into every corner, examining every inch of wall. Where was this sudden warmth coming from? Had Luigi built a fire in some furnace in the main cellar, piped the fire's heat into this cell through some small opening in floor or wall?

For an hour he searched and found nothing. At the end, perspiration had dampened his body, beads of moisture gleamed on his forehead.

And then he stood very still, hearing a sound of footsteps in the maze of corridors beyond the door.

Without haste the footsteps came nearer, as they had done many times before. Outside, they stopped. And Mario, stumbling forward, clawed at the door with his sweat-wet hands, crying loudly: "Luigi! Luigi! What new torment is this?"

His own voice echoed hollowly through the room behind him, and another voice came softly in answer. "Torment, my friend? Do you not enjoy the comfort of being warm?"

"But it grows *too* warm, Luigi! Merciful God, I'll suffocate! There's no outlet here for such warmth!"

"You have not suffocated in days gone by," Luigi replied quietly. "Why should you begin now?"

Then he laughed and was silent. Nor did Mario's frantic pounding on the door bring even a murmur of response. So that in the end, after the receding footsteps had again announced Luigi's departure, Mario stumbled back from the barrier, to stand wide-legged in the center of the room, gazing about him with enormous eyes.

It was true; he had not yet suffocated. But why? No less than a hundred times he had explored every tiniest section of this narrow cell, and had discovered no aperture. How then had the foul air of his own breathing escaped, unless through some hidden opening above the reach of his hands?

He did then what he had not thought to do before. Lifting the candle from its

niche, he held it high above him and, craning his neck to look up, made a silent tour of the chamber. And in doing this he discovered what might perhaps have been the secret of the vault's ventilation. For the upflung light of the candle revealed a narrow, almost invisible shadow where the stone walls formed an angle with the ceiling.

Was it possible that those walls failed to make contact, that a tiny air-space existed up there beyond the reach of his hands?

There could be no other explanation. Through some such aperture his own exhalations had escaped; otherwise death would long ago have stalked this grim enclosure. And through some such opening was this new warmth creeping in upon him.

For the room *was* warm! So warm, now, that it brought discomfort. Breath wheezed in Mario's parched throat as he returned the candle to its niche. Stripping himself of shirt and undershirt, he used the discarded garments to wipe rivulets of perspiration from his body.

Terror assailed him and he stared with gaunt, red-rimmed eyes at his silent companion, said hoarsely:

"This is what he meant when he declared the end was near, my beloved! But he will not dare! Surely he will not dare!"

But he wondered, and was not sure.

Hours passed and he paced the floor of the cell, pausing at intervals to wipe moisture from his drooling face. Mumbled words spilled from his lips, at times incoherently, at times with forced indifference. For long intervals he sat cross-legged on the floor, where the heat was less intense, and gazed up at the naked body of his loved one.

"It is a good thing I have you to comfort me, my dear," he whispered. "Otherwise I should go quite mad. Luigi did not think of that when he brought you."

But as the heat grew more unbearable, the calm went out of his voice and he stormed from wall to wall, screaming denunciations on the head of his tormentor. His voice became a cracked, sobbing thing which hurt his throat. With increasing horror he stared at the aperture beneath the ceiling, reviled the genius who had built such a chamber of torment.

And terror came into his eyes when he gazed at the niched candle and saw that the heat had wilted that waxen cylinder.

"Luigi!" he shrieked. "Luigi. Have mercy!" His clenched fists pounded the unyielding door until they were bruised and swollen and purple. But no answer came to his cries.

Madness came to mock him as he lurched wildly about the narrow cell, clawing the walls with his hooked fingers and wailing words of torment. Madness blazed in his bulging eyes and his eyeballs were gleaming glass marbles, hot in his head. Distorted visions grew out of his crazed brain.

He saw the leeringly triumphant face of Luigi staring at him from shadows

where no face existed. Rushing forward, he beat at the face with his fists, only to shudder with a knowledge of his own madness, and lurch backward, retching in his throat as the heat grew more intense.

Stumbling then to that strange waxen figure near the door, he sagged to his knees and put his trembling arms about the woman's thighs, stared fearfully up into her face.

"It is the end," he moaned. "The end, my beloved—for us both."

Then a strange light gleamed in his eyes and he swayed erect, to stand before her. "No, it is not the end for you! I am not that mad! For days I have made myself believe you were a creature of flesh and blood, alive and real. But I know better. I am not so mad that I can not change lies back to truths! The real Angelina will not die, even though I do!"

He stared past the waxen image, through the frowning walls of his prison, and saw in his mind the real Angelina, alive and lovely, in the magnificent home above him. Sad-eyed she was for love of him, and bewildered for not knowing what had become of him. But she was alive, and love for him was still in her soul. And he muttered insanely: "Just once more I will take your loveliness in my arms, beloved. Just once more I will make believe. And then I can forget this lifeless image and recall the truth, for the truth now is more comforting."

Slowly he turned, and walked again to the waxen figure of the woman he desired. His steps were uncertain and his heart pounding because of the torment within it. And his arms, outstretched to caress that nude figure, dripped sweat, trembled.

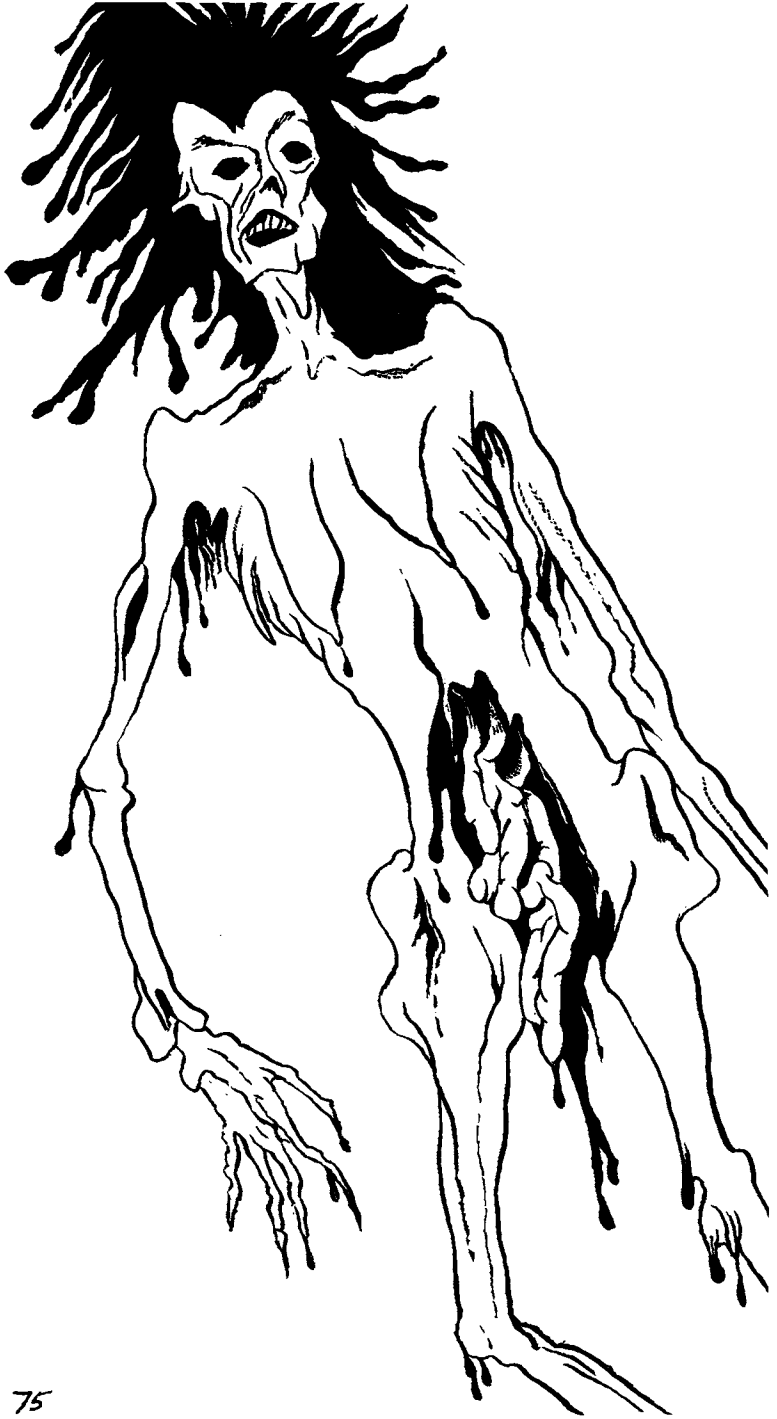
But he did not touch her. Instead, he stood suddenly rigid, staring with blood-rimmed eyes that opened in sheer horror.

Before him, as melted wax yielded to the force of its own weight and crawled like living flesh, the image of Angelina had stirred with life. As the candle in the niche was drooping, so, too, was the image of Mario's beloved. And as the flickering yellow glow of the candle-flame illumined her features, those features lost shape and form and slowly became a hideous distortion of reality.

Mario stared and cried out in horror, but the transformation continued before his eyes and he was powerless to prevent it. Slowly the woman's cheeks melted and ran away; slowly her lips curled downward in leering mockery; slowly her moulded breasts drooped and became shapeless mounds of ugliness. Slowly the smooth curves of her thigh crawled floor-ward.

A shriek welled from Mario's throat as he lurched forward, seeking frantically with both hands to preserve the beauty of that changing body. But still the horror continued, and his own face became racked with the futility of his efforts. Hoarse cries of anguish croaked from his parched lips. Madness tore at his heart.

And suddenly, as his fevered hands pawed the shapeless form before him, he saw something more, and fell back with a lurid shriek. For the face that leered out at him, where a waxen face of loveliness had been, was no longer white but



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black and hideous. The nude form that stood before him, where a waxen shape of beauty had stood, *was a human corpse!*

The room was a furnace, but Mario did not know. Like a man impaled, he stood on rigid legs, arms extended, his sweat-drenched face a frozen mask. Slowly, before him, that thin coating of wax continued to drool from the naked body beneath, and with each passing moment the hideous truth stood more revealed, until at last the mask was raised in its entirety and the truth stood no longer in doubt.

Once, not long ago, that naked form had been a dark-haired, beautifully shaped creature of warmth and passion. But the blood in that dead body had ceased flowing, that once lovely hair was now a crawling mass of horror, that face was a shrunken, hollow-cheeked death-mask devoid of beauty. And as the wax ceased dripping, Mario's loved one stood there in all her nakedness, gazing at him from empty eye-sockets—a cadaverous, death-eaten visitant from the grave.

For a moment Mario stared, but for a moment only. A wild shriek tore from his lips as he stumbled away from her. He did not hear the soft creaking sound which issued from the iron door behind him, nor did he turn to see the door's infant block of iron swing slowly outward, permitting a pair of glittering eyes to peer into the torment-chamber and watch him.

In Mario's brain something snapped, and his mad shrieks became madder peals of wild laughter which had no thought or reason. Into his eyes came a grey glare of permanent madness, and he slumped to the floor, to sit there in a strange dark world of his own, while he chuckled insane cackles of mad mirth.

So that, when the cell door swung wide, and Luigi paced slowly over the threshold, Mario only gaped at him and grinned, pointing a crooked forefinger at the long dead corpse of Angelina and croaking gleefully:

“Look! Look! She is not made of wax any more!”

But when there was no answer, he peered into Luigi's face, scowled and demanded petulantly: “Who are you?”

And then Luigi said quietly: “I have come to take you out of here and turn you loose.”

Prey of the Nightborn

PETER MARABECK'S WIFE was buried on Tuesday, and he met the other woman the following Saturday night while driving home from Putney. Snow had fallen fitfully for two days. The road through the valley was a grayish white finger, pointing, and the woman stood straight and still in a desolation of white.

She was weirdly beautiful and nearly naked, and Peter stiffened at sight of her. She took a step forward, staring, and raised her arms hungrily toward him. Her full, round breasts under their diaphanous covering gleamed like cups of molten silver. The sinuous motion of her hips was a whispering tone-poem of beauty—and then suddenly she was not there at all.

"That's strange," Peter thought. "Where'd she go?"

It was more than strange, for the valley was quite flat in all directions, and no person could have vanished so abruptly from the face of it. Peter left the car and walked to where the woman had stood watching him, but he saw nothing except a smooth carpet of snow, empty of footprints.

He said aloud, as he returned to the car: "I'm seeing things. Yesterday I was hearing things, and now I'm seeing them. It must be that the shock of losing Jane has given me nerves."

Yesterday, all day long, he had wandered aimlessly about the house in a vain attempt to stifle his acute loneliness. His own name, *Peter*, whispered by a woman's voice, had haunted him. Now he was seeing things, instead.

He drove slowly and came at last to the farmhouse which, not long ago, had echoed his wife's singing. Outside, wind sighed through the trees and moaned over the roof. Inside, there was no sound of earthly things; there were only shadows and silence, as if the walls and carpets and furnishing had joined their mistress in eternal sleep.

"I can't live here," Peter thought. "Every separate thing reminds me of her. Oh my God, if only I could be with her!"

A voice said softly: "Peter!"

He turned, startled, and the other woman was sitting there in an overstuffed chair near the window, as if she had been sitting there a long while. Slender she was, and alluringly lovely, and so scantily clad that Peter felt the blood in his veins come to life as he stared at her.

Her eyes were crystal globules reflecting the lamplight, and from the glowing

depths of them a magnetic power reached forth to enmesh Peter Marabeck's soul. A streamer of vivid scarlet, to match her lips, dangled like serpentine flame over the alabaster whiteness of one shoulder. The rest of her was pale and somehow unreal, yet real enough to draw Peter forward, wide-eyed and trembling.

And then suddenly the overstuffed chair was gray and empty, laughing at him. There was no woman; there was no scarlet mouth waiting for the hungry pressure of his lips. Mutely he stared, then muttered, "I'm goin' crazy."

He slumped into a chair and gazed about the room as if it were a strange, unholy place. "She spoke my name as I heard it yesterday," he thought. "Who is she? What does she want of me?" Then he slept, but it was not good slumber.

He dreamed that his wife came and stood beside him. "That woman is wicked, Peter," his wife whispered. "She is not for you. You must be careful."

In his dream he stood up and held his wife close to him, and spoke to her. But the words jangled noisily and became the vibrant clamor of a bell; and when he awoke, the room was full of the same sound.

He went mechanically through the kitchen to the back door. The bell jangled again, persistently, and he drew the door open. Snow was falling outside. The man on the stoop was covered from head to foot with it, and was puffing and blowing from the cold.

"Oh," Peter said. "It's you. Come in."

He had forgotten that Dr. Menner was coming, but now he was glad. It was good to stand and watch Dr. Menner pound the snow from his arms and legs. These things were real. He could understand them.

"Awful night," Menner said gruffly. "If I weren't a small-town practitioner, I'd be home in bed. Ugh! Have to warm myself over the stove a while and then—"

"There's no fire," Peter said.

"What? Night like this and no fire? You mad?"

"I—forgot."

The doctor stared queerly. "Oh, I see. Well, we'll talk. Want to talk to you anyway."

He stumped into the parlor, and Peter followed. "Been talking to a specialist," Menner declared. "He wants to see the—wants to see her."

"See her?" Peter frowned.

"Yes. Oh, I know, I know how you feel. But he insists. Soon as I told him about those marks on her throat, he snapped me up. Queer, too. Markham's the man. Usually takes a wholesale epidemic to interest him."

"He can't see her," Peter said stiffly. "Let the dead be."

"You're a fool, Marabeck."

"She wouldn't want to be dug up."

Menner leaned forward to point with an accusing finger. "Look here. Do you know what Markham thinks? The mark of the vampire, he says!"

"The mark of—? No, no! My God—!"

"It's a long time since this valley was cursed with the evil ones, Peter. You were no more than three years old; you don't remember it. But they came, hordes of them. Where from, nobody knows. We drove them out with wolfbane and fire, but not all of them."

"No, no!" Peter said thickly. "My wife died natural. She didn't—couldn't—"

"Not all of them," Menner nodded, remembering. "Some of the victims lived, with the blood-just on them. We isolated them, like lepers."

Peter was staring. Behind the overstuffed chair a face was looking steadily, silently into his own, and below the face a flame-colored sash glowed against a woman's alabaster shoulder. Crimson lips were curled, smiling. Pale breasts rose and fell in evil rhythm. White hands were waiting to encircle the doctor's throat.

"But they didn't stay where we put them," the doctor said thoughtfully. "One was a fiend. She escaped and took the others with her. Where to, no one knows. But if Markham's right, they're back—or *she's* back, anyway. And—"

Smooth white hands seized the doctor's throat, and Peter's scream of horror was soundless. Menner writhed, uttered ghastly sounds of torment and terror while carmine lips lowered to his stretched neck and fastened there.

Peter stared, wide-eyed. This was not real. He was seeing things again. But the doctor's feet were beating a rapid tattoo on the carpet, and the doctor's face, turned ceilingward, writhed with pain which was slowly becoming more than pain.

A sigh of contentment escaped Menner's twisted lips. His arms curled slowly upward and held the woman to him, and with his own hands he pressed her red lips deeper into his throat.

When she straightened at last, her victim lay limp. She turned to Peter and Peter sat staring. She smiled. Peter rose mechanically, and her outstretched hands were cold to the touch of his own cold fingers. The woman said softly: "Kiss me, Peter!"

He took her in his arms, and her lips on his were so utterly without warmth that they seemed paradoxically to be on fire. Her smooth fingers caressed his face, his throat. He looked into her bottomless eyes and forgot that his wife had just died, and knew only that he was lonely for a woman's love.

Lifting her from the floor, he carried her up the dusty staircase to the room where his wife had died. But he had no thoughts now for his wife. With the door shut he lowered his willing burden to a large chair and sat beside her, and feasted his eyes on the tempting beauty of her.

The half-revealed glory of her made his senses swim and stirred strange acids in his blood. No woman could be so lovely as this one! Surely she was an unreal thing created from the pain of his own loneliness, and soon she would melt away before him, leaving him alone again.

But her skin was vibrant and alive to the touch of his eager hands. Her lips responded hungrily to the pressure of his own, and her breasts, crushed against him, throbbed to a pulsating surge. She drew him closer and held him in her arms.

"Who are you?" Peter whispered.

"Morgu."

"What kind of woman are you?"

She did not answer. Instead, she crushed her mouth against his and held it there until he was drugged by the tempest-fury of his own mad yearning. Then she said, as a clock downstairs tolled four times: "Tomorrow, Peter, I will come for you."

Peter sighed and relaxed. What she did to him then, he was not sure, but her breath was cold on his lips and he slept.

Doctor Menner lay sprawled in the overstuffed chair, with his feet stuck out before him and his head lolling; and Peter, descending the stairs the next morning, found him there.

Peter shook him, and peered at the crimson puncture in his throat, and then sat down to think. "I must go to the village and tell the police," he thought. "No. If I do that, they will say I killed him. I must find Markham, the specialist, and tell him what happened. He alone will believe me."

He walked to the village, to Markham's house, and said to Markham: "I've come because Dr. Menner is dead." Then he talked hurriedly and excitedly about his wife and about the other woman; and while he talked, Markham listened and frowned. Then Markham asked many questions, and examined him, and said finally: "We're wasting time. Come."

They drove in the doctor's car to Peter's house, where Markham examined the corpse of Dr. Menner. "You can't stay in this house, Marabeck," Markham said. "You must leave."

"Tomorrow," Peter promised.

"Tonight, you fool! Today!"

"I must wait until my wife comes," Peter said. "If I go without seeing her first, how will she ever find me?"

The doctor stared at the dead man and said, scowling: "People don't believe in this any more. If I take him back with me now, you'll be accused of murder. Fortunately, Menner has no wife or people. We'll leave him here. Tonight I'll come again and we'll drive him to his own home. Let them find him there; they'll call me in to give an opinion, and I'll call it heart disease. These marks can be washed clean. No one will notice them."

Peter said good-bye stiffly, and the doctor went away again.

The sun was setting, and the red glare on the snow was like blood, but Peter was not afraid. In a little while Jane would come. He was sure of it. Somehow Jane would find a way.

He went upstairs and lay down, waiting. The room grew darker. Then his vigil was rewarded and his wife was with him, beside him. He held her in his arms gently and kissed her the way he had always kissed her.

"I must leave here, Jane. Dr. Markham says I must go."

She nodded. "I know, Peter. A new home in some little village where you will be happy. But you must take my coffin and be sure there is grave-earth in it. You *will* be happy, my beloved?"

Peter thought: "Why shouldn't I be happy? This business of living is easy to adjust. Lots of other men sleep days and work nights without minding it. I'll do the same."

"Has *she* been here, Peter?"

"Yes."

"She is wicked. She wants you. Listen to me and let me tell you who she is."

Peter listened, and instead of hearing words he was a part of them. Yet the things she told him were things out of the past, shadowy and dim. He saw the woman named Morgu leading an unholy company along the road toward the village. He saw the village street choked with people who screamed in mortal fear as they fled from the approaching horror. Women sank to their knees in supplication; men fought like beasts. And in a doorway not far distant a woman crouched crying, and a small boy huddled against her legs. The boy was Peter Marabeck.

Now there were fires burning, and in the center of the village stood a flaming cross. The lovely woman and her unholy horde retreated, abandoning their victims. And days later, men sat and talked in a room in some village home. One was Peter's father, another, Dr. Menner. And Menner was saying quietly: "We must face the facts. Some of our people lie dead with the mark of the vampire upon them. Others will survive, but the mark is upon them also. We must isolate them until we can discover some cure for their horrible illness."

Now the scene was strange indeed, for men and women paced like caged animals in a cleared space in the forest. In all directions a high wall prevented their escape. It was night, and the occupants of the prison yard filled the darkness with animal cries of hunger; and out of the shadows near the locked gate crept the woman named Morgu, leading her unholy followers.

The guard fled in terror. The gate was drawn open. Out of the prison yard rushed snarling human things thirsting for blood! And later that same night the red-lipped woman led her strange pack to a huge rockbound chamber amid frowning quarry walls, and then went forth alone to satiate her own dark hunger.

"You see, Peter, she is evil"

Peter shuddered. His wife's hand was cold in his, and her breath was cold, and on her throat the marks of vampire teeth were still visible. They would never die, those marks, because Jane herself could never die. She had returned to him as a creature of the night, but she was still his wife.

"Stay with me," he begged, and held her close to him, caressing her.

The warmth of his body comforted her, and she sighed contentedly. Her lips sought his, and his caressing hands fired her blood with an ardor more tempestuous, yet more gentle, than ever before. Her breath came swiftly.

Then there was another sound, and a lean gray shape was crouching in the shadows.

Terror drew a shriek from Peter's lips. He drew his wife closer to him, and she was trembling. Angry green eyes glared at them both. Peter lurched erect, dragging his wife with him, and suddenly where a quivering body had been pressed against him, there was no body. There were two sleek wolf-shapes battling horribly in the darkness.

It was a nightmare then. The two beasts, one grayish black, snarling, the other ivory-white and always on the defensive, circled warily, seeking an opening. They fought, leaping and slashing at each other in wild fury, and the room was a horror-chamber filled with sounds that came from no human lips.

When it was over, the larger, heavier beast staggered erect over its victim and uttered a ghastly howl of triumph. But then there were no wolves—no wolves at all. Instead, Peter Marabeck's wife lay lifeless and bleeding on the carpet, and the woman named Morgu stood beside her, arms outstretched and carmine lips parted, waiting for Peter to advance.

Peter stared at his wife and stumbled forward, but the voice of the other woman stopped him. He gazed into the woman's bottomless eyes. Her unholy loveliness held his gaze, and her lips whispered the question. "Whom do you love, Peter?"

"I love—you. You know that."

"Then come with me, Peter."

He went with her down the darkened staircase and through the lower rooms to the rear door. "You will be cold," he said foolishly, and it did not occur to him that she was already colder than the night itself.

He followed her. Where she was taking him he had no idea, nor did he care. "Only the night hours are worth living!" Morgu told him softly. "At night the world will be ours for the taking, when black winds sob in the heavens. We'll talk with Ahriman and the green-winged children of Nazora. We'll drink red wine with the mirth-master of hell!"

Side by side, he and she moved over snow-crowned fields, while the hours died behind them.

They came, after many hours of walking, to a spot where a narrow, virgin road wound into darkness impregnable, and presently they stood at the rim of an abandoned quarry. Smiling, the beautiful woman descended by means of a slippery, rock-hewn path. And at last, on the floor of the mammoth pit, she turned and held out her hands.

"This is our home, my Peter."

Peter gazed about him and cared nothing. Heaven or hell, it was hers—and her home was his. Yet the scene was dimly familiar, and he thought suddenly of what his wife had told him, and was afraid.

But he had had no time for remembering. The vampire-woman led him

rapidly over the quarry's white floor to where dark apertures invaded the far wall. Into one of these tunnels she went, with Peter following, and then the darkness was that of deepest night.

Hearing Peter stumble, the woman said to encourage him: "Soon you will be a creature of the dark, like me."

In the gloom her eyes had acquired a greenish lustre which made of her an animal-thing, strangely evil. But Peter followed her through labyrinthine passages, on and on, until they came to a large central chamber in which other animal eyes glowed also.

Now there was light, for above him a fissure extended narrowly, and moon-white gleamed through. All about him were men and women with evil faces, some clothed in ill-fitting garments, some naked. Baleful orbs examined him. An almost nude woman came close with parted crimson lips, and might have fallen upon him had not Morgu ordered her back.

In one corner of the cave another woman, limp and human and unconscious, hung in chains against the wall. Blood streamed from an incision in her throat; on the floor at her feet a man lay with mouth open to catch the trickling drops.

"These are my people," Morgu said. "Come!"

He followed her into a chamber where dozens of ancient wooden boxes lay side by side on the rock floor. The boxes were numbered, and filled with brown earth which reeked of decay. Then she led him still farther into the maze, to a smaller chamber where only two boxes lay, and where evil paintings hung from the walls.

Here a soft carpet covered the floor and moonlight stole through a niche in the ceiling; and on a table close beside a couch covered with blood-red silk, stood a red-lipped figure of Ahriman, the fiend of night, in bronze. And Morgu said, smiling: "This is my boudoir, beloved. Our boudoir. Your bed is beside mine. Love me, my Peter!"

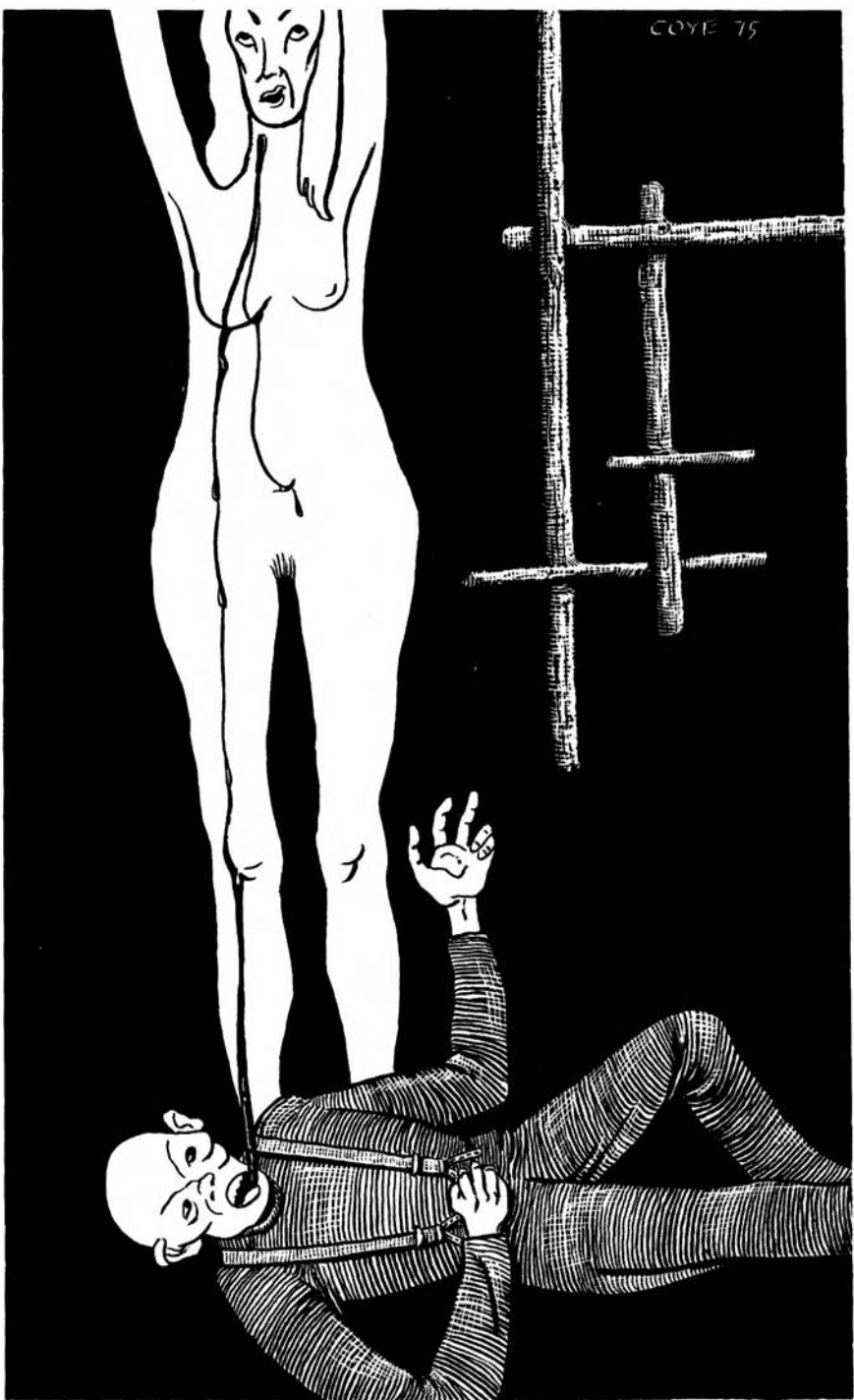
Peter took her in his arms and placed her upon the couch. The scarlet sash covering her breasts loosened in his fingers, and her breasts were soft against him, pulsating with evil excitement. Every movement of her alluring body was a dark symphony as she clung to him, drawing him closer. His senses swam; blood boiled in his veins.

There in the seclusion of that strange boudoir he yielded utterly to the hypnotic lure of the woman's bottomless eyes, and to the whispering entreaties of her silken voice. Her lips found his and drew the soul from his heaving breast. Gypsum-smooth flesh quivered under the avid clutch of his fingers.

And when he lay back at last, the soft whisper of her voice made words. "It is not death, Peter. You will feel no pain—only ecstasy. For a day you will sleep; then when darkness falls again, we will go forth together—children of the night."

Without fear he watched her lips descend to his throat and felt the pressure of them. Her full breasts were heavy against him, and his arms were locked around

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her. And then, suddenly, the woman recoiled. A harsh cry jangled from her lips as she fell back, staring at something beyond him.

Peter turned violently and gazed upon a strange sight—upon a figure attired entirely in white, and upon a blazing torch held high in the apparition's uplifted hand. His eyes opened wide. Beside him, Morgu had covered her face in agony and was screaming, for the advancing flame was a cross, and was an accusing crimson symbol of powers greater than hers!

Straight toward the couch came the woman in white, seemingly without fear. And she was Peter Marabeck's wife. Screaming, Morgu leaped erect and ran half-naked to the doorway. The other, lowering her torch, said quietly: "Don't be afraid, Peter."

Peter whispered her name. Like a child he clung to her, mumbling a confession of what he had done—of what, even worse, he had been going to do. But his wife answered simply: "She is a fiend, Peter. Any man would have done the same."

Dazed, still sobbing, Peter allowed himself to be led from the room. The horrors about him were indistinct and misty. On all sides, the demons of Morgu's hungry clan advanced, only to fall back in terror from the glare of the burning cross. Then he stood at the entrance to the caves, and behind him in the darkness of the tunnel stood the woman of passion—the woman named Morgu—watching him with evil green eyes.

He shuddered. His wife held the blazing torch aloft, and together they climbed the narrow, twisting path to the quarry's rim. There his wife turned and said: "I love you, Peter."

She pressed the torch into his hand, and her lips found his. "I love you, but now I must leave you. Take this torch and go home. When night comes again, my beloved, come to my grave in the cemetery."

"Yes," Peter said.

"And bring a knife, Peter. A silver knife."

Then she was gone, and across the white snow a sleek, wolf-like shadow-shape raced away, turning at the top of the first moonlit rise to look back at him.

The cellar of Peter Marabeck's house was filled with a grating clamor, and Peter stood at a work-bench, trundling a grindstone. Hours had passed since his return home, but his wife had said to bring a knife, and the knife must be silver . . .

Dr. Markham had been waiting for him. "So you've come at last," Markham had said, scowling blackly. "It's about time! I had to get Menner's body out of here myself!"

Peter was sorry about that, but now he had other things to think of. The sun would set soon, and he must tramp down the valley road to the cemetery. Jane would be there, waiting . . .

The grindstone sang a throaty accompaniment to his thoughts, while the edge on the knife grew keener.

Later, shivering a little from the cold, he closed the door behind him and went out. A leaden gloom diffused the fading reflections of the sun, and it would be a dark night, he thought, with gray clouds scurrying across the sky. There would be no moon.

He came to the cemetery and looked all about him and was afraid. But he went on and stood at last beside the stone which marked his wife's grave. Humbly he knelt, and wiped the slab with his bare hand, and gazed at the words carved there. They were his own words, saying simply: DEAREST JANE, MY WIFE.

And then Jane came.

She stood before him, smiling, with her arms outstretched. The same thin gown revealed her exquisite loveliness, and she seemed not to feel the chill night air. "I knew you would come, Peter," she said softly. "I knew you would not be afraid."

He thought: "No, I'm not afraid. Morgu is all I'm afraid of, and Morgu will surely not come for me tonight." Aloud he said: "You told me to bring a knife . . ."

"Yes, Peter. But first take me in your arms. Hold me. It will give you courage."

He crushed her against him and realized vaguely that there were two kinds of love, a good kind and an evil. This kind was good. Her body fused with his and became warmer, and when his hand sought the soft curve of her waist he was gentle despite the yearning that surged through him. Strangely, he seemed warmed by the pressure of satin-soft flesh, though there was no warmth in it. And suddenly he asked a question which had troubled him many hours.

"Last night, dearest, when you held the cross, why was it that you—that you were not—?"

"That I was not destroyed by it, Peter? I don't know. But when I prayed for help to save you, it was because I loved you. Hers was not my kind of love; it was bestial hunger. Do you fear death, Peter?"

"No," he said truthfully.

"Do you fear dying?"

"No."

"Did you bring the knife?"

He took the knife from his pocket and showed it to her. Then she said almost inaudibly: "There are two ways for us to be together, my beloved. There is the way of that woman named Morgu, but it is a way of sin and there is no happiness in it. The other way means peace and love, but you will need courage—and faith."

"I have faith," he answered.

"Then—" Standing there, she half uncovered her pale breasts and turned her

lips to his. No word passed between them as they embraced for the last time. Then she whispered softly: "It will not hurt me, Peter. A moment's pain and I will have died the real death. Then, if your love for me is greater than fear, you can join me."

She closed her eyes and waited, and for many minutes Peter stood rigid, fighting the terror that threatened to engulf him. He closed his eyes and prayed, and then his left hand sought her cool flesh. His right, gripping the knife, rose higher—and trembled.

"I can't do it!" he moaned.

"If you love me, Peter . . ."

Shuddering, he drove the blade home, and the silver point sank deep into the tender hummock of her breast, and blood welled from the wound. Her lips parted in sudden pain. Her eyes opened wide.

"Brave Peter!" she whispered.

Then her body crumpled, and she lay lifeless in the snow. And with a low cry, Peter fell to his knee beside her. His hands clawed at the knife and pulled it loose. Sobbing, he pressed his lips to hers and knew that she was dead.

A long time he lay there, while the blood from her pierced breast stained his clothes. Then, staggering, he stood over her and plunged the blade into his own body.

Agony forced a low moan from his drawn lips. The hilt of the knife remained protruding from his chest but he did not fall. The pain terrified him. Then, behind him, his own name was spoken aloud.

"Peter!"

He turned blindly. Death was but a matter of moments, and he would have fallen had his body not stiffened involuntarily at what he saw. There, close to him, stood the woman named Morgu, nearly naked and exotically beautiful. Her arms were extended toward him and her eyes were magnets drawing him forward.

For a moment only, Peter realized the frightful consequences. He was dying. If those alluring carmine lips fastened on his throat before death came, the gulf between him and the woman who lay dead in the snow would be forever unbridged, and he would be a creature of the night, evil and vile and lonely.

Then his eyes widened with desire. He stumbled forward, oblivious even to the agony that surged within him. Morgu's arms coiled sinuously about him and her near-naked body quivered in his mad embrace.

Pain and passion raged in Peter's racked body. The woman was even more nearly naked now; his frenzied fingers had torn at the scarlet sash from her breasts until it hung only by shreds. Her questing mouth fastened on his and seemed to drain the agony from within him, draining his life also. Triumph blazed in her glowing eyes.

He clung to her, and held himself erect with strength born of passion. Then the agony inflicted by the suicide knife became unbearable and he sagged to the

snow, limp and unconscious and perilously close to death.

Morgu, snarling in triumph, flung herself upon him, seeking his throat. It was the end, then. He knew it was the end. Those sharp teeth would imbed themselves in his neck and draw blood, and then no power in heaven or hell could release him.

He moaned the name of his wife and closed his eyes to blot out the impending horror. And then, from behind a tall gray headstone ten paces distant, an indistinct form stepped suddenly into the open. A tongue of flame split the darkness. A shrill report, like the bark of a dog, smothered every other sound.

The woman stiffened over her victim. Her hands went to her own throat, and a low cry, almost inaudible, choked on her lips. She struggled convulsively to rise, then crumpled horribly and fell backward into the snow.

From his hiding-place in the shadows, Peter's savior came slowly forward. A revolver was clenched in one hand; the other hand, clenched, held more bullets in readiness. The revolver was an ancient one, with the sign of the cross engraved upon its barrel—and the bullets were silver.

The man was Dr. Markham.

Grimly he strode to Peter's prone body and looked down. His gaze passed to the woman and he shuddered, for the nude body, beautiful no longer, was slowly and horribly disintegrating and was the body of an ugly hag.

In silence Dr. Markham lifted Peter Marabeck's body from the snow and placed it beside the body of Peter's wife. The other had not changed, even in death. The upturned face, pale and lovely, was still smiling.

Markham placed the two bodies side by side and reverently spread his coat over them. Then he turned, and of the woman named Morgu nothing remained but a grim dark stain on the snow.

"Finished," Markham muttered. "Finished at last—thank God. It will be an easy matter now to destroy the others . . ."

For a moment he stood motionless, his hands folded and his face uplifted in an attitude of prayer. Then, with a last glance at the two silent forms in the snow, he went away.

Maxon's Mistress

I HAD NOT SEEN MAXON in three years—not, indeed, since we had schooled together at Harvard. When I encountered him, therefore, in Westhaven, on that morning of Friday, the fourteenth of October, I was astounded into gasping his name and thrusting out my hand. In doing so, I received the surprise of my life, for he stared at me coldly a moment and then seized my arm in trembling fingers, and said in a whisper:

“Not Maxon, John. Not here. It's Brown.”

I gaped at him in open-mouthed astonishment. There he stood, Peter Maxon, the man with whom I had had more than one grand time in college, and whom I had openly envied during the years following our graduation—there he stood, peering around him furtively as if he were a criminal, and then frowning into my face and saying huskily: “Not Maxon, John! It's Brown!”

To be sure, I had read of his accident and had imagined him to be even then in a hospital. Peter Maxon's life during the past year had not been easy. The papers had carried front-page accounts of the hideous train-wreck which had cut short his career and transformed him from a medical genius into a broken cripple; and I had read several editorials lamenting the fact that he had apparently gone into seclusion. Knowing Peter himself, however, I had taken those editorials with a grain of salt and had assured myself that, once cured, Peter would return to the profession in which he had won so many honors.

Now he was here, in a small clothing shop on Westhaven's main street, frowning at me as if he resented my intrusion!

“The name is Brown,” he said again. “I'm not Maxon any more. Haven't been for months. I'm sorry you found me, John. Wish I had more time, but—”

He would have stepped past me to the door.

“For heaven's sake, wait a minute!” I cried. “Wait, Peter!” And I caught hold of him. “I want to talk to you!”

“About what?”

“About you. About us. Old times—everything. Good Lord, man, I've been wondering for months—”

He stood motionless, staring at me. His eyes seemed tired, his mouth thin and drawn. I realized that he was a sick man and that the torment of the past year had murdered something within him.

"I'm not well," he said curtly. "Can't you see that?"

"I'm not blind, Peter. And I'm no Good Samaritan, either. But we've been friends. I want to talk to you."

He hesitated, and his eyes seemed momentarily to be taking stock of me. Again he peered furtively around the shop, and then stepped closer. His hand darted into the pocket of his coat, reappearing with a battered bill-fold. Quickly he thrust a card into my palm.

"All right," he said. "All right. Come and see me. Come tonight. And remember, it's not Maxon. Don't be calling me Maxon."

He strode to the door and walked hurriedly across the threshold, leaving me to stare after him, hopelessly bewildered. For fully a minute I stood there, until the proprietor of the shop approached me and said in a womanish voice:

"Yes, sir. Can I do something for you?"

I shook my head and stared down at the card in my hand. It was a small white card, cheaply printed on poor stock. It said:

PETER BROWN, M.D.

17 Verndale Street

— Consultations by Appointment —

The hour was eight-fifteen when I strode along Verndale Street that evening. Number seventeen was the last house. Standing there gazing at the brass plate beside the door, I was humbly grateful to find the place at least no different from its neighbors, for I had frankly expected to find it some ancient, isolated hovel, in harmony with the change which had taken place in its proprietor.

The house squatted in a small yard strewn with October leaves and a short lane of cement led to the wooden steps. Ascending, I found the bell to be an old-fashioned pull-knob, and with some misgivings I made my presence known by pulling it timidly until a corresponding jangle echoed within. A moment later the door opened and Peter Maxon stood surveying me.

He said simply: "I'm glad you came, John."

He did not offer me his hand. Quietly he stood aside to let me enter, and when I had stepped past him he closed the door again behind me. "I'm alone," he said, and led me down a poorly lighted hall to a spacious but somewhat bare room containing a rather horrible array of antique New England furniture.

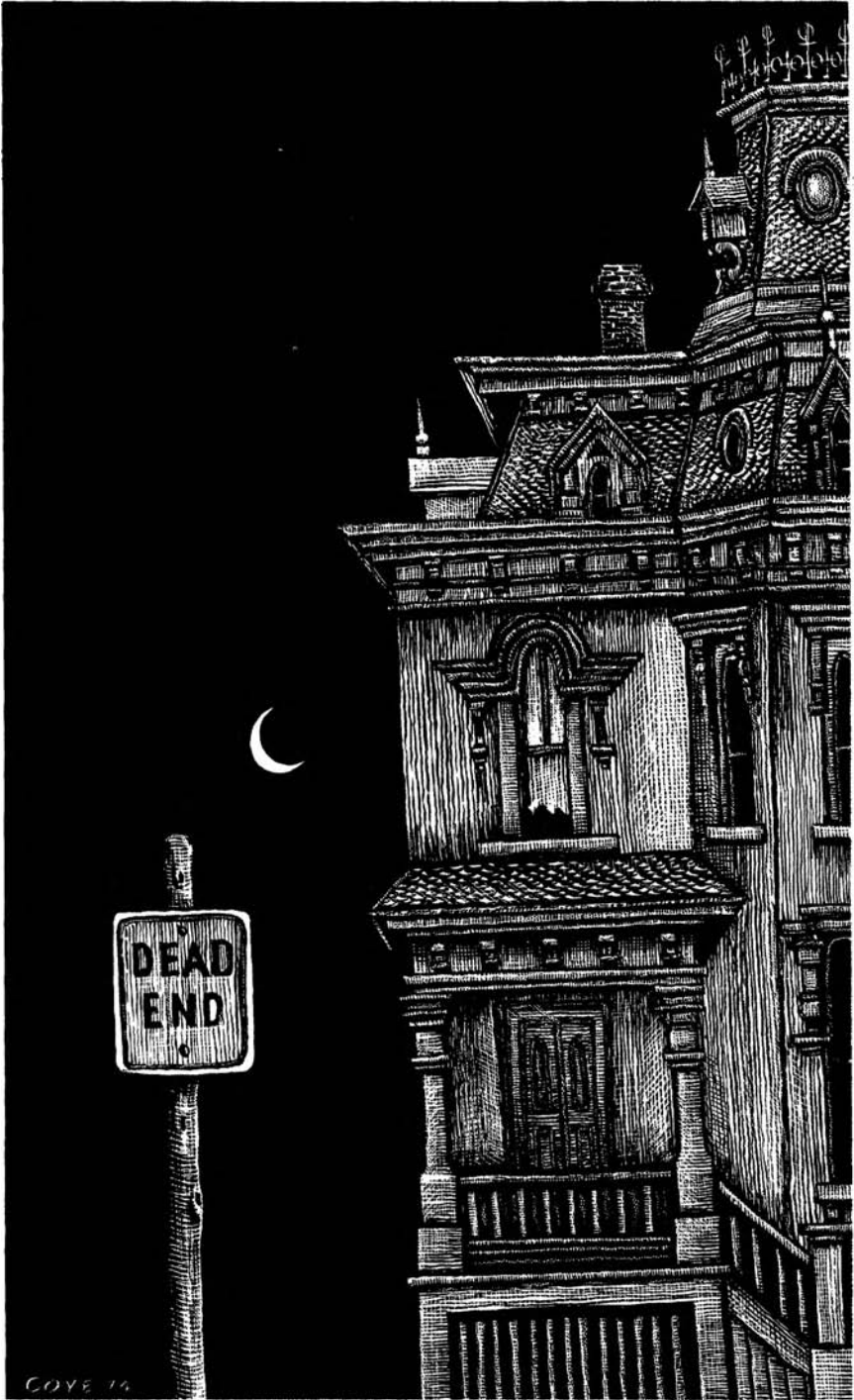
"You're in Westhaven on business?" he asked.

"If business is good."

"You're staying?"

"A day or two, anyway." I sat in one of the huge over-stuffed chairs, realizing that he did not consider me a guest in the formal sense of the word, and that I was expected to make myself comfortable.

He looked at me. Nervously he put one hand to his face, fingering his mouth. It was a thin hand and white—strangely so, for a man who three years ago had



been more than an ordinarily athletic. I could not help noticing it and being shocked by the almost feminine delicacy of it.

"I've been thinking about you," he said. "Since this morning, I mean. I want you to stay here, John. Want you to live here while you're in town."

"Something is wrong?"

"Everything." He sat in a chair facing me, and relaxed with an exhalation of breath that seemed suspiciously like a sigh.

"Nevertheless," I said, "it can't be so very serious. After what the papers said about you—Good Lord, they had you dying! They had you—" I stopped, realizing abruptly that the topic of conversation was distasteful. My companion's lean body was tense again; his thin white hands gripped the arms of his chair rigidly. Softly I said:

"I'm sorry, old boy. And I'll stay. Of course I'll stay."

I stood up, reaching for my hat.

"I'll be back," I promised, "as soon as I can get my luggage from the hotel."

Quietly I paced to the door, and left him.

When I pulled the bell of that house the second time that night, there was no answer. Bewildered, I put down my bags and yanked the bell-knob viciously, then smiled wryly at the thought that my friend had undoubtedly fallen asleep while awaiting my return. After all, I had been gone nearly an hour.

The door was open. I let myself in and strode down the hall to the room into which Peter had first led me. Then my bewilderment increased, for Peter was not sleeping there.

He was, in fact, not anywhere on the lower floor of the house, as I presently discovered after walking timidly through several unlighted rooms and finding myself once again in the corridor. Thinking him to be upstairs, I stood at the foot of the carpeted staircase and called his name. And there was no answer.

I returned, then, to the living-room and seated myself to await his arrival. Where he could have gone to, I had no idea—unless the house contained an attic or cellar wherein he had been unable to hear my summons. Taking up a magazine, I prepared to make the best of a perplexing situation.

Ten minutes later my patience was rewarded. A door opened and closed somewhere in the direction of the kitchen. I heard slow footsteps in the hall. My host walked mechanically into the living-room and stood staring at me.

"Well," I said, rising, "you're a fine one!"

He said, "Oh!" and suddenly smiled. Advancing to the table, he calmly placed a number of queer implements on the cloth and rubbed his hands together briskly, as if to brush dirt from them. "You've come back," he said. "I'm glad. I've been downstairs."

"And I've been waiting here," I informed him, "for a good long while."

"I didn't hear you come in. I was busy."

"Well," I demanded, "what now?"

"Why," he said simply, and walked to the antique desk which loomed in the corner, "let's play chess."

And play chess we did—as casually as though I had come to visit him for no other purpose. Play chess we did, despite the fact that my gaze persisted in roving toward the strange array of implements which he brought with him from the cellar.

The array included a small, short-handled trowel, a claw-hammer, and four keen-edged knives of various sizes!

I did not sleep that night. My room, at the end of the upstairs corridor, was small and stuffy. Its ceiling sloped sharply to the foot of my bed, leaving scarcely an inch of space above the iron bedposts. The single window, cut narrowly in the aged wall, admitted hardly a breath of air. The room had unmistakably been closed for some time before being opened for my accommodation.

To be sure, my host apologized for its condition. He said queerly:

"There's another chamber, but it's near mine. You wouldn't want that. This one's safer."

I wondered about that. Wondering, I lay awake and stared at the gray ceiling above me. I heard him retire; then, some time later, I heard the door of his room open again at the far end of the corridor. Footsteps scraped along the passage.

The footsteps continued almost to the door of my room. Then they stopped. For perhaps five minutes there was no further sound. Then the steps began again, this time diminishing in volume. I heard the door of Peter's room click shut.

In the morning I dressed slowly and after spending some ten minutes in the unattractive washroom which my friend had pointed out to me, I descended to the lower floor. The clock in the living-room said ten-twenty. Peter was sitting in one of the over-stuffed chairs, reading a newspaper.

"Good morning," he smiled. "You seem to be like me—get up any old time."

Something—some elusive, vague furtiveness—had come over him. When he asked me my plans for the day, his voice was peculiarly harsh. When I told him I might consider making the day a holiday, the better to renew our old friendship, he seemed not over-pleased.

"I'll make breakfast," he said. "Sit here and look at the paper."

"I prefer to help you."

"Well—" He studied me intently. "Well, all right. Come along."

We went into the kitchen. Presently I said: "Didn't you start to pay me a visit last night, after we'd retired?"

"Yes, I did."

"Changed your mind, eh?"

"I changed *her* mind," he said bluntly, turning to face me. "That's something I can't often do, but I succeeded last night."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you. I've got a lot to tell you. You see—"

I did not see. At that moment a bell jangled. Peter said quietly:

"It's the front door. The mailman."

I went to the door. On the stoop stood a short, plump man in uniform, holding a letter.

"Do you know if Mrs. Wilkes is comin' back?"

"Mrs. Wilkes?"

"She used to keep house for the feller that lives here. He told me last week she was gone. I got a letter for her."

"If you'll wait a moment—"

I turned. Peter was pacing along the passage toward me. He said curtly: "What is it? What's wrong?"

The mailman told him and showed him the letter. Peter thrust the envelope into his shirt pocket.

"I'll see that she gets it," he nodded.

I followed him back to the kitchen. Staring at him, I said thoughtfully:

"You had a housekeeper?"

"Yes."

"That rather makes my visit an inconvenience, doesn't it? I mean, if you are used to having your cooking done for you, then my presence here—"

"It's a relief to be rid of her," he said bluntly.

I nodded and dropped the subject. Patiently I waited for him to renew the conversation where the jangle of the door-bell had cut it short. He had promised me an explanation.

But I waited in vain. He told me nothing.

I did, however, learn something that afternoon. Two o'clock had passed and we were sitting in the living-room. We had had no dinner. I was hungry and wondered whether my position as guest entitled me to say so. Then all at once I made up my mind and pushed myself erect.

"I believe I'll take myself for a short walk," I said.

Peter lowered his magazine and gazed at me.

"You'll come back?"

"Of course."

"I've things to tell you," he said. "I've been thinking, John. Perhaps you'll be able to help me."

"If you care to tell me now—"

"No. Go for your walk."

I went walking—but walking did not help my thoughts. My memory continually reverted, despite the aid of sunshine and crisp October air, to the inexplicable snatches of conversation he had flung at me. His reference to "her," for instance. Could he have meant his housekeeper?

I walked slowly, with Peter Maxon continually in my thoughts. Looking about me after I had gone more than a mile, I discovered that I had reached the

edge of the town proper. Across the street stood a small restaurant and I remembered my original craving for food.

The place was empty. When I entered, a large moon-faced fellow came waddling along behind the counter and nodded to me. Finding his smile pleasant, I chose to sit at the counter itself, rather than seclude myself in one of the many narrow booths. And so, because of this fortunate choice on my part, I learned something more about Peter Maxon.

I had finished my meal and drawn my wallet from my pocket, intending to pay the man. He, at the moment, was standing directly in front of me. When a small white card fell from my wallet, he politely retrieved it for me. And the words PETER BROWN, M.D., stared him in the face in bold type.

"I say," he said. "Do you know Brown?"

I hesitated. "Well, I know him to speak to."

"He's a neighbor of mine," the moon-faced man declared.

"Really?"

"If I were you, I'd think twice before I took his say-so about being a doctor. Not that I can prove anything—but he's a queer one."

"How?" I frowned.

"Well, I don't know as there's any 'how' to it. He's just queer, that's all."

"You mean he's not quite right"—I put a finger to my forehead—"up here?"

My companion leaned on the counter, resting his weight on a pair of fat forearms. He needed no prompting. He said with a slow up-and-down shaking of his head:

"When he moved into Verndale Street about five months ago, I thought he *was* kind of cracked. Then he seemed to get better after his wife came to live with him."

"His wife?" I gasped. "Don't you mean his housekeeper?"

"No. It was his wife came first. Then she died about a month later, and he got a housekeeper. I guess he's had a tough time of it."

I said nothing. I could only sit and stare into the man's round face, while he talked on. Peter Brown's housekeeper, he said, had threatened time and again to leave her employer's house, and had remained only because of her great sympathy for Peter. She had finally left on the spur of the moment, not less than a week ago. At least, that was the neighborhood talk. He, himself, was not so sure. He was inclined to be suspicious—and Brown had been acting queerly of late—"

I hardly heard what he was saying. My thoughts were still struggling with that other statement he had made. Peter Brown's wife! Peter had told me nothing about a wife. Good God, no wonder he was not himself! No wonder he was blue and morbid and "strange." If he had lost his wife only a few months ago—

I wondered vaguely if his wife had been the girl who had, more than three years ago, worshipped him. Helen, her name had been. More than once he had spoken of her to me. Had he finally wed her, only to lose her again?

I felt suddenly ashamed of myself for listening to the moon-faced man's gossip. Hurriedly I stood up and nodded good-day. Then I walked slowly and moodily back to Peter's house on Verndale Street.

"I want to talk to you, John," Peter Maxon said to me that night.

"About—you?" I frowned.

"About me."

We had been playing chess. Quietly he stood up, walked to the desk and returned with a leather-bound book which I judged to be a diary. Seating himself again, he folded his hands on the book and stared into my face.

"In the beginning," he said, in a strangely methodical voice, "there was an accident. You know that, of course."

"Yes. The papers—"

"The papers were not accurate. When you have read this book, you will realize how wrong they were."

"You wish me to read that?"

"I do. From beginning to end. When you have finished, you will probably despise me. All I ask is a promise of secrecy."

He held the book toward me, and I could not help noticing again how thin and white his hands were. Bewildered and somehow uneasy, I accepted the volume.

"You are sure you want me to read this?"

"I do."

"Very well," I said. "If you have no objections, I'll take it to my room and read it there."

I stood up and paced slowly to the door. Silently he followed me, and as I turned to say good-night, his hand found my arm.

"Lock your door, John," he said simply.

"Lock it? For heaven's sake, why?"

"I want you to."

My answer might have been a laugh, but it was not. Something in the deadly earnestness of his voice warned me not to laugh. Scowling, I made my way up the narrow staircase. And when I had turned on the light in my room I obeyed his suggestion and locked the door. Then I undressed and got into bed, and after making myself comfortable by propping the pillow between my back and the bedpost, I opened the leather-bound book.

My guess had been correct. The book was a diary.

The first page was dated April 29. The handwriting was so illegible that I thought at first a child had done it. Then I learned better, for the words were these:

They have released me from the hospital and I have rented a small house on Verndale Street, in Westhaven. My name is Brown, now. What is the use of remaining Peter Maxon, when Maxon is dead? I have no wish for more publicity

or more pity. It is enough for me to have to look down at these hideous stumps of mine which are supposed to be arms. They say there is a God, but if so, he has a strange sense of humor. Two horrible mockeries of arms he has left me, after leading me on to believe that I might one day be of some real use to humanity. Yes, indeed, there is a God. He has just murdered me. Shall I kneel down and pray, perhaps, and thank him for the horrible thing he has done to me?

I closed my eyes and pitied my friend from the depths of my heart. True, he had been mistaken; those arms which he had called "horrible stumps" were now nearly as good as ever. Certainly they were no longer stumps, and perhaps never had been, in the true sense of the word. Yet I could appreciate the despair which had gripped him at the time the first page of the diary had been written.

I read on. The second entry was dated May 9. It said:

Helen has found me. I should be happy, but I am not. It has been lonely, living here alone in this small town, under an assumed name. But I saw the look in Helen's eyes when she first embraced me, and I saw the horror in her face when she first stared down at these claws of mine. And what I saw haunts me. She loves me, or she would not have come. But how can a woman love deformity?

What am I to do? She swears she will not leave me. I cannot do the proper thing and marry her, nor does she expect it. Yet she is here and intends to stay.

May 19. I wonder if I am happy. Theoretically, I suppose, I am living a lie. The neighbors have taken it for granted that Helen is my wife, and the store people call her Mrs. Brown. And she is content to be with me. "We are not living a lie," she said this evening, "so long as our love for each other is true. No truth can be a lie."

Yes, she loves me. She has always loved me. As for my returning that love, I am not so sure. How can a man's heart be concerned with love when it is full of bitterness? These vile arms of mine have robbed me of all human thoughts.

June 3. What did I say in the line above this? "These vile arms of mine have robbed me of all human thoughts?" That is true. But they have not robbed me of all inhuman thoughts! This morning, while I stared across the breakfast table at Helen, a thought came to me so horrible and hideous that Helen asked me what had frightened me. Frightened me! Great God, the thing is even now growing in my brain—growing malignantly, terribly. It is driving me mad.

June 4. What am I—a monster? All day long I have allowed this hideous new thought of mine to prey upon me. I have even attempted to convince myself that it is not hideous. I, Peter Maxon, have deliberately and viciously considered the business of murder. Well, why not? The God of "goodness" and "mercy" had no compunctions about murdering me. Why should I not have the last laugh?

June 5. I am going to do it. Monster, am I. Very well then, I shall be a monster. As a matter of fact, I shall be doing her a favor. I shall be relieving her

of the necessity of looking longer at the vile body of the man she loves. She will be happier dead, loving me as she does.

I have sent for DiAngelo. He can be trusted. I know enough about him to put him behind prison bars; he will ask no questions, nor will he talk afterwards.

Tonight, when he has come, I shall ask Helen to make coffee for us. The rest will be easy.

August 8. It is a long time since I last wrote in this book. Now I am able once again to use my hands. No, not my hands, but Helen's. Yes, I have done it. God help me, I am a murderer. But I have had the last laugh.

It was not an easy thing to do, despite the cold-blooded preparations I had made. She died quietly, from the morphine which I placed in her coffee, and because she died that way, without pain, her lips were smiling at me all the time I worked over her.

No, it was not easy. Had I been a less skillful surgeon, the result might well have been death for me, too. As it was, I owe my life to DiAngelo. He was indispensable. Now, after weeks of agony, I am able to use these new arms of mine.

As for Helen, they took her away and she is at peace. That, too, was carefully arranged, and in attending to the details DiAngelo did me the greatest favor. No one knows, except us two, that the woman who was quietly laid away to rest was laid away without arms. No one knows, either, that she was not my wife. The neighbors pity me. It is all very strange and complex.

But I have arms again—strong, straight arms, thanks to DiAngelo's surgical skill. In a few weeks more they will be healed, and the world will never know.

August 16. It is four A.M. and I am sitting here at the desk because I am afraid. Something unforeseen has happened. An hour ago I awoke in bed and my arms were moving and I was not moving them. They were pulling me toward the window; when my first sensation of horror had subsided, I realized that the window was open. I left my bed and strode slowly toward it, and stood there, and then I realized something else. That window faces south—and it was on a country road, directly south of this house, that Helen was laid away in the small, rural cemetery of DiAngelo's choosing. Not until I had closed the window did my arms become quiet again.

What strange thing is this that has happened? Could I have been dreaming, or have my arms really a will of their own? Great God, do these arms still belong to Helen?

August 31. I have hired a housekeeper, an elderly lady whose name is Mrs. Wilkes. I did not want her, but I was afraid to live alone any longer. I am convinced now that I am in grave danger.

These arms of mine are not mine. A hundred or more unimportant things have happened in the past few days to convince me that they possess a will of their own. Yesterday, for instance, I looked at a magazine in a news store and was attracted to it by the very lovely illustration of a woman on the cover. The

man in the store wrapped the magazine for me and would have handed it to me; and my hand refused to go into my pocket for the money with which to pay him! For more than a minute I stood there, attempting to force my hand to do as I wished. And in the end I found it necessary to stammer my apologies and walk out of the store.

What does this mean? Can it be that Helen is jealous, or is it something more serious? Is it possible that she is merely showing me the extent of her power over me, in order to prepare me for what is to come?

I do not know the answer, and I am afraid. So I have hired Mrs. Wilkes to take care of me.

September 7. Helen is jealous of Mrs. Wilkes. At first I attributed this thought to my own imagination and to the condition of my nerves. Now I know better. Today, while the lady was sitting in the living-room, I found myself being drawn toward her. Had she not suddenly turned to stare at me, I should have tiptoed to the back of her chair and seized her.

Now she is threatening to leave me. What am I to do?

September 17. Mrs. Wilkes has again threatened to leave me. Today, while she was serving me my dinner and bending over me, my hands suddenly dropped knife and fork and moved toward her. They moved of their own volition; I had nothing to do with it. Fortunately, the good lady stepped backward in time!

Fortunately, too, Mrs. Wilkes does not suspect the real reason for my strange antics. She misunderstands my motives entirely, and believes I am desirous of embracing her. She told me today that she would tolerate no more of it, and that if I did not "alter my ways" she would give up her position.

My God, what have I become? These arms of mine are becoming more and more sinister in their movements. They give me no peace!

If they can overcome my will while I am awake, what hideous acts may they not perform when I am asleep? When I consider the fearful possibilities, I am terrified!

October 7. The worst has happened. Last evening I was in the best of spirits. For several days the strange power that possesses my arms had been dormant and I had almost succeeded in assuring myself that I had at last obtained a measure of peace. Because I was in such good spirits, I asked Mrs. Wilkes to accompany me to the neighborhood theater and she accepted.

We returned to the house about eleven o'clock, and before midnight we had both retired for the night. Almost immediately after getting into bed, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, I was in Mrs. Wilkes' room, bending above her. My fingers were locked in her throat. She was dead.

God help me, I have murdered her! Even now, as I sit here, the good lady is lying dead in the room above me—strangled by my own hands! What will become of me?

October 9. I have done the only thing possible. I have told the neighbors that

Mrs. Wilkes left me, and I have hidden her body in the cellar, behind some boxes. In truth, I would not care much if she were found there. They would condemn me to death. But what good is life to me when my soul is not my own?

Did I say "Life"? My God, what mockery that word contains! I know, now, what can happen in the hours of darkness when I am asleep. Nothing can be worse; not even the thought of being branded and put to death for murder. Yet I am not so sure. Perhaps I no longer care what becomes of me, so long as God be merciful enough to mete out my punishment quickly!

This evening I awoke from an early nap and found myself in the bathroom at the end of the hall. Found myself standing stiff as stone before the medicine cabinet. What was I doing there? At first, in bewilderment, I did not comprehend; then a realization of the hideous truth came to me. I knew the answer. And, as if in grim corroboration of my thoughts, the hall clock downstairs suddenly chimed the hour—the same hour at which Helen had left me forever with a smile of contentment on her dying lips!

I think I know now what the end will be—for me.

October 14. Today I met John Andrews, an old friend and classmate of mine. Because he insisted, I invited him to the house. Perhaps if I can find courage enough to tell him the whole truth, he will be able to help me, though how I can be helped at this late date I do not know. At any rate, he is coming here this evening and I am hopeful for the best.

October 15. John is here. I think he suspects me of being mad. Last evening, when he called, I suggested that he remain with me during his stay in Westhaven. He agreed and went back to his hotel to get his things. While he was gone, I became suddenly possessed of the fear that he would discover Mrs. Wilkes' body, and I hurriedly planned a way to dispose of it more securely.

Whether I misjudged the time or not, I do not know. After dismembering the corpse and burying it in the far corner of the cellar where the ground is soft and damp, I came upstairs to await John's arrival—and there he sat, staring at me! And I still held the trowel and knives and other tools with which I had been working!

I did my best to appear nonchalant, but I am afraid John entertains queer thoughts concerning me. How much is it safe to tell him?

October 16. I am afraid again. Last night, while I lay awake in bed, a horrible desire came over me to go to John's room at the other end of the hall. My hands were twitching, just as they twitched after they had murdered Mrs. Wilkes. Can it be that Helen is jealous of John, too? Can it be that she intends to punish me for my sin by forcing me to live forever alone, with no friends whatever? Is that to be my torment?

John has gone out now, for a walk. He promised to return, but I wonder if he will. If he does, I shall tell him everything—or better still, I shall let him read this book. Then he will understand, and unless he condemns me for the horrible

things I have done, he may perhaps discover a way to help me.

Yes, I shall hand him this book when he returns. And I shall tell him to lock his door tonight. Dear God, let him not hate me! Let him understand!

There the diary ended. There its pages of horror and agony came to a close, and I, John Andrews, shut the book slowly and stared at its black covers. More than an hour had passed since I had laboriously read the first lines of that terrible volume.

The room was quiet, deathly quiet. Above my head burned the unshaded light, throwing its ghastly glare over floor and walls and ceiling. Like a dead man I sat there, propped up in bed, staring—staring at nothing, yet seeing the whole parade of horrors which had come out of the book before me.

How long I sat there I do not know. Not long, surely, for the room terrified me and the silence of the house filled me with dread. When at last the horror-parade marched away from me, leaving me to myself, I flung back the bedspread and groped erect.

Hurriedly I discarded my pajamas and got into my clothes, knowing only that I wanted to breathe clean sweet air again, to put Peter Maxon's house of evil far behind me and get away from the hideous book he had permitted me to read. But, as I regained control of my nerves, those mad thoughts were displaced by a realization that I must stay.

No matter what sin he was guilty of, Peter was my friend. I had accepted his hospitality; I owed him the decency of doing my best to help him in this hour of despair. Furthermore, I owed it to myself to investigate. If I departed from this horror-house without doing that, I should be something less than a man.

With these thoughts driving me, I moved silently toward the door.

And then I stopped, aware suddenly of a sinister noise in the corridor beyond the locked barrier. Nearer it came, and louder, and it was the slow *shf shf shf* of slipped feet.

I stood motionless, unable to shake loose the fear that came to seize me. Slowly, methodically the footsteps approached the door of my room, and there they ceased. I stepped backward, repressing the scream on my lips. As I stared at the scarred panels, the knob began slowly to turn.

At that moment I was mortally afraid. Trembling from head to foot, I moved backward step by step until the wall ended my retreat. The panels of the door trembled to a soft, insistent knocking, and a voice was audible. Soft words came through the barrier to whisper in the room where I stood rigid.

"Let me in, John," the voice pleaded. "It's only Peter. I—I want to talk to you."

I made no answer. My fists were clenched; my chest was heaving with a mighty ebb and flow of breath. A cold bead of perspiration trickled slowly down the side of my face and splashed on the back of my half-raised hand.

Plaintively the voice moaned from behind that locked door. "Please, John! Please open the door, so we can talk. I—I haven't much longer. In a

few minutes it will be too late—”

I could feel the blood drain from my face. Could feel my eyes widen with utter horror. Too late? It was already too late! That voice, speaking to me and entreating me to open the door, was not Peter Maxon's voice, not the voice of my friend! It was a woman's voice! It belonged to the woman whom Peter Maxon had once loved!

And yet it was not completely that, either. Unmistakably it contained a masculine quality, as of a man consciously *impersonating* a woman. Good God . . .

Then, for the second time I regained control of myself. No matter what happened in this house of madness, I must remain sane! No matter how irrational everything and everybody else in it might be, I must act rationally. I could take care of myself, at least against such creatures as I knew were in the house with me. That much I was sure of. I must fight against terror and be calm!

Slowly I stepped forward, and again the door before me vibrated to the thumping of a heavy fist. That strange voice, half Maxon's and half *bers*, shrieked at me in delirium.

“I've got to talk to you, John! God above, I haven't much time left! I want to tell you—”

There the voice reached its peak of shrillness, and died. The hammering on the door ceased abruptly. I heard a heavy scraping of feet and then a low moan—and then, beyond the barrier, something thudded to the floor of the corridor.

Even before the echoes of that thud had died away, I had the door open and was stumbling forward!

I lurched three steps, jarred to a halt, and stared down with eyes full of horror. At my feet lay the pajama-clad body of Peter Maxon, sprawled in a contorted heap on the floor. I thought he was dead.

He was not. On my knees beside him, I bent closer and caught the low sigh of his labored breathing. The feeble rays of a street-lamp filtered through the window of the room behind me and slanted palely across the threshold, illuminating Peter's face. And that face was a mask of strange contentment.

On the verge of death, Peter Maxon smiled up at me and tried to speak. The words that whispered from his lips were barely audible. Surely they were not coherent.

“It—finished, John. All—finish now. I knew she would—do it—that way. Don't think—too badly of me—”

His eyes fluttered toward me and his glassy stare clung to my face. With a sudden sob I took him in my arms, tried to still the trembling of his body. And in my arms he died, with a ghastly rattle in his throat and, paradoxically, a smile of utter peace on his lips.

Gently I lowered him to the floor and swayed erect. Then I saw what I had not seen before. The fingers of his right hand were curled about a small brown bottle whose cork had been removed. I stooped to remove the thing from his

grasp, and my eyes went wide with sudden comprehension.

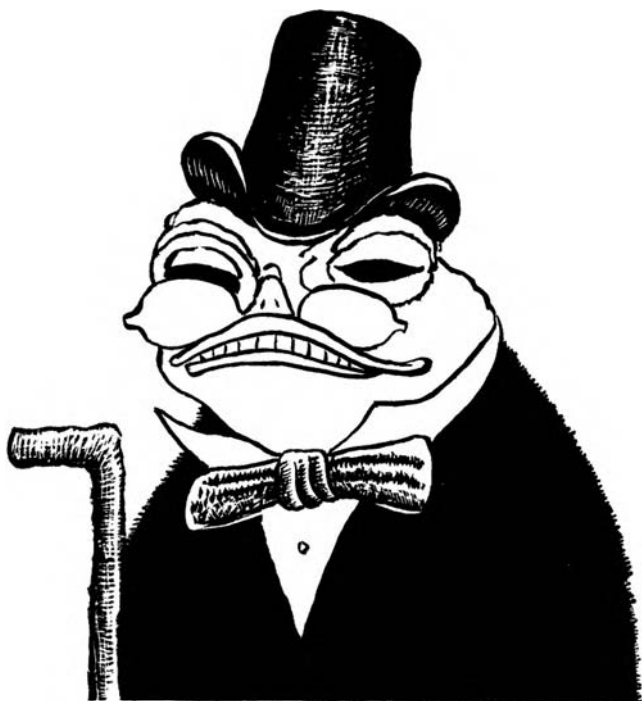
Black letters glared up at me from the bottle's label. Those letters formed the word MORPHINE.

That is all. Since that night I have done much thinking, much wondering. I think now that I understand the full meaning of the smile that curved Peter Maxon's dying lips.

With morphine he had murdered *her*. With morphine she had murdered *him*. He knew, and was glad.

Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps Peter Maxon's conscience and better nature drove him mad, and, suffering from hallucinations, his demented mind led those unholy hands of his to perform a ritual of death in keeping with the death he had meted out to her. If so, it was a just retribution, conceived by a lost mind in torment.

But I am not sure. There are things that lurk beyond the pale of human understanding. One may only grope blindly in darkness, and hope to find truth.



COYE 75

Dead Man's Belt

THE PARTICULAR WHEEL of industry of which Mulvahey and Jum Peters were morose and perspiring spokes, stopped its revolutions, year in and year out, approximately one hour after sundown when the city dump got too dark to be further fruitful. At this hour Mulvahey and Jum Peters plodded wearily and intricately through the sodden ashes and tin cans and rotted papers and corroded metals to the uncouth shanty which squatted, beetle-like, at the southern extremity of the dump yards.

Here the accumulated filth of the dump proper merged reluctantly into layers of expanding black sand and ran away for ever and ever into a waste expanse of emptiness. As far as the eye could follow, this untrodden tract of bleak shadow extended until the sky fell into it. "Nuttin' lan' " Mulvahey called it, because Mulvahey had imagination. Jum Peters merely scowled, and frowned at it and sometimes cursed it, and all the time hated it.

The dump yard was the end of the city, far beyond car-track terminals and paved road-beds. This other land was the end of everything, peopled only by scavenger dogs and sand crawlers and slate-colored rats and sometimes slinking, low-bellied cats. Jum Peters hated it because it was too near and because it was always there, never retreating, never relenting.

"Debble dark!" he cursed it. "You'm de debble hissel', jus' a-waitin' an' a-waitin' foh tuh creep up 'n' swaller wot ain' belong tuh yuh! Debble sh' 'nough is wot you is!"

The shanty was all there was. It clung to the dividing-line between Mulvahey's and Jum Peters' terrain and the "out-there" stretch of nothing-land. The shanty and all in it had been born of the dump. Mulvahey and Jum Peters and Mulvahey's woman had scraped it out of the dump yard's buried wombs and forced it together with black, callous, insensible hands.

Sheet tin, ragged on its edges and grimly streaked with red-brown rust, gripped hold of itself tenaciously and made four deformed, shapeless walls like an angular long-dead water-bug whose legs were curled under and out of sight. The roof, set atop it, was a bulging camera-shutter of the same metal, interleaved and again interleaved, where pointed contumacities stuck their jagged necks over the edge to keep watch on the disorder of muck below.

Mulvahey and Jum Peters collected the muck, day up and day down; and

Mulvahey's woman sorted it. The pile of charred rags there, underneath where the window should have been but wasn't, because there were no windows—that pile of rags Mulvahey had spent the whole of yesterday getting together. Tomorrow the man with the truck would come and pay ten cents a hundred pounds for it. And the bottles. Long bottles and short, with labels on and with labels off, brown bottles and white and green and without any certain color at all. Jum Peters had put them there, after digging them out from the ashes and papers and old automobile parts and stinking ooze.

It had rained yesterday, and that had made the reclamation all the more difficult, because the rain always sucked all of the dump's slumbering stench to the surface and made living, clutching, bottomless pitfalls out of dormant piles of gray slag. Jum Peters always cursed the rain. Mulvahey endured it but did not like it.

"Dat woman better hab somepin' good 'n' hot stewin' foh us," Jum Peters muttered now, as he groped laboriously through the deepening dusk and the uncertain stuff underfoot, toward the beetle shanty. "Ain' nuttin' much in dis heuh bag gwine get money, an' heuh I been wukkin' mos' all day t'rough. You heuh dat, Mulvahey?"

"Sho'. Cerema, she'm all right. She'm hab somepin'," grunted Mulvahey in return. The sack he was toting over his left shoulder was heavy and full of hard metal stuff that pricked into his back. It was not conducive to empty talk, although it did contain a battered tin box with the word **CAKE** on it in fancy letters, and that would make Cerema glad. Mulvahey could straighten out the dents in it and polish it with an oily rag and make it look as good as if it came straight from the store people. Cerema would like that, he thought.

The light was going in the shanty, and the radio was squeaking music. Mulvahey felt a brotherly love for the light. Before, it had been only candles which the dump surrendered, and sometimes the candles were full of gritty stuff which made them sputter. Now it was an electric light bulb strung down from the tin ceiling on a length of yellow wire, and it burned steadily, like a light-house saying, "Hullo dar, nigger! Come in heuh an' get yo'sel' comfable!"

Mulvahey had made it out of twenty-six old dry cell batteries which squatted under the stove like twenty-six little men hugging themselves to keep warm. Mulvahey had made the radio, too—out of innumerable unrelated parts and bits of naked wire. "Sometimes it gits somepin' an' sometimes it ain' feelin' like gittin' nuttin'—but w'en it *does* git, it sho' is like de Lawd Gawd Hissel'!"

Mulvahey and Jum Peters dropped their sacks outside and went in together. Cerema was standing over the stove, shaking something in an aluminum kettle. She turned with the kettle rigid in her hand and said:

"Heuh you is, huh? Mebbe sometime you-all'll git heuh w'en yuh supper is hot, 'stead waitin' 'til it's been settin' aroun' a-waitin' on you."

The shanty inside was more of the dump yard's propagation. The floor was a club sandwich of four magic layers: on the bottom a web-work of slate, next a

three-inch spread of ash siftings, then an expanse of blue-and-yellow oil-cloth with flowers creeping along its rim, and now an assortment of discarded mats, one at the threshold, two beneath the square-legged oak table, one before the single bunk, and one beside the great wooden-posted bed where Mulvahey and his woman slept. A shining gilt-framed mirror hung from the inner surface of the door, splintered only in one upper corner. On the wall near the stove was a calendar with three little girl-children leading a puppy dog somewhere on a string.

Salvage, all of it. Mulvahey and Jum Peters and Mulvahey's woman were proud of their abode.

Cerema was Mulvahey's woman. Cerema knew it and was glad of it and wanted it to be so for ever and ever until the Day of Judgment. Mulvahey and Jum Peters were brothers, and that made Cerema's chaste desires the more difficult. For when Jum Peters came home at midday, unknown to Mulvahey, to follow Cerema back and forth across the limited floor, to envelop her in his heavy arms and smother her protests with his unwanted lips and carry her squirming and kicking and fighting to the big bed—Cerema could not then tell Mulvahey.

Mulvahey, if she told him, would turn red like the outside of a tin can, and get rusty and gritty inside like the *inside* of a tin can, and scream terrible things at Jum Peters and try to kill him. He might even think, too, that Cerema *liked* Jum Peters—that she *wanted* him to come creeping back at noonday—that she was anybody's woman! And that was devil's talk.

And if Mulvahey fought Jum Peters, Jum Peters would do the killing. Because Jum Peters was big and thick-jowled and hairy, like a clump of solid inanimate black mud; and Mulvahey was different every way. Mulvahey was thin and soft and had too much temper without anywhere to hold the temper inside him.

Cerema put the food on the table without saying anything of what was in her heart. But she put the china plate in front of Mulvahey and the tin plate in front of Jum Peters, to show Jum Peters what she thought. Jum Peters had come back to the shanty this midday without saying anything to Mulvahey. And Cerema felt guilty—as if she had actually *enjoyed* having Jum Peters sneak back and possess her. And she didn't.

"Lawd Gawd," she prayed, "You knows deep down in Yuh heart dat I don' wan' dat Jum Peters a-slitherin' in heuh tuh do dat tuh me. You *knows*. I is Mulvahey's woman, I is. *Isn't* I, Lawd Gawd?"

Mulvahey and Jum Peters ate slowly, as if they would suck the rest and peace and satisfaction out of each morsel of food before they allowed it to escape. They ate canned corn and canned beef and a thick, smelly gruel that Cerema had made out of water and broken bones and moldy cabbage leaves.

They ate noisily, with their mouths close to the table; and Cerema stood tensely beside the stove, staring at them with her eyes. Cerema's eyes were small and dark; they were the most acute accomplishments in a face too yellowish and

too ill-proportioned to be pretty. Her hands fidgeted in her cotton dress, seeking a refuge where they might bury themselves and their secret. Her legs extended stiffly under her—thin, woodenish props stuck upright out of the floor, parallel with the wall. But her eyes glowed and smoldered and missed nothing.

Jum Peters, pushing his plate away and licking his mouth, said:

"Fetch dat 'baccer, you Cerema."

Cerema got tobacco from behind the stove and brought it to him. He broke it in his thick fingers and stuffed it slowly and deliberately into a metal-banded pipe with amber stem, and lighted it.

"You, Mulvahey, how much 'baccer you done got lef'?"

"I got 'nough," Mulvahey said. "Washinnun Jeffers, him a-cumin' heuh tuhnight foh tuh make talk wid me 'bout'n sellin' him dem parts f'um dem two auto'bilses out'n de dump. I got 'nough 'baccy foh giv'n him some."

"Look a-heuh, Mulvahey. I'se feelin' right fort'nate tuhnight, an' I'se bettin' dis heuh ledder bel' 'gains' youh 'baccy. Is you willin'?"

Jum Peters stood up with proud disdain and drew back the flaps of his coat, exposing an additional strip of leather encircling his middle, buckled with its glittering brass scab above the canvas belt which habitually supported his khaki lower garment.

"You-all done foun' *dat* in de dump?" Mulvahey marvelled, reaching out to take hold of it and feel its tangibility. "Dat's a gen'wine w'ite folkses bel'!"

"Ain' it?" Jum Peters grinned. "Ain' it now? Is you willin'?"

"Sho' 'nough I'se willin'! How'm us gonna bet foh it?"

"How much 'baccer you got?" Jum Peters demanded suspiciously. "Dis heuh bel' gwine tek whole lot foh bettin'."

Mulvahey groped into his pockets and brought out his possessions. Four slabs of the black stuff he placed on the table beside his china plate, and his eyes were glued upon the gleaming buckle of Jum Peters' belt in a hypnotic stare. That buckle, even more than the belt itself, was "w'ite folkses." It glittered with the brilliancy of the sunlight on wet pieces of tin; it was full of distance and far-away places. Mulvahey could peer into it and see reflections of the lamp bulb that was hanging there above the table, almost the way he could look into Cerema's eyes sometimes and never see what was behind them. This buckle was someone else's eyes; it might even be one of God's eyes the way it shone so. Mulvahey would have bet ten times four sticks of tobacco to possess it and wear it around him where he could stare into it whenever he wanted to.

"How'm us gonna bet foh it?" he repeated zealously.

Jum Peters fingered the belt with a cunning smile, unbinding it and placing it on the table beside the tobacco.

"Like country niggers bet down Sout'," he said. "You jus' watch."

Mulvahey watched with fixed eyes. Jum Peters expanded out of his chair and dragged two of the five torpid mats into the middle of the oil-cloth floor. He juggled them into position side by side with twelve inches of open floor between

them. Then he took hold of his chair and scraped it close, and sat down.

"Git yuh stool," he ordered. "Us'm gonna set heuh an' wait, me heuh an' you dar. W'ichever's mat er wahter-bug runs acrost fust, him git de winnin's."

Mulvahey understood, and grinned. He brought his stool and sat on it beside one of the rugs. Cerema stood watching them from the stove with her bright, scintillating eyes.

"If'n Mulvahey knowed wot I knows," she thought, "him jus' wouldn' be a-settin' dar waitin' foh wahter-bugs. Him ud be fightin' wuss'n de debble hissel'."

She came forward with curious face, albeit timidly enough, and would have stood behind Mulvahey's chair to wait for the decision. It wouldn't be long, she thought. Either a rat or a water-bug, or even a big brown cockroach, would scurry across the floor as soon as the shanty became quiet. It was always like that. Silence would come creeping and seeping through the cracks in the tin walls, and lower itself like a terrible human thing through the crevices in the roof; and then there would be nothing but the hissing of her own breath when she breathed, like rodents' feet scurrying back and forth over the linoleum floor.

The thought made Cerema shudder. When it got like that in the middle of the day, and Mulvahey and Jum Peters were out in the dump where she couldn't call to them, she wanted to pick up her pots and pans and kick open the door and run and run and run and run and never come back. She was even glad then, almost, when Jum Peters sometimes came sneaking in to get her.

She thought about Jum Peters again, while she watched the two men. She began at the beginning and thought it all through to the end, and it was just the same as it always was, because the ideas were unchanging and unchangeable. She hated Jum Peters passionately. Hating him that way, she glared at him until he looked up and caught her at it.

"Git out'n heuh, you," he growled. "How'm you expec' any wahter-bugs gonna come, wid you a-standin' dar fidgitin'? Git!"

Cerema retreated unwillingly and hated him all the more intensely. She went and sat down on the edge of the big bed, and the shanty became entirely still then because neither Mulvahey nor Jum Peters spoke for a long time. They crouched forward, both of them, like men squatting on the rim of a deep hole and peering down. But Mulvahey's eyes shifted constantly and unconsciously to the shining belt buckle on the edge of the table.

After a while there were other sounds, like unseen tongues whispering to each other across the room; but they weren't tongues, they were feet. They were rats' feet, and Cerema shuddered at the sound of them. She heard them at night, every night, and they were spirits talking and muttering and threatening in the darkness. They rustled over the floor and over the bed and up the tin walls and over the tin roof; and then they were like human fingers scratching on the cover of a coffin, trying to get in and trying to get out and all the time bemoaning their fate.

Cerema feared them because they were creatures of nocturnal hours and they were unseen. She was afraid because they were spirits of dead people, telling unintelligible secrets of far-away dreaded places where live folk could never go. Once, more than a whole year ago, she had dug up a human skull out there in the dump, and found the white, rotting bones of a young baby

Mulvahey and Jum Peters didn't seem to notice or care. They waited and waited and waited. A long, tapering, sleek gray body scuttled across the carpets between them and they sat tense and let it go. Ordinarily they would have hurled something blunt and solid at it and cursed vehemently if it got away; but now they were waiting and waiting and they feared to make a disturbance.

Cerema's nerves were afire. They hurt her and beat against the inside of her head like metal hammers. She wanted to stand up and talk out in a shrill voice, and she didn't dare because they would curse her, too. She heard footsteps kicking through the refuse outside, and it was Washington Jeffers coming, because no one else ever came. Washington Jeffers was the man who bought rags and bottles and chunks of metal and sometimes radio parts and automobile parts; and she wanted to tell Mulvahey that he was coming. But she didn't dare. She didn't dare move.

The water-bugs were out of their hiding-places. They came from under the tin walls and under the stove and out of the brown blankets on the big bed. One of them ran across Cerema's shoe, which was untied; and she felt its tremulous legs tickle her foot, but she didn't cry out because she was afraid to. Mulvahey and Jum Peters were sitting as if the spirits had whispered them into wood. Staring and waiting and waiting and staring.

Suddenly the stillness was cracked and shattered. It broke asunder with a booming reverberation and the rasping of Jum Peters' chair as Jum Peters lumbered up.

"You black-face skulkin' nigger, Mulvahey! You done moved a-purpose! Dat wahter-bug 'ud a-run 'crost my rug heuh if'n you hadn' moved! I'se a good min' tuh brek yuh black haid intuh fohty pieces!"

Then they were fighting because they wanted to fight. Cerema was glad and she was afraid. She was Mulvahey's woman and she wanted Mulvahey to kill Jum Peters, because she hated Jum Peters with a terrible hate. But she feared because Jum Peters was big and sinewy, and Jum Peters was impetuously and violently and hideously angry. Cerema was afraid for Mulvahey. But she was glad that there was a noise.

She stood wide-eyed on her spindle legs, with both arms reaching inflexibly back to the bed surface, holding herself up. She shivered when the table clattered over and cracked into two pieces, and Mulvahey and Jum Peters, straining in each other's arms, fell into the tin wall. The noise was too harsh and too brazen now. The roof quivered and rattled. The walls buckled and unbuckled with a crackling snap. Mulvahey and Jum Peters were grunting and sucking great gulps of breath.

They reeled erect again, and Cerema saw Jum Peters' face under the light. It was sweating and its lips were curled back exposing the broken tooth in the front of its mouth. Cerema shrank back along the bed, away from it, flattening herself against the wall. The face seemed to be glaring directly at her, as if she were to blame. She didn't want to look at it, but she had to look; and so she cringed and stared until her eyes wouldn't close at all, even if she wanted them to.

She knew, suddenly, that Washington Jeffers was pounding on the door outside. She cried out and pointed, but Mulvahey and Jum Peters were fighting among the stuck-up legs of the table, and they were straining hard and breathing like worn-out machines, so they didn't hear her.

The door clapped open then and Washington Jeffers came in with quick, furtive steps. He was a small, barrelly man with a big barrelly face that was very shiny and very black and had hair on it. He looked at Cerema, rigid against the tin wall, and he looked nervously, quickly, at the two men who were struggling like stiff clay animals. Then he strode into them to push them apart.

He strode into a long thick arm that was jabbing something with a sharp point at Mulvahey's neck. The sharp point entered Washington Jeffers' head until it struck against a bone; then it broke off in Jum Peters' fingers and Washington Jeffers groaned onto the floor. Jum Peters stepped backward very quickly, staring with big red-rimmed eyes at the knife-handle and the two inches of broken blade and the side of Washington Jeffers' head, where red blood was spitting like crimson water out of a suddenly punctured water-pipe.

"Lawd Gawd!" Jum Peters cried, opening his eyes wide. "I didn' go foh tuh—"

The silence was back again, and his words reeled round and round the shanty like living things of torment. They jangled back into his own ears, stabbing him. He stared fearfully again at the knife-handle and at the fountain of blood coming out of Washington Jeffers' head. Then he dropped the knife-handle as if it were white-hot and searing the flesh of his fingers. And he stared into Mulvahey's horrified face and into Cerema's awful wide eyes. And he turned and ran.

He ran out into the enveloping darkness of the dump yard. There was no sound behind him and no sound in front of him. He turned toward the unlimited expanse of Mulvahey's "nuttin' lan'," but its emptiness and graveyard gloom thrust him back with flat hands. Then he jerked about, mumbling and muttering to himself, and stumbled across the dump toward the dirt road on the other side.

And he was in a world of emptiness. There was nothing anywhere but that single needle-prick of yellow light behind him—Mulvahey's light, suspended on a wire from the tin roof and glittering out through the open door of the shanty—pointing and always pointing at him no matter which way he turned. And his feet were screaming at him, but they were underneath him and unescapable; if they had been behind him he could have run from them, but they were part of him, accusing and groaning and screeching. They sucked in and out of wet ashes; they crunched devil's talk to him.

"Blood . . . blood . . . blood!" they boomed. And they clinked into empty tin cans, jeering a singsong of mockery. "Washington Jeffers . . . Washington Jeffers!" It was the crack of that murderous knife-blade, snapping again and again and again, relentlessly.

He stumbled into black, immovable, jagged shapes that loomed up unexpectedly. His big body caromed into hard piles of twisted metal, and that made *another* voice. "*Tbud*. Lawd Gawd, I didn't go foh tuh—*Tbud*." The thud of Washington Jeffers' stumpy carcass striking the linoleum floor. Dead!

He was half-way across the dump yard then. The rest of the terrain was a field of ashes. Gray ashes, soaked by the rain yesterday, squishy and gritty and so soft that his shoes sank into them; and *that* made *another* sound. "Murrder . . . Murrder" at every step. "Murrder . . . Lawd Gawd, I didn't mean foh tuh—"

He reached the dirt road at last and stood there, stamping his legs up and down to knock the clinging gray funereal stuff off his boots. He looked back and saw the pin-prick of light a long way off, and it terrified him because it was still glittering malevolently and still pointing. He faced toward the city—miles and miles away, where people would be talking and street-cars would be grumbling and windows would be illuminated with colored lights, and there would be hundreds and hundreds of sheltering black doorways where he could hide. And he ran.

He ran on and on until the dirt road was a paved highway with car-tracks and street lights blinking. Then, because his legs were heavy, he stopped running and stumbled along at a walk. He followed the tracks until he came to houses and sidewalks. The street lights huddled closer together. A lumbering trolley car went past him. Automobiles rolled out of the dark, stared at him accusingly with round white eyes, and droned away again. People passed him and glanced at him because his face was gaunt and sweaty and heaving up and down in torment.

He walked by two huge oil vats that were lit up with floodlights. When he passed them he cringed against an iron railing and tried to cower away from the glare. He wanted lights because the darkness clutched out for him with invisible fingers; and he wanted darkness because lights pointed into his face and screamed at him. He walked on and on . . .

He reached the city slums. A clock on a big building said half-past nine and grinned at him. He scuffed along a dirty sidewalk and presently he opened a door that said POOL on it in red letters; and he went in and sat on a bench in the darkest corner.

He crouched there without looking up, listening to the click-click-click of little round balls hitting each other, and listening to the murmur of men's voices. For a long while he heard these sounds without looking toward them; then he lifted his head and saw four bright hanging lights over four green-topped rectangular tables which were like patches of green grass. He watched the little balls rolling on the grass and clicking into one another and rolling away again. No one bothered with him. No one came near him or spoke to him or even knew

he was there.

He found courage in the four lights and in the noise of the balls. The lights were shaded on top and were not pointing at him like Mulvahey's light; and the balls weren't screeching "Blood! Murder! Washington Jeffers!" They were tinkling like bits of glass. They were even winking at him and whispering. "Who'm gonna know? Who'm gonna know *anyhow*?"

Another illusion came to him then. The balls were all alike; they were all round and the same size; they all said the same thing. Other things were alike, too. The four hanging lamps were alike, and the four tables were alike, and the men in the room were alike.

He remembered that he and Mulvahey were the same way. He and Mulvahey were brothers; they looked like each other. He was a little stronger than Mulvahey and a little heavier, but no one ever noticed *that*. No one ever went to the dump yard shanty except Washington Jeffers, and Washington Jeffers was dead now. Who was going to know?

The idea simmered and took deeper root. The lights winked again out of one eye and said, "Sho' 'nough, Jum Peters, sho' 'nough. Who *am* gonna know, 'ceptin' Cerema?"

He considered it vaguely at first, just to think about something. The more he thought, the more the details dovetailed into each other, until all the significant points of the plan were in proper order, leading straight from the start to the conclusion.

"If'n I kills Mulvahey," he thought, "an' hides Mulvahey unner de deepes' part er de dump whar no one'm gonna ever fin' it—"

He looked up at the lights, and the lights nodded their approval.

"An' if'n I stays right in de shanty wid Cerema an' tells de p'lice w'en dey come dat I is Mulvahey an' dat Jum Peters done kill dat Washinnun Jeffers an' done run away—"

He listened to the clink of the balls and the murmur of voices, and they said over again: "Who'm gonna know? Who'm gonna know *anyhow*?"

He got up then and walked across the room and went out. While he strode along the sidewalk, back the way he had come, the conception burned up into his head and blazed out of his eyes. He began to run again. He kept running until he was far past the two illuminated oil vats.

"If'n I tells de p'lice I is Mulvahey, an' I tells dem Jum Peters done kill Washinnun Jeffers an' run away, dey is gwine go lookin' foh Jum Peters foh ebber an' ebber. Who'm gonna know de trut'?"

Cerema would know. He thought of that. But Cerema could be easily silenced. And if he killed Mulvahey, Cerema would be his woman without dispute. He could have her and take her and live with her. There would be no need to creep back at noonday out of the dump and stifle her voice and break her supple body in his arms to subdue it. He could *own* her.

By the time he reached the car-track terminals and the end of the paved road,

he had every step warily schemed. He would circle the dump like a scavenger dog, belly to the ground and eyes alert. He would make certain first that only Cerema and Mulvahey were inside the shanty. If some one else was there, he would burrow a hole in the sticky ashes and hide himself until Cerema and Mulvahey were alone. Then he would get hold of a thick, heavy, flinty wooden bludgeon and sneak up to the door and fall upon Mulvahey before Mulvahey could cry out.

Then he would tote Mulvahey's body out into the blackest, oldest, meanest part of the dump and dig a deep, deep hole under the refuse, and bury Mulvahey where not even the carrion rats would get to him. After that he would put on Mulvahey's clothes and go back to the shanty and tell the police when they came that Jum Peters had killed Washington Jeffers and run away.

This brought a new thought and a new glint to his eyes.

"If'n de p'lice ain' foun' out yit—an' mos' likely day ain'—day ain' gwine be no need foh tuh mek b'lieve I is Mulvahey a-tall," he muttered in time to his hurrying footbeats. "Day ain' gwine *know* nuttin' foh a long time, 'til some'un tells 'em Washinnun Jeffers ain' come home. Den dey gonna come an' fin' Washinnun Jeffers daid on de flo' an' me standin' dar an' Mulvahey gone. Dey'm gonna say tuh me, 'Whar'm Mulvahey? Who done dis killin'?' An' I'se gonna say, 'Mulvahey done dis killin' an' run away, da's wot!' An' how'm dey gonna *know*?"

That was the best plan of all, he pondered. The police would hurry out and seek Mulvahey for killing Washington Jeffers, and Mulvahey would be utterly dead and buried where they could never discover him. And after a few days, when they didn't find Mulvahey at all, they would give up and forget about it.

"Ain' likely dey gonna trubble demsel's 'bout'n ol' Washinnun Jeffers. Him jus' ol' nigger, da's all. Him jus' no-'coun'."

But supposing the police had already visited the shanty and found Mulvahey alive and Washington Jeffers dead? No, they wouldn't have come so soon; no one ever came to the shanty except Washington Jeffers and sometimes Washington Jeffers' little girl to bring him home at night. But still, if the police had heard the noise when he and Mulvahey had fought each other—

In that case he would have to revert to the first plan. He would have to put Mulvahey out of the way after the police had gone. Then, when the police came back, *he* would be Mulvahey. They wouldn't know, because he and Mulvahey *looked* like each other, except that Mulvahey was skinnier; and the police wouldn't notice that.

His boots sucked through soft sand now. There were no more street lights and no more sidewalk. The darkness united indefinitely with the dead extremities of the dump yard. A black, uneven, vicious anomaly of shadow merging into a jugged expanse of no-man's-land, and the metastasis was completed. A long way off the single light of the shanty blinked and winked, gutting the dark. Jum Peters groped toward it.

Now he skulked with jackal cunning along the edge of the yard. He pursued

no straight, undeviating course toward the light, but with the shanty as his objective he crouched and ran from one skeletal heap of filth to the next, darting in and out of cover, a bulging, misshapen beast on a mission of horror. Once he paused to grip a wooden cudgel, and a moment later he exchanged the cudgel in preference for a sharp-rimmed slab of corroded iron.

On hands and knees, from the end of the yard opposite the open entrance, he crawled to the shanty wall and listened. He heard Mulvahey's voice alone, and later Cerema's.

"If'n wot you'm sayin' is Gawd's trut', Cerema," Mulvahey was talking, "I'se sho' glad foh hab dat nigger run 'way. Does I know befoh, I sho' kills him daid foh playin' 'roun' someun else's 'oman. But looka heuh at dis bel' buckle! Ain' it sparkle!"

"Sho' 'nough it sparkle. I wonner does dey fin' Jum Peters, Mulvahey? If'n dey does—"

"Mo'n likely dat off'cer gits him befoh dis night'm ovuh, honey. Serve him right foh playin' 'roun' you."

Jum Peters listened and was satisfied. He edged to the doorway and groped silently to his feet. He lifted the iron truncheon high.

It was too simple, too competent. Three quick steps; the hammer thudded; Cerema screamed; Mulvahey fell. Jum Peters closed the door and said harshly: "Shut up, you Cerema, an' lissen."

Cerema retreated goggle-eyed until the side of the bed stopped her. She clung there with both hands, stiff as a stick, unable to twist her eyes from Jum Peters' advancing hulk.

"Does de p'lice come heuh yit?" Jum Peters demanded, grasping her arm. "Does dey?"

She nodded frantically. Her eyes contemplated his face with abject terror: two wide-open glittering needle-ends rimmed with white.

"Y-yes, dey done come."

"Who brung dem? *You*?"

"Not *me*! I never brung nobody!"

"Who, den?"

"Ol' Washinnun Jeffers' chile come heuh foh tuh take her pappy tuh home, an' her see Washinnun Jeffers layin' heuh daid, an' her run home an' tells. An' den a p'liceman comes heuh an' fin's out you done kill Washinnun Jeffers an' says him gwine fin' you an' goes out 'gain quick. I never bring'm!"

"You'm *my* woman f'um now on," Jum Peters said triumphantly. "Git a shubble."

"Foh—foh wot?"

"Git a shubble like I tell you! Else I gwine smash yoh haid in!"

Cerema scuttled across the room. Jum Peters went to Mulvahey's dead body and looked down at it. He scowled when he saw his belt, *his* belt with the glittering buckle, fastened around Mulvahey's middle, outside Mulvahey's black

coat where every one could see it. The belt didn't fit Mulvahey anyway, and that filled Jum Peters with a peculiarly vicious satisfaction. The belt was too big for Mulvahey; the end of the strap extended four inches, four holes extra, beyond the gleaming buckle. It hung down like a mongrel's tail punctured in four places. Four inches of tail, Jum Peters thought; and he grinned bitterly.

He removed Mulvahey's clothes then and removed his own clothes and exchanged them for Mulvahey's. He fixed the belt around his new coat tenderly, and he grinned again when he noticed that the strap was not too big for *him*. There wasn't any dog's tail hanging down. There wasn't even half an inch extra leather. The belt fitted precisely. And it ought to, because it was *his* belt, not Mulvahey's.

He lifted Mulvahey's carcass over his shoulder then and strode to the door with it.

"You Cerema," he said, "you bring dat shubble. Come 'long."

He carried Mulvahey out into the dump, and Cerema walked behind him with the shovel in the crook of her elbow, with her head bent and her feet shuffling. Instinctively Jum Peters picked a path through the intricate darkness, finding a way through dormant stacks of smelly filth. Deep into the dump he intruded, selecting his route by instinctive habit until he reached the most desolate terrain of the yard. There he dropped Mulvahey's corpse on the base of a slag pile and said thickly:

"Gib dat shubble heuh, woman."

Cerema relinquished her implement sluggishly, as if she would withhold it from his eager hands as long as she could. He snatched it and worked feverishly. The sodden ashes came up in bleak, sticky clumps; the hole penetrated under the slope of the stack, deeper with every thrust of Jum Peters' boot on the heel of the spade.

He dug by the feel of it, because the hole was too black to be visible. When it was long enough and wide enough to hold Mulvahey's body with the limp legs folded underneath, and deep enough to reach the shovel handle when Jum Peters groped down to find bottom, Jum Peters ceased digging and cast the corpse into it. Then he filled the grave and scraped loose ashes over it to make it appear natural.

"F'um now on," he told Cerema, "I is Mulvahey. I isn't Jum Peters no mo'. You calls me Mulvahey an' you keeps yuh mou't shut 'bout dis heuh us jus' done. W'en dat p'lice off'cer comes back an' asks mo' questuns, you let'm t'ink Jum Peters ain' come back no mo' ebber, an' you calls me Mulvahey jus' like I is Mulvahey. Does you unnerstan'?"

Cerema inclined her head fearfully. She followed him back to the shanty then, pacing after him like a woman already dead and walking to *her* grave. Jum Peters lingered on the threshold to kick the muck from his boots and replace the shovel in its accustomed place. Then he went in and sat in his own chair.

The table was still broken in two pieces and lying on the floor with its legs

extending toward the roof like a killed rat turned over on its back to expire. The two carpets were still spread together on the linoleum; but the water-bugs were not in evidence, nor were the four-legged, sleek-backed rodents from the dump. That was strange, for the shanty was quiet, almost as deathly silent as the dump yard and the fearsome swell of "nuttin' lan' " out beyond; and Washington Jeffers' carcass had been dragged against the wall and lay there like a curled-up monkey with its face hidden.

"Dat p'liceman say him a-comin' back heuh tonight?" Jum Peters demanded.

"Yes," Cerema said, "him a-comin'."

Jum Peters said: "Look heuh close at me, Cerema. Does I look like Mulvahey 'nough so dat man ain' gwine know no diff'rence?"

"I reck'n."

"Him look at Mulvahey hard-like w'en him come heuh befoh?"

"No. Him jus' as' some questuns an' go right out'n agin."

"Huh? Has I got Mulvahey's clo'es on me jus' like Mulvahey hissel' had dem on, Cerema?"

"Yes, you has."

"I'se bigger'n Mulvahey, huh?"

"Not 'nough bigger foh mek notice."

"I'se foh bel'-holes bigger," Jum Peters grinned. "Looka heuh."

Cerema twisted her rabbit eyes toward the belt. She nodded and said nothing. Jum Peters relaxed in his chair.

For a long time after that, the shanty was *very* still, Jum Peters thought. The stillness was as thick and blodgy as if some one Big and Almighty had shoveled wet slag all over *it* and into *it* and made a grave of *it*. It couldn't be any stiller even in Mulvahey's hole. The light went dim every so often and caused curious little grays to parade across the floor in procession, like pall-bearers returning sadly from a cemetery. Jum Peters couldn't get his mind away from them and they made him fidgety and nervous. He inspected himself again and again and again to be sure that he was wearing Mulvahey's clothes just as Mulvahey had worn them.

After a while he got up and disconnected the electric light and rummaged in the wooden box behind the stove until he found a candle stump. He lighted the candle with a match, and his fingers shook. He tipped the candle and held it over the stove until the melted wax fell drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . like the shovelfuls of filth falling into Mulvahey's gravehole. The wax made a mushy pool on the black iron, and he set the candle upright in it.

He felt more secure after that. The policeman couldn't stare at him so closely and intently without Mulvahey's accusing electric light hanging over him. The candle flame was not so terribly immutable and unflinching; it flickered and wavered and winked reassuringly like the lights in the pool parlor. It whispered the same thing: "Who'm gonna know? Who'm gonna know *anyhow*?"

He ruminated over the details again. Mulvahey's body they would never

discover. The policeman wouldn't have looked closely at Mulvahey in the excitement of uncovering a murder; therefore he wouldn't recognize any change when he returned. Cerema would keep her mouth closed; she was afraid to open it. They would search for Jum Peters until they didn't find him; then they would give up. No flaw was evident in the entire schedule. No possible flaw.

The candle sputtered. Jum Peters went to the door and looked out and went back to his chair again.

"Him a-comin'?" Cerema said tensely. "Him a-comin' heuh, Jum Peters?"

"Can' see nuttin'," he growled. "Wha's my name, woman?"

"M-Mulvahey."

"Don' you fergit dat. Speak dat name agin."

"Mulvahey," she whispered.

After that the policeman came.

The policeman was Irish and block-shouldered and had a blunt-cornered face as fixed in its expression as the angular walls of the shanty. His blue uniform distended the doorway. He carried a night-stick in his right hand.

He peered at Cerema and glanced casually at Jum Peters. He strode into the middle of the linoleum floor.

"He ain't come back here, hey?" he demanded.

"No suh," Jum Peters said. "He ain'."

"And you got no idea at all where he might've got to?"

"No suh. Him 'ud run 'way mos' anyw'eres 'ceptin' 'crost dat debble-lan' out'n dar."

"Yeah? Well, we ain't found no sign of him yet, but we'll get him. I'll have a look around here. Might get an idea, maybe."

Jum Peters sat stiff in his chair. Cerema stood stiff against the wooden bed end. The policeman strolled indifferently across the room.

The policeman stopped and stood quite still and looked curiously at the candle. He swung around sharply and stared at the dangling electric light bulb, and at Jum Peters. His thick-soled boots grated on the floor and grated on Jum Peters' nerves as he turned. Jum Peters stopped breathing and looked helplessly into his eyes.

"What happened to the light?" the policeman demanded.

"It—it done wen' out'n orduh, suh," Jum Peters gulped. "De wires—"

"Oh."

The policeman moved again. He peered at the stove, peered behind the stove, peered into Cerema's immobile face as he slouched past. He peered at the bed, raised the brown blankets and peered under the bed. He jerked around again. He glared at Jum Peters again.

Jum Peters licked his mouth. He tried to follow the focus of the policeman's eyes. The policeman wasn't staring into Jum Peters' *face*, but at something *under* Jum Peters' face. Jum Peters' head lowered itself spontaneously. His eyes

dilated to their extreme magnitude. His body became all at once hard and inflexible. He knew that the policeman was intently contemplating the coruscant belt buckle which glittered on the outside of his coat.

"Where'd you get all this stuff?" the policeman said. "Out of the dump?"

"Y-yes, suh. Out'n de dum'."

The policeman glanced queerly into Jum Peters' face. Then he resumed his inspection. He walked along the tin wall, dangling his night-stick from its leather strap. He stood over the crooked body of Washington Jeffers. He studied it dispassionately. He turned again and stared at Jum Peters.

Jum Peters knew what he was staring at. He was staring at the belt buckle again. He was noticing the difference in the length of the belt. Four holes difference, and the policeman was aware of it. On Mulvahey's middle, the end of the strap had lipped down like a dog's tail with four punctures. On Jum Peters' it barely extended enough to go around.

Jum Peters tried frantically to hide it with his hands. He leaned forward in his chair and sat like a man petrified. His eyes twitched and contracted with quick spasmodic jerks. His black face turned purple and became the color of the ashes in Mulvahey's grave.

"How often did this old guy come to visit you?" the policeman said.

Jum Peters did not reply. The policeman was deceiving him, playing with him the way the carrion dogs played with the dump rats when they caught them. Jum Peters knew. The policeman knew. Jum Peters knew the policeman knew. The policeman was only waiting . . . and waiting . . . and if that wasn't true, why was he standing in the doorway to block the opening and cut off the only way of escape!

"Well," the policeman shrugged, "I'll be goin' along. I guess there ain't nothin' here."

And he went out, leaving Jum Peters sitting there.

A long time later, Jum Peters shifted his position and looked down at the leather belt and laughed in a cracked voice. He laughed a long time. He stared at Cerema and laughed again.

"Ain' I de bigges' fool?" he said loudly. "Ain' I, huh? All 'count'n a no-coun' ledder bel'! Huh!"

He stood up, swaggering, and closed the door and secured the latch and lit the electric light with shaky fingers. And then, in the triumphant solitude of the shanty, he stretched himself full length on the bed and stared up at the roof. Fear went out of him. He told himself there was nothing to be afraid of. Probably the policeman had come here of his own accord, on the mere chance of finding something significant to work with. Probably he wouldn't come again. No one would come at all again, ever. There would be only Cerema and himself, together, and that was what he wanted.

He looked at Cerema and she was staring at him. Her eyes were as big as empty bowls and very white. They were motionless. Everything about her was

motionless, as if the full understanding of what had happened and what would happen had begun to flow into her with cosmic viscosity.

"Wha' you lookin' at?" Jum Peters demanded. "Huh? C'm heuh tuh me."

Cerema stepped backward, not forward, and stepped backward again, still staring.

"C'm heuh!" Jum Peters rasped.

"Lawd Gawd, no!"

Jum Peters looked at her and laughed. He stretched himself with the satisfied sleekness of a contented cat; he grunted animal grunts of anticipation. Presently he would get up off the bed and go to her, and pick her up in his arms and carry her back to the bed. But there was no hurry. It was good to lie and think, and know that he was quite safe and every single thing here belonged to him. The electric light was winking at him happily, and the candle had burned itself to a sputtering stump. Everything was peaceful and quiet. It was pleasant, too, to look at Cerema and watch the terror in her face, and know that she was staring back at him because she couldn't help it. It made him feel powerful and omnipotent and almighty.

He grinned when Cerema dropped trembling to her knees in the middle of the floor. He grinned again when she flung her face toward the ceiling and raised her arms despairingly and shouted luridly in a shrill voice:

"Lawd Gawd! Lawd Gawd, sen' Mulvahey back tuh me! Sen' Mulvahey back tuh tek care er me!"

"Ain' no Lawd Gawd gwine sen' back Mulvahey," Jum Peters growled, "ner neither no one else. You'm crazy."

But Cerema heard nothing but her own cry as she knelt there with closed eyes and twitching hands uplifted.

"Lawd Gawd, sen' back Mulvahey! Lawd Gawd—"

"Looka heuh," said Jum Peters irritably, swinging his long legs off the bed and standing very straight. "Wha' foh you wan' dat insignificant Mulvahey back foh? Looka heuh 't me. Ain' I better'n dat Mulvahey?"

He stroked himself proudly, triumphantly. He was still wearing Mulvahey's clothes, and they were too small for him, so he looked even bigger in them than he was. His fingers caressed the leather belt which fitted him snugly. He looked down at it and grunted. Huh! No dog's tail hanging down on *him*. No flappy little tail with four puncture-holes in it. And that shiny buckle looked better on him than ever it had looked on Mulvahey.

"Looka heuh," Jum Peters snarled impatiently. "Ain' I wo'th lovin'? Ain' I better'n dat sawed-off Mulvahey?"

Cerema didn't look. She was rigid on the floor, on her knees, with her arms stiff as iron over her head; and she was saying over and over:

"Lawd Gawd, sen' back Mulvahey . . . sen' back Mulvahey tuh me . . ."

Jum Peters strode toward her to take her. Then he stopped and grinned, and reached up and switched off Mulvahey's light. The shanty was all at once black

as a vault, and the only sound in it was the whimper of Cerema's breath and the murmur of Cerema's voice. Jum Peters stood quite still, but Cerema did not turn to see the hungry glare of his eyes or the twisting movements of his outstretched hands. Cerema was whimpering and moaning and praying . . . and the shanty was black with utter blackness . . .

Jum Peters drew a deep breath and took a step forward, and a sound stopped him. The sound was the creak of the door as the door opened. The door opened very slowly, and Jum Peters stared at it. And then Jum Peters became as rigid as a thing made of ice-cold metal. In the whole of him only one thing moved; his eyes opened and opened and opened, until they were boundless and protruding and stark white.

For a man stood in the doorway, and the man's face was graying black, and the man's clothing was wet and torn and loose-hanging and clotted with clinging lumps of slag. The man's arms hung lifeless at his sides; his decaying face moved not a muscle as he stared at Jum Peters with a boring penetrating gaze of awful portent. There was about him not one semblance of life or of motion; there was everything of death and decay and decomposition. And it was strange that Jum Peters could see him at all, for the darkness inside the shanty and outside the shanty was a winding-sheet of impregnable pitch. Yet the visitant was visible, and every separate detail of him was visible. And Jum Peters stared at him, and saw, and knew that he was a creature of the night, an earth-born, returned from the far-distant pits of gloom where *everything* is night.

Straight into the room the man came, and slowly, and directly toward Jum Peters, leaving the door open behind him. His clotted shoes made no scrape on the linoleum floor. There was no sound of breathing from his lips, no rustle from his garments. There were only his eyes and his two hands, held before him on a level with his face, with all ten fingers spread apart and seeming to grow larger and larger as they came closer to Jum Peters' protruding eyes.

Jum Peters stood like stone until all at once words bubbled from his lips.

"M-mulvahey! Don' touch me! Don' touch yoh hands tuh me! Go back tuh yoh grave-hole!"

Then he turned and ran, and ran headlong into the bed, gibbering and shrieking and moaning. With both arms outstretched on the railing of the bed, and his body pressed against the iron bars of it, he faced about again.

"Don't touch me!" he screamed.

But the figure came on and on, closer and closer, and Jum Peters' shrill voice became a cracked sob of terror. And Jum Peters stumbled away again, and tripped, and fell screaming to the floor, and scrambled up again by gripping the legs of the broken table.

"Lawd Gawd!" he shrilled, "don' come neuh me! Don' come no closer!"

He fell backward, because there was no other way to run. His big body clattered into the tin wall and quivered the shanty all around and above him. Flattened there, he stared at the approaching figure, at the hollow face and



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sunken eyes and wide-spread fingers, at the clotted garments and earth-blackened boots. And he could see nothing else. He could see no detail of the shanty behind that oncoming figure of undead death. Cerema was nowhere; the door was nowhere; the devil dark outside had come *inside*, inside the room, close and horrible and vicious.

"Go 'way, Mulvahey!" Jum Peters shouted. "Go back dar whar you come f'um!"

And then he fought. He fought because he had to, and because he was afraid not to. His hands lashed about, seeking a weapon. They clutched at the belt around his middle. They scraped against the glistening belt-buckle. Frantically Jum Peters whipped the belt out of its loops and seized it in his fist and laid about him with it. Whip-like, it whistled and whined through the dark, slashing again and again at the oncoming face of the man who was already dead.

And the man stopped. He stopped, and his lips curled into a smile of vague meaning as the stinging belt slapped against him. Again and again the leather lash cracked in violent contact with his sunken cheeks and never-blinking eyes. There was no sound, no faintest whisper except the whistle of the whip. There was nothing; nothing but Jum Peters' livid face and heaving chest, and the thin, vague smile on the whipped features of deathless rot.

Then, once again, the dead man stepped forward, and his smile vanished. His hands lifted slowly, convulsively; his lifeless eyes glowed with a dull sheen of luminosity, closer and closer to Jum Peters' perspiring jowls.

With a single great shriek Jum Peters turned and ran. He ran blindly. Head-long he stumbled into the upstuck legs of the broken table. He crashed to the floor, and his head thudded into the floor; and he lay there with a deep groan of semi-unconsciousness. And that was all.

The dead man leaned over him, and Jum Peters knew that this was so. The dead man's eyes were looking into his face and studying him intently, as if debating quietly and methodically what punishment was most fit to be meted out. And Jum Peters cringed violently away from that face, and from those eyes, and from the spread fingers of those hovering hands, as he would have cringed from a figure of flame. Jum Peters groveled into the floor and clawed with frozen fingers at the slick linoleum, as if he would scratch an aperture in the very earth beneath him and so escape the horror that loomed above his twisted body.

"Go-go 'way f'um me, Mulvahey!" Jum Peters sobbed. "Le' me be! Don' touch me! You'm *daid!*"

The face of the dead man altered as Jum Peters gaped into it. It became calm and peaceful and full of satisfaction, and it was smiling in a way that was not a smile at all, but a silent expression of deep understanding. And the hands reached down with motionless quickness and took from Jum Peters the leather belt which Jum Peters clasped in stiff fingers.

Jum Peters stared and saw then that the lash *had* made marks upon the dead man's features; for the marks were leering down at him in long, ugly, vicious

white welts. But they were bloodless and no real marks at all; they were only scars without definite form, white and ghastly visible upon their mask of graying decay. And upon the man's head, under its mat of crawling clotted hair, gleamed another white incision, a wide and hideous gash where Jum Peters' iron bludgeon had long ago, ever and ever so long ago, struck and brought death.

Jum Peters saw this, and the dead man's lips were parted, smiling, as those groping hands took hold of the leather belt and removed it from Jum Peters' fingers. Jum Peters stared and shuddered. For the man lifted the leather belt to his mouth and drew it very slowly and deliberately over his ashen lips, touching every inch of it in a strange caress. And he pressed the buckle of it also to his lips, as if he loved it with a strange affection. And then he leaned again and replaced the belt in Jum Peters' fingers; and he stood very straight, unsmiling and expressionless.

Jum Peters peered into his face and trembled violently with the significance of it. The expressionless contour of the face lingered in Jum Peters' eyes long after the dead man had turned away and paced slowly across the floor. And there the man stopped quite still and extended his arms, and into his arms came another figure with upturned face and wide worshipping eyes and parted lips.

The man's arms folded about this other figure and drew her into their embrace, and the lips of the dead man closed over the lips of Cerema; and Cerema and the dead man moved together to the door.

Jum Peters watched them, and into Jum Peters' eyes came swift and sudden horror. For he saw that Cerema, too, as she clung to the man's clotted body, became visible in the dark even as he was. A strange light, which was no light at all but merely a glow of life-in-death, swept from his form into hers and emanated anew from her, enveloping her and making of her a macabre, unreal woman. She clung desperately to her lover, and his arm was tight about her waist; and together they passed over the threshold into the outer darkness.

Jum Peters saw them, and crawled on hands and legs to the doorway, and lay there, watching. He saw them walk together across the dump and into the gloom of that vague, uninhabited terrain of devil dark which extended beyond. Side by side they walked; and they were the only visible moving things in a well of utter blackness; and they became smaller and smaller in the distance . . . and never once turned to look back . . . and so vanished, together, into the night.

Jum Peters stared and stared and stared. And presently a great horror welled into his soul, and he fell flat upon his face on the floor, with his hands clawing the threshold.

And darkness came over him as he lay there.

The darkness was gone when he awoke from it. Through the open door of the shanty streamed a shaft of burning yellow sunlight, making gold ingots of the upturned table and the stove and the metal posts of the bed. Jum Peters groped unsteadily to his feet and pushed one hand through his tangled hair, and rubbed

his eyes. He peered all about him in mute bewilderment, and he said aloud:

"I bin dreamin'. Ain' nuttin' like dat evuh *really* happen!"

But he saw something as he stared; and he strode quickly across the floor and stood over it. It was dead, and it was Cerema. And she lay on her back, with her face upturned to the roof and her hands flung out on the floor above her head, and her knees doubled beneath her, as if she had fallen backward from a kneeling position, and died that way.

Jum Peters gaped down at her and reached down to touch her. He drew his hand away very quickly and stepped backward without taking his gaze from her face. He did not understand it, because Cerema's face was happy and smiling and full of God's glory, and yet Cerema was dead. And certainly Cerema had died from fright and fear.

"Huh," Jum Peters grunted, and the grunt was a whisper. "Her allus wus queer. Her ain' no ord'nary woman."

But he knew he had been dreaming about the other thing, and he was not afraid any more, because the shanty was not dark. He strode to the stove and looked into the aluminum pot which stood there. Then he set about making a fire, because he was hungry. He went in and out of the shanty many times, gathering wood and papers and breathing great gulps of sunlight; and presently he kicked something and looked down and grunted. Then he leaned over and picked up the leather belt that lay there on the threshold, and he looked at it, frowning.

"I sho' 'nough must er been dreamin'!" he marveled. "Looks like I must er been runnin' roun' an' ravin'. Else how come dis bel' layin' heuh?"

But he slipped the belt through the loops of his khaki trousers and buckled it, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ain' gwine worry 'bout'n *dat*," he said.

He caressed the belt lovingly and examined it.

"Ain' no dog's tail hangin' down on *me*," he grinned. "Ain' no tail wid fough peep-holes in ut, danglin' down. *I ain' Mulvahey.*"

He was satisfied then. He made a fire and ate the stew in the pot when it was hot, and then he glanced at Cerema and said, musingly:

"Cain't leave *dat* heuh. Ain' no udder woman gwine lib heuh wid me while dat'm hangin' 'roun'."

He lifted Cerema's body to his shoulders, and found the shovel, and carried Cerema out into the dump. While he picked his way carefully through the piles of refuse, with Cerema's legs clasped like clay sticks in his arm and Cerema's head and arms dangling down his back, he thought of something else and said aloud:

"Huh. I'se gwine mek suah ob *dat*. Ain' gwine hab no mo' dreams like dat 'un."

He took Cerema to the place where he had buried Mulvahey's dead body, and he dug there with the shovel. He dug until the blade of the shovel

struck something soft and spongy, and then he climbed down in the hole and clawed with his hands. And then he stared for a moment into the face of the corpse, which was Mulvahey's face; and he said aloud, with relief:

"Huh. I knowed *dat*."

He climbed out again and tossed Cerema's body in on top of the other one, and filled in the hole. Then, with the shovel over his shoulder, he stumbled back to the shanty and closed the door and lay on the bed.

"Affer dis all ovuh fo' good," he told himself, "I'se gwine git me a woman foh tuh lib heuh wid me. Didn' cayuh nuttin' foh dat Cerema nohow. I'se gwine git me someun better'n *ber*."

He stretched himself and thought about it, and grinned with thinking about it. He looked up at the ceiling and felt very strong and powerful.

"I'se Gawd," he grinned. "Dat's who I is."

And he looked at himself and thought so. He stretched himself and gazed proudly at the leather belt around his middle. He thought about the dog's tail with the four holes, and he sneered. There was no dog's tail on him! He polished the buckle with his sleeve, and caressed the leather, and lay back, thinking. He thought about Washington Jeffers and the policeman and Mulvahey and Cerema; and he said, lazily:

"Who'm gonna know?"

He lay very still, breathing deeply; and he shut his eyes and thought about having another woman in the shanty, to live with him. He told himself the other woman would be better than Cerema, and there would be no Mulvahey to interfere.

"Bein' as I'se Gawd," he said thoughtfully, "I c'n git me de bestes' woman dey is, foh muhsel'."

So he dozed, and presently, vaguely, he was aware that his stomach hurt him. His stomach ached. He put his hands on it and pressed, and said aloud:

"Dat stew done dat. Cerema wa'n' no good cook nohow."

He drew a deep breath, and his stomach hurt more instead of less. He looked down and saw that his middle had swollen a little, and the belt was too tight around it. That was what hurt him. Scowling, he took the belt buckle in his hands and pulled it to loosen it; but it was stuck and wouldn't loosen. And suddenly he let it go and cried out shrilly:

"It moved! Lawd Gawd, it moved!"

Fear came to him then, and he stared with bulging eyes at the belt. He sat up, squirming against the bed post. With both hands he took hold of the belt and the belt buckle and strove mightily, desperately, to drag one through the other. He struggled until his hands were drenched with sweat and his face was a bloated reddish thing and his breath came in great gulps of agony. And when he took his hands away from the belt and stared down, he saw that the leather strap had wriggled through the gleaming buckle, and one hole was showing. A dog's tail with one puncture was dangling down.

Screaming, he twisted off the bed and stood erect, fighting at the encircling strap. He tore his fingers and wrists on the sharp edges of the buckle; he burned his hands on the leather. With huge eyes he glared at the belt, and his chest heaved up and down in mighty gasps, and mumbling sounds choked through his lips. A terrible pain was searing upward through his stomach and downward through his legs. He was on fire all over and inside, and he screeched with the agony of it.

And when he looked again, the belt had wriggled through the buckle another notch, and two holes were showing. A dog's tail with two punctures was dangling down.

He knew the meaning of horror then. He threw himself onto the bed, face down, and gripped the edge of the straw mattress with both hands extended, and pressed his body deep into it, striving to make himself smaller around the middle. He held his breath until his throat was full of whistling noises. He buried his eyes and nose and mouth in the unclean blankets and sucked the flannel with his lips. He clawed and scratched with his fingers. He beat the floor with his dangling feet.

He felt, he *knew*, that the leather band around his stomach was tightening. Tightening slowly, viciously, relentlessly.

Mad with the knowledge of it, he pushed himself violently off the bed and lurched into the middle of the room, where the upturned legs of the broken table stopped him. He hurled himself across the upstuck sticks of wood, sawing his body back and forth in frenzied desperation, striving to tear the leather in twain by chafing it. And all the time, as he twisted and writhed at his task, horrible sobs gurgled out of his mouth, and his eyes protruded, and his tongue grew thick and bloated in his teeth.

And he saw, looking down in his madness, that the leather strap had wriggled another notch through the gleaming buckle, and there was now a dog's tail dangling with *three* punctures. A terrible agony surged up through him, eating into his hands and legs and head and feet, driving reason out of his mind.

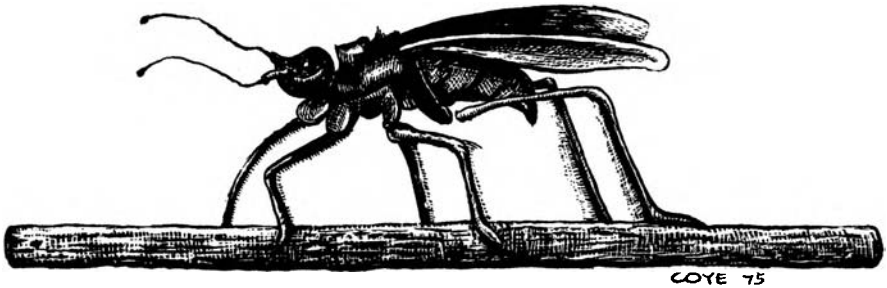
Screeching hideously, he staggered backward. His hands were clutching again at the belt, but they could find no hold, for the leather strap was a band of iron, cutting into the flesh of his stomach. It was wriggling into itself, closing itself tenaciously, and he could feel its movements. Momentarily he stood stock-still, glaring down at it. Then he looked about wildly for a knife, and there was no knife.

He shrieked again and again. He fought himself. He clawed at himself, at his face and breast and legs. He stumbled about the room, knowing only that he could not stand still. He crashed headlong into the tin wall and filled the shanty with the jangling vibrations of quivering metal. His voice rose higher and higher to a knife-like screech. He fell to the floor, rolling over and over. He clawed at the linoleum. He twisted on himself, writhing with the mad convulsions of a broken snake. He sobbed . . . and sobbed . . . and sobbed . . .

And suddenly he was very stiff and still, and his sobs ceased.

He was dead, and his outflung hands were locked in the smooth floor, with their fingernails buried from sight. His eyes were out of his head and his tongue filled his gaping mouth. His body was a rigid, twisted, swollen mockery, shapeless and hideous. There was absolutely no movement about him. Even the leather belt had stopped its wriggling.

The leather belt was a stiff band, sunk deep in the bloated flesh of his body. The buckle of it gleamed up at the ceiling, glittering and grinning. And the protruding end of the strap, like a dog's tail with four tiny incisions, hung limp and lifeless to the floor, with four empty holes gaping in it.



COYE 75

Boomerang

I DON'T EXPLAIN this story. It goes nowhere, it offers nothing, it has no beginning except in the thickness of a drunken man's tongue, and if it has an end I was not there to see it. Yet it troubles me and it will trouble you.

To begin with there were three of us in a place then called Kemal Sel's, which is in Sandakan on the northeast coast of Borneo, distant about seven days by steam from Singapore. The hour was near two in the afternoon and Sel's was an oven. The rain outside tumbled down from the hills, over the sandstone cliffs of Bahalla, in a deluge.

We were Kuyper, the cutch man, Matheson, the steamboat agent, and myself, Wilkes, of the B.N.B. Company.

"I ran into a queer one," Kuyper said.

He was home today from two weeks inland by river, by *prabu*, among the Kayan's of the upriver *kampongs* where still, despite trade and religion, the savages are children. He was home and glad to be home, and glad it was safe to drink again. He liked his rum. His belly was a barrel.

"I never did learn the fellow's name," he said. "We'll call him Smith. He—"

I said, "Wait." The fellow at the corner table was getting up. Was coming over.

He'd been there when we arrived, sitting in the gloom of his own thoughts. A white man but an odd one, bushy as a Hindu, his breed and age hidden by his beard. A derelict, perhaps, but that's a hard name. Few whites in Borneo are derelicts pure and simple. Drinking gets some; fever, homesickness, heat and rain and monotony get others.

He came over and nodded to us and said, "I've been working up nerve enough to ask to join you. Shouldn't, of course, but company's damned scarce and I'm fed up, being alone. Mind?"

You don't say no. Whites are whites, even with beards and sick eyes. I leaned back and pulled up a chair for him. We ordered drinks.

"This yarn of yours, Kuyper?" Matheson prompted.

Kuyper fished a pouch from his pocket—a new one, I noticed—and packed his pipe. "We'll call him Smith. I got the tale in a *kampung* deep in Kayan country. Diamonds up there, you know—small ones, not worth much, but plenty of them. Smith had his heart set on getting some."



You either liked Kuyper or you didn't. Most didn't, but it made no difference to him; he was big, important, he liked himself enough to make up for the dislike of others. I've called him a cutch man but that's leaving a lot unsaid. He'd come to Sandakan years ago as owner-captain of a freighter. He'd holed up, sold his ship and gone to work on a spirit farm, then bullied himself into a cutch concession and was rich now. And usually drunk.

He traveled a lot and told ugly stories. This was apt to be one of them.

"I was up there, you know, looking over the territory with an eye for raw materials." He drained his glass and blew smoke into it, grinning. The bushy man sipped slowly and eyed him.

"This fellow Smith wanted diamonds. He'd heard there were plenty in this particular *kampong*—place run by an old *kapala* named Makali. He was right, there was a fortune, but he was too late. Fellow named Phipps was there ahead of him. Young chap, honest trader—the stupid, plodding type. Smith, of course, was a bad one. Like me."

He laughed alone. Matheson glanced my way and raised an eyelid, which was safe enough then because Kuyper was too drunk to notice. The stranger smoked and sat and said nothing, but his eyes belonged in the yellow head of a *krait*.

"This fellow Phipps had been there a week," Kuyper said, "and the Kayans liked him. It was up to Smith, of course, to pay respects. Common decency. But Smith heard about the diamonds, heard that young Phipps had bought the whole mess, and he put his brains to work. You chaps ever see a *lansat* pod, the poison kind?"

"Seen the fruit," Matheson said. "Tastes like a plum."

"Not the kind I mean," said Kuyper, his grin ugly. "Comes from a dwarf variety found in that region. It's a pod, about the size and shape of a lima bean but fragile. Powders in your hand when dry. Deadly poisonous. Worst poison I know. Well . . . Smith had some that he'd picked and dried and was intending to bring back to—that is, to take back with him. He planted them in Phipps' tent."

It was going to be that kind of story. You could see it in Kuyper's ugly grin, in his red-flecked eyes. And not because he was drunk, either. Drunk or sober his idea of humor was always the same.

I signaled the Hainan waiter, but the bearded man was ahead of me. He said, "Mine, this time," and pushed himself up. He was long-legged as a mantis and walked with a limp.

He brought the drinks himself and sat down again, and there was a lull while Kuyper rolled his glass in his beefy hands to warm it. A finger tapped my shoulder and I turned to frown into the withered Javanese face of Kemal Sel.

"Mister Wilkes," Sel said. "I like to ask you question, please. Private."

I was an old customer. I walked with him to the far end of the room, where he held out a wrinkled hand in which something glittered.

"That man—he don't tell me his name—he give me this to pay for drinks. He say it worth money. I take it, but I don't know. I never see him before. Maybe

he cheat me.”

I looked at the stone and suppressed an urge to turn and stare at the bearded man. I thought, “It’s damned queer, his coming to our table like that, not naming himself.” The stone was a small uncut diamond. You don’t find them on the coast.

When I sat down again Kuyper was saying, “Well, this chap Smith went to old Makali, the *kapala*, with a cock-and-bull story that was sheer genius. He told Makali that Phipps was bad medicine. Phipps was the wickedest *bliam*—that’s a witch-doctor, you know—that ever lived. Most likely Phipps was planning to put a curse on the whole *kampung* and destroy it, and it might be a good idea to investigate. You can make those simple natives believe anything, you know.”

The bearded man said, “Can you?”

“You can if you’re as smart as Smith was,” Kuyper retorted.

“Well, the Kayans got Phipps out of his tent on a ruse and turned his stuff inside out. Of course they found the poison pods. That settled it.”

“They—killed him?”

“Not in so many words, no. Wouldn’t dare, with Divisional Forest Officers dropping in every so often. No . . . they just drove him out. Stripped him to his boots and trousers, hung the pouch of *lansat* pods around his neck and sent him packing.”

Matheson shuddered. The bearded man stared over the top of his glass and his breath made bubbles in the rum and his eyes smouldered.

I said, “He had no chance, of course. The jungle, the flies, fever, snakes, starvation . . .” and when Kuyper laughed I added, “Smith got the diamonds?”

“Bought them for a song. Smart man, that Smith.”

Matheson said, “A dangerous game. Perhaps he underestimated the chances of this fellow Phipps.”

“Eh?”

“With luck, Phipps might have reached some friendly *kampung*.”

Kuyper drained his glass and blew a loud laugh to the ceiling. “Alone, unarmed, with nothing to eat but dried poison pods, he might have licked the jungle? Don’t make me laugh!”

“There’s a thing called justice, Kuyper,” I said, “that sometimes gives a man strength to carry on.”

He shook his head, scowling now. “More than likely he ate the *lansat* pods to cut short his misery. Sensible thing to do, at any rate. One would be enough.”

There was a pause.

The bearded man said, “I think not. I think he would have saved them.”

“Eh? Why?”

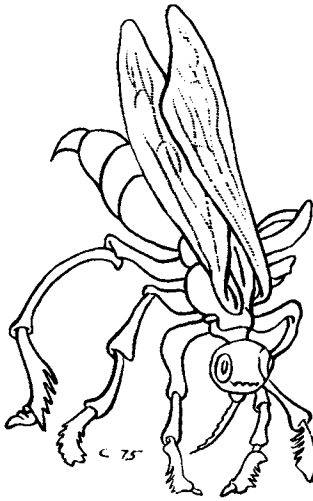
“For Smith,” he said and stood up.

He gave me the creeps, that fellow, and I was glad to see him go. I finished my drink and looked at my watch and said to Matheson, “Well?” To Kuyper I said, “Sorry to run off, but there’s work to be—” and then I was silent, staring.

Something was wrong with the man. His square face was the color of goat's milk and smeared with perspiration. He sat like wood, staring at an object the bushy fellow had left lying there on the table.

It was a tobacco pouch, an old one. I reached for it and my glance fell on Kuyper's glass.

Something more than rum had been in that glass. A little brown thing, only half dissolved, shaped like a lima bean, clung to the bottom of it.



The Crawling Curse

1.

VESKER, THE DUTCHMAN, paced methodically down the second-floor corridor and entered the room number 213. It was the room of the man he meant to murder; and without emotion or nervousness or any feeling whatever, he hid himself there to await his victim's arrival.

The hour was eleven o'clock at night, and Vesker's victim would return at eleven-fifteen. His name was Tenegai LaRoque, and he was a good man. He was part French and part Saputan, which made him a half-caste in the eyes of certain white men and a king invincible in the eyes of certain up-river natives. Government officials had thought enough of him to overlook the fact that he was the illegitimate son of a Saputan sorceress, and remember that he was also the son of a distinguished French officer. Consequently he held a position of high importance in Bandjermasin.

At present he was playing bridge with his wife and his wife's friends. It was his wife's arrangement. His wife was twenty-four and unforgivably lovely, and passionately French.

It was for her sake, as well as his own, that Vesker was hiding in Tenegai LaRoque's room. She and Vesker had planned the details together. Neither of them loved the man who was to be murdered.

The room was shadow-ridden and murky, and a very good place for Vesker's purpose. It was one of the best rooms in Bandjermasin's best hotel, which meant that it possessed two narrow windows and smelled a little and seldom saw light enough to dispel the lurking gloom. Tonight, as Vesker stood at the east window, the gloom was thick enough to be alive, and the view outside was one of black house-tops, twisted street-alleys, and occasional furtive eyes of ocher light.

Vesker stood and listened, and heard nothing; so he paced the room twice and then leaned against the wall with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was not afraid of what he was going to do. It would be quite simple and silent, and no one would know. No one but God, Vesper thought; and God was too busy with big affairs to worry about mere details.

There would be questions, afterward, and perhaps an official investigation. But that meant nothing. Bandjermasin was full of officious persons who had

nothing to do but investigate this and that, without learning anything.

It was eleven-fifteen. Vesker dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, and flattened his body against the wall behind the door. From his pocket he took a short length of lead piping, which was heavy and very solid. And he waited.

Presently he heard some one coming. The door opened, and a tall, stoop-shouldered shape stepped over the threshold. Vesker lifted the lead piping and brought it down again mightily. There was a crunch of bone, and a thin wheezing, and then the thump of a falling body.

Vesker stood over his victim and smiled thoughtfully. He put the weapon back into his pocket. Then he moved to the door, stepped out, listened intently, and came back again. He went to his knees and adjusted the limp body over his shoulder.

He closed the door of Tenegai LaRoque's room after him and carried Tenegai LaRoque to his own room, on the third floor. There he dropped his victim on the bed, and grinned, and breathed deeply with satisfaction.

No one would know.

LaRoque was dead. Vesker bent over him and listened for the sound of a beating heart, and heard nothing. He fumbled with the man's wrist and felt no pulse. So he went to a cupboard and took out four empty burlap bags, and dropped them on the floor. Then, from a bureau drawer, he took a large sheet of waterproof canvas and spread that over the carpet. He put the dead man on it.

While he was doing this, Tenegai LaRoque's wife came into the room.

She was undoubtedly beautiful, this woman. Her hair was black and her eyes were black, and a tropical sun had darkened her skin so that it stood out in startling contrast to the off-white of her evening gown. She was slender and not too tall, and the lines of her body were daringly revealed by the fit of her dress. She came and stood beside Vesker and looked down into the dead face of her husband.

"You are a brave man, Corlu," she smiled.

Vesker looked at her. He wanted this woman. From the very first night of their friendship, when he had met her at an exclusive social affair, he had wanted her.

"Any man can be brave," he said, "for sufficient reason."

"And I am sufficient?"

He took her in his arms and buried his lips in her black hair, and there was no need to answer.

"I love you, Renee," he said. But he did not love her; he wanted her. And he knew the difference. He held her against him until the perspiration of his arms left wet lines in her dress. Then he released her and said quietly:

"This will not be pretty. You had better go."

"You will come to me later?"

"As soon as it is finished."

She kissed him and touched the body of her husband with her foot. Then she

laughed softly, and went out, and Vesker locked the door after her.

He knelt beside the dead man, then, and undressed him, leaving him stark naked on the canvas sheet. Looking at what he had done, he smiled and said almost inaudibly:

“Yes, it will not be pretty. But it will soon be over, my friend.”

He went to the bed and raised the mattress, and took out a leather case which contained instruments. Then he went to the door again and made sure that it was locked. After that he loosened one of the bulbs in the chandelier above him, because the bright light seemed to threaten his solitude. And finally, with the case of instruments on the canvas beside him, he knelt again beside the dead man.

It would have been an all-night job had he not known how; but among other things he had studied medicine and knew the use of scalpel and hack-saw. And he had no personal feelings about the task. It was mechanical and did not frighten him.

He began with the dead man's leg, and at the first stroke of the knife the body twitched convulsively and the victim's lips parted to release a groaning monotone. Vesker stiffened and stared into the man's countenance. Then he listened again at the man's breast, and scowled. After that he worked very quickly.

He worked for an hour before he felt that he was not alone. The feeling grew upon him and annoyed him, so that he ceased his labor and rocked back on his knees. He had already removed both of his victim's legs and placed them to one side. The severed head and left arm lay with them on the canvas. Only the right arm remained, and it lay limp with its fingers slightly curled.

Vesker stared at it uneasily and told himself that the slow opening of the fingers was due to natural causes, and not to anything else. But a mist was forming over the fingers, or seemed to be, and it frightened him. The mist was like cigarette smoke, thin and gray and tenuous, and in motion. Was it taking form? No, of course it was not. That was only his silly imagination, and the lateness of the hour, and the unpleasantness of his task. And yet surely—

The mist *was* taking form. Vesker watched it and shrank away from it. It was a hand, now, like the hand of the dead man on the floor, except that these smoky fingers were malformed and exceedingly long. And they were descending slowly into the real hand. They were becoming a part of it.

The fingers of the dead man's hand opened, then, while Vesker watched them. The index finger pointed into his face accusingly, as if that other hand had given it the power of life. But of course it was not that; it was merely a mechanical reflex action caused by the severing of certain cords. Vesker laughed throatily.

He stopped laughing and held his breath. Over the victim's torso a second mist was forming, and the mist was becoming a face. Yes, it was a face, a woman's face. How could there be a woman's face like that? Was it his

imagination? No, because he was thinking of LaRoque's wife, and this woman was not LaRoque's wife.

It was almost no face at all, but what there was of it was vicious and sinister. The eyes were slanted and the cheekbones were high and the lips were full. The woman was a native, and very old. She was—

But that was foolish! There was no woman here at all. He was making her up in his mind and his inner consciousness was projecting an image of her. That was idiocy.

"There is nothing here," Vesker said aloud.

The woman's lips parted in a smile and seemed to form words to answer him. Vesker cursed and leaned forward and swept his arm through her. And then he laughed, because she was not there. She had never been there.

The hand of the dead man had shifted position on the canvas, and the index finger was still pointing at him. But that was only reflex action.

"I would make a poor professional," Vesker said, smiling. "My nerves are whisky-soaked."

He finished his task and put his instruments back into the case. Then he filled three of the burlap bags with portions of the dead man's body, and into the fourth bag he thrust the bloody canvas and the leather case. He wiped his hands on a towel and put the towel in his pocket. Then he unlocked the door and looked out.

The lights had been turned off in the corridor. Vesker took two of the burlap bags with him and went out, and locked the door after him. He carried the bags down the back stairs, and a car was standing in the side street. The street was deserted, and the car was his own. He placed the bags in the rear compartment.

He returned to his room, then, and made sure that every trace of evidence had been removed before he took the other two bags down to the car. Then he sat behind the wheel and drove.

He drove to the east end of the waterfront and dropped one of the four bags into the sea, after weighting it with heavy stones. He drove farther and dropped the second bag from the end of an abandoned dock. The third bag and the fourth he took with him in a rowboat and transported far out into the bay.

Then he returned to the hotel and went straight to Renee LaRoque's room and let himself in with his own key. And the dead man's wife was waiting for him.

2.

Four days later, when he first saw it, he was living in a private home in the European quarter with Tenegai LaRoque's wife. And he laughed, because he thought that the favorite cat of his mistress had eaten too much and was having cramps.

He had forgotten about Tenegai LaRoque. Four days had passed and there

had been an investigation. Government officials had questioned the hotel authorities aimlessly and foolishly, because LaRoque had disappeared. Where had LaRoque gone? No one knew. Perhaps he had tired of the heat and monotony of Bandjermasin and taken silent leave of absence to Singapore. Other men had done that. He would come back.

So they had stopped asking questions and they were now wondering what LaRoque would say when he returned and found his wife living with Corlu Vesker. Presently they would find something else to wonder about, and they would forget the whole affair. There would be a native uprising, or a Chinese merchant found stabbed, or something else to take its place.

So Vesker laughed when he first saw it, because he had nothing to worry about.

He was alone on the veranda, in the mosquito room. It was night, and a lamp burned on the table, and the wire netting was alive with droning insects. The glow of the lamp reached feebly out over the lawn and illuminated the veranda steps.

Vesker saw the thing on the steps. Then he saw what it was, and he recoiled so abruptly that he knocked the swizzle-stick out of the tall glass on the table beside him. For the thing was not a cat, but a human arm with a hand and five fingers, and it was sliding across the veranda floor toward him.

He stood up and drew a deep breath and walked toward it, because he did not believe what he saw. But he did not open the door of the mosquito room. He stood with his face pressed against the screen, staring silently. Then he shouted wildly:

“Renee! In the name of God, come quick!”

The thing was ten feet away and approaching like a large caterpillar, humping itself in the center and clawing forward with its five groping fingers. Vesker stood quite still and watched it. His eyes were wide and his face pale, and he was afraid.

“Renee!” he shouted. “Renee! Come out here!”

Then he took a small pearl-handled revolver from the bulging pocket of his linen coat, and flung the screen door open. He fired twice blindly and missed, and then he fired four times methodically. The thing ceased its forward motion and reared like a swaying snake, with its five fingers opening and closing in the air. It fell backward with the impact of the last bullet. Then it wriggled away with incredible speed, while Vesker clung to the door and gaped at it.

In a moment Renee LaRoque came and stared at Vesker and said shrilly:

“What is it? What were you shooting at?”

Vesker looked down at the revolver in his hand, and looked at the veranda floor, and shook his head heavily.

“I must be drunk,” he said.

But he knew better.

3.

Vesker wrote a letter.

It was the evening of the seventh day, and the lamp on the table threw his big shadow grotesquely over the paper. He was alone in the room and he was afraid, and his letter was both a confession and a lie.

"I killed him, and there was a good reason for doing so. You knew him, Fournier, so you will understand."

Fournier—Captain Jason Fournier—was in charge of the native police squad which patrolled the evil quarter of Bandjermasin's waterfront.

"He was a half-caste and a rotter, and he deserved to die, but I should not have interfered except that he was dragging his wife's good name in the dust. He was playing with another woman and the authorities suspected it. For Renee's sake I had to stop it.

"That night I went to his room at the hotel and argued with him. He was drunk, Fournier. You have seen him drunk, and you know how utterly uncontrollable he can become. He attacked me and I struck him, and when I bent over him he was dead.

"Why am I telling you this? Because I know it will go no further. We are friends. And I need your help. A terrible thing has happened, and I am going mad thinking of it. Four days after I had hidden his body, a horrible beast tried to get into the mosquito room to kill me. It was his hand, Fournier. As God is my witness, it was his hand and arm. *His!* I shot it, and it went away, but last night it came again and tried to get into my window.

"That was about two o'clock in the morning. I heard a scratching sound, like rats, and I sat up in bed and switched on a flashlight. The window was shut, Fournier. I always sleep with my windows shut, thank God. And the thing was coiled on the sill, with its five fingers flattened against the glass. It had forced the screen up, but the window was locked. It was awful! You will laugh at me, thinking I am drunk, but I am not drunk and I was not drunk last night when the thing came. What I saw was real.

"I screamed, Fournier, and rushed to the bureau for my revolver. But the thing has a brain, because when I turned again to shoot it, it was not there. Renee came running into the room—she is my guest, you know, for the time being, until she gets over the shock of her husband's infidelity—and she asked me what was wrong. I told her. She said I was mad. But I am not mad, Fournier. I was never more sane or sober in my life. And it was LaRoque's hand, his arm and fingers, trying to kill me.

"You must help me. I can not go to the police. The police would not know what to do, anyway. This is a terrible thing and driving me crazy. I am afraid, because LaRoque was not a white man but a half-caste, and part Saputan. They say his mother was a sorceress.

"What shall I do, Fournier? You have studied these things, and know

more than I. What shall I do?"

Vesker read what he had written. It did not give him courage; it frightened him more. Putting his beliefs on paper made him sure of them. He heard footsteps in the corridor outside his door, and he turned in his chair like a scared animal.

"Who is there?" he said harshly.

The knob turned and the door opened, and Renee LaRoque stood there. She wore yellow pajamas which were deep orange in the lamplight, and she had let her hair down so that it covered her shoulders and accentuated the white smoothness of her breasts. Vesker pushed his letter aside and stood up to meet her.

"Are you coming to me tonight?" she said softly.

"Yes."

"I'm tired of waiting, Corlu."

He held her passionately and kissed her until her eyes were wide with anticipation. Then he walked with her to the door.

"I will come in a moment," he promised. "I must finish a letter."

"To a woman?" she said quickly.

"There is no other woman. You know that."

She leaned in the doorway and pushed her hair back with smooth, slender fingers. Vesker lifted his hands and stepped close to her, and then stepped back again, laughing softly.

"As soon as I have finished the letter," he promised. And he closed the door after her.

He went to the table and began to read the letter over again, but it frightened him. He sealed it quickly, addressed the envelope, then turned the lamp low.

The corridor was dark, and Renee LaRoque's room was at the other end. He tiptoed along, smiling and rubbing his hands together softly. He was quite contented. Desire was greater now than fear, and in a moment he would forget about Tenegai LaRoque and about the creeping beast with five fingers.

He removed his necktie and carried it in his hand, and began to unbutton his shirt, because he was impatient. He was fumbling with the fourth button when he heard the scream.

He stopped abruptly. The scream was human, and came from the rear of the house where the servants' quarters were located. It was a vibrant shriek, full of terror.

Vesker stood quite still, waiting for it to come again, and after the scream he heard some one talking in a loud, frightened voice. Then he hurried down the corridor, and he was running when he reached the source of the sound.

It was the room of the Malay houseboy, Melgani. There was a light burning on the wash-stand, and the little brown-skinned native was kneeling foolishly on the carpet, with his bare arms uplifted and his face turned to the ceiling. From his lips poured a torrent of incoherent syllables which were prayers.

Vesker stood over him and frowned and shook him. The boy flung both arms around him and sobbed.

"What is it?" Vesker said sullenly.

The Malay muttered in his own tongue, pointing to the window. The window was half-way open and the screen was up. The white cotton curtains were moving indolently in the breeze.

"What is it?" Vesker said again. "Talk English, damn you!"

"Dem snake, *Tuan!*" the Malay whined. "Dem snake him come t'rough window affer me!"

"What snake?"

"Dem big white-color snake him hab twitchy head!"

Vesker stiffened and looked about the room fearfully. He said: "Where is it?"

"Him come 'cross floor! Him try climb on bed! Me yell, *Tuan!*"

"Where is it, I asked you!"

The Malay gazed about, too, and shook his head from side to side.

"Me—me not know, *Tuan.*"

And there was no snake. Vesker looked; Melgani looked. Holding the lamp, Vesker went to his knees and searched the floor, the corners, the bed-shadows. Rising, he searched the window-ledge, the wash-stand, the cupboard. There was no snake.

"Did you leave your window open?" Vesker demanded.

"No, no, *Tuan!* No!"

"Well, it's not here. It's gone again. Go back to bed."

Then he went out and walked slowly down the corridor to Renee LaRoque's room. But he was afraid again and he struck four matches, one after another, to light the way. And his hand trembled when he opened the door.

He thought at first that Renee LaRoque was lying that way for his benefit, because she was lovely and passionate and because she wanted him. She lay across the bed, limp and relaxed and nearly naked, with her hair dangling and her white throat exposed.

But when he had shut the door and tiptoed toward her, he saw something else.

She was not lying there for him. She had been flung there. Her lips were blue and parted, and her tongue protruded. Her throat was blotched with crimson. Her yellow pajamas were not open because *she* had opened them, but because they had been torn open!

Vesker could not believe it. He still expected something else. So he sat beside her and caressed her body with his big hands, and not until she failed to respond to his caresses did he realize that she was dead.

Then he moved away from her and stared at her, and licked his lips. He could not understand it. He still wanted her. She was limp and exquisite and warm, and yet she was dead. How could that be?

He leaned forward again to touch her, but terror took hold of him instead. He

leaped to his feet and paced the room, turning always to look at her. The lamp was burning on the dressing-table, and its pink silk shade made a bloody glow of the light. Beyond that the window was open. Renee had never slept with her window open!

The hand had killed her! The hand which had gone to the Malay's room, first, by mistake! God in heaven!

Vesker stared at her and felt cold blood climbing through his legs into his body. He could not take his eyes from her, but he did not want her now; he was afraid of her. She was no longer lovely; she was something dead and cold and horrible. But he was afraid to leave her.

He stood and stared, until he saw another face in the room. It was the same face he had seen on the night of the murder. It was the old native woman, nameless and strange, hovering over the body of Tenegai LaRoque's wife, and smiling—smiling triumphantly, as if she were proud of something.

Vesker said thickly: "Who—who are you?"

The woman looked at him. She was only the face of a woman. She did not answer.

"What do you want?" Vesker moaned.

But she was not there any more. There was only the strangled body of Renee LaRoque, and the lamp with the red silk shade, and the open window.

And fear. The fear was a living thing that seeped into Vesker's brain, undermining his reason. He rushed to the bed and glared into the space where the woman's face had hung. He beat at the space with his fists. He muttered and said meaningless things aloud. He screamed hysterically.

Then he sank to his knees and buried his face in Renee LaRoque's breast, and sobbed with terror.

4.

He did not mail the letter to Captain Jason Fournier. When he left Renee LaRoque and returned to his own room, the letter was not where he had put it. He found it on the floor, torn into very small pieces.

He looked at the pieces a long time before he could find courage enough to pick them up. And then he burned them. He was afraid of them.

"It is a good thing," he said. "If I had mailed the letter, there would have been trouble. If they ever learn that Tenegai LaRoque's wife is dead, they will hang me."

He would have to hide the body. Pacing his room, back and forth for an hour, he thought of possible hiding-places. It was a quarter after three o'clock, his watch said. He would have to complete the task before daylight, or the native servants would know.

He went back to Renee LaRoque's room and rolled the body in the top blanket of the bed. That was considerate, he thought. The blanket was soft and

woolly and would not irritate. Then he put the bundle over his shoulder and carried it upstairs to the top floor of the house, and up a final flight of wooden steps to the attic. It was very dark up here, and the only light was the probing eye of his flashlight.

He carried the body to the very end of the attic floor and laid it there. Then he held the flashlight in his hand and pointed its circular glare above him, to where three large cross-beams supported the sloping roof. One of those cross-beams was not a beam at all, but a hollow long-box containing seven thin water-pipes. He had opened it the first day, to repair one of the pipes, because the Malay servants did not know how.

He found a ladder and adjusted it carefully, and carried the blanket-wrapped body to the top of it. Resting his burden on the first and second beams, he sat a-straddle the third and pried the boards loose with his fingers. The seven pipes were of lead, and he bent them to enlarge the space. Then he stood on the beams and lowered the dead woman into the opening, and replaced the boards.

"They will never know," he said.

And he returned to his own room.

5.

Two evenings later he had dinner at the Karnery Club, and one of his friends said slyly:

"So you're keeping bachelor quarters again, Vesker. Eh?"

Vesker said: "They never stay long, these lovely ladies."

It was a very special occasion. A brilliant young government chap was being married tomorrow and having his last fling tonight. Exclusively stag. Imported whisky, wine for those who preferred it, and sufficient of both to make a regiment drunk. The doors of the Karnery Club were closed and locked to strangers. Every man of importance was present.

Vesker had come by invitation. They were sorry for him. They thought Renee LaRoque had walked out on him and taken the customary "silent leave." Most of Vesker's women had done that eventually.

"I suppose you'll be moving back to the shack, Vesker."

The "shack" was the small residential hotel exclusively reserved for government bachelors.

"Temporarily," Vesker smiled.

"Until romance wings through the window again, eh?"

"There are many fish in the water," Vesker shrugged. "Of course"—and he raised his eyebrows suggestively—"I loved her."

Ordinarily he would have been angry at their persistence, but tonight he did not mind. If they thought she had left him of her own accord, let them think so!

He spoke of it whenever the opportunity occurred. That was the best thing to do—make light of it. Left him? Of course, of course! Perhaps she had received

a message from her husband, and had skipped off to him. These women!

"You've had pretty good luck with them, Vesker. More than most of us."

"Ye-e-es."

"Ever really been in love?"

"Always," Vesker grinned.

He wanted to ask certain questions. Captain Jason Fournier was here, and, as a pleasant surprise, Lord Willoughby of the British North. Willoughby knew Borneo forward and backward. He had made a special study of Dyak lore, and knew every inch of the Merasi, the Upper Barito, the black-water country, the inland—everywhere. Willoughby had spent years among the Ibans, the Penihings, the Long-Glits, the Saputans.

But Willoughby was a hard man to talk to. You had to lead the conversation to him. And how could you switch it from women to natives?

"I have one rival," Vesker said, feeling his way along. "Heard recently about an up-river *kapala* who married fourteen women at the same time."

"Eh?"

"Probably a huge lie. The Dyaks don't do that, do they, Willoughby?"

Willoughby sucked the end of his pipe and uncrossed his legs. "It's possible," he said. "What tribe was it?"

"Damned if I know. The fellow was a Saputan, I think."

"Hard to believe, then, unless the chap was a *blian*."

One of the younger men frowned and said: "What?"

"A *blian*. Witch-doctor. Sorcerer. They have things pretty much their own way. If one of them wanted fourteen women, he'd take 'em."

"It's a queer thing, that," Vesker said. "The power they're supposed to have over the people, I mean. Absolute tommyrot, of course."

"Is it?"

"Eh?"

"You're a white man," Willoughby shrugged. "Being a white man, you can't see beyond the end of your all-important nose."

"You mean to say it's *not* tommyrot?"

"I do, emphatically!"

"I heard a tall yarn once," Vesker said hesitantly, "about a chap who murdered one of those fellows. Rather, a relative of one." Now he would have an answer to his questions! Willoughby would know and tell the honest truth. But how to ask him? How to put the case clearly, without overstepping the bounds of discretion?

"After murdering the native," he said slowly, "this chap cut the body up and buried it. And then, one night—"

One of the listeners rose, with a dry smile, and turned out two of the three electric lamps. The third lamp was behind Willoughby's chair, and Willoughby was leaning slightly forward with his face in the amber glare of it. The rest of the room was in shadow, made furtive and restless and sinister by Vesker's words.

"One night a horrible snake-like thing crawled into the murderer's room, for vengeance. It was the murdered man's arm, with five twisted fingers on the end of it!"

"And did it kill him." Willoughby asked quietly.

"I don't—" Vesker hesitated. He was going to say "I don't know," but then he would have to answer questions. And he wanted some one else to answer the questions. So he said bluntly: "Yes, it killed him."

Willoughby nodded, and the others watched him, waiting for his comment. He looked at them indifferently and said: "Well, what of it?"

"But such a thing isn't possible!" Vesker said.

"Why isn't it?"

"Why *isn't* it? Great Scott, man, a dead man's arm can't crawl out of its grave and—"

"Why not?"

"Well, how can it?"

Willoughby reached out and scratched a match on the cover of a book which lay on the table. He held the flame to the bowl of his pipe and stared at Vesker while he sucked the pipe-stem.

"With white men," he said, "it might be rare. Few whites know the secrets of necromancy. But you say the murdered man came of a sorcerer's family. A brother, was he?"

"I—I believe it was father and son," Vesker faltered. "Or mother and son."

"Well then, the father knew of his son's death, and the whys of it. So he raised the dead. You say the body was dismembered. He raised enough of it to return the murderer's compliment."

"You absolutely believe in necromancy, Willoughby?" a listener protested.

"Absolutely."

"Seen it work?"

"A hundred times, in Saputan *kampongs*."

"You should have some good stories, old chap."

Willoughby smiled. He had a reputation for his good stories. They were not bedtime tales, either. They filled his listeners with nocturnal dread and very real shudders. But men like that sort of thing.

"I'll tell you one," Willoughby said. "It's not pleasant."

Creaking rockers filled the room with suggestive sound as the men drew closer. A door opened and closed, and a newcomer said: "What the devil!" Jason Fournier silenced him with a curt word and made room for him. There was no other sound after that, except the breathing of many men and the bubbling noise of Willoughby's pipe. The lamplight was yellow and feeble.

"It happened in Ola-Baong, on the Upper Barito," Willoughby said. "The village *blian* was a wicked old Saputan named Mermingi. He had a particular grudge against a chap who had run off with his favorite woman."

Vesker stared. Behind Willoughby's chair a mist was forming. It was cigarette

smoke, of course—or pipe smoke. But why was it taking that particular shape? Why, in the name of God, was it becoming a woman's face?

"The Saputans, you know," Willoughby said, "have a particularly gruesome form of necromancy which leads a man to horrible death. They dress a corpse in the clothes of the intended victim and hide it away in the jungle, to rot. As the corpse decays, so does the victim. I've known men to go stark mad looking for the hiding-place, to avoid such a death."

Vesker's fingers were white and bony on the arm of his chair. The shape behind Willoughby's head was fully materialized now, and hideously clear. It was the same shape, the same face—the same sinister old woman! Great God, was he the only one who could see it? Were the others all blind?

"Merningi, the *blian*," Willoughby said, "obtained the body of an old woman who had died of beri-beri, and dressed it in the clothes of his intended victim. Then he toted it into the jungle and secreted it there."

But Willoughby was not saying that! Willoughby was no longer there! His face was the woman's face, with boring black eyes and withered lips. And his body was the body of a nearly naked Saputan woman, clad in dirty gray sarong and grass sandals! In God's name, could the others not see it?

"The next day the victim took sick. There was no reason for it; he simply became ill. He didn't know what Merningi had done, you see; so he couldn't help himself. Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he became violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Vesker was unable to cry out. He cursed himself for being an idiot. There was no woman there! How under heaven could any woman be sitting there when Willoughby was occupying the chair? He closed his eyes and opened them again, and the woman was looking straight at him, smiling significantly.

"The fellow died. He simply rotted away until the life was gone out of his body. I was with him when he gave up the ghost."

There was silence. Vesker leaped to his feet and cried harshly: "Stop it! Good God, stop it!"

Then one of the younger men turned on the lights and Willoughby, sitting in the chair, said with a dry smile:

"You asked for it, old man. Have a drink."

And the native woman was not there.

6.

Vesker sat up in bed and stared fearfully at the thing on the floor.

He had come home late from the club, and he had been drinking heavily. His lips were thick and sour. His sight was blurred. His stomach ached.

But before going to bed, he had packed all of his clothes and possessions into two big suit-cases, and this was his last night in the accursed house

which harbored Renee LaRoque's dead body. A tramp freighter, leaving Bandjermasin in the morning, would take him to Kuching.

Climbing into bed, he had removed his clothes and tossed them on a chair. And now they were on the floor.

They were on the floor, and something was dragging them!

Vesker sat and stared. He was dreaming, of course. The whole horrible affair, from beginning to end, had been the product of his own imagination. How could a dead man's arm have life? How could it crawl along, like a snake, and drag a handful of clothes in its curled fingers? That was madness. He was drunk.

Besides, he had locked his door carefully and turned the latch on the window. He looked at the window now, and it was shut tight. Faint moonlight glowed through it, illuminating the room. But the door was open, and the key was lying on the carpet!

Vesker screamed.

"I didn't mean to do it!" he shrieked. "I didn't mean to!"

The hideous thing paid no attention to him. It continued to crawl backward, pulling the clothes after it. How in the name of God had it gained admission? Had it clawed its way up the door and turned the lock with its fiendish fingers, after poking the key loose? Was there nothing it could *not* do?

But it was taking his clothes. What for? What good were his clothes? Did it think to imprison him in his room? Was it as foolish as that?

Vesker watched it. It slithered backward over the threshold, into the corridor. It turned to the right. Then it was gone.

Vesker leaped from the bed and slammed the door shut. He had other clothes; they were in one of the two suit-cases! At the club he could find a room for the rest of the night, and in the morning he would be far away from dead bodies and crawling hands, and faces that came from nowhere to leer at him.

Faces! He was on his knees, fumbling with the suit-case, and he remembered. He stood up, pawing his naked chest, stood with his eyes wide and his legs stiff as wood, huge and grotesque in loose-fitting pajamas. From his lips came a thick, bubbling sound.

He turned and ran to the door, and opened it. There he stopped, because the darkness of the corridor terrified him. He groped back again and sat on the bed, clawing with his fingers until the bedclothes were wrinkled and sweat-stained.

"Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he became violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Willoughby had said that. No, no, the woman had said it! Almighty God, the thing had taken his clothes! If he did not get them back—

He rushed to the open suit-case and pushed his hands deep into it, searching for a flashlight. Gaining his feet, he stood swaying. Where had the horrible creature taken his clothes? What dead body—

"Oh God, no!" he sobbed. "Not *her!* Not up there!"

But there was no other dead body. The thing had to have a dead body. Up there in the attic, in awful darkness, *she* was lying. Up there where he had put her, in the wooden casing which covered the water-pipes.

He ran to the door, and the glaring eye of the flashlight preceded him crazily as he groped into the corridor. The long corridor was full of moving shapes and suggestive sounds. It loomed over him and under him, clutching at him as he paced down it. He stopped twice and looked behind him. Merciful God, why had he hidden the body up there?

He gripped the railing with his left hand and held the flashlight rigid before him as he climbed the staircase. The light only made the surrounding darkness more hideous. Below him, when he was half-way up, a well of frightful gloom lay waiting. Above him was the singsong of the wind outside the house, and the creak of wooden floors inside.

On the upper landing he found one of his socks. The hand had dropped it.

He climbed the final flight of wooden steps, counting them subconsciously as he went. Seven of them. Seven terrible ascents into a vault of horror. His slippers thumped thunderously. The hammering of his heart was even louder.

He could hear his breath whine in and out, and at the top of the seven steps he stopped to push the wet hair out of his eyes. The flashlight made a ghastly yellow-ringed glare over the floor. Then he began the march of torment to the far end of the chamber.

And then the face came.

It was the woman's face, and it hung before him in the light, like a shadow. Its eyes drilled into him, and a triumphant leer curled its thin lips. But it made no attempt to stop him; it hung always before him as he stumbled forward.

With one hand he lifted the ladder into place, because he feared to put down the flashlight. Above him hung the three black cross-beams. And the face sat on every rung, always before him, as he ascended.

He stood swaying on the beams, high above the floor. The ceiling sloped over his head. Once, when he lost his balance and clutched wildly to steady himself, the flashlight threw a crazy figure 8 over ceiling, floor, and wall. And the face was always within it.

Trembling in every muscle, he lowered himself slowly and straddled the coffin which contained Renee LaRoque's body. He placed the flashlight between his legs, so that his hands were leprously white in the gleam of it as he leaned forward to loosen the boards. And on the other end of the beam, where the glare was pale, the face sat and watched him.

The boards came loose in his fingers. He dropped them and shuddered violently as they clattered to the floor beneath his perched body. One after another he let them fall. Then he stared at the thing in the coffin.

The face of Tenegai LaRoque's wife stared back at him, silent in death. His own clothes covered her body. Her yellow pajamas and the soft blanket lay neatly folded under her feet. And on the other end of the beam, the old woman

was still watching him.

He clawed madly, raking his fingers in dead flesh and tearing his clothes loose from it. His own breathing was louder than the sound of his exertions. The flashlight made his task hideous and terrible, until the dead woman lay naked under his outstretched hands.

Then he leaned back, with madness in his eyes. He held the clothes in the crook of his arm and stood erect on the beam, rocking from side to side. He glared at the face of the native woman and laughed at it, and the laugh was a jangling cackle.

"You won't kill me!" he screamed. "I know who you are! You're LaRoque's mother! You're the sorceress! But you won't kill me! I'm too strong for you!"

The face sat on the end of the beam and smiled triumphantly. It did not answer him. When he turned the flashlight and walked along the beam to the top of the ladder, it did not follow him.

He put one foot on the ladder and started down. His left hand pressed the crumpled death-clothes against his body. His right hand held the light and clung to the wooden rungs as he descended.

He reached the floor and stood swaying, and looked up triumphantly.

"You won't get me!" he shouted.

And then he stiffened. Above him on the black end of the third beam, something stirred. Vesker's lips writhed open to release a scream of terror. He flung himself backward.

He fell, and the flashlight clattered from his hand. His scream died to a whimpering moan. On hands and knees he clawed for the light, blindly, with his horrified gaze riveted on the thing above him. Then his twisted body became rigid, and he screeched wildly.

"No! No! Don't touch me! Don't—"

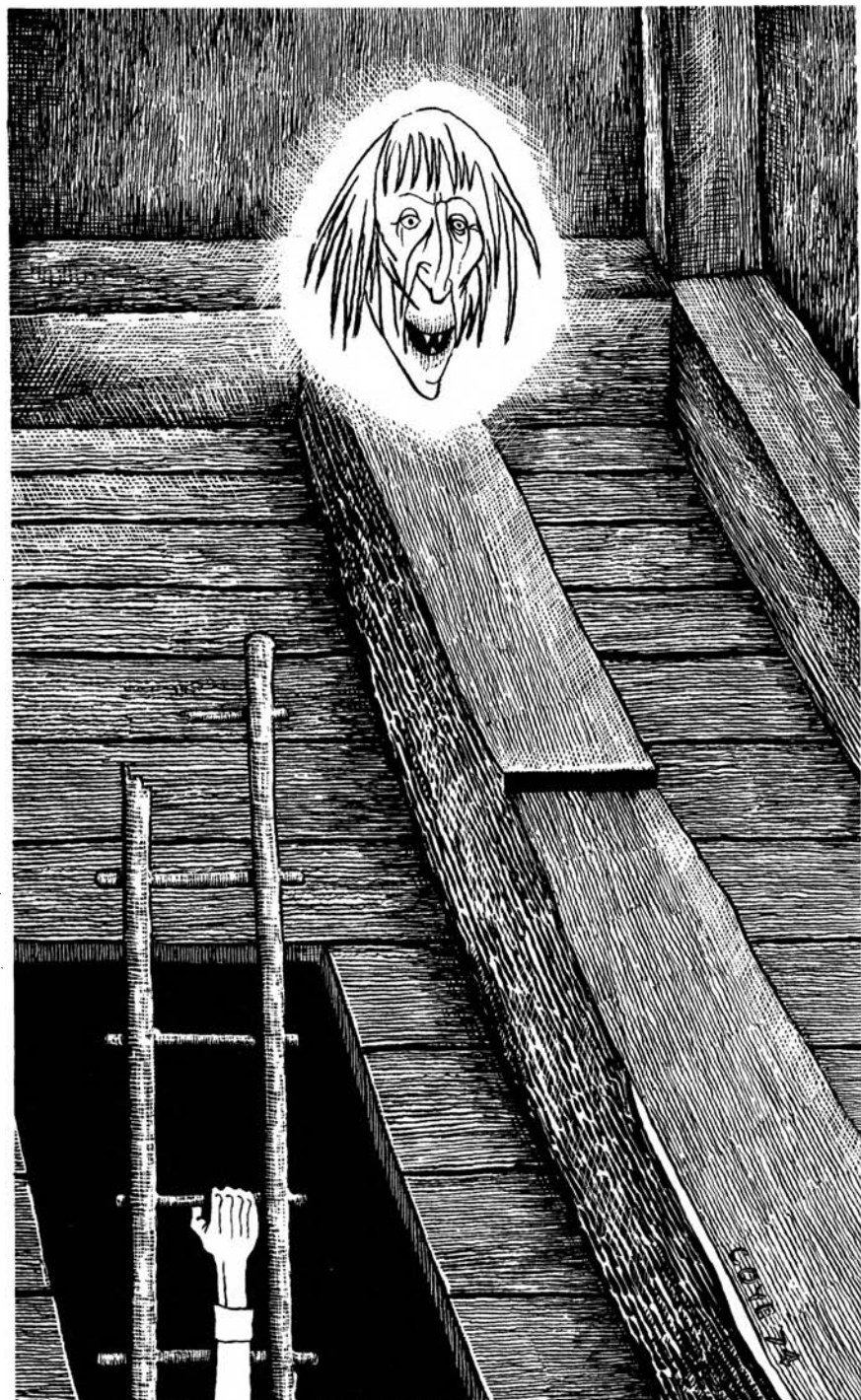
Above him, on the cross-beam, the thing slowly coiled.

"Don't touch me!" Vesker gibbered. "Don't—oh God, don't!"

The thing shot out and down with the speed of a leaping snake. It struck with vicious strength. A white, cold arm encircled Vesker's neck. Five twisted fingers buried themselves in the flesh of his throat.

Vesker's screech died to a gurgle. Wildly he staggered to his feet, clawing with both hands at the living-dead fingers which strangled him. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead. His eyes opened to hideous bigness and became white, glaring crescents. His breath choked in his throat. His face purpled.

He stumbled toward the exit, blindly. But he did not reach it. His legs went limp beneath him and he sagged to the floor. And the five living-dead fingers finished their task.



Purr of a Cat

SHE WAS A FORLORN-LOOKING THING, and it was raining, and I had driven so long over that lonely road, without a soul to talk to, that I'd have welcomed the devil himself for company. So I stopped.

"All right, sister," I said. "Jump in."

"Thank you," she said. "I—I'm so cold."

I snapped the heater on. Ordinarily I don't use it when driving alone at night, because it makes me drowsy and I'd be apt to fall asleep at the wheel. But she was shivering, so I leaned across her and thumbed the switch—and suddenly got a good look at the girl.

My breath stuck in my throat. I suddenly forgot all about my assignment to paint pretty pictures of brooks and mountains. One look at this girl was like a shot in the arm, jolting to life the *artist* in me. The hell with the Nu-Way Calendar Company and its paltry thirty bucks a week! The most beautiful girl in the world was sitting beside me!

I stared at her without apology. A man has a right to stare at such dazzling loveliness. I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her toward me, and soaked up the wonder of her flawless skin, the deep dark glow of her eyes, the warm red invitation of her mouth. "Lord!" I whispered, wonderingly. "Oh, Lord!"

She wasn't scared. Those deep eyes returned my stare without blinking, and she actually smiled a little—or maybe that was my imagination.

"What's your name?" I asked hoarsely. "Who are you?"

"Roseen," she said. "That's my name: Roseen."

"Where do you live?"

"A little way from here, near Endonville, With my father."

"You're going to pose for me!" I cried. "You understand, Roseen? I'm going to paint a picture of you!" I almost let my eagerness run away with discretion. I almost told her *how* she was going to pose for me, but yanked the words back just in time. That would come later, when I'd had a chance to win her confidence.

With an effort I stopped staring at her and got the car rolling again. But my gaze kept jerking back to her, to her face, to her wet black hair, to the ivory smoothness of her slender throat. And when, presently, she shrugged out of the

wet raincoat she'd been wearing, I stared so hard that I damned near ran the car into a highway fence.

She wasn't wearing much under that coat. Just a cotton dress, sort of old-fashioned. It was damp and it clung to her body, revealing the perfect thrust of her full young breasts, the flat line of her stomach, the inviting flow of her legs. Every little nerve in me began to pound.

"Are you going far?" she asked.

"To Endonville," I muttered, after a moment. "I'm supposed to stay there a week or so, painting the beauties of this backwood region."

"You will not like it there," she said. She moved closer to me and I could feel the warmth of her. It was a strange, intoxicating kind of warmth, like too much raw liquor running in my blood. It put wild ideas into my head.

"Why won't I like it there?"

"The hotel is small and dirty," she replied. "Perhaps my father will let you stay with *us*."

I don't know what it was—maybe just a germ of common sense fighting to crawl through my eagerness and warn me—but for a second I felt a bright, sharp premonition of danger. I wanted to say, "Oh, no, you don't!" and tell her I was wise to what happened to careless guys who accepted her kind of invitation. But I didn't say it.

Instead, I whispered, "Swell! That would be swell!"

She slid closer. "I think it would be very nice, too," she said softly—oh, so softly! And then I stopped the car. What the hell—it was so easy, so natural. I just took her into my arms and shaped my lips to hers. I felt her slim little body throbbing under my hands, and her breasts pulsing hard against me. And the low, purring sound that filled the car was not what I thought it was. It wasn't the heater. It came from deep within her—the sound a kitten makes when it is very warm and contented.

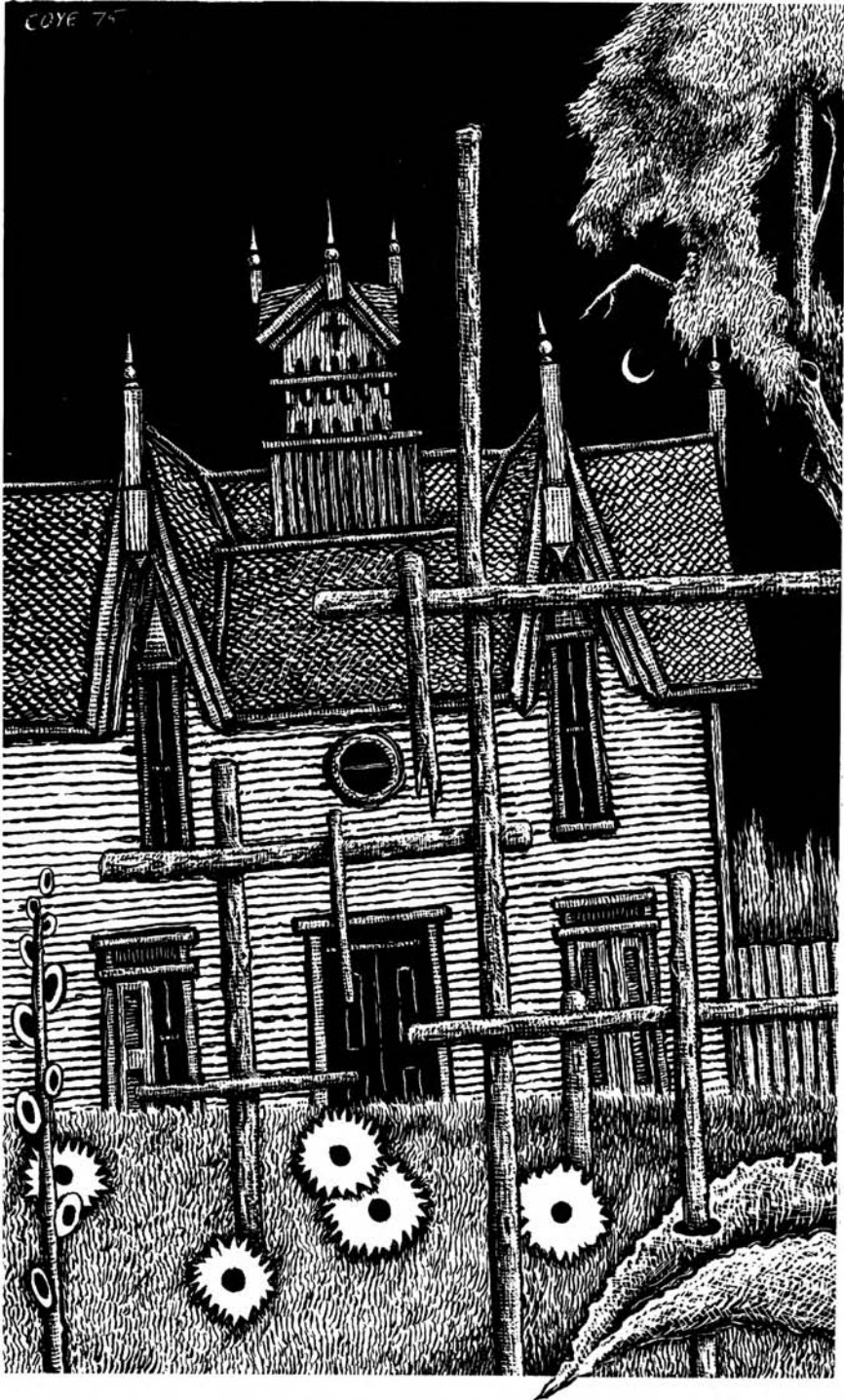
It was after midnight when we got to Roseen's house. There hadn't been another house along the road for five miles or more—nothing but deep black woods and stretches of swamp, with the rain pounding down in a wild fury. We stopped now, and I gave the house a leery look. It wasn't too inviting, what I could see of it in the dark. It looked old as the hills. The rain had flooded the yard, and the ancient building appeared to rise out of a boundless swamp.

But there was a light burning in one of the downstairs windows, and that looked good to me after so many miles of forsaken road. And Roseen's hand was warm in mine as she said, "Come! We'll ask my father if you may stay!"

Her father—she introduced him as Felcher Davis—got up off a shabby old divan and stood scowling at me. He was a big man, heavy-boned with an abundance of flesh, though not remarkably tall. His eyes were small and black, and set deep in fat, and he had thick gray hair that grew almost as long as a woman's.

"Your name's what?" he said. His voice had the breathlessness of a whisper,

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but it was a whisper you could have heard a long way off.

"Blake," I told him. "Frank Blake."

"He wants to paint my picture, father," Roseen said, smiling.

The old man stared at me a while, then shrugged and sat down again. "He can stay if you want him to," he said. The girl's hand touched mine, and she led me to the door. When I looked back, Felcher Davis was still sitting there, just sitting, like a fat, bloated gnome in the yellow light of an oil-lamp that needed cleaning.

"You must be tired," Roseen whispered. "Come!"

That was a hell of an old house! What little furniture it contained was about ready to disintegrate; the carpets were so threadbare you could see the floor through them. But I wasn't interested in the house. Not with Roseen beside me, showing me my room, telling me softly that her room was right next to it along the hall—with a connecting door.

"It is locked," she smiled, "on my side, Mr. Blake. You see?" She steered my hand to the knob and I tried it, and it was locked. "But maybe it will not be always locked," she whispered. "Especially if I am sure my father is not listening . . ." She melted into my arms and tipped her lovely head back, with her eyes shut and her red lips parted for a kiss. When she slipped out of my room a little while later, I didn't think the connecting door would be locked for long.

I pulled my pajamas out of my suitcase and got into them, wishing the room were a little less gloomy. It smelled of dust and age and disuse. There was no curtain at the window, and the glass rattled every time a gust of rain struck it. The wall-paper was damp and stained, and the bed was a prodigious old four-poster that could have handled three of me without any crowding.

Anyhow, I went to bed and tried to sleep. The rain beat against the house, and the wind howled. I heard a door slam shut downstairs. Curiosity pulled me out of bed, to the window, and I saw Roseen's father prowling out to the road. I wondered where he was going this time of night.

Just for the hell of it, I tried the connecting door, but it was still locked. So I crawled back into bed.

I was over-tired, I guess, or else very emotionally worked up. Anyway, I was a long time getting to sleep, and then I did some dreaming. I rode a galloping nightmare.

In this nightmare I was stark naked and wandering down a long, dark hall. Not just an ordinary hall, but a black tunnel that had no ending and was filled with a strange assortment of sounds—and shapes. Some of the shapes were cats. White cats. They walked along with me, rubbing against my legs. One of them leaped to my shoulders and purred softly against the curve of my neck—a pleasant sensation, warm and thrilling that did something to the temperature of my blood.

I heard a lot of whispering, a lot of feline sounds that were disturbingly human. There was no end to the tunnel. I just kept on walking, on and on, until the eeriness of the place took hold of me and I was terrified. Then I ran. I

ran away from the cats. I kicked at them and screamed at them, got hold of the one on my neck and flung it against the tunnel wall.

I ran until I woke up, and when that happened I wasn't in bed any more, but in the middle of the room, throwing my arms around like a madman. I was naked, and drenched with sweat, and the echoes of my screams still lived in the darkness around me.

I was afraid of the dark. I fished a match out of my trousers and lit the lamp on the old-fashioned bureau, then sat on the bed until my body stopped shaking. There was a queer, throbbing sensation in my neck, where I carry a strawberry birth-mark about the size of a quarter. I got out my shaving mirror and looked at the mark. It seemed redder.

But then common sense won out. I called myself a damned fool, went back to bed and slept like a babe. When I woke up, my watch read nine-thirty and the room was full of sunlight.

I got dressed and went downstairs, and found everything laid out for my breakfast—scrambled eggs, toast, coffee, a pot of marmalade. The food was only luke-warm, and there was a note propped against the salt-shaker.

"Father and I must go to work," it said. "Please make yourself at home. I shall look forward with great longing to your company this evening." It was signed, "Roseen."

Queer people, but generous!

Well, I hung around. If she had to work days, then I'd paint her picture in the evenings. I thought about it a lot—how I'd paint her. If I could get her to pose for me against the drab, musty background of my room, her white young body glowing with life against those deathlike shadows . . . what a picture! I thought about it a lot. Would she consent to bare her body to a stranger?

I went up to my room, set up an easel and went to work on the background. Then I got restless. That old house was too still, too empty. I was jittery again, and went prowling around to reassure myself there was nothing to be afraid of.

It had no right to be still standing, that house. Its timbers were rotten; there were gaps in the walls and floors through which rats and other crawly things probably roamed at will. I tried to open some of the windows, and couldn't. When I looked closer to find out *why* I couldn't, I found they were nailed shut.

About eight o'clock it got dark.

I was sprawled out on a couch in the kitchen, tired and half asleep—though why I should have been tired after doing nothing all day, I don't know—when all at once I sensed something beside me. I hadn't heard anything come in, but something was there. I opened my eyes, and at that moment a low voice whispered my name, and a pair of eager red lips closed over my own. Roseen!

What a greeting! What a way to come home! There she was on her knees beside the couch, with her arms curled around my neck and those hot red lips of hers scalding my mouth with a kiss that sent fever-flashes through me.

She must have come home from work *and* changed, because she wasn't

wearing any ordinary house-dress or work-dress; the gown she wore belonged on some Southern Belle of a century ago—when they bravely showed the world forty-nine percent of their beautiful breasts, and you wondered how in hell they kept the dress from slipping down to reveal all the rest of them.

Did I say Roseen was beautiful? In that gown she was more. She almost wasn't real.

I held her off at arm's length for a moment and studied her, stared at the smooth white shape of her bare shoulders, at the soft, throbbing swells of her exquisite bosom. I bent closer and touched my lips to her skin, in a gesture as old as the gown she wore. And I knew then that I was going to get that gown off her, that I was going to see her in the nude and paint her in the nude and . . . anyway, I knew it. Nothing was going to stop me.

"Where's your father?" I said, trying to be casual.

"He won't be home until late," she declared, smiling. And added, with her mouth close to mine and her dark eyes looking up into a part of me that no woman's eyes had ever discovered before: "Very late, my beloved."

Well, hell, it was easy. She knew she was beautiful. She was proud of her beauty. She *wanted* me to paint her.

We went upstairs and I showed her what I'd already done—the dark, shadowy background, the faint suggestion of an old oil-lamp burning off-stage in a corner. I explained where and how I wanted her to stand. She said softly, "It will be lovely. Very lovely." The old-fashioned gown rustled on the floor, and there she stood, and for a second I had to shut my eyes.

I'm no amateur, you understand. I've really studied art, and I've done some pictures, mostly nudes, that have been highly praised by the critics. I know what the human body looks like, both male and female. I know the names of the bones and muscles in it; I know the textbook names for breasts and shoulders and hips and legs. But I forgot all those things, looking at Roseen. She was just—woman.

All woman, and so stunningly beautiful she stopped the beating of your heart and caused your breath to lump up, strangling you. God, what perfection! Pale shoulders curving into arms that were made for an eternal caress. Full, flawless breasts with a hint of arrogance to them, as though they were proud of their exquisite loveliness and recklessly willing to accept any challenge. Long, glowing legs that flowed like milk into the most feminine of hips . . .

I stepped forward to pose her, and knew I was going to have trouble. Because she was made for love, and I wanted to paint her; I really wanted to *paint* her, to get that wondrous beauty down on canvas for others to marvel at and thrill to. It was a fever in me, along with other desires that threatened to burn every living thing inside the taut, trembling shell of my body.

When I touched her, I almost lost my head. She was so warm, so alive, so—so eager. But, by God, I posed her and went back to my brushes, and got to work.

I worked maybe an hour, and it was torture. Every time I lifted my eyes to

look at her, my control threatened to explode. But I stuck to it. The picture began to take shape. I'm a fast worker, once the mood is on me, and I got things done.

Then she sighed a little and came toward me. She put her head against my shoulder and closed her eyes. "I—I am so tired, so sleepy, my beloved," she whispered. "We will rest a while now . . . please?"

I remember very little after that. But I do remember turning to pick up her gown, which lay where she had dropped it an hour ago. I remember the light, languid touch of her fingers as she caught my arm and drew me back. I remember standing there, staring down at her, at the red smile on her parted lips, the trembling of her upraised hands, the pale, smooth wonder of her body.

The lamp sputtered and went out, but hell, I'd have blown it out anyway.

I was a sick man when I woke up. Weak. It was broad daylight and there was a sound of rain at the window. I swung my feet out of bed and sat up, and the room began swimming. It was like a terrific hangover, only worse. My head ached, there was no strength in me, and that burning sensation was in my neck again, only worse.

I gazed for my watch and couldn't believe my eyes. Eleven o'clock! I'd slept fourteen hours—or *had* I slept? Where was Roseen?

I got up and knocked on the connecting door, opened it and walked into her room. I hadn't been in her room before, and it surprised me. The curtain was drawn at the window. The place smelled dusty and dead as though it hadn't been touched by a breath of fresh air in years. I went slowly over to the bed, and saw that it hadn't been slept in. It didn't look as though it had been slept in ever. I pulled the covers back and they were so old, so yellow, so brittle, that they fell apart in my hands.

I replaced them and hid the damage. Something told me it would be safer that way. Roseen had lovingly whispered a promise to pay me a visit in *my* room, but I hadn't been invited to cross that threshold into *hers*. There might be a difference.

I went downstairs, and as before, my breakfast was laid out in the kitchen. The note this time was shorter. "Darling," it read, "I shall not live until I am with you again tonight." I wondered if the old man had read it, and if so, what he thought about it.

After eating, I felt better and went upstairs to work on the picture again. I worked until mid-afternoon, fighting off a weakness that was at times almost overpowering. I finished the background.

It occurred to me then that I ought to build a crate for the picture; otherwise, when I left here, it might be banged up in the car on those bad roads. I went through the kitchen and down a flight of decayed steps into the cellar, in search of tools and some wood. Right away I began to feel uneasy.

There was an odor in that cellar. I tried to tell myself it came from the

damp dirt floor, but it was not that kind of odor. I poked around, getting easier by the minute. It was a gloomy hole, filled with refuse, the remains of discarded furniture. There were two small windows, high up against the ceiling, covered with cobwebs.

Something *lived* down here. The odor was a dead giveaway. An animal of some sort, or several of them . . . I suddenly remembered the cats that had pursued me in my nightmare. Maybe that hadn't been a dream, after all. But if there were cats in the house, why hadn't I seen them upstairs?

I searched the cellar thoroughly, but if there were cats in it—or any other breed of animals—I couldn't find a trace of them. Just that stifling smell. When my jitters began to get the best of me, I went back upstairs. An hour or so later it began to rain, and I had to light some lamps.

I was in the parlor when Roseen came, and as before I didn't hear a sound until she was suddenly there before me. She wore her Southern Belle dress again. I got up off the divan and put my hands on her shoulders, stared at her and said softly, "You make less noise than anyone I've ever known. How do you get around? Do you float?"

Her red lips laughed at me, and she put an end to my questioning by kissing me. That was answer enough! With her gorgeous body pressed against mine, and my arms around her, I lost all interest in quiz programs. After a while I drew her to the divan.

"Tonight," I said, "we'll finish the picture." The mere thought of having her pose for me again brought out the sweat in me and put a blow-torch in my blood-stream. Her slim, white body against the musty shadows of that upstairs room . . . her mouth smiling at me . . . her warm eyes mocking me as I posed her . . .

Tonight, with the rain beating against the windows, I would get something more than art into my picture. I'd get *mood*. It would be a picture to drive men crazy. It would make me famous. And yet, even though the artist in me was wild with eagerness, something else in me whispered an eerie warning. This house, the odor in the cellar, the decayed bedroom next to mine . . . it all added up to a mystery that grew more sinister every moment. Who *was* this girl Roseen? Why did she and her father live in such a place? Where did they go in the daytime?

I could get an answer to that last question, anyway, by asking her! I asked her. "Look," I said. "Did you just get home from work?"

She nodded, smiling.

"But surely you don't work in that dress!"

"I came in quietly," she whispered, "and changed into this dress—just for you. Am I not beautiful in it, my beloved?"

"But," I protested, "I didn't hear you come in. I—"

She snuggled closer, took my arms, and wrapped them around her. What could I do? With the lamplight glowing so wonderfully on the pale satin of her shoulders and breasts, and her parted lips silently pleading to be kissed . . . hell,

I thought, the questions could wait.

Suddenly, from the adjoining room, I heard the voice of her father, urgently calling her name. "Roseen! Come here! Come quickly!" The girl squirmed from my embrace and sprang to her feet. Evidently her father's tone of voice was significant. She sped across the parlor and over the threshold, without even a glance at me.

I stood up. The eerie silence of this old house was such that any sudden outcry bred tension. *I* felt tense, too. I cat-footed across to the doorway and looked into the next room. Roseen and Felcher Davis were standing together at a window that faced the road. They were peering out. They seemed afraid of something.

I strode to a window in the parlor, and *I* looked out, too. It was dark as sin out there, and raining harder than ever. The road was invisible. I could hear trees tossing in the wind but couldn't see them. Then I saw a light.

It appeared to be a flashlight, approaching through the stormy dark. Another one blinked on behind it, and a third. They came closer. I saw the shapes of men behind them. We were evidently about to entertain callers!

Suddenly I was aware of a movement behind me. I swung around. Nothing was there; yet I had an uncanny feeling that something had rushed past with incredible speed. Yes, by God! A strand of spider-web in the doorway that led to the adjoining room was fluttering like a pennant in a gale!

I strode to the doorway and saw, with amazement, that the adjoining room was now empty. Roseen and her father were gone! But in order to leave that room they must have passed within a yard of me, and I hadn't heard anything. I'd sensed a sudden swift movement, but . . .

Someone was thumping noisily on the front door. That was a sound I understood. Almost with relief, I strode to the door and opened it.

They were men and there were five of them, grizzled, earthy-looking fellows from the village, as solid and real as the mountain country that had spawned them. They filed in, and the last one slammed the door shut to blot out the wind and the rain. They ringed me, looked me over. Their leader, a barrel-chested, black-bearded fellow as tall as I and a good fifty pounds heavier, came a step closer and said, "Who're you? What you doin' here?"

I hadn't the slightest idea what they wanted, but it seemed a wise plan to humor them. "My name's Frank Blake," I said. "I'm an artist. Came here to paint pictures."

They exchanged looks. Then the man at the rear, the one near the door, pushed forward and dumped something at my feet. I took a sudden backward step. The thing was a dog, and it was dead.

"You know anythin' about this?" the fellow demanded, eyeing me.

"What—do you mean?"

"Dog's been kilt. Third one this week, mister. Not shot nor run over, but *sucked*. Look at it."

Sucked. It was an ugly word, but descriptive. And accurate. I looked closer and shuddered. There was a small gash in the dog's throat; no other mark on its body, anywhere. Why did my hand go suddenly, involuntarily, to the mark on my own throat?

"Dog was kilt near here," the fellow snarled. "Got yellow mud on his feet and under his belly. Only yellow mud in miles is right close to this place." He suddenly thrust his face close to mine. "*What you doin' in this house, mister?*"

"I told you! Painting!"

"Paintin' what?"

"Now look here," I said, getting sore. "If you think I'm killing your dogs, you—"

"No decent man would live in this house."

"I tell you—"

"Used to be mighty queer things go on around here when old man Davis and his daughter was livin'," the leader of the group said darkly. "More than dogs was kilt then. The year before they died—the worst year—babies took to dyin' all too frequent. No one's lived in this house since, mister. We think you better not stir the place up. You better git."

I stared at him. "They—died?" I muttered. "Davis and his daughter *died*? What are you talking about? Who said they were dead?"

"Been dead seven years, mister." He glanced at his companions. "They died hard, but they're dead."

"You're crazy. Why, they were here in this room less than ten minutes ago!"

They looked at me. Just looked. Not a word was uttered for fully a minute, and the moan of the wind, the sound of rain against the windows were strangely loud in that tense stillness. Suddenly I couldn't stand their stares any longer.

"By God, I'll show you!" I shouted. "I've been painting the girl's picture. You wait here. I'll get it!"

I barged upstairs to my bedroom and got the picture and took it down to them. I propped it on the divan. "There!" I said. "Is that Roseen Davis, or isn't it?"

They stared at the picture. It was almost finished, that picture, and it was beautiful. It took your breath away. There she stood, white as an alabaster statue, every gorgeous, flowing line of her accented by the background of shadows against which she stood. Her lips curved in that inviting smile, her arrogant young breasts glowingly lovely, her hips and legs so smooth, so soft, so warmly alive that it made my blood pound just to look at her.

But these men didn't see what I saw. The picture didn't warm *their* blood. They suddenly backed away from it and began muttering. They gave me quick, wide-eyed stares that said they were afraid of me, afraid of *it*.

One of them croaked, "Let's get out of here, fellers!"

They fled, and I was alone.

"What the hell," I thought. "They're crazy!" I shut the door, picked up the

painting. I carried the canvas upstairs, set it back on the easel and stood there admiring it.

I'd been there about five minutes, I guess, when the door creaked behind me.

I turned, startled—and there stood Roseen.

"Is it that beautiful?" she whispered, smiling.

I grinned at her. "It's beautiful, but not alive," I said. "I'll take the original."

I put my hands on her white shoulders. "Where the devil did you get to? I had visitors."

"Visitors?"

"Some men from the village."

"Oh," she said, nodding. "The queer ones, no doubt. You must not be afraid of them."

"They told me—"

But she wasn't having any more of my questions. Her arms went around my neck, warm and soft as kittens, and she put her mouth against mine to silence me. Her lips shaped themselves to my lips and clung fast for a moment, and her fiery body throbbed in my embrace. After that I didn't care what the villagers had told me. To hell with it.

"You said," she whispered, "we would finish the picture tonight."

I nodded. I moved the easel into position and stared at her while the Southern Belle gown rustled to the floor. She took her place in the shadows, and I went to work. As before, it was the hardest work I'd ever done. The nearness of her set my blood to boiling. Every trembling nerve in my body ached to be loving her, not painting her, and I grudged every moment I had to stand there smearing paint on the canvas. Yet I had to have that picture!

There wasn't a sound in the old house as I worked. Not a murmur, except the wind and the rain. That helped; it enabled me to concentrate. By midnight I was finished.

"Come and look at it," I said.

She glided to my side, studied my work and voiced a little sigh of happiness.

"It is so like me," she murmured, "I am almost jealous of it. Perhaps you will love it more than you love me."

I laughed a little, and reached for her. She stepped back. Her white body was etched against the glow of the lamp for a moment; then suddenly the room was in darkness. I waited, my heart pounding, my arms outstretched. In the dark her lips found mine and she slipped into my embrace.

I don't remember much of what happened after that. I don't remember going to sleep. I don't know how much of what I dreamed was really a dream.

Anyway, I was in that long tunnel again, only it was a bigger tunnel, a longer tunnel, and this time there was only one cat. It was a white cat, a beautiful creature, the most beautiful cat I had ever seen. It walked along beside me, into the endless dark. It rubbed against my legs, looked up at me and purred. After a while it leaped gently to my shoulder and put its mouth against my throat.

Its mouth was warm and moist, and the sound of its purring grew louder. I began to feel drowsy. I stumbled. There was a strange weakness in me, a lassitude that blurred my vision and made it hard for me to walk. I leaned against the wall of the tunnel, to rest, and became aware of an odor, a familiar odor, that reminded me of a cellar somewhere.

The weakness grew overwhelming, and I lost consciousness.

When I awoke, I was in bed, alone, and the room was murky. "Must be almost morning," I thought. My watch read six-thirty. I felt weak, almost too weak to move. There was a queer burning sensation in my neck.

I lay there trying to recall what had happened after I finished the painting, but it wouldn't come back; it was all a deep, vast blur in which nothing would take shape. I seemed to remember warm lips against mine, and a soft, sweet body in my arms . . . whispers in the dark, and a pleasant purring sound of contentment, and a hot mouth touching my throat . . . but it was all a pattern of shadows, half forgotten already. And I was too weak now to bring it back.

The room grew darker. I didn't understand that. I looked at my watch again, and struggled out of bed and dragged myself to the window. The moon was up! In God's name what had I done?—slept through a whole night and day, and into the beginning of another night? There could be no other explanation!

Suddenly, from the deeper darkness of the woods at the edge of the swampy yard, a shape emerged. A flashlight winked, went out again. The shape prowled forward, followed by others. I remembered the villagers who had come last night to question me. I sensed trouble.

The prowlers separated as they approached the house. For a while I tried to follow them with my eyes, but it was like striving to follow dim ghosts through a dream. I reached for my clothes. That frightening weakness took me again, and it took every last ounce of my strength to get me dressed. I opened the door and went along the hall to the stairs.

I smelled smoke. I heard a voice outside yelling triumphantly, "There, by God, there! That will do it!" I heard a noise like paper rattling, only it wasn't paper; it was the old, dry timbers of the house being consumed by flames! A cloud of strangling smoke poured up the narrow stair-well.

"They've set fire to the house!" I muttered. And I hated them. God, how I hated them! This house had become a part of me, or I of it. It meant hours of supreme bliss with a beautiful girl. It meant strange journeys through that long, dark tunnel, into a land of dreams. And they'd set a torch to it! Damn them! Damn their rotten souls to hell!

I raged along the hall, cursing the smoke, the flames that leaped up. The flames beat me back to the door of my room and I knew suddenly that I'd be trapped if I didn't get out of there. This house was old. It would go up like old paper. I snatched my painting and went stumbling through the smoke to the stairs.

As I groped down them, a sound poured up from below, knifing through the noise of the fire. A shrill, keening sound, a scream like that of a wounded animal. The kind of scream you hear at night, sometimes, in a zoo or a circus—where the big cats are. It shrilled around me as I stumbled across the parlor to the front door.

I got the door open and fell across the porch, picked myself up and crawled to the steps, crawled down them and across the yard. Behind me the house was a blazing inferno, hurling out heat. When I was out of reach of the heat I turned, looked back. I turned just in time to see a white blur, a lean white shape that looked like a giant cat, leap out through a cellar window.

For an instant the shape seemed to hang suspended in air, so tremendous was its leap. Then it flashed along the ground and vanished into the woods. I don't remember anything else. I passed out.

When I came to, there was no house. It was daylight, and raining, and the cellar of the old place was just a grim hole in the earth, filled with black, smouldering debris. I walked around it. After a while I jumped over to my car, to see if it was damaged. The paint was blistered and the tires looked queer, full of lumps, but it would run. I got into it—with my picture of Roseen—and drove away. I drove all day and half the night, and got home at four a.m.

The doc can't figure me out. "The weakness," he says, "is due to loss of blood. You've lost an awful lot of blood somehow, yet I can't find a break in the skin anywhere. Can you explain it?"

Sure I can, but not to him. Not to anyone. No one's going to call me crazy and send me up for a mental examination. I'll get over the weakness, the doc says. It will take time, and rest, but I'll be all right after a while. "Provided," he says, "the cause of your condition is not repeated."

I wonder about that, especially at night. She didn't die in the fire. I saw her escape—I'm sure of it. And maybe she'll find me. Maybe I'll even go back there, so she can find me without too much trouble.

Nights, I sit and stare at the picture; then I shut my eyes and see her standing there in the shadows, in the bedroom of that old house. White and warm and beautiful . . . with a smile of invitation and promise on her red lips, and her arms outstretched, and the lamplight caressing her shoulders, her exquisite breasts . . .

I can hear her whispering, "Come with me, my beloved. Come with me . . ."

Maybe I will. If I look at the picture long enough, maybe I will.

Tomorrow Is Forever

THE DETAILS OF HIS DEPARTURE from the front were still annoyingly vague, but that he had entered a new and unfamiliar region was now certain, and the strangeness of his surroundings disturbed him. On what mission had he been sent here? Where were his comrades?

He had walked at least a day and a night, yet there was no real day or night in this place by which to measure time. There was silence and a road—and there were dim shadow-shapes who plodded aimlessly on, like himself, to no apparent destination.

Were there no towns, no villages, in this shrouded valley? Must he trudge forever through a changeless twilight, along a road that led to nowhere?

He was tired and walked slowly. And hungry, too, though it was a kind of hunger, he sensed, that food and drink would not appease. "I would give the Iron Cross I won in Poland," he thought glumly, "to be back with Fedor and Karl and Fritz in the mud of the Caucasus. Is there no way *out* of this accursed place?"

Presently, hearing footsteps, he paused again, and out of the twilight another of the plodding people came toward him. This time it was one of his own kind. His hope came alive, and with an arm upflung in greeting he strode forward. "Wait!" he shouted. "I wish to talk!"

But the man was deaf and blind to him, and trudged past without recognition. The road was once more empty.

Shaking with anger, he resumed his journey. It did not occur to him to be afraid—he was a soldier, sheathed in an armor of arrogance through which fear had not yet found an opening. But beneath his anger lay bewilderment and a nagging sense of aloneness. Panic beat its dark wings more insistently, now, against the wall of his calm. What *was* this valley in which he wandered?

On he went, measuring time by his weariness and the sound of his boots, until at last, ahead, there were lights in the darkness.

It was not a large place—not important—but about it was something old and familiar that puzzled him anew. The shape of its twisting streets tugged at his memory, and a voice within him whispered a warning.

But here were people and houses, and the sound of voices bright against the night. He heard a child's laughter and the warm wonder of a woman singing.

With a click of his heels and new stiffness in his shoulders, he confronted the first man who approached.

"What is this place?"

The man was old, with graying hair and a bent body. Beside him skipped a dark-haired child whose hand he clasped. They chatted gaily and laughed at some private joy they shared, and without a glance in his direction, went past.

Embittered, he sullenly watched them. "Because I'm alone," he thought, "they choose to be insulting. Very well, I *am* alone. But not for always. The day has come in hundreds of other miserable villages such as this, and will come here." They would regret their insolence, these people. He would learn the name of the place and report it.

But it was not easy to learn the name. Identifying signs had been removed, and though the pattern of its streets and the shape of its houses told him its nationality, he could not sort it from the scores of similar places he had seen. "They are all alike, these worthless towns," he reflected. "They were built to be destroyed."

His scorn was a good thing. Strengthening his pride, it held in check the beating wings of panic as, one after another, the people he accosted ignored him.

Were they imbeciles, these people? By the church he confronted a slender girl of twenty— "You! *Fraulein!* Tell me what place this is!"—and she turned instead, with her sweetest smile, to a young man who approached from the opposite direction.

In the square he spoke to children dancing— "Stop it! An end to this nonsense! I have questions to ask!"—and they romped away without hearing.

From street to street, his anger mounting, he sought information. None saw him. None heard. At last, his rage past holding, he rushed at a youth who would not listen, and swung his fist.

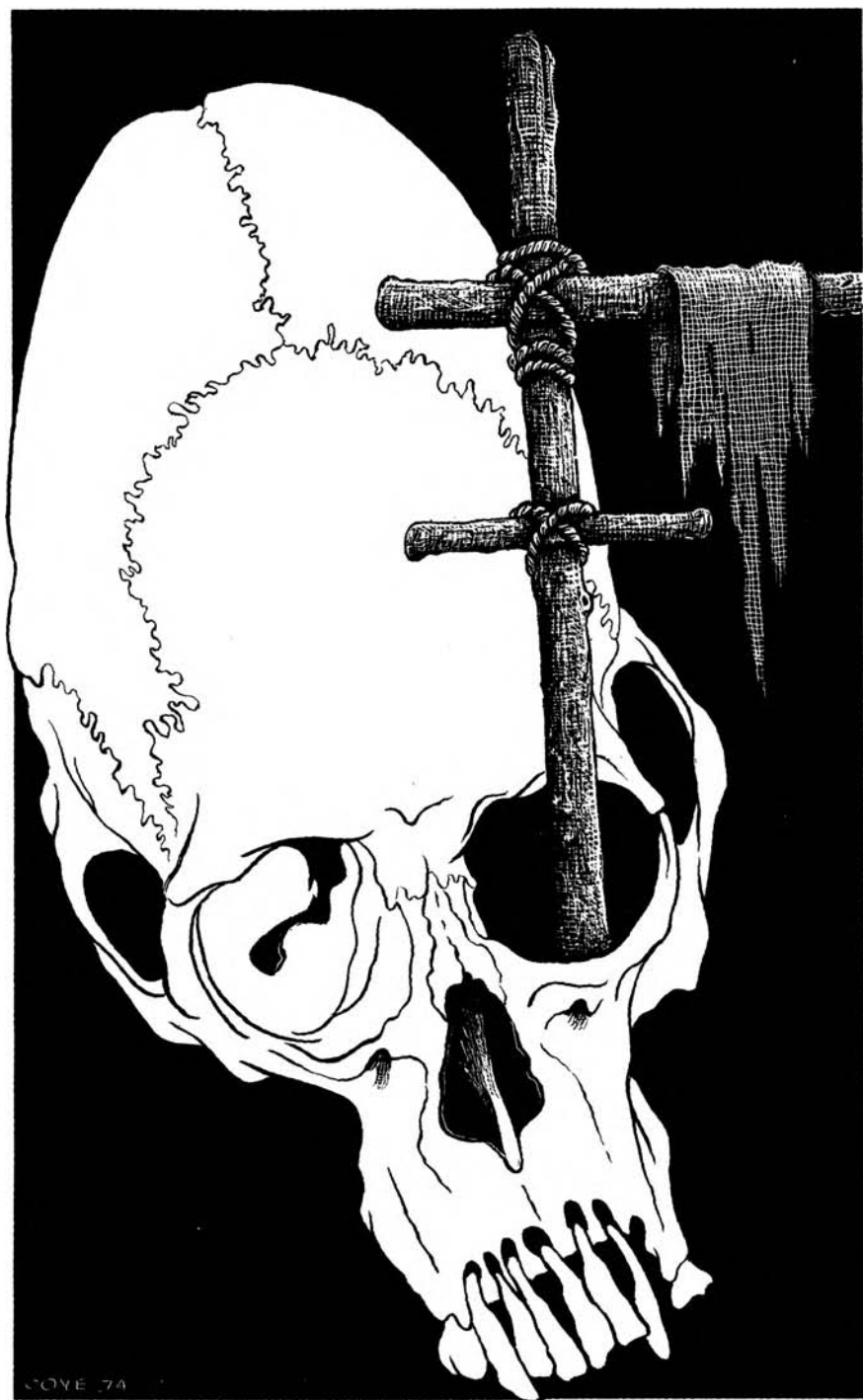
Feeling nothing, the youth walked on.

The beating wings broke down his barrier then, and drove him to flight. He wanted no more of this place that would have none of him! He ran back the way he had come, seeking the long road of shadows that had led him here.

But the way was changed. The streets formed and reformed before him, ever different. At every turn were more of the huddled houses, more lights, more people—and no end to his flight. The path of departure had disappeared.

He stopped at last. Running was futile. The wings were thunder-loud and louder. He turned once more to the people who passed—but now tears drenched his face and terror rode his voice. "Speak to me! Look at me! The way out of here—please!" But he was not there. They saw only one another.

As the lights dimmed and the streets emptied of life, he went on dragging feet from house to house, looking in. Who *were* these people, so warless in a world at war? In this house a golden-haired girl knelt before the fire to play with eager children. In this, four nodding elders ringed a table spread with food. In this, young couples danced to gay music, and a laughing lass lifted her lips for a



lover's kiss. In all he found peace. But none found him.

"Are they deaf to the roar of the guns, also?" he wondered. "And the thunder of the bombs?"

On he went. The sound of his voice at their windows did not disturb them, nor the pounding of his fists.

At every door his voice grew shriller, and as the sound of his boots rang hollowly through street after street, terror supplanted his rage. The lights were dimming. Windows darkened one by one, and the sound of voices ceased as the village blinked its eyes for sleep.

At last he gave up. His rage was spent. The wings had beaten all pride from him. Only a great and lasting fear remained, and the thought that he was alone, quite alone, and might be alone forever. Crying, he crouched in a doorway.

The village slept. Through its streets, now, dim shadows moved, plodding aimlessly as he had plodded.

He watched them. Some he recognized. "This one I knew in Kharkov, before he perished from the cold. This one we left behind at Kiev." One by one they passed, without seeing him. Suddenly his hands clawed at the pavement and he was erect, shouting hoarsely in a last, hopeless struggle to be heard.

"Friedrich! Friedrich! In God's name, wait for me! It is Kropp, your friend!"

But the shadow passed. Not even Friedrich could hear. He sank again in the doorway, staring animal-eyed.

It *had* been Friedrich; he was certain. No mistake was possible. When you have marched with a man all those months, fought by his side, shared food and bedding with him . . .

"I was the first to reach him when he fell," he thought dazedly. "It was I who tore the bayonet from his heart and dug the grave in which we buried him. We marched together in Poland, and through half of Russia. We were together at Lidice . . ."

Lidice! His eyes grew large and, stumbling to his feet again, he stared anew at the shapes and shadows of the village—this village in which now, forever, he would walk unwanted. *Lidice!*

He knew then the name of the valley, and the meaning of the long, dark road along which he had come. He knew where he was.

The Ghoul Gallery

LET ME CONVINCING YOU, first, that the young man who came to my medical offices that night was not the type of man who gives way, without reason, to abject fear.

Yet when I stepped into my outer office and saw him slumped on the divan, I knew that he was in the throes of mortal terror. His face was ghastly white, made hideous by the mop of jet hair that crawled into his eyes. He raised his head sluggishly and glared at me like a trapped animal.

I nodded quietly to the girl who stood beside him. She stepped past me into the inner office, and I drew the door shut silently.

I had known this girl for years. For that matter, all London knew her, as a charming, lovely member of the upper set, a sportswoman and a distinguished lady of one of England's famous old families. She was Lady Sybil Ravenal.

Tonight, half an hour ago, she had telephoned me, seeking permission to bring a patient—a patient very dear to her—to my suite. Now she stood before me, her hand resting on my arm, and said suddenly:

"You've got to help him, Doctor Briggs! He—he is going mad!"

"Suppose you tell me," I suggested softly, "what he is afraid of."

"I can't Doctor. There is the family name to consider. He—he is Sir Edward Ramsey."

I started. That name, too, was well known to me and to the rest of London. Sir Edward Ramsey, the favorite playboy of the upper strata, noted sportsman, adventurer. I could not believe that such a man would be sitting in my offices, dragged into the depths of fear.

"You must tell me the cause," I said kindly. "Otherwise I can do nothing."

The girl's lips tightened defiantly.

"When a man comes to you with a broken leg," she said, "you don't ask him where he got it. Please!"

"A fractured leg is a physical malady. His is mental."

"But he comes to you in the same capacity, Doctor. You must help him!"

"I can only give you the usual advice," I shrugged. "Since you refuse to divulge the cause of his terror, I can only suggest that he get away from it."

I could see, from the obvious twist of her mouth, that she was keenly disappointed. She would have argued with me, perhaps pleaded with me, had not the

door opened suddenly behind her.

I say "opened." In reality it was flung back savagely. Young Ramsey stood on the threshold, reeling, glowering at me out of smoldering eyes. I did not know, then, what made him intrude at that moment. I thought, foolishly, that he was afraid of being left alone in the dimly lighted outer office.

He staggered forward blindly, groping toward me.

"The thing!" he cried. His voice was high-pitched and nasal. "By God, it's following me! It's—it's—"

I stared at him in bewilderment. There was no sound in my rooms at that moment—no sound at all except the half-inaudible humming of a machine in the adjoining suite—an electro-therapeutic machine used by my associate in the treatment of leucocythemia and similar afflictions.

Yet the boy's hands clawed at the sleeve of my coat. He flung himself against me muttering a jargon of words that had no seeming intelligence. And then, very suddenly, his twitching face became fixed, staring, glaring at something beyond me. With a strangled sob of abject horror, he stumbled back.

I was beside him in an instant, holding his quivering body upright. As I looked at him, his eyes were wide open and rimmed with white, glued in mute terror upon a small table which stood against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

The table was an insignificant one, placed there merely for ornamental purposes. I had covered it with a black cloth and lined it, along the back, with a small rack of medical volumes. In the center of the black cloth, facing into the room, I had set a human skull.

The thing was neither fantastic nor horrible, merely a very ordinary medical head bleached white. In the shadows, perhaps, the eyeless sockets and grinning mouth, with its usual set of enameled teeth, were a bit unconventional; but certainly there was nothing to excite such uncontrollable horror as gripped the man in my arms.

His eyes were full of sheer madness as he stared at it. His lips had writhed apart and were twitching spasmodically. He clung to me with all his strength; and at length, wrenching his gaze from the thing on the table, he buried his head in my arms and surrendered to the fear which overwhelmed him.

"Be merciful, Briggs!" he moaned. "For God's sake, be merciful! Come with me—stay with me for a day or two, before I go utterly mad!"

There was no alternative. I could not send a man away in such condition. Neither could I keep him with me, for my quarters were not fitted with additional rooms for mad patients.

I forced him into a chair, where he could not see the death's-head on the table. Leaving him with the girl who had brought him, I hurriedly packed a small overnight case and made ready for an all-night siege of it. When I returned, I found the boy slumped wearily in the chair with his head in the girl's comforting arms.

"Come," I said quietly.

He looked up at me. His bloodshot eyes struggled to drag me into focus.

"You—you are coming with me, Briggs?" he asked slowly.

"I am."

He pushed himself heavily out of the chair. As he turned, his hand groped for mine. He spoke with a great effort.

"Thanks, Briggs. I'll—try to get back a little courage."

That was my introduction to Sir Edward Ramsey. The account of our departure, and of our subsequent arrival at Sir Edward's huge town house, is of little importance. During the entire journey my two companions did not utter a word. The boy seemed to have shrunk into himself, to have fallen into the lowest depths of fearful anticipation. The girl sat stiff, rigid, staring straight ahead of her.

I remember one thing which struck me as being more or less peculiar, in view of the boy's social position. No servant opened the door to us. For that matter, the boy made no attempt to summon one by ringing the bell. Instead, he groped into his pockets for his own door-key and fumbled nervously with the lock. Turning his head sideways, he spoke to me stiffly:

"My man's—deaf, Briggs. Damned nuisance, but it's the only reason he—stays. The others cleared out long ago."

The door swung open. I followed Sir Edward down the carpeted hall, with the girl beside me. The boy was trembling again, glancing about him furtively. I was forced to take his arm and lead him quietly into one of the massive rooms adjoining the corridor.

There he sank into a chair and stared up at me hopelessly. I realized that he had not slept in many hours—that he was on the verge of breakdown.

Opening my case, I administered an opiate to deaden his nerves, although I had little hope that it would have the desired effect. The boy's terror was too acute, too intense. However, the drug quieted him; he slept fitfully for the better part of an hour; long enough for Lady Sybil to draw me aside, motion me to a chair, and tell me her story.

She came directly to the point, softly and deliberately. They were in love, she and Ramsey. They were betrothed. Six weeks ago his love had changed to fear.

"At first he fought against it," she said evenly. "Then it took possession of him—of his very soul. He—he released me from my promise."

"Why?"

"Because of the curse that hangs over his family."

"And that is why you came to me tonight?"

"I came, Doctor," she said fervently, "because it was a last hope. I love him. I can not give him up. He lives alone here, except for a single servant who is deaf. I have been with him every day since this influence claimed him. At night, of course, I can not be at his side—and it is the night-time he fears!"

MURGUNSTRUMM AND OTHERS

"And the cause of his fear?" I prompted.

"I—I can not tell you."

I knew better than to demand an explanation. Without a word I returned to my patient. He was not sleeping, for when I stood over him his eyes opened and he stared at me wearily. I drew a chair close to him and bent forward.

"I want you to tell me," I said simply, "the entire story. Only under those conditions can I help you. Do you understand?"

"That—is impossible."

"It's necessary."

"I—can't do it, Briggs."

"In that case," I shrugged, getting to my feet, "I shall take you away from here. At once!"

"No, no, Briggs! You—you can't! The thing will—follow me. It trailed me to your offices. It—"

It was the girl who cut him short. She stepped closer and took his hands firmly, and looked straight at me.

"He is under oath to say nothing, Doctor," she said evenly.

"Under oath? To whom?"

"His father, Sir Guy."

"Then, of course, I shall see Sir Guy at once—"

"He is—dead."

I stood silent, glancing from one to the other. Suddenly the girl straightened up and stood erect, her eyes blazing.

"But *I* am not under oath!" she cried, almost savagely. "I will tell you—"

"By God, no!" The boy groped up, his face livid.

I understood, then, the courage in Lady Sybil's heart. Slim, lovely as she was, she turned on him fiercely, forcing him back into the chair.

"I am going to tell him," she said bitterly. "Do you hear? The oath does not bind me. I am going to tell Doctor Briggs all I know. It is the only way to help you."

Then, without releasing him, she turned her head toward me.

"This house, Doctor," she said, "is very old and full of musty rooms and corridors. It is made hideous by a terrifying sound that comes, always at night, from the upper galleries. The sound is inexplicable. It is a horrible note which begins with an almost inaudible moan, like the humming of an electric motor. Then it increases in volume to the pitch of a singsong voice, rising and falling tremulously. Finally it becomes a screaming wail, like a human soul in utter torment."

She waited for my questions. I said nothing. The boy had ceased his squirming and sat like a dead man, glaring at me out of lifeless eyes.

"The galleries have been examined many times," Lady Sybil said quietly. "Nothing has ever been discovered to provide an explanation. Four times in the past year the upper recesses of the house have been wired for electric lights; but

the lights in that portion of the house never work. No one knows why."

"And that—that is all?" I murmured.

"I think that is all. Except—the history of the House of Ramsey. You will find that in the library, Doctor. I will remain here with Edward."

I hesitated. I did not think it vital, at that moment, to go rummaging through the library in pursuit of ancient lore. But Lady Sybil looked quietly at me and said, in an even voice:

"The library is at the end of the main corridor, Doctor. You will find the necessary books in section twelve."

I did not argue. There was no denying that cool, methodical tone! Before I left the room, however, I examined my patient carefully, to be sure that I was justified in leaving him. He had sunk into complete apathy. His eyes remained wide open, as if he feared to close them. But the opiate had produced an effect of semi-torpor, and I knew that he would not soon become violent again. Thus I turned away and paced silently to the door.

By a singular coincidence the door opened as I reached it. On the threshold I came face to face with the servant, a ferret-faced fellow with deep-set, colorless eyes, who peered at me suspiciously as I went past him into the corridor.

In this manner, after prowling down the dimly illuminated passage, I came to the library, and sought the particular section which the girl had suggested. Section twelve proved to be not in the main library, but in a secluded recess leading into the very farthest corner. The walls before me were lined with long shelves of books, symmetrically arranged. An ancient claw-footed desk stood in the center, and upon it a gargoyle reading-lamp which I promptly turned on.

The alcove had obviously been unused for some time. A layer of dust hung over it like a funeral shroud. Its musty volumes were sealed with a film of dirt, except—and this is what led me forward eagerly—for a certain shelf which lay almost directly beneath the lamp. The books on this particular shelf had been recently removed, and had been thrown back carelessly.

I took one of the volumes to the desk and bent over it. It contained, in some detail, a history of the house in which I stood, and a lengthy description of its occupants since time immemorial. Allow me to quote from it:

Sir Guy Ramsey. 1858-1903. [Evidently the father of my patient.] Eton and Cambridge. [Here followed an account of an adventurous and courageous life.] In the year 1903, Sir Guy was suddenly stricken with an inexplicable fear of darkness. Despite all efforts to discover the reason of his terror, no cause was revealed, and Sir Guy refused to divulge any. In September of the same year, Sir Guy became utterly mad with fear and spoke continually of a certain "specter" which had taken possession of him. Physicians were unable to effect a cure, and on the ninth day of the month of September, Sir Guy was found in the upper galleries, where he had, to all appearances, been strangled to death.

His own hands clutched his throat; but upon his hands were certain marks and bruises which revealed the imprint of another set of fingers. In these

imprints, the thumb of the unknown murderer's left hand was singularly missing. No clue has ever been discovered as to the identity of the assailant.

I closed the book slowly. Mechanically I opened a second of those significant volumes, which proved to be an account of the life and death of another of Sir Edward's forebears. From the dates, I judged the gentleman to be Sir Edward's grandfather—the father of the man whose fate I had just learned. His name, peculiarly, was also Sir Edward.

On the twenty-seventh day of January, in the year 1881, Sir Edward was suddenly noticed to be prowling fearfully in the upper galleries. From that time on he was observed to be very much in the throes of acute terror; but when accused of this, Sir Edward refused to confide the nature of his fear. On February first he was found choked to death in the upper galleries, his own hands twisted into his throat and the imprint of another set of hands, with the thumb of the left hand missing, still evident on his dead wrists.

The murderer was not discovered. For three years after Sir Edward's death, the galleries were closed and sealed, after a careful inspection by the police. At the end of that period they were again opened by command of Sir Guy, son of the deceased.

And there was one other passage—a paragraph or two describing the sudden death of some distinguished lady far back in the archives. Her name, according to the book before me, was Lady Carolyn.

A woman [the script said] imbued with the same fearless courage which marked the men of her blood. In the final days of her life she lived alone in the London house. She left a single parting message, found after her death: "I am becoming insane. The specter has ebbed my last bit of resistance. Madness is, after all, a fitting death—much better than eternal fear and horror."

This note was found on the morning of July third, 1792. Lady Carolyn was murdered, strangled to death by unknown hands, on the night the note was written. Her unfortunate body was discovered in the galleries, her fingers still clutching her dead throat, and the marks of other fingers, with the thumb of the left hand missing, imprinted on the back of her hands and wrists. For three years following her death, every effort was expended to locate the fiend who had so brutally destroyed her. The attempt was without avail.

I make no effort to explain these quotations. They are significant in themselves. As for the specter, I could find no further mention of it. Page after page I turned, hoping to discover some clue which might lead to a solution. I found nothing.

I did, however, chance upon something of unusual interest, in the oldest of the heavy volumes. It was an account of a very ancient feud. The names mentioned were those of Sir Godfrey Ramsey (the date was in the century before the French Revolution) and Sir Richard Ravenal. The account gave mention of several brutal killings and disappearances, the majority of these executed by the House of Ravenal. The cause of the feud was not divulged.

The hatred between the two families, however, had come to an end with the death of Sir Richard Ravenal, who was, to quote the withered page before me, *an artist of unusual genius. In the year previous to his death, having formed a truce with the House of Ramsey, he did present to Sir Godfrey Ramsey one or two paintings of great value, executed by himself, as a token of eternal friendship. These paintings have been carefully preserved.*

I sought faithfully for an account of the life of this same Sir Godfrey. Eventually I found it, and read the following:

Twelve years after the Houses of Ramsey and Ravenal had formed the pact of peace, Sir Godfrey was suddenly stricken with an incomprehensible terror which led to complete madness. He did call his son, Sir James, to him and say the following words: "A curse has descended upon the House of Ramsey. It is a curse of horror, of torment. It is intended to make gibbering idiots of the men who bear the honored name of Ramsey. For this reason I command you to an oath of silence. The curse has taken possession of me, and I shall die. When you are of age, you, too, will be stricken by the specter. Swear to me that you will not reveal the nature of the curse, lest your sons and their sons after them live in mortal fear."

This oath was written into parchment and preserved. On the second day following its execution, Sir Godfrey was found lying in the upper galleries . . .

I closed the last volume with the uncomfortable feeling of having delved into a maze of horror and death. In the upper reaches of the very house in which I stood, countless members of the House of Ramsey had been hurled into madness and cruelly murdered. Even now, the man who occupied these whispering rooms and huge, empty corridors was being slowly forced under the same hellish influence of insanity. I understood now his reason for silence. He was bound by a family oath which had been passed down from father to son. He *could* not speak!

The influence of that mad room still hung over me as I paced across the library and returned to the room where Sir Edward and Lady Sybil awaited me.

The boy was sleeping. As I entered, Lady Sybil came toward me quietly and stood before me.

"You—have found the books?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Then you know why he is bound to silence, Doctor. He is the last of the Ramseys. I—am the last of—the Ravenals."

I stared at her. I had not suspected any connection between the names in those ancient volumes and the name of the girl before me. Peering into her features now, I felt suddenly as if I had been plunged into an affair of death itself. She—the last of the Ravenals!

"He has never broken the oath," she murmured, "not even to me. I have never remained here at night—never seen the specter. But I have questioned the servants who fled from here, and so I know."

I turned to my patient. He was sleeping peacefully now, and I thanked God that the terror had temporarily left him. Lady Sybil said softly:

"I shall stay here the night, so long as you are here, Doctor. I can not leave him now."

She walked quietly to the divan and made it as comfortable as possible. I did not suggest that she go to one of the sleeping-chambers on the floor above. For my part, I could not consider waking my patient; I would have to sit by him through the night. And I knew that she, too, preferred to be close to him. At any rate, I hadn't the cruelty to suggest that she remain alone, in one of those shadowed, deathly silent rooms on the upper corridor, through the long hours of sinister darkness that confronted us.

I think that she slept very soon after she lay down. When I bent over her a moment later, to drape a silken coverlet over her lovely figure, she did not stir.

I realized then that I was the only person awake in this massive, spectral house. I was alone with the unknown being that patrolled the upper galleries. I closed the door of the room and bolted it. Very quietly I returned to my chair and lowered myself. Then I sat there, staring fearfully into the deepening shadows, until I dozed into a fitful slumber.

If the specter of the House of Ramsey crept out of its hidden lair that night, I did not know it. When I awoke, a welcome sunlight was sliding across the floor at my feet, from the opposite window. I was alone in the room. Sir Edward and Lady Sybil had vanished.

I stood up. It was difficult to believe, in this glow of warm sunlight, that anything unusual had occurred during the night.

Evidently nothing had. The door opened behind me and the ferret-faced servant, scuffling forward, said evenly:

"Breakfast is waiting, sir."

I followed him to the dining-hall, and there found my two companions. Lady Sybil rose to greet me with a smile. The boy remained seated. His face was extremely haggard and white. He nodded heavily.

"Thought we'd let you sleep, Briggs," he said. "You earned it."

He did not refer again to the previous night. Lady Sybil, too, maintained a discreet silence. When the meal was over, I called her to me.

"I shall stay here," I said, "until I am sure that his terror does not return. I do not feel justified in leaving the house at the present time."

"You wish me to do something, Doctor?"

I gave her a prescription. In substance, the desired medicine was little more than a tonic, though it contained a slight portion of morphine. It would serve to keep the boy's nerves under control; but I realized even then that the cause of his fear must be removed before any medicine would benefit him.

Lady Sybil, however, promised to have the prescription filled. She had other matters to attend to, she said, and would probably return some

time in the late afternoon.

When she had gone, I sought out, once again, those significant volumes that I had found the night before. I studied them for a very long time. It must have been well after two o'clock when Sir Edward came into the library.

He slouched into a chair and remained there, without any display of animation or life. When I got quietly to my feet and replaced the last book on the shelf, he looked at me without emotion.

"Where to, Briggs?" he said dully.

"With your permission," I replied, "I should like to have a look at the galleries."

He nodded. I fancied that the slightest cloud of suspicion crossed his face; but he offered no objections.

I had difficulty in finding my way. The route which led to the upper levels was no easy one to follow, winding as it did through a succession of peculiarly dark and unlighted corridors. Eventually, however, I found myself at the bottom of a circular staircase that coiled upward into the gloom of the floor above. I mounted the steps slowly, holding to the great carved bannister for support; and, having reached the second landing, I followed the twistings of the passage by keeping as close to the wall as possible.

At the end of this circular passage, a curtained window revealed the street below. As I peered down and saw the pavement far below me, I could not repress a shudder.

Cautiously I continued along this corridor to the bottom of a second staircase. Once again, with heavy steps, I groped upward.

And here, at the top of the last incline, I found the upper galleries of the House of Ramsey. The room lay directly before me. Its massive door, standing half open, revealed a thread of light from some hidden source—a gleam which penetrated like a livid, groping hand into the blackness of the passage.

I entered timidly, leaving the door open behind me. Before me extended a room of enormous size, more like a huge banquet chamber than an art alcove. The illumination was intense, coming as it did from a series of four broad windows set in the farther wall—windows which were uncurtained, and designed to flood the interior with light.

For the rest, the floor was lined with a smooth carpet of dull hue. The walls on opposite sides of me as I moved forward were devoted entirely to framed paintings. The rear wall, which contained the only entrance—through which I had come—was carefully covered with a soft gray drape, cut to outline the wooden panels of the door.

I had taken no more than a dozen steps forward into this strange chamber when I came to an abrupt halt. Before me, as I stood motionless, lay evidence that my patient had been here before me—a silk kerchief, embroidered in black with his emblem. I recognized it instantly. He had worn it on the previous evening, tucked in the breast pocket of his jacket. And now it lay here on the

carpet, damnable in its significance as I stared down at it. So he had not slept the night through! He had come here—come to this death room, to keep some infernal midnight tryst!

I dropped the thing into my pocket. Having done this, I turned to inspect the magnificent works of art that surrounded me. And then, almost immediately after that first startling episode, came a second shock, a thousand times greater than the first!

The thing glared out at me with horrible malice. It hung before me, leering into my face. I recoiled from it with a sudden intake of breath.

It was a skeleton, painted in dull values of gray and white, with a single blur of jet-black background, created by an artist who possessed a fiendish cunning for horrifying the human eye. Every revolting effect of death was incorporated into that ghastly countenance. And yet, in a medical sense, the thing was far from perfect.

Even as I stared at it, I discerned a dozen very evident faults of construction. Hideous it was, but hideous only because the artist had sacrificed accuracy in order to make it so.

The eye-sockets, executed in a fiendish combination of gray pigments, were horribly empty and staring—but they were too close-set to be natural. The frontal bone, a streak of livid white, was terrible in its effect—but far too broad. The two superior maxillary bones, forming the upper jaw and bounding the glaring, vacant nasal cavity, were hideously formed—but were *separated* on the under surface from the row of broken teeth, in order to lend that maddening grin to the mouth.

There were other defects, easily recognizable. They were less significant. But as a work of horror, the skeleton before me was faultless. Never have I been so completely unnerved by something which I knew could hold no power over me.

I went toward it with irresolute steps, determined to inspect it at close range and then leave the room immediately. The singular glare of its dead features had sapped all my curiosity. I wanted to get away from it.

The painting was very old. Only three colors were evident—white, gray, and that sepulchral black. At the bottom of the heavy gilt frame I found the name of the artist—a name which choked on my lips as I cried it aloud. That name, faint and almost illegible, was *Ravenal!*

Ravenal! “In the year previous to his death, having formed a truce with the House of Ramsey, he did present to Sir Godfrey Ramsey one or two paintings of great value, executed by himself . . .”

I left the room with an inexplicable sense of fear. Fascination it might have been, for that hideous thing behind me. Horror it might have been, for the slow realization that here—here in this fiendish picture—lay the secret of innumerable murders, and a hellish curse of madness!

There is little more to tell. The concluding event of my stay in the House

of Ramsey was not long in forthcoming.

The hour was already late when I returned to the library on the lower floor. Sir Edward had not moved from his position. He greeted me with a nod; and the girl, who had returned during my tour of inspection, came toward me to give me the medicine I had ordered.

I forced the boy to take it. Then, in depressing silence, we sat there, the three of us, as the hour grew later and later. Lady Sybil and I made a feeble attempt to play backgammon; but the boy's glassy eyes haunted us. The game was a mockery.

When ten o'clock came, I rose and took the boy's arm.

"A night's sleep," I said sternly, "would be one of your best medicines."

He glanced at me wearily, as if it hurt him to move.

"You are turning in, Briggs?"

"I am."

He sank back into his chair with a half-inaudible murmur. I motioned quietly to Lady Sybil, thinking that if she left him he would be certain to come with us, rather than be left alone. The girl had already prepared a room for herself on the upper floor.

But the boy did not move. As I drew the door shut, he looked up suddenly and spoke in a voice that was strangely harsh.

"Leave it open, Briggs. I'll—go to bed in a while. Closed doors are ghastly—just now."

In the corridor outside, I said goodnight to Lady Sybil and climbed the stairs to my room. The room opened on an unlighted passage—a narrow, gloomy tunnel that twisted from darkness into darkness, revealed only by the glow of light from my own chamber.

The hands of my watch, as I laid the timepiece carefully upon the table, stood at thirty-two minutes after ten o'clock. No sound stirred in the great house. Lady Sybil, having climbed the stairs behind me, had gone to her room at the far end of the corridor. Below stairs, the servant of the penetrating eyes had evidently retired.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when I heard Sir Edward's step on the stairs. He climbed wearily, inertly. His tread moved along the corridor. I heard the door of his chamber open and close. After that there was nothing but an ominous, depressing, sinister silence.

I left my door open. Most men in my position would, I presume, have closed it and made haste to throw the bolt. But I found comfort, such as it was, in an open exit. I had no desire to be a rat in a trap.

Nervously I switched off the light and sank wearily to the bed. There I lay, facing the half-open door, striving to get rid of my thoughts. And there I lay when, a long time later, I was dimly conscious that the silence had dissolved into sound.

It had no definite beginning, no positive substance. Only in the acute stillness

of the capacious structure would it have been audible at all. Even then it was no more than a dead hum, like the drone of muted, smothered machinery.

It increased in volume. For fully sixty seconds, perhaps longer, I lay unmoving, as the sound became a throbbing, wavering reality. I twisted about to stare at the door, as if I expected the vibrations to filter into my room and take the form of some ghastly supernatural being.

Then I heard something more—the distinct tread of human feet advancing quietly along the passage outside! And I saw it—saw the hunched form of Sir Edward Ramsey, creeping slowly along the corridor. Visible for a moment only, he passed the open door of my chamber. An unearthly mask of sepulchral light surrounded him—an obscure, bluish vapor that seemed to rise out of the floor at his feet and hang about him like an ethereal cloak, a Protean winding-sheet. And I shall never forget the fear-haunted glare of the boy's eyes as he moved through the darkness.

He walked as though an inner force guided him forward. His hands hung lifelessly at his sides. His face was tense and ghastly gray, strained to an almost diabolical degree of expectancy. And then, passing out of my range of vision, he vanished.

I sprang from the bed and reached the door in a stride. There I stopped, with both hands clutching the door-frame. The sound of his footsteps had already died; but another form was coming silently out of the darkness and moving past me. The form of Lady Sybil—following him!

I did not hesitate then. I knew, as surely as if the walls themselves were screeching it out to me, that the boy was going to those infernal galleries in the upper recesses of the house. And up there would be that eternal fiend of murder and madness—that unnamed horror which had for centuries preyed on the inhabitants of this ghastly dwelling.

Groping into the passage behind those two grim figures, I fell into the mute procession. Far above me, that dirge of hell had risen to a whimpering moan—a human voice in torment—rising and falling with my steps as I paced forward.

I saw the two figures before me now—the boy still enveloped in that weird mist; the girl silhouetted behind him. His tread was the tread of a man who had repeated this midnight journey many times and knew every creaking board, every turn of the passage, every twist of the long, winding stairways that led into the upper gloom.

He went on—and on. Behind him crouched the girl, shadowing him as a jungle cat might shadow some unknown, half-dreaded quarry. I saw that evil shroud of unnatural light ascend the stairs, hovering about him—saw it grope down the second labyrinth—saw it climb again up, up, into the stygian murk. The girl crept after him, and I trailed behind with the utmost caution, lest he should turn and find me behind him.

Only once—before the door of that chamber of abhorrence at the very roof of the house—did he hesitate. Then, swinging the heavy barrier open, he entered.

Through that open doorway, in tripled intensity, came the voice of the House of Ramsey. It beat upon me in waves—a terrific summons, whining hideously, rising and falling with infuriate vehemence. And I knew, in that frantic moment, why Sir Edward had not fled in terror from this place of pestilence. He *could* not. That spectral voice possessed a spell that would allow no man to leave. It was irresistible in its cunning!

I slunk forward. The girl had already crossed the threshold. As I slipped through the aperture, I saw them directly before me—Lady Sybil pressed flat against the wall; the boy, surrounded by that Protean well of light, standing motionless with both hands uplifted.

The room was a pit of blackness, except for that bluish cone of light. A chill sensation took possession of me. I knew that we were not alone. I felt a malignant, gloating presence, invisible but sentient. All about me emanated that tenuous thread of sound, high-pitched now and wailing in an almost articulate voice. *Human!*

The boy crept forward. He breathed heavily. His body quivered and trembled like a thing disjointed. I knew instinctively what he wanted. It was that grim thing on the farther wall.

Mechanically my eyes turned to stare at it. Then, overcome by what I saw, I fell back.

A wall of darkness faced me. To right, to left, above and below, not a single detail of its construction was visible—except one. There, in the very space where that gleaming skeleton had hung before, a mad thing leered out at me.

It was no dead rack of bones—not now. It was a face—a living, twisted, cruel face, set atop a writhing body. Even as I watched, a mist of phosphorescent light, bluish white, began to emanate from it. The rack of bones became a glowing torso, taking on human form.

Young Ramsey stood glued to the floor before it. Behind me I heard a stifled sob come from the girl's lips. I could not advance—could not move.

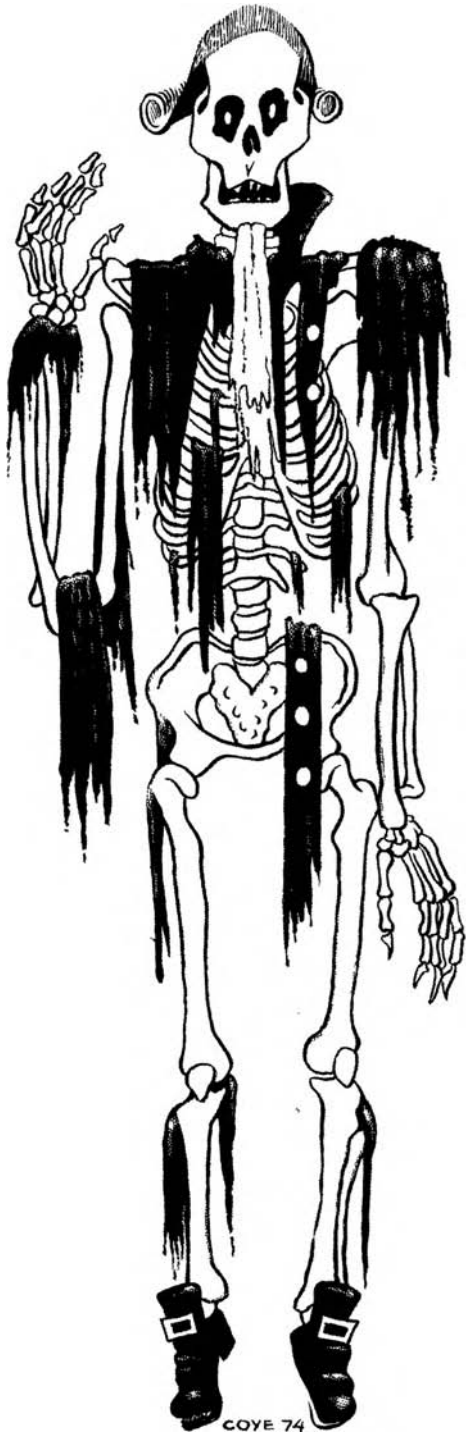
Slowly the thing changed contour. Slowly it twisted forward, coiling its sinuous way out of the great gilt frame. It was a skeleton no longer. It had become an undead form, indefinite in shape, swelling and contracting to grotesque mockeries of human mold. I saw a misty outline of ancient clothing hanging from its limbs—a garb that was hundreds of years old in style. And the face, lifted in terrible malice, was the face of an English nobleman.

It burned with a frightful glow, vivid and unnatural. The living dead hands writhed up—up to the thing's own throat, with evil suggestiveness.

And then, as if from a great distance, a strangled screech split the silence of that room of death. The specter's lips curled apart, revealing a double row of broken teeth. Words came through them. Vicious, compelling words.

“To strangle one's self is better than to be mad for eternity! Do you hear, Ramsey? To *strangle one's self*—”

Sir Edward stumbled back, away from it. I saw his hands jerk up to his



throat. I saw that fiendish, dead-alive creature lunge toward him.

Then a thin cry rose behind me, from Lady Sybil's lips. I was pushed roughly aside. Sobbing wildly, the girl dashed past me and fell upon the great gilt frame, slashing at it with a knife-like thing which she clutched in her hand. Flat against it, she raked the canvas into ribbons, clawing, ripping at it in sheer madness.

I think it was the sight of her, overcome by the horror of what we had seen, that made me move. I swung about, lurched forward. Against the wall, close to that living monstrosity, reeled Sir Edward. His face was livid with insanity—in sanity brought on by the damned thing that grappled with him. His mouth was twisted apart, thick with blood and foam. His body twisted convulsively. And his hands—his own hands—were clenched in his throat.

That shapeless thing was all about him, hideously malformed. It had no limits, no bounds. It was a mold of bluish mist, with leering face and groping hands. And the hands—God, I can never forget them! They were huge, hairy, black. They were twined about the boy's wrists, forcing the boy's fingers into his own throat. Strangling him! Murdering him! And the thumb of the hairy left hand was missing!

With a mighty jerk I wrenched those fingers from their hold. Behind me the girl was still hacking at the contents of the huge frame, tearing the canvas. The wailing shriek rose to a frenzy—shrilled higher and higher.

Then, all at once, the voice became a sob—a sob of unspeakable anguish, as the girl's knife struck home. It gurgled into silence. The massive shape before me dissolved into a circular, throbbing, writhing wraith of fog, with only hands and face visible. The face lifted upward in agony; the hands clenched on themselves, doubled into knots. Before my eyes the thing became a blurred outline. And then—nothing.

Young Ramsey slid to the floor on hands and knees, in a dead faint. I whirled about, stumbling to Lady Sybil's side.

Neither of us noticed, then, that the room was once more in utter darkness. We were intent upon only one thing. Together we tore at that infernal painting, dragging it out of its frame, raking it to shreds.

The frame fell with a crash, hurtling down upon us. Lady Sybil reeled back with a cry of fear. I held her erect. Together we stood there, staring—staring into something empty and black and sinister.

Presently I found courage enough to grope for a match and strike it. I blundered forward, only to stop as if an outflung hand had suddenly thrust me back, while the match dropped from my fingers. I must have screamed.

But I was saturated with horror. I was immune to anything more. Grimly I found a second match and, with the yellow glare preceding me, stepped into the aperture revealed by the falling of the picture.

The space was long, thin, hardly more than three feet deep—a silent, ancient vault. There, lying at my feet, extended an oblong box, black and forbidding, with closed cover. A coffin.

I scratched another match, and lifted the cover slowly. Glowering up at me, made livid by the light of the match, lay a skeletal form, long dead, crumbling in decay.

I stared down at it for an eternity. It was repulsive, even in death. The skull was a grinning mask. The hands were folded on the chest—and the thumb of the left hand was missing.

Beneath those hands lay something else—a rectangular plate of tarnished metal, engraved with minute lettering. I picked it out with nervous fingers.

The legend was hardly visible. I rubbed the metal on the sleeve of my coat, scraping away the film of dust. But the engraving had been scored deep. Holding the match close to it, I made out the words:

Sir Richard Ravenal. Famous artist. Eternal seeker into the secrets of the undead. His body placed here, secretly by his son, in accord with a request made before his death. The hatred between Ramsey and Ravenal may never die!

Mechanically I returned the inscription to its resting-place. The girl stood behind me. I stepped past her, out of the vault, and paced across the gallery to where Sir Edward Ramsey lay motionless on the floor.

Lifting him in my arms, I turned to the door.

“Come,” I said to the girl.

She followed me out of the room. In silence we descended the black staircase to the lower levels. There, in the boy’s chamber, I lowered Sir Edward to the bed; and, bringing my medicine kit from my own room, I worked over him until he regained consciousness.

The boy stared up at me, reaching out to clutch my hand. He was weak, pathetically weak, but the haunted sheen of terror was gone out of his eyes. I moved away, allowing Lady Sybil to take my place.

Then I left them there—those two who loved each other with a love that was more intense than the most utter terror of this gaunt house.

I groped down the main staircase to the servants’ level and roused the ferret-faced deaf man. Together we climbed to the galleries. There we dragged forth that grim coffin with its horrible contents.

Later, in the kitchen of that sinister house, we kindled a great fire. Into it we cast the remains of the shattered picture. Into it we threw the oblong box.

And we stood there side by side, with the scarlet glare of the flames reflected in our faces, until the curse of the House of Ramsey had burned to a handful of dead ashes.

The Cult of the White Ape

THE HOUR IS MIDNIGHT. The oil lamp on the table before me, casting its weird glow over my face, is a feeble, inadequate thing that flickers constantly as the corrugated iron roof of the shack trembles with the throbbing beat of incessant rain. It has rained here in the village of Kodagi for the last four months—a horrible, maddening dirge that drives its way into a man's brain and undermines his reason. The M'Boto Hills of the Congo, sunk in the stinking sweat of the rain belt, are cursed with such torment.

It was raining when Matthew Betts came here. I was outside at the time, working on the veranda inside my cage of mosquito-netting. A man must have some relief from the monotony or else go mad; and I had found, after being sent here by the Belgian government to fill the position of *chef de poste*, that my hobby of entomology was a heaven-sent blessing.

When Betts came, I was busily sorting specimens and mounting them on the little oki-wood table in my veranda laboratory. Beside me, on the stoop, squatted old Kodagi. A cunning man, Kodagi. A wizened monkey of a man with parchment face and filed teeth and a broad grin that bespeaks much hidden knowledge. He belongs, I believe, to the Zapo Zaps—a queerly deformed race which inhabits these mysterious jungles. For years he has been the village Ngana, the witch-doctor and magician of the tribe.

Kodagi, I like to believe, is my friend. It is a peculiar half-dead friendship at most, and yet I am thankful for the little that is allotted me. There are rumors—more than rumors—that Kodagi disliked intensely the white man who held the position of *chef de poste* before me, and that this white man died a slow, unpleasant, and altogether inexplicable death. More than once I have suspected that Kodagi is one of the all-powerful members of the Bakanzenzi—the terrible, cannibalistic secret cult which even the natives of my village speak of in fearful undertones.

Kodagi was watching me astutely as I went about my work. His beady eyes followed me everywhere, saw every movement. Occasionally he muttered something to me under his breath; but the monotonous beat of the rain smothered his voice.

All at once he turned, to stare at the opposite wall of the clearing.

“Look, *Bwana!*” he pointed.

I jerked about obediently, to see the nose of a safari winding its sluggish way into our silent domain. Sloshing through the soft mud they came, with heads down and backs bowed under the weight of their burdens. At their head strode a white man—a hulking buffalo of a man with coarse red face and loose-fitting white drill which hung from him like a drenched winding-sheet. In one hand he carried a kiboko. The other hand he flung up to salute me, and shouted boisterously, at the same time turning in his tracks to snarl at the cringing natives behind him. They were afraid of him evidently, for they cowered back in silence and huddled together in whispering groups while he strode forward to the veranda.

I watched him quietly. I thought I knew his identity, since I had been informed that certain land close to the village had been leased by the officials of a powerful rubber company. This company, the report stated, would send a chap named Betts—Matthew Betts—to the village of Kodagi, where he would experiment with various types of latex-producing trees and vines.

If this was the man they were sending, I decided instantly that I disliked him. He was drunk; and it is not good for white men to drink native rum in the sweating, fever-ridden murk of the Congo, less than five degrees from the equator. I was infinitely glad when my Jopaluo house-boy, Njo, relieved me of the task of opening the veranda door for him.

I saw then that he was very drunk. He stumbled on the step and lurched forward. Perhaps he did not see Kodagi crouching there; perhaps he saw but did not care. At any rate, his outstretched foot entwined between Kodagi's black legs. He stumbled and caught himself on the mosquito-netting. Then, before I could prevent it, he swung upon Kodagi with a rasping snarl. His heavy boot drove into the Ngana's naked ribs. Kodagi, screaming in pain and writhing hideously, tumbled off the stoop into the mud.

The result was instantaneous. Straightening up, Betts stepped toward me with a livid grin. Two steps he took, and opened his mouth to speak. Then the grin faded with uncanny abruptness, leaving an expression of unholy fear on his bloated face. I saw his eyes dilate. His features lost color. He flung himself sideways and jerked up a Luger in his fist. A sudden belch of flame seared through the muzzle; and the bullets, whining dangerously close to me, roared blindly into a patch of thick scrub beside the veranda rail.

After that there was complete silence for a moment. Betts stood rigid, trembling. Behind him, at the rim of the clearing, the porters of his safari were running madly to safety, screeching in terror. Njo, my house-boy, was down on his knees in the middle of the doorway, muttering in his native tongue. Kodagi, who had been lying prone in the mud at the foot of the stoop, had vanished!

I turned slowly, mechanically, to stare at the clump of brush which had excited Betts' drunken attention. I saw nothing—nothing at all. Frowning, I strode to Betts' side and gripped his arm.

“What the devil,” I snapped, “are you doing? Are you mad?”

"Mad? *Mad!*" the words came from his dry mouth in a thick whisper. "You—you didn't see it, Varicks?"

"See what?" I said curtly.

"The—the thing—there in the reeds!" His eyes shifted furtively. Reddish brown eyes, they were, sunk in fatty pits that made them incredibly small and pointed.

"You're drunk," I shrugged. "Come inside."

"I—I saw it, Varicks," he muttered again. "An ape-thing—a *white* ape—big as a man—standing there snarling at me—"

"Come inside," I ordered, taking hold of him. Evidently he had swilled enough native rum to put a less powerful man under the ground. White apes—in the Congo! That was about the limit—the nearest thing to D.T.'s I had seen in many months.

But he refused to be led away. He wrenched his arm from my grip and continued to stand there, staring, muttering something about not daring to turn his back. I saw that I should have to use extreme measures, or else have a raving fever-drunk lunatic on my hands.

"You're seeing things," I said quietly. "Come on—we'll have a look. If anything was hiding in the reeds, there will be footprints in the mud. You'll see."

He went with me unwillingly, holding back so much that I was practically forced to drag him along. Together we stumped down the veranda steps and wallowed through the mud to the suspicious patch of brush. He stood beside me, uneasy and twitching, as I pushed forward and parted the high reeds with my hands.

Then, very suddenly, I froze in my tracks. My arms remained outflung, like the wings of a great bat. My groping foot stiffened in the very act of kicking the reeds aside; and there, directly beneath it, lay the soggy imprint of another foot!

Betts' eyes went horribly wide and filled with fear. His fingers dug into my forearm. He whispered something, but I did not hear, for I was already on my knees, examining the thing in front of me.

It was the mark of a man's foot—a naked, human foot. In the heel of it, where a little pool of water should have accumulated, lay a well of something else—something red and sticky that was blood.

Without a word I stood up again. Carefully, painstakingly, I examined every inch of that clump of reeds. I found nothing else—nothing but that damning, significant imprint of a human foot and the spilled human blood in the heel of it. When I finally pushed Betts toward the shack, my fists were clenched and my mouth was screwed into a thin, troubled line. I was afraid.

On the veranda, inside the screen of mosquito-netting, I lowered myself heavily into a chair. Betts sat close to me, facing me, peering fearfully into my face. For an instant neither of us offered to break the silence which had crept over us. Then, leaning forward, Betts extended an unsteady hand to clutch my knee. His lips sucked open.

"What—what was it?" he whispered thickly.

I did not answer him immediately. I was thinking of Kodagi, whom he had kicked into the mud, and who had disappeared with such incredible swiftness. One moment the village sorcerer had been lying lifeless in the filth. Next moment Betts had seen that hideous apparition in the reeds, and Kodagi, all at once, had vanished.

"I don't know what it was," I said evenly, replying to Betts' query. "I only know that you've made a horrible blunder."

"A—blunder? Me?"

"In this village," I said meaningly, "one doesn't kick and beat the natives. This is deep-jungle territory. The natives are not the half-civilized, peaceful breed you're accustomed to handling. They are atavistic. Many of them are members of the Bakanzenzi."

"You—you mean—"

"Up here," I said quietly, "you are in the heart of strange jungles and strange people, where queer things take place. That's the best explanation I can offer you."

"But the ape—" he mumbled. "I saw—"

"This is not gorilla country, Betts. The big apes never come here. They never leave their stamping-grounds in the Ogowwi and Kivu districts."

He blinked at me uncomprehendingly. His fat hand came up shakily to wipe the sweat from his jowls. Evidently my words had made a deep impression upon him, for his eyes were quite colorless and his mouth twitched.

"Get me—a drink, Varicks," he said gutturally. "I need it."

I hesitated. He had had enough to drink already. But one more might serve to steady his nerves and prevent a collapse. I got out of my chair to get it.

He rose with me and turned clumsily to the veranda door. Jerking it open, he looked toward the opposite end of the clearing, where his safari had first appeared.

"Lucilia!" he bellowed. "Lucilia!"

I was bewildered—even more bewildered when I followed the direction of his stare and saw what I had not noticed before. A *mesbeela* chair—a kind of covered hammock carried by four bearers—had been set down at the edge of the jungle. The bearers, having fled like frightened rodents at the sight of Betts' demonstration, had now returned. At the sound of the big man's voice, they lifted the *masbeela* and carried it forward.

"My God!" I said thickly. "You haven't brought a woman here?"

"Why not?" Betts grumbled.

"This is no country for a white woman, Betts. You know damned well—"

"That's my business," he snapped. "She's my wife."

I choked the retort that came to my lips. Then I turned to stare at the woman who was approaching us. She was young—much younger than her bull-necked husband—hardly more than a slim, very lovely girl. When Betts spoke her name

and she placed her hand in mine, I felt that I should be more than glad to endure her husband's drunken presence during his stay in Kodagi's village. A white woman, here in this horrible place, was an angel from heaven.

During the following day I saw little of Betts and his wife. They drove their safari to the far end of the village and took possession, with their entire equipment, of a huddled group of broken-down abandoned huts. Njo, my house-boy, brought news to me late in the afternoon, that Betts had gone alone into the jungle on a preliminary tour of inspection.

"Alone?" I frowned, peering into Njo's yellow-toothed mouth.

"Yes, *Bwana*. He is an ignorant fool!"

"Drunk?" I said curtly.

"So drunk, *Bwana*, that he can not walk straight!"

"Hmm. You think he was drunk before, when he claimed to see a white ape in the brush, Njo?" I asked meaningly.

The little Jopaluo's eyes widened in fear. He fell away from me, grimacing. I had to repeat the question before he would answer.

"Others have seen the white ape, *Bwana*," he whispered uneasily. "I myself have looked upon it one night in the jungle near the moon-tower of the Bakanzenzi; and many of the Manyimas and Zapo Zaps have seen it. It is *mafui*—the were-ape. It is not of this world, *Bwana*!"

"You are afraid, eh?"

"Afraid! Aiiii! The *mafui* means death!"

I glanced at him quickly. There was no doubt about the terror in his face; it was genuine and abject. With a shrug of indifference, altogether assumed to mask my own forebodings, I turned away—and then turned back again.

"Where is Kodagi?" I demanded.

"He is in his hut, *Bwana*, across the village."

"Go to him then," I ordered, "and tell him that I am sorry for what the big white man did to him. Tell him to come here and I will take the pain from his bruises."

"Yes, *Bwana*!"

Njo scurried out, leaving me alone. For some time I paced back and forth in the central room of the shack, listening to the throb of rain on the roof above me. Presently I went out on the veranda. I made sure that my revolver—a Webley forty-four—hung in its holster at my belt.

An hour later Betts came to visit me. He came alone, wallowing and sloughing through the black mud, completely drunk and in ill temper. He fell shakily into a veranda chair beside me.

"Stinkin' weather!" he cursed. "Rain, rain—"

"You're drinking too much," I said curtly. "A man can't bloat himself with liquor up here and remain alive as well, Betts. He can't—"

"Can't!" he bellowed. "You and the rest of the fools in this country make a

bloody creed out of that word. Can't do this; can't do that. They told me I can't grow rubber in the Ituri district. Well, by God, I've got the concession and I'm going to!"

I shrugged. If he wished to kill himself with native poison, that was his affair. But I thought of his girl-wife—slim, flower-faced, and so very lovely. I pitied her from the bottom of my heart.

It would be the inevitable conclusion. He would drink himself semi-insane. The rain would beat into his mind and drive out reason. He would turn on Lucilia, make life a living hell for her. From the momentary glance I had already had of her troubled face, it was evident that the process had already begun.

"Look here," I began curtly. "You've got to send your wife out of this. You've no right to keep her here and—"

The door opened behind me. I turned quickly, to see Njo, the house-boy, scuffling toward me. He had returned from the village. He had a message for me.

Bending over, he delivered it in a whisper.

"Kodagi says, *Bwana*," he muttered, "that he will come and he thanks you. He says that you are his friend, but the red-eyed white man had better beware. That is all, *Bwana*."

Njo stepped back and vanished. With tight-pressed lips I turned back to Betts.

"There is danger here," I said grimly. "You have no right to expose your wife to it."

"No? You're gettin' pretty damned interested in her, ain't you?"

"I am doing what you are too drunk to do!" I snapped, choking back my temper. It was an effort, just then, to keep from taking his thick throat between my fingers and twisting some sense into him.

"If it's so almighty dangerous," he leered, "what are *you* stayin' here for then?"

"Because the danger does not concern me. I don't kick witch-doctors, Betts. I don't shoot at white apes. I make a point of minding my own business."

"Well?"

"My predecessor was a man of your type, Betts. He did about as he pleased. He died very slowly and unpleasantly—and mysteriously."

My words had no effect. Betts lumbered to his feet, swaying unsteadily, and grinned down at me.

"You're worse than the niggers with your damned superstitions," he scoffed. "Me—I'm hard-headed and sensible. I'm goin' to finish what I started."

"You refuse to send Lucilia—"

"She stays right here with me. I got to have some one to pour drinks for me, Varicks. She ain't much good for anythin' else, but she'll learn."

"Have you—" I began, then caught myself. My question was too delicate.

"Wot?"

"Have you been married long?"

"About a month," he grumbled, turning away. "That's all—about a month."

I'm thinkin' it was a mistake. But I reckon she'll learn. I'll teach her."

Then he groped down the steps and staggered away into the darkness.

I saw him many times after that. He was continually under the effect of liquor, and he came to me bragging and boasting about the progress he was making. Already he had repaired his huts to withstand the hammering rain. Already he had made preparations for planting his latex-producing shrubs and vines.

His wife seldom accompanied him when he came to visit me. At first I could not understand this; but then, one night when she did come with him, I knew the reason. She was ashamed.

Her lovely throat bore indelible marks of finger-prints. Her left cheek, pallid and colorless, was scratched with a livid red welt, where he had either struck her or raked her with his fingernails. Yet, even though we met by chance occasionally when he was not about, she refrained from mentioning these things to me.

Then one night Betts said to me quizzically:

"I been lookin' at a big clearin' about a quarter of a mile back in the jungle, Varicks. What in hell is the tower affair in the middle of it?"

I knew what he meant. He had stumbled upon a wide amphitheater far from the village proper, where members of the secret cult of the Bakanzenzi, according to whispered rumors, were supposed to meet. As for the tower, it was a solid pillar of gleaming white stone, somewhat squat and encircled by a platform at the top, which rose, like a thing of another world, from the reeds of the clearing.

During my four months' stay in Kodagi's village, I had examined this tower many times. It was not hollow, but solid and thick; and the stones had evidently been brought from a great distance, since I could find no others like them in the surrounding district. It is my belief—and I am sure that the belief is no idle supposition—that this tower was built many hundreds of years ago by the Phenicians. There are many such towers scattered throughout Africa's gloomy interior. They were originally erected to the Phenician goddess, Astarte—but now, naturally enough, they are sacred to native gods and exponents of black magic and *mafui*.

I explained this, as best I could, to the man who sat before me. He shrugged at mention of Astarte; he sneered when I spoke of *mafui*.

"What is this Bakanzenzi of yours?" he grinned.

"What is it?" I said quietly. "I am not sure, Betts. For that matter, no white man is ever sure of the secret cults. The Bakanzenzi are cannibals, who are said to be able to transform themselves into animals at certain times. Kodagi has told me that the tower-glade is sacred to the Bakanzenzi. They hold their rites by the old white tower. The walls of the glade are made up of twisted, writhing-limbed oki-trees, said to be magic. According to Kodagi, the penalty for disturbing the sacred amphitheater is death—horrible and certain."

"Rot," Betts grunted. "You're an old woman, Varicks."

"I have lived in these jungles long enough to be careful," I said simply.

"Yeah? Well, I've been here long enough to know that the glade is good planting-ground. Tomorrow I'm diggin' up the ground around the white tower and plantin' it with rubber vines. Tell *that* to your blasted Bakanzenzi!"

I argued with him. He told me curtly that the ground came within his jurisdiction and he intended to do as he pleased. Moreover, he did it. The following day he put his entire gang of blacks to work, planting the glade of Astarte with indigenous rubber plants and vines. He drove the natives brutally; and while they did his work for him, he sprawled in the shadow of the tower and swilled rotten whisky into his stomach.

That night his wife came to my shack—alone. We sat inside, out of the chill, moisture-ridden air; and I saw, as she leaned close to me in the glow of the lamp, that fresh marks of brutality were livid on her face and neck.

"I—I am afraid," she whispered tensely. "He is drinking more than ever. He has whipped some of our black boys until they can hardly walk!"

"He has also—beaten you?" I suggested softly.

She turned her face away. A dull line of crimson crept about her throat and rose higher. Reaching out, I took her hand and held it.

"There is bound to be trouble," I said bitterly. "You say he has beaten the natives—and yet no natives have come to me with complaints. That is ominous. They would ordinarily bring their troubles to me, since I am in charge. This silence means that they intend to settle the score on their own account."

"You—you can do nothing?"

"I will do my best. Kodagi is coming here tomorrow, to have his wounds re-dressed. He was kicked brutally, severely. I am afraid there are internal injuries."

Lucilia's hand slipped unconsciously to her own side. She winced and stifled an exclamation of pain as her fingers touched some hidden bruise. I knew then that Betts had used his heavy boots on more than Kodagi; and a sullen rage found its way into my heart. God—if I ever *caught* him kicking her!

"Does he know you are here?" I said suddenly.

"No," she said, shaking her head heavily. "He—he has taken to going into the bush at night—alone. I do not know where he goes. He is always drunk—savage. I dare not question him."

My fists clenched. I saw that she was crying softly, and drew her close to me so that her head rested on my shoulder.

"Why does he hate you, Lucilia?" I pleaded.

"Because—because he is drunk. And because he is jealous of you. You are all that he would like to be. Clean—strong—"

"If I were strong in courage," I said bitterly, "I would take you away from him."

She raised her face slowly, almost entreatingly.

"I—wish you would—Lyle," she whispered.

Then I caught myself. She was his wife; I was a civilized white man, in spite of our surroundings. I could kill him—and would kill him—if I found him mistreating her. But I could not make love to her, in spite of my emotions. There was a difference between protection and theft.

I walked back with her, through the rain. The hut where she lived was empty. Betts had not returned. I whispered farewell to her and returned, with slow steps and heavy heart, to my own dreary shanty on the other side of the village.

Kodagi came the next afternoon, limping painfully and supporting himself on the shoulders of two of the Zapo Zaps. I dressed his wounds with infinite care. Then, thinking to insure his friendship, I led him and his two henchmen into the rear room of the shanty. There I gave them presents of cigarettes and other valueless odds and ends which might catch their fancy. In addition, I allowed them to peer through the high-powered microscope which stood on the table—a thing which had always excited their curiosity in the past.

Kodagi bent over the instrument for many minutes, finally stepping aside to make room for one of his companions. He grinned at me gratefully. I attempted, then, to explain the secret of it to him.

"You see," I said, "the high-powered lenses make things seem larger than they really are and—"

The door slammed open behind me, drowning my words. I swung about, ready for any kind of emergency in view of what had already occurred. I found myself face to face with Betts, who stood swaying in the doorway.

He was savagely drunk—more drunk than I had ever before seen him. He lunged toward me with both hands outflung, snarling like an animal.

"So you're here, are you!" he rasped. "You—"

The curse was not pleasant. It was a livid torrent of abuse and epithet.

"What do you want?" I said crisply. Kodagi and his men had stepped away from the table and were watching me intently.

"You know damned well what I want!" he bellowed. "My wife comes here when I'm away in the jungle, does she? You and her—"

There was but one answer possible. I seized his arms and flung him away from me.

"You're drunk!" I said curtly. "If you say another word—by God, Betts, you're not fit to live with a woman. If you don't stop your infernal drinking and quit beating the natives, I'll have you sent back to the coast. You—you scum!"

He caromed across the floor like a top-heavy bullock. For thirty seconds he glared at me; and the utter hate and jealousy in his face must have been visible even to Kodagi and the Zapo Zaps. Then, with a burning oath, he clawed at the revolver in his belt.

He was drunk enough to have killed me. Luckily his fingers were clumsy, slippery with sweat. Before he could get the thing free and level it, I was upon him. My fist ground into his mouth. He jerked erect under the impetus of the

blow; then, groping for support with lifeless fingers, he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Kodagi and the two natives faded silently through the open doorway. They said nothing; they departed like ghosts. I was left alone with the limp thing on the floor.

For a moment I stood stiff by the table, undecided whether to leave him there or to make some attempt to revive him. Then I considered that after all he had been drunk; he had not known what he was doing. I dropped to my knees beside him and wiped the blood from his face.

Some one else entered the shack then. I heard the veranda door open and close, and hesitant steps crossed the outer room. I glanced up to find Lucilia standing above me, on the threshold.

"You—you have killed him?" she whispered tensely.

"No. He would have killed me."

A soft, choking exclamation came from her pale lips. She stared into Betts' face; and as she did so, the renegade's eyes twitched open.

We were silent, all three of us, for a long moment. Presently Betts groped to his feet and stood confronting us. A sneer curled his mouth.

"I suppose you're damned glad," he said gutturally, turning to his wife, "that Varicks did for me."

"Yes," she said simply. "I am."

"Yeah?" he snarled. "Well, by God, I'll change *that* before I'm done!"

He turned heavily, without a word to me, and lurched over the sill. I heard him stagger through the outer room. The veranda door thudded. Lucilia and I were alone.

"Why did you come here?" I shrugged. "You know it brings his madness to the surface."

"I had to come, Lyle. When he left me, he was insane. He—he might have killed you."

She seized my arm passionately. Her face was ghastly white.

"I'm afraid of him, Lyle!" she said fervently. "He—he is becoming an animal. At the slightest sound, he turns with horrible quickness to stare behind him, like a thing of the jungle. He walks on tiptoe and talks in a whisper when we are alone. When he thinks I am not looking, he mutters to himself and claws at the empty air, as if bats were fighting him."

"Vampire bats," I said aloud, without meaning to utter the words.

"What?" she said suddenly.

"Nothing," I mumbled. "You had better go back. It is not safe for you to excite his temper. If anything happens, come to me at once."

"I wish—oh, I wish I could stay here with you!"

"So do I," I said sincerely. "But it's impossible."

She walked out with dragging steps. I could read the anguish in her stooped shoulders and hanging head. But I could do nothing, then. I could only stare,

and let her go.

When she had gone, I made an attempt to be rational. For an hour I worked over my case of entomological specimens, labelling them and separating them into their proper groups. But my mind was not on the work. My thoughts persisted in returning to her description of Betts' mysterious behavior.

I have studied medicine to some extent; and I knew that a medical diagnosis of Betts' malady was simple enough and completely devoid of mystery. The man had delirium tremens. He was on the verge of madness, brought on by an excess of native rum and bad whisky. And yet when I considered old Kodagi's sudden disappearance in that first hour of torment—when I considered the tower of Astarte and the horrible cult of the Bakanzenzi—I knew that the medical explanation was not complete. Other things—unknown, unnamed things of darkness and the jungle—had taken possession.

An hour dragged on. It was nearly midnight when I heard the door of my shanty clatter open. I turned from the specimen table with both of my arms uplifted to defend myself—and then my arms dropped helplessly as *Lucilia* stumbled into the room.

"He is gone!" she said sibilantly.

"Gone?" I repeated. "Where?"

"He was in the house when I returned. I heard him pacing back and forth in his own room, mumbling and talking to himself. I sat on the stoop and waited—waited for him to come out and—and beat me. I must have fallen asleep—from exhaustion. When I awoke, the shack was abandoned. He has gone into the jungle again, Lyle!"

I stood rigid, undecided what to do. She came closer and stared pitifully into my face.

"Lyle," she whispered, "his—his clothes are thrown on the bunk where he sleeps. He—he must be naked!"

"In the jungle—*naked*?" I said roughly. "Good God, no!"

"It is true, Lyle. He is an animal. He—"

But I thrust her aside. This ghastly affair had reached its climax, and I was determined to settle it once and for all.

"Stay here," I ordered crisply. "I intend to find him."

She slumped into a chair. I threw a coat about my shoulders and strode into the outer room, where Njo was asleep upon his bunk in the corner. I prodded him to consciousness and swore at him because he sat like a monkey on the edge of the bunk, blinking at me in bewilderment. Then, with the little Jopaluo trailing at my heels, I stepped into the night.

The clearing lay in nearly complete darkness. For once, the rain had ceased its monotonous drizzle; and the jungle was buried under a steaming mist. The sky was grayish black, void of stars. The moon, hanging in the middle of it like a blurred lantern, was blood-red.

We went straight to Betts' hut. There, with the aid of the search-lamp in my

clenched fist, we found the man's spoor leading from the rear door—and the prints were those of naked feet! It was not difficult to trail that curious line of tracks into the jungle.

For twenty minutes we continued, following a well-beaten path through the jungle. In this manner we came to that significant grove in the midst of the great trees, where the gleaming tower of Astarte stuck up from the reeds like a white tooth.

And there, at the base of the tower, we found a continuation of Betts' naked footprints. Round and round the tower they went—a circular, deep-beaten path of fresh imprints made by naked feet. And there they ended.

Confused, bewildered, not at all sure of my own sanity, I led the way back to my own shanty. For a long time I talked to Lucilia of what I had seen; and finally, mastering the fear of her heart, she returned to her hut. Far into the night I sat on the veranda of my place, smoking and waiting and wondering. It was the night before the full moon.

In the morning, Betts came to me cursing. He made no mention of the previous night. He was blind with rage because many of the euphorbias, which he had brought all the way from Madagascar and planted in the grove, had been uprooted. He demanded that I find the culprit.

I could do nothing, and I told him so. Still cursing, he slunk into the jungle.

I heard no more from him during the hours of daylight. Nor did I hear from Lucilia, who, for the sake of her own safety, refrained from coming near me. But when night came, and the moon swung into a sky of pitch, the village chief made a visit to my shanty and stood before me on the veranda.

"I come, *Bwana*," he said bitterly, "for justice. The red-eyed white man has done murder. He has killed two of the men who worked for him."

I did not bother to ask useless questions. My position of *chef de poste* demanded that I do one thing—and one thing only. Strapping a revolver holster about my belt, I went directly to Betts' abode.

His wife opened the door to me and stared at me in consternation. She must have read the anger in my face, for I confess that I made no attempt to conceal it. Betts himself sat slumped in a chair close to the table.

I accused him outright of murdering two of the blacks. He lurched to his feet and snarled into my mouth.

"Why wouldn't I?" he rasped. "They were pullin' up my rubber plants in the grove. I caught 'em at it! By God, I'll murder the whole bloody tribe if they don't leave my plants alone!"

"You're under arrest!" I snapped. "This is my village. I won't stand for—"

He moved with such uncanny quickness that I could not prevent it. His fist hammered into my eyes, hurling me into the wall. I heard Lucilia scream as I went down. I saw Betts, running with tremendous speed and agility, swirl across the threshold and race into the jungle. Staggering up, I wiped the blood from

my face and plunged after him. The jungle closed over me.

I had no flash-lamp this time. There was nothing to light the trail. The moon above the trees was full and vivid, but here it was blotted out completely by interlaced branches and creepers. I stumbled headlong, plunging into unseen thickets and strangling vines. For half an hour I groped through the bush, stopping at intervals to listen for sounds of the fugitive. Once I heard a scream—a woman's scream. At that moment I did not realize the hellish portent of it, and so I continued to fight my way forward.

Then it came. I had no defense against it, since it fell upon me from behind. As I faltered in the darkness, the underbrush broke apart behind me. I heard a sudden terrifying suck of breath. Then something—God, I can not force myself to call it human!—something hideously powerful, stark naked, reeking with the stench of liquor, crushed me into the dank floor of the jungle. A white arm lashed about my throat. I was lifted bodily and flung over a sweat-soaked shoulder. At terrific speed I was borne through the jungle. Overhanging vines tore at my face and beat against me, filling my eyes with blood. I believe I lost consciousness.

What happened from then on is a blur of agony. I felt the naked form beneath me heaving and panting as it raced on and on through the pitch. Then the jungle opened wide and a gleaming white glare, from the moon above, blinded me. I was carried another hundred steps, then flung to the ground. When my eyes opened, staring through a mask of blood, I found myself bound hand and foot with reed ropes and lying in a contorted position at the foot of that mysterious, curious tower of Astarte, in the center of the forbidden amphitheater of the Bakanzenzi!

Something stirred beside me. I jerked myself about fearfully, expecting anything. My eyes went wide in horror. There, flung brutally against the stone not two yards away from me, and moaning with the pain of the reeds that cut into her wrists and ankles, lay Lucilia. I can see her face a hundred times over, so deeply was it engraved with fear!

I could say nothing. My mouth welled with blood; my lips were thick and swollen. Dumbly I stared out into the clearing. The moon, hanging very low over the great ceiba silk-cotton trees and borassus palms at the rim of the amphitheater, had not yet swung deep enough to illuminate the tower. The entire center of the clearing lay in mottled blackness, masking the tower in shadow.

But we were not alone. Out there, half hidden in the gloom, a huge white shape inhabited the shadows with us. I could see it lumbering around the tower, mumbling and wailing to itself in a guttural voice that rose, at sudden intervals, into a screaming chant. In a mad circle it rushed, and as it hurtled past in front of me I saw something more—a jet-black bat-shape flapping and fluttering about its head. I saw the flame of fireflies swirling.

Terror came to me then. I shrank close to the girl beside me, and I was mortally afraid. The thing out there was Betts. I *knew* it was Betts. Yet the

thought brought no consolation, for the creature was a stark naked raving mad-man in the grip of some weird occult power beyond my comprehension.

I stared into Lucilia's eyes.

"How—how did you come here?" I choked. "Did he—"

"He came back as soon as you had gone, Lyle! He was naked, mad! He seized me—carried me here—"

Something in her voice gave me courage, because I knew that she needed me. It was a strange time to think of love; and yet I knew, at that moment, that I loved her, that she loved me in return. This ordeal had thrown us together and made us realize the truth.

I lifted my head then and shouted to the terrible thing that lumbered about us.

"Betts!" I screamed. "Betts! Get hold of yourself, man. You're mad!"

The naked thing stopped in its tracks and laughed hideously. I saw it point to the rising moon. Behind it, at the edge of the jungle, I thought I saw the massive underbrush sway and rustle with a significant, peculiar movement, as if a horde of unseen things lay in wait there. Then, chattering frantically, the horrible mad thing continued its ceaseless circle.

Once again fear gripped me. I stared with unblinking eyes, waiting and wondering what the end would be. Somehow I knew that Betts was not alone. The Bakanzenzi—the dreaded cult which held its rites in this clearing at the height of the full moon—were somewhere about, only waiting until the moon-white should reach the sacred tower.

Then, at my feet, a shaft of moonlight fell upon the base of the column. The great white shape stopped its prowling and stepped full into the glow. I saw every detail of Betts' unclad form—a terrible naked figure covered with self-inflicted cuts and slashes.

He approached with short, jerky steps, flinging his arms wildly.

"Betts!" I shouted. "For God's sake—"

He ignored me. In a shrill, screeching voice he began to speak, turning his bloody head in all directions as if he were addressing some immense gathering. The man was gripped with some tremendous power of hallucination. He saw things which did not exist—or perhaps they *did* exist and were beyond my human perceptions!

"The time has come!" he muttered. "The moon has risen to the sacred tower. The unbelievers must die, as it was ordained by the Goddess of the Tower! The time—is—now!"

He flung himself forward. I saw his arm lunge up. The pallid white light gleamed on the blade of a horribly long knife clenched in his fist. I closed my eyes with a shudder. Lucilia, pressed close against me, moaned softly and tried to take my hand.

But Betts did not reach us. A furious burst of sound stopped him in his tracks. From all sides of the tower it came—the wild, thunderous beat of drums.

It rose out of the jungle like the hammering of rain on a tent-top, deafening in its intensity. At the same moment a hairy arm, stark white and gleaming in the moonlight, twisted about my waist from behind and lifted me from the base of the tower. A sudden stench of rancid flesh came over me, strong enough to be nauseating. I felt myself carried, at a curious lumbering, rolling gait, through the high reeds to the jungle rim. There, in the protecting shadow of the borassus palms, I was flung down. Lucilia Betts was tossed beside me; and when I regained my senses long enough to stare about me, the monstrous hairy creature had vanished. Vanished just as Kodagi had vanished from the mud of the village floor!

Then it began in earnest.

The drums took up a wild reverberation. There was no steady beat; merely a continuous roar of noise emanating out of nothing. Betts, adding his voice to the tumult, had dropped his knife and was once more lumbering round and round the white tower, trotting with the shifting gait of a great gorilla. Beyond him, all about him, I saw native forms, glistening black in the glare of the moon. Like ants they were, crouching in the reeds; and their faces were hidden behind triangular black masks of carved wood—the sign of the Bakanzenzi!

They watched Betts with a hungry stare, as if waiting for something. He saw them. His even, rolling stride became a peculiar jumping, hopping gait, altogether erratic. But still he moved in the same mad circle!

There could be no more horror—so I thought. The only thing that kept me from going insane was the touch of Lucilia's hands on my manacled arms. Then her voice screamed beside me.

“The tower! Oh—God! Look!”

She shrank against me, trembling. But my eyes were riveted to the top of the tower, open wide in the culmination of horror. There, peering down at Betts with savage lust, hung a face—a hideous face, white and hairy and huge, with drooling fangs that glistened in the light. An ape's face—a white ape of enormous size, larger than the gorillas of the Kivu country!

The thing dropped down behind Betts. It followed him in his route about the tower, trotting clumsily behind him and making no attempt to close the intervening distance. Then Lucilia screamed again; and I saw another of those horrible white shapes appear in the top of the tower, to drop down and join in the procession. One after another they come, as if by magic, to leap into the rushing circle of monstrosities headed by Betts. When I finally closed my eyes, overcome by the horror of it, more than a score of them had joined the ring.

I think then that the moon-glow struck the tip of the tower, as a signal. A peculiar vibrating chant rose all about me, rising and falling like a tide of water. A dozen scattered fires leaped into being about the clearing, as if they had been waiting for some hidden sign. The light was blinding, bewildering. It roared and flickered and threw great blotches of sparks into the vivid sky. The Bakanzenzi were dancing—dancing and screaming and hammering on their infernal drums.

And suddenly the natives were no longer there—no longer before me. In their place appeared creatures of the jungle. I saw leopards swirling in the reeds; great rock pythons coiled in the glare of the fires, filling the night with their hissing voices; crocodiles thrashing about with open jaws; bush-pigs racing madly! The terrible lingas and dinwinti drums roared faster and faster.

Lucilia fainted then. I pressed her close to me and stared in horror. The great apes were rumbling, hammering upon their chests as they lumbered about the tower. Their fanged mouths were open, dripping saliva. And Betts was no longer leading them in the ritual—he was racing at top speed, as fast as his sweating legs would carry him, to *escape!* His voice rose in a tortured screech, full of terror. He raised his arms to the moon, blubbing in torment.

I could not close my eyes. Every detail of that mad scene burned into my brain. The fires, already burning and waiting for their cannibalistic offering—the jungle creatures writhing and leaping about the flames—the great apes of the tower closing in on their victim with relentless certainty. God!

Then they caught him. I heard a heart-rending scream that rose in livid crescendo and was smothered at its peak. Then came a mighty crash of sound, a deafening bellow; and the giant *mafui* apes dragged their victim down. I fainted.

When I opened my eyes again, I peered into the frightened face of Njo, my house-boy. I lay on the veranda of my own shanty, in the village of Kodagi, and Lucilia Betts lay ten feet distant from me, sprawled pitifully on the stoop. Njo was struggling faithfully to pour brandy between my clenched teeth.

“Who—who brought me here?” I said thickly, gripping his arm.

The Jopaluo peered into my face and shuddered.

“You were here, *Bwana*,” he whispered fearfully. “I found both of you here at daylight, when the screams of leopards and the dinwinti drums awakened me.”

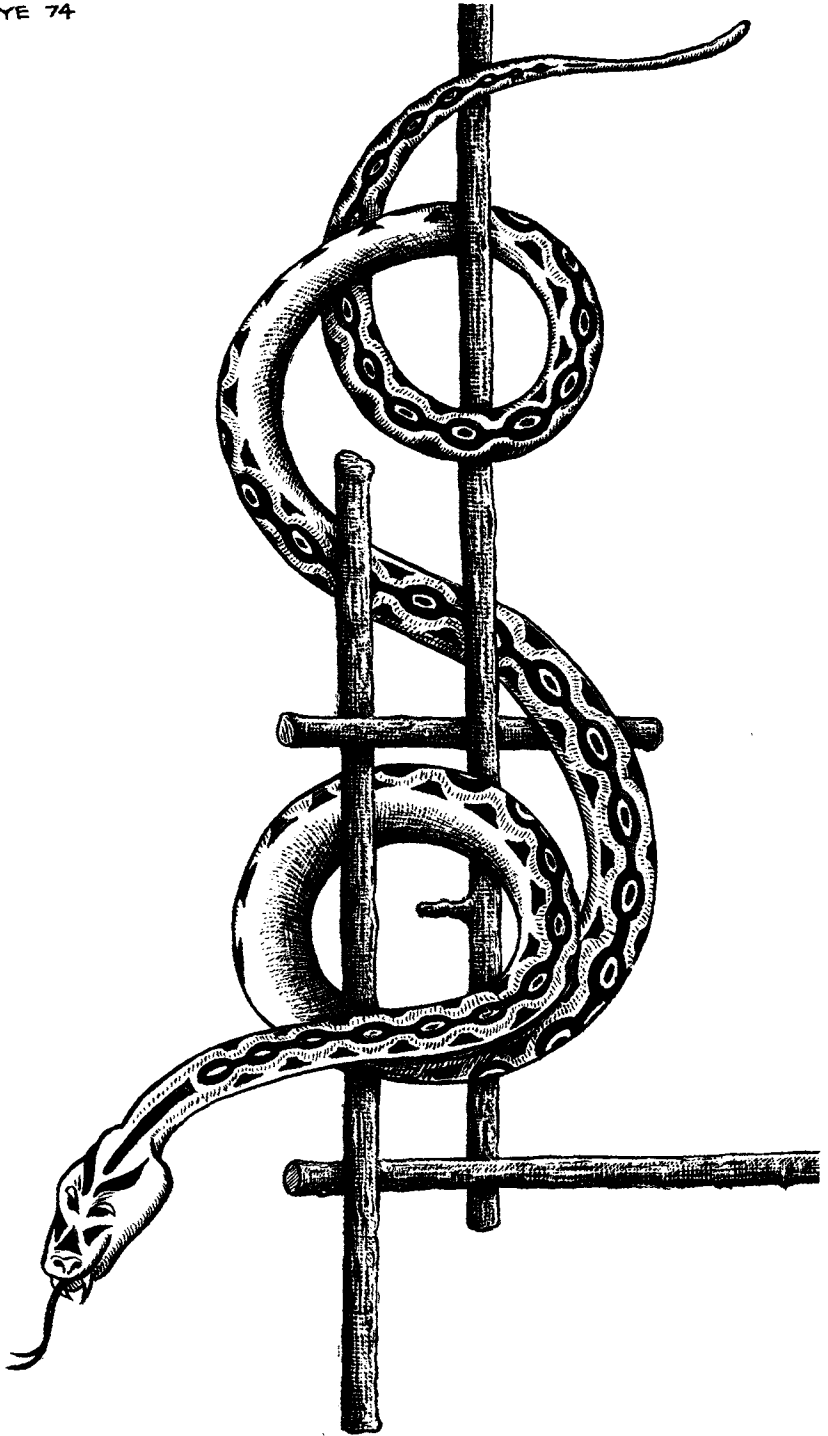
I could get no more out of him, in spite of my questioning. That was his story—he had found us there on the veranda at daylight.

When I had recovered strength I left him to care for Lucilia, while I stumbled back through the jungle to the clearing of the Bakanzenzi. I was determined to know the truth.

The amphitheater was deserted. At the base of the tower I found stains of blood and many, many footprints—*human* footprints. Side by side in the muddy ground I found two other things of mystery. One was a crescent-shaped disk of mother-of-pearl—the ancient symbol of Astarte. The other, half buried in the mud, was a gold seal ring bearing Betts' initials—and inside it, curled maliciously and staring up at me with cloudy gold eyes, lay a tiny green whip-snake—the symbol of the Bakanzenzi.

On my way back to the shanty, I made a visit to the hut of old Kodagi, for the purpose of asking him a single significant question. Quietly I pushed aside the reed mat that hung over the entrance; and Kodagi was sitting there on

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the floor, blinking at me.

"Do you know," I said simply, squatting beside him, "where Betts is?"

He peered into my face for a long time. A wealth of uncanny wisdom and knowledge was engraved in his parchment features at that particular moment.

"Last night, *Bwana*," he shrugged, "I heard the screams of the leopards and the victory cries of the great apes. It is possible that Betts was torn by the big cats—or killed by a wandering tribe of gorillas from the Kivu."

"Apes—" I muttered. "It was an ape who carried Lucilia and me to safety under the borassus palms. An ape—"

"Perhaps, *Bwana*," Kodagi said softly, "the ape was your friend. Perhaps he saved you because you were kind to him, healing his wounds and letting him peer through your magic instruments and—"

My head came up with a jerk.

"What?" I snapped.

"Nothing, *Bwana*. I was talking to myself. I always talk to myself when it is raining, *Bwana*—and you see for yourself it is raining again."

And so I left him. And tonight, now that the ordeal is finished, I find myself unable to sleep. I am sitting here with pencil and paper in the inner room of my shanty, with the flickering lamplight playing over my shrunken face. Lucilia has gone to her own hut, with Njo to keep guard over her until morning. Then she and I, together, will depart from this strange village and leave behind us, for ever, the domain of the Bakanzenzi and the hideous region of *mafui*. We shall be married at the mission of the white fathers in the village of Bugani, twenty miles down-river, and from there we shall go directly to the coast.

There I shall make my report to the government, and in it I shall say that Betts was devoured by leopards. But Lucilia and I—and old Kodagi, who squats for ever on the floor of his hut and is wiser by far than any of us—we know better.

The Brotherhood of Blood

IT IS MIDNIGHT as I write this. Listen! Even now the doleful chimes of the Old North Church, buried in the heart of this enormous city of mine, are tolling the funeral hour.

In a little while, when the city thinks itself immune in sleep, deep-cradled in the somber hours of night—I shall go forth from here on my horrible mission of blood.

Every night it is the same. Every night the same ghoulish orgy. Every night the same mad thirst. And in a little while—

But first, while there is yet time, let me tell you of my agony. Then you will understand, and sympathize, and suffer with me.

I was twenty-six years old then. God alone knows how old I am now. The years frighten me, and I have deliberately forgotten them. But I was twenty-six when she came.

They call me an author. Perhaps I was; and yet the words which I gave to the world were not, and could not be, the true thoughts which hovered in my mind. I had studied—studied things which the average man dares not even to consider. The occult—life after death—spiritualism—call it what you will.

I had written about such things, but in guarded phrases, calculated to divulge only those elementary truths which laymen should be told. My name was well known, perhaps too well known. I can see it now as it used to appear in the pages of the leading medical journals and magazines devoted to psychic investigation.

“By—Paul Munn—Authority on the Supernatural.”

In those days I had few friends; none, in fact, who were in harmony with my work. One man I did know well—a medical student at Harvard University, in Cambridge. His name was Rojer Threng.

I can remember him now as he used to sit bolt upright in the huge chair in my lonely Back Bay apartment. He filled the chair with his enormous, loosely-constructed frame. His face was angular, pointed to gaunt extremes. His eyes—ah, you will have cause to consider those eyes before I have finished!—his eyes were eternally afire with a peculiar glittering life which I could never fully comprehend.

“And you can honestly sit there, spilling your mad theories to the world?” he

used to accuse me in his rasping, deep-throated voice. "Good Lord, Munn, this is the Twentieth Century—a scientific era of careful thought—not the time of werewolves and vampires! You are mad!"

And yet, for all his open condemnation, he did not dare to stand erect, with his face lifted, and *deny* the things I told him. That sinister gleam of his eyes; there was no denying the thoughts lurking behind it. On the surface he was a sneering, indifferent doubter; but beneath the surface, where no man's eyes penetrated, he *knew*.

He was there in my apartment when she came. That night is vivid even now. There we sat, enveloped in a haze of gray cigarette smoke. I was bent over the desk in the corner, hammering a typewriter. He lay sprawled in the great overstuffed chair, watching me critically, intently, as if he would have liked to continue the heated argument which had passed between us during the past hour.

He had come in his usual unannounced manner, bringing with him an ancient newspaper clipping from some forgotten file in the university. Thrusting the thing into my hand, he had ordered me to read it.

That clipping was of singular interest. It was a half-hearted account of the infamous vampire horror of the little half-buried village of West Surrey. You recall it? It was known, luridly, as the "crime of eleven terrors." Eleven pitiful victims, each with the same significant blood-marks, were one after the other the prey of the unknown vampire who haunted that little village in the heart of an English moor. And then, when the eleventh victim had succumbed, Scotland Yard—with the assistance of the famous psychic investigator, Sir Edmund Friel—discovered the vampire to be the same aged, seemingly innocent old woman who had acted as *attendant nurse* to the unfortunate victims. A ghastly affair.

But Threng held the newspaper clipping up to me as a mere "trick" of journalism. He denounced it bitterly.

"What is a vampire, Munn?" he sneered.

I did not answer him. I saw no use in continuing a futile debate on a subject in which we had nothing in common.

"Well?" he insisted.

I swung around, facing him deliberately.

"A vampire," I said thoughtfully, choosing my words with extreme care, "is a creature of living death, dependent upon human blood for its existence. From sunset to sunrise, during the hours of darkness, it is free to pursue its horrible blood-quest. During the day it must remain within the confines of its grave—dead, and yet alive."

"And how does it appear?" he bantered. "As the usual skeletonic intruder, cowed in black, or perhaps as a mystic wraith without substance?"

"In either of two forms," I said coldly, angered by his twisted smile. "As a bat—or in its natural human substance. In either shape it leaves the grave each night and seeks blood. It obtains its blood from the throats of its victims, leaving two significant wounds in the neck from which it has drawn life. Its victims,

after such a death, inherit the powers of their persecutor—and become vampires.”

“Rot!” Threng exclaimed. “Utter sentimentality and imagination.”

I turned back to my typewriter, ignoring him. His words were not pleasant. I would have been glad to be rid of him.

But he was persistent. He leaned forward in his chair and said critically:

“Suppose I wished to become a vampire, Munn. How could I go about it? How *does* a man obtain life after death, or life *in* death?”

“By study,” I answered crisply. “By delving into thoughts which men like you sneer at. By going so deeply into such things that he becomes possessed of inhuman powers.”

That ended our discussion. He could not conceive of such possibilities; and he laughed aloud at my statement. Bitterly resentful, I forced myself to continue the work before me. He, in turn, thrust a cigarette into his mouth and leaned back in his chair like a great lazy animal. And then—*she* came.

The soft knock on the door panel—so suggestive that it seemed from the world beyond—startled me. I swung about, frowning at the intrusion. Visitors at this hour of night were not the kind of guests I wished to face.

I went to the door slowly, hesitantly. My hand touched the latch nervously. Then I forced back the foolish fear that gripped me, and drew the barrier wide. And there I saw her for the first time—tall, slender, radiantly lovely as she stood in the half-light of the outer passage.

“You—are Mr. Paul Munn?” she inquired quietly.

“I am,” I admitted.

“I am Margot Vernee. It is unconventional, I suppose, calling upon you at this hour; but I have come because of your reputation. You are the one man in this great city who may be able to—help me.”

I would have answered her, but she caught sight, then, of Rojer Threng. Her face whitened. She stepped back very abruptly, fearful—or at least so I thought—that he might have overheard her.

“I—I am sorry,” she said quickly. “I thought that you were alone, Mr. Munn. I—may I return later? Tomorrow, perhaps—when you are not occupied?”

I nodded. At that particular moment I could not find a voice to answer her; for she had inadvertently stepped directly beneath the bracket lamp in the wall, and her utter beauty fascinated me, choking the words back into my throat.

Then she went; and as I closed the door reluctantly, Rojer Threng glanced quizzically into my face and said dryly:

“Wants you to help her, eh? I didn’t know you went in for that sort of thing, Munn. Better be careful!”

And he laughed. God, how I remember that laugh—and the cruel, derisive hatred that was inherent in it! But I did not answer him. In fact, his words were driven mechanically into my mind, and I hardly heard them. Returning to the typewriter, I attempted to force myself once more into the work that

confronted me; but the face of that girl blurred the lines of my manuscript. She seemed to be still in the room, still standing near me. Imagination, of course; and yet, in view of what has happened since that night, I do not know.

She did not return as she had promised. All during the following day I awaited her coming—restless, nervous, unable to work. At eleven in the evening I was still pacing automatically back and forth across the floor when the door-bell rang. It was Rojer Threng who stepped over the threshold.

At first he did not mention the peculiar affair of the previous night. He took his customary place in the big chair and talked idly about medical topics of casual interest. Then, bending forward suddenly, he demanded:

“Did she return, Munn?”

“No,” I said.

“I thought not,” he muttered harshly. “Not after she saw me here. I—used to know her.”

It was not so much the thing he said, as the complete bitterness with which he spoke, that brought me about with a jerk, confronting him.

“You—knew her?” I said slowly.

“I knew her,” he scowled. “Think of the name, man. Margot Vernee. Have I never mentioned it to you?”

“No.” And then I knew that he had. At least, the inflection of it was vaguely familiar.

“Her story would interest you,” he shrugged. “Peculiar, Munn—very peculiar, in view of what you were telling me last night, before she came.”

He looked up at me oddly. I did not realize the significance of that crafty look then, but now I know.

“The Vernee family,” he said, “is as old as France.”

“Yes?” I tried to mask my eagerness.

“The Château Vernee is still standing—abandoned—forty miles south of Paris. A hundred years before the Revolution it was occupied by Armand Vernee, noted for his occult research and communications with the spirit world. He was dragged from the château by the peasants of the surrounding district when he was twenty-eight years old and burned at the stake—for witchcraft.”

I stared straight into Threng’s angular face. If ever I noticed that unholy gleam in his strange eyes, it was at that moment. His eyes were wide open, staring, burning with a dead, phosphorescent glow. Never once did they flicker as he continued his story in that sibilant, half-hissing voice of his.

“After Armand Vernee’s execution, his daughter Regine lived alone in the château. She married a young count, gave birth to a son. In her twenty-eighth year she was prostrated with a strange disease. The best physicians in the country could not cure her. She—”

“What—kind of disease?” I said very slowly.

“The symptoms,” he said, sucking in his breath audibly, “baffled all those

who examined her. Two small red marks at the throat, Munn—and a continual loss of blood *while she slept*. She confessed to horrible dreams. She told of a great bat which possessed her father's face, clawing at the window of her chamber every night—gaining admittance by forcing the shutters open with its claws—hovering over her.”

“And—she died?”

“She died. In her twenty-eighth year.”

“And then?” I shuddered.

“Her son, François Vernee Leroux, lived alone in the *château*. The count would not remain. The horror of her death drove him away—drove him mad. The son, François, lived—alone.”

Threng looked steadily at me. At least, his *eyes* looked. The rest of his face was contorted with passion, malignant.

“François Vernee died when he was twenty-eight years of age,” he said meaningly. “He, too, left a son—and *that* son died at the age of twenty-eight. Each death was the same. The same crimson marks at the throat. The same loss of blood. The same—madness.”

Threng reached for a cigarette and held a match triumphantly to the end of it. His face, behind the sudden glare of that stick of wood, was horrible with exultation.

“Margot Vernee is the last of her line,” he shrugged. “Every direct descendant of Armand Vernee has died in the same ghastly way, at twenty-eight years of age. *That* is why the girl came here for help, Munn. She knows the inevitable end that awaits her! She knows that she can not escape the judgment which Armand Vernee has inflicted upon the family of Vernee!”

Roger Threng was right. Three weeks after those significant words had passed his lips, the girl came to my apartment. She repeated, almost word for word, the very fundamental facts that Threng had disclosed to me. Other things she told me, too—but I see no need to repeat them here.

“You are the only man who knows the significance of my fate,” she said to me; and her face was ghastly white as she said it. “Is there no way to avert it, Mr. Munn? Is there no alternative?”

I talked with her for an eternity. The following night, and every night for the next four weeks, she came to me. During the hours of daylight I delved frantically into research work, in an attempt to find an outlet from the dilemma which faced her. At night, alone with her, I learned bit by bit the details of her mad story, and listened to her pleas for assistance.

Then came that fatal night. She sat close to me, talking in her habitually soft, persuasive voice.

“I have formed a plan,” I said quietly.

“A plan, Paul?”

“When the time comes, I shall prepare a sleeping-chamber for you with but

one window. I shall seal that window with the mark of the cross. It is the only way."

She looked at me for a long while without speaking. Then she said, very slowly:

"You had better prepare the room, Paul—soon."

"You mean—" I said suddenly. But I knew what she meant.

"I shall be twenty-eight tonight—at midnight."

God forgive me that I did not keep her with me that night! I was already half in love with her. No—do not smile at that. You, too, after looking into her face continually for four long weeks—sitting close to her—listening to the soft whisper of her voice—you, too, would have loved her. I would have given my work, my reputation, my very life for her; and yet I permitted her to walk out of my apartment that night, to the horror that awaited her!

She came to me the next evening. One glance at her and I knew the terrible truth. I need not have asked the question that I did, but it came mechanically from my lips, like a dead voice.

"It—came?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "It came."

She stood before me and untied the scarf from her neck. And there, in the center of her white throat, I saw those infernal marks—two parallel slits of crimson, an eighth of an inch in length, horrible in their evil.

"It was a dream," she said, "and yet I know that it was no dream, but vivid reality. A gigantic bat with a woman's face—my mother's face—appeared suddenly at the window of my room. Its claws lifted the window. It circled over my bed as I lay there, staring at it in mute horror. Then it descended upon me, and I felt warm lips on my neck. A languid, wonderfully contented feeling came over me. I relaxed—and slept."

"And—when you awoke?" I said heavily.

"The mark of the vampire was here on my throat."

I stared at her for a very long time, without speaking. She did not move. She stood there by my desk; and a pitiful, yearning look came into her deep eyes.

Then, of a sudden, I was gripped with the helplessness of the whole evil affair. I stormed about the room, screaming my curses to the walls, my face livid with hopeless rage, my hands clawing at anything within reach of them. I tore at my face. I seized the wooden smoking-stand and broke it in my fingers, hurling the shattered pieces into a grinning, maddening picture of the Creator which hung beside the door. Then I tripped, fell, sprawled headlong—and groped again to my feet, quivering as if some tropic fever had laid its cold hands upon me.

There were tears in Margot's eyes as she came toward me and placed her hands on my arm. She would have spoken, to comfort me. I crushed her against me, holding her until she cried out in pain.

"Merciful Christ!" I cried. And the same words spurted from my lips, over and over again, until the room echoed with the intensity of them.

"You—love me, Paul?" she said softly.

"Love you!" I said hoarsely. "*Love* you! God, Margot—is there no way—"

"I love you, too," she whispered wearily. "But it is too late, Paul. The thing has visited me. I am a part of it. I—"

"I can keep you away from it!" I shouted. "I can hide you—protect you—where the thing will never find you!"

She shook her head, smiling heavily.

"It is too late, Paul."

"It is never too late!"

God! The words sounded brave enough then. Since then I have learned better. The creature that was preying on her possessed the infernal powers of life-in-death—powers which no mortal could deny. I knew it well enough, even when I made that rash promise. I had studied those things long enough to know my own limitations against them.

And yet I made the attempt. Before I left her that night, I hung the sign of the cross about her lovely throat, over the crimson stain of the vampire. I locked and sealed the windows of my apartment, breathing a prayer of supplication at each barrier as I made it secure. And then, holding her in my arms for a single unforgettable moment, I left her.

The apartment above mine was occupied by a singular fellow who had more than once called upon me to discuss my work. He, too, was a writer of sorts, and we had a meager something in common because of that. Therefore, when I climbed the stairs at a quarter to twelve that night and requested that he allow me to remain with him until morning, he was not unwilling to accede to my request, though he glanced at me most curiously as I made it.

However, he asked no questions, and I refrained from supplying any casual information to set his curiosity at rest. He would not have understood.

All that night I remained awake, listening for signs of disturbance in the rooms below me. But I heard nothing—not so much as a whisper. And when daylight came I descended the stairs with false hope in my heart.

There was no answer to my knock. I waited a moment, thinking that she might be yet asleep; then I rapped again on the panels. Then, when the silence persisted in haunting me, I fumbled frantically in my pockets for my spare key. I was afraid—terribly afraid.

And she was lying there when I stumbled into the room. Like a creature already dead she lay upon the bed, one white arm drooping to the floor. The silken comforter was thrown back. The breast of her gown was torn open. Fresh blood gleamed upon those dread marks in her throat.

I thought that she was dead. A sob choked in my throat as I dropped down beside her, peering into her colorless face. I clutched at her hand, and it was cold—stark cold. And then, unashamed of the tears that coursed down my

cheeks, I lay across her still body, kissing her lips—kissing them as if it were the last time that I should ever see them.

She opened her eyes.

Her fingers tightened a little on my hand. She smiled—a pathetic, tired smile.

“It—came,” she whispered. “I—knew it would.”

I will not dwell longer on the death of the girl I loved. Enough to recount the simple facts.

I brought doctors to her. No less than seven expert physicians attended her and consulted among themselves about her affliction. I told them my fears; but they were men of the world, not in sympathy with what I had to tell them.

“Loss of blood,” was their diagnosis—but they looked upon me as a man gone mad when I attempted to *explain* the loss of blood.

There was a transfusion. My own blood went into her veins, to keep her alive. For three nights she lived. Each of those nights I stood guard over her, never closing my eyes while darkness was upon us. And each night the thing came, clawing at the windows, slithering its horrible shape into the room where she lay. I did not know, then, how it gained admittance. Now—God help me—I know all the powers of that unholy clan. Its nocturnal creatures know no limits of space or confinement.

And this thing that preyed upon the girl I loved—I refuse to describe it. You will know *why* I make such a refusal when I have finished.

Twice I fought it, and found myself smothered by a ghastly shape of fog that left me helpless. Once I lay across her limp body with my hands covering her throat to keep the thing away from her—and I was hurled unmercifully to the floor, with an unearthly, long-dead stench of decayed flesh in my nostrils. When I regained consciousness, the wounds in her throat were newly opened, and my own wrists were marked with the ragged stripes of raking claws.

I realized, after that, that I could do nothing. The horror had gone beyond human power of prevention.

The mark of the cross which I had given her—that was worse than useless. I *knew* that it was useless. Had she worn it on that very first night of all, before the thing had claimed her for its own, it might have protected her. But now that this infernal mark was upon her throat, even the questionable strength of the cross was nullified by its evil powers. There was nothing left—nothing that could be done.

As a last resort I called upon Rojer Threng. He came. He examined her. He turned to me and said in a voice that was pregnant with unutterable malice: “I can do nothing. If I could, I *would* not.”

And so he left me—alone with the girl who lay there, pale as a ghost, upon the bed.

I knelt beside her. It was eight o'clock in the evening. Dusk was beginning to creep into the room. And she took my hand in hers, drawing me close so that

she might speak to me.

"Promise me, Paul—" she whispered.

"Anything," I said.

"In two years you will be twenty-eight," she said wearily. "I shall be forced to return to you. It is not a thing that I can help; it is the curse of my family. I have no descendants—I am the last of my line. You are the one dearest to me. It is *you* to whom I must return. Promise me—"

She drew me very close to her, staring into my face with a look of supplication that made me cold, fearful.

"Promise me—that when I return—you will fight against me," she entreated. "You must wear the sign of the cross—always—Paul. No matter how much I plead with you—to remove it—promise me that you will not!"

"I would rather join you, even in such a condition," I said bitterly, "than remain here alone without you."

"No, Paul. Forget me. Promise!"

"I—promise."

"And you will wear the cross always, and never remove it?"

"I will—fight against you," I said sadly.

Then I lost control. I flung myself beside her and embraced her. For hours we lay there together in utter silence.

She died—in my arms.

It is hard to find words for the rest of this. It was hard, then, to find any reason for living. I did no work for months on end. The typewriter remained impassive upon its desk, forgotten, dusty, mocking me night after night as I paced the floor of my room.

In time I began to receive letters from editors, from prominent medical men, demanding to know why my articles had so suddenly ceased to appear in current periodicals. What could I say to them? Could I explain to them that when I sat down at the typewriter, *her* face held my fingers stiff? No; they would not have understood; they would have dubbed me a rank sentimentalist. I could not reply to their requests. I could only read their letters over and over again, in desperation, and hurl the missives to the floor, as a symbol of my defeat.

I wanted to talk. God, how I wanted to! But I had no one to listen to me. Casual acquaintances I did not dare take into my confidence. Rojer Threng did not return. Even the fellow in the rooms above me, who shared his apartment with me that night, did not come near me. He sensed that something peculiar, something beyond his scope of reason, enveloped me.

Six months passed and I began, slowly at first, to return to my regular routine. That first return to work was agony. More than one thesis I started in the proper editorial manner, only to find myself, after the first half-dozen pages, writing about *her-her* words, *her* thoughts. More than once I wrenched pages from the roll of the typewriter, ripped them to shreds and dashed them to the

floor—only to gather them together again and read them a hundred times more, because they spoke of her.

And so a year passed. A year of my allotted time of loneliness, before she should return.

Three months more, and I was offered an instructorship at the university, to lecture on philosophy. I accepted the position. There I learned that Rojer Threng had graduated from the medical school, had hung out his private shingle, and was well along the road to medical fame. Once, by sheer accident, I encountered him in the corridors of the university. He shook my hand, spoke to me for a few minutes regarding his success, and excused himself at the first opportunity. He did not mention *her*.

Then, months later, came the night of my twenty-eighth birthday.

That night I did a strange thing. When darkness had crept into my room, I drew the great chair close to one of the windows, flung the aperture open wide, and waited. Waited—and *hoped*. I *wanted* her to come.

Yet I remembered my promise to her. Even as I lowered myself into the chair, I hung a crucifix about my throat and made the sign of the cross. Then I sat stiff, rigid, staring into the black void before me.

The hours dragged. My body became stiff, sore from lack of motion. My eyes were glued open, rimmed with black circles of anxiety. My hands clutched the arms of the chair, and never relaxed their intense grip.

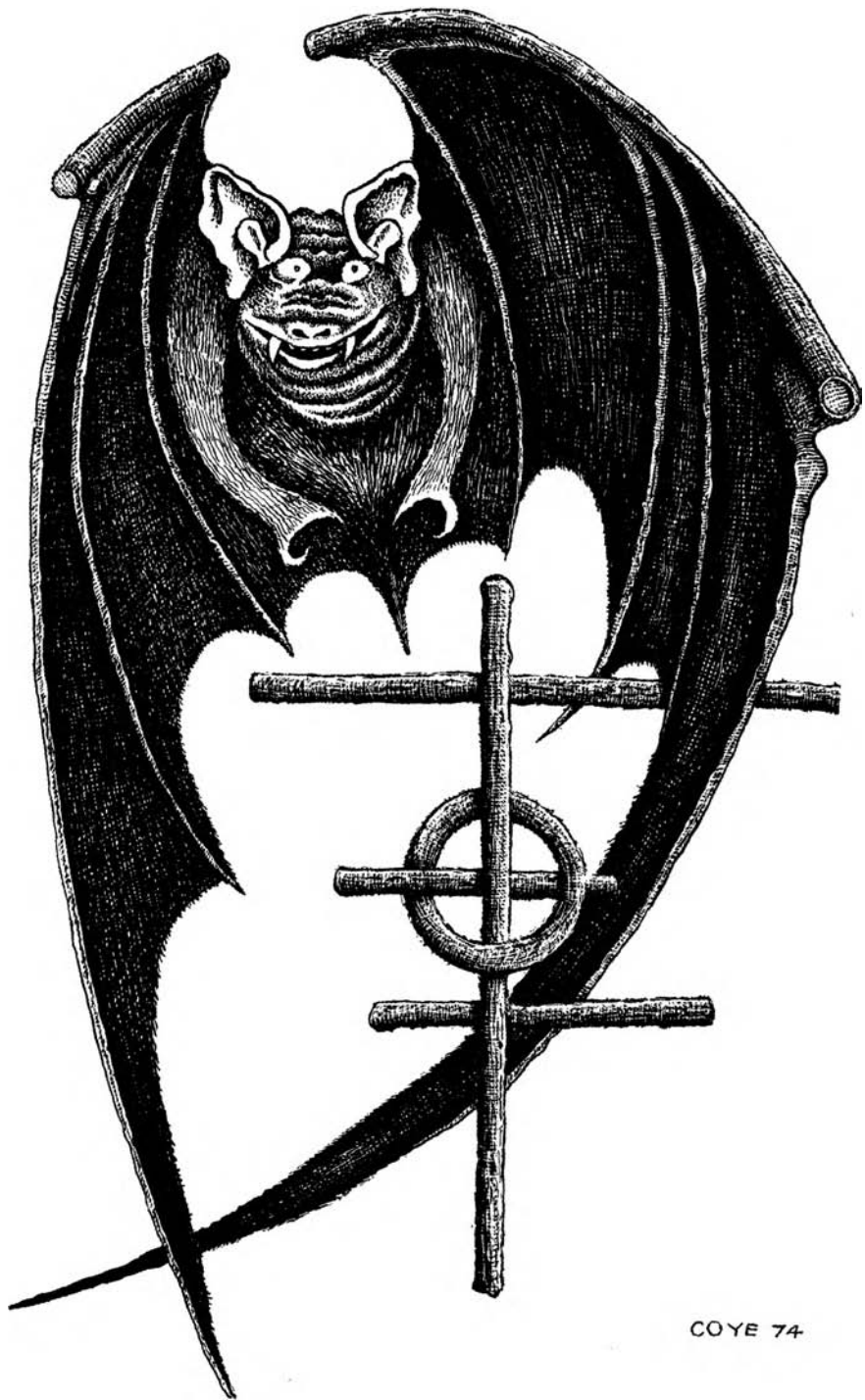
I heard the distant bell of the Old North Church tolling eleven o'clock; and later—hours and hours and hours later—it struck a single note to indicate the half-hour before midnight.

Then, very suddenly, a black, bat-like shape was fluttering in the open window. It had substance, for I heard the dead impact of its great wings as they struck the ledge in front of me; and yet it had *no* substance, for I could discern the definite, unbroken shape of the window frame *through* its massive body! And I sat motionless, transfixed—staring.

The thing swooped past me. I saw it strike the floor—heard it struggling erratically between the legs of the table. Then, in front of my eyes, it dissolved into a creature of mist; and another shape took form. I saw it rise out of the floor—saw it become tall and lithe and slender. And then—then *she* stood before me, radiantly beautiful.

In that moment of amazement I forgot my danger. I lurched up from the chair and took a sudden step toward her. My arms went out. Her arms were already out; and she was standing there waiting for me to take her.

But even as I would have clasped her slender body, she fell away from me, staring in horror at the crucifix that hung from my throat. I stopped short. I spoke to her, calling her by name. But she retreated from me, circling around me until she stood before the open window. Then, with uncanny quickness, she was gone—and a great black-winged bat swirled through the opening into the outer darkness.



For an eternity I stood absolutely still, with my arms still outstretched. Then, with a dry, helpless sob, I turned away.

Need I repeat what must already be obvious? She returned. Night after night she returned to me, taking form before me with her lovely, pleading arms outstretched to enfold me. I could not bring myself to believe that this utterly lovely, supplicating figure could wish to do me harm. For that matter, I could not believe that she was dead—that she had ever died. I wanted her. God, how I wanted her! I would have given my life to take her beautiful body once more in my arms and hold her close to me.

But I remembered my promise to her. The crucifix remained about my throat. Never once did she touch it—or touch me. In fact, never once did I see her for more than a single fleeting instant. She took birth before my eyes—stood motionless while I stumbled out of the chair and groped toward her—and then the awful power of the sign of the cross thrust her back. Always the same. One maddening moment—and hours upon hours of abject, empty loneliness that followed.

I did no work. All day, every day, I waited in agony for the hour of her coming. Then one day I sat by myself and thought. I reasoned with myself. I argued my personal desires against the truths which I knew to be insurmountable.

And that night, when she stood before me, I tore the crucifix from my throat and hurled it through the open window. I took her in my arms. I embraced her; and I was glad, wonderfully glad, for the first time in more than two years.

We clung to each other. She, too, was glad. I could see it in her face, in her eyes. Her lips trembled as they pressed mine. They were warm, hot—alive.

I am not sure of all that happened. I do not want to be sure. Even as her slender body quivered in my arms, a slow stupor came over me. It was like sleep, but more—oh, so much more desirous than mere slumber. I moved back—I was forced back—to the great chair. I relaxed. Something warm and soft touched my throat. There was no pain, no agony. Life was drawn out of me.

It was daylight when I awoke. The room was empty. The sunlight streamed through the open window. Something wet and sticky lay upon my throat. I reached up, touched it, and stared at my fingers dispassionately. They were stained with blood.

I did not need to seize upon a mirror. The two telltale marks of the vampire were upon my neck. I knew it.

She came the next night. Again we lay together, deliriously happy. I had no regrets. I felt her lips at my throat . . .

Next morning I lay helpless in the big chair, unable to move. My strength had been drawn from me. I had no power to rise. Far into the day I remained in the same posture. When a knock came at my door, I could not stand up to admit the

visitor. I could only turn my head listlessly and murmur: "Come in."

It was the manager of the house who entered. He scuffed toward me half apologetically and stood there, looking down at me.

"I've been 'avin' complaints, sor," he scowled, as if he did not like to deliver his message. "The chap up above yer 'as been kickin' about the noise yer makes down 'ere o' nights. It'll 'ave ter stop, sor. I don't like to be tellin' yer—but the chap says as 'ow 'e's seen yer sittin' all night long in front o'yer winder, with the winder wide open. 'E says 'e 'ears yer talkin' ter some 'un down 'ere late at night, sor."

"I'm—very ill, Mr. Robell," I said weakly. "Will you—call a doctor?"

He blinked at me. Then he must have seen that significant thing on my throat, for he bent suddenly over me and said harshly:

"My Gawd, sor. You *are* sick!"

He hurried out. Fifteen minutes later he returned with a medical man whom I did not recognize. The fellow examined me, ordered me to bed, spent a long while peering at the mark on my neck, and finally went out—perplexed and scowling. When he came back, in an hour or so, he brought a more experienced physician with him.

They did what they could for me; but they did not understand, nor did I undertake to supply them with information. They could not prevent the inevitable; that I knew. I did not want them to prevent it.

And that night, as I lay alone, *she* came as usual. Ten minutes before the luminous hands of the clock on the table beside me registered eleven o'clock, she came to my bed and leaned over me. She did not leave until daylight was but an hour distant.

The next day was my last; and that day brought a man I had never expected to see again. It brought Rojer Threng!

I can see his face even now, as he paced across the room and stood beside my bed. It was repulsive with hate, masked with terrible triumph. His lips curled over his teeth as he spoke; and his eyes—those boring, glittering, living eyes—drilled their way into my tired brain as he glared into my face.

"You wonder why I have come, Munn?"

"Why—" I replied wearily. I was already close to eternity; and having him there beside me, feeling the hideous dynamic quality of his gaunt body, drew the last tongue of life out of me.

"She has been here, eh?" he grinned evilly.

I did not answer. Even the word *she* coming from his lips, was profanity.

"I came here to tell you something, Munn," he rasped. "Something that will comfort you on the journey you are about to take. Listen—"

He lowered himself into the great chair and hunched himself close. And I was forced to listen to his savage threat, because I could not lift my hand to silence him.

"I used to love Margot Vernee, Munn," he said. "I loved her as much as you

do—but in a different way. She'd have none of me. Do you understand? She would have none of me! She despised me. She *told* me that she despised me! *She!*"

His massive hands clenched and unclenched, as if they would have twisted about my throat. His eyes flamed.

"Then she loved *you!* *You*—with your thin, common body and hoary brain. She refused me, with all I had to offer her, and accepted you! Now do you know why I've come here?"

"You can do nothing—now," I said heavily. "It is too late. She is beyond your power."

Then he laughed. God, that laugh! It echoed and re-echoed across the room, vibrating with fearful intensity. It lashed into my brain like fire—left me weak and limp upon the bed. And there I lay, staring after him as he strode out of the room.

I never saw Rojer Threng again.

I wonder if you know the meaning of death? Listen . . .

They carried me that evening to a strange place. I say *they*, but perhaps I should say *he*, for Rojer Threng was the man who ordered the change of surroundings. As for myself, I was too close to unconsciousness to offer resistance. I know only that I was lifted from my bed by four strong arms, and placed upon a stretcher, and then I was carried out of my apartment to a private car which waited at the curb below.

I bear no malice toward the two subordinates who performed this act. They were doing as they had been told to do. They were pawns of Rojer Threng's evil mind.

They made me as comfortable as possible in the rear section of the car. I heard the gears clash into place; then the leather cushion beneath me jerked abruptly, and the car droned away from the curb.

I could discern my surroundings, and I took mental note of the route we followed, though I do not know that it matters particularly. I remembered crossing the Harvard Bridge above the Charles River, with innumerable twinkling lights showing their reflections in the quiet water below. Then we followed one of the central thoroughfares, through a great square where the noise and harsh glare beat into my mind. And later—a long time later—the car came to a stop in the yards of the university.

Once again I was placed upon a stretcher. Where they took me I do not know; except that we passed through a maze of endless corridors in the heart of one of the university's many buildings. But the end of my journey lay in a small, dimly lighted room on one of the upper floors; and there I was lifted from the stretcher and placed upon a comfortable brocaded divan.

It was dusk then, and my two attendants set about making my comfort more complete. They spooned broth between my lips. They turned the light out of

my eyes. They covered my prostrate body with a silken robe of some deep red color.

"Why," I murmured, "have you—brought me here?"

"It is Doctor Threng's order, sir," one of them said quietly.

"But I don't want—"

"Doctor Threng fully understands the nature of your malady, sir," the attendant replied, silencing my protest. "He has prepared this room to protect you."

I studied the room, then. Had he not spoken in such a significant tone, I should probably never have given a thought to the enclosure; but the soft inflection of his words was enough to remove my indifference.

As I have said, it was a small room. That in itself was not peculiar; but when I say that the walls were broken by only *one* window, you too will realize something sinister. The walls were low, forming a perfect square with the divan precisely in the center. No hangings, no pictures or portraits of any kind, adorned the walls themselves; they were utterly bare. I know now that they were *not* bare; but the infernal wires that extended across them were so nearly invisible that my blurred sight did not notice.

One thing I shall never forget. When the attendants left me, after preparing me for the night, one of them said deliberately, as if to console me:

"You will be guarded every moment of this night, sir. The wall facing you has been bored through with a spy-hole. Doctor Threng, in the next room, asked me to inform you that he will remain at the spy-hole all night—and will allow nothing to come near you."

And then they left me alone.

I knew that she would come. It was my last night on earth, and I was positive that she would see it through by my side, to give me courage. The strange room would not keep her away. She would be able to find me, no matter where they secreted me.

I waited, lying limp on the divan with my face toward the window. The window was open. I thought then that the attendants had left it open by mistake; that they had overlooked it. I know now that it was left wide because of Rojer Threng's command.

An hour must have passed after they left me to myself. An hour of despair and emptiness for me. She did not come. I began to doubt—to be afraid. I knew that I should die soon—very soon—and I dreaded to enter the great unknown without her guidance. And so I waited and waited and waited, and never once took my eyes from the window which was my only hope of relief.

Then—it must have been nearly midnight—I heard the doleful howling of a dog, somewhere down in the yard below. I knew what it meant. I struggled up, propping myself on one elbow, staring eagerly.

A moment later the faint square of moonlight which marked the window-frame was suddenly blotted out. I saw a massive, winged shape silhouetted in the

opening. For an instant it hovered there, flapping its great body. Then it swooped into the room where I lay.

I saw again that uncanny transformation of spirit. The nocturnal specter dissolved before my eyes and assumed shape again, rising into a tall, languid, divinely beautiful woman. And *she* stood there, smiling at me.

All that night she remained by my side. She talked to me, in a voice that was no more than a faint whisper, comforting me for the ordeal which I must soon undergo. She told me secrets of the grave—secrets which I may not repeat here, nor ever wish to repeat. Ah, but it was a relief from the loneliness and restlessness of my heart to have her there beside me, sitting so quietly, confidently, in the depths of the divan. I no longer dreaded the fate in store for me. It meant that I should be with her always. You who love or ever have loved with an all-consuming tenderness—you will understand.

The hours passed all too quickly. I did not take account of them. I knew that she would leave when it was necessary for her to go. I knew the unfair limits that were imposed upon her very existence. Hers was a life of darkness, from sunset to sunrise. Unless she returned to the secrets of the grave before daylight crept upon us, her life would be consumed.

The hour of parting drew near. I feared to think of it. With her close to me, holding my hand, I was at peace; but I knew that without her I should lapse again into an agony of doubt and fear. If I could have died then, with her near me, I think I should have been contented.

But it was not to be. She bent over to kiss me tenderly, and then rose from the divan.

"I—must go back, beloved," she whispered.

"Stay a moment more," I begged. "One moment—"

"I dare not, Paul."

She turned away. I watched her as if she were taking my very soul with her. She walked very softly, slowly, to the window, I saw her look back at me, and she smiled. God, how I remember that last smile! It was meant to give me courage—to put strength into my heart.

And then she stepped to the window.

Even as she moved that last step, the horrible thing happened. A monstrous, livid streamer of white light seared across the space in front of her. It blazed in her face like a rigid snake, hurling her back. There, engraved upon the wall, hung the sign of the cross, burning like a thing possessed of life!

She staggered away from it. I saw the terror in her face as she ran to the opposite wall. Ten steps she took; and then that wall too shone livid with the cross. Two horrible wires, transformed into writhing reality by some tremendous charge of electricity, glowed before her.

She sought frantically for a means of escape. Back and forth she turned. The sign of the cross confronted her on every side, hemming her in. There *was* no escape. The room was a veritable trap—a trap designed and executed by the

infernally cunning mind of Rojer Threng.

I watched her in mute madness. Back and forth she went, screaming, sobbing her helplessness. I have watched a mouse in a wire cage do the same thing, but this—this was a thousand times more terrible.

I called out to her. I attempted to rise from the divan and go to her; but weakness came over me and I fell back quivering.

She realized then that it was the end. She fought to control herself, and she walked to the divan where I lay, and knelt beside me.

She did not speak. I think she had no voice at that moment. I held her close against me, my lips pressed into her hair. Like a very small, pitiful leaf she trembled in my arms.

And then—even as I held her—the first gleam of dawn slid across the floor of that ghastly room. She raised her head and looked into my face.

“Good-bye—Paul—”

I could not answer her. Something else answered. From the spy-hole in the opposite wall of the room came a hoarse, triumphant cackle—in Rojer Threng’s malignant voice.

The girl was dead—dead in my arms. And that uncouth voice from the wall, screaming its derision, brought madness to my heart.

I lunged to my feet, fighting against the torture that drove through my body. I stumbled across the room. I reached the wall—found the spy-hole with my frozen fingers—clawed at it—raged against it—

And there, fighting to reach the man who had condemned me to an eternity of horror—I died.

My story is finished. The chimes of the Old North Church have just tolled a single funereal note to usher in the hour. One o’clock

It is many, many years since that fateful night when I became a creature of the blood. I do not dare to remember the number of them. Between the hours of sunrise and sunset I cling to the earth of my grave—where I refuse to stay, until I have avenged her. Then I shall write more, perhaps, pleading for your assistance that I may join her in the true death. A spike through the heart will do it

From sunset until sunrise, throughout the hours of night, I am as one of you. I breathe, I drink; occasionally, as at this moment, I write—so that I may speak her name again and see it before me. I have attended social functions, mingled with people. Only one precaution must I take, and that to avoid mirrors, since my deathless body casts no reflection.

Every night—*every night*—I have visited the great house where Rojer Threng lives. No, I have not yet avenged her. The monster is too cunning, too clever. The sign of the cross is always upon him, to keep me from his throat. But sometime—*sometime*—he will forget. And then—ah, *then!*

When it is done, I shall find a way to quit this horrible brotherhood. I shall die the real death, as she did—and I shall find her.

The Door of Doom

THE GREAT MANSION, rising out of the depths of the moor before me, seemed to be a thing endowed with life-in-death. In spite of the immense height of its crumbling turrets, it seemed to be crouching with outstretched arms, waiting for me to come within reach. I stood there in a clump of stubble, staring at it uneasily.

For the better part of an hour I had been groping my way across desolate miles of barren country, through the enveloping darkness. Back in the little village of Norberry, where I had inquired my way, the native Britons had peered into my face and cringed away from me, muttering maledictions and whispering among themselves. The tottering old inn-keeper, as ancient and as wise as the moor itself, had seized my arm in one trembling hand and pointed off into the lonely, terrifying expanse of waste-land that lay before me.

"There ain't nobody lived there for years," he mumbled. "It's the house of the undead, it is. Ain't nobody ever goes there, neither trades-people nor travelers. Folks passin' near in the night-time has heard horrible things—things that ain't, by no manner o' means human. Voices from the grave, they be, singin' death chants . . ."

Now, having trudged my weary way across the moor and finally arrived before my destination, I hesitated to step within reach of those ancient walls. Yet I feared the ridicule of my comrades more than I dreaded this repulsive, malignant pile. With heavy feet I groped the last hundred paces. Passing through the stone gateway, I climbed to the topmost step and let the iron knocker fall into its worn grooves.

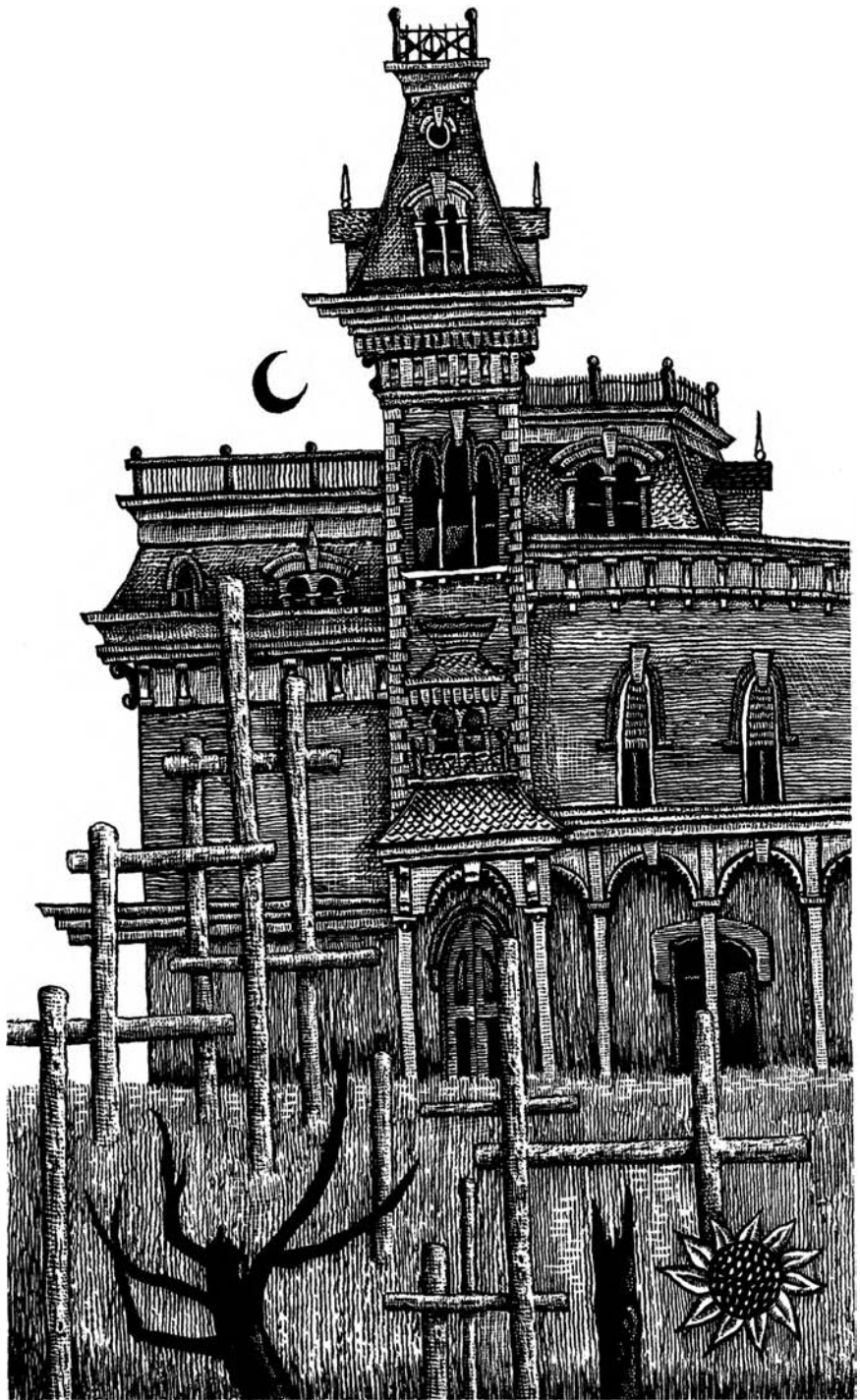
Above me the twisted walls of the house hung in a menacing mass, resembling nothing so much as a giant vampire bat with outflung wings. Behind me, as I stood there, lay the flat, bleak expanse of scrub through which I had come.

The door swung open as I waited. For thirty seconds I remained motionless, staring over the threshold into the slanted, expressionless, deep-rimmed eyes of the Oriental servant who had opened it. Then the servant said softly:

"Who are you?"

"Captain Reed," I informed him. He drew the great door a foot wider and flattened against it to permit me to pass.

"You go inside," he said impassively. "The others, they are all here,



waiting for you."

I let him lead the way. As I paced along behind him, marveling that his sandalled feet made no sound on the thick carpet of the hall, I glanced about me and shuddered.

I had hardly expected this sort of thing, even after the three-hour drag on a once-a-day train and the four-mile tramp across an untraveled moor. Perhaps I should have been somewhat prepared, knowing the peculiar whims and idiosyncracies of James Lamoran, and after listening to Rojer Macon's quiet exclamations in the Army and Navy Club the preceding afternoon. Yet of all the possible places for the annual reunion of the Deathless Four, this was certainly the most gruesome, the most dimly black and horrible, that Lamoran's acute imagination could have conceived!

Worse than that, Lamoran had actually taken a two-year lease upon this ghastly structure, and intended to live here. Macon had run across him in Soho, and learned the news; and then later, in the smoking room of the club, Macon had chanced upon David Pell and me, and passed the word along.

"What kind of a place is it?" Pell had demanded, and both he and I leaned close to catch every word.

"What kind of place? Precisely the sort of place you'd expect it to be, old man, when Doctor Jim Lamoran rents it! Lamoran wouldn't live in a *house*, you know. He has to have a haunted graveyard or a ruined abbey replete with vampires and all the necessary horrible creeping affairs. I haven't seen the place, of course; but Jim informed me that it's out Norberry way, sunk in the center of the deadest, blackest, loneliest stretch of moor in Cheshire. It's been there, he says, for half a million years or so, allowing for exaggerations. At any rate, it has neither date nor postmark on it."

Now, as I trailed silently after the corpse-faced Oriental, I began to feel that Macon's dry comments were more fact than mockery. Moreover, I could hear Macon's modulated voice emanating from a closed door at the far end of the corridor along which I paced.

"He'll be here," Macon was saying. "Eddy Reed might be late once in a while, but he always arrives eventually. I don't envy him his walk across the moor at this hour."

"Quite possible," this in Lamoran's voice, "that he thinks we're all quite mad. He probably asked directions in the village, and listened to the fantastic tales that surround this place. He'll be here, though."

The Oriental opened the door. I stepped over the threshold into a huge reception chamber where my three soldier friends were seated at one end of the long table. Instantly the three faces turned toward me, as the Oriental droned my name. Then, scrambling out of their chairs, Macon, Lamoran, and Pell swooped down upon me, making me welcome and besieging me with questions.

A strangely mingled feeling of joy and sadness came over me at that moment, as they led me to the table. We four had been through the great war together,

side by side, from start to finish. We alone, of the members of a certain squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, had returned to tell of the horrors. They had named us—the newspapers and the men of the Army and Navy Club—the “Deathless Four,” and we in turn strove to perpetuate the memory of our companions by coming together at least once each year for twenty-four hours of companionship.

We were a strange lot, and yet the chains which bound us together have bound many a stranger group of men under the same circumstances. Doctor James Lamoran, the oldest among us, was a tall, finely formed gentleman of infinite knowledge, eternally studying some intricate phase of occultism which happened to meet his attention. Pell was the portly, overstuffed, altogether prosperous banker. Rojer Macon, our youngest member and hero, since he had brought down more enemy Fokkers than the rest of us combined, was once again a smiling, irresponsible sportsman of the blue blood—happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care, and ready for anything with a tinge of adventure in it!

As for myself, I am an American. My father and my father's father were soldiers before me. It is in my blood. In the spring of 1916, despairing that my countrymen would ever see action in the great combat, I threw my lot with the R.F.C. Now, to-night, fourteen years later, I found myself sitting here in this most sinister of ruined houses, in company with the three dearest friends I had in the entire world.

“Why,” I demanded of Lamoran, “did you lease this ghastly house?”

He smiled before he replied. Then:

“You asked your way in the village?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And you heard nothing?”

“I heard enough,” I frowned, “to send me back to London as if all hell and the devil were on my tail. The yokels hissed at me and whispered like gibbets, calling this place the—”

“The House of the Undead, eh?”

“Yes,” I shuddered.

“Maybe they're right,” Macon grinned. “Ever since we got here I've been hearing the most gruesome creaks and groans and—”

“Where did the Chinese chap come from?” I demanded, ignoring his banter.

Lamoran's eyes narrowed very slightly, as if I had touched upon a vital point. He looked straight at me and said simply:

“That I don't know.”

“What? You mean you didn't bring him?”

“He was here when I came, Reed.”

“But they told me in the village—”

“That the house has been uninhabited for fifteen years? That is true.”

“Then how the devil,” Macon exclaimed, “did the fellow—”

“People who have lived in this place,” Lamoran said quietly, “have either

vanished utterly from the face of the earth, or have fled in terror. Off and on, for many hundreds of years, the house has been abandoned. For the past fifteen years it's been empty. And yet—"

He stopped to light a cigarette, shrugged his shoulders in resignation, and finished softly:

"When the estate agent escorted me here to look the place over early last week, the door opened in our faces and Tai-tse-Kiang stood on the threshold to welcome us!"

"That's his name?" Macon scowled.

"Yes. Tai-tse-Kiang."

"It's easily explained, of course," I suggested. "The fellow was out of work in London, heard you intended to take over this place, and slipped in before you to sort of establish himself, eh?"

"On the contrary," Lamoran smiled, "he says he has been here—always."

"What?"

"Always."

"But that's pure rot!" Pell sputtered, rubbing his hands together.

"Perhaps. We shall learn the truth in due time, I dare say. Meanwhile—"

Lamoran stopped speaking. The service door at the opposite end of the hall had opened abruptly, and the Chinaman, Tai-tse-Kiang, was pacing mechanically forward with four wine glasses on a tray. I had an opportunity, then, to see the fellow more closely and in a better light, though the light, of course, consisted of nothing more inspiring than a massive candelabrum suspended by an iron chain from the ceiling.

Unquestionably there was something peculiar about the Oriental's stolid face. The eyes, in particular, harbored no definite light or color; they were like the eyes of a dead creature, with a suggestion of some filmy substance masking the pupils. But that, I believe, is the rule rather than the exception with people of the Far East. They are renowned for their stolidity and lack of emotion; and this man was evidently merely significant of his race.

He said nothing as he placed the glasses before us. When he had finished, he retired quietly and closed the connecting door. Lamoran glanced at me, smiled queerly, and lifted the glass to his lips.

"To our less fortunate companions who cannot be with us to-night," he proposed, rising to his feet. Then, under his breath, so that only I, who was closest to him, could have heard it: "And to the succeeding events of this evening of madness!"

We sat down again. Lamoran pushed his empty glass aside and bent forward.

"I have a bit of a treat for you," he smiled, "and for myself. As yet I've not made a complete inspection of my new home. To-night, with you three to accompany me, I propose to do so. There are rooms and rooms and rooms; half a hundred or more of them. What they contain I haven't the vaguest notion. Perhaps we shall find something, eh?"

"Maybe we'll uncover some ghosts," Macon grinned.

"So our ace of aces believes in the supernatural? Not you, Rojer!"

"Well—"

"A place like this," Pell said eagerly, "ought to contain some pretty valuable art treasures. That's my hobby, you know. Oriental stuff, in particular. If your everlasting Chink weren't so infernally alive, I'd stuff him and put him in my London house, Lamoran!"

"Good! And you, Reed?"

"Ready for anything," I grinned, "providing we all stick together. I don't believe in ghosts unless I'm left alone. Then I'm like the rest of humanity. I don't say there aren't any, because some damned thing might overhear me or read my thoughts and swoop down to offer proof that there are."

Lamoran laughed easily. Rojer Macon, too, began to grin; but the grin vanished with uncanny abruptness. He was sitting nearest the service door. I saw him stiffen suddenly in his chair and twist about as if something had brushed past him. His laugh ended in a gurgle.

I confess that I did not see the thing take place. I was busily staring at Macon at the moment, wondering what had come over him. Then Pell's rasping voice brought me about again.

"My God, what's this!"

Pell and Lamoran were both peering at the table top. Macon, too, lifted his head at that hoarse outcry and looked in fascination. There, lying on the silken cloth precisely in the center of the four empty glasses, lay a flat square of white paper, with written words scrawled over its surface! It had *not* been there before!

"Something—something brushed by me!" Macon whispered sibilantly. "I felt it!"

Pell said nothing. He reached out with nervous fingers to pick up the paper; then withdrew his hand and licked his lips. Lamoran, more calm than any of us, lifted the thing and read the message aloud:

"The Iron Door on the lower corridor must not be opened. All other rooms in the house are yours; but the Iron Door bars the secret of the Master, and death is the penalty for intrusion. There will be no other warning."

Lamoran let the paper fall again. The last word he had uttered—the word *warning*—seemed to hiss in a double crescendo through the chamber in which we sat.

"Where did it come from?" Pell said huskily.

"Something went past me, I tell you!" Macon muttered again.

"Nothing came into the room," I said feebly. "Yet, the paper was not here when Tai-tse-Kiang brought in the wine."

Lamoran's critical glance passed from Pell's face to Macon's, then to mine, and finally back to the damning sheet of paper. Suddenly, with thin lips and hands clenched, he lurched to his feet, scraping his chair out from beneath him.

"Kiang!" His voice seared across the room with the intensity of a lash.

The service door opened slowly. Once again the Oriental paced forward with automatic steps, looking neither to right nor left. He came to a motionless stop in front of the man who had summoned him.

"Yes, sir?" he said unemotionally.

"Did anyone enter this room just now?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you?"

"Outside the door, sir, in the event that you called."

"This bit of paper," Lamoran said stiffly, "was dropped on the table less than five minutes ago. Have you ever seen it before?"

He jabbed the paper abruptly into the Chinaman's hand. The Oriental glanced at it, nodded, and passed it back.

"It has been given to every new master of this house, sir, for the past thousand years. Many have disobeyed it, and died."

"How do you know that?" I demanded.

"I have seen them go, sir," he said, turning to face me.

"How long have you been here?" I pressed, trying to smile knowingly at Lamoran.

"Always, sir."

"Always, is it? How old are you?"

"I was born," the Oriental said quietly, "hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, at the time of K'ung Tsze and the Chou dynasty. It was I who assisted K'ung Tsze, whom you call Confucius, to inscribe the Ta Hsueh. I was, and I am, the servant of him who rules the universe."

The man was mad. There was no other plausible explanation. Lamoran, however, insisted on putting further questions, evidently for the purpose of confounding him. Lamoran knew more about ancient Chinese lore than any of us.

"What is this Ta Hsueh?" he demanded.

"It is the third of the four books, sir. The first is Lun Yu, containing information about K'ung Tsze; the second is the Book of Mencius, a disciple of K'ung Tsze; the third is the Ta Hsueh, dealing with social and political matters; the fourth is Chung Yung, a thesis on conduct written by K'ung Chi."

"Hm-m. And where did you work with Confucius?"

"In the city of Chung-tu, sir, when the master was made magistrate in the year 498 B.C."

Lamoran nodded, with a half concealed smile, and waved the fellow aside. Turning about with a positive lack of expression, the Oriental retraced his steps to the service door, and passed through.

"Stark mad," I shrugged. "Else he thinks we are utter fools."

"What he said about K'ung Tsze—was it right?" Macon demanded. "It's a bit over my head."

"It was right," Lamoran admitted. "However, any educated Chinese could

supply the same information.”

“And this infernal paper?”

“That,” Lamoran said darkly, “is beyond me for explanation. Unless—”

But he left the thought unfinished. Thrusting the sinister threat into his pocket, he turned about with a dry laugh and said:

“Come on. Let’s have a look at the place. For the time being we’ll just let the Iron Door alone. The rest of the house ought to provide enough to keep us occupied.”

We walked into the main hall together. Lamoran led the way, with Rojer Macon pacing close beside him. Pell and I stepped into the gloomy corridor with our shoulders rubbing, and Pell, leaning close to mutter into my ear, said significantly:

“It’s a damned hoax, Reed, instigated by that Bloody Chink. He’s got something in that room that’s worth money—some priceless art piece or something. I tell you I’m going to have a look before I leave this place!”

I grinned at that. It was like Pell to be belligerent about such an affair. Whenever Pell’s nose caught the scent of an art secret, nothing in heaven or hell could hope to keep him quiet!

I thought little of his threat then. Later I remembered it—acutely. Meanwhile, we set about our tour of inspection.

The hour was long after midnight when we finally returned from our tour of the immense structure. We found nothing; nothing, that is, beyond a most amazing and confusing labyrinth of unused passages and abandoned rooms. The house was constructed in four tiers, with a narrow, evil-smelling tower leading up from the rear. Only those rooms on the lower floor were furnished and revealed any signs of recent occupancy; and of those, only the library held any interest for me.

We were tired and, I imagine, somewhat disappointed, when we filed into the reception chamber. Once again the Oriental servant, Tai-tse-Kiang, fetched drinks for us.

“I suggest we turn in,” Lamoran said quietly. “I, for one, am about done for.”

“A sign of weakness,” Macon grinned. “You should ask the Chinaman how he remains awake for five hundred years!”

“You, Reed?”

“I’d like to have a look at the library,” I confessed. “I’ll turn in later.”

Lamorán stood up, emptied his glass, and nodded.

“Felt that way myself,” he smiled. “I think you’ll find something—interesting. Try the right hand shelf against the farther wall, second from the bottom.”

I stared at him. He laughed, then turned away.

“You can take one of the candles from the candelabrum here,” he suggested. “The sleeping chambers are on the next floor. I pointed them out to

you, you'll remember."

He went out then, with Pell and Rojer Macon groping after him. When they had gone, I lifted one of the candles and, holding it face-high before me, prowled through the tomb-like corridors to the library door.

The library itself was a room of huge dimensions, lined completely around with shelves of dust-covered volumes. My boots made rather a *thump-thump* as I paced across it toward the particular section which Lamoran had mentioned, since the highly polished floor—dusty, of course, but solid nevertheless—was for the most part uncarpeted. A circular rug lay before the dead fireplace, supporting two deep leather chairs. Farther back stood a claw-legged table. Other than that there was nothing.

The unsteady sputter of the candle cast my shadow in grotesque outlines before me as I advanced. I remember looking back and noticing the almost fantastic footprints, like the trail of a ghost-creature, made by my advance. There was another line of them, as well, leading in and out of the room, caused, no doubt, by Lamoran's boots when my host had been here before me. Beyond that the dust was unbroken. I went down on my knees beside a row of stolid bindings and set the candle on the floor.

I intended to have a look at Lamoran's significant shelf first, then seek the books I had come for. In short, I was eager to learn more of the history of this gaunt house and the strange folk who had inhabited it. But as I leaned forward, drawing out one of the large volumes, I saw that my own quest and Lamoran's suggested books were one and the same. The volumes he had told me to have a look at, because they would excite me, were the very volumes I desired to examine!

I opened the book at random, scuffing the pages under my thumb and shifting the candle so that it might throw a better light. In a little while I came upon the following pages:

Lord Burgell . . . mysteriously vanished during the hours between midnight and dawn. The servant, Tai-tse-Kiang, who had been a devoted guardian of the family for sixty years or more, discovered that Lord Burgell was . . . missing. This occurred on December 4th, 1732.

I read it again, quite unable to believe what I had stumbled upon. Tai-tse-Kiang—1732. It was impossible! That would make the man more than two hundred years old!

It was, I reasoned, not the same man. Perhaps another of the same name, but most assuredly not the same individual who had poured wine for the four of us less than half an hour past. Many English families kept their servants for generations and—

My head came up with a sudden jerk. Behind me, the library door, which I had cautiously closed upon entering, had swung half open under the pressure of some freakish draft from the outside corridor. Nevertheless I turned on my knees, with my shadow projected on the floor in front of me like a prostrate

bat, and watched in fascination.

Then my blood chilled. I heard footsteps—heard them as distinctly as I heard the throbbing of my own heart—and yet there was no living thing within the radius of the candlelight! The book remained clutched in my hands as I crouched rigid. Step by step, mechanically, with deathlike rhythm, the unseen thing advanced across the floor toward me. Then, very abruptly, it halted. The hellish feet were directly beside me. Whatever it was, it stood above me.

I would have moved—would have lurched to my feet and fled from the room in terror—had not the next occurrence happened with such terrifying swiftness. The book was snatched from my fingers and replaced in its niche. A second book was drawn from the shelf, flung open, and placed in my rigid hands. Something indistinct, like a thin pencil of fog, indicated a line halfway down the left hand page.

My eyes fixed automatically on the indicated line, and I read the words. I remember now that the page was done in script, not in print, and that the book was incredibly old. I saw only two things: the name Tai-tse-Kiang and the significant date 1247. Then I heard a soft, throaty laugh at my shoulder, and the book was returned to its place.

Had I wished to then, I could not have risen to my feet. My body was numb with something akin to complete horror. I know that the footsteps receded across the floor with that same damned tread. I know that I stared after them and saw—nothing. Then the door swung shut, clicked, and I was alone.

For an eternity I remained there. My face must have been a ghastly color, stained with sweat. I do not know. I do know that I trembled violently with a sense of cold more intense than any I have ever experienced in the highest roof of the heavens. I do know that when I finally got to my feet, the candle had burned itself to within an inch of the floor, and only a flickering stump, with hanging wick, remained.

I had to walk slowly from the room, in order to keep that feeble light alive. The darkness, had it overwhelmed me at that moment, would have brought a scream from my dry lips. And I noticed one thing more as I paced across the floor—that the undead thing which had crept upon me, and thrust that infernal book into my hands, and laughed at me, had left no footprints in the heavy layer of dust.

When I closed the door of that room of horror and turned back along the corridor to go to my own chamber, there were but four tracks of footprints marring the even surface of the library floor. They were the impressions of my own boots, one set trailing in, the other trailing out, and the older prints made by the boots of James Lamoran.

I slept but little that night. My room was a small one, with a single window and only one door, which opened on the narrow corridor that ran along the second-floor landing. The chamber was stuffy, yet I dared not leave the door wide lest that unnamed, formless inhabitant of the house should creep upon me.

I did not stop to reason that if the thing were truly of another world, a closed door would hardly hinder it—in fact, would only hinder my own escape. When a man is afraid, he seeks to confine himself as securely as possible.

I cannot say how many hours passed before I heard the thing approach. Perhaps two, perhaps three—but no more. This time, when the footsteps drew near along the corridor, they came, not from the direction of the stairway, but from the opposite end of the passage, where lay the rooms of my companions.

I lay quite still, flat against the wall, my fingers twisted around the wooden bedposts in preparation for the sudden leap that would bring me upright. Outside, those hellish footsteps came nearer and nearer—now at the door of my room—now hesitating before entering.

My nerves were on edge. I think I should have screamed to the high heavens if my door had opened at that instant. But the door remained closed. The footsteps began again, moving away, continuing to promenade down the passage. I heard them descend the great staircase; then they grew softer and softer and finally passed from the realm of my hearing.

For another long moment I lay tense. The footsteps did not return. I waited for an eternity, and nothing disturbed the complete silence of the house. In the end, I think, I dropped into a fitful sleep.

I dreamed that I heard a sing-song voice, an Oriental voice, moaning a soft, faraway chant. The sort of monotone that one hears occasionally in distant China, in the temples of Confucius or the shrines of Lao-Tze. After the ordeal I had gone through, the chant was soothing and almost beautiful. But then I did not know the significance of it.

Morning came eventually. The warm sunlight, streaming in a straight line across my bed from the oblong window, woke me. I looked about me then, at the mellow friendliness of the chamber, at the flat, shimmering expanse of moor outside, and laughed at the fears that had gripped me. I lighted a cigarette, dressed without haste, opened the door of my room.

There were footprints in the passage. They were my own, of course, and Lamoran's and Pell's and Macon's, made by us when we had climbed to our rooms on the previous night. I did not expect to find the prints made by the feet of the invisible thing that lurked among us. There were none in the library; there would be none here.

Lamoran and Macon were awaiting me in the reception chamber, which room had been set aside as our dining room. Pell, evidently, had not yet come down.

"Did you—inspect the book-shelf I recommended?" Lamoran said dryly.

I nodded.

"I want to talk to you about it," I said.

"Yes? I think I know your questions, old man. I don't know the answers."

"What answers?" Macon demanded, frowning at the one-sided conversation.

"Nothing, Rojer. A little historical matter. Where the devil is Pell?"

"Not down yet?" I asked.

"No. He's not used to staying up nights, I reckon."

"Want me to drag him out?" Macon proffered.

"Well—yes. You might as well."

Macon left us. We sat down, Lamoran and I, and I looked at him quizzically.

"I found the books," I said. "While I was reading one of them, something came into the library and lifted it from my hands, and laughed."

He didn't smile. On the contrary, he leaned abruptly forward, scowling at my words.

"Something?" he said slowly.

"Something," I shrugged, "is all I can call it. It possessed a voice; it made audible footsteps; yet it had no substance and left no prints in the dust of the floor. I heard it again after I had retired. It crept along the corridor, paused at my door, then descended the stairs."

"I wonder . . ." Lamoran said grimly. "Reed, do you know anything about the supernatural? That is, beyond the imbecile ideas of the ordinary layman?"

I was about to answer him, about to say that I knew something of Eastern forms of life after death, embracing vampires, mafui, voodooes, and some obscure claims of India's interior, when Rojer Macon returned. Macon's voice, flung out of a crimson, excited face, stifled my reply.

"He's gone! Pell's gone!"

Lamoran stiffened abruptly in his chair. I half rose, then fell back again, staring at Macon's excited, trembling figure.

"What are you saying?" Lamoran demanded in very curt, precise words.

"He's gone, I tell you! His bed hasn't been slept in!"

Lamoran's hands clenched on the edge of the table, crumpling the cloth in their grip. I saw his face lose color and his eyes dilate. He got to his feet swiftly and stood to his full height, with one hand still holding the table.

"Come with me, Reed," he said grimly. "I think I know."

I followed him. Rojer Macon, trailing along behind me, muttered and sputtered to himself in an undertone, demanding to know where we were going. Lamoran said nothing more. I thought I knew our destination, but I was in no mood to offer explanations.

We passed through four narrow corridors, all of which we had traversed the night before. At the end of the last one we turned aside and entered a passage which was strange to me. I noticed a single line of footsteps in the dust, leading us deeper and deeper into the gloomy abyss of the great manse.

Finally we reached it: the Iron Door designated in that ghostly message which had been flung upon our banquet table the preceding evening. The trail of footsteps led directly to its massive barrier, and there ended. Lamoran swung about with a grim military precision and faced me.

"You heard the—thing—descending the stairs last night?" he demanded.

"I did."

"The thing you heard was Pell. He came here."

I nodded heavily. Lamoran was right; there was no argument. I watched with a strange sense of foreboding as Lamoran flattened himself against the door and seized the latch.

The door was immense. It filled the entire end of the corridor, forming a block of ancient, solid iron more than eight feet in height and at least five in width. How thick it was we could not guess. The latch securing it was as heavy and thick as a bludgeon; it was so ponderous that Lamoran found difficulty in raising it from its grooved runway.

"Give me a hand," he grunted.

I moved forward to assist him. There was room on the bar for both of our hands without crowding; yet, in spite of our combined exertions, we could not raise the thing from its grooves.

Lamorán stepped back, wiping his sweating hands on his trouser legs.

"Damned thing is locked somehow," he grunted.

He surveyed the door bitterly, as if he would have liked to smash it down.

"Hadn't we better call out?" I suggested. "If Pell is locked in there—"

He nodded. Flat against the door, I called Pell's name in a loud voice, shrill enough to penetrate beyond the barrier. Then I waited—we all waited—for a reply. There was none, unless—was it my imagination, or did I actually hear that same uncanny, mocking laugh that had terrified my senses in the library during the preceding hours of darkness? No, it was not imagination, for as I turned quickly to confront Lamoran I saw him whirl about, with a snarl on his lips, to peer at Rojer Macon.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he snapped.

"Laughing?" Macon muttered, recoiling. "Good God, Jim, I didn't—"

It came again, cutting into Macon's mumbled protest. Rojer stopped short, with ashen face, and fell back against the wall. Lamoran took a step forward, hesitated, and raised his arm savagely. I did not move.

"The same thing," I said heavily, "I heard last night."

For a full moment no movement passed between the three of us. We stared blankly, fearfully, into each other's tense faces. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the corridor with us. Yet those two successive laughs had come from our midst, mocking us, from somewhere within reach of our hands!

Lamorán's uplifted hands fell slowly to his sides. He turned about. His face had faded almost to the bleached whiteness of Macon's. Then, very suddenly, he snapped at me.

"Get away from that door!"

I moved quickly, with my eyes fixed on him. The instant my body was away from the barrier, he flung himself forward. His thick-set shoulder crashed against the metal with the force of a flung battering ram.

The sinister door withstood his attack without so much as a protesting groan. The very force of his onslaught hurled him away from it. He tried again and

again with the same lack of results until, holding his shoulder in pain, he staggered back and leaned against the opposite wall of the corridor.

"Nothing—but dynamite—will move it," he gasped.

He seized my arm abruptly.

"We've got to get some!"

"But—it will take hours."

"Damn it, man, don't you know the truth of this thing yet! Some infernal supernatural force is at work in this house. Pell is in there, under its influence. We've got to get him out!"

"There's a train at noon, from the village," I said weakly, realizing that we could not possibly obtain an explosive nearer than London. "I could leave at once and make it back here by midnight, on the late train."

"Not you. I need you here. Macon!"

"I'll go," Rojer said curtly. "By God, that's more in my line—action. I'm nothing but a damned parasite if I stay here."

"It's dangerous," Lamoran frowned. "There's the moor to cross. It'll be pitch black, full of pitfalls."

"I'll make it," Macon said grimly.

"Good! Get enough of the stuff to blow this infernal door to hell!"

Rojer nodded silently. Without a word, he turned his back on us. We stood there, Lamoran and I, beside the door that barred its dread secret, and watched our companion hurry down the passage. When he had vanished, Lamoran said dully:

"We can't do anything here, Reed, until he returns. Suppose we give the house a thorough once over, top to bottom, and pray to God we find something to work on."

We made a systematic job of it, as we had been trained to do in the army. Starting at the tower, we searched every nook and crevice of the upper floors, every abandoned tunnel, every blind room. We found nothing in those upper recesses, except the marks of our own footprints of the last evening. It was far into the afternoon when we reached the ground floor again.

There, in the reception chamber, we found Tai-tse-Kiang, the stolid Oriental, methodically arranging the table for our delayed luncheon. The sight of food, I think, took some of the grotesquery out of our souls and made us remember that we were, after all, human beings in human surroundings. We sat at the table and devoured the stuff in silence. More than once our glances met in strained silence. More often we found ourselves staring at the empty chairs which had so recently held the jovial grinning faces of Pell and Macon.

The repast over, we scoured the lower floor and the horrible, inky-black pits of the sunken cellars. Here again we found nothing; nothing but the inevitable silence and darkness which brooded over the entire manse. When we finally groped up the stone steps from the pits, night had fallen and the servant had dinner ready for us.

We began it in silence. From the dead, resigned glare of Lamoran's eyes, I did not in the least expect any such outburst as developed. But develop it did, when the Oriental servant was bending over Lamoran's shoulder.

Lamoran reached up suddenly to grip the man's arm.

"You know what happened here last night?" he snapped.

"I have guessed, sir," the Oriental shrugged.

"Do you know the reason?"

"Yes."

Lamoran swung a livid face upwards. The entire affair had whipped all sense of reserve and all desire of caution out of his system. He was completely, thoroughly angry at that moment.

"What is it, then!" he growled.

"The other white man, sir, dared to disobey the warning which was given you. This is the house of the Master. The Iron Room is the room of the Master. He who enters—also dies."

"Damned rot!" Lamoran snarled.

"You are speaking sacrilege, sir. Confucius—"

"To hell with Confucius! And with you! Of all the blasted, infernal—"

Tai-tse-Kiang listened impassively to the most furious, livid outbursts of vehemence that I had ever heard pour from Lamoran's lips. I knew, well enough, that Lamoran possessed a temper and a goodly store of invective, but never had I heard him release it with such crimson hate. In the end the Oriental said, very softly:

"That is worse than penetrating the Iron Door. The Master has ears—and hears."

Then he straightened up and backed away, releasing his arm from Lamoran's grip. As he came erect, the light from the hanging candelabrum illuminated his entire face; and I shuddered at the glittering, half subdued cruelty in his slanted eyes.

"That," murmured Lamoran, when he had gone, "will probably bring results, Reed. I'm going to turn in. Macon won't return before midnight, even with the best of fortune, and when he comes, we'll need steady nerves for the task ahead of us."

He rose from the table.

"You have a revolver?" he said suddenly.

"Yes," I said. "In my room."

"Better join it—and keep it warm," he smiled dryly.

When I left Lamoran and retired to my own room on the second landing that night, I did not remove my clothes. Perhaps it was the knowledge that I had, at the most, only two hours or so of available sleep. Perhaps it was the subtle premonition that something would happen even before those two hours had elapsed. At any rate, I threw myself on the bed without removing a single article

of my garb. In fact, I added an extra burden: I removed the automatic revolver from my luggage and dropped it into my coat pocket.

I did not attempt to sleep. My thoughts mulled about in confusion. First the malignant face of Tai-tse-Kiang persisted in rioting through them; then the Iron Door in that half buried passage almost directly below me seemed to loom out of the darkness and mock me. Again I had visions of Rojer Macon groping across the blackened moor in the dead of night with his significant burden. And then, climaxing this series of nightmares, I heard something.

At first it was merely a whisper; then it increased in intensity until I recognized it as being a continuation of the soft, almost lovely Oriental chanting that had penetrated my dreams of the night before. This time, however, I knew it to be no dream, but reality. And rather than lie in my chamber, pondering futilely over the cause of it, I slipped from the bed, obtained a tiny pocket flash-light from my bag, and crept to the door.

The sound came from below. I tiptoed along the passage to the head of the great ramp, and there hesitated. I felt, then, something religious in the monotonous tone of it. It possessed the same quality of tone that I had heard more than once in far-away India, where the cowed priests of the Buddhist temples stand upon their flat housetops, with their followers kneeling in the streets below, and offer sunset prayers to their god.

I descended the ramp very quietly, making no sound that might interrupt. Following the intonations, I passed along the lower corridors, feeling my way in the dark without having recourse to the flash-light in my hand.

So I came at length to the corridor of the Iron Door. Even as I entered the mouth of that dismal tunnel, the chant ceased. I, too, stopped—and waited. A door opened in the pitch-like gloom far in advance of where I crouched. I heard footsteps, moving away from me. I followed them. They led me through a second series of short passageways to the head of the chill, black stone steps that twisted down into the pits. Undaunted, since I had traversed this same route during the afternoon, I continued.

My boots might click on those bare steps, I considered. Therefore I removed them; and as I went from step to step, deeper into the depths, I made less noise than a shadow. Far above me hung the doorway. Before me, as I reached the bottom level of the old house, extended that sinister labyrinth of subterranean pits and tunnels which Lamoran and I had so carefully inspected earlier in the day.

My unsuspecting guide was still ahead of me. I could hear him, and I guessed now his identity, for he shuffled along with an ominous scraping movement of sandal-shod feet. The man was obviously Tai-tse-Kiang.

Down here it was cold, with a penetrating chill that crept into my very bones. I hardly noticed it, so intent was I upon keeping track of my quarry as he paced through the network of interwoven ways. For perhaps three or four minutes I continued to creep after him, and then the sound of his progress ceased.

MURGUNSTRUMM AND OTHERS

He was, I knew, in the most remote room of the cellars. This particular room had but one means of ingress, since it was the final chamber in a twisting chain of pits. I advanced silently to that opening and flattened against the stone. Then I saw him—or saw his indistinct form.

He crouched beside the opposite wall, twenty feet from me. His hands were uplifted. He had pushed aside a portion of the wall, revealing a secret niche which Lamoran and I had not previously discovered. Even as I watched, the Oriental slid forward with cat-like grace, and vanished within the opening.

Again I waited. I saw nothing. I heard nothing, except a half inaudible rasping sound, as of metal grating against metal. Then, with the same sinuous movement, the Chinaman reappeared and reached up to replace that section of the stone which hid his alcove from prying eyes.

I had barely time to secrete myself before he turned. Luckily, the wall beside me was irregular with protuberances, and I was able to pack myself into one of them. Almost before I had become motionless again, the Oriental shuffled past me, returning the way he had come. He looked neither to right nor left, and the light was so obscure that I could make out no detail of his features. This time, however, he walked with quicker step. Before many seconds had passed, he had vanished again.

I remained in my hiding place until I could be certain that he would not hear me. Then I slipped out and drew the catch-latch on my flash-light. With the beam of yellow playing upon the floor at my feet, I advanced toward that mysterious section of wall which I had seen moved aside.

I found it. The stone slab was, to all appearances, a part of the solid whole; yet, when I discovered the correct inch upon which to exert pressure, it slid back under my fingers as easily as a square of wood. Evidently it was nicely balanced with counter-weights.

Before me lay the hidden niche. Perhaps five feet across it extended, and it could have been no more than two feet in depth. It contained nothing more, at first glance, than a long iron lever which extended down through the stone ceiling.

I inspected the thing cautiously, without touching it. I was in no mood, just then, to put my hands on anything I did not fully understand; and this peculiar stick of metal, protruding from the roof of the alcove, was seemingly inexplicable.

But was it? It was connected, evidently, with the room above it, on the main floor of the house. I strove to remember the plan of those upper corridors. I tried to organize, mentally, the many rooms and passages over my head. And then, like a sudden cold shock, I knew the meaning of this iron rod. It hung directly beneath the door of the Iron Room!

In its present position, more than three feet of it protruded below the ceiling of the cellar. Had it been pushed up to its full length, it would have extended into the very center of the Iron Barrier, forming a lock which no mortal could

hope to shatter! This, then, was the thing which had baffled Lamoran's attack. This thing, crude and almost aboriginal in design, was the lock of the Iron Door!

Still I did not touch it. The Iron Door had been locked securely. Evidently the Oriental, with some fiendish plan in mind, had come here to release the lock. Now that the door above me was open, there was nothing left for me to do but go at once to Lamoran's chamber and tell him.

I turned about to step out of the niche. The light in my hand played its beam at my feet. My groping foot struck something soft, yielding. I stared down—at a human leg.

For a moment I stood rigid, frozen. Then, gulping down my fear, I dropped to my knees and peered into the narrow fissure which concealed the rest of the limp body. I stared into the dead, upturned face of Rojer Macon. I stared at the strangler's cord which still encircled Rojer Macon's dead throat.

After that, with the flash quivering like a cobweb in my groping hand, I ran back the way I had come. I wanted to look into Lamoran's face—to hear him talk—to plead with him to flee this madhouse of horror.

How long it took me to reach the stone stairs leading to the main floor, I am not sure. I know that I stumbled into blind passages and scraped the skin from my hands and tore my clothing and was altogether like a blind bird in a trap. I know that I fell while climbing the steps, and was on hands and knees when I reached the upper passage.

Then caution possessed me again. I began to realize that this was no time for blundering, blubbering fear. If I were to warn Lamoran in time to prevent further horror, I must be quiet as a ghost and as soft-footed as a cat. I dropped the flash-light into my pocket, drew my revolver, and crept noiselessly along the corridor in the overwhelming darkness.

I would have to pass the Iron Door. That thought alone terrified me. Yet it would have to be faced, if I were to reach Lamoran's room on the upper landing. Consequently I trod, eventually, into the fatal corridor.

The dread passage was no longer in abject darkness. One of the candle-brackets, set at wide intervals in the grim wall of the tunnel, had been recently ignited. It sputtered perhaps a dozen yards from me, filling a certain portion of the corridor with an unearthly globule of sickly yellow pigment. I noticed, too, that only one of the brackets had been lighted, and that one was the particular candle that cast its glow directly upon the surface of the Iron Door. Obviously the Oriental had traversed this passage before me, and had created the light for some uncanny reason of his own.

I crept toward it slowly, with the utmost caution. There was no telling when Tai-tse-Kiang might return and find me here; no telling the consequences if such a discovery were to occur. Thus I had proceeded no more than half the distance to the Iron Door when a sudden, unexpected footfall caused me to hurl my bent body against the wall and flatten out like a clinging bat. Far in advance of me, at the very mouth of the corridor, I saw the shadowy outline of an approaching

figure—a figure which came forward with dead, mechanical steps toward me and toward the door.

I watched it in fascination, until it entered the realm of light. Then, to my horror, I saw that it was James Lamoran!

I should have cried out to him, warning him, had not the expression of his tense face choked the words on my lips. His gaunt head was outthrust, his hands hung lifeless at his sides; his body was a stiff, rigid thing that moved as if some exterior force were propelling it. His eyes were wide open, unblinking, and ghastly livid in the glow of that infernal light. He was not conscious, not awake. Either he was walking in his sleep—a thing which I had never known him to be guilty of—or he was under the influence of a somnambulistic trance brought upon him by hypnotic powers.

Trembling, but fascinated beyond power to move, I crouched in my place of hiding and watched him. He went straight to the Iron Door, stopped before it, and raised his dangling hands to seize the latch. The iron rod lifted easily in his fingers. The great barrier swung slowly, ponderously inward with a rasping screech. Like a mindless automaton, Lamoran paced over the threshold into the forbidden chamber, and the massive portal rolled shut behind him.

I heard the latch click as the door closed. Perhaps it was that sinister thud which made me realize that I was entirely to blame for whatever might happen to my friend in that chamber of horrors. I lurched from my place of concealment. I stumbled blindly forward, with a half uttered, choking cry of delayed warning. My fingers twisted about the iron rod and strove to lift it.

The thing was fast again; immovable. Though I am no anemic weakling, I could not stir the latch from its grooves. In desperation I flung my entire body against the barrier, hoping to do what Lamoran had been unable to do on that other horrible occasion.

The result was the same. The door flung me back again, and again, and again. I pummelled it with my fists, kicked at it in my stockinged feet, madly, futilely, unreasonably. Then as I fell back with a sob, I was aware of the automatic clenched in my fist.

Savagely I jammed the muzzle against that mocking lock and jerked the trigger. Three bullets thudded into the metal, into the narrow, slot-like opening which held the iron rod. The roar deafened me. I heard a rasping clash of metal, heard a heavy, significant thud under my feet as my bullets released the counter-balance and let it fall into the death-pit in the cellars below.

The Iron Door creaked open under the weight of my body.

What happened from that moment on, as I staggered over the threshold, is a maze of distilled horror. It occurred with such rapidity that I can but vaguely recall it.

I saw my companion ten feet before me, his back toward me, pacing lifelessly across the stone floor. Beyond him I saw a towering, inhuman form with two glittering, greenish eyes that had the power to drag me forward.

The thing was a monstrous idol—a squatting, deformed image of the heathen Confucius. Its huge, vividly colored arms were crossed derisively over its flat chest. Its head was outthrust on a sinewy neck. Its bare feet were curled fiendishly together, like talons. And there, prone upon the floor before it, lay the lifeless figure of the man who had been missing since the previous night. Pell!

All this I saw in the feeble light that penetrated from the outer corridor. It burned itself into my memory in the space of a broken second. Then I knew, instinctively, that Lamoran had been lured into this chamber by the formless specter of the House of the Undead. The idol, squatting before me, held some terrible power of death; and Lamoran was being forced toward it!

After that, I acted. Lunging to one side, I lifted the gun in my hand and jammed the trigger until the chamber was empty. I fired in madness, in positive hate. I aimed at the very center of that leering face.

The effect was instantaneous. The dead features, rotten with age, crumpled under the impact of four bullets. Lamoran, groping toward it, twitched suddenly as if with the ague, and became motionless. Then I was running forward, the smoking automatic still gripped in my hand.

He would have fallen had not my arm gone about his middle. As it was, he sagged down on my shoulder and could not speak for a full minute. I felt the cold sweat on his white face, felt his body quiver. Then he lifted his head limply and murmured:

“Thanks, Reed. You—were just in time.”

I waited until he could stand erect. In another moment he got hold of himself and I was relieved of his dead weight. He turned slowly to examine the horror room.

“I was lying in my room,” he said bitterly, pacing toward Pell’s dead body, and speaking to me in jerky phrases, “when the thing came. Footsteps—in the passage outside. My door opened. No one there. A strange force, hellishly hypnotic, took hold of me. Tried to fight it. Couldn’t. It led me here. God knows what would have happened.”

He was on his knees beside Pell.

“Good God, Reed,” he said suddenly. “Look here!”

I groped to his side and stared down. There had been enough horror already; I will not attempt to describe Pell’s body. Enough to say that some sharp instrument—a hideously long knife or sword—had slashed it nearly in twain, from skull to abdomen.

“Nasty,” Lamoran shuddered. “Ugh! How the devil—”

He straightened up suddenly and stepped forward to the huge idol. I saw him poke his fingers into the shattered head. He grunted with satisfaction and called to me.

My bullets had scored four irregular holes in the thing’s flat forehead, about an eighth of an inch apart, on an almost perfectly straight line above the eyes. Below that, the center of the face had crumpled in, revealing the tip of an

ancient long-sword which extended, apparently, the entire length of the idol's bulk. Looking closer, I saw a narrow, significant slit running perpendicularly through the mass.

"Favorite trick of the ancients," Lamoran said raspingly. "There'll be a square flagstone in the floor under Pell's body. The victim walks toward this damned thing, steps on the stone. Pressure releases a counter-weight or spring of some sort. The sword flashes down and out through the groove, cleaving the intruder from head to foot. I'd—I'd have got it when I knelt beside Pell just now if your bullets hadn't put the thing out of order. Ugly death!"

He turned away heavily. His tired face was beginning to regain its normal color; but mine, I think, must have been as white as a death's-head.

"The thing—" I said brokenly, "the thing that led you here, that inhabits this horror house. What is it, Jim? If we don't learn—"

"I think I know. Help me get Pell to the reception hall."

We lifted Pell between us and carried him to the door. As we crossed the threshold, Lamoran glanced significantly at the shattered lock and looked at me in bewilderment.

"You had to shoot your way in here?" he demanded.

I told him of the counter-balance in the cellar, and of Rojer Macon. I knew then how this infernal door was operated. Once opened, to admit a victim, it had the hellish power of locking itself as soon as it swung shut again, and could not be released until that crude balance in the pit was reset. A simple enough mechanism in itself—worked with ordinary weights and counter-weights—but a device that had caused more than one unholy death in the darkness of the idol's chamber.

In silence we bore Pell to the reception hall. There we placed him on the long divan and decently covered his twisted body with an embroidered silk robe. Finally Lamoran turned to me.

"I've gone pretty deep into occultism, you know," he shrugged. "What I have to tell you is not mere twaddle."

"It is—truth?"

"I will tell you what I know. In many of the secret cults of China and India, it is believed that every true idol of K'ung Tsze or Confucius is inhabited by the deathless spirit of one of the Master's disciples. The man who originally constructed this house—you'll find this fact in one of those books in the library—was an English nobleman who spent most of his time in the interior of China. When he came here, he brought the Confucian image with him. He himself was a member of a cult known as the K'ung Shah, now extinct. He obtained the idol in one of the most ancient temples of the Orient. He also brought with him a Chinese servant named Tai-tse-Kiang."

Lamorán glanced at me. I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"That is all," he shrugged.

"Do you mean," I muttered, "that Tai-tse-Kiang is an 'undead,' that he is

one of the Master's disciples, inhabiting the thing we have just destroyed? Good God, man, it is imposs—"

"Nothing is impossible."

"But such a creature, with the horrible power of assuming human form, the power of life-in-death—"

"I think you will find," Lamoran said quietly, "that the power has been destroyed. The unseen specter of this House of the Undead was last known to be in my chamber, where he came to exert his influence on me. If you will go there, you may find the reason why Tai-tse-Kiang so jealously guarded the Iron Room from destruction."

I groped to the door, confounded by his words. His own voice was almost hypnotic at that moment; it was the voice of a man who had delved deeper—far deeper—into such matters of eternal mystery than most mortals dared even to think. Mechanically I climbed the great ramp to the upper floor and paced along the passage to Lamoran's chamber.

There I stopped, and an involuntary cry came from my lips. Tai-tse-Kiang, the Oriental servant, lay full length across the threshold, with his face staring upward in death.

The lower part of that face had crumpled in decay. The forehead, smooth and flat, was punctured with four bloodless bullet holes.

The Death Watch

IN A WAY it was my fault. But I had known Elaine Ingram for years, and when she asked me for the details of her brother's passing I could not force myself to tell her the truth.

When she said to me that night, right after the funeral, "Did he ask for me before he went, Harry?"—I lied to her. I had to.

"Yes," I said, "he kept asking for you. He kept saying how much he loved you."

"Did he say he would come back?" Elaine whispered.

"Yes," I told her; "he said he'd come back."

She and her husband, Peter Ingram, took over the old house out there at the edge of the swamp. Peter was a writer; he could make a living anywhere. And Elaine insisted on moving in because, she said, Mark would be coming back sometime and he would surely return to the house in which he had died.

For six months they lived in that house, and I got to be pretty good friends with Peter. He'd come over to the radio station every now and then and sit with me while I was on watch. Sometimes on the mid-watch, which is usually dull around four in the morning, he'd poke about, asking questions, and I'd tell him what I knew about being a radio man.

He had a natural aptitude for that sort of thing and before long he could have sat there at the bug and worked a shift without much trouble, if I'd dared to let him.

One night he was sitting there, watching me, and when a lull came and I leaned back to light a cigarette, he said suddenly: "Harry, I'm worried about Elaine."

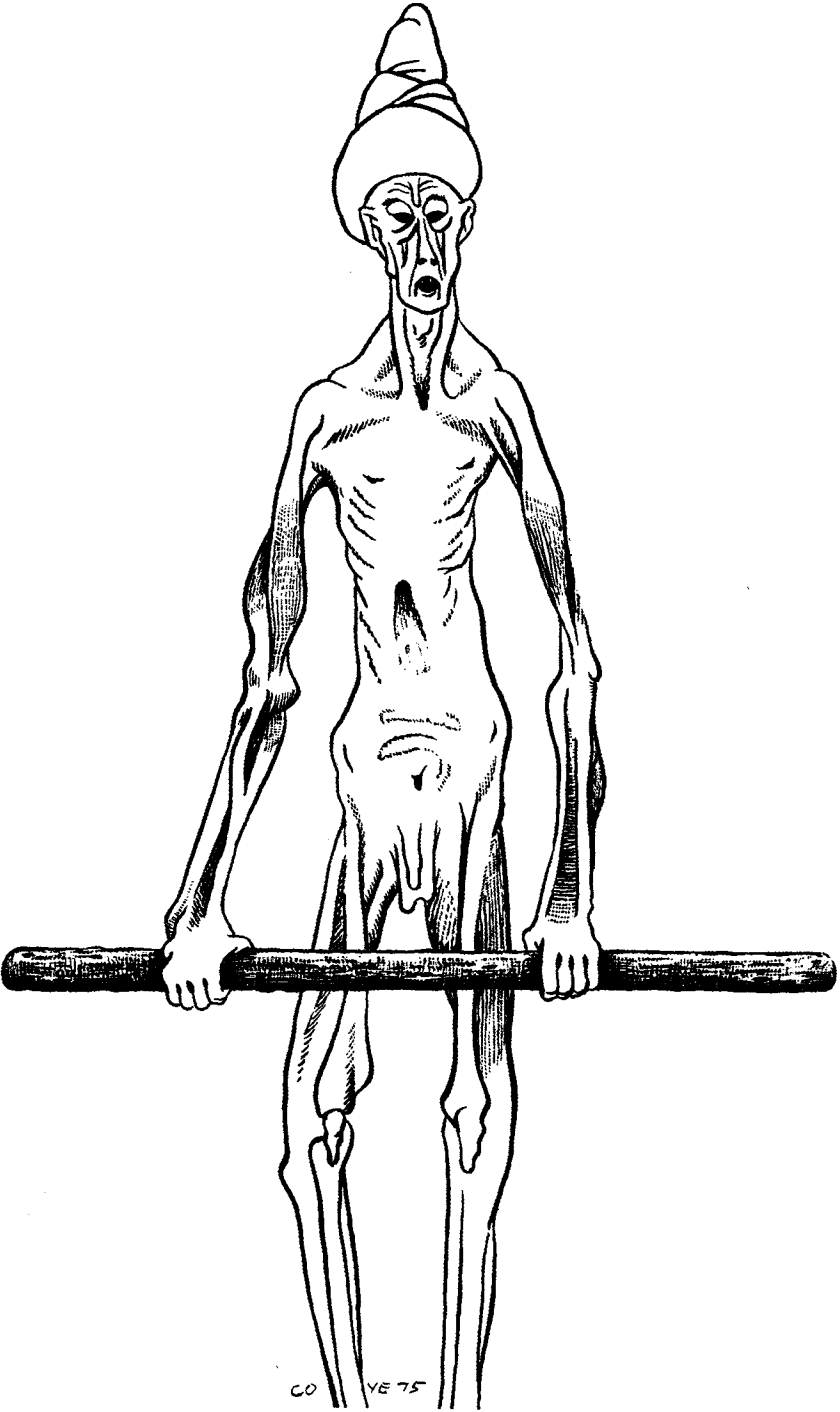
I knew what the trouble was. Elaine was convinced, you see, that her dead brother would come back to her.

"She just sits there in the living-room," Peter said, "and never says a word. Old Yago sits there with her. Harry, I've got to do something about it. It's driving me insane."

I said: "Why don't you get rid of Yago?"

"Elaine likes him."

This Yago had lived in various shacks around town for as long as I could remember.



He claimed to be a Seminole Indian. He drank a lot, and folks said he was queer. Whatever he was, Elaine had taken a fancy to him and hired him to work around the place; and now he was living there.

"Harry," Peter said, "I've got to convince her that she's wrong, that the dead don't come back. But she won't talk to me any more. If I sent Yago away, she'd just go deeper into those damned books of hers."

I thought it over for a few days, and one day I said to him: "Why don't *you* read up on spiritualism? You can't expect to argue with Elaine unless you can talk her language. Study the stuff for a while and you'll be able to pick the holes in it."

He was fooling with an old amplifier which had been lying on my desk. He looked up at me, stared a moment, then nodded. I didn't see him again for two weeks.

Bill Macy said to me one day: "What the devil is Ingram up to? I was in the post office this morning and there were half a dozen boxes of equipment from the Beacon Radio Company, addressed to him. I thought he was a writer."

"The poor guy's got to have a hobby of some kind," I said. "He's lonely."

But that night, to satisfy my curiosity, I figured out an excuse for calling on him, and drove over there about nine o'clock.

It was a black night, and when the nights get black in Florida they're like ink. I drove slowly because the road was bad, and I could hear the frogs grunting in the swamp all around me, and after a while I saw the lighted windows of the house.

You can't imagine a house in a place like that unless you've lived in Florida and seen some of the left-overs from the boom. This place was enormous. It had about twelve rooms and looked like a small hotel, very ornate and elaborate, and yet it was the only house for miles around.

As I remember, some wealthy chap from New York figured the town would grow out that far, and sank a small fortune in the house and then realized his mistake. He put it in the hands of an agent, who couldn't sell it—because who would want to live miles from civilization on the edge of a swamp filled with snakes and 'gators and bugs?

So the agent rented the place to Elaine and Mark and their mother—this was before Elaine married Peter Ingram—and I think they paid twenty a month for it. Then the mother died and Elaine was married, and Mark stayed on alone.

He was a radio man and a good one, but that house did something to him. We at the station noticed the change in him and begged him to move into town, but he bought a lot of books and told us to mind our own business.

He gave up his job in August. Bill Macy relieved him one morning at eight, and he said to Bill: "Tell Crandall I'm through." Just like that. When I heard it, I went out to the house and begged him to reconsider. I told him it was unfair of him to quit like that, without giving me a chance to get a man to replace him.

He stared at me, and there was a queer, dull light in his eyes, and his eyes never blinked. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I have work to do."

For a month I didn't see him. Then the rumor spread around that he was sick, and I went there to find out.

He was sick all right. That queer, dull light in his eyes had become a wild glare that scared me. He looked half starved and had a raging fever.

I drove back to town and got Doc Wendell. And that night, while Doc and I watched over him, Mark died.

Now Elaine and Peter and old Yago had the place, and when I climbed out of my car that night, Yago opened the door to me.

"Hello," I said. "Is Mr. Ingram at home?"

Yago nodded and I followed him inside to the living-room. It was an enormous room, with a big fireplace and a lot of musty furniture, and Elaine was sitting there, reading. Yago limped over to a chair near the fireplace, and paid no more attention to me, and Elaine looked up and said:

"Hello, Harry."

"I've got a swell story for Peter," I said. "Is he around?"

"He's upstairs."

She didn't get up to go after him, but just sat there, staring at me. She was a good-looking girl, Elaine, a little bit on the short side but slim and trim, with very even features. She seemed tired, though, and I could see that she hadn't bothered much about her looks lately. Careless, I suppose, because they didn't have many visitors and she seldom went anywhere except to the village.

"I'll go talk to him," I said, but she shook her head.

"He's working. I'm afraid he won't want to be disturbed."

Well, there was something queer in the air, and I didn't exactly know what to do. I could have laughed it off and gone up to Peter's workroom anyway, but something in the way Elaine was looking at me gave me the creeps.

"It is pretty late," I mumbled. "Maybe I'd better come around some other time."

But just then I heard a door open upstairs, and Peter called down: "Is that you, Harry?"

When I went up, I saw right away that he was in bad shape. He was wearing slacks and slippers and no shirt, and needed a shave, and looked all in. He couldn't have looked any worse after a week's drunk.

"Been a long time since I've seen you, Mister," I said.

He nodded, and kept on nodding for a moment while he stared at me. He seemed to be making up his mind to do something, and then rather abruptly he gripped my arm and said: "Want to show you something."

His workroom was at the end of the hall and he didn't release my arm until we were inside with the door closed. "Even my wife hasn't been in this room for the past two weeks," he said. "Look."

I looked, and my mouth sagged open.

It was a big room and reeked of stale cigarette smoke. The shades were down. I guessed that they'd been down, and the windows, too, for a long time. And the whole back end of the room was piled with radio junk!

"What the devil," I demanded, "are you doing? Building a broadcasting station?"

"Look it over," he said quietly.

I looked it over. He had some ultra-short-wave apparatus that was unlike any "ultra-freq" stuff I had ever seen. The receiver apparently was still in the experimental stage, with loose wires and disconnected condensers sprawled in a mess, but the transmitter was what made me suck in my breath.

I knew what this "ultra" stuff was all about, but the weird-looking amplifiers Peter had hooked to his transmitter stumped me.

He saw me squinting with disbelief.

"Don't worry," he said. "It'll work. I'm throwing the ultra high-frequencies clear out of the spectrum with that amplification hook-up."

"About all you'll do," I said, "is drive the boys at the station mad, interfering with our reception. What's more, you haven't a license."

"For what I'm doing I don't need a license. Besides, it's far from finished. I'll be a month working on it yet before I'm ready."

I walked over to his desk, and he had a stack of radio books there that would have tested the learning of an advanced electrical engineer. I started to look them over but he said gently: "Never mind those, Harry."

He pulled open a drawer. There were more books in the drawer—books of a different sort.

"Some of these were in the house when we came here," he said. "Mark must have been studying them. Others I obtained by mail, from a collector."

I skimmed through a couple of them, but it was all Greek to me. Stuff about the Black Mass and Bethmoora and the black lakes of Hali. Stuff about voodoo and the dark arts.

"Hell," I said, "only a nut would bother wading through this junk. What's eating you, anyway?"

"She reads it," he said.

"Who? Elaine?"

"Yes."

"You mean she takes this junk seriously?"

He nodded. I didn't like the way he stared at me, or the way he handled those books when he replaced them in the drawer. He seemed to resent my disbelief, and he touched the books the way some folks touch a Bible. Reverently, sort of.

Then suddenly he said: "Elaine mustn't know about this. You understand? She thinks I'm working on a novel."

"That's what I thought, too," I said.

"Well, you know better now. But you mustn't tell Elaine."

I told him I wouldn't tell Elaine. I told him he could stand some sleep, too,

and if he didn't ease up a little he'd find himself in bed with a nervous breakdown.

His answer to that was a crazy kind of laugh, and the same sort of laughter kept coming in little gusts from way down inside him as he walked with me along the hall.

"I'll be over to see you soon," he promised, and held my hand for a minute; and I felt his eyes on me as I went down the stairs.

I turned, said, "So long," and walked into the living-room to say good-night to Elaine. Evidently I didn't make much noise. Elaine didn't hear me coming.

She was on her knees there in the shadows, and in front of her was a table on which stood a photograph of Mark. Her hands gripped the edge of the table and her gaze was glued to the photograph. I thought she was praying.

Naturally I took a step backward and would have faded into the hall again without disturbing her. But then I heard the words that were whispering from her lips.

"Hear me, O Mighty Nyarlathotep!" she was incanting. "You who walk in the farthest shadows by the black lakes of Hali, listen to me, I entreat you! And you, O Hastur, O Prince of Evil! Send him back to me, for my own god has failed me. Give him to me as he promised to return . . ."

I stood there, chewing my lips and gaping at her. It didn't make sense. It was a mumbo-jumbo that scared me, and I felt little shivers crawling over me.

Then, while Elaine went on repeating those same words, I saw Yago, the Seminole. He was sitting on the other side of the room, staring straight at me. It was dark over there, and his eyes were like red coals in the darkness, and I suddenly had a feeling that if I intruded, those coals would burn me.

I'd had enough. I tiptoed out of there and closed the front door behind me as softly as I could. I got into my car and turned it around and drove back out of the swamp.

That night I stood the mid-watch, and jumped at every slightest sound. My nerves were as tight as fiddle-strings. Even the shrill cackle of code couldn't make me feel at ease, and once, while I was working the *S. S. Exhibitor*, a big housewife spider came slowly through the open door into the operating-room, and I went over backward with a shriek.

I didn't go near Peter Ingram's house for three long weeks. I wanted to forget what I'd seen there. But then one night . . .

Macy was supposed to relieve me at midnight. At eleven, his wife phoned to say he was sick, so I called George Latham's home, to get George out. His wife answered. George was at the fights. When he came in, she said, she'd hustle him over to the station.

At one o'clock I'd been on duty for nine hours, and was all in, and suddenly everything went wrong. A Norwegian freighter was calling with important business, and a mad clatter of meaningless dots and dashes came out of nowhere

to drown him out and tear my ears off.

For half an hour it continued unabated. When George arrived, I was a mental wreck and was cursing my head off.

"Listen to it!" I said.

And suddenly there was something else for us to listen to!

It was the voice of Peter Ingram! For a while it slurred up and down the scale, the way a phonograph sounds if you press a finger against the turntable, slowing it, then letting it speed up, then slowing it again. We couldn't distinguish words right away, because of the crazy variations in tone. But finally the tone leveled out, and Ingram's voice roared through the operating-room.

George Latham and I stared at each other, and neither spoke. I don't know what he was thinking, but my thoughts were back in the shadowed living-room of that big house on the edge of the swamp. I was standing there with Yago's glittering eyes on me, and I was watching Elaine—because the words that came roaring through the phones were almost the same words I had heard Elaine whispering, on that other occasion.

Something about the black lakes of Hali . . . about Nyarlathotep and Hastur and the Prince of Evil . . . and Mark, Elaine's brother, who was dead and who had promised to come back.

It went on and on, on and on, and we listened to it. An S.O.S. couldn't have silenced the air-lanes any more completely. Both George and I knew that every operator within listening distance was doing exactly what we were—forgetting his job and concentrating on that weird, crazy babble of words from Peter Ingram.

Finally George said explosively: "I've been telling you for weeks that guy is goofy! Listen to him!"

I was listening. "*Harken to me, O Mighty Nyarlathotep! You who rule the midnight forests by the shores of Hali, hear me . . .*"

"I'm going over there," I said.

For Peter's sake, I had to. For our own, too. The crazy fool was interfering with all kinds of important business. If he kept it up, he'd have the law down on his neck, and then maybe it would get back to us—we'd be criticized for having let him monkey around the station.

I didn't want to lose my job. I didn't want Peter to get into any trouble either, because, in spite of what I'd seen and heard, I still thought the world of Elaine.

So George Latham took over, and I backed my car out of the station garage and drove over to that house on the edge of the swamp. It was raining a little, and the road was black and dangerous, and there was a light in Peter's work-room, but the rest of the house was in darkness.

I stepped into a pool of water at the foot of the steps and began cursing. The door was locked; I had to knock, and then had to stand there for what seemed like an hour, waiting for someone to answer my pounding.

Old Yago opened up. I said, "I want to see Peter; it's important," and I pushed past him. He turned to stare at me as I strode to the stairs. I could feel his eyes eating into my back. Not until I was halfway up the staircase did he close the door; and while I was hiking along the hall to Peter's workroom I heard the Indian climbing after me.

Peter's door was shut. I banged on it. A chair scraped inside, and there was a queer, heavy silence for about ten seconds—which seemed a long time—and Peter said: "I'm not ready for you yet. Go back to bed."

"It's Harry Crandall," I said.

"Who?"

"Harry Crandall. And I've got to talk to you!"

The chair scraped again, and I heard footsteps. I should have been prepared, I suppose. I should have remembered how thin and emaciated he'd been on my last visit. But the door opened, and I took one look at the man and stepped back, cold all over. He was like a ghost.

"Come in," he said. "I thought you were my wife."

I kept staring at him. His face was dead-white, and his eyes were like holes burned in a sheet. He hadn't slept, hadn't eaten, for days; I was sure of it. His hands shook, and a bulging little muscle at the side of his mouth kept twitching, and his breathing was hoarse and fast, as if the effort hurt him.

He closed the door, put a claw-like hand on my arm and pulled me toward the desk on the other side of the room. The desk was a radio table now—of a sort. It was cluttered with wires and paraphernalia, and in the midst of the chaos hung a microphone.

"I'm working on ultra high-frequency waves," Ingram said. "This outfit here"—and he pointed to the transmitter—"is a special apparatus for throwing the signals outside the known spectrum."

I put my legs wide apart and jammed my hands against my hips and glared at him. "You weren't working the high-frequency waves a while ago," I growled. "You raised hell with everything on the Atlantic coast!"

"I was experimenting then. Probably had some parasitics. That's ironed out. Now I'm ready to begin."

I glanced over his apparatus. I'm no Marconi, but I know enough about radio to know that ultra high-frequency stuff is all in the experimental stage, and damned deep. Evidently he'd been doing a lot of reading.

But the book that lay open beside the microphone was not a radio book. It was one of those tomes from the desk drawer and was full of stuff I wouldn't want to read unless I were good and drunk in broad daylight. Queer formulæ, queer names, rituals . . . all that stuff. Necromancy, I guess you'd call it. And some of those formulæ, if I know my languages, were in Arabic.

"This," I said, "is what you were sending out over the air?"

He nodded. His hand was pawing my arm again, pulling me aside, and there was an odd expression on his face—a queer twist of unholy anticipation—as he

lowered himself into the chair. The hand that closed over that microphone was as thin and bony as the fist of a corpse.

"Listen," he muttered. "I'll show you!"

"But—"

"Don't worry. I'll not interfere with the station. What I have to say will go out where no human words have ever gone before. I've worked for weeks to reach out into the void. Tonight, just before you came, I had an answer."

"An answer from what?" I said, frowning.

"I don't know yet. But now—"

Well, I stood there and listened to him, and before many minutes passed I was cold as ice, and afraid. I'm a sober man; I've stood many a mid-watch alone, with wind rattling the windows and rain hammering a dirge on the station-house roof . . . but the words that whispered from Peter Ingram's quivering lips scared me.

It was the same old stuff at first, but the ghastly eagerness in Ingram's half-mad face made it different. The guy actually believed he was talking to someone. You could tell by his eyes, by the way he glued his mouth to the mike.

He mumbled Arabic, then went back to English. "Listen to me, O Nyarlathotep, O ruler of the darkest dwelling-places of the far departed. Hear me, in the name of the twisted ones who crawl through the halls of Hell! Hear me, in the name of her who suckles the legless children of the vast Lake of Hali. The Mass is midnight black, and crimson blood flows from the wounds of the gods I have denounced. Take me to thine own scaly bosom and hear my prayer . . ."

"I was an unbeliever, O Mighty One. I sought thee first with ridicule for my wife who believes in thee. I would have proved to her that there was no life after death, no hope, no return for the departed. Now I would bring the dead back to her, and this is the night. This is the night I have awaited, O Prince of Darkest Dark! He died when the wind wailed as it does tonight, and when the storm gathered. Tonight the way is open . . ."

Peter Ingram wasn't talking for my benefit. He didn't even know I was standing there watching him, listening to him. When his voice trailed off he still sat there, gripping the mike, and his hands were shaking, and beads of sweat dripped from his wasted face and splashed on the open book in front of him.

The room was still as a tomb. The rain whipping against the windows seemed to make no sound, and wind whining around the house had no voice. Not for me. My heart was sledging, and I was cold, and scared.

Something here was all wrong. In a kind of daze, I realized that. Weeks ago, Peter Ingram had dug his teeth into a study of this stuff in order to prove to Elaine that she was wrong in her beliefs. He'd been determined then to convince her that her dead brother never would or could come back. And now he believed all that she believed, and more!

The man was mad!

"Listen," I mumbled. "For God's sake, stop this business. Forget it."

But he was whispering into the microphone again, paying no attention to me.

"Send him back to her, O Mighty One," he pleaded. "It was on a night like this that he died, and on his lips was a promise to return. Grant him that dying wish this night! Let him return!"

Suddenly he stiffened, sat there with his eyes closed and began to tremble from head to foot. I took a step backward, staring at him.

"Listen!" he shouted. "Listen, Elaine! An answer! I swore to you I'd get an answer, and I have! I am!"

Well, I didn't hear anything. I told them later, at the police station, that I did not hear anything, and I repeat it here, so help me God, *I didn't hear anything!* Peter Ingram sat there, sucking breath and gasping it out again, and I stared at him, and that was all.

For about one minute—one endless, horrible minute—that was all. Then I did hear something downstairs.

A door opened. The wind hurled it shut again, and glass broke—so I knew it was the front door. Then I heard footsteps.

They weren't the kind of footsteps you'd have made or I'd have made. They were heavy, house-jarring thuds that rattled the walls and shook the floor on which I was standing. They were slow, plodding steps.

Someone down there had come in by the front door—which was locked—and was walking along the hall. Someone huge, heavy. My mind flashed to a picture of Frankenstein's monster, striding in out of the storm . . .

Peter Ingram swung around in his chair and stared at the door. The door was closed. I think now that Peter expected the thing downstairs to come up and open that door—to come up in answer to the words he had mumbled over the mike. But Elaine's room was downstairs, and the thing strode along the hall down there, and I heard a door clatter open, and then—and then a woman was screaming.

God, that scream!

The sound came wailing up to us, shrill as the zero-shriek of a hurricane. It ripped and slashed its way through the whole house, drowning out the yammer of the rain, the voices of the storm outside. For one long, ghastly minute it continued unabated, and then it became a hideous gurgling sound, and I heard something else mixed up in it.

I heard a guttural, snarling voice, and a sound of human bodies thrashing about in a death-struggle. The voice was a man's.

"Damn you!" it bellowed. "You left me alone! You left me here to rot! Damn you!" And then the voice became a grisly peal of mad, maniacal laughter, and the woman's screams were silent.

About that time, I reached the door of Peter Ingram's workroom, and got the door open, and went stumbling down the hall toward the stairs. And the voice was still hurling out bursts of triumphant mirth.

It was dark down there. I think I yelled out: "Elaine, I'm coming!"

I'm coming!" but I'm not sure of that—or of certain other things, either. I do know that a scurrying shape sped along the lower hall while I was descending the stairs. That shape was whimpering and sobbing like a frightened animal, and it rushed to the front door, which was open, and it vanished into the night. It was Yago, the Indian.

I do know, too, that Peter Ingram stood there at the head of the staircase and kept shouting: "They answered me, Elaine! They answered me!"

But Ingram was crazy. The doctors said he was crazy.

Anyway, I got to the bottom of those stairs and found a light-switch and went stumbling along the lower hall to Elaine's room. The door was open, and I would have rushed in if the light hadn't shown me what awaited me.

The room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, and the bedclothes were all over the floor, and the floor was red. Red with blood. Elaine lay in a crumpled, twisted heap against the legs of a dressing-table.

I didn't have to go any closer to know that I couldn't be of any help. I could see her face, her throat. Something with unbelievably powerful hands had torn her . . .

I backed out over the threshold. I turned on all the lights and staggered to the foot of the stairs and stared up at Ingram, who was still up there, waiting.

"Come down," I mumbled. "For God's sake, Peter, come down here!" But he just stood there, gripping the wall with one hand, the bannister-post with the other, and he kept shouting: "I've had an answer! Tell Elaine to hurry! I've had an answer!"

I left him there. I staggered out of the house and got into my car and drove to town. When the police went there, about half an hour later, they found Ingram pacing back and forth along the upstairs corridor, enraged because his wife would not go up to him. And they found Elaine in her room downstairs, as I'd left her.

Later they listened to me, and I told them exactly what I've told you, and they stared at me and exchanged glances and said firmly: "Yago is the man we want. We'll find him."

They didn't find Yago. They haven't yet. He was a Seminole Indian, and the Seminoles know every inch of the Everglades, every hiding-place of the great swamp.

Yago will never be found, and perhaps that's best. Because if they caught him, he might tell them the truth—or what I think is the truth—and he might make them believe it. And then they would question me again, and I might tell the whole truth.

I think about it when I'm alone on the mid-watch. I hear the wind wailing out of the swamp, and hear the frogs grunting . . . and I think of the night Elaine's brother died. Because in the very beginning I should have told Elaine and Peter *how* he died, instead of lying to them.

I should have told them that Mark was a raving maniac when Doc Wendell

and I sat beside his bed that night. I should have told them that he not only promised to come back, but *swore* to come back—swore in a mad outburst of rage to return and destroy his sister for having deserted him.

The hours of the mid-watch are long and black . . . and more than once, on my knees, I've prayed for daylight



The Caverns of Time

IT WAS A STRANGE REGION, this into which John Grayson had thrust himself. Dark, deserted mountain roads had led him into it, through walls of silence as menacing as man-made barriers.

"What you want with the Jules, mister?" the woman asked.

Grayson fumbled the telegram from his pocket. It had been delivered yesterday at his hotel in Roanoke. "FELLOW NAMED CARLTON CLOUGH SUGGESTS YOU UPROCK JULES FAMILY IN ENDONVILLE STOP IF ANY GOOD WE CAN USE AFTER ROANOKE BROADCAST GOOD LUCK TED."

A great deal, Grayson sensed, hung on his answer to the woman's question. These people were not hospitable to strangers. He said warily, "A man named Carlton Clough sent me. Do you know him?"

They exchanged glances. The old storekeeper shrank deeper into the shadows behind his counter. The woman rose. She was very old, very tiny. Her figure was that of an underfed adolescent, with a thin stem of neck, small breasts that stabbed the worn wool of her sweater. "You can ride with me," she said.

"But my car—"

"Can't use a car on the road we're goin'. It will be here when you come back for it." She held the door open, waiting, and Grayson felt himself drawn toward her hostile eyes.

Was it his imagination, or did he hear the silver-bearded old storekeeper whisper, "*If you come back!*" It might have been the wind.

Outside, he stood shivering. This little shack was like a candle-flame in a vast cavern. He was loath to leave it, especially with so dubious a guide. From the blackness of a nearby shed he heard the clump of a horse's hoofs, the squeal of sled-runners on hard-packed snow. A lantern winked. He saw the woman seated on what appeared to be an ancient buckboard fitted with steel slides.

"Get up, Mister Grayson!"

He climbed to the seat beside her. The little store vanished.

It was hardly a road. On both sides the darkness was filled with the wind's whining. They climbed, and Grayson began to wonder if the ascent would ever end. The winding ruts reached their zenith; the horse pawed for his footing. Down they went, and ever down, the woman's withered face set in a grin that gleamed in the lantern-light.

They stopped, to rest the animal. Grayson fumbled matches and a cigarette from his pocket, leaned forward to strike a light. The woman caught his arm. He jerked his head up to find her staring not at him but over the horse's head into the crowding dark.

Suddenly she snatched up the lantern and blew it out. And Grayson heard the sounds which had caught her attention. Someone was approaching.

The woman's hand touched his wrist. "Be careful!" she warned. "Say nothing!"

Grayson thought he saw a shadow climbing. From her perch beside him the old woman bent backward, gathering something from the belly of the wagon. It was a whip, its black coils sleek as those of a snake. With it she dropped soundlessly into the snow and glided forward.

"Stand, Judie!" she shrilled.

The advancing figure halted, raised its head, and Grayson saw the white mist of a frightened face in which two black eyes widened as though to burst. A girl's face, young and lovely. Back she stumbled, her arms upflung for protection.

But the whip was swifter than her weary feet. It uncoiled about her thin cotton dress, lashed through the fabric and viciously caressed her back and shoulders. Again and again, while Grayson sat paralyzed with astonishment, the withered woman struck. She was an expert with her hellish weapon!

The stricken girl sank to her knees, moaning, her bare shoulders glowing dimly in the dark. The whip sought out her tender skin, exploding against it with savage pistol-cracks. Her white breasts tautened with agony as her hands sought feebly to cover them.

Finding his voice at last, Grayson shouted hoarsely, "Stop it! In God's name, stop!" And she stopped—but because she was finished, not because of his outcry.

She flung the whip into the wagon and lifted the whimpering girl in her arms. Without compassion she threw the girl, too, into the wagon, then clambered back to her perch and snarled a command to the horse.

Numb with amazement, Grayson looked over his shoulder at the pitiful shape. The moans and sobs had ceased. The girl lay in a huddled heap, her half-clad body cruelly exposed to the bitter cold. And she was beautiful. Not merely attractive, but beautiful! The perfection of her shoulders, the soft, pale loveliness of her young breasts, the matchless shape of her slim, bare legs . . . Grayson saw these things as in a fantastic dream, and felt them deep within him. The mere sight of her made his blood race.

He said darkly, "Damn it, your treatment of this girl calls for an explanation!"

The withered woman turned her head to stare at him. "You were not asked to come here, Grayson. Meddling, even in thought, is not tolerated by our people." Then she was silent.

An hour passed. They had traveled far, climbing a mountain and descending

deep into a black valley. Ahead, windows glowed in the rambling shadow of an ancient farmhouse, but whether the house stood alone or was one of a community, Grayson could not know.

The wagon stopped. A door opened and light spilled out. A man stood there, waiting. He spoke to the withered woman, then strode forward, black-bearded and grotesquely tall, to lift the whipped girl from the wagon. Grayson warily followed the withered woman inside.

A strange room, that! Oil lamps of a forgotten era burned on a massive table. A great stone fireplace yawned darkly. Room and occupants were mellow with time!

There was the withered woman, muttering in a strange tongue as she knelt before the fire. There was the tall, bearded man, grimly dropping his limp burden to the floor. And the girl, conscious now, her dark eyes aglow in a pale mist of face; her small hands clasped over soft, trembling breasts, her lovely shoulders red with the welts of the whip.

Who were these people? Not Kentuckians, surely! Why in damnation hadn't Ted Jeffery supplied him with more information concerning them? How was he to talk to them, make them understand him, without knowing their background?

Grayson wet his lips. "You—you have been very kind. I'm sure I can reach the Jules place without troubling you further, if—"

The man stared, scowling. The woman turned. Awkwardly, Grayson hurried on: "If you will just tell me where the Jules live—"

The woman said gravely, "This is where the Jules live. Here." Then she added, "I'm Sarah. This is my husband, Fletcher. What you want of us, Grayson?"

Grayson recovered slowly from his amazement, and was instantly on the defensive. Talk to these people of a weekly radio hour known as "This America"? Explain to them, or try to, that he, as advance man, wished to make friends with them so that Ted Jeffery might interview them on a nation-wide hookup? Ah, no!

"Why, I—there's nothing I want of you," he said desperately. "You see—ah—Carlton Clough asked me to come here. What he meant, I don't know. Nor will I until he gets here!"

The huge bearded man and his wife exchanged glances, and Grayson sensed with sinking heart that they were not pleased. Had he blundered?

"Very well," the woman said. "You are welcome to remain until he comes." She drew open a door to the left of the fireplace. "This will be your room, Grayson. Goodnight." She thrust a thick stump of candle into Grayson's hand, and shut the door behind him.

Grayson stared around him. The room was no larger than a cell. He tried the window; it was not locked. After a moment of indecision he shrugged, kicked his shoes off and threw himself on the bed. His eyes closed. He thought dreamily

of the beautiful girl in the next room. He slept.

Voices waked him, and he reared on his elbows, listening. But it was not English he heard, nor was it any of the half dozen tongues of which he possessed a trifling knowledge. There was an old-world formality in it, and presently he realized that a sizable group must be assembled in the adjoining room.

He crouched with an eye to the crack between door and frame, and what he saw amazed him.

Men and women of dark, swarthy complexion, occupied rough-hewn benches forming an unbroken circle. In the center stood the slender, white-faced girl whose beauty had thrilled him. Like a prisoner she stood, her dark eyes wide and wet, pale hands clasped to her ivory breasts.

One man sat apart, matted hair looped low on his brow, shading greenish eyes that never blinked in their cold scrutiny of the girl. The girl shrank from that gaze, as though it were an icy hand pawing the pale beauty of her body, twisting and squeezing her sensitive flesh.

Presently the formal discussion ended. As one, the group stared at the green-eyed man. He slowly stood up.

"You," he said, speaking in English to the girl, "are not one of us and never have been, though that can be changed. I shall forgive you for running away. I may later forgive your other faults. But before pity enters my heart, you must be punished." His thin lips flattened in what might have been a smile of anticipation.

The others nodded, murmuring their approval. The withered woman knelt, kissing the man's hands as though in gratitude. The girl shuddered, fighting back a sob of terror, and Grayson saw her tremble as though touched by something repulsive.

The withered woman said, "We thank you, Nicholas. We thank you for Judie's sake, too, though she has lost her tongue." Then Grayson heard his own name spoken, and saw them look toward his door. He retreated in haste.

A moment later Fletcher Jules entered and stood over him. "Rise, Grayson, and prepare to leave."

Feigning a reluctance to wake, Grayson rubbed his eyes. "Leave? But it's the middle of the night!"

"That cannot be helped. Dress yourself for the cold, and come."

The great room was empty except for Sarah Jules and her husband when Grayson emerged from his bedroom. They were waiting for him. The woman said tonelessly, "Whatever you may see or hear from this time on, Grayson, remember that our people will not tolerate interference from an outsider." With that she drew the door wide and motioned him out.

It was bitter cold. Ghosts of houses loomed and passed in the dark, but Grayson saw no lights anywhere. Perhaps the light of day shunned this place and left it *always* dark.

A larger building loomed apart from the others. Into it, through an empty meeting-room and down a dim flight of stairs, they went. At the base of the stairs extended a low-roofed tunnel. Along this in silent wonder Grayson walked for what he judged to be an eighth of a mile. Then he heard music and laughter, and was plunged suddenly into a scene of old-world gaiety that left him breathless!

Men and women alike were dressed in glittering finery, dancing to wild gypsy music in a vast room that smelled richly of wine. The gaunt Nicholas was there, and others who had sat in judgment of Judie at the Jules house.

Grayson was swept into the abandon of merrymaking. Despite his reluctance he was whirled from one group to another as the music leaped to swifter tempo. He looked for Judie in vain. Around and around the room he danced, deafened by the din, winded by the exertion.

But now to his ears came a sound that stiffened him. Others heard it, too, and for an instant the heart of the festival seemed to cease beating—but only for an instant. Led by Nicholas, the dancers quickly resumed their abandon. But Grayson stood motionless.

Again it came, the sound of a girl screaming. What had Nicholas said? She must be punished . . . !

Grayson retreated stealthily around a huge platform at the rear of the room, toward a door there. No one challenged him. An instant later he was prowling along a narrow tunnel, his way lit by a lamp he had seized.

Guiding him now were the girl's screams, brilliant with agony.

On he went. A lamplit cavern broadened before him. He stopped short, staring. His search was ended.

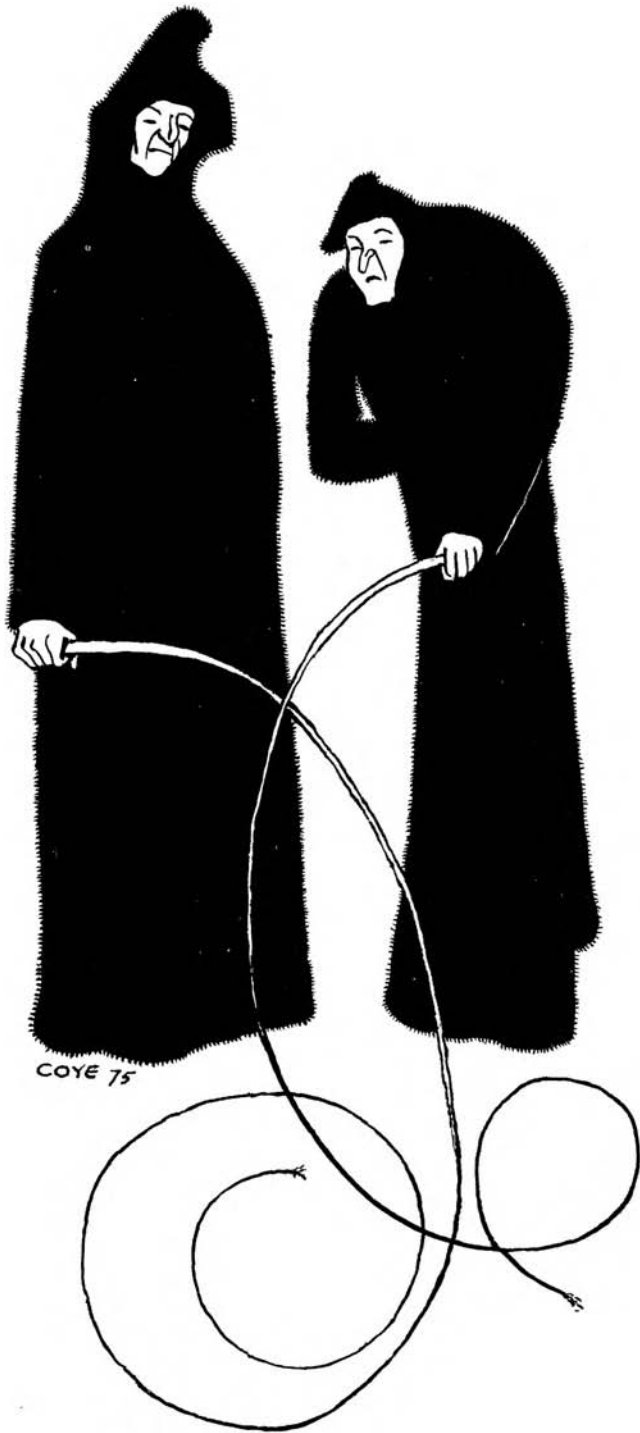
Naked, or nearly so except for a thin girdle of black that clung loosely about her, the girl Judie knelt in an attitude of supplication in the center of the chamber, her wrists held high by ropes reaching from the ceiling. Her head drooped. Her dark mass of hair flowed like black water about her shoulders, curling down to veil, but not hide, the flawless ivory of her breasts, the soft, sweet lines of her body.

Flanking her, armed each with a whip, stood two grim females garbed in somber black robes. The whips rose and fell with mechanical, monotonous rhythm across the girl's arched back. At each vicious caress, she screamed in agony.

Breath hissed from Grayson's mouth as he leaped. Blind with rage, he scattered the women, seized a whip from one of them and drove them back. The whip cracked about them as they fled.

He turned then to the kneeling girl. In a moment her wrists were freed and she lay in his arms, so soft and warm and thrillingly lovely that he could not believe she was real. He gazed tenderly into her ashen face and clumsily wiped her tears. "They'll never whip you again!" he muttered. "Never!"

Her arms crept about his neck and he thought that she smiled. At the same



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time, knowing the danger of this place, he looked for a way of escape and saw an opening in the far wall. With the girl in his arms, he strode toward it.

She stirred a little in his embrace, her white body warm and soft as a kitten. "I—I can walk, Grayson," she whispered, "with some help from you. Together, perhaps we can escape. There is a way out from this place; that I know for sure!"

But Grayson did not hear. He was staring at the opening, at the grim shapes crowding it. He put the girl down and turned. Other silent shapes moved slowly from the tunnel by which he had entered. He was trapped.

It was a good fight, and a surprisingly long one. He did his best. His heart and soul were in it, and the nearness of the terrified girl—her courage as she fought beside him—gave him the strength of ten men. When at last he staggered to his knees under the onslaught, he was too weak to rise again.

One of the men, Fletcher Jules, stood over him and spoke angrily in the tongue Grayson did not understand. The others nodded, muttering their agreement. But the gaunt Nicholas, gazing at the girl, spoke in English.

"My people ask that you be dealt the final punishment, and the stranger with you," he said. "But we have another law that they forget. No man may knowingly lay his hands upon one of our women except he take her unto himself for always!" A smile crookedly touched his mouth, and the green eyes glittered. "It is my hope that you will enjoy being this man's bride, for his bride you shall be, if only for one brief heartbeat of time!"

Surrounded by the swarthy men of the valley, Grayson was marched back to the great meeting hall. Gaiety was dead there. Those who had not joined in the hunt for him were seated now in silence.

Grayson was marched to the platform, Judie with him. Nicholas stood before them. "Kneel!"

"I kneel to no man!" Grayson muttered. But heavy hands forced him down, held him there.

Judie knelt beside him. Then began a ceremony so strange that Grayson wondered if he were dreaming.

Nicholas began a chant, and the valley people joined with him. About their dolorous singing was something mystic, less of flesh than of soul. Grayson glanced at the girl, wondering if she too would join with them, and she did, but her eyes, unlike those of the others, were not tight shut, her hands not crossed upon her breast.

She leaned closer to him, and he felt her slim, warm body against his as her hand covertly sought his own. Though her lips scarce moved, a whispered message reached him.

"I am to be your bride, Grayson, through no choice of either of us. But know this: If choice were mine, I would kneel with you gladly. Remember that, when I am taken from you as is their custom. I shall not want to go, Grayson! My heart will die within me. Save me from it, if you can!"

Grayson squeezed her fingers. God, she was lovely! In this dim light her kneeling body was a thing of wonder, molded from dreams. His gaze caressed the proud beauty of her youthful breasts, the flow of her ivory thighs. He could feel the warmth of her like a drug. Give him half a chance, and he would have this girl for his bride in the manner of his own people, not hers!

The chanting ceased. Grayson stared at what appeared to be a giant pair of manacles in the hands of Nicholas. Advancing, the gaunt man looped a golden ring about Grayson's neck, then did the same to Judie, linking them like slaves. Words flowed like molten metal from his lips.

Now the valley people shed their silence. A mighty shout rose. Gay music set them to dancing!

With a look of wonder, Grayson turned to the girl beside him and rose, lifting her up. "By their quaint custom we're evidently man and wife," he said. "Well, their custom will do until another comes along!" He smiled into her eyes. "Is it also their custom for the lucky fellow to kiss his bride?" he mused.

His arms went about her, and the delicious, trembling warmth of her yielding body made him oblivious to all else. Here was beauty! Here was the lure of all womankind wrapt in one slim, quivering girl. His girl! His to caress, to possess. His bride!

Cupping her chin, he tilted her face to his and sought her parted lips. But at that instant, with a bellowed roar, the giant Nicholas thrust between them.

"Blasphemer!" thundered Nicholas. "Know you not it is forbidden to touch the bride! But no . . ." and his voice softened with mockery . . . "our ways are strange to you. You have much to learn. Drink, Grayson. Drink to your bride, to your future!"

From the rear of the platform came a young and lovely girl, near naked, holding a golden cup on a golden tray. Grayson took it and glanced questioningly at his bride. He saw her face averted, a tear on her cheek. "Thanks, but I'm not thirsty," he said.

"Drink! Or it will be forced upon you!"

He was surrounded by swarthy shapes awaiting their leader's signal. Rage blazed within him. Then a hand trembled on his arm and his bride whispered brokenly, "Drink, or they will kill you."

"Is it poisoned?"

"No, Grayson."

"You ask me to drink it?"

Her lip quivered. The white, shimmering pearl of a tear fell from her cheek and ran slowly between her exquisite breasts. "Yes," she sighed.

Grayson drank, defiantly. The face of Nicholas blurred before him. Suspecting treachery, he sought within himself for pain but discovered only a pleasant languor. Faint were the festive shouts of the celebrants, dimmer still the tawny glow of the lanterns. From a distance he seemed to hear a woman sobbing—his woman, his bride, weeping in the tortured depths of her heart.

How much of what followed was reality, how much dream, Grayson could not know. He walked in a shadow-world of wonder. In and out of this alluring world weaved beautiful but disturbing phantasms.

Lovely young women, veiled only in pools of shimmering mist, paraded provocatively before him, their gestures an invitation for him to join them. Moonwhite of no form known on earth caressed their enticing bodies; stardust knitted diaphanous robes for their nude beauty. With them he walked through pleasure-paths of dream, their nearness arousing in him sensual hungers he had not known he possessed.

Time meant nothing in this mystic world. Yet there were moments when some part of him rebelled at the delights of the moment. In these moments a face more beautiful than those of his tempting companions, a girlish figure even more alluring than theirs, struggled to intrude.

In time, he remembered her name. Judie, his bride! He heard voices, one the thin voice of the withered woman, Sarah Jules, the other her husband's.

"He dreams," the woman said. "They all dream, after drinking the wedding wine! Ah, what I would give to know of what he dreams!"

"Every woman would give her all to know the secret of the wine," Fletcher Jules mocked. "It is forbidden to ask."

"Aye, I know it. Nor do I ask. Nor would I answer, my love, if you were to ask of what I dreamed that night, while entertained by the Master; or of what other brides dream. More than most, I know what goes on in the Master's house, since to me is entrusted the privilege of keeping it in order."

Through the mists, Grayson heard them. They spoke not English, yet he understood. What powerful potion, what mighty lifter of barriers, had he consumed?

But now the woman spoke in English, mocking him. "Dream, fool! If you knew the truth, your joy would rot! We have strange customs here, Outsider. The one that now enslaves you is strangest of all. Shall I tell him of it, Fletcher?"

"He is asleep."

"Ah, but he should be told. Be happy with your dreams, Outsider, whatever they are. While you dream, your lovely bride belongs to another. When two are wed among our people, the bridegroom spends his wedding night dreaming—but the bride spends it in the arms of the Master! Do you hear, Outsider? Look, Fletcher. He scowls!"

"You imagine it."

The woman's voice faded, derisively taunting Grayson until silence took it. A door closed. Grayson's eyes opened. He recognized his surroundings and was mildly surprised. They had returned him to his bed in the home of the Jules.

Rising, he moved soundlessly to the door. Anger fought with prudence, and anger won. He flung the door wide. Sarah Jules and her husband whirled to face him.

"He is awake!" Sarah gasped. "But it is too soon!"

Grayson ploughed forward. His fist caught the big man flush on the jaw and felled him, and he caught the woman as she turned to flee. Holding her by the throat, he shook her.

"My wife. Where is she?"

More than rage widened her eyes as she squirmed. Fear was in them, and unless he were mistaken, a wondering respect for his courage. "Are you mad?" she whispered. "Nicholas would kill you!"

"I'll risk it! Lead on!"

She obeyed because she had to.

Trembling in his grasp, she opened the door and stumbled into the night.

The night was cold and black, but the woman knew her way. Soon, out of the darkness ahead, loomed the shape of a house larger than any Grayson had seen since entering the valley. Its great hand-wrought door was shut against intrusion.

"I can take you no further," Sarah Jules said. "The Master's door is locked."

"You have a key for it. You talk too much, woman!"

She plucked a key from her bosom. "I—I cannot take you to the Master himself, Grayson!" she muttered. "I know not where he is!"

"You came here on *your* wedding night, old one. Lead on!"

She crept forward. Grimly he followed through a series of well furnished rooms. "He—he is below," she sobbed, "in his chamber in the earth. May the Master have mercy on us both!"

They entered a small but rich room in which candles burned dimly, and now an uncomfortable sensation seized Grayson that he was being watched. He hesitated, while Sarah Jules stooped over a low table and her fingers groped for something Grayson could not see.

The creaking of a counterbalance startled him. Abruptly he stepped back from a section of the floor that swung swiftly open, revealing a dark chasm in which a descending flight of stairs was visible.

"Follow me," Sarah Jules whispered.

Down she went, into a darkness that lay in wait like some slumbering beast. With a sixth sense warning him, Grayson warily followed. One glimpse he had of the tunnel below, leading into abysmal gloom. Then a voice shrilled behind him.

"No, Grayson, no! That way leads to the pits!"

He flung himself back upon the steps as the voice was smothered. Judie's voice! But as he whirled, Sarah Jules caught at his legs.

Grayson's frantic kick smashed her full in the face, and she fell back, screaming. He leaped to the carpeted floor above, stumbled, caught himself.

"Well done, Outsider," said a voice slurred with mockery. "Dare you come the rest of the way?"

A chill touched Grayson's rigid body. The girl he loved lay in a sobbing heap across the threshold of a door which until now he had not known existed. Attired like one of the mystic creatures of his dream, in a diaphanous white web

of gown that hid nothing, revealed all, she lay like an exhausted dancer, her white legs limp, white breasts faintly throbbing. She had warned him, and the Master had struck her down.

And now the gaze of the Master was on Grayson himself, dark and deadly with anger. The muscles of his huge body rippled under tunic and tight-fitting black trousers. His restless hands clutched a whip.

Grayson eyed the whip with misgiving. Fashioned of some flexible metal, it bristled with glittering spines capable of tearing a man's flesh from his body in great ragged bites!

The whip uncoiled. With the speed of light it leaped across the room, whistling its challenge. Grayson threw up his arms to protect his face: a gesture so tardy that it wrung a peal of laughter from his tormentor.

"Dance, Grayson!"

But Grayson did not dance. Inch by inch he gave ground, while the gleaming whip menaced him. Judie, pale and lovely in the gown that hid none of her exquisite beauty, watched through a mist of anguish. Sarah Jules crouched like a toad upon the pit steps. Inexorably the silver serpent drove Grayson into a corner from which there could be no escape.

He flung himself forward, risking the bite of the lash in a desperate attempt to reach his tormentor. But the metal was swifter. Coiling about him, it made rags of his clothes, laying bare his skin. He fell back and it pursued him.

Blood reddened the rags of his clothing. Sweat oiled his face. No more could he retreat. And still the Master advanced.

"This, Grayson," Nicholas taunted, "is but a sample of what awaits you in the Pit. Your bride can tell you of that, for her father was the last to die there. Like you, Grayson, Carlton Clough was an outsider. He took himself a wife. He attempted to depart to the Outside, with his wife and child. He paid, Grayson, and his wife died of madness in the caverns, seeking him. His daughter—your bride—can tell you, Grayson!"

Grayson's endurance died. Bloody beyond recognition, he sank to the floor and lay unmoving. The whip licked out once more to test him; then the Master drew closer, his gaze evil, while Sarah Jules chuckled malignantly on the stone steps and the girl Judie sobbed her heart out.

"Not dead, I think," Nicholas murmured, bending closer. "You see, Sarah, he breathes. I was very careful not to—"

Swift as light, Grayson's hand closed over the silver snake. With all his strength he reared up!

It played no favorites, that fiendish serpent! Its frightful barbs bit deep into the Master's throat, and then Grayson was on him, battering him with crimson fists. With the whip wound like a noose about his neck, Nicholas fought back. But Grayson scarce felt his blows. The sight of Judie's trembling body, the dark knowledge of what she had been through, gave Grayson a madman's strength.

The withered woman clawed at his legs, to upset him, and he sent her

tumbling down the steps with a kick that silenced her. On the brink of the steps the Master tottered, striving to free his throat from the serpent's deadly embrace.

Grayson measured him. One more blow would finish him. But it was not needed. The giant toppled. The silver serpent, his own grim weapon, was the end of him. For as he fell, the tail of the whip fastened under the body of Sarah Jules, drawing taut with one grisly wrench the barbed loop that encircled the Master's throat.

Sobbing a little, Grayson took his bride in his arms, feeling the warmth of her against him, the beating of her heart beneath a soft, round breast. He put his coat about her. His mouth found hers, and for a moment nothing else mattered except the seeking velvet softness of her lips, the quivering of satin-smooth curves beneath his hot hands.

Then they fled. The ghosts of silent houses disappeared behind them. The valley slept.

Strange, Grayson mused, that here in this ancient, evil place he had found himself a wife, a girl more beautiful in body and spirit than any he had met in his own so-called civilization. Joy filled his heart, despite the agonies inflicted by the silver whip. "You are sure of the way, darling?" he muttered.

"Almost," she said, "I found it before. I can reach the place where Sarah Jules trapped me. If you know the way from there . . ."

Grayson nodded. How many hours ago was that? Centuries, it seemed! Time meant nothing here. "How does it feel to be Mrs. Grayson?" he asked, holding her hand.

"I love it." She smiled shyly. "That is—I think I will, darling."

"What he said about your father—is it true?"

"Yes, Grayson."

"But your father can't be dead! Indirectly it was he who sent me to this place!"

"That I do not understand," she said. "He died in the Pit, many years ago."

Grayson was too weary to let it trouble him. He saved his strength for walking, for now they were through the valley and climbing. It would be a long, difficult climb.

Twice he stopped to rest, sinking wearily into the snow. His legs had grown numb with cold, and he felt the loss of so much blood. Back in the Master's house, in a red pool on the floor, lay the strength he now so sorely needed.

It was during one of these rest periods, while he lay with his head cradled on Judie's warm lap, her body warming his, that he heard the first sounds of pursuit. The wind brought them—faint, far-off echoes of shouting in the valley below.

Grayson sat up with a start. "They're after us!"

With Judie's help he struggled on. But now she almost had to carry him. Time and again he stumbled. The snow stung his wounds. The wind iced his blood.

Audible now without intermission were the sounds of pursuit, steadily creeping closer. Looking back, Grayson saw lights in the windy dark below. High out of the valley they had climbed, but steeper still loomed the ascent ahead.

"This," Judie gasped at his side, "is where I was turned back before. I know not the way from here. Only Sarah Jules has ever gone the whole way Outside!"

The lights were gaining. Grayson stumbled on. He fell and crawled, with Judie's low, pleading voice beating against the mass of pain that was his mind. At last he could stand no more.

"Go on without me," he muttered. "Alone, you'll have a chance."

Judie's tears wet his face as she shook her head. "If it's a trail they follow," she cried, "then a trail I'll give them! I'll lead them away from you!"

"No!"

She knelt beside him, looking deep into his eyes as though in one brief fragment of time she sought to etch the image of him on her memory forever. Sobbing, she parted her coat and drew his face against her, and clung to him. The warmth of her was a delicious drug. The satin sweetness of her skin was a caress. Her lips found his, desperately, and her slender body was a flame against his own.

"Try to go on," she whispered. "If I lose them, I will find you. If not . . . there will be another day, my darling." From her wrist she slipped a bracelet, a chain of gold which Grayson had last seen in the caverns, when it linked the two of them as man and wife. It closed over his own wrist, and she was gone.

Too weak to cry out, he saw her speeding down the darkness, obliterating their prints as she went. Then she fled from the path and vanished.

Grayson dragged himself on. The shouts of the pursuers died into a silence that reared behind him like a barrier. The cold crept through him. Only the dim hope that his bride might escape, and somehow return to him, kept him going.

How long he crawled he did not know. When he collapsed at last, he continued to crawl through a nightmare, pursued by shadows that gave him no rest.

He thought at first, when he waked, that the face above him was her face, but it had no answering smile for him and was quickly replaced by a man's.

"Grayson, by God! You're out of it at last!"

Grayson stared about him—at the bed, the hospital room, the nurses. "How long?" he muttered. "How long have I been here?"

"Days. You've had a tough time of it, old man. Chap who picked you up was a farmer out clearing the road after the storm. He got my name from papers in your wallet, and notified me. Your car was found in a shed not far from where you keeled over."

Grayson reared on his elbows, his eyes burning with a strange fever. "What shed, Ted? Where?"

"Back of an old store, on the road from Appalachia. That is, it used to be a store. Been abandoned for years, I'd say."

A frown crossed Grayson's gaunt face. "Abandoned?"

"Yes. Whatever possessed you to invade this neck of the woods anyway?"

"Your telegram."

"Telegram? I didn't send you any telegram."

"But you did. In my clothes—you'll find it somewhere—"

"Everything that was in your pockets is right here. No telegram, Grayson."

"A man named Carlton Clough," Grayson began, his voice shaken with sudden doubt. "You wired that he—"

"Who?"

But Grayson's gaze had fallen on the little pile of his possessions that lay on the table. Weakly he reached toward it, drawn by something that gleamed yellowly in the room's dim light.

"Who?" the man beside the bed asked again. "Carlton *Who*?"

"It doesn't matter," Grayson whispered. Gone from his voice was the shadow of doubt that had made it so nearly inaudible. In his eyes again flowed that strange ecstatic fever. In his hand lay a golden chain, the bridal link placed upon his wrist by the beautiful girl he loved.

He stared at it, seeing again the glorious beauty of her slim white body, feeling again, ecstatically, the sweet, thrilling warmth of her.

"Wait for me, darling," he whispered. "Wait for me, Judie! I'm coming!"

Many Happy Returns

THE HOUSE WAS AN OLD ONE on an old road, miles from anywhere, but the freshly painted sign by its driveway—*TOURISTS' REST*—was as reassuring as a cleric's smile of welcome.

"Let's," Grace Martin said, squeezing her husband's hand. "There's no telling what we might find!"

Their car was already bulging with antiques collected in six states, but Tom Martin didn't care. He had just acquired his M.A., a teaching job at a highly regarded prep school, and a beautiful bride. "Done," he agreed without hesitation.

The warped and weathered door creaked open as they wriggled from the car. A man as old as they had expected, with a crown of white hair glowing in the dusk, limped down the rickety steps to greet them. An equally old woman, doll-dainty, smiled and nodded in the doorway.

It was the woman who escorted the newlyweds to their upstairs room. "Our name is Wiggin," she said, "but please call me Anna. And when you've freshened up, do come down for tea."

Grace Martin became enthusiastic about the massive four-poster bed while her husband irreverently bounced on it and pronounced it comfortable. They "freshened up" by lamplight and went downstairs to a dim parlor filled with antiques and the smell of age.

Anna Wiggin poured tea into fine old cups, and her husband Jasper, in reply to Grace Martin's question, said in a cracked voice, "No, we do not collect antiques. Not really. We have just acquired these things as we needed them."

"You are only just married, you two," Anna said with her smile. "I can always tell."

"Five days," Grace admitted.

"You are very young," Jasper said.

"Not so young. I'm twenty-two. Tom is twenty-four."

The old man moved his head up and down as if to say he had made a guess and the guess was correct. He did not say how old he and Anna were. He did remark, "I am a little older than my wife, also," then sipped his tea and added, "You must tell Anna your birthdays. She will read your futures."

"By our birthdays?" Grace Martin said.

"Oh, yes."

"How can you do that, Mrs. Wiggin?"

"I can do it." The doll-woman leaned closer, nodding and nodding. "When were you born, my dear?"

"May eleventh."

"It won't work, you know," Tom Martin said with a grin. "She—" Then puzzled by the old woman's expression, he was silent.

Jasper rose from his chair and placed his hands on his wife's frail shoulders. Though all but transparent in the lamplight, the hands were strong and long-fingered. "Now, Anna," he said softly, "do not be excited."

Grace Martin sent a half-frightened glance at her husband and said, "Is there something special about that date?"

"It is Anna's birthday also."

"Oh, how nice! We *are* special, then, aren't we?"

"Don't go putting on airs," Tom Martin chided. "You're forgetting—"

"Now, darling, don't spoil it."

"I will get some more tea," the old man said. "Fresh cups, too. We must have a toast."

The others were joking about the birthday when he returned from the kitchen with a tray. Placing four full cups on the table, he sat down again. The lamplight splashed his shadow on a wall as he raised a hand and said, "To the day that gave us two such lovely ladies."

They laughed and drank.

"You see, my dear," the old man said to his wife, "it never fails."

"What never fails?" Tom Martin asked.

"Only yesterday Anna was saying we would have to leave this house and find another. So few travelers use this old road any more. And even with many guests we sometimes wait years, of course."

"Wait for what?" Tom said.

"They have to have the same birthday, you see."

Tom nodded solemnly. It was past the old folks' bedtime, he supposed. When you were that old, a break with custom could make the mind a bit fuzzy. "Well, of course—" He started to rise. Grace and he had had a long day too, more than three hundred miles of driving.

"Wait, please," Jasper Wiggin said. "It is only fair that you understand."

With a tolerant smile Tom sank down again.

"There is a mathematical master plan, you see," the old man said. "Each day so many people are born, so many die. The plan insures a balance."

"Really?" Tom suppressed a yawn.

"I can simplify it for you, I think, if you will pay close attention. Each date—that is to say, each eleventh of May or ninth of June or sixth of December and so forth—is a compartment in time. Now suppose a thousand people are born today, to take their place with all the thousands born on this date in previous

years. If the plan were perfect, all those born today would live exactly a year longer than those born one year ago, and so on. You follow me?"

"Uh-huh," Tom said sleepily.

"But the plan is not perfect. There is a thinning out through sickness and accidents—there has been from the beginning—and as a consequence, some of those born today will die before the expiration date, and others will live beyond it to maintain the balance."

"Sure," Tom mumbled.

"Each time compartment in each of the time zones is controlled this way. Life moves according to mathematics, just as the stars do."

"Remarkable," Tom said. Across the table his wife Grace was practically asleep. "What about the normal increase in population?"

"Oh, that's accounted for. So are wars, plagues, and things of that sort. If we had more time, I could make it all quite clear."

"You discovered this yourself, Mr. Wiggin?"

"Oh, no. There was a man from Europe staying with us one summer—a mathematical genius named Marek Dziok. Not in this house, of course; we have moved many times since then. Dziok had an accident—he was very old, and one night he fell down the stairs, poor man—but before he died, he took us into his confidence."

"I see."

"You don't believe me?" Jasper Wiggin said. "Dziok was writing a book—a philosophy based on his mathematics. He never finished it. But I have the manuscript . . ." He left his chair and limped to a bookcase, from which he lifted out a thin, paper-bound sheaf of papers. "Perhaps you would like—but no, you won't have time." Shaking his head, he put the sheaf of pages back.

"I guess I'd better take my wife to bed," Tom Martin said. "She's asleep."

"Yes, it works faster on women."

"What works faster?"

"The powder."

"You mean you put something—" Staring at his wife, Tom placed his hands flat on the table and pushed himself erect. It required enormous effort. "You mean—"

"You haven't been listening, have you?" the old man complained sadly. "And I've tried so hard to explain. Your wife and mine share the same time compartment, don't you see? You know yourself by now that Anna and I are much older than people get to be *naturally*. There's only the one way to do it."

"By—by killing off—"

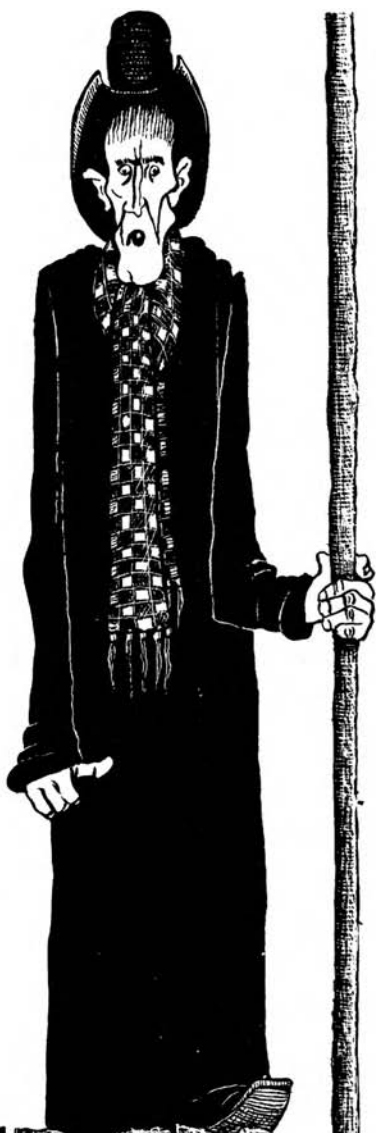
"Precisely."


"And you think you're going to kill *Grace*?"

"It's been nineteen years since the last one for Anna," the old man sighed. "Hasn't it, dear?"

The doll-woman nodded, "Jasper has been luckier. He had one eight years ago."

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"You're crazy!" Tom Martin shouted. "Both of you, you're crazy! Grace, wake up! We're getting out of here!" But when he leaned across the table to shake his wife awake, his legs went limp. He collapsed onto his chair. His head fell on his hands.

After a moment he was able with terrible concentration to bring the faces of Jasper and Anna Wiggin into focus again. There was something he had to remember—something he or they had said earlier, or he should have said but hadn't . . .

"It won't hurt, you know," the old man was saying sympathetically. "You'll both be asleep."

"Both . . . both . . ."

"Oh, yes. We'll have to kill you too, of course. Otherwise, you'd tell."

"Wait," Tom whispered. The room was filling with shadows now. "Wait . . ."

"But it won't be a waste, your dying. Somebody in *your* compartment will benefit, you know. Somebody with your birthday."

"Birthday," Tom repeated. That was it—birthday. "You're wrong about Grace—about—her—birthday." He made a supreme effort to get the words out before it was too late. "I tried—to tell you. She wasn't born May eleventh—"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Martin," the old man said sadly.

"No, no, it's true! She was born May eleventh in *Manila*. The Philippines. Her father taught—taught college there. Different—time—zone. Don't you see? A whole—day—different—"

The room went dark. In the darkness, though, he thought he heard the old woman begin to weep, and was sure he heard the old man saying, "Now, now, Anna, don't do that. There will be another one before too long."

Then nothing . . .

He was in the big four-poster bed when a shaft of sunlight wakened him. His wife lay asleep at his side. Their clothes were neatly folded on chairs.

Tom yawned and sat up. His wife opened her eyes and said, "Hi."

"You know something? I don't remember going to bed last night," Tom said.

"Neither do I."

"I don't remember getting undressed or folding my clothes like that. Grace"—he was frowning now—"I *never* fold my clothes. You know that."

"All I remember," she said with a yawn, "is getting sleepy at the table." She looked at her watch. "Anyway, we'd better be moving. It's after nine."

When they were ready to go they walked downstairs together, Tom carrying their suitcases. Anna Wiggin came from the parlor to greet them. "Did you sleep well?" she asked, peering into their faces.

"I'll say we did," Tom said.

"You were both so tired," Anna said, nodding. "Won't you have breakfast before you go?"

They said no, thanks, they were late as it was, and Tom took out his wallet

to pay for their night's lodging. Anna said wait, please, she would get her husband, he was out in the field. So Tom and Grace Martin went to their car with the suitcases and Tom went back into the house alone.

It came back to him when he walked into the parlor and saw the table and the tea service and the extra cups. The extra cups! At first it was fuzzy and confused; then it sharpened and he remembered everything—just as Grace had remembered everything up to the time of *her* falling asleep.

He snatched the sheaf of papers from the bookcase. It was indeed a manuscript, handwritten and yellowed with age. Its title was *The Mathematics of Life* and its author was Marek Dziok.

Under the author's name, in a different hand, was written: *Born 1613. Died (by accident) 1802.*

There was a sound of footsteps in the kitchen. Tom thrust the manuscript inside his shirt and quickly stepped away from the bookcase.

"You know, I'm still sleepy," his wife said later as their car purred along a parkway. "It must have been that house. They were nice old people, though, weren't they?"

"Remarkable," Tom said.

"I wonder how old they really are."

Tom did not answer. He had already finished his figuring and now he was thinking of the pilfered manuscript inside his shirt. That, too, was remarkable. With the information it contained, a man could live a long time.

Of course, it was all pretty weird and sinister. Nevertheless . . .

In spite of himself, he began to think about birthdays—his wife's and his own.

Ladies in Waiting

HALPER, THE VILLAGE REAL-ESTATE MAN, said with a squint, "You're the same people looked at that place back in April, aren't you? Sure you are. The ones got caught in that freak snow storm and spent the night there. Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes, is it?"

"Wilkins," Norman corrected, frowning at a photograph on the wall of the old man's dingy office: a yellowed, fly-spotted picture of the house itself, in all its decay and drabness.

"And you want to look at it again?"

"Yes!" Linda exclaimed.

Both men looked at her sharply because of her vehemence. Norman, her husband, was alarmed anew by the eagerness that suddenly flamed in her lovely brown eyes and as suddenly was replaced by a look of guilt. Yes—unmistakably a look of guilt.

"I mean," she stammered, "we still want a big old house that we can do over, Mr. Halper. We've never stopped looking. And we keep thinking the Creighton place just might do."

You keep thinking it might do, Norman silently corrected. He himself had intensely disliked the place when Halper showed it to them four months ago. The sharp edge of his abhorrence was not even blunted, and time would never dull his remembrance of that shocking expression on Linda's face. When he stepped through that hundred-seventy-year-old doorway again, he would hate and fear the house as much as before, he was certain.

Would he again see that look on his wife's face? God forbid!

"Well," Halper said, "there's no need for me to go along with you this time, I guess. I'll just ask you to return the key when you're through, same as you did before."

Norman accepted the tagged key from him and walked unhappily out to the car.

It was four miles from the village to the house. One mile of narrow blacktop, three of a dirt road that seemed forlorn and forgotten even in this neglected part of New England. At three in the afternoon of an awesomely hot August day the car made the only sound in a deep green silence. The sun's heat had robbed even birds and insects of their voices.

Norman was silent too—with apprehension. Beside him his adored wife of less than two years leaned forward to peer through the windshield for the first glimpse of their destination, seeming to have forgotten he existed. Only the house now mattered.

And there it was.

Nothing had changed. It was big and ugly, with a sagging front piazza and too few windows. It was old. It was gray because almost all its white paint had weathered away. According to old Halper the Creightons had lived here for generations, having come here from Salem where one of their women in the days of witchcraft madness had been hanged for practicing demonolatry. A likely story.

As he stopped the car by the piazza steps, Norman glanced at the girl beside him. His beloved. His childhood sweetheart. Why in God's name was she eager to come here again? She had not been so in the beginning. For days after that harrowing ordeal she had been depressed, unwilling even to talk about it.

But then, weeks later, the change. Ah, yes, the change! So subtle at first, or at least as subtle as her unsophisticated nature could contrive. "Norm . . . do you remember that old house we were snowbound in? Do you suppose we might have liked it if things had been different? . . ."

Then not so subtle. "Norm, can we look at the Creighton place again? Please? Norm?"

As he fumbled the key into the lock, he reached for her hand. "Are you all right, hon?"

"Of course!" The same tone of voice she had used in Halper's shabby office. Impatient. Critical. *Don't ask silly questions!*

With a premonition of disaster he pushed the old door open.

It was the same.

Furnished, Halper had called it, trying to be facetious. There were dusty ruins of furniture and carpets and—yes—someone or something was using them; that the house had *not* been empty for eight years, as Halper claimed. Now the feeling returned as Norman trailed his wife through the downstairs rooms and up the staircase to the bed chambers above. But the feeling was strong! He wanted desperately to seize her hand again and shout, "No, no, darling! Come out of here!"

Upstairs, when she halted in the big front bedroom, turning slowly to look about her, he said helplessly, "Hon, please—what is it? What do you *want*?"

No answer. He had ceased to exist. She even bumped into him as she went past to sit on the old four-poster with its mildewed mattress. And, seated there, she stared emptily into space as she had done before.

He went to her and took her hands. "Linda, for God's sake! What *is* it with this place?"

She looked up and smiled at him. "I'm all right. Don't worry, darling."

There had been an old blanket on the bed when they entered this room

before. He had thought of wrapping her in it because she was shivering, the house was frigid, and with the car trapped in deepening snow they would have to spend the night here. But the blanket reeked with age and she had cringed from the touch of it.

Then—"Wait," he had said with a flash of inspiration. "Maybe if I could jam this under a tire! . . . Come on. It's at least worth a try."

"I'm cold, Norm. Let me stay here."

"You'll be all right? Not scared?"

"Better scared than frozen."

"Well . . . I won't be long."

How long was he gone? Ten minutes? Twenty? Twice the car had seemed about to pull free from the snow's mushy grip. Twice the wheel had spun the sodden blanket out from under and sent it flying through space like a huge yellow bird, and he'd been forced to go groping after it with the frigid wind lashing his half-frozen face. Say twenty minutes; certainly no longer. Then, giving it up as a bad job, he had trudged despondently back to the house and climbed the stairs again to that front bedroom.

And there she sat on the bed, as she was sitting now. White as the snow itself. Wide-eyed. Staring at or into something that only she could see.

"Linda! What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing . . ."

He grasped her shoulders. "Look at me! Stop staring like that! What's happened?"

"I thought I heard something. Saw something."

"Saw *what*?"

"I don't know. I don't . . . remember."

Lifting her from the bed, he put his arms about her and glowered defiantly at the empty doorway. Strange. A paper-thin layer of mist or smoke moved along the floor there, drifting out into the hall. And there were floating shapes of the same darkish stuff trapped in the room's corners, as though left behind when the chamber emptied itself of a larger mass. Or was he imagining these things? One moment they seemed to be there; a moment later they were gone.

And was he also imagining the odor? It had not been present in the musty air of this room before; it certainly seemed to be now, unless his senses were playing tricks on him. A peculiarly robust smell, unquestionably male. But now it was fading.

Never mind. There *was* someone in this house, by God! He had felt an alien presence when Halper was here; even more so after the agent's departure. Someone, something, following them about, watching them.

The back of Linda's dress was unzipped, he realized then. His hands, pressing her to him, suddenly found themselves inside the garment, on her body. And her body was cold. Colder than the snow he had struggled with outside. Cold and clammy.

The zipper. He fumbled for it, found it drawn all the way down. What in God's name had she tried to do? This was his wife, who loved him. This was the girl who only a few weeks ago, at the club, had savagely slapped the face of the town's richest, handsomest playboy for daring to hint at a mate-swapping arrangement. Slowly he drew the zipper up again, then held her at arm's length and looked again at her face.

She seemed unaware he had touched her. Or that he even existed. She was entirely alone, still gazing into that secret world in which he had no place.

The rest of that night had seemed endless, Linda lying on the bed, he sitting beside her waiting for daylight. She seemed to sleep some of the time; at other times, though she said nothing even when spoken to, he sensed she was as wide awake as he. About four o'clock the wind died and the snow stopped its wet slapping of the windowpanes. No dawn had ever been more welcome, even though he was still unable to free the car and they both had to walk to the village to send a tow-truck for it.

And now he had let her persuade him to come back here. He must be insane.

"Norman?"

She sat there on the bed, the same bed, but at least she was looking *at* him now, not through him into that secret world of hers. "Norman, you do like this house a little, don't you?"

"If you mean could I ever seriously think of living here—" Emphatically he shook his head. "My God, no! It gives me the horrors!"

"It's really a lovely old house, Norman. We could work on it little by little. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"If you can even imagine living in this mausoleum, I *know* you're crazy. My God, woman, you were nearly frightened out of your wits here. In this very room, too."

"Was I, Norman? Really?"

"Yes, you were! If I live to be a hundred, I'll never stop seeing that look on your face."

"What kind of look was it, Norman?"

"I don't know. That's just it—I don't know! What in heaven's name *were* you seeing when I walked back in here after my session with the car? What was that mist? That smell?"

Smiling, she reached for his hands. "I don't remember any mist or smell, Norman. I was just a little frightened. I told you—I thought I heard something."

"You *saw* something too, you said."

"Did I say that? I've forgotten." Still smiling, she looked around the room—at the garden of faded roses on shreds of time-stained wallpaper; at the shabby bureau with its solitary broken cut-glass vase. "Old Mr. Halper was to blame for what happened, Norman. His talk of demons."

"Halper didn't do that much talking, Linda."

"Well, he told us about the woman who was hanged in Salem. I can see now,

of course, that he threw that out as bait, because I had told him you write mystery novels. He probably pictured you sitting in some sort of Dracula cape, scratching out your books with a quill, by lamplight, and thought this would be a marvelous setting for it." Her soft laugh was a welcome sound, reminding Norman he loved this girl and she loved him—that their life together, except for her inexplicable interest in this house, was full of gentleness and caring.

But he could not let her win this debate. "Linda, listen. If this is such a fine old house, why has it been empty for eight years?"

"Well, Mr. Halper explained that, Norman."

"Did he? I don't seem to recall any explanation."

"He said that last person to live here was a woman who died eight years ago at ninety-three. Her married name was Stanhope, I think he said, but she was a Creighton—she even had the same given name, Prudence, as the woman hanged in Salem for worshipping demons. And when she passed away there was some legal question about the property because her husband had died some years before in an asylum, leaving no will."

Norman reluctantly nodded. The truth was, he hadn't paid much attention to the real-estate man's talk, but he did recall the remark that the last man of the house had been committed to an asylum for the insane. Probably from having lived in such a gloomy old house for so long, he had thought at the time.

Annoyed with himself for having lost the debate—at least, for not having won it—he turned from the bed and walked to a window, where he stood gazing down at the yard. Right down there, four months ago, was where he had struggled to free the car. Frowning at the spot now, he suddenly said aloud, "Wait. That's damn queer."

"What is, dear?" Linda said from the bed.

"I've always thought we left the car in a low spot that night. A spot where the snow must have drifted extra deep, I mean. But we didn't. We were in the highest part of the yard."

"Perhaps the ground is soft there."

"Uh-uh. It's rocky."

"Then it might have been slippery?"

"Well, I suppose—" Suddenly he pressed closer to the window-glass. "Oh, damn! We've got a flat."

"What, Norman?"

"A flat! Those are new tires, too. We must have picked up a nail on our way into this stupid place." Striding back to the bed, he caught her hand. "Come on. I'm not leaving you here this time!"

She did not protest. Obediently she followed him downstairs and along the lower hall to the front door. On the piazza she hesitated briefly, glancing back in what seemed to be a moment of panic, but when he again grasped her hand, she meekly went with him down the steps and out to the car.

The left front tire was the flat one. Hunkering down beside it, he searched for

the culprit nail but failed to find any. It was underneath, no doubt. Things like flat tires always annoyed him; in a properly organized world they wouldn't happen. Of course, in such a world there would not be the kind of road one had to travel to reach this place, nor would there be such an impossible house to begin with.

Muttering to himself, he opened the trunk, extracted jack, tools and spare, and went to work.

Strange. There was no nail in the offending tire. No cut or bruise, either. The tire must have been badly made. The thought did not improve his mood as, on his knees, he wrestled the spare into place.

Then when he lowered the jack, the spare gently flattened under the car's weight and he knelt there staring at it in disbelief. "What the hell . . ." Nothing like this had *ever* happened to him before.

He jacked the car up again, took the spare off and examined it. No nail, no break, no bruise. It was a new tire, like the others. Newer, because never yet used. He had a repair kit for tubeless tires in the trunk, he recalled—bought one day on an impulse. "Repair a puncture in minutes without even taking the tire off the car." But how could you repair a puncture that wasn't there?

"Linda, this is crazy. We'll have to walk back to town as we did before." He turned his head. "Linda?"

She was not there.

He lurched to his feet. "Linda! Where are you?" How long had she been gone? He must have been working on the car for fifteen or twenty minutes. She hadn't spoken in that time, he suddenly realized. Had she slipped back into the house the moment he became absorbed in his task? She knew well enough how intensely he concentrated on such things. How when he was writing, for instance, she could walk through the room without his even knowing it.

"Linda, for God's sake—no!" Hoarsely shouting her name, he stumbled toward the house. The door clattered open when he flung himself against it, and the sound filled his ears as he staggered down the hall. But now the hall was not just an ancient, dusty corridor; it was a dim tunnel filled with premature darkness and strange whisperings.

He knew where she must be. In that cursed room at the top of the stairs where he had seen the look on her face four months ago, and where she had tried so cunningly to conceal the truth from him this time. But the room was hard to reach now. A swirling mist choked the staircase, repeatedly causing him to stumble. Things resembling hands darted out of it to clutch at him and hold him back.

He stopped in confusion, and the hands nudged him forward again. Their owner was playing a game with him, he realized, mocking his frantic efforts to reach the bedroom yet at the same time seductively urging him to try even harder. And the whisperings made words, or seemed to. "Come Norman . . . sweet Norman . . . come come come . . ."

In the upstairs hall, too, the swirling mist challenged him, deepening into a moving mass that hid the door of the room. But he needed no compass to find that door. Gasping and cursing—"Damn you, leave me alone! Get out of my way!" He struggled to it and found it open as Linda and he had left it. Hands outthrust, he groped his way over the threshold.

The alien presence here was stronger. The sense of being confronted by some unseen creature was all but overwhelming. Yet the assault upon him was less violent now that he had reached the room. The hands groping for him in the eerie darkness were even gentle, caressing. They clung with a velvet softness that was strangely pleasurable, and there was something voluptuously female about them, even to a faint but pervasive female odor.

An *odor*, not a perfume. A body scent, drug-like in its effect upon his senses. Bewildered, he ceased his struggle for a moment to see what would happen. The whispering became an invitation, a promise of incredible delights. But he allowed himself only a moment of listening and then, shouting Linda's name, hurled himself at the bed again. This time he was able to reach it.

But she was not now sitting there staring into that secret world of hers, as he had expected. The bed was empty and the seductive voice in the darkness softly laughed at his dismay. "Come Norman . . . sweet Norman . . . come come . . ."

He felt himself taken from behind by the shoulders, turned and ever so gently pushed. He fell floating onto the old mattress, half-heartedly thrusting up his arms to keep the advancing shadow-form from possessing him. But it flowed down over him, onto him, into him, despite his feeble resistance, and the female smell tantalized his senses again, destroying his will to resist.

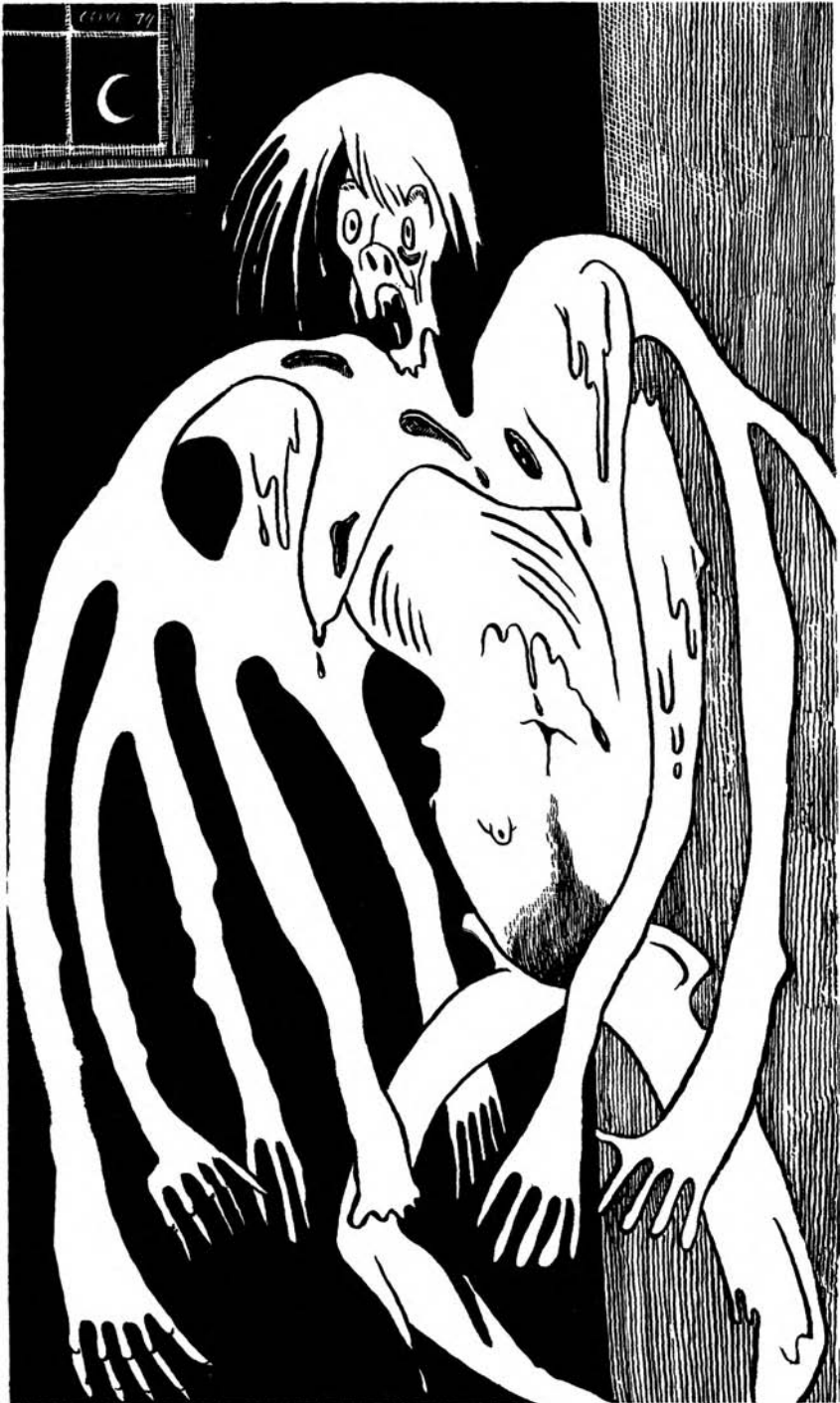
As he ceased struggling he heard a sound of rusty hinges creaking in that part of the room's dimness where the door was, and then a soft thud. The door had been closed. But he did not cry out. He felt no alarm. It was good to be here on the bed, luxuriating in this sensuous, caressing softness. As he became quiescent it flowed over him with unrestrained indulgence, touching and stroking him to heights of ecstasy.

Now the unseen hands, having opened his shirt, slowly and seductively glided down his body to his belt . . .

He heard a new sound then. For a moment it bewildered him because, though coming through the ancient wall behind him, from the adjoining bedroom, it placed him at once in his own bedroom at home. Linda and he had joked about it often, as true lovers could—the explosive little syllables to which she always gave voice when making love.

So she was content, too. Good. Everything was straight-forward and above-board, then. After all, as that fellow at the club had suggested, mate-swapping was an in thing in this year of our Lord 1975 . . . wasn't it? All kinds of people did it.

He must buy this house, as Linda had insisted.



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Of course. She was absolutely right. With a sigh of happiness he closed his eyes and relaxed, no longer made reluctant by a feeling of guilt.

But—something was wrong. Distinctly, now, he felt not two hands caressing him, but more. And were they hands? They suddenly seemed cold, clammy, frighteningly eager.

Opening his eyes, he was startled to find that the misty darkness had dissolved and he could see. Perhaps the seeing came with total surrender, or with the final abandonment of his guilt-feeling. He lay on his back, naked, with his nameless partner half beside him, half on him. He saw her scaly, misshapen breasts overflowing his chest and her monstrous, demonic face swaying in space above his own. And as he screamed, he saw that she did have more than two hands: she had a whole writhing mass of them at the ends of long, searching tentacles.

The last thing he saw before his scream became that of a madman was a row of three others like her squatting by the wall, their tentacles restlessly reaching toward him as they impatiently awaited their turn.

The Grisly Death

1. Death in the Night

"WELL," THE YOUNG MAN SAID, "at least this is a whole lot better than listening to that damned jazz band any longer."

He brought the car to a stop, leaned back in the seat, and drew a deep breath of cold, damp sea air. Snowflakes swirled fantastically in the glare of the headlights. The winding road, leading from King's Highway to South Beach, was a velvety aisle of white, blurred only by the marks of the car's tires.

"This is going to be grand!" the girl said. "I've never seen the surf at night."

She opened the car door and stepped down into the snow. She was a good-looking girl, about twenty. She wore dance slippers, a black velvet evening-gown, metal-cloth wrap, and no hat. The young man, climbing out after her, was attired formally.

"You'll get soaked, young lady," he grinned.

They walked together up the white-cloaked beach-path, leaving the car unlocked behind them. Heavy storm surf rumbled on the far side of the dunes; the air was cold, wet with fine spray. Reaching the crest of the ridge, they stood staring out across the beach, where white waves broke on the sand. They kissed each other and laughed a little. The girl said, putting a hand to her wind-blown blond hair:

"We're crazy; do you know it? We'll both get pneumonia!"

"We'd have got D.T.'s, staying with that drunken crowd any longer," the young man said.

They walked down to the water's edge and stood there, and the girl looked down at her ruined slippers and said: "I hate to get commercial at a time like this, but our little escape-act is going to cost you five dollars. Look. That must be the place Frank was telling about. The Sanderson place. Remember?"

She pointed to where a gaunt black structure loomed ahead, at the top of a rising cliff, near enough to be visible through the falling snow. The young man nodded and put his arm around her. Together they walked along the shore.

"It's lonely here," the young man said. "I wouldn't want to come here alone at night. Would you?"

"We're not alone," replied the girl. "We've got company. Look."

She pointed again, and the young man stared, scowling. An indistinct shape was walking toward them along the beach, not far distant. The shape was a man, a large man, and grew larger as it came nearer. The young man said with a forced laugh:

"Somebody else must have queer ideas. Most likely he belongs to the Coast Guard. I wouldn't want that job for—"

He stopped talking and stood motionless, staring with wide eyes. The girl's eyes widened, too, and continued to widen as the intruding shape came nearer. The shape was human and naked, and walked with slow, mechanical strides, as if unaware of its surroundings. Its head hung grotesquely on its flat chest, its long arms swung like weighted pendulums. A mop of shaggy black hair concealed its features.

The young man, gaping at it, stepped backwards abruptly.

"My God! That's the thing Frank was telling us—"

His voice broke the girl's spell. She put one hand to her mouth and screamed through her fingers. The scream was a short, shrill crescendo which rose above the mutter of the surf for a moment, then died to a whisper. The girl turned and ran headlong, stumbling as her high-heeled slippers caught in the wet sand.

The oncoming naked shape stopped, stood rigid. His head jerked up. The young man, staring into the thing's face, made a sobbing sound in his throat and stumbled backwards, away from it. The face was leprous white, hideous. Small, hungry eyes glowered beneath thick brows. The distorted crescent of a mouth opened to release a guttural growling noise. The naked shape was suddenly in motion again, leaping with tremendous strides after the fleeing girl.

The girl had no chance. She turned, screamed, and threw up both arms to defend herself. The thing fell upon her, smothering her wild shriek of terror. Powerful fingers clutched at her, hurling her to the wet sand. The naked shape dropped on her, tearing at her with both hands, subduing her with the weight of its body.

The girl fought wildly, turning and twisting in the creature's vile embrace, driving her small fists into the thing's evil countenance. Her efforts brought an increased snarl to the gaping mouth above her. The mouth descended abruptly, burying itself in soft flesh. The girl's struggles became weaker, and ceased.

The young man, standing a dozen yards distant, came to life and forced himself to run forward. He screamed luridly: "Damn you, leave her alone! Leave her alone or I'll—"

The unfinished threat meant nothing. The monster turned, glaring, and the young man's wild advance ceased abruptly. The naked thing rose slowly and stood erect. The young man stiffened, sobbed thickly, and took a faltering step forward. The leprous shape fell upon him.

The young man struck twice with his fists, struck blindly at the lunging body of his assailant. A huge hand closed over the front of his snow-flecked tuxedo and dragged him into the monster's embrace. Powerful arms encircled him,

exerting pressure. A scream of agony, of supplication, welled from the young man's mouth as the arms bent him backwards. Something snapped dully. The young man went limp.

The monster stood on wide-spread legs, snarling. Deliberately he lifted the young man on his corded arms. Silently he carried the limp body of his victim to the water's edge, and raised it high, and hurled it. A dull splash accompanied the monster's grim laugh of triumph. Both the laugh and the splash were smothered by the unceasing mutter of the surf.

The monster turned, strode back to the torn, mutilated form lying on the sand. He stopped, took the girl in his arms, and glared down at her hungrily. Slowly he walked away along the beach, toward the gaunt black house on the distant promontory, carrying the girl with him.

Later, the incoming tide washed up a drowned, broken, tuxedo-clad body, and the body rolled back and forth, back and forth amid seaweed and white foam, as if still alive. There was nothing else. Nothing but wet sand, falling snow, and darkness.

2. The House of Mystery

"It's one of those cases," Hurley said, "that give you the living jitters. For no reason at all, this fellow and his girl walk out of a swell house-party, get in their car, and drive down to a lonely stretch of beach—at midnight of a cold night, when it's snowing to boot. Six hours or so later, somebody misses the two people out of the party, and raises a howl, and goes lookin' for 'em, and finds 'em murdered and 'phones us. And by that time, after it's snowed all night and covered up all possible footprints, there's nothin' for us to look at but the bodies."

Hurley—Lieutenant Michael Hurley of the State Police—leaned his big bulk across the table and jabbed a stiff forefinger at Mark Simms.

"Those bodies aren't pretty to look at, mister. We find the boy washed up on the beach, like he was drowned, only he wasn't drowned, because his back was broken. We find the girl almost half a mile away, all covered with snow in a kind of gully between two sand-dunes. She's been stripped, and what's left of her would give a guy the horrors just to look at. I've seen human bodies cut up with a knife, but this is the first time I ever saw one torn apart—with raw flesh ripped right off the bones."

Simms stretched himself out of his chair and put a cigarette between his frowning lips. He was tall and powerfully built, and moved with a careless grace which gave him an appearance of being lazy. He said quietly:

"Want me to go down there?"

"As a personal favor to me," Hurley scowled.

Simms nodded, took his hat and overcoat from the back of a chair, and walked to the door. A moment later Hurley went to the window, stood there,

and watched a long black coupé, Simms' private car, drone out of the yard.

The clock on the coupé's dash said ten-fifteen. Snow had fallen all night long, and the highways had not yet been cleared. Simms drove slowly. It was a long ride, and a dreary one, from State Police Barracks in Edgewater to the lonely stretch of beach between Plymouth and Segmore, where the bodies of the young man and the girl had been discovered. Most of the way, Simms slumped down in the seat and chewed an unlighted cigarette.

Half a dozen cars were parked between the beach road and the sand-dunes when he got there. He scowled, muttered aloud his personal opinion of curiosity-seekers, and paraded slowly toward the place which seemed to be the center of attraction. People in overcoats were standing around in groups, talking and staring. Murder, Simms reflected, was the biggest crowd-magnet in existence.

He pushed forward and spoke quietly to a uniformed State Trooper who stood a little aside from the gawking spectators. The trooper said indifferently:

"We took the bodies out of here, Mr. Simms. No point in leaving them there, was there? They're up to the Rand place, where the house-party was."

"What's going on here?"

"Nothing. I got orders to hang around, that's all. These other people are just sight-seers. They been parading in and out of here ever since eight o'clock. Queer how news gets around."

Simms strolled down to the water's edge and along the beach to where another, smaller knot of curiosity-seekers stood around in overcoats. A second uniformed trooper nodded to him as he came up, and the trooper explained, in guarded tones, how and where the body of the girl had been discovered. Simms listened carefully, then looked around to be sure of missing nothing. Satisfied, he turned away.

A figure detached itself from the group of spectators and came toward him. A low voice croaked:

"Ain't you Simms, the detective officer, mister?"

The owner of the guttural voice was a woman, large and foreign-looking. She wore a dirty dress, high shoes, and a crucifix, and her coarse gray hair was wind-blown and unkempt. She belonged, evidently, in the fishing-village down below, where the foreign element made a meager living by selling whatever sea-stuffs their broken-down nets were capable of dragging in.

"Well?" Simms said impatiently.

"If you're a detective officer," the woman said, waddling up to him, "I got somethin' to tell you. Ain't you the Mr. Simms that come down to the village the time Annie Garry was drowned?"

"I'm Simms."

"Well then, if you want to know what killed them two young people, I can tell you all right. It was somethin' not of this earth, that's what it was. Only last week I seen it with my own eyes, down in the village, and next mornin' we found Pete DiMosa's hound-dog all torn to pieces and half eaten, just like that

poor girl was done to. And I ain't makin' up any story, either, because I *seen* it!"

Simms peered into the woman's face and wondered. She was sincere. Being familiar with the district and its happenings, she might have something genuine to be sincere about.

"All right," Simms said. "Who did it?"

"It ain't a 'who.' It's a thing that looks like a man, and it goes around naked. Only it ain't a man, and you nor nobody else can tell me it is! It ain't of this world!"

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know, nor I don't want to know. I don't want nothin' to do with anything that goes around in the night-time, eating flesh off of dogs and human beings!"

Simms made a sucking sound with his lips and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Staring at the woman, he debated the wisdom of questioning her further, and decided that other things were more important. Later, perhaps—

"What's your name?" he said quietly.

"Maria," the woman declared. "Maria Senko."

Simms said unemotionally: "All right. I'll look you up later." Then he turned and strode down the beach.

The woman's words were in his mind as he climbed into his car and backed it around. Ordinarily he would have shrugged his shoulders, made a wry face, and passed the whole thing off as being rank superstition. But this was obviously not an ordinary business. Murders were more or less in the line of routine duty; but most murderers, after committing their crimes, did not feed on the bodies of their victims.

For future reference, it might be well to keep the Senko woman's conversation in mind.

The big coupé bumped slowly along the shore road and turned left into King's Highway. A little while later it stopped before a typical Cape Cod winter home, and Simms got out. According to Hurley's description, this was the Rand place, from which the murdered young man and his companion had started out on their last grim mile.

The house was a middling large one, white with blue shutters and a long, screened-in veranda. Simms climbed the steps slowly and thumbed the bell. The door opened. A tall, sallow-faced youth stood staring at him.

The young man's eyes were black-rimmed, twitching, his hair uncombed, his hands unsteady. Evidently he had gone a long time without sleep. He said suspiciously:

"What is it? What do you want?"

"The name is Simms."

"Simms? Oh. They said you were coming."

Simms paced down the hall and into the living-room. He stiffened when he saw two sheet-covered shapes lying side by side on the carpet. Slowly he walked

toward them, stooped, and peered down. The young man said behind him:

"We were told not to—to touch—"

Simms raised one of the sheets, and the young man stopped talking and turned away abruptly. Professional indifference marked Simms' actions, but the indifference died a quick death as the second sheet came away, revealing what lay beneath.

Simms sucked breath through his lips and lowered the white cover hastily. When he stood erect again, his face had lost color and he was breathing heavily. Walking across the room, he said grimly:

"Who's around?"

"Nobody. I'm alone here," the young man faltered. "The others have gone to police headquarters to—to be questioned. The police are sending some men down here to take charge."

Simms glanced at him quickly. "Pretty tough ending for a party, eh?"

"Good God, it wasn't the party! The party had nothing to do with it!" The young man choked back a sob and stared fearfully at the covered shapes on the floor. "They—they just walked out on us, to get some air, and—"

"Sweethearts?" Simms said.

"No, but—"

"All right. It doesn't matter." Simms paced the length of the room and back again. "You're Frank Rand, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"When Lieutenant Hurley was here this morning, early, you told him something about hearing and seeing some queer things going on around here. Hurley says you were drunk and talking foolish. That right?"

"No. I wasn't drunk."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Well, he asked me if I had any idea who might have done it. Then I told him what happened when I went to the Sanderson place, one night about a week ago. It's true; I did go. We were having a party here, and one of the girls got pretty sick. Our phone was out of order, so I went over there to see if—"

"What happened?" Simms scowled.

"Well, when I got there, the dogs started to make a fuss and I got scared. They're ugly brutes, and they've got a bad reputation around here. I didn't dare open the gate and take a chance with them. Then Sanderson came out of the house to see what all the noise was about, and you'd have thought I was just a dirty tramp, the way he yelled at me. Told me to clear out and stay out, or he'd let the dogs loose."

"So you got out," Simms murmured.

"What else could I do? Sanderson's queer anyway. He's a taxidermist, or something. Got a house full of stuffed animals and birds. Well, I didn't have the nerve to face him, so I started back here again, and I could hear those dogs barking for a long time after I left the place. Then I got the idea something was

following me, and—”

“And what?”

“Something *was* following me. It trailed me here and hung around the house all the rest of the night. It wasn't a dog; it was a man. He looked—well, I didn't get a close-up view of him, but he looked like a madman. I told Lieutenant Hurley that, and he laughed at me. But I'm telling you the same.”

Simms put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and let it droop. He said presently:

“How far is this Sanderson place from here, buddy?”

“It's about half a mile.”

“And how,” Simms demanded quietly, “do I get there?”

The Sanderson domain lay at the end of a narrow dirt road marked PRIVATE, NO TRESPASSING. Simms parked his car a hundred yards from the heavy wooden gate, got out slowly, and paced forward. Shifting his cigarette to one corner of his mouth, he leaned on the gate and stared at the structure beyond.

The house was a large one, looming above a sleek expanse of snow-carpeted lawn. It seemed deserted, but the effect was false. The quiet solemnity of the scene was disturbed almost immediately by the shrill baying of hounds, and Simms scowled blackly as a pair of powerful, dark-brown shapes came loping around the corner of the house towards him. After the dogs came a stoop-shouldered man in overalls. The man stopped, stood motionless, peering intently. Then he advanced again.

Simms studied him as he approached the gate. The fellow was a foreigner, evidently, short of stature but thick-limbed and possessed of abnormal strength. His face was not pleasant to look into. The upper lip was a hare-lip, hooked grotesquely to reveal tobacco-stained teeth. One eye, the left one, was a colorless, glassy protuberance, half covered by a drooping lid. The man was glaring fixedly with his good eye. When he reached the gate, he snarled at the dogs to move aside, and said curtly:

“What you want?”

Simms said casually: “To see Mr. Sanderson.” Then he gazed past the fellow's shaggy head to the front door of the house, which had opened. A woman stood on the threshold, staring anxiously. The one-eyed man turned, called out gutturally:

“This man want to see Mr. Sanderson. He want—”

“The name is Simms. State Police,” Simms said quietly.

“He come from the police.”

The girl stared longer than seemed necessary, then nodded and re-entered the house. Simms looked down at the dogs. They were lean, vicious brutes, standing motionless, regarding him with hungry eyes. When he looked up again, a tall, well-dressed man of middle age was walking toward him.

“You are from the police?”

Simms nodded, studied the man casually.

"I'd like a word with you."

"With me? Ah, yes. It is about that unfortunate affair of last night. Certainly, sir. Please come in."

Simms put a hand on the gate, opened it. His attitude of professional indifference was more than a little forced. It was hard to be entirely unemotional in the face of two four-legged devils who, though quiet at the moment, seemed merely waiting for a command to hurl themselves upon him. Moreover, the one-eyed man was frowning unpleasantly, and Sanderson's welcoming smile seemed, in contrast, to lack sincerity.

Silently Simms followed the man to the house, ascended the steps, and passed through the doorway into a spacious inner hallway. At the end of the hall a woman was rearranging books on a small table. She looked up sharply, studied him intently for an interval of ten seconds, then looked down again. Simms had a momentary glimpse of attractive features, dark glowing eyes. Then Sanderson said behind him:

"This way, sir, if you please."

Simms entered a room on the right and stood waiting while Sanderson closed the door. The room was a large one, well furnished. Stuffed birds of every description stared with lifelike eyes from behind the glass panels of a square cabinet near the far wall. Sanderson paced forward, indicating a chair. Simms sat down.

"Now, sir. You have come to me about last night's unfortunate occurrence?"

"Nobody," Simms said, "seems to know exactly what did occur last night."

"And you think that perhaps I may be able to—"

"I think you may." Simms leaned forward, uncrossing his legs. "There's been some talk about those dogs of yours, Sanderson."

"But that is nonsense! They are never permitted to run free at night!"

"They weren't loose last night, by any chance?"

"Certainly not!"

Simms shrugged, leaned back again. Apparently Sanderson was telling the truth. The chances were, too, that the Rand boy had done some slight exaggerating in his story of the midnight visit to the taxidermist's domain. Sanderson was a nervous type—even now he was rubbing his hands together and sitting unnaturally stiff in his chair—but he hardly seemed vicious. Past middle age, he had soft gray hair and a pale, womanish complexion, watery blue eyes, a weak-looking body. He might be king of his own personal household, but would certainly attract no special attention elsewhere.

"You keep quite a few of those dogs, don't you?" Simms said.

"I have eleven."

"And all man-eaters, eh?"

"That is ridiculous," Sanderson retorted irritably. "The dogs are my pets. They are quite harmless."

"Those two at the gate didn't look so harmless."

"But I assure you—"

"All right." Simms stood up, shook a cigarette out of its package. "Evidently I'm in the wrong pew. Sorry."

He paced to the door, aware that Sanderson, behind him, was scowling. In the corridor the dark-eyed girl was still bending over the small table, stacking books. She stared unblinkingly, and continued to stare until Sanderson stepped over the threshold. Simms walked to the front door, opened it, nodded to the doctor, and departed, pondering the meaning of the girl's stare.

The two dogs approached him with ominous sluggishness as he advanced toward the gate. The one-eyed man, leaning there, spoke a guttural command, and the dogs fell back, growling.

"Thanks," Simms said dryly.

The gate creaked shut behind him. Slowly he strode away from it. A moment later a bend in the road, behind him, hid the Sanderson place from view.

He stopped, stood scowling. For a while he hesitated, thinking about the one-eyed man, the girl, and Sanderson's apparent innocence. Then, acting on impulse, he hiked across the road and into the woods, intent on learning more about Sanderson's secluded household.

Henry Sanderson, at that moment, was pacing silently down the inner corridor of the big house. His womanish face, no longer under the observation of Simm's discerning gaze, had changed character. His lips were curled in a crooked smile of triumph, his pale blue eyes filled with a glow of anticipation.

At the end of the corridor he stopped, pushed open a side door, and spoke to the dark-eyed girl in the room beyond.

"I shall be very busy for the next half hour, Miss Evans. Very. If the gentleman from the police sees fit to return, you may call me. I shall be in my laboratory."

The girl stared. Still smiling, Sanderson closed the door, paced down a narrow passageway to the kitchen, opened a door in the rear wall. His hand groped for a light-switch. Before him a flight of straight, steep stairs extended downward into a cellar.

He descended slowly, paced with increasing eagerness through the first of the cellar's large rooms. It was elaborately furnished, containing an expensive ping-pong table, chairs, a miniature shooting-gallery. The second room was a modern heating plant, with a massive oil furnace looming above a smooth concrete floor. The door leading to the third and last room was locked.

Sanderson's pale eyes burned with anticipation as he drew a ring of keys from his pocket. He entered silently, switching on a light and closing the door behind him. The light revealed a gleaming black floor, uncarpeted, and dark walls reaching to a low ceiling. The chamber was small, square. A white metal table on wheels, standing in one corner, supplied an atmosphere of grim solemnity,

accentuated by a vague odor of chemicals which pervaded the whole room. Cases of gleaming steel instruments added to the chamber's grim suggestiveness.

Quietly Sanderson paced to the far wall, placed one hand against the smooth panelling, and pressed heavily. The panels moved under his fingers, sliding sideways with scarcely a sound. A door-sized aperture appeared in the wall. Iron bars frowned in Sanderson's face.

He leaned forward, again fumbling with keys. The iron door opened inward under pressure. A light-switch clicked under his groping hand. Slowly he stepped over the threshold, entering the small prison-room beyond. Standing motionless again, he looked down at a huddled shape on the floor, said softly:

"It is time for another treatment, my friend."

The shape on the floor did not move. It was a human shape, attired in ragged trousers only. Sanderson touched it with his foot, persuasively.

"I say it is time for another treatment."

The prisoner's eyes opened and focussed on Sanderson's face. Sluggishly the man sat up, staring, then shrank back.

"No! No—!"

"But yes," Sanderson corrected. "Come."

A low moaning sound came from the prisoner's throat. He stood up heavily, trembling from head to foot. For a moment he stood swaying, sobbing, then walked to the door like a man condemned to death. Sanderson, smiling cruelly, followed him from the room.

Mechanically the prisoner entered the laboratory, paced to the metal table. Turning, he mumbled again in a thick whisper:

"No! Oh God, no—"

Sanderson's grim smile silenced him. Still sobbing, he stretched himself on the white-topped table, lay motionless, staring with horror-filled eyes at the ceiling above. His mouth hung open, drooling. His face was stark white with fear.

"This time," Sanderson said softly, "we will employ no anaesthetic. It will not be necessary."

The prisoner's reply was a liquid moan, only half audible. Leaning over him, Sanderson fumbled a moment with leather thongs. When he straightened again and paced silently across the room, his victim was unable to turn and watch him. The man's arms and legs were securely bound to the table-top.

Sanderson returned, wheeling before him a small, glass-topped cabinet. Assorted instruments gleamed dully behind the cabinet's transparent doors. Small, colorless bottles and vials reflected the glare of the overhead light.

Quietly then, Sanderson leaned over the table and gazed down into the up-turned face of his victim. He smiled cruelly. His fingers caressed the man's body, came to rest on the lower portion of the abdomen.

"Now, my friend, if you are ready . . ."

3. Devil Dogs

Mark Simms stared ahead of him to where the Sanderson place loomed grotesque and huge above its snow-carpeted lawn. To his right, twenty yards distant, lay the gate through which he had previously invaded the taxidermist's strange domain; but he had no use for the gate now. His visit, this time, was for a different purpose.

Before him, a close-meshed wire fence blocked further progress. Behind lay the woods through which he had tramped for the past ten minutes. Sanderson's yard was deserted. The one-eyed man was no longer around. Neither were the dogs.

Scowling, Simms inspected the fence and weighed his chances of climbing it without attracting attention. His scowl increased as he considered the viciousness of Sanderson's watch-dogs. He hesitated, then shrugged, put both hands on the barricade, and swung himself up.

Next moment he was standing flat against the rear wall of the house, breathing heavily from his swift run across the yard. Ten paces distant, a light glowed in a narrow window close to the ground. Silently he moved toward it, crouched low, staring.

It was a cellar window. The room beyond was evidently a game-room. An expensive ping-pong table stood in the center of the floor. An open doorway revealed part of a furnace-room.

Simms put both hands on the window, grunted with satisfaction when it slid upward under pressure. The floor of the game-room was an eight foot drop below. He peered down, frowning, then stiffened abruptly.

A muffled sound invaded the room beneath him, originating in a distant part of the cellar. The sound was a human voice, screaming shrilly. It ended suddenly, then began again. Agony was the cause of it.

Simms' eyes narrowed, stared intently. He pulled himself over the window-sill, hung at arms' length, and dropped, landing with a soft thud. The sound came again as he paced past the ping-pong table to the doorway of the furnace-room. It was high-pitched, vibrant, packed with terror. Simms' face paled. Cautiously he crossed the threshold, peered cautiously at the huge oil-furnace ahead of him, then saw a door in the far wall. The door was closed. Unpleasant sounds, sinister and grimly suggestive, came from the room beyond.

He advanced slowly. Another sound, the significant opening and closing of a door behind him, stopped him when he was half way across the chamber. He turned, stepped suddenly into the shadow of the furnace, stood motionless. Slow footsteps were audible in the game-room.

The footsteps came closer, hesitantly, as if their owner were fearful of making a noise. A slender figure appeared in the connecting doorway. Simms stiffened involuntarily as he recognized the girl with the dark eyes—the girl who had stared at him rudely, without apparent reason, less than half an hour ago.

She was unaware of his presence. Slowly she advanced across the room and stood rigid beside the closed door in the far wall, listening to the sounds of agony from beyond the barrier. The shrill wails had ceased; all that was left was a low moaning, interspersed with deep sobs and accompanied by indistinguishable words in a mocking, guttural voice.

The girl seemed fascinated by the sinister quality of the voice. She did not turn when Simms stepped from his place of concealment and moved toward her. He was almost upon her, reaching out to put a hand on her arm, when she spun around. His warning whisper silenced her outcry.

"Easy," he said almost inaudibly. "Take it easy. I just want to talk to you, sister."

Her eyes widened. She took a step backward, stood staring.

"What—what are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are," Simms murmured. "Snooping."

"You're mad! Don't you realize—"

"I'm realizing plenty. That's why I'm here."

She glanced fearfully at the door, then put trembling fingers on Simms' hand. Even while listening to the grim sounds from beyond the door, Simms appreciated the warmth and softness of those fingers.

"You shouldn't have come here," the girl whispered. "No one is allowed down here. No one except Oleg."

"Oleg?"

She shuddered. "He's the one-eyed man who met you at the gate. The—dog-keeper." She spoke the words as if they bore some hideous significance. Her fingers tightened on Simms' arm. "If Mr. Sanderson finds us here, he'll ki—"

She caught herself, stared suspiciously into Simms' scowling face. "He'll discharge me," she finished stiffly.

Simms said quietly: "He'll kill you, eh? Why not admit it?"

"I didn't mean that."

"You meant it, all right. What's going on here?"

"Nothing. Oh, please go."

"Not until I've seen what's behind that door, sister."

"But—"

She turned abruptly, leaving the protest unfinished. Her sharp intake of breath was distinctly audible in the menacing silence of the chamber. The sounds from beyond the barrier had ceased.

The silence was significant. Simms gripped the girl's arm, said curtly, in a low voice:

"Get out of here. The show's over."

"But if he finds you here—"

"He won't."

The girl hesitated, would have continued her protests. Simms muttered maledictions under his breath and pushed her toward the game-room door. Even

then she hesitated, stood staring at him.

"I tell you, if he finds you here—"

"Get upstairs," Simms growled savagely. "If he finds me here, I'll feed him to those damned pets of his. Beat it!"

She obeyed then. He heard the soft whisper of her footsteps as she disappeared. A door opened and closed softly. Alone, Simms gazed fixedly at the grim barrier before him. There was a moment of nerve-racking silence, then a key grated in the lock.

Simms moved backward, retreating even deeper into the shadows of the huge furnace. The door opened while he stared at it. Sanderson came over the threshold.

Sanderson was smiling crookedly. Turning, he relocked the door, tested it, then strode across the room, passing within ten feet of Simms' motionless body. Pacing through the game-room, he looked neither left nor right, nor up. Above him hung the open window through which Simms had entered. He walked beneath it without seeing it. Mechanically he strode to the stairs and ascended.

When he was gone, Simms exhaled slowly and relaxed.

No further sounds came from behind the locked barrier. Simms approached it warily, put one hand on the knob. The cellar was quiet as a vault. The light in the game-room went out as someone upstairs, probably Sanderson, turned the switch.

Scowling, Simms put his weight against the door, pushed hard. It refused to budge. Impatiently he fumbled in his pockets for a sharp-pointed instrument, found a pen knife, thrust the small blade into the lock. Five minutes later his forehead was beaded with sweat. He stepped back, mumbled an oath, stared at the door savagely.

Whoever had built that door had done a thorough job. It was solid, impervious to assault. Nothing but the correct key would open it.

With a shrug, Simms abandoned the task and paced back to the window. A running start gave him a hand-hold. Cautiously he dragged his lean body through the aperture and stood erect in the snow outside. A quick glance revealed the yard to be deserted.

He stooped, closed the window carefully, then strode toward the distant wire fence. Half way across the snow-covered lawn he swung about jerkily, stood staring. The rear door of the house had opened. At the foot of the steps stood the one-eyed man, Oleg, glaring viciously.

Simms hesitated, frowning, then began to walk backwards, slowly, toward the fence. The one-eyed man came with short, quick strides across the yard, his boots kicking snow up in front of him. He said gutturally:

"Hey, you! You wait a minute!"

There was no alternative. Simms reached the fence, stood motionless. The one-eyed man strode up to him, glared savagely.

"So you come back, hey?" the man snarled. "Well, now you stay back. Mr.

Sanderson, he don' like snoops. I take you to him and see what he says."

"You and who else?" Simms said quietly.

The one-eyed man stiffened, reached out a clawing hand. Simms' clenched fist shot inside the extended arm, made hard, driving contact with the man's jaw. That fist was famous. Oleg stumbled backward, caught himself, hurtled forward again with amazing fortitude. His long arms lashed out to encircle Simms' middle.

Simms sidestepped, scowling. Twisting free, he brought a pile-driving right hand up from nowhere, buried his knuckles in the one-eyed man's throat. Oleg sprawled backward in the snow, spitting scarlet blood into the white mound thrown up by his shoulders. Next moment the man was on his knees, swaying. With the same amazing display of strength, he stumbled erect again.

But he had had enough. Retreating from Simms' fists, he turned, waddled quickly toward the house. Simms watched him, bewildered. A shrill whistle tocsinned from the dog-keeper's bruised lips. The whistle was answered by a deep-throated baying sound which brought a glint of understanding to Simms' narrowed eyes.

What the one-eyed man could not do alone, he intended to do with the help of Sanderson's blood-hungry hounds!

Simms turned, ran to the fence, hauled himself up and over. Dropping into the deep snow on the far side, he hesitated a moment, weighing his chance. The black coupé was a ten-minute hike distant through the woods—only five minutes by the road. Oleg had vanished around the side of the house. Eleven dogs, Sanderson had said. One man against eleven four-legged man-hunters . . .

Simms sucked a deep breath, ploughed swiftly through the banked-up snow, following the fence-line. The gate, the beginning of the road, lay not far distant. He was on the road itself, running along hard-packed ruts, before the yammering of the dogs became audible again behind him. Turning his head, he caught a momentary glimpse of sleek, low-bellied shapes racing across the white lawn toward the gate. The one-eyed man was stumbling after them, intent on opening the barrier and letting the brutes loose.

Simms ran, breathing heavily, fists clenched, mouth twisted into a scowl. His gaze swept the side of the road, seeking a weapon of defense. He saw one, plunged aside to scoop it up, then ran on again, one hand gripping a bludgeon of heavy pine. In another moment he rounded the bend in the road, saw the car looming ahead.

He turned then. A sinister snarling sound, behind him, made him realize his danger. Ten paces distant the first of Sanderson's hell-hounds surged into view, fangs gleaming, jaws drooling saliva.

Simms planted both feet in the snow, set himself. The tawny shape hurtled clear of the ground, lunging upward for his throat. The wooden bludgeon made a sharp whining sound through the air, meeting the brute's charge with a bone-breaking impact. A sickening crunch accompanied contact. The killer stiffened

in mid-air, fell at Simms' feet in a twisted heap, writhing.

But there were more of them than a single bludgeon could take care of. Simms retreated, holding the club in both hands, thrusting, stabbing with it, beating back the hurtling shapes that sought to drag him down. Sanderson had trained those devils well; they went straight for the throat, fangs bared for murder. But the snow hindered them

Simms' legs collided with the car's bumper. He turned, leaped swiftly to the running board, jerked the door open. The club descended once more, on an up-turned mouth drooling blood and froth. Sweat-drenched and gasping, Simms slid onto the car's cushion, slammed the door shut, jabbed a probing foot at the starter-button.

Down the road, the one-eyed man came into view, running clumsily on bent legs. He stopped, stood glaring, raised one hamlike fist and shook it sullenly as Simms ground the car in gear. Snarling viciously, Sanderson's four-legged devils clawed at the running-board, seeking vainly to reach the man behind the wheel.

In reverse, the car groaned down the road, gaining speed, as Simms turned in the seat and scowled through the rear window, watching the ruts. Realizing defeat the dogs fell back. The one-eyed man stood ankle-deep in snow, muttering epithets.

Simms, guiding the big coupé onto the state road a moment later, put a shaky hand to his forehead to wipe away the perspiration gleaming there, and said aloud through a grim smile:

"Close. Damned close."

4. Prisoner

That night, in the upstairs corridor of Sanderson's big house, the dark-eyed girl stood motionless, rigid, beside a window which overlooked the yard outside. The long corridor was sinister with shadows. Eight hours had passed since the significant visit of Mark Simms.

Outside, now, pale moonlight blurred the snow-covered yard. Beyond the high fence which enclosed Sanderson's domain, the deep woods were black and close, seeming to hold the isolated house in a tenacious grip. The dark-eyed girl, staring out at the menacing wall of blackness, shuddered involuntarily.

Eight hours ago she had stood in the same place, fearfully watching an incident which had caused her slender hands to tighten tremblingly on the window-sill. She had seen Simms' brief combat with the dog-keeper, Oleg, and witnessed Simms' escape. Now, pressing her attractive face against the cold window-glass, she saw something else—something which she had apparently been waiting for.

Outside, near the closed gate, a tiny eye of yellow light glowed in the dark. Enduring but a moment, the glow vanished, then reappeared, then vanished again. Obviously it was a signal.

The girl turned quickly from the window and paced down the corridor to the head of the stairs. Hesitating a moment, she stared into the gloom below, listening. An hour ago, Sanderson had retired to the laboratory in the cellar. If he had come up again since then . . .

Evidently he had not. The downstairs rooms were in darkness as she descended the stairs and moved silently toward the front door. The door clicked shut behind her. On the outside steps she hesitated again, peering with narrowed eyes across the deserted yard to where the signal-light had glowed near the gate.

A moment later she had reached the end of the narrow path and was pushing the gate open with nervous fingers. Sheltered by darkness from the chance gaze of any person in the house, she stared about her, called anxiously in a low voice:

“Max! Where are you?”

Something moved in the shadows near the fence. The girl stiffened, stepped backward, then relaxed with an exhalation of relief. A stocky, stoop-shouldered man strode toward her, his face masked by a down-turned hat brim, his thick-set body bundled in a heavy raglan overcoat. His hand found her arm, clung there.

“This is damned risky business, pal. After this, we’ve got to find some other way.”

The girl nodded, stared at him. He had a bunched-up face, inclined to fatness. A black, untrimmed mustache gave him a perpetual scowl. Bushy brows protruded over keen dark eyes.

“The police were here, Max,” the girl said stiffly. “That affair of last night—they’ve linked Sanderson with it. They sent Mark Simms.”

The man named Max was silent a moment, scowling.

“What else?”

“I tried again to find out what Sanderson does in the laboratory. It’s dangerous. If he begins to suspect me—”

“Don’t gamble.”

“The whole thing is a gamble. Every move I make.”

Max scowled again, made a growling noise in his throat. Sullenly he stared across the yard to where the big house loomed gaunt and silent, guarding its secrets. Max’s stumpy fingers closed more firmly over the girl’s arm.

“Listen. I went up to the Hopevale this morning and did some heavy talking. I told them the best way to end this whole business was to call in the police and haul their man back where he came from. They wouldn’t listen. Said Sanderson had too much influence and money, couldn’t be handled that way. They don’t want him; they want the others.”

The girl nodded, bit her lower lip until it was white. She, too, looked toward the big house.”

“It’s a strange place, Max.”

“And no place for a kid like you,” Max growled. “But what the hell. Be careful, that’s all.”

“You’ll be back tomorrow night?”

"Late."

"Then I'll have another try at getting in that room. It's the only place, Max. The rest of the house is nothing at all. I've been over it from top to bottom. That one room—"

"Okay, Claire." Max freed the girl's arm, thrust his hand out. "Only for God's sake, go easy. You and me have been pals a long time."

The girl took his hand, dropped it, turned away. At the gate she stood motionless, peering intently ahead of her, as if dreading her return to Sander-son's huge house. Then she drew a deep breath, slipped quickly through the aperture, ran swiftly down the path to the front door.

Max stood scowling, his hands buried in the pockets of his heavy overcoat. His eyes narrowed under their bushy brows; he continued to stare, even after the front door of the house had closed on the girl's vanishing figure. Then, muttering through curled lips, he moved sideways, paced slowly along the outside of the high fence, not toward the road but away from it.

He went slowly, obviously intent on prowling closer to the house. Not long ago, Mark Simms had traversed that same route, on the same mission, and a lighted cellar window had lured Simms over the wall into a terrain of danger. The same window, the same pale glow, caught Max's gaze as he strode cautiously through the deep snow outside the barrier.

He stopped, pressed himself close to the fence, stood staring. Studying the barrier in both directions, he moved warily toward a place where a man of his short stature could climb over. His dark eyes narrowed with anticipation as he sought a hand-hold.

Had he been less intent on the problem before him, he might have been aware of something else, something more vital. Behind him, not ten paces distant, a hunched shape stepped suddenly from the shelter of passive pines, stood glaring at him. The watcher's lips hooked into a snarl of silent triumph; his one good eye twitched with the intensity of his gaze. He was Oleg, the dog-keeper.

Max, failing to turn, reached both hands to the fence, hauled himself up. Then the warning came too late. The sudden rush of heavy feet, breaking the snow-crust behind him, caused him to let go and drop, only to be seized in the embrace of the dog-keeper's outflung arms.

They were strong arms. Fighting desperately in their cruel grip, Max went limp as a viciously upthrust knee ground into his groin. Stumbling, he collapsed in the deep snow, groaning. The one-eyed man fell upon him.

There was no resistance, no opportunity for any. Ham-like hands slapped against Max's face, ramming his head down with pile-driver force, even as he struggled weakly, dazedly, to squirm from under his adversary's weight. Grunting, growling with animal fury, Oleg struck again and again, then rocked backwards, glaring.

Once before, eight hours ago, the one-eyed man had engaged in conflict with a prowling trespasser. The result then had been defeat. Now the result was

different, and Oleg's good eye bore a triumphant glint as he stood erect. The battered, bloody face of his opponent stared up at him. Max was unconscious.

Mumbling gutturally, Oleg stooped, lifted the limp body to his shoulders, straightened again. Pacing along the fence to the gate, he strode up the path leading to the house and ascended the steps, grunting under Max's dead weight.

The front door swung shut behind him. Triumphantly he traversed the inner corridor, entered the small study at the far end, and dumped his burden into a chair.

He was still standing there, peering down into Max's bloody countenance, when Henry Sanderson came across the threshold behind him.

Sanderson stopped, drew a sharp breath, stood motionless. He had been smiling quietly to himself when he entered the chamber; now he scowled in bewilderment, looked quickly from Oleg to the man in the chair. Abruptly, harshly he said:

"What is this man doing here? Who is he?"

Oleg turned slowly, put a hand to his face and fingered his thick lips before answering.

"I found him outside."

"Who is he?"

"I don' know. Miss Evans, she was talk to him by the gate, little while ago. Then she sneak back in here, and this man come prowlin' around the fence. I see him from upstairs. I go out the back way without make any noise, and bring him in here."

Sanderson looked at the prisoner's battered features, then at Oleg's big hands, and nodded understandingly. He paced forward, stared intently at the man in the chair, scowled again.

"He was talking with Miss Evans?"

"Yes."

"You mean he came here to see her, secretly?"

"Yes."

Sanderson's eyes narrowed, took on a dull glint of suspicion. He swung about, glaring.

"Tell Miss Evans to come in here!"

"Huh?"

"Go upstairs and tell her to come here!"

Oleg grinned crookedly. Still grinning, he scuffed over the threshold and down the corridor to the foot of the staircase. Sanderson, standing with hands hipped and legs spread wide, continued to stare at the unconscious prisoner, as if vainly attempting to tag the man with a name.

Sanderson's normally pale face was even paler than usual. He turned, glared angrily at the doorway, as if impatient to confront the girl whom Oleg had accused. Yet, when the girl did enter the room a moment later, Sanderson's words were calmly spoken, void of any trace of suspicion.

"We have captured a trespasser, Miss Evans. It occurs to me that perhaps you may know the man."

Claire Evans stood motionless, looking straight at the man in the chair. Just for an instant her mouth twitched, her slender body stiffened. Then she regained control of herself, frowned in conventional fashion, and paced forward. Eyes narrowed, she gazed into the prisoner's features. Not until she was quite sure that the color had returned to her face, and the tell-tale twitching gone from her mouth, did she turn.

"Do you suppose he is from the police?" she said, feigning bewilderment.

"Then you don't know him?"

"I'm not sure. The face is familiar, but—"

It was clever acting. The hesitation was far better, far more convincing, than a blunt denial. If Sanderson knew it to be a lie, he gave no indication of so knowing. He, too, could be clever.

Quietly he strode forward, leaned over the chair, and thrust a hand into the man's coat pocket. Straightening, he carried a worn leather bill-fold to the table. His frown of impatience indicated, on the surface at least, his annoyance at not having thought of such a simple procedure before.

Methodically he dumped the contents of the bill-fold and examined them. Then he turned, holding a driver's license in his hand. Apparently he was unaware that Claire Evans was staring at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Ferris. Max Ferris." Sanderson mouthed the name as if it were distasteful. "Does that mean anything to you, Miss Evans?"

"I'm afraid not," the girl said evenly.

"Nor to me, either. Why should a man by the name of Max Ferris wish to come prowling about my house like a criminal?"

"Perhaps he had lost his way," Claire Evans said quickly.

"Hardly. When he regains consciousness, I shall question him. It is very annoying. You may go now, Miss Evans."

Claire Evans shot a quick, despairing glance at the limp form in the chair. Slowly she turned away, as if reluctant to leave the man in Sanderson's custody.

"Shall you want me again tonight, Mr. Sanderson?"

"I think not."

The girl went out, forcing herself to walk, slowly, casually. Sanderson stood watching her with narrowed eyes, and listened to the diminishing sound of her footsteps as she paced down the corridor. Even after the staircase had ceased creaking under the girl's weight, and her footsteps had died to silence in the upper hall, Sanderson remained staring.

His mouth curled in a slow, sinister smile, full of grim significance. Quietly he turned toward the man in the chair, paced forward, and twined his fingers in the man's black hair, jerking the head back to expose better the battered face.

"So I have been harboring a snake," he murmured softly. "My very efficient secretary is a colleague of Mr. Max Ferris, who is employed by my erstwhile

hosts. That is interesting. Very interesting. It should lead to some rather entertaining developments, Mr. Ferris."

The prisoner's head slumped down again as Sanderson released it. Turning, Sanderson strode to the door, stood on the threshold, and shouted the name of Oleg, the dog-keeper.

A moment later, when the one-eyed man scuffed into the room, Sanderson nodded toward the still unconscious prisoner and said softly:

"Take Mr. Ferris to my laboratory. I shall attend to him later."

5. Escape and Capture

Mark Simms, driving an open touring car with State Police insignia painted on its side, brought the car to a stop at the mouth of the narrow road which led through the woods to Sanderson's isolated domain. Pushing the door open, Simms slid from behind the wheel and said quietly to the three men in the car:

"We walk the rest."

Two of the three men were State Troopers. The third was Lieutenant Hurley. Hurley said, scowling:

"This all sounds fishy to me, Simms. Damned fishy. If anyone except you—" He pulled a watch from his pocket, peered at it in the light of the headlamps, and thrust it back again irritably. "Ten-twenty. Hell of a time to be chasing ghosts."

"Where we're going," Simms shrugged, "any time is a hell of a time. You'll find that out."

The three men followed him down the road, Hurley walking with short, quick strides to catch up to him. Simms was silent, then. The road was dark, sinister. Simms' thoughts centered on the four-legged devils which had come within an ace of sinking their fangs into him, not too long ago, along this same shadowed aisle.

He made fists of his hands, strode rapidly down the crusted ridge between deep ruts of snow. Not until he reached the last bend in the road, beyond which lay the gate to Sanderson's estate, did he stop.

"Now what?" Hurley growled.

"I told you. I don't know."

"Well, what's the program? Do we barge into this guy's house and demand admission to that cellar room of his or do we hang fire and wait for nothing to happen?"

Simms scowled, pushed his hat-brim off his forehead, and massaged his chin with a lean hand. He was still thinking of the dogs, and of Oleg, the dog-keeper—and, for no reason at all, of the dark-eyed, good-looking girl who had been generous enough to warn him of the danger lurking in that cellar hideout.

"I'm going to get a look inside that room," he shrugged. "The rest of you stick around, watch the house. If I don't come out—"

Hurley's reply was a facetious grin, signifying gentle disbelief of the story Simms had told back at the State Police barracks. Ignoring the grin, Simms said quietly:

"Don't make any mistake, mister; this is no jacked-up house party. If it were as easy as that, we'd be banging on the front door with a search warrant. But it's not that kind of a place."

He turned, paced slowly down the road, leaving Hurley and the two troopers to stare after him. A moment later he rounded the bend, stood staring. Before him lay the Sanderson gate, and beyond that, glowing spectral white in moonlight, the smooth snow-carpeted lawn which nurtured Sanderson's house of mystery.

The place looked innocent enough; but even at that moment, as Simms stood staring, strange things were occurring within those looming walls. Even as Simms paced slowly forward to the gate, a door in the upstairs corridor of the big house inched open with equal slowness.

The corridor was a shadowed church-aisle, leading into and out of darkness. The pale yellow glow, emanating from the opening doorway, silhouetted the slender, feminine form of the dark-eyed girl who was even then in Simms' thoughts. Quietly she closed the door behind her and tiptoed down the passage to the head of the stairs.

The girl's eyes were wide, her lips tight-pressed in a face empty of color. Her outstretched hand, as she descended the stairs, made a soft whispering sound on the bannister. At the foot of the wide staircase she stood listening, staring intently at a thin sliver of light which came from under the closed door of Sanderson's study.

Warily she tiptoed along the thick carpet, not once taking her gaze from the door as she stole past it. Safely beyond, she relaxed a little, allowed a slow sigh of relief to escape her lips. A moment later she had paced across the unlighted kitchen, in the rear of the house, and was opening the door which led to the cellar.

There was no light to guide her. Softly she closed the door behind her, descended the steep steps to the game-room, and moved swiftly toward the locked door of Sanderson's laboratory. Turning to look furtively around her, to make sure that she was unobserved, she drew a small steel instrument from its hiding-place in her dress, and centered her attention on the lock.

Cold perspiration marred the girl's forehead then. After every few moments she ceased her efforts, straightened, stood listening, as if fearful of being discovered. When finally the lock clicked under the manipulations of the steel jimmy in her fingers, and she reached out a trembling hand to push the door open, she was breathing quickly through parted lips, and her face was chalk-colored.

Timidly she stepped over the threshold, peered into the impregnable dark of the chamber beyond. A soft whisper left her mouth then.

"Max! Where are you?"

There was no answer until she spoke the name twice. Then a low, throaty sound, muffled so as to be almost inaudible, emanated from a corner of the room before her. Again the girl stood rigid, fearful of hearing other sounds from the rear. Cautiously she struck a match, held the guarded flame high.

The man named Max Ferris lay bound and gagged on the floor, his feet and hands roped together, his head resting wearily against the wall.

Claire Evans moved forward swiftly, dropping the match as it burned her fingers. In darkness again she bent above Ferris' bound body, working desperately to free him. No sooner had the gag come loose than Ferris licked his lips, expectorated vehemently, and said warmly:

"I was countin' on you, pal. God, this place gives me the jitters!"

"Be quiet," she told him curtly.

"Huh?"

"Quiet! Sanderson hasn't gone to bed. He's in his study, upstairs. If he hears us—"

Ferris' answer was a vicious growl, signifying his hate of the man who had made him a prisoner. He was silent until the girl succeeded in freeing his hands; then, thrusting her aside, he bent forward and loosened his legs, then stood up, shifting back and forth as if suffering from pins-and-needles. Deliberately he rubbed his legs to bring back the circulation.

"Does Sanderson know that you and I know each other?"

"No," Claire Evans said. "No, he doesn't."

"That's a break. I thought he'd seen us together, the way that one-eyed foreigner landed on me right after you left me. How do I get out of here, pal?"

She put a hand on his arm, drew him toward the door. Again she cautioned him to silence, then led him through the furnace-room to the narrow window through which Mark Simms, of the State Police, had entered on that other occasion. Faint moonlight blurred the dirty panes, revealing the aperture. The girl said anxiously:

"Can you make it?"

Ferris scowled, nodded. His hand sought the girl's shoulder.

"Listen. Are you headin' for trouble on account of this? Is he goin' to know you did it?"

"I—I don't think so. I'll get back upstairs to my own room and go to bed. He won't see me. He'll think you got loose yourself Max."

"Okay. Thanks, pal. Give me a hand up."

She held her hands for him, wincing as the hard sole of his shoe came in contact with the soft flesh of her palms. A gasp escaped her lips as she straightened, adding an impetus to his lunge for the window-sill. He hung by one hooked arm, pushed the window up with his free fingers. Next moment he was over the sill. The window dropped with a soft thud. The girl was alone.

She stood rigid, realizing the peril of her own position. Once again she

listened intently for the sounds she expected to come from above, and suppressed a sob of relief when the sounds failed to materialize. Quickly she moved to the stairs, ascended to the door at the top, thrust it open, slipped into the unlighted kitchen. Clenching her hands to keep them from trembling, she paced along the corridor toward the central staircase.

A light still glowed beneath the closed door of Sanderson's study. The girl hesitated, moved past with cat-like steps. Her outstretched hand closed gratefully over the bannister. Silently she began to ascend.

Below her, the door of Sanderson's study opened. A calm, deliberate voice stopped the girl's ascent.

"I should like to speak to you, Miss Evans."

Claire Evans turned slowly, every trace of color gone from her face. Her hand, clutching the bannister, was the only thing that steadied her as she peered down, with wide eyes, at Sanderson's motionless form. Sluggishly she retraced her steps, as if descending into the arms of some waiting monster, whose gaze hypnotized her.

She stopped again as Sanderson paced forward to confront her. Studying her intently, coldly, he said in a significantly even voice:

"What are you doing downstairs at this hour?"

"Is—is it late?" she faltered.

"That is not the point. You know my orders in regard to prowling about the house after having retired."

The girl took a step backward, said anxiously: "I—I'm sorry. I was hungry. I went to the kitchen—"

"You went to the kitchen?"

"Yes."

Sanderson's eyes narrowed under beetling brows. Narrowed abruptly, meaningly. His hand shot out, clamped over the girl's arm. Bitterly he dragged her toward him.

"Did you by any chance go *beyond* the kitchen?" he rasped thickly.

"No, no! I—"

"Don't lie to me! It is too easy to discover the truth!"

He glared at her vehemently. She stared back into those convulsed features, and shuddered. Resistance was futile. Sanderson's fingers dug cruelly into her arm, pulling her along the corridor. A liquid sob welled from the girl's lips as she realized his intent and anticipated the fury which would be turned upon her, full force, when he discovered what she had done.

The anticipation was less than the reality. Sanderson, a moment later, stood staring with wide eyes at the open door of the downstairs laboratory, and began slowly to tremble with savage rage. His face whitened, turned scarlet. He took a step forward, peered at the corner of the room where the prisoner had been confined, and then, with ominous slowness, turned to confront the girl in his grasp.

"So you found a way to release him."

The words were thick, guttural, all the more threatening because they were spoken with vicious deliberation. Claire Evans shrank from them, sought frantically to free herself. The effort served only to increase Sanderson's anger. Fiercely he dragged her over the threshold, hurled her against the far wall. With one clenched hand he held her in front of him, with the other he pressed the concealed spring which operated the hidden door beside her.

The girl stared then, stared with widening eyes at sight of the upright iron bars revealed by the sliding panels. She beat desperately at the hand that held her, as Sanderson produced keys and pushed the iron grill open. Then she was flung forward, and stumbled across the threshold into the lightless prison-cell beyond.

The grill clicked shut with a metallic rasp. Sanderson, standing close to it, glared through the bars and said savagely:

"I shall attend to you later, Miss Evans. Personally."

The sliding panels came together. Sanderson turned slowly, paced across the laboratory, reached mechanically for the light-switch near the door.

Then he stiffened, his hand froze on the switch. From the furnace-room, just beyond, came a sound which held him motionless.

Mark Simms, prowling warily along the outside of the high fence, sought a place of ingress where the gloom of overhanging trees might conceal him from the chance gaze of any members of Sanderson's household. Arriving at the spot where he had once before scaled the barrier, he took time to stare about him, making sure that he was unobserved.

His thoughts centered unpleasantly on Oleg, the dog-keeper, and on the blood-hungry devils who obeyed the one-eyed man's bidding. As silently as possible, and with every nerve alert, he hauled himself over the wooden barrier and dropped on the other side.

He took two slow steps forward and stopped abruptly, stood motionless. Ahead of him, something moved near the wall of the house. A shadow detached itself, stepped away from the cellar window. Simms scowled at sight of a short, thick-shouldered human shape, scowled even more intensely as the shape straightened, moved furtively across the moonlit lawn toward the gate.

Abruptly Simms fell back. His original intention had been to get into Sanderson's cellar hideout, by whatever method presented itself, and discover what the sinister chamber contained. Now he changed his mind, strode rapidly along the fence, keeping carefully in the shadows afforded by the barrier. If Sanderson's chamber of mystery had been important in itself, then this new development—this silent, skulking shape which had apparently come from the very room—was infinitely more important!

Nearing the gate, Simms hung back, waited for the thick-shouldered man to get there first. The man reached it, turned for a moment to peer back at the

house, then pushed the gate open and strode into the road. Simms followed warily, fists clenched, lips tight.

This was not on the program. It puzzled him, put furrows of bewilderment in his forehead. Vaguely he wondered if the prowling shape ahead of him, apparently bent on escaping from Sanderson's house of evil, had any connection with the sounds of agony and torment which had emanated from the room in the cellar, not long ago.

There was but one way to find out. Cautiously Simms kept out of sight until the man ahead had rounded the bend in the road. Whatever happened then would be less likely to attract attention from Sanderson's house. It was safe, then, to close the gap.

Simms did so, silently and swiftly. He was almost upon the plodding shape before the man heard him. Abruptly the man stiffened, wheeled about. Simms' hand, plunging into a flapping coat pocket, jerked up again with a levelled revolver. The man stared into the menacing muzzle, made a muttering sound in his throat, stood motionless. Sullenly he said:

"Well, what's the idea?"

Simms studied him, took careful note of the square-jawed face, the compact body, the strong shoulders. It would not pay to take chances.

"Just where were you going, mister? And where from?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I heard you, all right. And where I'm going is none of your damned business!"

"I think it is."

"Well, I think different. If you want any information, ask Sanderson!"

Simms advanced methodically, ran a hand over the man's clothing, frowned again when he found the man unarmed. Impatiently he pondered the best course of action, regretted the fact that he had advised Hurley and the others to leave him.

The problem solved itself. The thick-shouldered man stared suddenly down the road, made a sucking sound with his lips. Heavy footsteps crunched in the snow. Lieutenant Hurley's harsh voice said with welcome abruptness:

"What's going on here? Hey?"

"This guy," Simms said, "is something on Sanderson's list. He just crawled out of a window and made a get-away."

"Yeah? A get-away from what?"

"Ask him."

"You can ask all you damn well want to," the thick-shouldered man growled. "See what good it does you."

Hurley scowled, clamped a firm hand on the man's arm.

"You'll talk, mister, when we get you to Headquarters."

"You can't take me to Headquarters! I got nothin' to do with Sanderson's

hell-house. I work for—”

“For what?”

“That’s my business. The name’s Max Ferris; that’s all you need to know.”

“We’ll know more,” Hurley shrugged, “in a little while. Okay with you, Simms?”

Simms nodded, stood on wide-spread legs as Hurley pushed Max Ferris down the road. A frown twisted Simms’ lips. He mouthed the name over again. Ferris—Max Ferris. Somehow it was familiar, yet its significance eluded him. Still bewildered, he turned away.

Ferris had escaped from Sanderson’s house through the cellar window. That window led indirectly to the room with the locked door. Somewhere there was a connection

Uneasiness gripped Simms as he again prowled along the fence. Scaling the barrier at the same point as before, he stood motionless with his back to it, peering ahead to where the big house loomed gaunt and mastodonic a hundred yards distant. Somehow, now, the house seemed more sinister than ever.

With every forward step he took, his uneasiness increased. Instinct urged him to greater speed, caution held him back. Sanderson’s domain, for all its seeming innocence, had proved itself to be a home of shadowy menace.

A light gleamed in the cellar window now where no light had gleamed before. The window itself was closed. Reaching it, Simms crouched, pressed his face close to the pane. No sounds came from the chamber within.

Warily he slid the window up in its grooves, lowered himself through the aperture. Once again his roving gaze encountered the ping-pong table, the rich furnishings of the game-room. On tiptoes he moved across the threshold into the furnace-room. Then he stopped, narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. The door of the mystery room was open.

6. Beneath the Cellar

Prowling forward on silent feet, Simms was unaware of the watching eyes behind him, unaware of the shadowed form which stood motionless near the huge oil-burner, following his every move with unblinking orbs. From the very beginning, when the window had first creaked open, Sanderson had crouched there waiting. Now his hands opened and closed twitchingly, his face was a mask of triumph.

Blind to impending peril, Simms stepped cautiously to the threshold of the laboratory, stood staring, bewildered more by the fact that the door was open than by the room’s contents. A light glowed inside. His gaze encountered the white-topped table, the cases of instruments.

The table in particular, with its leather thongs obviously designed to hold a human patient in place, fascinated him. He frowned thoughtfully, pondering its significance. Such a table could have nothing to do with the practice of

taxidermy. Its presence here meant that Sanderson was something more than a taxidermist.

Simms' hand went into his pocket, came out again holding his revolver in readiness. Had he turned, he might have seen the menacing shape which detached itself from the shadows of the furnace behind him and tiptoed forward on silent feet. But he did not turn. He moved slowly over the threshold, toward the table.

"If you are wise," a quiet voice said behind him, "you will stand quite still, Mr. Simms!"

Simms froze, stood rigid. Before he could turn, or even consider the advisability of turning, the voice said curtly:

"And you will drop that gun—immediately!"

For a split second Simms hesitated, then realized the peril of his position. His fingers opened reluctantly, letting the revolver fall.

"Now walk forward slowly, Mr. Simms."

Simms obeyed, his face white, his whole body aching to wheel about. Soft footsteps whispered across the floor behind him as his unseen adversary paced forward to take possession of the fallen gun. Then the footsteps receded. A dull click stabbed its way into Simms' consciousness.

He whirled then, stared bitterly at the closed door. Even as he lunged toward it, spurred on by blind fury, a key grated in the lock.

A mocking laugh found its way into the room as Simms hurled himself against the barrier. The door, constructed to withstand just such an assault, budged not an inch. A triumphant vibrant voice, Sanderson's voice, said harshly:

"You were very foolish to come back here, Mr. Simms. From now on, you have only yourself to blame for what happens!"

Simms stepped back with mechanical slowness, his face colorless, his hands half upraised in front of him. His tongue came out to lick his lips. He stared with wide eyes at the barrier which had suddenly transformed Sanderson's laboratory into a sinister prison-chamber. He cursed himself blindly and bitterly, albeit silently, for being fool enough to walk into Sanderson's trap.

His hands clenched then, itching to make contact with the unseen face beyond the door. Grimly he waited for further words of triumph, but none came. Instead, there was only a repetition of that mocking laugh, eating its way into his soul.

His rage was greater than his fear, then. Had he been able to gaze into Sanderson's face, as Sanderson turned away from the locked door, the order of his emotions might have been reversed.

For Sanderson, pacing silently through the furnace-room to the stairs which led to the upper portion of the house, had suddenly become an animal. His eyes were abnormally wide, hungry, in a face vile with avidity. His whole body was trembling. He had become a slave of some unholy desire, and the details of that desire were engraved indelibly in every line of his countenance.

Straight through the kitchen and into the central corridor he strode, and without hesitation or preamble ascended the wide staircase to the second floor. Stopping before a closed door, he rapped impatiently on the panels, and said gutturally:

“Oleg! Oleg, get up!”

A moment of forced waiting ensued. The door opened. Oleg, the dog-keeper, stood there attired in crumpled white pajama trousers, the upper part of his body naked and hairy, his face wrinkled in a frown of bewilderment.

“You want me?”

“We have work to do.”

Oleg stared, took note of the animal eagerness in Sanderson’s eyes. A grin curled his lips. Some of the same eagerness found its way into his own good eye. He turned quickly, waddled back into the room, reappeared almost immediately with his feet encased in shoes and his thick body clad in coat and trousers.

“We go downstairs, huh?” he said leeringly. “We let loose the dogs and those others, huh?”

Sanderson nodded curtly, turning from the door and striding back down the hall. With short, quick steps Oleg followed him, breathing noisily, his blind eye seeming to come to life as it caught something of its mate’s glitter. Master and servant descended the stairs together, the same unholy eagerness spurring both forward. A moment later the main portion of the house lay above them. They stood in the dimly lighted game-room in the cellar.

Keys dangled from Sanderson’s outthrust hand as he paced to the far end of the game-room. Stooping, he dragged aside a dark-toned length of carpet near the wall, exposing the oblong outlines of a cunningly placed trap-door.

His hand jabbed down, thrust a key into its slot. The trap swung slowly downward, revealing the top rungs of a wooden ladder. With a brief backward glance at his companion, Sanderson put a groping foot on the ladder and began to descend. Below him lay a vault of darkness impregnable. Above, Oleg sidled past the ping-pong table, peered down, and followed his master’s lead, making animal noises in his throat.

The darkness vanished as Sanderson reached the foot of the ladder and thumbed a light-switch in the wall beside him. Staring up at Oleg’s descending body, he growled a curt order.

“Close the trap!”

Oleg paused, reached up a ham-like hand, pushed the trap-door shut above him. By the time he reached the floor of the vault, Sanderson was advancing eagerly toward a row of small, grilled doors on the opposite side.

The vault was a sub-cellar, small, compact, foul with the heavy stench of unwashed human flesh. Its sole means of illumination was a dusty, unshaded lamp-bulb, dangling, at the end of a stapled wire from the low ceiling. Yet the light was sufficiently strong to cast a sickly glow over the entire chamber, baring the room’s entire contents.

Walls and ceiling were of massive, rough-hewn boards, solidly put together. A small, heavily-barred door broke one wall. Frowning cell-doors, four in number and fitted with significant iron bars, broke another. Toward these Sanderson strode and stood glaring.

Oleg, still mumbling animal sounds, waddled forward to his side.

There was another sound then, a suggestive, sinister sound from the shadowy darkness behind the grilled doors. Hearing it, Sanderson smiled crookedly, took a slow step forward, said aloud in a rasping voice:

“Get up! It’s time to go out!”

Reaching forward, he brought his key-ring into sharp contact with the iron bars, rattling them there as if realizing that the sound would mean something to the cells’ lethargic occupants. The jangling clamor did mean something. Almost immediately, the sinister sounds from within were intensified as though heavy unwilling animals were condescending to stir from their places of retreat.

But they were not animals. The faces which came forward like floating masks and flattened against the bars were human faces, or at least nearly so. Staring fixedly at Sanderson, they were like death-heads in the yellow glow of the overhead light, every hollow, every protruding mound of flesh accentuated by the other glare.

Four of them, in all, studied Sanderson in the manner of slaves studying a master. All four were alike in one respect: they were less than human, despite the general normalcy of their unlovely features. The eyes which regarded Sanderson were madmen’s eyes, hideously white where there should have been no white. The hands which gripped the iron bars were gaunt, powerful. The half-clad bodies beneath those terrifying faces were huge and hairy.

Yet Sanderson did not fall back, did not shudder. Calmly he surveyed them, as though examining caged animals in a zoo. Quietly he nodded to Oleg, who paced to the wooden door in the near wall, raised the horizontal bars, and opened the door wide. The one-eyed man’s eagerness had abated. He seemed apprehensive. He licked his lips nervously as he stood waiting beside the open doorway.

The keys rattled again in Sanderson’s hand. Methodically he leaned forward, opened the first of the four grilled doors. A curt command came from his lips.

“Come out! It is dark outside; time for you to be gone.”

The cell’s occupant slouched slowly over the threshold into the full glare of the light. He was naked, this one. Stark naked, except for a thin silver chain which encircled his throat. That chain had reposed, not long ago, on the slender throat of a young girl—a young girl who, in the midst of a merry party at the Rand house, had crept away with her tuxedo-clad escort and gone for a midnight stroll along the deserted beach, on a night when snow had fallen and the surf had pounded a death-dirge in the dark.

Sluggishly the naked shape paced across the room, past Oleg, and through the small doorway where Oleg stood on guard. With narrowed, triumphant eyes



Sanderson stood watching, then turned and unlocked the second of the iron-barred cell-door . . . and the third . . . and the fourth.

When it was over, the four cells were empty, the four gaunt inmates had vanished silently through the doorway which apparently led to the outside. Oleg, closing the door and dropping the heavy wooden bars into place, swung about and said gutturally:

“Now I go let loose the dogs, huh?”

Sanderson nodded, smiled cruelly. Turning, he retraced his steps to the ladder, and climbed it, thrusting open the trap above him. Ascending to the game-room, he waited for Oleg to clamber through the aperture. Then he lowered the trap, locked it, and slid the concealing carpet back into place.

“All right, let the dogs loose,” he said grimly. “This time we will give the police something to think about. Something they will never forget.”

7. Portygee Murder

Mark Simms, finding himself trapped in Sanderson's laboratory, finally ceased his futile assault on the locked door and stepped back, realizing that he had only himself to blame. He had been a fool, had walked blindly into a trap so obvious that even a half-wit would have sensed the presence of danger. Now, with a slow shrug of his shoulders, he lowered himself into a chair and sat staring.

Morbidly he inspected the room in which he had been made prisoner. A light still burned in the ceiling, the white-topped table and glass-panelled instrument cases still gleamed dully, suggestively, adding to his belief that the chamber was something more than a laboratory for taxidermal pursuits. He stood up, paced toward the table.

He stopped abruptly. Above him, the light went out, leaving him alone in a well of darkness.

A scowl twisted Simms' lips. Turning, he stared toward the door, anticipating the return of the fiend who had imprisoned him. Then he saw that no streaks of light penetrated beneath the barrier from the cellar beyond, and he realized that Sanderson, or someone else, had undoubtedly extinguished all the cellar lights by turning a switch in the upper portion of the house.

There was nothing significant in that. Merely a matter of routine.

He groped back to the chair and sat down again. Escape was impossible. The room contained only one door, and that was locked. True, he had come here with the avowed intent of picking that lock and forcing his way into this very room. But Sanderson, after slamming the door shut and turning the key in the slot, had cunningly left the key in its niche. That key, expertly designed and modern in style, could not be forced loose from the inside. Simms had tried, had labored long and steadily over it with sweat drenching his face and breath groaning through his clenched teeth. But his efforts had been futile.

Slumped in the chair now, he pushed a spread-fingered hand through his

dishevelled hair and made a desperate attempt to reason the situation out. There was but one answer. His every line of thought, no matter how devious, returned to the same point. The door *had* to be opened.

His mind shifted to the steel instruments in the sinister glass-panelled cases near the wall. Scowling, he stood erect again and felt his way through the dark toward them. Then he heard something and stood quite still, one hand dropping mechanically to the pocket where his revolver should have been but was not.

The sound was almost inaudible, and came not from the cellar but from somewhere close by, beyond the rear wall of the laboratory. He turned slowly, cursing the darkness which made him blind. The sound came again, a muffled hammering noise, as if someone, or something, were wearily pounding at the wall itself, seeking release or admittance.

Simms flattened against the smooth barrier, listened a moment. He said curtly, in a guarded voice:

"Who's there? Who is it?"

The answer stiffened him. It came slowly, after an interval of ten seconds or more. A woman's voice, vibrant and pleading, said suddenly:

"Oh God, let me out of here! Please let me out!"

Simms' face paled. Despite the distortion caused by the intervening wall, he knew that voice, recognized it. It belonged to a girl with dark brown eyes, a girl who had been in his thoughts more than was necessary during the past few hours.

He pressed his face to the wall, said quietly in a voice barely loud enough to carry through:

"Take it easy, sister. What is this—a door?"

"Yes! Yes, it's a door! It opens from that side. There's a hidden panel—"

Simms stepped back, passed a flat hand over the wall, exploring its smooth surface.

"All right, sister. I'll find it. Take it easy now."

He did find it, after an interlude of nerve-wracking doubt. A grunt of satisfaction escaped his lips as the sliding panels opened. He stepped forward quickly. His outstretched hand encountered perpendicular bars, came in contact with another hand, soft and warm, which clung there. He scowled, bewildered.

"What is this, a jail?" he said quietly.

A sob answered him, but whether relief or despair motivated it, he could not be sure. His fingers still covered those other fingers, protectingly. The girl said anxiously:

"Can't you make a light?"

Simms scowled, reached into his pocket for matches, wondering why he had failed to think of it before. His scowl deepened when his search produced only a crumpled book of paper stubs with but two lights left. He scratched one carefully, stared into the girl's face as the match sputtered into flame.

It was a white face, anxious and full of fear. The sight of it did something to

Simms' masculine heart, made him hate Sanderson blindly, viciously.

"How did you get here?" the girl whispered.

"Walked in, like the damned fool I am."

"You—you mean you're locked in?"

"I sure am, sister. You and me both, so we might as well get together on it. How does this iron thing open?"

"With a key," she said heavily. "Sanderson has it."

Simms made a wry face, dropped the glowing match as it burned his fingers. The darkness then seemed more complete than ever, holding the girl and himself in a tenacious grip. He fumbled with the iron door, realized that the girl was right. Only a key would open it.

For that matter, what difference did it make whether the door came open or not? Even if he succeeded in jimmying the lock, the girl would still be a prisoner. But somehow he wanted her beside him, without those grim bars intervening. Why, he did not know, had no time to wonder. But the bars were sinister . . .

Saving his last match for the task ahead of him, he mumbled a word of encouragement to the imprisoned girl, then turned and groped back across the laboratory. There were sharp-pointed steel instruments in the glass-panelled cabinets near the wall. Those instruments were better than the thin-bladed pen-knife in his pocket.

His out-thrust hand located one of the cabinets, clawed open the glass door. Scooping a handful of tools, he returned to the iron grill, pushed the crumpled match-book, with its solitary match, through the bars into the girl's hand.

"Light that and hold it where I can see what I'm doing. I'll get you out of there, all right."

She obeyed without protest, holding the flame directly above the lock, where its glare illuminated the key-slot and cast flickering shadows into her anxious face. Simms selected an instrument that looked like a nut-pick. Poking it into the slot, he turned it slowly in lean fingers.

He was still turning it when the match went out. In the dark then, he continued his efforts, working by touch alone. The girl said softly, eagerly:

"Can you do it?"

His answer was inaudible. The real answer came a moment later, when he straightened triumphantly and put his weight against the door. The lock clicked. The door opened inward with a soft whine. A sob of relief came involuntarily from the girl's lips.

Then, for no reason at all, she was suddenly in Simms' arms. Tortured nerves gave way; the terror of the past few hours, and the horrors of her confinement, took their toll. Sobbing softly, the girl clung to Simms with trembling hands, as if realizing that she had found at last, the only person in this house of sinister mystery who could be trusted.

For a long time neither Simms nor the girl spoke. Holding her in his arms, Simms waited patiently for her sobs to cease. Darkness enveloped the two of

them; they seemed utterly alone in a world of shadows. Then, stepping backward, Claire Evans said in a low, trembling voice:

"There—there's someone else in the prison-room."

Simms stiffened, scowling. "Someone else?"

"Yes. A man, chained to the wall—"

Grimly Simms paced forward, feeling his way across the threshold. He had no light, no means of making one. In the dark, he advanced cautiously, one hand half upraised in front of him.

His probing foot came in contact with something soft, limp. A low exclamation left his lips. He stooped, reached an exploring hand to touch the thing on the floor. His fingers encountered rough clothing, naked flesh, matted hair, then came in contact with the metal links of a chain.

Slowly he stood erect, turned away. Groping to the doorway, he collided with the girl, put a firm hand on her trembling arm.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know," she said.

"That sort of thing comes under the general head of taxidermy, hey?"

The girl shuddered, came closer to him. She was afraid; he could tell that by the way she was trembling, the way her slender body quivered against his. Well, she had a right to be afraid. Any sensitive girl, after being locked in Sanderson's vile prison-room and forced to remain there in the dark, in company with that pitiful thing on the floor . . .

Simms' mind shot back to the very first time he had invaded Sanderson's cellar. The sounds he had heard then, the hideous human cries of agony, had in all probability come from the tortured throat of the poor devil who lay chained in the prison-room. No further sounds would come from that same throat. Not any more. Sanderson, damn him, had—

The girl's voice interrupted Simms' thoughts. She said suddenly:

"We've got to get out of here, Mr. Simms. We—we mustn't be here when that monster comes back! You don't know him. He isn't human!"

Simms' mouth tightened in a thin line. His hand went into his pocket, came out holding the assorted steel instruments which he had taken from one of Sanderson's glass-panelled cabinets.

No, he did not know Sanderson as well as the girl did. But if that thing in the prison-room, chained to the wall there, was a sample of Sanderson's handiwork . . .

Lieutenant Michael Hurley leaned across the butt-scarred table in the headquarters room of State Police Barracks, and glared into the stubborn face of Max Ferris. The clock on the wall, above him, said three-thirty. For more than an hour Hurley had been sitting in the same place, staring into the same stubborn countenance, striving to batter down the prisoner's resistance.

He dragged a deep breath now, preparatory to beginning a new line of attack.

The telephone at his elbow interrupted him with a jangling clamor. He clawed the instrument toward him, jammed the receiver against his ear, and growled into the mouthpiece.

Then he listened, and Max Ferris stared at him, watching his face go white. The 'phone trembled in Hurley's hand. He set it down, mumbled inaudible words, as if dazed. When he forked the receiver a moment later and stood up, his face was utterly empty of color. He paced slowly to the door, opened it, and spoke thickly to someone in the next room. Then he returned to the desk, gazed down at Ferris, and said heavily:

"I guess you were right, mister. I guess I was a damned fool not to believe you in the first place. But, good God—"

Ferris said anxiously: "What's happened? What's happened now?"

"Murder. Worse."

Uniformed troopers entered the room, stood staring as Hurley turned to confront them. Hurley said sluggishly, still dazed by the abruptness of what had happened:

"There's been murder, down in the Portygee fishing-village. We'll have to go down there."

The troopers gaped. Hurley's overtaxed nerves gave way abruptly.

"For God's sake, get moving! Get the car!"

His fists tightened then, and he stood trembling. He was still trembling when he climbed into the cruising-car, a moment later. Even in the glow of his cigarette, his face was still white and strained. He was thinking fearfully of the young man in evening clothes, and the young woman in a velvet dance-gown, both of whom had been slaughtered two nights ago on the lonely, storm-driven expanse of South Beach.

The car, bearing Hurley, Max Ferris and two troopers, droned out of the yard, into the main highway. Ten minutes later, after roaring sullenly ahead at dangerous speed, drilling the dark with its twin headlights, it swung left into a narrow, macadam road where tall trees loomed on either side.

The four men exchanged no idle comments as the winding road slipped under the headlight's glare. Each man was apparently concerned with his own thoughts. Hurley, in particular, had drawn into his shell and was sitting rigid, staring straight ahead of him. Not until the lights of the fishing-village winked ahead, through the damp darkness, did Hurley condescend to volunteer any information.

"Kelly called me," he said then, "from a jerk gas-station somewhere near here. Said there'd been wholesale murder in the village. Kelly wouldn't exaggerate."

The others nodded grimly. Shane Kelly, toughest trooper on the force, would not be apt to garnish the truth. If he said something was so, it was so.

"All I got to say is," Hurley growled, "we been barking up the wrong tree. We been hanging around Sanderson's place, like damned fools, and now

this happens.”

The car groaned from macadam into deep ruts of beach-sand, labored ahead for another hundred yards, and came to a stop in the center of the little village. Ramshackle huts, some of them showing lighted windows, loomed on either side. A thick-set man came striding forward from a nearby doorway.

Hurley got out, stared around. The night air was cold, penetrating, with a salty smell of seaweed and beach-foam. A dull rumble of surf was audible from the darkness off to the left. Hurley breathed deeply, turned to face the man who was advancing toward him.

An outstretched hand found Hurley's arm and clung there. Hurley peered into the man's face, said curtly:

“All right, Kelly. Spill it. What happened?”

“If I told you, you'd call me a liar,” Kelly muttered. “Come and look for yourself.”

The others followed as Hurley strode after the trooper's six-foot figure. It occurred to Hurley to wonder, then, why the village was so quiet—why, if murder had been committed, the inhabitants were not swarming excitedly about the scene of the horror. The question was answered a moment later when Kelly, stopping in the doorway of one of the shanties, said grimly:

“This place was a madhouse when I first got here. Queer people, these foreigners. I had to slap a couple of 'em down before they'd break up and clear out. Then they holed themselves up like rats, and locked their doors. That is, some of 'em did. The others—well, you'll find out.”

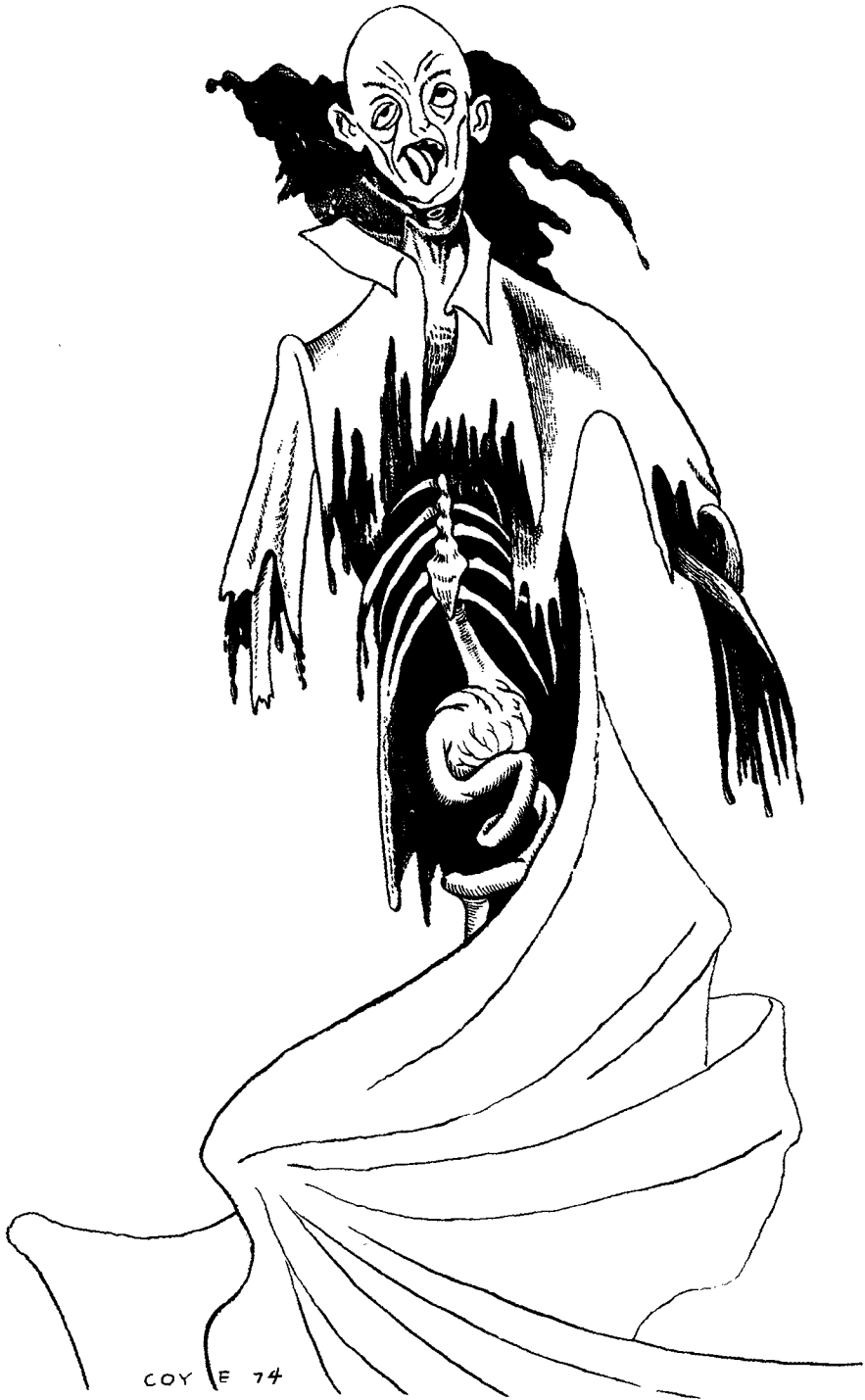
Hurley paced over the threshold, studied the layout with narrowed eyes. The place was a two-roomed hovel, musty, ill-smelling. Bare walls angled up from an uncarpeted floor. A home-made table, topped with oil-cloth and supporting dirty dishes, stood crookedly in the center of one room. In the other room, a four-poster bed ate up all the available space.

Hurley stood motionless, stared down at a huddled shape on the floor near the legs of the table. The shape was covered with torn tarpaulin. A protruding arm and foot held Hurley's gaze, caused him to lean forward, licking his dry lips.

“That's one of 'em,” Kelly said huskily. “Pietro Gallini, the guy's name is. His wife is in the other room. It seems she was in bed, and he was eatin' his breakfast, gettin' ready to go out fishin'. They work queer hours, these foreigners.”

Hurley reached down, drew the tarpaulin aside. His breath caught in his throat. Max Ferris, standing close behind him, took a step backward and said “Christ!” One of the troopers turned away, clearing his throat noisily.

The thing on the floor was a man, or had been. Its face, gaping up at the ceiling, was a death-mask of fear, with protruding, button-like eyes and lolling tongue. The throat, half covered by a blood-drenched shirt-collar, was torn from ear to ear, the interior jugular vein horribly exposed. From throat to groin, the man's body was a mangled, crimson mass of shapeless flesh.



Only for a moment did Hurley stare. Then, shuddering violently, he dragged the tarpaulin back into place and stepped away. Slowly, as if steeling himself to the ordeal, he faced Kelly and said:

"Let's see the other one."

Kelly hung back, answered curtly: "She's in the other room, I told you."

Hurley paced forward, seemed relieved when he reached the bed and found nothing lying there. Then his gaze dropped to the floor. He stiffened. Slowly, with trembling fingers, he stuck a cigarette in his lips and lit it, inhaling deeply.

The woman had apparently been sleeping naked. She lay in the shadows of the bed, uncovered, her arms embracing the wooden bed-leg. Coarse black hair masked her face, her large body lay in a lake of carmine. Hurley took one long look at the pile of mutilated flesh, at the horrible thing which had been done to it, and recoiled abruptly. The cigarette hung limp in his lips. He made a growling sound in his throat as he stumbled across the threshold.

The others stared at him. Pacing to the table, he leaned there with both hands gripping the table-top, said thickly:

"All right, I've seen enough. Let's have the story."

"That's all the story there is," Kelly shrugged, "except what happened afterwards."

"Well, what happened afterwards?"

"Plenty. There was a woman here named Maria Senko, swearing to God she saw the murderer when he came out of the shack. Said she knew what he was, and where he came from. Said he was one of Sanderson's creatures, whatever that means."

Hurley's eyes narrowed. He said quietly: "Go ahead. Spill it."

"Well, she had plenty of guts, this Senko woman. I guess all these foreigners have plenty. She did a lot of talkin', and persuaded some of the villagers to go with her to the Sanderson place, for a showdown. I couldn't stop 'em. They started off down the beach about twenty minutes before you got here."

Hurley spat out the butt of his cigarette. "They've gone to Sanderson's place?"

"Unless they get cold feet and change their minds."

"And that's all you know? The Senko woman didn't say who murdered these two people?"

"Only that one of Sanderson's creatures did it," Kelly shrugged. "If you can make any sense out of that—"

Hurley straightened, glared at Max Ferris.

"I guess that fits in with what you were telling me, all right. That makes me a thick-headed damned fool. If I'd listened to Simms—"

He strode to the door, turned again, said sullenly to the troopers:

"One of you stay here. Kelly, you come with me. You too, Ferris. If the Senko woman had guts enough to break in on Sanderson, I guess we can do the same. And by God, if that house of his is the kind of house I think it is, I'll be

apt to hand him over to the Senko woman and let her tear him apart!"

8. Handshake with Death

Henry Sanderson, standing at a window of his home, peered out across the snow-covered yard to where gaunt trees cast their shadows in pale moonlight. A clock, somewhere in the bowels of the big house, struck four times. Outside, the first traces of murky dawn were beginning to be visible.

A scuffing sound at the end of the corridor caught Sanderson's attention. He turned sharply, then relaxed again as Oleg, the dog-keeper, came toward him along the dimly lighted passage.

"The dogs have returned?" Sanderson demanded.

Oleg nodded affirmatively, reaching a hand up to push shaggy hair out of his eyes. "They come back just now."

"And the others?"

"Only two come back yet. Antone, he is still out. So is the bad one."

Sanderson scowled, turned again to the window. Presently he stiffened, put both hands on the sill and stared hard. Outside, a hunched shape appeared at the lower end of the yard, came slowly forward across the moonlit snow.

The shape was a man, half naked, walking with head down and long arms dangling almost to the ground. At sight of him, Sanderson stepped back, said curtly to Oleg:

"Come!"

Striding down the corridor with Oleg behind him, he descended the stairs to the main portion of the house, and advanced quickly to the front door. A cruel, hungry smile twisted his lips as he drew the door open. Outside, the hunched shape was still moving across the yard toward the house.

Sanderson stepped onto the veranda, stared at the man intently, and called out in a harsh voice:

"Rennick! Here!"

The man named Rennick stood motionless, then turned his head slowly, as if seeking the source of the command. Sluggishly he came forward, ascended the veranda steps, stopped again and peered dully at Sanderson. Clotted hair hung over his eyes. His expressionless face was a hideous gargoyle, smeared with blotches of red sticky stuff which was blood. His dangling hands were carmine.

"I have something more for you, Rennick," Sanderson said quietly. "Something easy, right here in the house. Come with me."

The man licked his lips, made a guttural sound in his throat. With the same sluggish movement, as if his body were somehow bloated and unwieldy, he followed Sanderson into the house and down the central corridor to the kitchen. Sanderson's hand touched the wall-switch which controlled the cellar lights, then came away again without turning it.

"It will be more entertaining in the dark," he murmured.

He opened the cellar door, motioned his strange companion forward. Slowly, with increasing eagerness, Rennick descended the wooden steps into the vault of darkness below. Sanderson followed warily, watching every move the man made, as if uncertain how much longer his orders would be obeyed. Oleg, the one-eyed man, hung back at an even greater distance.

No lights burned in the cellar. The game-room, and the furnace-room beyond, were wells of gloom, except for the faint murky glow emanating from the narrow window high in the wall. At the foot of the stairs Rennick stopped, stared around him as if bewildered. Sanderson, pointing to the door of the laboratory, held forth a ring of keys and said softly:

"Whatever you find in there is yours. All yours, Rennick. Two people are in there, and one—" Sanderson's lips curled significantly—"is a woman."

Rennick's bloody fingers clawed the keys from Sanderson's hand. His gargoyle mouth opened, his tongue came out to lick his lips. He took a quick step forward. Then he stood quite still.

Before him, a significant sound invaded the silence of the cellar. There was a dull, metallic click—the click of a lock yielding under pressure. The door of the laboratory creaked faintly as it was pushed open from within.

Rennick stood rigid, glaring with avid eyes. A shadowy figure, barely visible in the darkness of the chamber, stepped through the widening aperture in front of him. A low, liquid growl came from Rennick's throat.

The escaping prisoner stopped as if stabbed. Behind him a whispering voice, the voice of Claire Evans, said suddenly, anxiously:

"Mark! What is it? What's wrong?"

Mark Simms drew a long, deep breath and stepped backward. His mind, already weary from the nerve-racking suspense of the past hour, refused for a moment to focus on the new danger confronting him. He knew that the way to escape was barred, that the girl and he were no longer alone in the cellar. Beyond that he could not think.

The past hour had taken its toll on him. Only after an eternity of trying had he succeeded in forcing the wedged key from its slot, to enable him to pick the lock of the prison-door. The constant threat of impending peril had sapped his strength. The curse of darkness had not helped.

Now, reaching behind him to grip the girl's hand, he waited stiffly, grimly, for the materialization of this new menace. His fingers still clutched the sharp-pointed steel instrument with which he had opened the barrier. His very stiffness warned the girl to silence.

The darkness itself was a menace, concealing the real danger which lurked within it. From somewhere in that well of gloom, hellishly close, came a sound of slow, throaty breathing. There was nothing else.

Simms' heart hammered against his ribs, leaving him alternately hot and cold as he did the only thing possible: waited for the unseen assailant, or assailants, to take definite form. The girl beside him was trembling; he could feel the throb of

her body. Yet she knew better than to cling to him, hindering his freedom of movement. She too, waited grimly for what was coming.

It came, presently, in the form of slow, stealthy footsteps. The darkness itself, or a certain portion of it, seemed to advance sluggishly, threatening annihilation. Simms' fingers tightened around the slender shaft of the steel tool. He reached out a protecting arm, pushed the girl back over the threshold.

Then, with uncanny quickness, the advancing shape took form. A snarling, half-naked hulk lunged forward, uttering obscene sounds which ate into the very core of Simms' soul. Outstretched hands, reeking of blood, made vicious contact with Simms' recoiling body.

Hurled against the wall, Simms fought with fury born of desperation. What he was fighting, he could not be sure, even though the thing possessed human form. That vile stench of blood was nauseating, stifling; it came from the man's whole body, from the gusts of sour breath exploding from his lips. Writhing sideways, Simms slipped from the embrace of the monster's naked arms, lunged clear of the drooling mouth which sucked toward his throat.

He went down then, hurled off balance by a sudden sweep of the fiend's arm. The snarling face descended toward him, even as he rolled frantically to avoid it. He stabbed upward with all his strength, driving the sharp-pointed steel tool into the center of the massive hulk that fell upon him.

It was a battle to the death. From the doorway of the prison-room, the girl stared with wide eyes, horrified, unable to go to Simms' aid. At the far end of the chamber, two other shadowed forms watched the conflict with equal intentness, waiting for the inevitable conclusion.

On the floor, Simms waged a grim, desperate battle for existence. Pinned down by the monster's heaving body, he strove wildly to free himself, drove blow after blow into the obscene mouth which sought to fasten in his throat. Hooked fingers, possessed of incredible strength, clawed at him, tearing the clothes from his chest and shoulders, raking the flesh beneath. Animal growls came gutturally from the fiend's lips, filling the entire chamber with their awesome significance.

Simms groaned audibly. His strength was near gone, his body limp and lame from the agony it was absorbing. Only his will to live, to obtain revenge, gave him power enough to continue fighting.

He heard something then, which quickened his dulled senses. Where the sound came from, he could not be sure, but its source was not in the cellar. Somewhere in the upper portion of the house, or in the terrain outside the house, hell had broken loose. There was a muffled sound of gunfire, of men shouting harshly. A lurid scream jangled shrill and clear above other sounds which were unnameable . . .

Simms heaved himself sideways, wrenching clear for an instant of the weight above him. A mad thought entered his mind, festered there, born of renewed hope. Throwing away the chance to regain his feet, he used up his moment of

freedom by rolling blindly across the floor, until his twisting body thudded painfully against the solid base of the huge furnace. Then the monster was upon him again, clawing at him with increased ferocity.

Simms staked everything, his own life and the life of the girl, on the next mad move. Fighting furiously one moment, he went suddenly limp the next, feigning defeat. A growl of triumph came from the foam-flecked lips which hung within a foot of his throat. The lips descended . . .

Simms' hands shot up with pile-driver force. Savagely they slapped against the fiend's neck, locked there. With a final desperate lunge he twisted half erect, exerted all his strength in hurling the blood-smeared face away from him.

There was a sickening, grinding impact as the monster's head crashed against the iron base of the furnace. Hot blood, spurting from the man's crushed skull, splashed over Simms' arms. Releasing his hold, Simms rocked backwards, groped to his knees.

Those other sounds were still audible in all their significance. Something else was audible, too. Something closer, more important. Suggestive sounds came from the lesser darkness, near the foot of the cellar stairs. Staring, Simms made out two indistinct shapes, and thanked God that the increasing dawn-light from the narrow window had relieved him of his blindness.

Those shapes were sinister, their presence lent a new significance to the attack of the monster. One of them, the one advancing slowly, cautiously toward him, obviously intent on finishing what the unnamed fiend had begun, was Oleg, the dog-keeper. The other was the proprietor of this house of horror, Sanderson himself.

Even as Simms stared, Sanderson came to life. He had been listening intently, fearfully, to the sounds from above. Now, realizing the one-eyed man's purpose, he reached out and dragged Oleg back, snarling at him.

"No, you fool! Not now! Let the dogs loose and release the others. By God, if this is a police raid, and they find those things here—"

Simms groped erect, stepped back into the shadows of the furnace. His gaze shifted anxiously to the door of the prison-room, seeking the shadowed form of the girl. She was standing there motionless, as if fascinated by the sudden turn of events. She cried out a warning as Sanderson took a slow step forward.

Ice-cold fingers gripped Simms' heart then. He stared at Sanderson, stiffened convulsively. He was a rat in a trap, about to be destroyed. Sanderson's outstretched hand held a levelled black object which was a revolver. Unarmed, Simms' stood in the face of cold-blooded annihilation.

The sounds from above meant nothing now, even though they had increased in volume. Sanderson, obviously fearing an invasion by the police, intended to wipe out all evidence of his sadistic ghoulishness. Advancing slowly, deliberately, he held the gun in rigid fingers, waiting for a chance to press the trigger.

For ten seconds Simms stood motionless, protected by the gloom of the massive furnace. There in the shadows he was hidden from the killer's staring

eyes. If he moved, even stirring an inch, it would be to invite a bullet.

His body ached from its rigidity, throbbed from the mauling it had received at the hands of the madman who lay inert on the floor. He wondered vaguely why the hellish pounding of his heart did not give him away. Grimly he watched Sanderson's slow advance, stared at the weapon in the man's fist.

Then he lunged.

It was a desperate, headlong lunge, inspired by a wild hope of achieving the impossible. Blindly Simms shot into the open, hurtled across the narrow expanse of floor separating him from the killer's revolver. Head down, arms outflung in front of him, he hurled himself straight at Sanderson's legs.

Too late, Sanderson recoiled.

The gun belched, even as Simms made contact. In the narrow confines of the cellar, the report was a thunder-clap, reverberating wildly from wall to wall, filling the chamber with a mad, mocking cacophony. From the doorway of the laboratory, Claire Evans screamed.

The gun did not belch again. Hurling back by the force of Simms' charge, Sanderson reeled drunkenly across the floor. The gun spun from his hand, lost itself in deeper darkness near the furnace. Simms, carried forward by his own momentum, crashed sideways into the wall.

Dazed by the impact, he clung there, fighting to retain consciousness, anticipating attack. But the attack was not forthcoming. Sanderson, stumbling backward, had no desire to meet the same fate as the madman who lay on the floor. His only thought was for escape.

The stairs groaned as he staggered up them, clawing the railing with curled fingers. Simms, staring with wide eyes, took a step forward, stood swaying. The door at the top clattered shut. Sanderson was gone.

9. *Taps*

Simms was aware, then, that things were happening in the upper portion of the house. The realization came to him slowly, eating its way into him sluggishly, fighting through a fog of sensations which already crowded his mind. He was aware, too, that his violent handshake with death had left its mark within him. Sickness and nausea possessed him. Body and brain were both numb, slow to react.

He turned slowly, facing the girl who came toward him. She, too, had suffered a reaction. She was sobbing as she put a trembling hand on his arm and said anxiously, almost inaudibly:

"Are—are you hurt?"

"Some," he muttered. "I'll get over it."

She looked toward the top of the stairs, as if bewildered by the sounds from above.

"Something is happening, Mark. Something terrible!"

Simms scowled, moved slowly forward. Whatever was going on up there, he and she would be better off in the thick of it, rather than down here waiting for the hell to descend. He climbed slowly, waited at the top for her to reach him. His hand gripped the knob, turned it, came away again. The door was locked.

The girl stared, frightened. Simms stepped back, lunged forward again, bringing his shoulder in savage, painful contact with the barrier. He tried again, made a growling noise in his throat. A moment later, when his fourth effort brought success and the door clattered open, his face was white from self inflicted agony, his shoulder was red and raw, beginning to swell.

Grimly he paced into the kitchen, peered around him. The room was pale with gray dawn-light, seemed cold, sinister. The corridor leading to the front of the house was a murky tunnel, uninviting.

The place was strangely quiet, so quiet that Simms hung back, bewildered, and reached a protecting hand behind him to grip the girl's arm. Cautiously he entered the corridor, paced down the thick carpet. A sound from the floor above caught his attention. He stiffened, strode slowly past the door of Sanderson's study, stopped again at the foot of the central staircase.

Those other sounds were again audible then, not from within the house but from somewhere outside. They were significant, telling their own story. Men and dogs were out there, and at least one woman. Claire Evans stood staring, listening, and stepped closer to Simms as if fearing to be left alone. Again that guttural, throaty sound, strangely like an exclamation of triumph, came from the landing above.

Simms put one foot on the stairs, motioned the girl back as she would have followed. She watched him with unblinking eyes as he ascended noiselessly. Nearing the top, he made fists of his hands, anticipating danger. His gaze encountered a hunched figure standing at one of the hall windows. The man was Oleg.

The top step creaked dismally as Simms trusted his weight to it. Abruptly Oleg swung about, glaring. Judging from appearances, the one-eyed man had been staring hungrily at what was going on in the yard below the window. His face was still a gloating mask as he confronted Simms. With a hoarse growl of triumph he hurled himself forward.

His very eagerness proved his undoing. Had he come slowly, the result might have been different. Simms, acting on instinct alone, dropped on hands and knees as the hurtling body shot toward him. The stair-well, yawning below, was a death trap.

The one-eyed man saw his danger too late. Frantically he strove to quell his momentum. A lurid scream jangled from his lips as he rocketed headlong over Simms' sprawled frame. Arms outflung, body contorted by the impact, Oleg shot into space.

He struck once, midway down the stairs. The sound was a sickening crunch. Rebounding, he crashed sideways against the railing, screaming agony as his

broken body pitched the remaining distance to the corridor below. With a dull thud he landed at the feet of the girl who stood, wide-eyed.

Simms stood erect at the top of the stairs, peered down and licked his lips. The upper hallway was empty when he turned to examine it. Slowly he descended, stepped past the girl's rigid form, and bent over the broken thing on the carpet. When he straightened again, he took the girl's arm, led her away.

Claire Evans, looking at him fearfully, whispered:

"Is he—is he dead?"

Simms nodded. The nod might have meant anything. He had more to think about, now, than the fate of the one-eyed man who had assisted Sanderson in making this place a house of hell. Gripping the girl's hand, he moved quickly toward the front door. Upstairs, Oleg had been glaring hungrily down at what was going on in the yard. That was significant.

But was it? The sounds of turmoil had abated now. The baying of the dogs, for instance, which had carried hellish possibilities with it, was no longer audible. There were no more revolver shots

Simms dragged the door open, stood wide-legged on the threshold. Then, instead of pacing forward across the veranda, he stood very still, his fingers tightening on the arm of the girl beside him.

It was a strange scene, and the curtain had evidently not yet fallen on the grim climax of it. A hundred yards distant across that snow-carpeted terrain of death, two separate knots of figures—uniformed troopers—were gathering around significant dark shapes which lay on the ground. Simms stared at them, scowling in bewilderment as he recognized Hurley. Beside Hurley stood the man who had called himself Max Ferris, the man who had crawled from the cellar window, a very long time ago, and had been apprehended before making his escape.

There were other things, too, in that grayish-white enclosure. Oleg, the one-eyed man, had evidently succeeded in carrying out Sanderson's orders before going upstairs to view the horror from a place of security. Gaunt, four-legged shapes made dark blotches in the snow, where bullets from the troopers' guns had felled them. Sanderson's dogs, some of them at least, would no longer run wild, terrorizing the countryside

Mechanically Simms released the girl's arm and took a step forward. Then he stopped again, realized that Hurley and the troopers had not come alone. Some of the intruders at the far end of the yard were not members of the police.

Even as Simms stared, a strange procession detached itself from the group and came slowly, menacingly toward the veranda. A woman led them, the same thick-set foreign-looking woman who had accosted Simms on South Beach, long ago. He pondered the meaning of her presence, narrowed his eyes as he peered at her. Maria Senko, the name was. But why

He stepped backward, said quietly to Claire Evans:

"They mean trouble. Better be careful."

The girl did not reply. She, too, was perplexed, gazing fearfully at the

muttering men who followed the Senko woman forward. They were denizens of the fishing village. Hard-faced foreigners, all of them, advancing ominously.

What they wanted, Simms could only guess. The guess brought a new thought, a thought which had been crowded from his mind during the rapid events of the past quarter hour. Sanderson! Where—

The Senko woman, stopping at the foot of the steps, glared up at him and said sullenly:

“Where is he, huh? Where’s Sanderson?”

Simms made no answer. The woman’s face fascinated him. Cold-blooded murder was written in it. The eyes were small, glowing pits, the lips were curled back over unclean teeth. Maria Senko and the men of the village had come here for one reason only—to lay their hands on Sanderson and destroy him.

Trembling fingers made contact with Simms’ arm. Behind him, Claire Evans said hesitantly:

“I—I think I know where he is, Mark. There’s a prison-room in the cellar—”

Simms hesitated. Glancing quickly across the yard, he saw that Hurley and the troopers were concerned only with a problem of their own. They were lifting those other shapes from the ground, preparatory to carrying them into the house. And the Senko woman was already climbing the veranda steps, glaring as if she believed the girl and himself to be guilty of shielding Sanderson’s whereabouts.

Simms turned then, and made up his mind. They wanted Sanderson? All right, they could have him. The more hideous the punishment they meted out to him, the more fitting it would be. This was one time when police routine had to be discarded. Any attempt to enforce it would bring disaster anyway. The villagers were in no mood to be thwarted.

Motioning the girl forward, he said quietly: “Go ahead. Show me.” Then he paced behind her as she moved slowly down the corridor, back into the bowels of the house.

The villagers followed eagerly, muttering among themselves. Fists clenched, lips tight-pressed in a drawn face, Simms listened to them, and heard also the sound of Hurley’s harsh voice bellowing from the yard outside, as if Hurley had at last waked up to a realization of what Maria Senko and her followers intended to do.

Claire Evans, half turning, said anxiously:

“I may be wrong. He may have escaped. But if he’s in the house, he’ll be hiding in—”

The girl stopped talking, stood rigid. Simms, too, heard the sound which had startled her, a furtive, half-inaudible sound from the gloom of the corridor ahead. The girl shrank against him, trembling. Even as he pushed past her, a hunched shape appeared suddenly at the end of the passage, racing desperately toward the door of Sanderson’s study.

Too late, Simms lunged forward. The study door clattered open, slammed

shut in his face as he reached the threshold. Heavy footsteps pounded across the carpeted floor inside.

Savagely he flung the door open again, stumbled over the threshold. At the far end of the room, twenty paces distant, Sanderson was clambering through an open window. For a single second the man crouched on the ledge, stared fearfully as Simms ploughed toward him. Then his hunched body shot from view.

Simms reached the window in a dozen floor-eating strides. It opened on the far side of the house, looked out on a narrow expanse of white lawn. Beyond, not more than twenty yards away, loomed a tangled wall of trees and underbrush.

Sanderson, running on bent legs, crouched low after the fashion of an anthropoid, was already within a few strides of reaching his objective.

Simms put both hands on the sill and hauled himself over, sucking a deep breath as he sprawled to the ground beneath. Behind him the guttural voices of Maria Senko's followers were audible, and when he turned his head, after covering half the distance to the spot where Sanderson had vanished, he saw Claire Evans standing in the window, stiff and motionless, staring. Then his thoughts centered on Sanderson, to the exclusion of all else.

If Sanderson got into the woods, with sufficient head-start to stifle the sounds of his flight, he would make good his escape. There would be a dozen ways open to him. But he needed that head-start.

Simms crashed blindly through dense underbrush, hacking his way with flailing arms. He stopped, heard sounds ahead of him, and ploughed on again. His eyes were no good to him now. Here in the woods, the gray murk of dawn had not yet penetrated. Gaunt trees loomed up in front of him, vicious creepers caught at his legs, tripped him. But those sounds were still audible ahead, advertising the direction of Sanderson's stumbling flight.

Without doubt, the man was making a desperate attempt to elude pursuit. Ahead of him lay the sandy, rock-ribbed cliffs leading down to the sea. If he reached them, there would be a well-defined path, where a man could run without danger of committing suicide.

There was a path already. Reaching it, Simms gave voice to a throaty sob of relief. His body ached savagely, his pounding heart threatened to burst with the punishment it was receiving. Yet he was closing the gap with every stride. The sounds ahead of him were closer. In another moment . . .

The thing happened abruptly. One moment he was stumbling along the narrow path, through an aisle of gloom, next moment a gray expanse of open sky loomed ahead of him, and he made a violent attempt to hurl himself back.

The thing was a trap. Sanderson, realizing the futility of trying to shake loose pursuit, had cunningly contrived to end the matter another way. With the same animal cunning which had marked his every action, he had chosen a shadowed path which led to the brink of the cliff and there ended. Now, crouching there at the trail's end, he waited with outstretched arms as Simms

lunged toward him.

His intent was obvious. With a single sweep of those powerful arms, he could send his assailant hurtling through space. Far below, white water hissed over jagged rocks, awaiting the victim.

But Sanderson guessed wrong.

Simms' lean body bent double as it made contact. Skidding to the ground, with hooked legs outthrust, he crashed heavily, dragging Sanderson with him as he fell. Less than a foot from the cliff's edge, the two writhing bodies tangled in desperate embrace. There, with death reaching spectral hands from the depths below, began a silent, deadly conflict which could have but one hideous conclusion.

Stunned by his contact with the hard ground, Simms fought blindly, instinctively, during those first few minutes. His lips clamped shut on the agonized sobs that welled from his throat. Sick from his old injuries, exhausted by his headlong run through the woods, he had no strength left for anything except the grim business of self-preservation. Yet he was conscious of every detail of what was happening.

Sanderson, fearing impending destruction, had become a mad, lunging animal. The very trap which he had so cunningly laid, so triumphantly prepared for his adversary, was now equally dangerous to himself. Furiously he fought clear of the cliff's edge, where that sickening drop threatened to engulf him.

The man was no weakling. His huge body, despite its layers of fat, possessed enormous strength. That strength was doubled now by his desire to live. His left hand shot out with a sledge-hammer force, clawing at Simms' throat. His right doubled into a hamlike fist, pounded viciously against Simms' heaving body, inflicting agony with every blow.

Simms fought back with equal fury. Savagely he lunged sideways, jerked his legs free of the weight that pinned them down. Sucking great gulps of breath into tortured lungs, he flung both arms around the big man's middle, whipped his legs up and locked them in a vise-like grip.

His fury inspired a cunning equal to that of the man he was fighting. Despite his dread of annihilation, or perhaps because of it, he remembered other things, recalled what Sanderson had attempted to do to a dark-eyed girl, and what the fiend had done to other victims.

Hate and desperation combined in Simms' soul, gave him abnormal strength. Tired muscles clamored for relief, yet he continued to force the combat, put forth every effort to obtain a head-grip and apply killing pressure.

Then he was aware of something else. Somewhere nearby a hoarse voice was bellowing to attract attention. It sounded like Hurley's voice. If that were true, then Hurley and the troopers, and probably those grim foreigners led by the Senko woman, had found the trail, followed it . . .

Triumphantly Simms renewed his attack. With a quick lunge he twisted sideways, hurled Sanderson's writhing body nearer the cliff's edge. His curled hands

drove against the man's neck, clamped there. For a moment victory was certain. Sanderson fell backwards.

A liquid gurgle welled from the big man's throat. Then, with hellish abruptness, the tables were turned again. Sharp teeth imbedded themselves in the flesh of Simms' wrist. His mouth opened, released a hoarse cry of pain. Agony surged through him, eating its way along his arm, numbing the whole side of his body. He stiffened, rocked back on his knees.

A crash of underbrush sounded behind him. Hurley's voice came again, roaring triumphantly, close at hand. Wrenching his mangled wrist loose, Simms lunged forward with blind fury to bring the conflict to an end.

A shriek jangled from Sanderson's bloody lips, as the big man sprawled backward. Stumbling half erect, Simms leaped headlong. Hurley's triumphant bellow, behind him, changed suddenly to a hoarse yell of warning.

It came too late. Sanderson's hands clawed out, caught Simms' legs. For a sickening instant the big man's writhing body toppled on the brink of the cliff. Simms, off balance and carried forward by the fury of his charge, realized his peril but could not avoid it.

Flailing arms found his thighs, locked there in a last embrace. Desperately, hopelessly he strove to regain his equilibrium, to hurl himself clear. His wide eyes stared down into emptiness. Far below, white water churned hungrily over protruding black rocks.

With Sanderson's contorted hulk clinging to him in a mad grip of death, Simms hurtled over the brink.

10. Reveille

There was nothing to see when Hurley stumbled to the cliff's edge and stared down. The foam-flecked water, far below, was all that met Hurley's horrified gaze. Black rocks reared their jagged crowns above hissing surf. Farther out, the white water merged with the deep, rolling green of the sea.

For a long moment Hurley stood there, motionless. Then, shuddering violently, he turned away. Ten paces distant a white-faced girl stood utterly rigid, staring at him; and behind her, other intruders were crowding forward.

Hurley paced toward them with sluggish steps. He did not look into the girl's face. Could not. Mechanically he put an arm around her shoulders. To the troopers who were gazing at him questioningly, he said in a lifeless voice:

"One of you go down there and look around."

Later, long later, Hurley sat at his desk in the headquarters room of State Police Barracks, and peered into the fixed faces of Max Ferris and Claire Evans. Except for the slow breathing of three people, the room was strangely still, as if death itself were a grim spectre among those present.

The girl sat in a straight-backed chair near the wall, staring straight ahead of

her with unseeing eyes. She did not look up when Ferris leaned forward, drew a folded newspaper clipping from his coat pocket, and slid it across the desk. She displayed no interest whatever when Ferris said quietly:

"There's all the proof you need. I wasn't lying. Wasn't exaggerating, either."

Hurley unfolded the paper, scowled down at it. A creased photograph of Henry Sanderson stared back at him from the printed page. Beneath the photograph was a name which was not Henry Sanderson. The name was Henry Marsden. Half-inch headlines said luridly:

HOPEVALE INMATE ESCAPES

*Henry Marsden, Four-Year Inmate of
Private Institution for Insane,
Makes Getaway During Night.
Is Still at Large*

Hurley narrowed his eyes and read further, skipping the introductory sentences which merely repeated the headlined information.

. . . Marsden, confined to the Hopevale Sanatorium four years ago this month, was believed by many to have been a victim of unusual circumstance, and himself made many insistent claims that he was not mentally ill. It is remembered that at the time of his confinement, the name of Franklin J. Reese, brother-in-law of the escaped inmate, played a prominent part in proceedings . . .

Max Ferris, following the movements of Hurley's forefinger on the paper, said quietly, as if reading Hurley's thoughts:

"Whether you know it or not, the guy we found chained in Marsden's prison-room, dead from torture, was the same Franklin Reese. I guess it's easy to figure out why Marsden tortured him to death. I did some close figuring myself, and got plenty of facts to back it up. And I'm telling you Marsden wasn't mad when he was first put away. He may have been insane when he got out, but not when he went in. He was framed, for money—money reasons. And this Reese guy framed him beautifully."

Ferris leaned back, sucked on an unlighted cigarette.

"As for the rest of it, I've told you all I know," he shrugged.

"You better tell me again. This time I'll listen."

"Well," and Ferris hunched his shoulders in a slight shrug, "Marsden escaped from the Hopevale madhouse in July. He must have bought this house and fixed it up during the next couple of months, in preparation for the plans he had for revenge. Three weeks ago, four other inmates escaped. Four of the worst cases in Hopevale—and if they're considered bad in that hell-dive, they're *bad*. Everything pointed to an outside job.

"Well, the Hopevale people were scared stiff, then. Their reputation wasn't any too good anyway, and another splurge of unfavorable publicity would have ruined them. So they kept the whole thing quiet and called in the Beacon Agency, where I work."

Hurley scowled, said grimly: "And then?"

"That's about all, I guess. I worked on the case a few days, and didn't get to first base even. Nothing to tie to. Then I heard some queer stories about this Sanderson place down here, and did some nosing around. It looked hot. So I dragged Miss Evans into it—she's one of the best on the Beacon payroll—and she worked herself into a job as Sanderson's secretary.

"Claire found out the lowdown. Sanderson, Marsden rather, was more than half mad, I guess. Maybe they get that way, after being cooped up in a madhouse for four years. Anyway, he had the vicious idea of avenging himself on society for what it did to him. He engineered the escape of those four Hopevale inmates, and transported them to his house down here, and kept them in confinement, and let them loose every once in a while to commit wholesale murder. I guess he knew how to control them. He learned that in the madhouse. If he didn't, Oleg did anyway. Oleg used to work at the Hopevale. That's where Marsden got him from."

Hurley stared with narrowed eyes. Judging from the expression on his face, he was thinking of recent horrors which bore out Ferris' statement. Thinking probably, of the half-naked, mindless monsters who, after being turned loose by Oleg, the dog-keeper, had fallen before the guns of the troopers, back there in Sanderson's dawn-lit yard. He shuddered, as if the memory of those half-human horrors would haunt him for a long time to come. Then he put his head in his hands and stared down at the desk, into the photographic features of the mad fiend who was responsible for the entire maze of terror.

"Well, it's all over now," he mumbled. "All over, and we've lost the best man in the department. Mark Simms was ace-high. If luck hadn't turned against him at the last minute—"

A soft sobbing sound interrupted Hurley's eulogy, stifled his dreary words. He turned slowly, peered at the girl in the corner, realized that the loss of Mark Simms meant even more to her than it did to the department. Meeting his gaze, she stood erect, trembling, and paced forward.

She was fighting to control her emotions. Suddenly, as if she had been holding the words back for a long time, she said aloud, harshly:

"Oh, God, why did it have to end that way? *Why?* He didn't deserve to die! He should be alive and strong, and—"

A quiet voice, from the doorway behind her, said evenly:

"Thanks, sister."

The girl stiffened, turned slowly, trembling from head to foot. She drew a sharp, sobbing breath, and stared fixedly. Hurley peered past her with eyes as big as saucers. Max Ferris, blinking foolishly, uttered a guttural exclamation.

In the doorway, leaning casually against the door-frame, stood a dishevelled six-foot figure, hands wedged in his pockets. A grim smile twisted the man's lips; his face was blood-smearred, masked by a tangle of wet hair. A long purple welt extended from forehead to chin. Quietly he came forward, walking like an animated scarecrow, his torn clothes hanging in sodden, limp disarray.

The girl stared at him as if seeing a ghost. She took a step forward. Hurley, groping erect, said thickly:

“Well, for the love of God, where did you come from?”

Mark Simms reached out a bruised hand and shook a cigarette from the pack on the desk. Deliberately he stuck the white cylinder in his mouth, lit it, and lowered his scarecrow body into a chair. Drops of water splashed on the floor beneath him. He pushed the drenched hair out of his eyes, and made an obvious effort to stop shivering. All he said was:

“That ocean is cold this time of year, Hurley. Damned cold.”

Then Hurley released pent-up emotions by voicing a lurid oath, and the oath brought another wry smile to those pale lips.

“It’s a funny feeling, dropping through space that way, Hurley. I figured I was done for then, but the good Lord must have figured otherwise or something. When we got all through falling into hell, Sanderson was on the bottom. He got the rocks, I got the water in between. That made all the difference in the world.”

Simms pulled deeply on his cigarette, stared thoughtfully at the glowing end of it.

“Deep water that was, Hurley. Deep enough to drown a guy ten times over, when he’s only half conscious the way I was. But there’s a big rock down there, sticking up out of the surf. Maybe you’ve seen it. The old-timers around here call it ‘Ladyface’ because it looks just like a girl’s face. Maybe that’s what gave me luck. I had enough sense to climb up on the thing and take it easy for a while. And I swear to God that rock looked just like the face of—”

Simms turned slowly, staring meaningfully at Claire Evans. A dull red flush colored the girl’s features as she realized what he meant. Then, groping erect, he exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke and said with a shrug:

“Anyway, you can take my word for it, Hurley—I had a damned good reason for wanting to live a while longer.”

Stragella

NIGHT, BLACK AS PITCH and filled with the wailing of a dead wind, sank like a shapeless specter into the oily waters of the Indian Ocean, leaving a great gray expanse of sullen sea, empty except for a solitary speck that rose and dropped in the long swell.

The forlorn thing was a ship's boat. For seven days and seven nights it had drifted through the waste, bearing its ghastly burden. Now, groping to his knees, one of the two survivors peered away into the East, where the first glare of a red sun filtered over the rim of the world.

Within arm's reach, in the bottom of the boat, lay a second figure, face down. All night long he had lain there. Even the torrential shower, descending in the dark hours and flooding the dory with life-giving water, had failed to move him.

The first man crawled forward. Scooping water out of the tarpaulin with a battered tin cup, he turned his companion over and forced the stuff through re-eded lips.

"Miggs!" The voice was a cracked whisper. "Miggs! Good God, you ain't dead, Miggs? I ain't left all alone out here—"

John Miggs opened his eyes feebly.

"What—what's wrong?" he muttered.

"We got water, Miggs! Water!"

"You're dreamin' again, Yancy. It—it ain't water. It's nothin' but sea—"

"It rained!" Yancy screeched. "Last night it rained. I stretched the tarpaulin. All night long I been lyin' face up, lettin' it rain in my mouth!"

Miggs touched the tin cup to his tongue and lapped its contents suspiciously. With a mumbled cry he gulped the water down. Then, gibbering like a monkey, he was crawling toward the tarpaulin.

Yancy flung him back, snarling.

"No you won't!" Yancy rasped. "We got to save it, see? We got to get out of here."

Miggs glowered at him from the opposite end of the dory. Yancy sprawled down beside the tarpaulin and stared once again over the abandoned sea, struggling to reason things out.

They were somewhere in the Bay of Bengal. A week ago they had been on board the *Cardigan*, a tiny tramp freighter carrying its handful of passengers

from Maulmain to Georgetown. The *Cardigan* had foundered in the typhoon off the Mergui Archipelago. For twelve hours she had heaved and groaned through an inferno of swirling seas. Then she had gone under.

Yancy's memory of the succeeding events was a twisted, unreal parade of horrors. At first there had been five men in the little boat. Four days of terrific heat, no water, no food, had driven the little Persian priest mad; and he had jumped overboard. The other two had drunk salt water and died in agony. Now he and Miggs were alone.

The sun was incandescent in a white hot sky. The sea was calm, greasy, unbroken except for the slow, patient black fins that had been following the boat for days. But something else, during the night, had joined the sharks in their hellish pursuit. Sea snakes, hydrophiinae, wriggling out of nowhere, had come to haunt the dory, gliding in circles round and round, venomous, vivid, vindictive. And overhead were gulls wheeling, swooping in erratic arcs, cackling fiendishly and watching the two men with relentless eyes.

Yancy glanced up at them. Gulls and snakes could mean only one thing—land! He supposed they had come from the Andamans, the prison isles of India. It didn't much matter. They were here. Hideous, menacing harbingers of hope!

His shirt, filthy and ragged, hung open to the belt, revealing a lean chest tattooed with grotesque figures. A long time ago—too long to remember—he had gone on a drunken binge in Goa. Jap rum had done it. In company with two others of the *Cardigan's* crew he had shambled into a tattooing establishment and ordered the Jap, in a bloated voice, to "paint anything you damned well like, professor. Anything at all!" And the Jap, being of a religious mind and sentimental, had decorated Yancy's chest with a most beautiful Crucifix, large, ornate, and colorful.

It brought a grim smile to Yancy's lips as he peered down at it. But presently his attention was centered on something else—something unnatural, bewildering, on the horizon. The thing was a narrow bank of fog lying low on the water, as if a distorted cloud had sunk out of the sky and was floating heavily, half submerged in the sea. And the small boat was drifting toward it.

In a little while the fog bank hung dense on all sides. Yancy groped to his feet, gazing about him. John Miggs muttered something beneath his breath and crossed himself.

The thing was shapeless, grayish-white, clammy. It reeked—not with the dank smell of sea fog, but with the sickly, pungent stench of a buried jungle or a subterranean mushroom cellar. The sun seemed unable to penetrate it. Yancy could see the red ball above him, a feeble, smothered eye of crimson fire, blotted by swirling vapor.

"The gulls," mumbled Miggs. "They're gone."

"I know it. The sharks, too—and the snakes. We're all alone, Miggs."

An eternity passed, while the dory drifted deeper and deeper into the cone. And then there was something else—something that came like a moaning voice

out of the fog. The muted, irregular, sing-song clangor of a ship's bell!

"Listen!" Miggs cackled. "You hear—"

But Yancy's trembling arm had come up abruptly, pointing ahead.

"By God, Miggs! Look!"

Miggs scrambled up, rocking the boat beneath him. His bony fingers gripped Yancy's arm. They stood there, the two of them, staring at the massive black shape that loomed up, like an ethereal phantom of another world, a hundred feet before them.

"We're saved," Miggs said incoherently. "Thank God, Nels—"

Yancy called out shrilly. His voice rang through the fog with a hoarse jangle, like the scream of a caged tiger. It choked into silence. And there was no answer, no responsive outcry—nothing so much as a whisper.

The dory drifted closer. No sound came from the lips of the two men as they drew alongside. There was nothing—nothing but the intermittent tolling of that mysterious, muted bell.

Then they realized the truth—a truth that brought a moan from Miggs' lips. The thing was a derelict, frowning out of the water, inanimate, sullen, buried in its winding-sheet of unearthly fog. Its stern was high, exposing a propeller red with rust and matted with clinging weeds. Across the bow, nearly obliterated by age, appeared the words: *Golconda—Cardiff*.

"Yancy, it ain't no real ship! It ain't of this world—"

Yancy stooped with a snarl, and picked up the oar in the bottom of the dory. A rope dangled within reach, hanging like a black serpent over the scarred hull. With clumsy strokes he drove the small boat beneath it; then, reaching up, he seized the line and made the boat fast.

"You're—goin' aboard?" Miggs said fearfully.

Yancy hesitated, staring up with bleary eyes. He was afraid, without knowing why. The *Golconda* frightened him. The mist clung to her tenaciously. She rolled heavily, ponderously in the long swell; and the bell was still tolling softly somewhere within the lost vessel.

"Well, why not?" Yancy growled. "There may be food aboard. What's there to be afraid of?"

Miggs was silent. Grasping the ropes, Yancy clambered up them. His body swung like a gibbet-corpse against the side. Clutching the rail, he heaved himself over; then stood there, peering into the layers of thick fog, as Miggs climbed up and dropped down beside him.

"I—don't like it," Miggs whispered. "It ain't—"

Yancy groped forward. The deck planks creaked dismally under him. With Miggs clinging close, he led the way into the waist, then into the bow. The cold fog seemed to have accumulated here in a sluggish mass, as if some magnetic force had drawn it. Through it, with arms outheld in front of him, Yancy moved with shuffling steps, a blind man in a strange world.

Suddenly he stopped—stopped so abruptly that Miggs lurched headlong into

him. Yancy's body stiffened. His eyes were wide, glaring at the deck before him. A hollow, unintelligible sound parted his lips.

Miggs cringed back with a livid screech, clawing at his shoulder.

"What—what is it?" he said thickly.

At their feet were bones. Skeletons—lying there in the swirl of vapor. Yancy shuddered as he examined them. Dead things they were, dead and harmless, yet they were given new life by the motion of the mist. They seemed to crawl, to wriggle, to slither toward him and away from him.

He recognized some of them as portions of human frames. Others were weird, unshapely things. A tiger skull grinned up at him with jaws that seemed to widen hungrily. The vertebrae of a huge python lay in disjointed coils on the planks, twisted as if in agony. He discerned the skeletal remains of tigers, tapirs, and jungle beasts of unknown identity. And human heads, many of them, scattered about like an assembly of mocking, dead-alive faces, leering at him, watching him with hellish anticipation. The place was a morgue—a charnel house!

Yancy fell back, stumbling. His terror had returned with triple intensity. He felt cold perspiration forming on his forehead, on his chest, trickling down the tattooed Crucifix.

Frantically he swung about in his tracks and made for the welcome solitude of the stern deck, only to have Miggs clutch feverishly at his arm.

"I'm goin' to get out of here, Nels! That damned bell—these here things—"

Yancy flung the groping hands away. He tried to control his terror. This ship—this *Golconda*—was nothing but a tramp trader. She'd been carrying a cargo of jungle animals for some expedition. The beasts had got loose, gone amuck, in a storm. There was nothing fantastic about it!

In answer, came the intermittent clang of the hidden bell below decks and the soft lapping sound of the water swishing through the thick weeds which clung to the ship's bottom.

"Come on," Yancy said grimly. "I'm goin' to have a look around. We need food."

He strode back through the waist of the ship, with Miggs shuffling behind. Feeling his way to the towering stern, he found the fog thinner, less pungent.

The hatch leading down into the stern hold was open. It hung before his face like an uplifted hand, scarred, bloated, as if in mute warning. And out of the aperture at its base straggled a spidery thing that was strangely out of place here on this abandoned derelict—a curious, menacing, crawling vine with mottled triangular leaves and immense orange-hued blossoms. Like a living snake, intertwined about itself, it coiled out of the hold and wormed over the deck.

Yancy stepped closer, hesitantly. Bending down, he reached to grasp one of the blooms, only to turn his face away and fall back with an involuntary mutter. The flowers were sickly sweet, nauseating. They repelled him with their savage odor.

"Somethin'—" Miggs whispered sibilantly, "is watchin' us, Nels! I can feel it."



COYE 73

Yancy peered all about him. He, too, felt a third presence close at hand. Something malignant, evil, unearthly. He could not name it.

"It's your imagination," he snapped. "Shut up, will you?"

"We ain't alone, Nels. This ain't no ship at all!"

"Shut up!"

"But the flowers there—they ain't right. Flowers don't grow aboard a Christian ship, Nels!"

"This hulk's been here long enough for trees to grow on it," Yancy said curtly. "The seeds probably took root in the filth below."

"Well, I don't like it."

"Go forward and see what you can find. I'm goin' below to look around."

Miggs shrugged helplessly and moved away. Alone, Yancy descended to the lower levels. It was dark down here, full of shadows and huge gaunt forms that lost their substance in the coils of thick, sinuous fog. He felt his way along the passage, pawing the wall with both hands. Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth he went, until he found the galley.

The galley was a dungeon, reeking of dead, decayed food, as if the stench had hung there for an eternity without being molested; as if the entire ship lay in an atmosphere of its own—an atmosphere of the grave—through which the clean outer air never broke.

But there was food here; canned food that stared down at him from the rotted shelves. The labels were blurred, illegible. Some of the cans crumbled in Yancy's fingers as he seized them—disintegrated into brown, dry dust and trickled to the floor. Others were in fair condition, air-tight. He stuffed four of them into his pockets and turned away.

Eagerly now, he stumbled back along the passage. The prospects of food took some of those other thoughts out of his mind, and he was in better humor when he finally found the captain's cabin.

Here, too, the evident age of the place gripped him. The walls were gray with mold, falling into a broken, warped floor. A single table stood on the far side near the bunk, a blackened, grimy table bearing an upright oil lamp and a single black book.

He picked the lamp up timidly and shook it. The circular base was yet half full of oil, and he set it down carefully. It would come in handy later. Frowning, he peered at the book beside it.

It was a seaman's Bible, a small one, lying there, coated with cracked dust, dismal with age. Around it, as if some crawling slug had examined it on all sides, leaving a trail of excretion, lay a peculiar line of black pitch, irregular but unbroken.

Yancy picked the book up and flipped it open. The pages slid under his fingers, allowing a scrap of loose paper to flutter to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it; then, seeing that it bore a line of penciled script, he peered closely at it.

The writing was an apparently irrelevant scrawl—a meaningless memorandum which said crudely:

It's the bats and the crates. I know it now, but it is too late. God help me!

With a shrug, he replaced it and thrust the Bible into his belt, where it pressed comfortingly against his body. Then he continued his exploration.

In the wall cupboard he found two full bottles of liquor, which proved to be brandy. Leaving them there, he groped out of the cabin and returned to the upper deck in search of Miggs.

Miggs was leaning on the rail, watching something below. Yancy trudged toward him, calling out shrilly:

"Say, I got food, Miggs! Food and brand—"

He did not finish. Mechanically his eyes followed the direction of Miggs' stare, and he recoiled involuntarily as his words clipped into stifled silence. On the surface of the oily water below, huge sea snakes paddled against the ship's side—enormous slithering shapes, banded with streaks of black and red and yellow, vicious and repulsive.

"They're back," Miggs said quickly. "They know this ain't no proper ship. They come here out of their hell-hole, to wait for us."

Yancy glanced at him curiously. The inflection of Miggs' voice was peculiar—not at all the phlegmatic, guttural tone that usually grumbled through the little man's lips. It was almost eager!

"What did you find?" Yancy faltered.

"Nothin'. All the ship's boats are hangin' in their davits. Never been touched."

"I found food," Yancy said abruptly, gripping his arm. "We'll eat; then we'll feel better. What the hell are we, anyhow—a couple of fools? Soon as we eat, we'll stock the dory and get off this blasted death ship and clear out of this stinkin' fog. We got water in the tarpaulin."

"We'll clear out? Will we, Nels?"

"Yah. Let's eat."

Once again, Yancy led the way below decks to the galley. There, after a twenty-minute effort in building a fire in the rusty stove, he and Miggs prepared a meal, carrying the food into the captain's cabin, where Yancy lighted the lamp.

They ate slowly, sucking the taste hungrily out of every mouthful, reluctant to finish. The lamplight, flickering in their faces, made gaunt masks of features that were already haggard and full of anticipation.

The brandy, which Yancy fetched out of the cupboard, brought back strength and reason—and confidence. It brought back, too, that unnatural sheen to Miggs' twitching eyes.

"We'd be damned fools to clear out of here right off," Miggs said suddenly. "The fog's got to lift sooner or later. I ain't trustin' myself to no small boat again, Nels—not when we don't know where we're at."

Yancy looked at him sharply. The little man turned away with a guilty

shrug. Then hesitantly:

"I—I kinda like it here, Nels."

Yancy caught the odd gleam in those small eyes. He bent forward quickly.

"Where'd you go when I left you alone?" he demanded.

"Me? I didn't go nowhere. I—I just looked around a bit, and I picked a couple of them flowers. See."

Miggs groped in his shirt pocket and held up one of the livid, orange-colored blooms. His face took on an unholy brilliance as he held the thing close to his lips and inhaled its deadly aroma. His eyes, glittering across the table, were on fire with sudden fanatic lust.

For an instant Yancy did not move. Then, with a savage oath, he lurched up and snatched the flower out of Miggs' fingers. Whirling, he flung it to the floor and ground it under his boot.

"You damned thick-headed fool!" he screeched. "You— God help you!"

Then he went limp, muttering incoherently. With faltering steps he stumbled out of the cabin and along the black passageway, and up on the abandoned deck. He staggered to the rail and stood there, holding himself erect with nerveless hands.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely. "God—what did I do that for? Am I goin' crazy?"

No answer came out of the silence. But he knew the answer. The thing he had done down there in the skipper's cabin—those mad words that had spewed from his mouth—had been involuntary. Something inside him, some sense of danger that was all about him, had hurled the words out of his mouth before he could control them. And his nerves were on edge, too; they felt as though they were ready to crack.

But he knew instinctively that Miggs had made a terrible mistake. There was something unearthly and wicked about those sickly sweet flowers. Flowers didn't grow aboard ship. Not real flowers. Real flowers had to take root somewhere, and, besides, they didn't have that drunken, etherish odor. Miggs should have left the vine alone. Clinging at the rail there, Yancy *knew* it, without knowing why.

He stayed there for a long time, trying to think and get his nerves back again. In a little while he began to feel frightened, being alone, and he returned below-decks to the cabin.

He stopped in the doorway, and stared.

Miggs was still there, slumped grotesquely over the table. The bottle was empty. Miggs was drunk, unconscious, mercifully oblivious of his surroundings.

For a moment Yancy glared at him morosely. For a moment, too, a new fear tugged at Yancy's heart—fear of being left alone through the coming night. He yanked Miggs' arm and shook him savagely; but there was no response. It would be hours, long, dreary, sinister hours, before Miggs regained his senses.

Bitterly Yancy took the lamp and set about exploring the rest of the ship. If

he could find the ship's papers, he considered, they might dispel his terror. He might learn the truth.

With this in mind, he sought the mate's quarters. The papers had not been in the captain's cabin where they belonged; therefore they might be here.

But they were not. There was nothing—nothing but a chronometer, sextant, and other nautical instruments lying in curious positions on the mate's table, rusted beyond repair. And there were flags, signal flags, thrown down as if they had been used at the last moment. And, lying in a distorted heap on the floor, was a human skeleton.

Avoiding this last horror, Yancy searched the room thoroughly. Evidently, he reasoned, the captain had died early in the *Golconda's* unknown plague. The mate had brought these instruments, these flags, to his own cabin, only to succumb before he could use them.

Only one thing Yancy took with him when he went out: a lantern, rusty and brittle, but still serviceable. It was empty, but he poured oil into it from the lamp. Then, returning the lamp to the captain's quarters where Miggs lay unconscious, he went on deck.

He climbed the bridge and set the lantern beside him. Night was coming. Already the fog was lifting, allowing darkness to creep in beneath it. And so Yancy stood there, alone and helpless, while blackness settled with uncanny quickness over the entire ship.

He was being watched. He felt it. Invisible eyes, hungry and menacing, were keeping check on his movements. On the deck beneath him were those inexplicable flowers, trailing out of the unexplored hold, glowing like phosphorescent faces in the gloom.

"By God," Yancy mumbled, "I'm goin' to get out of here!"

His own voice startled him and caused him to stiffen and peer about him, as if someone else had uttered the words. And then, very suddenly, his eyes became fixed on the far horizon to starboard. His lips twitched open, spitting out a shrill cry.

"Miggs! Miggs! A light! Look, Miggs—"

Frantically he stumbled down from the bridge and clawed his way below decks to the mate's cabin. Feverishly he seized the signal flags. Then, clutching them in his hand, he moaned helplessly and let them fall. He realized that they were no good, no good in the dark. Gibbering to himself, he searched for rockets. There were none.

Suddenly he remembered the lantern. Back again he raced through the passage, on deck, up on the bridge. In another moment, with the lantern dangling from his arm, he was clambering higher and higher into the black spars of the mainmast. Again and again he slipped and caught himself with outflung hands. And at length he stood high above the deck, feet braced, swinging the lantern back and forth . . .

Below him, the deck was no longer silent, no longer abandoned. From bow to

stern it was trembling, creaking, whispering up at him. He peered down fearfully. Blurred shadows seemed to be prowling through the darkness, coming out of nowhere, pacing dolefully back and forth through the gloom. They were watching him with a furtive interest.

He called out feebly. The muted echo of his own voice came back up to him. He was aware that the bell was tolling again, and the swish of the sea was louder, more persistent.

With an effort he caught a grip on himself.

"Damned fool," he rasped. "Drivin' yourself crazy—"

The moon was rising. It blurred the blinking light on the horizon and penetrated the darkness like a livid yellow finger. Yancy lowered the lantern with a sob. It was no good now. In the glare of the moonlight, this puny flame would be invisible to the men aboard that other ship. Slowly, cautiously, he climbed down to the deck.

He tried to think of something to do, to take his mind off the fear. Striding to the rail, he hauled up the water butts from the dory. Then he stretched the tarpaulin to catch the precipitation of the night dew. No telling how long he and Miggs would be forced to remain aboard the hulk.

He turned, then, to explore the forecastle. On his way across the deck, he stopped and held the light over the creeping vine. The curious flowers had become fragrant, heady, with the fumes of an intoxicating drug. He followed the coils to where they vanished into the hold, and he looked down. He saw only a tumbled pile of boxes and crates. Barred boxes which must have been cages at one time.

Again he turned away. The ship was trying to tell him something. He felt it—felt the movements of the deck planks beneath his feet. The moonlight, too, had made hideous white things of the scattered bones in the bow. Yancy stared at them with a shiver. He stared again, and grotesque thoughts obtruded into his consciousness. The bones were moving. Slithering, sliding over the deck, assembling themselves, gathering into definite shapes. He could have sworn it!

Cursing, he wrenched his eyes away. Damned fool, thinking such thoughts! With clenched fists he advanced to the forecastle; but before he reached it, he stopped again.

It was the sound of flapping wings that brought him about. Turning quickly, with a jerk, he was aware that the sound emanated from the open hold. Hesitantly he stepped forward—and stood rigid with an involuntary scream.

Out of the aperture came two horrible shapes—two inhuman things with immense, clapping wings and glittering eyes. Hideous; enormous. *Bats!*

Instinctively he flung his arm up to protect himself. But the creatures did not attack. They hung for an instant, poised over the hatch, eyeing him with something that was fiendishly like intelligence. Then they flapped over the deck, over the rail, and away into the night. As they sped away towards the west, where he had seen the light of that other ship twinkling, they clung together like witches

hell-bent on some evil mission. And below them, in the bloated sea, huge snakes weaved smoky, golden patterns—waiting! . . .

He stood fast, squinting after the bats. Like two hellish black eyes they grew smaller and smaller, became pinpoints in the moon-glow, and finally vanished. Still he did not stir. His lips were dry, his body stiff and unnatural. He licked his mouth. Then he was conscious of something more. From somewhere behind him came a thin, throbbing thread of harmony—a lovely, utterly sweet musical note that fascinated him.

He turned slowly. His heart was hammering, surging. His eyes went suddenly wide.

There, not five feet from him, stood a human form. Not his imagination. Real!

But he had never seen a girl like her before. She was too beautiful. She was wild, almost savage, with her great dark eyes boring into him. Her skin was white, smooth as alabaster. Her hair was jet black; and a waving coil of it, like a broken cobweb of pitch strings, framed her face. Grotesque hoops of gold dangled from her ears. In her hair, above them, gleamed two of those sinister flowers from the straggling vine.

He did not speak; he simply gaped. The girl was bare-footed, bare-legged. A short, dark skirt covered her slender thighs. A ragged white waist, open at the throat, revealed the full curve of her breast. In one hand she held a long wooden reed, a flute-like instrument fashioned out of crude wood. And about her middle, dangling almost to the deck, twined a scarlet, silken sash, brilliant as the sun, but not so scarlet as her lips, which were parted in a faint, suggestive smile, showing teeth of marble whiteness!

“Who—who are you?” Yancy mumbled.

She shook her head. Yet she smiled with her eyes, and he felt, somehow, that she understood him. He tried again, in such tongues as he knew. Still she shook her head, and still he felt that she was mocking him. Not until he chanced upon a scattered, faltering greeting in Serbian, did she nod her head.

“Dobra!” she replied, in a husky rich voice which sounded, somehow, as if it were rarely used.

He stepped closer then. She was a gipsy evidently. A Tzany of the Serbian hills. She moved very close to him with a floating, almost ethereal movement of her slender body. Peering into his face, flashing her haunting smile at him, she lifted the flute-like instrument and, as if it were nothing at all unnatural or out of place, began to play again the song which had first attracted his attention.

He listened in silence until she had finished. Then, with a cunning smile, she touched her fingers to her lips and whispered softly:

“You—mine. Yes?”

He did not understand. She clutched his arm and glanced fearfully toward the west, out over the sea.

“You—mine!” she said again, fiercely. “Papa Bocito—Seraphino—they no



have you. You—not go—to them!”

He thought he understood then. She turned away from him and went silently across the deck. He watched her disappear into the forecabin, and would have followed her, but once again the ship—the whole ship—seemed to be struggling to whisper a warning.

Presently she returned, holding in her white hand a battered silver goblet, very old and very tarnished, brimming with scarlet fluid. He took it silently. It was impossible to refuse her. Her eyes had grown into lakes of night, lit by the burning moon. Her lips were soft, searching, undeniable.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“Stragella,” she smiled.

“Stragella . . . Stragella . . .”

The name itself was compelling. He drank the liquid slowly, without taking his eyes from her lovely face. The stuff had the taste of wine—strong, sweet wine. It was intoxicating, with the same weird effect that was contained in the orange blooms which she wore in her hair and which groveled over the deck behind her.

Yancy’s hands groped up weakly. He rubbed his eyes, feeling suddenly weak, powerless, as if the very blood had been drained from his veins. Struggling futilely, he staggered back, moaning half inaudibly.

Stragella’s arms went about him, caressing him with sensuous touch. He felt them, and they were powerful, irresistible. The girl’s smile maddened him. Her crimson lips hung before his face, drawing nearer, mocking him. Then, all at once, she was seeking his throat. Those warm, passionate, deliriously pleasant lips were searching to touch him.

He sensed his danger. Frantically he strove to lift his arms and push her away. Deep in his mind some struggling intuition, some half-alive idea, warned him that he was in terrible peril. This girl, Stragella, was not of his kind; she was a creature of the darkness, a denizen of a different, frightful world of her own! Those lips, wanting his flesh, were inhuman, too fervid—

Suddenly she shrank away from him, releasing him with a jerk. A snarling animal-like sound surged through her flaming mouth. Her hand lashed out, rigid, pointing to the thing that hung in his belt. Talonic fingers pointed to the Bible that defied her!

But the scarlet fluid had taken its full effect. Yancy slumped down, unable to cry out. In a heap he lay there, paralyzed, powerless to stir.

He knew that she was commanding him to rise. Her lips, moving in pantomime, formed soundless words. Her glittering eyes were fixed upon him, hypnotic. The Bible—she wanted him to cast it over the rail! She wanted him to stand up and go into her arms. Then her lips would find a hold . . .

But he could not obey. He could not raise his arms to support himself. She, in turn, stood at bay and refused to advance. Then, whirling about, her lips drawn into a diabolical curve, beautiful but bestial, she retreated. He saw her dart back,

saw her tapering body whip about, with the crimson sash outflung behind her as she raced across the deck.

Yancy closed his eyes to blot out the sight. When he opened them again, they opened to a new, more intense horror. On the *Golconda's* deck, Stragella was darting erratically among those piles of gleaming bones. But they were bones no longer. They had gathered into shapes, taken on flesh, blood. Before his very eyes they assumed substance, men and beasts alike. And then began an orgy such as Nels Yancy had never before looked upon—an orgy of the undead.

Monkeys, giant apes, lunged about the deck. A huge python reared its sinuous head to glare. On the hatch cover a snow-leopard, snarling furiously, crouched to spring. Tigers, tapirs, crocodiles—fought together in the bow. A great brown bear, of the type found in the lofty plateaus of the Pamirs, clawed at the rail.

And the men! Most of them were dark-skinned—dark enough to have come from the same region, from Madras. With them crouched Chinamen, and some Anglo-Saxons. Starved, all of them. Lean, gaunt, mad!

Pandemonium raged then. Animals and men alike were insane with hunger. In a little struggling knot, the men were gathered about the number-two hatch, defending themselves. They were wielding firearms—firing pointblank with desperation into the writhing mass that confronted them. And always, between them and around them and among, darted the girl who called herself Stragella.

They cast no shadows, those ghost shapes. Not even the girl, whose arms he had felt about him only a moment ago. There was nothing real in the scene, nothing human. Even the sounds of the shots and the screams of the cornered men, even the roaring growls of the big cats, were smothered as if they came to him through heavy glass windows, from a sealed chamber.

He was powerless to move. He lay in a cataleptic condition, conscious of the entire pantomime, yet unable to flee from it. And his senses were horribly acute—so acute that he turned his eyes upward with an abrupt twitch, instinctively; and then shrank into himself with a new fear as he discerned the two huge bats which had winged their way across the sea . . .

They were returning now. Circling above him, they flapped down one after the other and settled with heavy, sullen thuds upon the hatch, close to that weird vine of flowers. They seemed to have lost their shape, these nocturnal monstrosities, to have become fantastic blurs, enveloped in an unearthly bluish radiance. Even as he stared at them, they vanished altogether for a moment; and then the strange vapor cleared to reveal the two creatures who stood there!

Not bats! Humans! Inhumans! They were gipsies, attired in moldy, decayed garments which stamped them as Balkans. Man and woman. Lean, emaciated, ancient man with fierce white mustache; plump old woman with black, rat-like eyes that seemed unused to the light of day. And they spoke to Stragella—spoke to her eagerly. She, in turn, swung about with enraged face and pointed to the Bible in Yancy's belt.

But the pantomime was not finished. On the deck the men and animals lay

moaning, sobbing. Stragella turned noiselessly, calling the old man and woman after her. Calling them by name.

"Come—Papa Bocito, Seraphino!"

The tragedy of the ghost-ship was being reenacted. Yancy knew it, and shuddered at the thought. Starvation, cholera had driven the *Golconda's* crew mad. The jungle beasts, unfed, hideously savage, had escaped out of their confinement. And now—now that the final conflict was over—Stragella and Papa Bocito and Seraphino were proceeding about their ghastly work.

Stragella was leading them. Her charm, her beauty, gave her a hold on the men. They were in love with her. She had *made* them love her, madly and without reason. Now she was moving from one to another, loving them and holding them close to her. And as she stepped away from each man, he went limp, faint, while she laughed terribly and passed on to the next. Her lips were parted. She licked them hungrily—licked the blood from them with a sharp, crimson tongue.

How long it lasted, Yancy did not know. Hours, hours on end. He was aware, suddenly, that a high wind was screeching and wailing in the upper reaches of the ship; and, peering up, he saw that the spars were no longer bare and rotten with age. Great gray sails stood out against the black sky—fantastic things without any definite form or outline. And the moon above them had vanished utterly. The howling wind was bringing a storm with it, filling the sails to bulging proportions. Beneath the decks the ship was groaning like a creature in agony. The seas were lashing her, slashing her, carrying her forward with amazing speed.

Of a sudden came a mighty grinding sound. The *Golconda* hurtled back, as if a huge, jagged reef of submerged rock had bored into her bottom. She listed. Her stern rose high in the air. And Stragella with her two fellow fiends, was standing in the bow, screaming in mad laughter in the teeth of the wind. The other two laughed with her.

Yancy saw them turn toward him, but they did not stop. Somehow, he did not expect them to stop. This scene, this mad pantomime, was not the present; it was the past. He was not here at all. All this had happened years ago! Forgotten, buried in the past!

But he heard them talking, in a mongrel dialect full of Serbian words.

"It is done. Papa Bocito! We shall stay here forever now. There is land within an hour's flight, where fresh blood abounds and will always abound. And here, on this wretched hulk, they will never find our graves to destroy us!"

The horrible trio passed close. Stragella turned, to stare out across the water, and raised her hand in silent warning. Yancy, turning wearily to stare in the same direction, saw that the first streaks of daylight were beginning to filter over the sea.

With a curious floating, drifting movement the three undead creatures moved toward the open hatch. They descended out of sight. Yancy, jerking himself erect and surprised to find that the effects of the drug had worn off with the coming of dawn, crept to the hatch and peered down—in time to see those



fiendish forms enter their coffins. He knew then what the crates were. In the dim light, now that he was staring directly into the aperture, he saw what he had not noticed before. Three of those oblong boxes were filled with dank grave-earth!

He knew then the secret of the unnatural flowers. They *bad* roots! They were rooted in the soil which harbored those undead bodies!

Then, like a groping finger, the dawn came out of the sea. Yancy walked to the rail, dazed. It was over now—all over. The orgy was ended. The *Golconda* was once more an abandoned, rotted hulk.

For an hour he stood at the rail, sucking in the warmth and glory of the sunlight. Once again that wall of unsightly mist was rising out of the water on all sides. Presently it would bury the ship, and Yancy shuddered.

He thought of Miggs. With quick steps he paced to the companionway and descended to the lower passage. Hesitantly he prowled through the thickening layers of dank fog. A queer sense of foreboding crept over him.

He called out even before he reached the door. There was no answer. Thrusting the barrier open, he stepped across the sill—and then he stood still while a sudden harsh cry broke from his lips.

Miggs was lying there, half across the table, his arms flung out, his head turned grotesquely on its side, staring up at the ceiling.

"Miggs! Miggs!" The sound came choking through Yancy's lips. "Oh, God, Miggs—what's happened?"

He reeled forward. Miggs was cold and stiff, and quite dead. All the blood was gone out of his face and arms. His eyes were glassy, wide open. He was as white as marble, shrunken horribly. In his throat were two parallel marks, as if a sharp-pointed staple had been hammered into the flesh and then withdrawn. The marks of the vampire.

For a long time Yancy did not retreat. The room swayed and lurched before him. He was alone. Alone! The whole ghastly thing was too sudden, too unexpected.

Then he stumbled forward and went down on his knees, clawing at Miggs' dangling arm.

"Oh God, Miggs," he mumbled incoherently. "You got to help me. I can't stand it!"

He clung there, white-faced, staring, sobbing thickly—and presently slumped in a pitiful heap, dragging Miggs over on top of him.

It was later afternoon when he regained consciousness. He stood up, fighting away the fear that overwhelmed him. He had to get away, get away! The thought hammered into his head with monotonous force. Get away!

He found his way to the upper deck. There was nothing he could do for Miggs. He would have to leave him here. Stumbling, he moved along the rail and reached down to draw the small boat closer, where he could provision it and

make it ready for his departure.

His fingers clutched emptiness. The ropes were gone. The dory was gone. He hung limp, staring down at a flat expanse of oily sea.

For an hour he did not move. He fought to throw off his fear long enough to think of a way out. Then he stiffened with a sudden jerk and pushed himself away from the rail.

The ship's boats offered the only chance. He groped to the nearest one and labored feverishly over it.

But the task was hopeless. The life boats were of metal, rusted through and through, wedged in their davits. The wire cables were knotted and immovable. He tore his hands on them, wringing blood from his scarred fingers. Even while he worked, he knew that the boats would not float. They were rotten, through and through.

He had to stop, at last, from exhaustion.

After that, knowing that there was no escape, he had to do something, anything, to keep sane. First he would clear those horrible bones from the deck, then explore the rest of the ship . . .

It was a repulsive task, but he drove himself to it. If he could get rid of the bones, perhaps Stragella and the other two creatures would not return. He did not know. It was merely a faint hope, something to cling to.

With grim, tight-pressed lips he dragged the bleached skeletons over the deck and kicked them over the side, and stood watching them as they sank from sight. Then he went to the hold, smothering his terror, and descended into the gloomy belly of the vessel. He avoided the crates with a shudder of revulsion. Ripping up that evil vine-thing by the roots, he carried it to the rail and flung it away, with the mold of grave-earth still clinging to it.

After that he went over the entire ship, end to end, but found nothing.

He slipped the anchor chains then, in the hopes that the ship would drift away from that vindictive bank of fog. Then he paced back and forth, muttering to himself and trying to force courage for the most hideous task of all.

The sea was growing dark, and with dusk came increasing terror. He knew the *Golconda* was drifting. Knew, too, that the undead inhabitants of the vessel were furious with him for allowing the boat to drift away from their source of food. Or they *would* be furious when they came alive again after their interim of forced sleep.

And there was only one method of defeating them. It was a horrible method, and he was already frightened. Nevertheless he searched the deck for a marlin spike and found one; and, turning sluggishly, he went back to the hold.

A stake, driven through the heart of each of the horrible trio . . .

The rickety stairs were deep in shadow. Already the dying sun, buried behind its wreath of evil fog, was a ring of bloody mist. He glanced at it and realized that he must hurry. He cursed himself for having waited so long.

It was hard, lowering himself into the pitch-black hold when he could only

feel his footing and trust to fate. His boots scraped ominously on the steps. He held his hands above him, gripping the deck timbers.

And suddenly he slipped.

His foot caught on the edge of a lower step, twisted abruptly, and pitched him forward. He cried out. The marlin spike dropped from his hand and clattered on one of the crates below. He tumbled in a heap, clawing for support. The impact knocked something out of his belt. And he realized, even as his head came in sharp contact with the foremost oblong box, that the Bible, which had heretofore protected him, was no longer a part of him.

He did not lose complete control of his senses. Frantically he sought to regain his knees and grope for the black book in the gloom of the hold. A sobbing, choking sound came pitifully from his lips.

A soft, triumphant laugh came out of the darkness close to him. He swung about heavily—so heavily that the movement sent him sprawling again in an inert heap.

He was too late. She was already there on her knees, glaring at him hungrily. A peculiar bluish glow welled about her face. She was ghastly beautiful as she reached behind her into the oblong crate and began to trace a circle about the Bible with a chunk of soft, tarry, pitch-like substance clutched in her white fingers.

Yancy stumbled toward her, finding strength in desperation. She straightened to meet him. Her lips, curled back, exposed white teeth. Her arms coiled out, enveloping him, stifling his struggles. God, they were strong. He could not resist them. The same languid, resigned feeling came over him. He would have fallen, but she held him erect.

She did not touch him with her lips. Behind her he saw two other shapes take form in the darkness. The savage features of Papa Bocito glowered at him; and Seraphino's ratty, smoldering eyes, full of hunger, bored into him. Stragella was obviously afraid of them.

Yancy was lifted from his feet. He was carried out on deck and borne swiftly, easily, down the companionway, along the lower passage, through a swirling blanket of hellish fog and darkness, to the cabin where Miggs lay dead. And he lost consciousness while they carried him.

He could not tell, when he opened his eyes, how long he had been asleep. It seemed a long, long interlude. Stragella was sitting beside him. He lay on the bunk in the cabin, and the lamp was burning on the table, revealing Miggs' limp body in full detail.

Yancy reached up fearfully to touch his throat. There were no marks there; not yet.

He was aware of voices, then. Papa Bocito and the ferret-faced woman were arguing with the girl beside him. The savage old man in particular was being angered by her cool, possessive smile.

"We are drifting away from the prison isles," Papa Bocito snarled, glancing at

Yancy with unmasked hate. "It is his work, lifting the anchor. Unless you share him with us until we drift ashore, we shall perish!"

"He is mine," Stragella shrugged, modulating her voice to a persuasive whisper. "You had the other. This one is mine. I shall have him!"

"He belongs to us all!"

"Why?" Stragella smiled. "Because he has looked upon the resurrection night? Ah, he is the first to learn our secret."

Seraphino's eyes narrowed at that, almost to pinpoints. She jerked forward, clutching the girl's shoulder.

"We have quarreled enough," she hissed. "Soon it will be daylight. He belongs to us all because he has taken us away from the isles and learned our secrets."

The words drilled their way into Yancy's brain. "The resurrection night!" There was an ominous significance in it, and he thought he knew its meaning. His eyes, or his face, must have revealed his thoughts, for Papa Bocito drew near to him and pointed into his face with a long, bony forefinger, muttering triumphantly.

"You have seen what no other eyes have seen," the ancient man growled bitterly. "Now, for that, you shall become one of us. Stragella wants you. She shall have you for eternity—for a life without death. Do you know what that means?"

Yancy shook his head dumbly, fearfully.

"We are the undead," Bocito leered. "Our victims become creatures of the blood, like us. At night we are free. During the day we must return to our graves. That is why"—he cast his arm toward the upper deck in a hideous gesture—"those other victims of ours have not yet become like us. They were never buried; they have no graves to return to. Each night we give them life for our own amusement, but they are not of the brotherhood—yet."

Yancy licked his lips and said nothing. He understood then. Every night it happened. A nightly pantomime, when the dead become alive again, reenacting the events of the night when the *Golconda* had become a ship of hell.

"We are gipsies," the old man gloated. "Once we were human, living in our pleasant little camp in the shadow of Pobyezdin Potok's crusty peaks, in the Morava Valley of Serbia. That was in the time of Milutin, six hundreds of years ago. Then the vampires of the hills came for us and took us to them. We lived the undead life, until there was no more blood in the valley. So we went to the coast, we three, transporting our grave-earth with us. And we lived there, alive by night and dead by day, in the coastal villages of the Black Sea, until the time came when we wished to go to the far places."

Seraphino's guttural voice interrupted him, saying harshly:

"Hurry. It is nearly dawn!"

"And we obtained passage on this *Golconda*, arranging to have our crates of grave-earth carried secretly to the hold. And the ship fell into cholera and starvation and storm. She went aground. And—here we are. Ah, but there is blood

upon the islands, my pretty one, and so we anchored the *Golconda* on the reef, where life was close at hand!"

Yancy closed his eyes with a shudder. He did not understand all of the words; they were in a jargon of gipsy tongue. But he knew enough to horrify him.

Then the old man ceased gloating. He fell back, glowering at Stragella. And the girl laughed, a mad, cackling, triumphant laugh of possession. She leaned forward, and the movement brought her out of the line of the lamplight, so that the feeble glow fell full over Yancy's prostrate body.

At that, with an angry snarl, she recoiled. Her eyes went wide with abhorrence. Upon his chest gleamed the Crucifix—the tattooed Cross and Savior which had been indelibly printed there. Stragella held her face away, shielding her eyes. She cursed him horribly. Backing away, she seized the arms of her companions and pointed with trembling finger to the thing which had repulsed her.

The fog seemed to seep deeper and deeper into the cabin during the ensuing silence. Yancy struggled to a sitting posture and cringed back against the wall, waiting for them to attack him. It would be finished in a moment, he knew. Then he would join Miggs, with those awful marks on his throat and Stragella's lips crimson with his sucked blood.

But they held their distance. The fog enveloped them, made them almost indistinct. He could see only three pairs of glaring, staring, phosphorescent eyes that grew larger and wider and more intensely terrible.

He buried his face in his hands, waiting. They did not come. He heard them mumbling, whispering. Vaguely he was conscious of another sound, far off and barely audible. The howl of wolves.

Beneath him the bunk was swaying from side to side with the movement of the ship. The *Golconda* was drifting swiftly. A storm had risen out of nowhere, and the wind was singing its dead dirge in the rotten spars high above decks. He could hear it moaning, wheezing, like a human being in torment.

Then the three pairs of glittering orbs moved nearer. The whispered voices ceased, and a cunning smile passed over Stragella's features. Yancy screamed, and flattened against the wall. He watched her in fascination as she crept upon him. One arm was flung across her eyes to protect them from the sight of the Crucifix. In the other hand, outstretched, groping ever nearer, she clutched that hellish chunk of pitch-like substance with which she had encircled the Bible!

He knew what she would do. The thought struck him like an icy blast, full of fear and madness. She would slink closer, closer, until her hand touched his flesh. Then she would place the black substance around the tattooed cross and kill its powers. His defense would be gone. Then—those cruel lips on his throat . . .

There was no avenue of escape. Papa Bocito and the plump old woman, grinning malignantly, had slid to one side, between him and the doorway. And Stragella writhed forward with one alabaster arm feeling . . . feeling . . .

He was conscious of the roar of surf, very close, very loud, outside the walls

of the fog-filled enclosure. The ship was lurching, reeling heavily, pitching in the swell. Hours must have passed. Hours and hours of darkness and horror.

Then she touched him. The sticky stuff was hot on his chest, moving in a slow circle. He hurled himself back, stumbled, went down, and she fell upon him.

Under his tormented body the floor of the cabin split asunder. The ship buckled from top to bottom with a grinding, roaring impact. A terrific shock burst through the ancient hulk, shattering its rotted timbers.

The lamp caromed off the table, plunging the cabin in semi-darkness. Through the port-holes filtered a gray glare. Stragella's face, thrust into Yancy's, became a mask of beautiful fury. She whirled back. She stood rigid, screaming vividly to Papa Bocito and the old hag.

"Go back! Go back!" she railed. "We have waited too long! It is dawn!"

She ran across the floor, grappling with them. Her lips were distorted. Her body trembled. She hurled her companions to the door. Then, as she followed them into the gloom of the passage, she turned upon Yancy with a last unholy snarl of defeated rage. And she was gone.

Yancy lay limp. When he struggled to his feet at last and went on deck, the sun was high in the sky, bloated and crimson, struggling to penetrate the cone of fog which swirled about the ship.

The ship lay far over, careened on her side. A hundred yards distant over the port rail lay the heaven-sent sight of land—a bleak, vacant expanse of jungle-rimmed shore line.

He went deliberately to work—a task that had to be finished quickly, lest he be discovered by the inhabitants of the shore and be considered stark mad. Returning to the cabin, he took the oil lamp and carried it to the open hold. There, sprinkling the liquid over the ancient wood, he set fire to it.

Turning, he stepped to the rail. A scream of agony, unearthly and prolonged, rose up behind him. Then he was over the rail, battling in the surf.

When he staggered up on the beach, twenty minutes later, the *Golconda* was a roaring furnace. On all sides of her the flames snarled skyward, spewing through that hellish cone of vapor. Grimly Yancy turned away and trudged along the beach.

He looked back after an hour of steady plodding. The lagoon was empty. The fog had vanished. The sun gleamed down with warm brilliance on a broad, empty expanse of sea.

Hours later he reached a settlement. Men came and talked to him, and asked curious questions. They pointed to his hair which was stark white. They told him he had reached Port Blair, on the southern island of the Andamans. After that, noticing the peculiar gleam of his blood-shot eyes, they took him to the home of the governor.

There he told his story—told hesitantly, because he expected to be

disbelieved, mocked.

The governor looked at him cryptically.

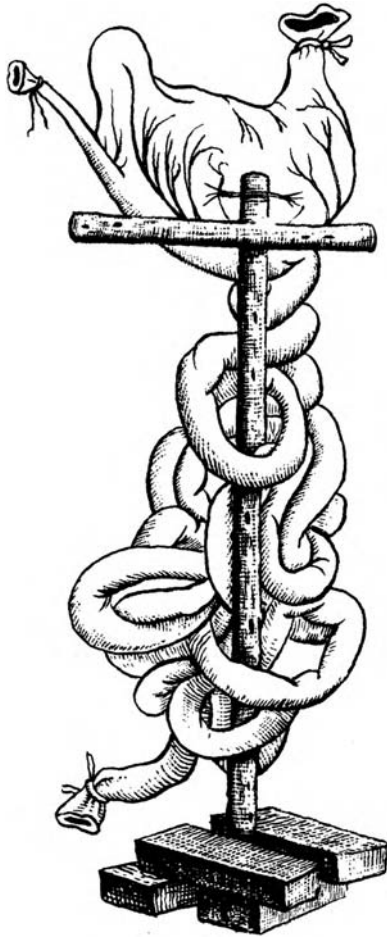
"You don't expect me to understand?" the governor said. "I am not so sure, sir. This is a penal colony, a prison isle. During the past few years, more than two hundred of our convicts have died in the most curious way. Two tiny punctures in the throat. Loss of blood."

"You—you must destroy the graves," Yancy muttered.

The governor nodded silently, significantly.

After that, Yancy returned to the world, alone. Always alone. Men peered into his face and shrank away from the haunted stare of his eyes. They saw the Crucifix upon his chest and wondered why, day and night, he wore his shirt flapping open, so that the brilliant design glared forth.

But their curiosity was never appeased. Only Yancy knew; and Yancy was silent.



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