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THE VAMPIRE MASTER by Hugh Davidson

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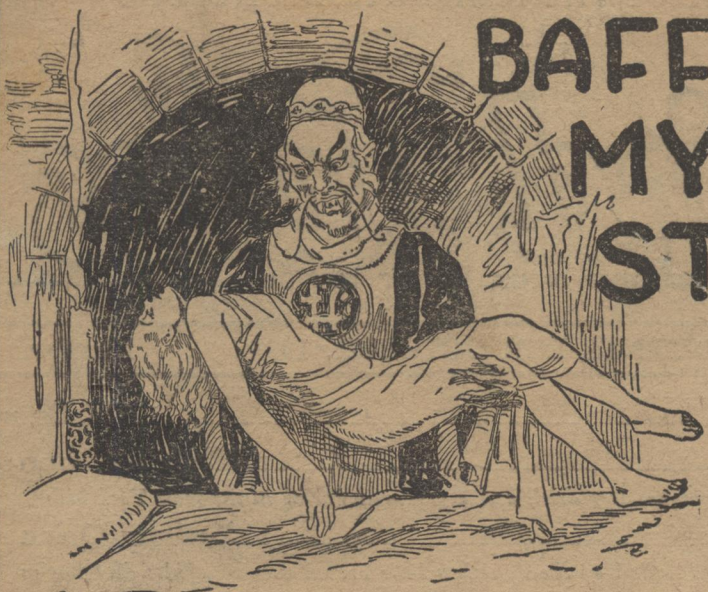

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 22 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1933 Number 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, $3.00 a year in the United States, $4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Vampire Master

By HUGH DAVIDSON

"He flung Dale back and with a snarl of rage leapt and seized me."

A thrilling novel of corpses that would not stay dead, and a gruesome horror in the hills of New York

"I TELL you I must see Doctor Dale at once! I don't care what his rules about appointments are—what I have to see him about is vital!"

"But he never sees any one except by appointment," I told our caller, whose card read "Dr. William Henderson, Maysville, New York."

"I'm Doctor Dale's secretary, Harley Owen," I added. "Couldn't you tell me your business with him?"

Doctor Henderson shook his head impatiently. "I came here to see Doctor John Dale himself and not any secretary," he said. "And I'm going to see him!"

Before I could stop him he had pushed past me and was entering Doctor Dale's inner office. Doctor Dale was at his black

desk, bent over a mass of open books. He looked up in surprize as Doctor Henderson made his hasty entrance, with me close at his heels.

"Doctor Dale, I apologize for forcing myself in on you like this," said Doctor Henderson, "but it's vitally necessary for me to consult you."

Dale looked questioningly at me. "It's a Doctor Henderson from Maysville," I told him. "He wouldn't state his business."

"But I assure you that my business with you is urgent," Doctor Henderson said, "utterly urgent, in fact."

Doctor Dale looked keenly at him, then closed the books on his desk. "Very well, Doctor Henderson," he said quietly. "Owen, will you place a chair for our caller?"

When Doctor Henderson was seated Dale nodded to me and I took pad and pencil and seated myself in the corner. Henderson looked sharply at me.

"The matter on which I wish to see you is a confidential one," he told Dale pointedly.

"It will remain so," answered Doctor Dale calmly. "Owen is not only my secretary but also my chief assistant."

Henderson seemed rather unsatisfied but said nothing further on the subject. He glanced around the office, at the huge window in its southern wall looking out across the clustered skyscrapers of lower New York, at the locked mahogany wall-cabinets that lined the western wall, and at the crowded book-shelves on the eastern side, with their multitude of volumes in calf, vellum, cloth, boards, and paper, books of every age and in every language, and all of them works on witchcraft, sorcery, diabolism, demonology and a hundred other phases of the supernatural.

As Henderson turned his gaze back to Doctor Dale, I could not help mentally contrasting the two. Doctor Henderson was a perfect type of the elderly provincial physician who rather looks down on the business-like manner of medical men today. His thin, tall figure was clothed in a loosely-hanging black suit and he wore a stiff, old-fashioned wing-collar and nose-glasses secured by a narrow black ribbon to his lapel. His thin, graying hair was brushed stiffly back, his spare, clean-shaven face and blue eyes were austere, and the impression he gave was one of primness and preciseness troubled now by worry.

Doctor Dale was a complete contrast, even to his tweed suit and soft silk shirt the antithesis of Henderson's formal attire. Doctor John Dale is an attractive and to some people a handsome man. Though he is a few years over forty, his trim, compact figure is as muscular as a youth's, and his brown hair and short brown vandyke beard are unmixed with gray. His features are strong but rather ordinary, except for his extraordinary hazel eyes, which can at some times be cold and bleak as brown ice but at others can seem hot as brown flame.

Doctor Dale seems to see everything at a glance with those quick hazel eyes. He seems also in some queer way to be able to hear not only the thing you are saying but the thing you are going to say. This is no doubt due to the quickness with which his mind works, for few men can think and act more quickly.

"DOCTOR DALE," began Henderson, "I've come to you for consultation and help on an extraordinary matter. I come to you because a former colleague of mine once told me that among medical men of New York, Doctor John Dale had a reputation as a specialist of a unique kind."

"Just what kind of a specialist did this

former colleague of yours tell you that I was?" asked Dale.

"He said," Doctor Henderson answered slowly, "that you were a specialist in evil; in other words, a specialist in cases where tangible forces of evil were encountered against which medical science was powerless, and to fight which occult science had to be used."

"That is the nature of my work," Doctor Dale acknowledged. "I take it, then, that you've come to consult me on some matter that has need of occult as well as medical science?"

"I have, yes," said Henderson still more slowly. "Doctor Dale, in your work against the forces of evil have you ever met with the phenomenon called vampirism?"

Dale's eyes flickered with quick interest but he showed no other sign of surprize at the question. "Vampirism? Yes, I have come in contact with it, though that was a number of years ago."

"But you know then that vampirism is a reality?" Doctor Henderson pressed anxiously. "You don't doubt that it exists?"

"Of course not," Doctor Dale replied promptly. "Vampirism is only too dreadfully real, as real as diabolism and voodooism and lycanthropy are real, as real as the benign forces that help humanity and the malign forces that prey on humanity are real. Vampirism is simply one of the ways used by those malign forces to prey upon mankind."

"But just what is vampirism—or a vampire—really?" Doctor Henderson asked tensely. "I am asking you, Doctor Dale, because I wish to make sure we are not dealing in misunderstandings when I put before you the matter that brought me here."

Doctor Dale leaned back, stroking his short beard thoughtfully. "A vampire," he said finally, "is simply a dead person who can move and act as though alive. He can do this because through the malign forces of evil his dead body has been reanimated with life, not with real life but with a pseudo-life. Therefore, though the vampire is a dead person he is not of the truly dead and his body can exist indefinitely without dissolution while that pseudo-life imbues it.

"Because the vampire gets his pseudo-life through the malign forces of evil, he is himself essentially and unchangeably evil. He can think and act as in life, has immensely greater bodily strength than even he had in life, but his thoughts and actions are all evil. And like almost all things and forces of evil, the vampire is strongest by night and weakest by day. So weak is his pseudo-life during the day that from sunrise until sunset the vampire must lie stiff and unmoving as though really dead, in his coffin.

"But with night's coming the vampire's pseudo-life is strong and he can go forth during the night on his hideous quest. The vampire must have, to sustain the pseudo-life that activates his dead body, the blood of people still living. So by night he visits the living, usually at first those closest to him in life, and with his teeth punctures their throats and sucks their blood. And the vampire visits his victim again and again until that victim dies.

"Once dead, the victim becomes himself a vampire and his dead body is animated by the same evil pseudo-life! That is so because the taking of the victim's life-blood into the vampire's veins has formed a tie of evil between them that makes the victim also a vampire when he dies, unless he that vampirized him has been destroyed before then. The former victim, now a vampire himself, will go forth to find his own victims, who will

in turn become vampires when they die. So widens outward the hideous circle of the vampire evil if it is not stamped out."

"But there are ways of stamping it out, surely?" exclaimed Doctor Henderson. "There are ways—if not in ordinary science, in occult science—of combating this vampire evil?"

"There are ways," Doctor Dale admitted, "by which the malign forces behind the vampire can be overcome by benign ones, but they are not easy ways to use. To destroy the vampire for good the pseudo-life of its dead body must be ended, and there is but one way to do that. That way is to find the body by day while it lies stiff and helpless, to drive a wooden stake through its heart and to cut off its head. That done, its pseudo-life departs and it becomes one of the true dead, a dead body and nothing more.

"That is the only way in which a vampire can be destroyed, though there are ways by which vampires can be kept from their victims. The cross, for instance, paralyzes and repels the vampire as it does every other thing of evil, since the cross is no mere token of a religious sect but is an age-old symbol that has been used by the peoples of the earth in all times to combat evil forces. It is a symbol through which the benign forces of the universe can convey themselves to oppress the malign ones, and it is powerful for that reason.

"Branches of garlic are utterly repellent to the pseudo-living vampire, and so too are branches of the wild-rose. In some parts of the world, sprays of mayflower or of rowan are used instead of these. In still others, red peas and iron are held to form a barrier that the vampire can not pass. But there are many methods that have been used to repel the dreaded vampire in various sections of the earth and some of them are of no real value, just as there are many ideas concerning vampires and their powers which have no real truth in them. The final truth is that the vampire is a dead body reanimated by evil pseudo-life, and that the only conclusive weapon against it is the use of the stake and steel upon it which alone can make it truly dead."

Doctor Henderson had listened intently. "And you say then that vampirism is one of the rarest of the evils that prey upon humanity?" he asked.

Dale nodded. "Yes, and that is well, since it is perhaps the most terrible of all and the hardest of all to fight. As I told you, it has been long since I have had contact with any case of real vampirism."

Henderson's hands trembled slightly as he asked, "What would you say, then, if I told you that vampirism had broken out in Maysville?—that a vampire or vampires were at their hideous work in my village?"

"I would say that it was surprizing, at least," Doctor Dale answered slowly. "Is that the matter on which you came to consult me?"

Doctor Henderson nodded tensely. "It is. Doctor Dale, I know how incredible it sounds, but I am certain in my own mind that vampirism is going on up in my village, and I must have your help to combat it!"

2. *Henderson's Story*

DOCTOR DALE showed no surprize at Henderson's astonishing statement, though his hazel eyes were alert.

"Suppose you tell me all about it," Dale suggested to the overwrought physician. "Remember that I know nothing of Maysville or its people, and any information you can include may be helpful."

He turned momentarily to where I sat in the corner of the office. "Take notes on Doctor Henderson's information as

usual, Owen," he said, and I nodded, my pencil poised.

Doctor Henderson, still in the grip of strong emotion, sat back in his chair. "There's so little to tell that sounds sane," he said. "Yet what there is——

"You say you don't know Maysville? Well, it's a village of seven or eight thousand people up north of here in New York state, lying west of the Hudson River and close to one of the northeastern spurs of the Catskill Mountains. It was one of the earliest-settled places in that region and there still live there some fairly wealthy families who descend from the early settlers, and who have estates between Maysville and the hills west of it.

"Those hills are the outer hills of the Catskill Mountain spur and lie about eight miles west of Maysville in a range extending north and south. They and the valleys between them are so thickly wooded as to be almost impenetrable. There are in these hills a good number of old Colonial manor-houses that go back to the early Eighteenth Century, but they've been long abandoned and only one of these old manors, the old Geisert place in which Gerritt Geisert is now living, is inhabited.

"But in the rolling country between the hills and the village are the estates of the wealthier families I mentioned. The biggest of these estates belongs to James Ralton, whose family is one of the most important in the region. Of course I know almost all the people in the other estates, the Harmons and Moores and Wilseys and the rest, but know the Raltons best; for I tended James Ralton when he was a boy, brought his daughters Olivia and Virginia into the world, and attended Allene, his wife, in her recent last illness.

"It was about four weeks ago that Allene Ralton first sickened. Her health had always been good, but she began suddenly to lose weight and to exhibit a marked paleness and weakness. Soon her weakness was so pronounced that she was forced to stay in her bed. I diagnosed her case as secondary anemia but was rather puzzled by it; for secondary anemia, as you know, results from a direct loss of blood and I could not understand how Allene Ralton could be losing blood so suddenly.

"But it was clear that Allene was actually losing blood, and strength with it, with the passing of each day. Her blood supply was steadily failing. To correct this condition I gave her injections of the Klein-Lorentz solution, the new improved form of the iron-arsenic compounds used in treating secondary anemia. While the Klein-Lorentz solution can not replace blood that has been lost, it aids the body to produce more blood to replace that lost, if the body has enough time to do so.

"In this case it had not enough time, for Allene Ralton grew more bloodless and weak with amazing quickness. Within ten days after her first sickening she was in a critical state, and sinking lower and lower before our eyes. James Ralton, of course, was nearly frantic about it and I was almost as bad. For here was Allene Ralton dying before my eyes and I could do nothing to save her!

"It is true that I had noticed on her neck two small red punctures, located above the junction of the internal jugular and subclavian veins, but these punctures showed no sign of bleeding and of course I didn't give them a second thought. Neither did I, at the time, attach any significance to the strange things that Allene kept saying in her deliriums of weakness; for I didn't dream then what was the dreadful truth.

"Two weeks after she had first sickened, Allene Ralton died, having despite

my injections of Klein-Lorentz solution into her, become so lacking in real blood and consequently so weak that her heart simply stopped beating. James Ralton was like a dazed person during the funeral, while the two daughters, Olivia and Virginia, were absolutely grief-stricken.

"In fact when Olivia, the eldest daughter, became ill and weak a few days after her mother's funeral, I thought at first that her grief was responsible. I did what I could to cheer her up, and so did her father and young Edward Harmon, her fiancé. But it had little or no effect, for in a few days Olivia Ralton was so weak that she stayed in her bed. And then I saw for the first time that she was showing all the symptoms of the same condition of secondary anemia which had been responsible for her mother's death.

"I was profoundly shocked. Here was the strange illness that had baffled me and killed Allene Ralton, now attacking Olivia! In my alarm I wondered if this could not be some hitherto unknown contagious form of blood-disease that was attacking her as it had her mother. The same thing was suggested by James Ralton, who naturally was terribly worried by this illness of Olivia's coming after her mother's sudden death, as was young Harmon, her fiancé.

"In a few more days Olivia was visibly worse from loss of blood, her pulse irregular and her breath short; in fact, all the symptoms that her mother had exhibited. Again I used injections of Klein-Lorentz solution to try to build up new blood in her body, but it seemed useless; for Olivia was losing blood faster than her body could replace it, even aided as it was by my injections.

"IT WAS while making one of these injections yesterday that I noticed two small marks on Olivia's neck, two punctures exactly like those I had seen on her mother's neck. I examined them carefully, for I had begun to suspect that even though they showed no sign of bleeding these marks were connected in some way with the loss of blood by Allene Ralton and now by Olivia. Could it be, I asked myself, that some poisonous creature or insect had bitten first Allene Ralton and now Olivia? Something that had sucked blood from the mother and now from the daughter?

"Then as I asked myself that question, long-forgotten and half-learned knowledge rose in my mind. I remembered all the features of Allene's strange illness, her progressive bloodlessness, the lack of any sign of real disease, and as I reviewed mentally the things I had heard Allene babble unknowingly in her deliriums of weakness, I knew the answer to all that had happened in a blinding and terrible flood of light.

"The thing that had made those marks, the thing that was preying upon Olivia Ralton as it had preyed upon Allene Ralton, could only be a vampire! I had heard of such cases, of dead men and women who had come to take the blood of the living; but because I had not had any direct contact with them, I had not taken much stock in them. Yet here was the dreadful evidence of their reality before my eyes! A vampire was draining away Olivia's life-blood as her mother's had been drained, and unless it was stopped she would die as Allene had died!

"My mind was in turmoil after I made this dreadful discovery. I was certain it was actually vampirism that had killed Allene Ralton and now was killing her daughter. But who was the vampire or vampires responsible for it, the dead who were coming back to take the blood of the living? And how could I, a medical

man with only orthodox medical training, combat this dark horror?

"It was then I remembered how a colleague of mine had once told me of a specialist in evil, a Doctor John Dale of New York City, who had made his life-work the fighting of the forces of evil which many physicians encounter in their practise. I determined to go down to New York to get the aid of this Doctor Dale to fight the vampire horror that seemed to have come into being in Maysville.

"So I told James Ralton and Edward Harmon that, told them that it was my belief Olivia and Allene were victims of vampirism and that I meant to get aid that could stop the vampire's hideous work. Of course Ralton and Harmon were astounded and horrified. Like myself they had heard of the dreaded vampire evil without ever dreaming they might themselves come into contact with it.

"I told them to say nothing of it to Olivia Ralton, or to any one else, for that matter, but to make sure that nothing visited Olivia during the night. Her father said he would watch with her through the night each night; so I felt she was safe for the time being. This morning James Ralton told me on the telephone that she had not been disturbed during the night; so I took the first train to New York.

"When I arrived here I came straight to your office, Doctor Dale, and forced myself in despite your secretary, Mr. Owen. For I believe that this thing is terribly important, that unless the vampire menace up in Maysville can somehow be stopped, Olivia Ralton will die a victim as did Allene Ralton. And that is why I have come here to beg you to come up to Maysville and combat this terrible thing!"

DOCTOR HENDERSON'S brow was damp and he was leaning forward tensely in his chair as he finished, his voice hoarse with emotion. Doctor Dale had listened to him with silent but intent interest, while my pencil had been flying over my pad as I recorded what the physician told.

"Doctor Henderson, I admit that what you have told does point directly toward vampirism," Dale said. "Yet, as I have told you, vampirism is not frequent, and there may be another explanation."

"But you'll come up to Maysville and see for yourself whether or not it's vampirism?" Henderson asked him quickly. "I assure you that any fee you might ask James Ralton for your services——"

"Let us first go further into the matter," Doctor Dale interrupted. "You say, Henderson, that besides the marks on the throats of Allene and Olivia Ralton, it was the delirious wanderings of Allene Ralton that led you to suspect the presence of vampirism. Just what was the nature of those wanderings?"

"They were fearful," Doctor Henderson told him. "They occurred mostly during the last days of Allene's illness, when she was so weak as to be delirious most of the time. She would toss restlessly to and fro in bed, muttering inaudibly, and sometimes her mutterings were loud enough to hear.

"Most of them were about a face she seemed to feel watching her. She would whisper fearfully of red eyes looking in at her, of gleaming teeth. She would mutter also of dogs howling, and moan as though in terror. And once as I sat beside her bed I saw Allene in her delirium shrink as though from something terrible, and utter in a hissing whisper, 'My throat—my throat—he again——.'

"At the time, as I told you, I made nothing of all this, for as you will know from experience, patients in delirium ut-

ter the most weird and unlikely sort of things, stuff that floats up from their subconscious minds. But later on, when I had seen the marks on Olivia's throat and remembered those on Allene's, I remembered her ravings too and they made me suspect vampirism."

Doctor Dale nodded thoughtfully. "But during Allene Ralton's conscious period?" he asked. "Did she tell you then of any night-visitant such as her wanderings would indicate?"

Doctor Henderson shook his head. "No, she didn't. She wasn't conscious much in those last days, you know. She did tell me that she had been having terrible dreams and felt a dread of night's coming. She also said that the howling of the dogs down at the lodge, which they had been doing a good bit lately, by night, somehow oppressed her."

"What about your present patient, Olivia Ralton?" Doctor Dale continued. "Have you heard anything of the same nature from her?"

"Well, of course Olivia hasn't been delirious," Henderson said. "She's told me also that she has oppressive nightmares and that she dislikes the way the dogs at the lodge howl at night, but that's all."

Doctor Dale seemed to consider that, his brow wrinkled in thought. Then he asked Doctor Henderson, "You say Allene Ralton's decline in blood and health was first noticed a month ago?"

"Yes, about four weeks ago," answered the Maysville physician. "It was the first week in September that I noticed it."

"Just who, can you tell me, had died in or around Maysville just previous to that?" Dale asked.

Henderson drew in his breath, looked fixedly at Dale. "I see what you mean, Doctor Dale. You are trying to find out whether some one who died about then became the vampire in question, are you not? Let me think—the first week in September."

Henderson thought a few moments, then looked up. "The only persons to die in Maysville in the days directly before that were three, an old lady of ninety who died of sheer senility, a young farmer killed in a tractor accident, and an infant that died in birth. Surely it's inconceivable that any of them became vampire after death."

"Well, did any strangers come to Maysville about that time?" Doctor Dale asked. "I mean any one who came then to stay."

"No one but a new telegraph operator at the Maysville railroad station, named Fellowes. And of course Gerritt Geisert came to Maysville about then, but one would hardly call him a stranger."

"Gerritt Geisert?" repeated Doctor Dale. "Isn't that the person you mentioned as living in the only one of the old manors back in the hills now inhabited?"

Doctor Henderson nodded. "Yes, the Geisert manor is one of the oldest of the old places back in the hills, goes back to the early Eighteenth Century. I understand the original Geisert, whose first name also was Gerritt, left the whole region about the middle of the Eighteenth Century when for some reason nearly all of those manors in the hills were abandoned.

"But a month or more ago one of his descendants, also named Gerritt Geisert, came back to the region, arriving one night in Maysville. He notified authorities he was taking possession of the old manor in the hills, showing them the old family deeds. I understand he's engaged in studies of some sort out there, for he comes into the village only now and then in the evening."

"Geisert—Gerritt Geisert," murmured

Doctor Dale, frowning in thought. "I suppose this Gerritt Geisert is acquainted with you and the Raltons and the others?"

"Gerritt's become acquainted with most of the older families, the Raltons and Moores and others, yes," Henderson said. "He only comes in on infrequent evenings, as I said, but all of us like to have him call, for he's a courteous and highly interesting fellow."

"What about this Fellowes who came to Maysville about the same time?" Dale asked. "What's he like?"

"Why, I've only seen him occasionally around the station where he has the night shift," Doctor Henderson said. "He seems rather an ordinary young fellow."

Doctor Dale nodded, sat back in his chair for a time in thought, while Henderson watched him anxiously.

Finally Dale looked up. "You say you told no one but James Ralton and Edward Harmon that you suspected vampirism and were coming to get me to fight it?" he asked.

Doctor Henderson nodded. "Yes, and as I said, I asked them to tell it to no one else. I was afraid that if Olivia Ralton heard what I feared about her case it would make her much worse."

"It's well you did so," Dale told him. "It would be the worst of handicaps if I went up there with every one in the village knowing what my mission was."

"Then you're coming up to Maysville?" Doctor Henderson said quickly. "You're going to take the case?"

Doctor Dale nodded decisively. "You can expect Owen and me on the first train in the morning. For if it is actually vampirism that is going on in your village, the sooner it is stopped the better for all there."

The Maysville physician paled. "I know," he said. "I've been almost out of my wits about this thing. But now that you're coming to work on it, I feel immeasurably more confident."

"Yes, but remember," Doctor Dale told him gravely, "that if this is really vampirism I can not guarantee that I can overcome it. For vampirism, as I said, is one of the most terrible of all the forms of evil and one of the hardest to fight.

"It will help us in that fight, if fight it is that lies ahead," he added, "if none in Maysville save those who must, knows what purpose brings Owen and me there. I rely on your silence therefore."

"You may to the utmost," Doctor Henderson assured him quickly. "Then I can expect you tomorrow?"

"On the first train tomorrow morning," Dale told him. "That will give Owen and me time to assemble the equipment we'll need. If James Ralton watches over Olivia as you say he means to, she should be safe tonight, and tomorrow we'll be with her."

Doctor Henderson nodded, and with a clasp of Dale's hand and a bow to me, he walked out of the office.

DOCTOR DALE quickly rose then and selected from the crowded bookshelves on the office's eastern wall a battered calf-bound quarto. He ran through its pages, read intently when he found what he sought.

He put the book thoughtfully down on his desk, then, and turned to me.

"You got all he told, Owen?" he asked. "Well, what do you think of it all?"

I shook my head. "Looks like as strange a case as we've taken yet. We've had some queer ones, but this is the first time that we've ever come up against vampirism."

"The first time since you've been with me, Owen," Docor Dale corrected me. "I've had some experience myself in the

past with the vampire evil, as I told Henderson. And I confess that of all the forces of evil I've met so far, I'd least rather have to fight this dreadful one of vampirism."

"It may not be really vampirism at all," I suggested. "This Doctor Henderson may simply have mistaken the indications and become fearful."

Dale shook his head. "No, Owen, from what he told me I am certain that, terrible as it seems, vampirism of the most dreaded sort is going on up in Maysville. For he told me, Owen, more than he knew himself. I mean when he told of this Gerritt Geisert who so recently reached Maysville."

"I thought you'd struck on something there," I said, and Dale nodded, picked up the old calf-bound quarto he had been looking at.

"This is David Newell's *Remarkable Cases of Wizardry,* published here in New York in 1767. It's a plain account of some of the outbreaks of evil forces experienced in Colonial days, and here's the passage from it that I remembered when Henderson mentioned the name Gerritt Geisert.

"Also it has been told that a man dwelling in New York province near the northern Kaatskill Mounts, Gerritt Geissart by name, did plague and afflict many of his neighbors by taking by night their blood and life in a most dreadful way. Some said this Geissart was really dead, and finally went many with weapons and clerics to slay the wizard. But they found him not, dead or alive, since he had fled. And since then has none lived in his house or in those houses near to it whose occupants he had afflicted.

"That's what I remembered when Henderson mentioned the name Gerritt Geisert," Doctor Dale said, closing the book. "And that, Owen, is how a Gerritt Geisert lived a hundred and fifty years ago and how he left the region. And now a Gerritt Geisert has returned!"

I stared at him. "Dale, you can't mean to say that you think this Gerritt Geisert who has come back to Maysville is——"

"I think nothing, yet," Doctor Dale interrupted, "save that as I told Henderson, the sooner we get to Maysville the better. For terrible as vampirism is, I think it is more than ordinary vampirism going on there, and that somehow, by us or by others, it must be stopped!"

3. *A Vigil for a Vampire*

"MAYSVILLE!" called the conductor as the train slowed.

"Our stop, Owen," said Doctor Dale. We grasped our cases, Dale taking the black case that held the occult equipment he had brought; and as the train stopped, we stepped down in the bright October sunlight onto the platform of Maysville's small frame station.

"There's Henderson," said Doctor Dale, and I saw the tall, thin figure of the Maysville physician hastening toward us.

Henderson greeted us and led the way to his car. As we drove away from the station he told us, "You'll stay with me while here, of course."

"Thank you, doctor," Dale answered. "I'm anxious to get out to see these Raltons as soon as possible."

Doctor Henderson nodded. "After lunch we'll drive out there."

Maysville seemed a typical New York village, the main street that held its business blocks extending northward and southward into an avenue of old houses, mostly of stone. On the short side streets were smaller frame houses painted white.

West of Maysville we could glimpse rolling country that extended to the Catskills' dark wooded foot-hills. These ran north and south in a range some miles west of the village and had a forbidding wildness of appearance, but the rolling countryside between them and the village

was one of sleek fields dotted with the pretentious homes of large estates.

Doctor Henderson's own home proved a stone one of some size, presided over by a stout housekeeper. After we had lunched there and stowed our personal effects in the room Henderson designated, we set out with him and drove westward.

The countryside was even more idyllic at close range, with its well-kept fields, hedges bordering the roads, and stone gateways and lodges at the entrance of estates. The mellow October sunlight fell warmly on all. Henderson, though, was patently too nervous to appreciate the scene's beauty, and Dale was not observing it but looking thoughtfully toward the dark hills westward.

Henderson soon turned in from the road through an entrance beside which a stone lodge squatted. A winding driveway led through stately grounds with great trees toward the half-glimpsed gray-stone mass of a large building. This, the residence of James Ralton, was a stone mansion of semi-Gothic style impressive in its massiveness and size.

A few moments later, inside the luxuriously furnished mansion, Henderson was introducing us to James Ralton himself. He was a middle-aged man with gray-sprinkled dark hair and cultivated face, and with fine gray eyes that held a mixture of anxiety and relief as he shook hands with Doctor Dale and me.

"Doctor Dale, you can't know how glad I am that you and Mr. Owen are here," he said. "Henderson has told me enough about you to make me sure that if any one can stop this ghastly business you can."

"What is your own opinion of the business?" Dale asked him. "Doctor Henderson believes it a case of vampirism—do you also believe that?"

Ralton whitened. "Doctor Dale, I don't know what to believe! Vampirism going on here seems so incredible, yet it does seem that my wife and now my daughter have been victims of such a hideous thing. Whether or not it is really vampirism that killed my poor wife and has now attacked Olivia, I am sure it is something of terrible nature. And I'll be eternally grateful if you can check it in my daughter's case."

Doctor Dale nodded. "I suppose we can see Miss Ralton now?"

"Of course," Ralton said. "This way. Virginia, my other daughter, has been staying today with Olivia."

He led the way up a broad formal stair with Doctor Dale, carrying his black case, and Henderson and I following. We passed along a wide-panelled hall on the second floor and into a spacious corner room quite evidently a girl's room.

A GIRL who had been sitting by the bed in the corner rose as we entered. She was under twenty and very pretty, with dark brown hair and the gray eyes of James Ralton. Ralton introduced her to us as his younger daughter, Virginia, and then went over with us to the bed in which lay another girl.

"My daughter Olivia," he said, looking down at her with a sort of anxious pride. "Doctor Dale and Mr. Owen, dear, who I told you were coming."

"The doctor that Hendy went to see in New York?" asked Olivia Ralton weakly. "I am so glad to see them."

I was shocked by Olivia Ralton's appearance. She was beautiful, her hair dark, eyes large and dark also, with semi-oval face. But it was a wasted beauty, her unnaturally white skin drawn too tightly over her bones, her eyes too tired and listless in expression.

There was on the dressing-table near her bed a large framed photograph of a

woman of middle age, sweet-faced and with dark hair and dark eyes like those of this girl. It was not hard to guess that the picture was of her dead mother, Allene Ralton.

Doctor Dale took a chair beside the bed. "Miss Ralton, I and Owen are here to help you," he told her, "to combat your illness."

"It doesn't seem really like an illness at all," she told him. "I just feel terribly weak lately, and without any real energy."

"When did you begin to feel this way?" Doctor Dale asked her.

Olivia's brow wrinkled. "About two or three days after mother's funeral, I think."

"Just what do you feel? Can't you describe it more fully?"

"Well," said Olivia Ralton hesitatingly, "when I wake some mornings I seem to feel weaker, as though part of my strength had gone somehow during the night."

Doctor Dale glanced significantly at Doctor Henderson and me, then turned back to the girl in the bed.

"Doctor Henderson has told me of certain marks on your throat," he said. "You'll not mind if I examine them a moment?"

Without waiting for her permission Dale deftly pulled back the silk coverlet, exposing Olivia Ralton's white neck. Upon it near the left side of the throat were two tiny red punctures, about two inches apart. Dale touched them gently, and we saw Olivia wince as he did so.

"When did you get these marks?" he asked. She shook her head.

"I don't know, doctor. I didn't even know I had them until Doctor Henderson saw them. Some insect must have bitten me."

"Tell me," said Doctor Dale, "have you ever felt at night that something was fastening upon your throat, upon these marks?"

Olivia Ralton hesitated. "I've dreamed of something like that."

"What did you dream?" asked Dale.

"Why, it was just silly like most dreams. But I seemed to hear the dogs down at the lodge howling—they howl a good bit now at night for some reason. And perhaps hearing the dogs in my sleep made me dream of teeth, long sharp white ones. For I seemed to see such teeth coming down toward me, teeth and a bright red mouth from which came hot, bitter breath. I think there were red eyes somewhere there too, like those of an animal, and a sort of pain in my throat that hurt and yet was at the same time delightful."

"You've dreamed of that more than once?" Doctor Dale asked.

"Yes, isn't it silly? But somehow it made me feel bad—I know the mornings I felt worse were after I'd had nightmares like that."

Doctor Dale rose calmly, but with a gleam in his hazel eyes that I knew from experience to denote interior excitement.

"I think we can stop the nightmares for tonight," he told Olivia. "I've a sleeping-powder here that will stop them."

Dale placed a powder beside the water-carafe and glass on the night-table. Then with a few cheery words to Olivia, he terminated his visit, James Ralton and Henderson and I leaving the room with him, Virginia Ralton remaining with her sister.

We four passed downstairs, unspeaking. It was not until we had reached the library, a splendid room with tall book-rows and massive stone fireplace and mullioned windows, that James Ralton broke

the silence with an anxious question to Doctor Dale.

"WELL, doctor, what did you learn? Is it——"

"It is vampirism, yes," said Dale. "Ralton, beyond doubt your daughter's life and blood are being drained from her by a vampire, and it is certain that your dead wife died from the same thing."

"Allene victim of a vampire!" exclaimed James Ralton. "Good God, Dale, what are we to do? How can we protect Olivia from this horror?"

"We must know first what dead person is vampirizing her," Dale said. "Once we know that we can act. All vampires, though they can roam abroad at night in their hideous work, must lie from sunrise until sunset stiff and helpless in their coffins. When we have found who this vampire is we can go by day to its coffin and end its activities in the one way in which vampires can be destroyed, by driving through its heart a wooden stake and severing its head from its body. Then it will be truly dead and not one of the terrible dead-alive."

"But we don't know who this vampire may be that preyed on my wife and now on my daughter!" Ralton said. "And how can we find out?"

"We can find out," Doctor Dale said, "by lying hidden in Olivia's room tonight and waiting for the vampire to appear. Olivia will be unconscious from my sleeping-powder and will know nothing. If the vampire does visit Olivia again tonight we will be there and may be able to overcome it. But even if we can not, we will learn its identity and go by day to where its body lies and destroy it."

"Doctor Dale, I'll do it—I'll watch with you!" said James Ralton, his face pale but determined. "I rely on your advice, for in this terrible matter I'm entirely helpless."

"I'll watch with you too," Doctor Henderson said. "And we'll probably have a fifth, young Edward Harmon, who will be here."

"Olivia's fiancé?" Doctor Dale said. "That should make enough."

"Then you'll be staying for dinner here," Ralton said. "Of course we'll say nothing to Olivia or Virginia or the servants."

DINNER that evening was not very cheerful in the big and somewhat gloomy Ralton dining-room. All of us but Virginia Ralton were oppressed by the dreadful vigil ahead of us, and even she seemed rather subdued, no doubt by her mother's recent death.

Doctor Dale managed to carry on with her and James Ralton a certain amount of conversation, relative to Maysville and its people. I pricked up my ears when I heard the conversation touch on Gerritt Geisert, whom James Ralton knew and seemed to like.

He told Dale in answer to a question that he could not imagine why Gerritt Geisert lived out at his old place, the roads into the hills being long unused and almost forgotten, and he having no car. I gathered that Gerritt Geisert had been a caller welcomed by both Ralton and his dead wife.

Night had fallen when we left the dining-room. Virginia was upstairs with Olivia and we were in the library when Edward Harmon arrived.

Harmon was a tall, serious young fellow of thirty, his anxiety concerning Olivia Ralton very evident. He seemed more than a little disappointed when Virginia came down with word that Olivia was already sleeping under the influence of Doctor Dale's powder.

We carried on a desultory and somewhat nervous conversation until Virginia Ralton retired. When she had done so Edward Harmon turned to Doctor Dale at once with the question uppermost in his mind.

"Doctor Henderson told me what he suspected, doctor. Was he right?"

"You mean, is Olivia's case one of vampirism?" Dale asked. "It is, and we are going to begin fighting the vampire tonight."

Harmon listened intently as Doctor Dale explained our plan. "Then we're going to wait up there for this vampire? What if it doesn't come?"

"Then we'll wait tomorrow night and every night after until it does come," Dale said. "It's our best method of fighting it."

Harmon shook his head. "It's a ghastly business. But I'm with you in anything that will save Olivia from this hideous thing."

Dale looked at his watch. "I think we'd better get up and take our places in Olivia's room now," he said. "It's after ten, and Miss Virginia and most of the servants seem to have retired."

Doctor Dale, still carrying the black case he had brought from New York, led our silent little group as we started upstairs. The lights we snapped out behind us save for a few hall lamps, leaving most of the big house's first floor dark. The second floor also was dark and there was only dim moonlight in Olivia Ralton's room when we softly entered.

Doctor Dale looked quickly around. There were broad French windows in the room's northern and western sides, the northern window having a balcony outside. The bed on which Olivia Ralton lay in deep slumber was in the northwest corner, with its head against the western wall, there being a few yards of space between it and the northern window.

The darkness was deepest around the windowless south and east walls, and it was in the shadows there, at Doctor Dale's whispered directions, that we took our places. I was in the southeast corner with Dale at my right and James Ralton, Edward Harmon and Doctor Henderson at my left. Before crouching down in the shadows Doctor Dale took from his case two small crosses, one of which he handed me without comment.

In a whisper he impressed us with the necessity of making no move or sound until he gave the word. Then, crouching down in the shadows, we began our strange vigil. The only thing plainly visible in the room beside the moonlit windows in the north and western walls was the blur of white that was the bed in which Olivia Ralton lay sleeping.

Darkness and silence. I could just make out Doctor Dale's form as a deeper shade in the shadows to my right, and my other companions were as dimly visible at my left. The occasional scraping of a shoe showed me they were moving nervously, and I could hear the rapid breathing of James Ralton beside me, and of Henderson and Harmon beyond him. Somewhere downstairs a clock struck eleven with long, slow notes.

I found my thoughts on the girl sleeping in the bed, on Olivia Ralton and on her mother and all these Raltons stricken so suddenly by a visitation of evil. In the darkness that evil, that had taken the life of Allene Ralton and now was preying on Olivia, assumed darker, stronger proportions. What had Doctor Dale told me—that vampirism was terrible enough but that he feared here was vampirism more terrible?

RALTON started a little beside me as there came from below the long notes of the clock striking midnight. Silence was again descending upon the big

darkened house when it was broken again by a sound which startled all of us but Doctor Dale into betraying movements.

The sound was the howl of a dog, a long, quavering cry that came through the night half in anger and half in fear. At once two or three other dogs howled in the same way, a long, barking chorus that came strangely to our ears as we crouched in the sleeping girl's room. The howls changed rapidly into short barks, a furious barking that grew louder and louder.

"The dogs are barking at someone—something——" whispered James Ralton beside me.

Dale whispered swift warning: "Quiet now, above all!"

The dogs' barking reached a veritable frenzy, and then suddenly with a few panicky yelps they were silent. Their tumult was broken off as sharply as though by a blow, and the silence that followed seemed ten times more intense than before.

We had not long to wait. There was a soft sound from the balcony outside the north window, and my heart leapt uncontrollably as I saw out on that balcony an erect figure dimly visible in the moonlight. From Ralton's convulsive clutch on my wrist I knew he and the others had seen also.

The figure moved closer to the window and we could see that it was white-clad. It pressed its face against the window, peering into the dark room in whose shadows we crouched. We saw that face against the window clearly, and it was a woman's face—a face that would have been beautiful in a mature way had it not been distorted by a diabolic expression of cold cruelty. The face seemed somehow familiar to me, with its well-formed features and dark hair hanging loose around the shoulders. Against that dark hair this woman's face was deathly white.

Her dark eyes as she peered in seemed filled with crimson light. Her lips were brilliant red in her dead-white face, parted enough to disclose the white teeth. She wore a single flowing white garment that I recognized with an unconscious shock as a shroud. She seemed not to see us in the dark room as she gazed in with crimson-lit eyes.

There came a choking whisper from James Ralton. "Good God, it's Allene! It's my wife!"

"Allene Ralton—Olivia's mother!" Doctor Henderson murmured dazedly. "And I pronounced her dead—she is dead!"

4. *Gerritt Geisert*

"QUIET!" whispered Doctor Dale. "For God's sake make no sound!"

My brain seemed whirling as I clutched tighter the cross in my hand. This weird visitant of the night was, then, the dead mother of the girl sleeping here, the dead Allene Ralton! She who had died herself as a victim of vampirism, coming back from the dead by night to her daughter!

Allene Ralton's eyes had made out the sleeping girl on the bed and her face lit with unholy pleasure, a smile of gloating cruelty illumining her features as though flames of hell had suddenly flared high behind the alabaster mask of her face. With that gloating smile unchanged she reached up toward the outside window-handle.

The handle clicked and the window swung open. Allene Ralton stood in its opening clearly visible to our eyes, a white-shrouded shape as solid and real as any of us. Her eyes still red-lit, she glided from the window toward the head of the bed and bent over Olivia.

She seemed deliberately gloating over her daughter's sleeping form, bending

slowly down. Slowly Allene Ralton's red mouth approached the white uncovered neck of the girl, the brilliant lips forming a round red circle. I felt unbearable tension. Would Dale never act?

James Ralton, his self-control snapping, leapt to his feet beside me. "Allene!" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing?—why have you come back from the dead?"

With an unhuman screech of fear and anger Allene Ralton bounded back from the bed to the window-opening as Dale and I reached our feet.

"So you waited here to trap me?" she cried, her voice stabbingly shrill. "You fools! Fools, all of you!"

Ralton made as to leap toward her, but Doctor Dale grasped him, held him back. "Allene, it's I—it's James!" Ralton was crying madly. "What has made you come back? Let me go, Dale!"

"No, Ralton!" Dale cried. "Stay back—help hold him, Owen!"

Allene Ralton's laughter rang diabolically. "You need not hold him, I do not want *him!*" she mocked. "I and he whom I serve have better victims—see!"

She stretched her hand toward the bed, and Olivia Ralton, without waking, emerged from the bed and moved toward Allene as though called by resistless forces.

Allene Ralton's eyes flared red in triumph. "She comes at my call! Come, dearest—it is your mother, Olivia—come with me——"

Doctor Dale sprang toward her, the cross extended in his hand. Allene Ralton's mocking smile vanished and she recoiled out onto the balcony as though struck by terrific forces.

"Allene!" screamed Ralton. "Don't go—Dale, don't——" He tumbled in a dead faint.

"She will be ours yet—will be one of us yet!" screeched the thing that wore Allene Ralton's shape, in hellish fury. "One of us yet!"

With the words, as Doctor Dale advanced with his cross upon her, she whipped back out over the balcony. Dale and I rushed out after her, Henderson and Harmon lifting up Ralton.

Allene Ralton was gone from the balcony and we saw her white shape gliding off through the trees of the dark grounds. She looked back to see Dale and me on the balcony, her white face moved as though in devilish mirth, and then she was gone into the darkness.

DOCTOR DALE spun round and hastened back into the room, snapped on its lights. Olivia Ralton still stood sleeping by the side of her bed. Doctor Henderson and young Harmon were bringing James Ralton out of his faint, his horror-widened eyes gazing dazedly about.

He clutched Doctor Dale's arm. "It was Allene! What happened?—where did she go?"

"She has gone back for tonight, I think, to her coffin," said Doctor Dale grimly.

"To her coffin? Dale, she can't really be dead! She must have been living—yet she wasn't like Allene at all!"

A sudden thought struck him. "Dale, you don't think that Allene is the dead person you say has been vampirizing Olivia?"

"I know that she is!" Doctor Dale said. "Ralton, the vampire that has been sucking Olivia's blood is undoubtedly her own dead mother!"

"It can't be so!" cried James Ralton. "Dale, Allene was a saint on earth and she couldn't have become such a thing of evil as a vampire!"

"It is so!" Doctor Dale told him. "Ral-

ton, your wife died as the victim of a vampire. Now it is one thing known to be terrible truth that whoever dies from the sucking of his blood by a vampire, becomes by reason of that horrible transfusion, when he dies, a vampire himself.

"He may have been the most saintly of people while living, yet if he dies as a vampire's victim he will inevitably become a vampire himself when dead—will have in his coffin a horrible kind of corpse-life and will go forth by night for blood to sustain that life. Always, too, a vampire chooses its first victims from its own family. And that is what Allene Ralton, become a vampire after death, is doing."

"It's impossible!" cried James Ralton again. "Allene couldn't do such a thing! She'd have died gladly for Olivia and Virginia!"

"I do not doubt it," said Dale, "but that was while she was living, Ralton. Dead, she has become vampire and like all vampires is cruel and evil as a fiend. She will remain so until we end her vampire activities and make her one of the truly dead.

"And we must do that for Olivia's sake as well as for her own. For there is a tie now between her and her daughter whose blood she has sucked. You saw how she could command Olivia even in sleep. And if Olivia should die before Allene Ralton's vampire-life is brought to an end, Olivia too will become vampire!"

Dale turned from the stunned Ralton to Olivia, whom Henderson was helping back into bed, still sleeping. "She's all right for the present," he said after examining her, "and will know nothing of all this when she wakes in the morning. I think that you, Harmon, had best watch here with her for the rest of this night, however. And I will put protections here for her that Allene Ralton can not pass if she dares come back again tonight."

Doctor Dale took from his black case a number of sprays of dirty-looking white blossoms with withered leaves, garlic flowers that he had procured before leaving New York. These we arranged over the door and window-frames, first locking the latter securely.

Dale even crushed some of the blossoms and rubbed them along the cracks of the window and door openings, and placed others around the head of Olivia Ralton's bed. Then leaving Edward Harmon seated beside the sleeping girl, with but one lamp glowing, we went downstairs.

WHEN we reached the library, James Ralton sank into a chair as though still stunned by what had taken place. Henderson stood with white face by the cheery blaze in the stone fireplace, while Doctor Dale faced us with features grave and determination in his hazel eyes.

"We have discovered the identity of the vampire preying on Olivia," he said, "and our next step is clear. That vampire must be destroyed—we must go tomorrow to Allene Ralton's tomb and do that."

James Ralton paled. "You mean to use what you said was the only way to destroy vampires, to——"

"To open the coffin and drive a wooden stake through the vampire's heart and cut off its head—yes!" said Dale.

"But to do that to Allene's body!" exclaimed Ralton. "I can't bear to think of her being mangled so."

"Would you rather her dead body retained the horrible corpse-life it has at present?" Doctor Dale asked him sternly. "Would you rather that she went forth from her coffin each night imbued with that life, preying upon her own daughter

and later perhaps on others? No, Ralton, your dead wife must be so treated, for only when we have done that to Allene Ralton's corpse will her vampirism cease. Then we will be free to attack the one behind this, the master vampire who first vampirized and killed Allene and who still is spreading evil here if——"

He froze suddenly, all four of us motionless as from outside came a heart-chilling sound. It was a sudden barking chorus from the dogs at the lodge, howls rising in a crescendo of fear and fury.

"The dogs!" exclaimed Henderson. "They're howling as when——"

"Upstairs, quick!" cried Doctor Dale. "Allene Ralton was here once tonight and may have come back!" We were hastening to the door, Ralton with us, when Smart, the butler, entered.

"A caller has just arrived, sir," he told James Ralton. "It is Mr. Gerritt Geisert."

"Gerritt Geisert!" Doctor Dale's exclamation was unconscious.

Relief showed on James Ralton's face. "Oh, Gerritt," he said. "It must have been he who stirred up the dogs coming in. Show him in."

Doctor Dale's eyes were narrowed, and my heart beat faster as we waited for Smart to bring in the caller. When he did so, James Ralton greeted him with outstretched hand.

"You're rather a late caller, Gerritt. And you gave us rather a scare just now."

"A scare?" repeated Gerritt Geisert softly. "How could I?—but I am very sorry if I did."

Gerritt Geisert, whom Doctor Dale and I were watching closely, was tall and almost bony, a commanding figure in dark clothes. His age would have been hard to guess. From his straight black hair and brows, his pallid white unwrinkled face and erect bearing, one might place him as not much over thirty. But something in his commanding black eyes and in the expression of his features would have given pause.

There was about him, indeed, an atmosphere of immense experience and self-control and self-confidence. They were hinted in the high forehead, written plain in the long straight nose and pointed, saturnine chin, and almost too plain in the straight red line of the lips, straight almost to cruelty. His white skin was drawn tightly as though stretched over the bones of his face. The longer one watched, the less certain one became of his age but the more aware of his overmastering personality.

"I'm sorry if I gave any one a fright," he was saying in a soft, almost silky voice. "I was returning home late from the village, saw your place still lit up and thought I might drop in——"

"Oh, it's no fault of yours—it was just that you set the dogs at the lodge howling as you came in," said James Ralton nervously. "Let me introduce Doctor John Dale of New York, and Mr. Harley Owen, his assistant. They've come up to help Henderson in Olivia's case."

Gerritt Geisert bowed and it seemed to me that as he faced Dale his black eyes crossed and clashed Dale's hazel ones in sudden question and challenge. "How is Olivia?" he asked Ralton with the right touch of courteous solicitude. "Not worse, I trust?"

Ralton hesitated. "Not exactly," he said, "but her case has taken a strange turn and Henderson thought it advisable to have the help of Doctor Dale and Mr. Owen."

He turned to us. "I think I'll go up for a moment to make sure she's all right —I'd feel easier after what just happened. You won't mind for a moment, Gerritt? Or you, Doctor Dale?"

"Of course not," said Dale, Gerritt Geisert bowing agreement.

Ralton went out and we heard him ascending the stairs.

A TENSENESS seemed somehow to drop upon the library as he left. Gerritt Geisert was standing near the fireplace, regarding Doctor Dale and Henderson and me with a smile that had hidden mockery in it.

"I shouldn't think," said Doctor Henderson to Geisert, "that you'd care much about walking back out through those lonely hills this late."

"I do not mind," Gerritt Geisert smiled, "though it is true that my ancestral mansion is rather isolated."

"I've heard quite a bit about it," Dale told him, "and about you."

"What could you have heard about me?" Geisert asked smilingly. "I'm just a rather indolent student leading a half-hermit existence."

"I've been told that," Doctor Dale said. "But part of what I heard or rather read was about a different Gerritt Geisert than yourself."

"A different Gerritt Geisert?" repeated Geisert, his black brows drawing together. "Whom do you mean?"

"I mean the Gerritt Geisert who almost two hundred years ago had to flee this region as a wizard of a particularly diabolical kind," Dale told him. "When Doctor Henderson mentioned your name I remembered that."

Geisert's black eyes were not smiling now, but deadly. "So you know about that?" he said ominously. "Well, what of it? I am not proud of having that wizard Gerritt Geisert as my ancestor and namesake, but one can not choose one's ancestors."

"Then he was your ancestor and namesake?" Doctor Dale said. "But how is it there is no mention of that Gerritt Geisert having descendants?"

"Dale, what are you getting at?" asked Henderson bewilderedly. "You're surely not questioning Mr. Geisert's identity, are you?"

"It does not matter—I have no objection to answering him," said Gerritt Geisert contemptuously. "My remote ancestor Gerritt Geisert, who left this region two centuries ago under charges of wizardry, went to another part of the country, married and left descendants, of whom I am the last. The deeds of the old Geisert estate here were passed down in the family and I came back here with them and took possession."

"That explains everything nicely, of course," said Doctor Dale. "Yet there is another explanation that would fit as well."

"And what is that?" asked Geisert with sinister softness.

"It is that you are not the descendant of that ancient Gerritt Geisert at all, but are that same Gerritt Geisert yourself!"

Geisert's eyes flared momentarily redder and then he laughed softly. "Doctor Dale," he said, "you do not flatter my appearance when you accuse me of living two hundred years."

"I did not mean," said Doctor Dale softly in turn, "that you have been *living* for those two hundred years."

The shaft of bitter meaning in his words went home through Gerritt Geisert's mocking mirth, and his eyes flamed hell-crimson again.

"So *that* is what you think?" he snarled. "I know now—you're no mere medical specialist Henderson brought here!"

"I am a specialist," said Doctor Dale, slowly, bitingly. "A specialist in combating and in destroying evil!"

Gerritt Geisert retreated a step. His white face was diabolical, twisted in in-

fernal wrath, his eyes blazing scarlet with fury as he and Doctor Dale faced each other. And Doctor Dale's own hazel eyes were flaming with purpose.

I had risen to my feet and Doctor Henderson was staring amazedly at the two, but Geisert and Dale ignored both of us. Geisert had stepped back into shadow, and the shadow seemed somehow thickening about him.

"And what have you, the specialist in evil, discovered since you came here?" he asked Dale sneeringly.

"I've discovered that Olivia Ralton is the victim of a vampire," Doctor Dale told him steadily, "as was her mother, Allene Ralton."

Gerritt Geisert shook his head mockingly. "Victims of vampirism? It sounds too mediæval, doctor, really."

"It is only too real," said Dale, "but I am going to stop it by destroying the vampire master who has loosed that black evil here."

"And who can that vampire master be?" asked Gerritt Geisert, moving almost imperceptibly sidewise. "I take it that you know?"

"Yes, I know, and what is more you know too!" Doctor Dale exclaimed; "know that the dead-alive master vampire who has come back from the past to wreak hideous evil here again is—*help, Owen!*"

Gerritt Geisert had sprung toward Doctor Dale in a flashing leap that took him across the room with flying shadows about him that seemed in the firelight like monstrous wings! His eyes were flaming crimson, his sharp teeth gleaming, as Dale went down beneath his rush. He seemed seeking Dale's throat with his teeth.

But at Dale's warning cry I had leapt forward, jerking my pistol from my coat-pocket and levelling it at Geisert. It roared twice as I pulled trigger, but though its muzzle was but a few feet from Gerritt Geisert's side he seemed unaffected by the shots. He flung Dale back with terrific force, and with a snarling cry of rage leapt and seized me.

His grip was rib-crushing, his eyes gleaming red like those of a mad animal, his bitter offensive breath almost overpowering me as his teeth swiftly sought my throat. I felt sudden giddiness as the sharp teeth touched my throat, heard amazed cries from James Ralton and Edward Harmon as they dashed into the room, then glimpsed Doctor Dale staggering up and extending toward us the cross from his pocket.

Gerritt Gesiert was knocked loose from me as though by a terrific blow from the cross. He was hurled back against the library windows, that jarred open from the impact. For a moment he stood thus against the outer darkness, a diabolical rage on his face, his eyes blazing hell-red in that white mask, dark cloak wide like great black wings behind him.

"So you have found out so much!" he cried furiously to Doctor Dale. "Then find out this also, that you creatures of a day can match me neither in strength nor in craft! Allene Ralton was mine and is mine, do you hear? So shall Olivia be mine and hers, and so shall you all one by one, and others after you, come beneath my mastery!"

In a flash he was gone into the darkness outside. There was a mad tumult of frenzied barking from the dogs at the lodge.

"After him!" I cried, leapt to the window and Edward Harmon with me, but Doctor Dale grasped and held us back.

"No, Owen!" he exclaimed. "We'd be helpless out there against him—he was too strong for us even here!"

"Geisert—Gerritt Geisert!" James Ralton was exclaiming. "Then he is the——"

"He is the vampire master who has loosed this curse of vampirism here, yes!" Doctor Dale said. "He is the Gerritt Geisert who plagued this region as a vampire two hundred years ago, who fled then to escape destruction and who now has come back to begin his unholy work again!"

"Gerritt Geisert the vampire master!" cried the white-faced Henderson. "Then he was the one who preyed on Allene?"

"You heard him boast it," Doctor Dale said. "After being forced to flee from here two hundred years ago, Geisert must have lived in many parts of the world, lying by day in his coffin, which he could transport from place to place at night, and going forth by night to suck the blood of his victims. Now he has come back here, to vampirize this region again!

"His coffin he probably placed in the old Geisert house you told me of, or in one of the other old untenanted houses back in those hills. There he has lain by day in death-like state but by night has been free to move, coming openly into the village or visiting his victims by stealth. Allene Ralton was first of those victims, and when she died as a vampire's victim and became vampire herself she came back to prey on Olivia, the circle of evil thus expanding endlessly outward from the vampire master, Gerritt Geisert!"

"But now that we know he's the master vampire we can go out by day and search for his body to destroy it!" cried Edward Harmon.

Doctor Dale shook his head. "Not yet! Our first task must be to end Allene Ralton's vampire activities by using stake and steel upon her body. That will release her from the dead-alive and halt her preying upon Olivia. Once that is done we can attack Gerritt Geisert himself."

He turned to Ralton. "Have you still any objections to us using the methods I described on your dead wife's body?"

"No, I can't have any objections now," groaned James Ralton. "Anything that will release Allene from that terrible state and save Olivia——"

"Very well," said Doctor Dale swiftly. "Tomorrow morning, then, we'll go to the cemetery and use the stake and knife on Allene Ralton's body. Once she is truly dead we can attack Gerritt Geisert and destroy or try to destroy him.

"Until then, say nothing of the truth to any one. The law can not help us in this, nor can mere numbers, and the fewer who know, the better. It is on our own knowledge and powers we must rely to defeat Geisert's two-centuries experience of evil and his powers, and——"

He was interrupted by the sudden hurried entrance of Virginia Ralton in hastily donned negligee.

"Dad, what happened?" she cried. "I heard shots and cries—and the dogs all barking——"

"There, Virginia, it's all right," James Ralton told her, his arm about her. "A gun was fired accidentally and we had some excitement, but nothing to worry about. Run back up to bed."

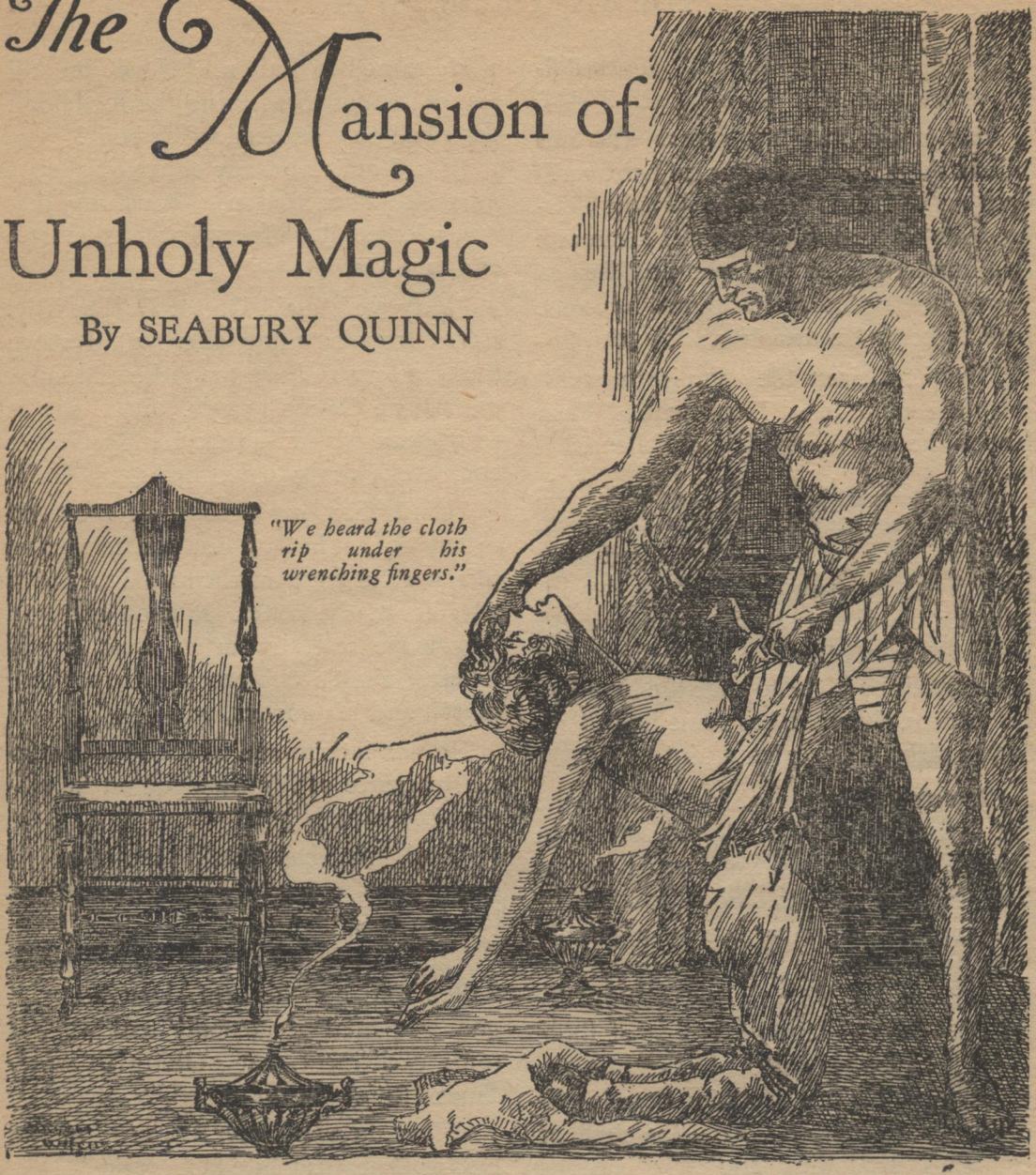
When she was gone, Ralton turned to Doctor Dale, his white face tragic. "Dale, we can stop this horror can't we? We can overcome Geisert before he makes more innocent people into hell-fiends like himself?"

Doctor Dale's face was grave. "I do not know," he said. "We face here an embodiment of evil stronger and more terrible than any I have ever before faced. Whether that evil may prove too strong for me and for all of us—I do not know."

Don't miss next month's thrilling installment, about bodies that walked and carried their coffins with them.

The Mansion of Unholy Magic

By SEABURY QUINN



"We heard the cloth rip under his wrenching fingers."

An eery tale, with chills, thrills and shudders a-plenty, about a brilliant exploit of the dauntless little French scientist, Jules de Grandin

"CAR, sir? Take you anywhere you want to go."

It was a quaint-looking figure which stood before us on the railway station platform, a figure difficult to classify as to age, status, or even sex. A man's gray felt hat which had seen better days, though not recently, was perched upon a head of close-cropped, tightly curling blond hair, surmounting a face liberally strewn with freckles. A pull-over sweater of gray cardigan sheathed boyishly broad shoulders and boyishly narrow hips and waist, while the straight, slim legs were encased in a pair of laundry-faded jodhpurs of cotton corduroy. A pair of bright pink coral ear-drops completed the ensemble.

Jules de Grandin eased the strap by which his triple-barreled Knaak combination gun swung from his left shoulder and favored the solicitor with a look denoting compound interest. "A car?" he echoed. "But no, I do not think we need one. The motor stage——"

"The bus isn't running," the other interrupted. "They had an accident this afternoon and the driver broke his arm; so I ran over to see if I could pick up any passengers. I've got my car here, and I'll be glad to take you where you want to go —if you'll hurry."

"But certainly," the Frenchman agreed with one of his quick smiles. "We go to Monsieur Sutter's hunting-lodge. You know the way?"

A vaguely troubled look clouded the clear gray eyes regarding him as he announced our destination. "Sutter's lodge?" the girl—by now I had determined that it was a girl—repeated as she cast a half-calculating, half-fearful glance at the lengthening lines of red and orange which streaked the western sky. "Oh, all right; I'll take you there, but we'll have to hurry. I don't want to—come on, please."

She led the way to a travel-stained Model T Ford touring-car, swung open the tonneau door and climbed nimbly to the driving-seat.

"All right?" she asked across her shoulder, and ere we had a chance to answer put the ancient vehicle in violent motion, charging down the unkempt country road as though she might be driving for a prize.

"*Eh bien,* my friend, this is a singularly unengaging bit of country," de Grandin commented as our rattling chariot proceeded at breakneck speed along a road which became progressively worse. "At our present pace I estimate that we have come five miles, yet not one single habitation have we passed, not a ray of light or wreath of smoke have we seen, nor——" he broke off, grasping at his cap as the almost springless car catapulted itself across a particularly vicious hummock in the road.

"Desist, *ma belle chauffeuse,*" he cried. "We desire to sleep together in one piece tonight; but one more bump like that and——" he clutched at the car-side while the venerable flivver launched itself upon another aerial excursion.

"Mister," our driver turned her serious, uncompromising face upon us while she drove her foot still harder down on the accelerator, "this is no place to take your time. We'll all be lucky to sleep in bed tonight, I'm thinkin', in one piece or several, if I don't——"

"Look out, girl!" I shouted, for the car, released from her guiding hand while she answered de Grandin's complaint, had lurched across the narrow roadway and was headed for a great, black-boled pine which grew beside the trail. With a wrench she brought the vehicle once more to the center of the road, putting on an extra burst of speed as she did so.

"If we ever get out of this," I told de Grandin through chattering teeth, "I'll never trust myself to one of these modern young fools' driving, you may be——"

"If we emerge from this with nothing more than *Mademoiselle's* driving to trouble us, I think we shall be more lucky than I think," he cut in seriously.

"What d'ye mean?" I asked exasperated. "If——"

"If you will look behind us, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what it is you see," he interrupted, as he began unfastening the buckles of his gun-case.

"Why," I answered as I glanced across the lurching car's rear cushion, "it's a man, de Grandin. A running man."

"*Eh,* you are sure?" he answered, slipping a heavy cartridge into the rifle bar-

rel of his gun. "A man who runs like that?"

The man was certainly running with remarkable speed. Tall, almost gigantic in height, and dressed in some sort of light-colored stuff which clung to his spare figure like a suit of tights, he covered the ground with long, effortless strides reminiscent of a hound upon the trail. There was something oddly furtive in his manner, too, for he did not keep to the center of the road, but dodged in a sort of zigzag, swerving now right, now left, keeping to the shadows as much as possible and running in such manner that only for the briefest intervals was he in direct line with us without some bush or tree-trunk intervening.

DE GRANDIN nursed the forestock of his gun in the crook of his left elbow, his narrowed eyes intent upon the runner.

"When he comes within fifty yards I shall fire," he told me softly. "Perhaps I should shoot now, but——"

"Good heavens, man; that's murder!" I expostulated. "If——"

"Be still!" he told me in a low, sharp whisper. "I know what I am doing."

The almost nighttime darkness of the dense pine woods through which we drove was thinning rapidly, and as we neared the open land the figure in our wake seemed to redouble its efforts. Now it no longer skulked along the edges of the road, but sprinted boldly down the center of the trail, arms flailing wildly, hands outstretched as though to grasp the rear of our car.

Amazingly the fellow ran. We were going at a pace exceeding forty miles an hour, but this long, thin woodsman seemed to be outdistancing us with ease. As we neared the margin of the wood and came into the dappled lights and shadows of the sunset, he put on a final burst of speed and rushed forward like a whirlwind, his feet scarce seeming to touch the ground.

Calmly, deliberately, de Grandin raised his gun and sighted down its gleaming blue-steel barrels.

"No!" I cried, striking the muzzle upward as he squeezed the trigger. "You can't do that, de Grandin; it's murder!"

My gesture was in time to spoil his aim, but not in time to stop the shot. With a roar the gun went off and I saw a tree-limb crack and hurtle downward as the heavy bullet sheared it off. And, as the shot reverberated through the autumn air, drowning the rattling of our rushing flivver, the figure in our wake dissolved. Astonishingly, inexplicably, but utterly, it vanished in the twinkling of an eye, gone completely—and as instantly—as a soap-bubble punctured with a pin.

The screeching grind of tortured brakes succeeded, and our car bumped to a stop within a dozen feet. "D-did you shoot?" our driver asked tremulously. Her fair and sunburned face had gone absolutely corpse-gray with terror, making the golden freckles stand out with greater prominence, and her lips were blue and cyanotic.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle,* I shot," de Grandin answered in a low and even voice. "I shot, and had it not been for my kind and empty-headed friend, I should have scored a hit." He paused; then, lower still, he added: "And now one understands why you were in a hurry, *Mademoiselle.*"

"Th-then, you saw—you saw——" she began through trembling lips, plucked feverishly at the steering-wheel with fear-numbed fingers for a moment, then, with a little, choking, gasping moan, slumped forward in her seat, unconscious.

"*Parbleu,* now one can sympathize with

that Monsieur Crusoe," the little Frenchman murmured as he looked upon the fainting girl. "Here we are, a dozen miles from anywhere, with most unpleasant neighbors all about, and none to show us to our destination." Matter-of-factly he fell to chafing the girl's wrists, slapping her cheeks softly from time to time, massaging her brow with deft, practised fingers.

"Ah, so, you are better now, *n'est-ce-pas?*" he asked as her eyelids fluttered upward. "You can show us where to go if my friend will drive the car?"

"Oh, I can drive all right, I think," she answered shakily, "but I'd be glad if you would sit by me."

Less speedily, but still traveling at a rate which seemed to me considerably in excess of that which our decrepit car could make with safety, we took up our journey, dipping into desolate, uninhabited valleys, mounting rocky elevations, finally skirting an extensive growth of evergreens and turning down a narrow, tree-lined lane until we reached the Sutter lodge, a squat, substantial log house with puncheon doors and a wide chimney of fieldstone. The sun had sunk below the western hills and long, purple-gray shadows were reaching across the little clearing round the cabin as we came to halt before the door.

"How much?" de Grandin asked as he clambered from the car and began unloading our gear.

"Oh, two dollars," said the girl as she slid down from the driving-seat and bent to lift a cowskin bag. "The bus would have brought you over for a dollar, but they'd have let you down at the foot of the lane, and you'd have had to lug your duffle up here. Besides——"

"Perfectly, *Mademoiselle,*" he interrupted, "we are not disposed to dicker over price. Here is five dollars, and you need not trouble to make change; neither is it necessary that you help us with our gear; we are quite content to handle it ourselves, and——"

"Oh, but I want to help you," she broke in, staggering toward the cabin with the heavy bag. "Then, if there's anything I can do to make you comfortable——" She broke off, puffing with exertion, set the bag down on the door-sill and hastened to the car for another burden.

Our traps stored safely in the cabin, we turned once more to bid our guide adieu, but she shook her head. "It's likely to be cold tonight," she told us. "This fall weather's right deceptive after dark. Better let me bring some wood in, and then you'll be needing water for your coffee and washing in the morning. So——"

"No, *Mademoiselle,* you need not do it," Jules de Grandin protested as she came in with an armful of cut wood. "We are able-bodied men, and if we find ourselves in need of wood or water we can—*mordieu!*"

Somewhere, faint and far-off seeming, but growing in intensity till it seemed to make our very eardrums ache, there rose the quavering, mournful howling of a dog, such a slowly rising and diminishing lament as hounds are wont to make at night when baying at the moon—or when bemoaning death in the family of their master. And, like an echo of the canine yowling, almost like an orchestrated part of some infernal symphony, there came from very near a little squeaking, skirking noise, like the squealing of a hollow rubber toy or the gibbering of an angry monkey. Not one small voice, but half a dozen, ten, a hundred of the chattering things seemed passing through the woodland at the clearing's edge, marching in a sort of disorderly array, hurry-

ing, tumbling, rushing toward some rendezvous, and gabbling as they went.

The firewood clattered to the cabin floor, and once again the girl's tanned face went pasty-gray.

"Mister," she told de Grandin solemnly, "this is no place to leave your house o' nights, for wood or water or anything else."

The little Frenchman tweaked the needle points of his mustache as he regarded her. Then: "One understands, *Mademoiselle*—in part, at least," he answered. "We thank you for your kindness, but it is growing late; soon it will be dark. I do not think we need detain you longer."

Slowly the girl walked toward the door, swung back the sturdy rough-hewn panels, and gazed into the night. The sun had sunk and deep-blue darkness spread across the hills and woods; here and there an early star winked down, but there was no hint of other light, for the moon was at the dark. A moment she stood thus upon the sill, then, seeming to take sudden resolution, slammed the door and turned to face us, jaw squared, but eyes suffused with hot tears of embarrassment.

"I can't," she announced; then, as de Grandin raised his brows interrogatively: "I'm afraid—scared to go out there. Will—will you let me spend the night here?"

"Here?" the Frenchman echoed.

"Yes, sir; here. I—I *daren't* go out there among those gibbering things. I can't. I can't; I *can't!*"

De Grandin laughed delightedly. "*Morbleu,* but prudery dies hard in you Americans, *Mademoiselle,*" he chuckled, "despite your boasted modernism and emancipation. No matter, you have asked our hospitality, and you shall have it. You did not really think that we would let you go among those—those whatever-they-may-bes, I hope? But no. Here you shall stay till daylight makes your going safe, and when you have eaten and rested you shall tell us all you know of this strange business of the monkey. Yes, of course."

As he knelt to light the fire he threw me a delighted wink. "When that so kind Monsieur Sutter invited us to use his lodge for hunting we little suspected what game we were to hunt, *n'est-ce-pas?*" he asked.

COFFEE, fried bacon, pancakes and a tin of preserved peaches constituted dinner. De Grandin and I ate with the healthy appetite of tired men, but our guest was positively ravenous, passing her plate for replenishment again and again. At last, when we had filled the seemingly bottomless void within her and I had set my pipe aglow while she and Jules de Grandin lighted cigarettes, the little Frenchman prompted. "And now, *Mademoiselle?*"

"I'm glad you saw something in Putnam's woods and heard those things squeaking in the dark outside tonight," she answered. "It'll make it easier for you to believe me." She paused a moment, then:

"Did you notice the white house in the trees just before we came here?" she demanded.

We shook our heads, and she went on, without pausing for reply:

"That's Colonel Putnam's place, where it all started. My dad is postmaster and general storekeeper at Bartlesville, and Putnam's mail used to be delivered through our office. I was graduated from high school last year, and went to help Dad in the store, sometimes giving him a lift with the letters, too. I remember, it was in the afternoon of the twenty-third of June a special delivery parcel

came for Colonel Putnam, and Dad asked me if I'd like to drive him over to deliver it after supper. We could make the trip in an hour, and Dad and Colonel Putnam had been friends since boyhood; so he wanted to do him the favor of getting the package to him as soon as possible.

"Folks had started telling some queer tales about Colonel Putnam, even then, but Dad pooh-poohed 'em all. You see, the colonel was the richest man in the county, and lived pretty much to himself since he came back here from Germany. He'd gone to school in that country as a young man, and went back on trips every year or so until about twenty years ago, when he married a Bavarian lady and settled there. His wife, we heard, died two years after they were married, when their little girl was born; then, just before the War, the daughter was drowned in a boating accident and Colonel Putnam came back to his old ancestral home and shut himself in from everybody, an old, broken and embittered man. I'd never seen him, but Dad had been to call once, and said he seemed a little touched in the head. Anyway, I was glad of the chance to see the old fellow when Dad suggested we drive over with the parcel.

"There was something queer about the Putnam house—something I didn't like, without actually knowing what it was. You know, just as you might be repelled by the odor of tuberoses, even though you didn't realize their connection with funerals and death? The place seemed falling apart; the drive was overgrown with weeds, the lawns all gone to seed, and a general air of desolation everywhere.

"There didn't seem to be any servants, and Colonel Putnam let us in himself. He was tall and spare, almost cadaverous, with white hair and beard, and wore a long, black, double-breasted frock coat and a stiff white-linen collar tied with a black stock. At first he hardly seemed to know Dad, but when he saw the parcel we brought, his eyes lighted up with what seemed to me a kind of fury.

" 'Come in, Hawkins,' he invited; 'you and your daughter are just in time to see a thing which no one living ever saw before.'

"He led us down a long and poorly lighted hall, furnished in old-fashioned walnut and haircloth, to a larger apartment overlooking his weed-grown back yard.

" 'Hawkins,' he told my father, 'you're in time to witness a demonstration of the uncontrovertible truth of the Pythagorean doctrine—the doctrine of metempsychosis.'

" 'Good Lord, Henry, you don't mean to say you believe such non——' Dad began, but Colonel Putnam looked at him so fiercely that I thought he'd spring on him.

" 'Silence, impious fool!' he shouted. 'Be silent and witness the exemplification of the Truth!' Then he calmed down a little, though he still continued walking up and down the room, twitching his eyebrows, shrugging his shoulders and snapping his fingers every now and then.

" 'Just before I came back to this country,' he went on, 'I met a master of the occult, a Herr Doktor von Meyer, who is not only the seventh son of a seventh son, but a member of the forty-ninth generation in direct descent from the Master Magician, Simon of Tyre. He possesses the ability to remember incidents in his former incarnations as you and I recall last night's dreams in the morning, Hawkins. Not only that: he has the power of reading other people's pasts. I sat with him in his *atelier* in Leipzig and saw my whole existence, from the time I was an

insensate ameba crawling in the primordial slime to the minute of my birth in this life, pass before me like the episodes of a motion picture.'

" 'Did he tell you anything of this life; relate any incident of your youth known only to yourself, for instance, Henry?' Father asked him.

" 'Be careful, scoffer, the Powers know how to deal with unbelievers such as you!' Colonel Putnam answered, flushing with rage, then calmed down again and resumed pacing the floor.

" 'Back in the days when civilization was in the first flush of its youth,' he told us, 'I was a priest of Osiris in a temple by the Nile. And she, my darling, my dearest daughter, orphaned then as later, was a priestess in the temple of the Mother Goddess, Isis, across the river from my sanctuary.

" 'But even in that elder day the fate which followed us was merciless. Then as later, water was the medium which was to rob me of my darling, for one night when her service to the Divine Mother was ended and temple slaves were rowing her across the river to my house, an accident overturned her boat, and she, the apple of my doting eyes, was thrown from her couch and drowned in the waters of Nilus. Drowned, drowned in the Egyptian river even as her latest earthly body was drowned in the Rhine.'

"COLONEL PUTNAM stopped before my father, and his eyes were fairly blazing as he shook his finger in Dad's face and whispered:

" 'But von Meyer told me how to overcome my loss, Hawkins. By his supernatural powers he was able to project his memory backward through the ages to the rock-tomb where they had laid the body of my darling, the very flesh in which she walked the streets of hundred-gated Thebes when the world was young. I sought it out, together with the bodies of those who served her in that elder life, and brought them here to my desolated house. Behold——'

"With a sort of dancing step he crossed the room and swept aside a heavy curtain. There, in the angle of the wall, with vases of fresh-cut flowers before them, stood three Egyptian mummy-cases.

" 'It is she!' Colonel Putnam whispered tensely. 'It is she, my own little daughter, in her very flesh, and these'—he pointed to the other two—'were her attendants in that former life.

" 'Look!' He lifted the lid from the center coffin and revealed a slender form closely wrapped in overlying layers of dust-colored linen. 'There she stands, exactly as the priestly craftsmen wrapped her for her long, long rest, three thousand years ago! Now all is prepared for the great work I purpose; only the contents of that parcel you brought were needed to call the spirits of my daughter and her servants back to their earthly tenements, here, tonight, in this very room, Hawkins!'

" 'Henry Putnam,' my father cried, 'do you mean to say you intend to play with this Devil's business? You'd really try to call back the spirit of one whose life on earth is done?'

" 'I would; by God, *I will!*' Colonel Putnam shouted.

" 'You shan't!' Father told him. 'That kind of thing is denounced by the laws of Moses, and mighty good sense he showed when he forbade it, too!'

" 'Fool!' Colonel Putnam screamed at him. 'Don't you know Moses stole all his knowledge from the priesthood of Egypt, to which I belonged? Centuries before Moses was, we knew the white arts of life and the black arts of death.

Moses! How dare you quote that ignorant charlatan and thief?'

" 'Well, I'll have no part in any such Devil's mummery,' Father told him, but Colonel Putnam was like a madman.

" 'You shall!' he answered, drawing a revolver from his pocket. 'If either of you tries to leave this room I'll shoot him dead!'

The girl stopped speaking and covered her face with her hands. "If we'd only let him shoot us!" she said wearily. "Maybe we'd have been able to stop it."

De Grandin regarded her compassionately. "Can you continue, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked gently. "Or would you, perhaps, wait till later?"

"No, I might as well get it over with," she answered with a sigh. "Colonel Putnam ripped the cover off the package Father had brought and took out seven little silver vessels, each about as large as a hen's egg, but shaped something like a pineapple—having a pointed top and a flat base. He set them in a semicircle before the three coffins and filled them from an earthenware jug which was fitted with a spout terminating in a knob fashioned like a woman's head crowned with a diadem of hawks' wings. Then he lighted a taper and blew out the oil-lamp which furnished the only illumination for the room.

"It was deathly still in the darkened room; outside we could hear the crickets cheeping, and their shrill little cries seemed to grow louder and louder, to come closer and closer to the window. Colonel Putnam's shadow, cast by the flickering taper's light, lay on the wall like one of those old-time pictures of the Evil One.

" 'The hour!' he breathed. 'The hour has come!'

Quickly he leaned forward, touching first one, then another of the little silver jars with the flame of his taper.

"The room's darkness yielded to an eery, bluish glow. Wherever the fire came in contact with a vase a tiny, thin, blue flame sprang up.

"Suddenly the corner of the room where the mummy-cases stood seemed wavering and rocking, like a ship upon a troubled ocean. It was hot and sultry in that house, shut in as it was by the thick pine woods, but from somewhere a current of cold—freezing cold!—air began to blow. I could feel its chill on my ankles, then my knees, finally on my hands as I held them in my lap.

" 'Daughter, little daughter—daughter in all the ages past and all the ages yet to be, I call to you. Come, your father calls!' Colonel Putnam intoned in a quavering voice. 'Come. Come, I command it! Out of the illimitable void of eternity, come to me. In the name of Osiris, Dread Lord of the Spirit World, I command it. In the name of Isis, wife and sister of the Mighty One, I command it! In the names of Horus and Anubis, I command it!'

"Something—I don't know what—seemed entering the room. The windows were tight-latched; yet we saw the dusty curtains flutter, as though in a sudden current of air, and a light, fine mist seemed to obscure the bright blue flames burning in the seven silver lamps. There was a creaking sound, as though an old and rusty-hinged door were being slowly opened, and the lids of the two mummy-cases to right and left of the central figure began to swing outward. And as they moved, the linen-bandaged thing in the center coffin seemed to writhe like a hibernating snake recovering life, and stepped out into the room!

"Colonel Putnam forgot Father and me completely. 'Daughter—Gretchen,

Isabella, Francesca, Musepa, T'ashamt, by whatever name or names you have been known throughout the ages, I charge you speak!' he cried, sinking on his knees and stretching out his hands toward the moving mummy.

"There came a gentle, sighing noise, then a light, tittering laugh, musical, but hard and metallic, as a thin, high voice replied: 'My father, you who loved and nurtured me in ages gone, I come to you at your command with those who served me in the elder world; but we are weak and worn from our long rest. Give us to eat, my father.'

" 'Aye, food shall ye have, and food in plenty,' Colonel Putnam answered. 'Tell me, what is it that ye crave?'

" 'Naught but the life-force of those strangers at your back,' the voice replied with another light, squeaking laugh. 'They must die if we would live——' and the sheeted thing moved nearer to us in the silver lamps' blue light.

"BEFORE the Colonel could snatch up the pistol which had fallen from his hand, Father grabbed it, seized me with his free hand and dragged me from the house. Our car was waiting at the door, its engine still going, and we jumped in and started for the highroad at top speed.

"We were nearly out of the woods surrounding Putnam's house—the same woods I drove you through this afternoon—when I happened to look back. There, running like a rabbit, coming so fast that it was actually overtaking our speeding car, was a tall, thin man, almost fleshless as a skeleton, and apparently dressed in some dust-colored, close-fitting kind of tights.

"But I recognized it! It was one of those things from the mummy-cases we'd seen in Colonel Putnam's parlor!

"Dad crowded on more speed, but the dreadful running mummy kept gaining on us. It had almost overtaken us when we reached the edge of the woods and I happened to remember Father still had Colonel Putnam's pistol. I snatched the weapon from his pocket and emptied it at the thing that chased us, almost at pointblank range. I know I must have hit it several times, for I'm a pretty good shot and the distance was too short for a miss, even allowing for the way the car was lurching, but it kept right on; then, just as we ran out into the moonlight at the woodland's edge, it stopped in its tracks, waved its arms at us and—vanished."

De Grandin tweaked the sharply waxed ends of his little, wheat-blond mustache. "There is more, *Mademoiselle,*" he said at length. "I can see it in your eyes. What else?"

Miss Hawkins cast a startled look at him, and it seemed to me she shuddered slightly, despite the warming glow of the fire.

"Yes," she answered slowly, "there's more. Three days after that a party of young folks came up here on a camping-trip from New York. They were at the Ormond cabin down by Pine Lake, six of 'em; a young man and his wife, who acted as chaperons, and two girls and two boys. The second night after they came, one of the girls and her boy friend went canoeing on the lake just at sundown. They paddled over to this side, where the Putnam farm comes down to the water, and came ashore to rest."

There was an air of finality in the way she paused. It was as if she had announced, "Thus the tale endeth," when she told us of the young folks' beaching their canoe, and de Grandin realized it, for, instead of asking what the next occurrence was, he demanded simply:

"And when were they found, *Mademoiselle?*"

"Next day, just before noon. I wasn't with the searching-party, but they told me it was pretty dreadful. The canoe paddles were smashed to splinters, as though they'd used them as clubs to defend themselves and broken them while doing so, and their bodies were literally torn limb from limb. If it hadn't been there was no evidence of any of them being eaten, the searchers would have thought a pair of panthers had pounced on them, for their faces were clawed almost beyond recognition, practically every shred of clothing ripped off them, and their arms and legs and heads completely separated from their bodies."

"U'm? And blood was scattered all around, one imagines?" de Grandin asked.

"No! Not a single drop of blood was anywhere in sight. Job Denham, the undertaker who received the bodies from the coroner, told me their flesh was pale and dry as veal. He said he couldn't understand it, but I——"

She halted in her narrative, glancing apprehensively across her shoulder at the window; then, in a low, almost soundless whisper: "The Bible says the blood's the life, doesn't it?" she asked. "And that voice we heard in Colonel Putnam's house told him those mummies wanted the vital force from Dad and me, didn't it? Well, I think that's the answer. Whatever it was Colonel Putnam brought to life in his house three days before was what set on that boy and girl in Putnam's woods, and it—they—attacked them for their blood."

"Have similar events occurred, *Mademoiselle?*"

"Did you notice the farm land hereabouts as we drove over?" she asked irrelevantly.

"Not particularly."

"Well, it's old land; sterile. You couldn't raise so much as a mortgage on it. No one's tried to farm it since I can remember, and I'll be seventeen next January."

"U'm; and so——"

"So you'd think it kind of funny for Colonel Putnam suddenly to decide to work his land, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps."

"And with so many men out of work hereabouts, you'd think it queer for him to advertise for farmhands in the Boston papers, wouldn't you?"

"*Précisément, Mademoiselle.*"

"And for him to pay their railway fare up here, and their bus fare over from the station, and then get dissatisfied with 'em all of a sudden, and discharge 'em in a day or two—and for 'em to leave without anybody's knowing when they went, or *where* they went; then for him to hire a brand-new crew in the same way, and discharge *them* in the same way in a week or less?"

"*Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin answered in a level, almost toneless voice, "we consider these events somewhat more than merely queer. We think they have the smell of fish upon them. Tomorrow we shall call upon this estimable Putnam person, and he would be well advised to have a credible explanation in readiness."

"Call on Colonel Putnam? Not I!" the girl rejoined. "I wouldn't go near that house of his, even in daylight, for a million dollars!"

"Then I fear we must forego the pleasure of your charming company," he returned with a smile, "for we shall visit him, most certainly. Yes, of course.

"Meantime," he added, "we have had a trying day; is it agreeable that we retire? Doctor Trowbridge and I shall oc-

cupy the bunks in this room; you may have the inner room, *Mademoiselle.*"

"Please," she pleaded, and a flush mantled her face to the brows, "please let me sleep out here with you. I'd—well, I'd be scared to death sleeping in there by myself, and I'll be just as quiet—honestly, I won't disturb you."

She was unsupplied with sleeping-wear, of course; so de Grandin, who was about her stature, cheerfully donated a pair of lavender-and-scarlet striped silk pajamas, which she donned in the adjoining room, expending so little time in process that we had scarcely had time to doff our boots, jackets and cravats ere she rejoined us, looking far more like an adolescent lad than a young woman, save for those absurd pink-coral ear-studs.

"I wonder if you'd mind my using the 'phone?" she asked as she pattered across the rough-board floor on small and amazingly white bare feet. "I don't think it's been disconnected, and I'd like to call Dad and tell him I'm all right."

"By all means, do so," bade de Grandin as he hitched the blanket higher on his shoulder. "We can understand his apprehension for your safety in the circumstances."

THE girl raised the receiver from the old-fashioned wall fixture, took the magneto crank in her right hand and gave it three vigorous turns, then seven slow ones.

"Hello? Dad?" she called. "This is Audrey; I'm—*oh!*" The color drained from her cheeks as though a coat of liquid white were sprayed across her face. "Dad—Dad—what *is* it?" she cried shrilly; then slowly, like a marionette being lowered by its strings, she wavered totteringly a moment, let fall the telephone receiver and slumped in a pathetic little heap upon the cabin floor.

De Grandin and I were out of bed with a bound, the little Frenchman bending solicitously above the fainting girl, I snatching at the telephone receiver.

"Hullo, hullo?" I called through the transmitter. "Mr. Hawkins?"

"Huh—hoh—huh-hoh-huh!" the most fiendish, utterly diabolical chuckle I ever heard came to me across the wire. *"Huh—hoh—huh-hoh-huh!"*

Then click! the telephone connection broke, and though I repeated the three-seven ring I'd heard the girl give several times, I could obtain no answer, not even the faint buzzing which denotes an open wire.

"My father! Something dreadful has happened to him, I know!" moaned the girl as she recovered consciousness. "Did you hear it, too, Doctor Trowbridge?"

"I heard something, certainly; it sounded like a poor connection roaring in the wire," I lied. Then, as hopeful disbelief lightened in her eyes: "Yes, I'm sure that's what it was, for the instrument's quite dead, now."

Reluctantly reassured, Audrey Hawkins clambered into bed, and though she moaned once or twice with a little, whimpering sound, her buoyant youth and healthily tired young muscles stood her in good stead, and she was sleeping peacefully within an hour.

Several times, as de Grandin and I lay in silence, waiting for her to drop off, I fancied I heard the oddly terrifying squeaking sounds we'd noticed earlier in the evening, but I resolutely put all thought of what their probable origin might be from my mind, convinced myself they were the cries of nocturnal insects, and—lay broad awake, listening for their recurrence.

"What was it that you heard in the telephone, Friend Trowbridge?" the little Frenchman asked me in a whisper

when her continued steady, even breathing had assured us that our youthful guest was sound asleep.

"A laugh," I answered, "the most hideous, hellish chuckle I've ever listened to. You don't suppose her father could have laughed like that, just to frighten——"

"I do not think *Monsieur* her father has either cause for laughter or ability to laugh," he interrupted. "What it is that haunts these woods I do not surely know, my friend, though I suspect that the crack-brained Colonel Putnam let loose a horde of evil elementals when he went through that mummery at his house last summer. However that may be, there is no doubt that these things, whatever be their nature, are of a most unpleasant disposition, intent on killing any one they meet, either from pure lust for killing or in order to secure the vital forces of their victims and thus increase their strength in a material form. It is my fear that they may have a special grudge against Monsieur Hawkins and his daughter, for they were the first people whose lives they sought, and they escaped, however narrowly. Therefore, having failed in their second attempt to do the daughter mischief this afternoon, they may have wreaked vengeance on the father. Yes, it is entirely possible."

"But it's unlikely," I protested. "He's over in Bartlesville, ten miles away, while she's right here; yet——"

"Yes, you were saying——" he prompted as a sudden unpleasant thought forced itself into my mind and stopped my speech.

"Why, if they're determined to do mischief to either Hawkins or his daughter, haven't they attempted to enter this house, which is so much nearer than her home?"

"*Eh bien,* I thought you might be thinking that," he answered dryly. "And are you sure that they have made no attempt to enter here? Look at the door, if you will be so good, and tell me what it is you see."

I glanced across the cabin toward the stout plank door and caught the ruddy reflection of the firelight on a small, bright object lying on the sill. "It looks like your hunting-knife," I told him.

"*Précisément,* you have right; it *is* my hunting-knife," he answered. "My hunting-knife, unsheathed, with its sharp point directed toward the door-sill. Yours is at the other entrance, while I have taken the precaution to place a pair of heavy shears on the window-ledge. I do not think I wasted preparations, either, as you will probably agree if you will cast your eyes toward the window."

Obediently, I glanced at the single window of the room, then stifled an involuntary cry of horror; for there, outlined against the flickering illumination of the dying fire, stood an evil-looking, desiccated thing, skeleton-thin, dark, leather-colored skin stretched tightly as drum parchment on its skull, broken teeth protruding through retracted lips, tiny sparks of greenish light glowing malevolently in its cavernous, hollow eye-sockets. I recognized it at a glance; it was a mummy, an Egyptian mummy, such as I had seen scores of times while walking through the museums. And yet it was no mummy, either, for while it had the look of death and unnaturally delayed decay about it, it was also endued with some kind of dreadful life-in-death; for its little, glittering eyes were plainly capable of seeing, while its withered, leathery lips were drawn back in a grin of snarling fury, and even as I looked, they moved back from the stained and broken teeth in the framing of some phrase of hatred.

"Do not be afraid," de Grandin bade.

"He can look and glare and make his monkey-faces all he wishes, but he can not enter here. The shears and knives prevent him."

"Y-you're sure?" I asked, terror gripping at my throat.

"Sure? To be sure I'm sure. He and his unpleasant playfellows would have been inside the cabin, and at our throats, long since, could they have found a way to enter. The sharpened steel, my friend, is very painful to him. Iron and steel are the most earthly of all metals, and exercise a most uncomfortable influence on elementals. They can not handle it, they can not even approach it closely, and when it is sharpened to a point it seems to be still more efficient, for its pointed end appears to focus and concentrate radiations of psychic force from the human body, forces which are highly destructive to them. Knowing this, and suspecting what it is that we have to do with from the story Mademoiselle Hawkins told us, I took precautions to place these discouragers at doors and window before we went to bed. *Tiens,* I have lain here something like an hour, hearing them squeak and gibber as they prowled around the house; only a moment since I noticed that thin gentleman peering in the window, and thought you might be interested."

Rising, he crossed the cabin on tiptoe, so as not to wake the sleeping girl, and drew the burlap curtain across the window. "Look at that until your ugly eyes are tired, *Monsieur le Cadavre,*" he bade. "My good Friend Trowbridge does not care to have you watch him while he sleeps."

"Sleep!" I echoed. "D'ye think I could sleep knowing *that's* outside?"

"*Parbleu,* he is much better outside than in, I think," returned the Frenchman with a grin. "However, if you care to lie awake and think of him, I have no objections. But me, I am tired. I shall sleep; nor shall I sleep the worse for knowing that he is securely barred outside the house. No."

REASSURED, I finally fell asleep, but my rest was broken by unpleasant dreams. Sometime toward morning I awoke, not from any consciousness of impending trouble nor from any outward stimulus; yet, once my eyes were open, I was as fully master of my faculties as though I had not slept at all. The pre-dawn chill was in the air, almost bitter in its penetrating quality; the fire which had blazed merrily when we said good-night now lay a heap of whitened ashes and feebly smoldering embers. Outside the cabin rose a furious chorus of light, swishing, squeaking noises, as though a number of those whistling rubber toys with which small children are amused were being rapidly squeezed together. At first I thought it was the twittering of birds, then realized that the little feathered friends had long since flown to southern quarters; besides, there was an eery unfamiliarity in this sound, totally unlike anything I had ever heard until the previous evening, and it rose and gathered in shrill tone and volume as I listened. Vaguely, for no conscious reason, I likened it to the clamoring of caged brutes when feeding-time approaches in the zoo.

Then, as I half rose in my bunk, I saw an indistinct form move across the cabin. Slowly, very slowly, and so softly that the rough, uneven floor forbore to creak beneath her lightly pressing feet, Audrey Hawkins tiptoed toward the cabin door, creeping with a kind of feline grace. Half stupefied, I saw her pause before the portal, sink stealthily to one knee, reach out a cautious hand——

"*Non, non; dix mille fois non*—you shall not do it!" de Grandin cried, emerging from his bunk and vaulting across the cabin, seemingly with a single movement, then grasping the girl by the shoulders with such force that he hurled her half across the room. "What business of the fool do you make here, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked her angrily. "Do not you know that once the barriers of steel have been removed we should be—*mon Dieu,* one understands!"

Audrey Hawkins' hands were at her temples as she looked at him with innocent amazement while he raged at her. Clearly, she had wakened from a sound and dreamless sleep when she felt his hands upon her shoulders. Now she gazed at him in wonder mixed with consternation.

"Wh-what is it? What was I doing?" she asked.

"Ah, *parbleu,* you did nothing of your own volition, *Mademoiselle,*" he answered, "but those other ones, those very evil ones outside the house, in some way they reached you in your sleep and made you pliable to their desires. *Ha,* but they forgot de Grandin; he sleeps, yes, but he sleeps the sleep of the cat. They do not catch him napping. But no."

We piled fresh wood upon the fire and, wrapped in blankets, sat before the blaze, smoking, drinking strong black coffee, talking with forced cheerfulness till the daylight came again, and when de Grandin put the curtain back and looked out in the clearing round the cabin, there was no sign of any visitants, nor were there any squeaking voices in the woods.

BREAKFAST finished, we climbed into the ancient Ford and set out for Bartlesville, traveling at a speed I had not thought the ancient vehicle could make.

Hawkins' general store was a facsimile of hundreds of like institutions to be found in typical American villages from Vermont to Vancouver. Square as a box, it faced the village main street. Shop windows, displaying a miscellany of tinned groceries, household appliances and light agricultural equipment, occupied its front elevation. Shuttered windows piercing the second-story walls denoted where the family living-quarters occupied the space above the business premises.

Audrey tried the red-painted door of the shop, found it locked securely, and led the way through a neat yard surrounded by a fence of white pickets, took a key from her trousers pockets and let us through the private family entrance.

Doctors and undertakers have a specialized sixth sense. No sooner had we crossed the threshold than I smelled death inside that house. De Grandin sensed it, too, and I saw his smooth brow pucker in a warning frown as he glanced at me across the girl's shoulder.

"Perhaps it would be better if we went first, *Mademoiselle,*" he offered. "*Monsieur* your father may have had an accident, and——"

"Dad—oh, Dad, are you awake?" the girl's call interrupted. "It's I. I was caught in Putnam's woods last evening and spent the night at Sutter's camp, but I'm—*Dad!* Why don't you answer me?"

For a moment she stood silent in an attitude of listening; then like a flash she darted down the little hall and up the winding stairs which led to the apartment overhead.

We followed her as best we could, cannoning into unseen furniture, barking our shins on the narrow stairs, but keeping close behind her as she raced down the upper passageway into the large bedroom which overlooked the village street.

The room was chaos. Chairs were

overturned, the clothing had been wrenched from the big, old-fashioned bed and flung in a heap in the center of the floor, and from underneath the jumbled pile of comforter and sheets and blankets a man's bare foot protruded.

I hesitated at the doorway, but the girl rushed forward, dropped to her knees and swept aside the veiling bedclothes. It was a man past early middle life, but looking older, she revealed. Thin, he was, with that starved-turkey kind of leanness characteristic of so many native New Englanders. His gray head was thrown back and his lean, hard-shaven chin thrust upward truculently. In pinched nostril, sunken eye and gaping open mouth his countenance bore the unmistakable seal of death. He lay on his back with arms and legs sprawled out at grotesque angles from the inadequate folds of his old-fashioned Canton flannel nightshirt, and at first glance I recognized the unnaturalness of his posture, for human anatomy does not alter much with death, and this man's attitude would have been impossible for any but a practised contortionist.

Even as I bent my brows in wonder, de Grandin knelt beside the body. The cause of death was obvious, for in the throat, extending almost down to the left clavicle, there gaped a jagged wound, not made by any sharp, incising weapon, but rather, apparently, the result of some savage laniation, for the whole integument was ripped away, exposing the trachea to view—yet not a clot of blood lay round the ragged edges of the laceration, nor was there any sign of staining on the nightrobe. Indeed, to the ordinary pallor of the dead there seemed to be a different sort of pallor added, a queer, unnatural pallor which rendered the man's weather-stained countenance not only absolutely colorless, but curiously transparent, as well.

"Good heavens——" I began, but:

"Friend Trowbridge, if you please, observe," de Grandin ordered, lifting one of the dead man's hands and rotating it back and forth. I grasped his meaning instantly. Even allowing for the passage of *rigor mortis* and ensuing *post mortem* flaccidity, it would have been impossible to move that hand in such a manner if the radius and ulna were intact. The man's arm-bones had been fractured, probably in several places, and this, I realized, accounted for the posture of his hands and feet.

"Dad—oh, Daddy, Daddy!" cried the distracted girl as she took the dead man's head in her arms and nursed it on her shoulder. "Oh, Daddy dear, I knew that something terrible had happened when——"

Her outburst ended in a storm of weeping as she rocked her body to and fro, moaning with the helpless, inarticulate piteousness of a dumb thing wounded unto death. Then, abruptly:

"You heard that laugh last night!" she challenged me. "You know you did, Doctor Trowbridge—and there's where we heard it from," she pointed with a shaking finger at the wall-telephone across the room.

As I followed the line of her gesture I saw that the instrument had been ripped clear from its retaining bolts, its wires, its mouthpiece and receiver broken as though by repeated hammer-blows.

"They—those dreadful things that tried to get at us last night came over here when they found they couldn't reach me and murdered my poor father!" she continued in a low, sob-choked voice. "I know! The night Colonel Putnam raised those awful mummies from the dead the she-thing said they wanted our lives, and

one of the others chased us through the woods. They've been hungering for us ever since, and last night they got Daddy. I——"

She paused, her slender bosom heaving, and we could see the tear drops dry away as fiery anger flared up in her eyes.

"Last night I said I wouldn't go near Putnam's house again for a million dollars," she told de Grandin. "Now I say I wouldn't stay away from there for all the money in the world. I'm going over now—this minute—and pay old Putnam off. I'll face that villain with his guilt and make him pay for Daddy's life if it's the last thing I do!"

"It probably would be, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin answered dryly. "Consider, if you please: This so odious Monsieur Putnam is undoubtlessly responsible for loosing those evil things upon the countryside, but while his life is forfeit for his crimes of necromancy, merely to kill him would profit us—and the community—not at all. These most unpleasant pets of his have gotten out of hand. I make no doubt that he himself is in constant, deadly fear of them, and that they, who came as servants of his will, are now his undisputed masters. Were we to kill him, we should still have those evil ones to reckon with, and till they have been utterly destroyed the country will be haunted by them; and others—countless others, perhaps—will share the fate of your poor father and that unfortunate young man and woman who perished on their boating-trip, not to mention those misguided workingmen who answered Monsieur Putnam's advertisements. You comprehend? This is a war of extermination on which we are embarked; we must destroy or be destroyed. Losing our lives in a gallant gesture would be a worthless undertaking. Victory, not speedy vengeance, must be our first and great consideration."

"Well, then, what are we to do, sit here idly while they range the woods and kill more people?"

"By no means, *Mademoiselle.* First of all, we must see that your father has the proper care; next, we must plan the work which lies before us. That done, it is for us to work the plans which we have made."

"All right, then, let's call the coroner," she agreed. "Judge Lindsay knows me, and he knew Dad all his life. When I tell him how old Putnam raised those mummies from the dead, and——"

"Mademoiselle!" the Frenchman expostulated. "You will tell him nothing about anything which Monsieur Putnam has done. It has been two hundred years, unfortunately, since your kin and neighbors ceased paying such creatures as this Putnam for their sins with rope and flame. To tell your truthful story to the coroner would be but signing your commitment to the madhouse. Then, doubly protected by your incarceration and public disbelief in their existence, Monsieur Putnam's mummy-things could range the countryside at will. Indeed, it is altogether likely that the first place they would visit would be the madhouse where you were confined, and there, defenseless, you would be wholly at their mercy. Your screams for help would be regarded as the ravings of a lunatic, and the work of extirpation of your family which they began last night would be concluded. Your life, which they have sought since first they came, would be snuffed out, and, with none to fight against them, the countryside would fall an easy prey to their vile depredations. *Eh bien,* who can say how far the slaughter would go before the pig-ignorant authorities, at last convinced that you had told the sober truth when they thought you raving, would finally arouse them-

selves and take befitting action? You see why we must guard our tongues, *Mademoiselle?*"

NEWS of the murder spread like wildfire through the village. Zebulon Lindsay, justice of the peace, who also acted as coroner, empaneled a jury before noon; by three o'clock the inquisition had been held and a verdict of death by violence at the hands of some person or persons unknown was rendered.

Among the agricultural implements in Hawkins' stock de Grandin noted a number of billhooks, pike-like instruments with long, curved blades resembling those of scythes fixed on the ends of their strong helves.

"These we can use tonight, my friends," he told us as he laid three carefully aside.

"What for?" demanded Audrey.

"For those long, cadaverous things which run through Monsieur Putnam's woods, by blue!" he answered with a rather sour smile. "You will recall that on the first occasion when you saw them you shot one of their number several times?"

"Yes."

"And that notwithstanding you scored several hits, it continued its pursuit?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You know the reason? Your bullets tore clear through its desiccated flesh, but had not force to stop it. *Tiens,* could you have knocked its legs off at the knees, however, do you think that it could still have run?"

"Oh, you mean——"

"Precisely, exactly; quite so, *ma chère.* I purpose dividing them, anatomizing them, striking them limb from limb. What lead and powder would be powerless to do, these instruments of iron will accomplish very nicely. We shall go to their domain at nightfall; that way we shall be sure of meeting them. Were we to go by daylight, it is possible they would be hidden in some secret place, for like all their kind they wait the coming of darkness because their doings are evil.

"Should you see one of them, remember what he did to your poor father, *Mademoiselle,* and strike out with your iron. Strike and do not spare your blows. It is not as foeman unto foe we go tonight, but as executioners to criminals. You understand?"

WE SET out just at sundown, Audrey Hawkins driving, de Grandin and I, each armed with a stout billhook, in the rear seat.

"It were better that you stopped here, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin whispered as the big white pillars of the mansion's antique portico came in view between the trees. "There is no need to advertise our advent; surprize is worth a thousand men in battle."

We dismounted from the creaking vehicle and, our weapons on our shoulders, began a stealthy advance.

"S-s-st!" Audrey warned as we paused a moment by a little opening in the trees, our eyes intent upon the house. "Hear it?"

Very softly, like the murmur of a sleepy little bird, there came a subdued squeaking noise from a hemlock thicket twenty feet or so away. I felt the short hair on my neck begin to rise against my collar and a little chill of mingled hate and apprehension run rippling through my scalp and cheeks. It was like the sensation felt when one comes unexpectedly upon a serpent in the path.

"Softly, friends," Jules de Grandin ordered, grasping the handle of his billhook like a quarterstaff and leaning toward the sound; "do you stand by me, good friend Trowbridge, and have your

flashlight ready. Play its beam on him the minute he emerges, and keep him visible for me to work on."

Cautiously, quietly as a cat stalking a mouse, he stepped across the clearing, neared the clump of bushes whence the squeaking came, then leant forward, eyes narrowed, weapon ready.

It burst upon us like a charging beast, one moment hidden from our view by the screening boughs of evergreen, next instant leaping through the air, long arms flailing, skeleton-hands grasping for de Grandin's throat, its withered, leather-like face a mask of hatred and ferocity.

I shot the flashlight's beam full on it, but its terrifying aspect caused my hand to tremble so that I could scarcely hold the shaft of light in line with the leaping horror's movements.

"*Ça-ha, Monsieur le Cadavre,* we meet again, it seems!" de Grandin greeted in a whisper, dodging nimbly to the left as the mummy-monster reached out scrawny hands to grapple with him. He held the billhook handle in the center, left hand upward, right hand down, and as the withered leather talons missed their grasp he whirled the iron-headed instrument overhand from left to right, turning it as he did so, so that the carefully whetted edge of the heavy blade crashed with devastating force upon the mummy's withered biceps. The limb dropped helpless from the desiccated trunk, but, insensible to pain, the creature whirled and grasped out with its right hand.

Once more the billhook circled whistling through the air, this time reversed, striking downward from right to left. The keen-edged blade sheared through the lich's other arm, cleaving it from the body at the shoulder.

And now the withered horror showed a trace of fear. Sustained by supernatural strength and swiftness, apparently devoid of any sense of pain, it had not entered what intelligence the thing possessed that a man could stand against it. Now it paused, irresolutely a moment, teetering on its spindle legs and broad, splay feet, and while it hesitated thus the little Frenchman swung his implement again, this time like an ax, striking through dry, brown flesh and aged, brittle bone, lopping off the mummy's legs an inch or so above the knees.

Had it not been so horrible I could have laughed aloud to see the withered torso hurtle to the ground and lie there, flopping grotesquely on stumps of arms and legs, seeking to regain the shelter of the hemlock copse as it turned its fleshless head and gazed across its bony shoulder at de Grandin.

"Hit it on the head! Crush its skull!" I advised, but:

"*Non,* this is better," he replied as he drew a box of matches from his pocket and lighted one.

Now utter terror seized the limbless lich. With horrid little squeaking cries it redoubled its efforts to escape, but the Frenchman was inexorable. Bending forward, he applied the flaming match to the tinder-dry body, and held it close against the withered skin. The fire caught instantly. As though it were compounded of a mass of oil-soaked rags, the mummy's body sent out little tongues of fire, surmounted by dense clouds of aromatic smoke, and in an instant was a blaze of glowing flame. De Grandin seized the severed arms and legs and piled them on the burning torso so that they, too, blazed and snapped and crackled like dry wood thrown on a roaring fire.

"And that, I damn think, denotes the end of that," he told me as he watched the body sink from flames to embers, then to white and scarcely glowing ashes. "Fire is the universal solvent, the one

true cleanser, my friend. It was not for nothing that the olden ones condemned their witches to be burned. This elemental force, this evil personality which inhabited that so unsavory mummy's desiccated flesh, not only can it find no other place to rest now that we have destroyed its tenement, but the good, clean, clarifying flames have dissipated it entirely. Never again can it materialize, never more enter human form through the magic of such necromancers as that *sacré* Putnam person. It is gone, disposed of—*pouf!* it is no longer anything at all.

"What think you of my scheme, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked. "Was I not the clever one to match iron and fire against them? Was it not laughable to see—*grand Dieu,* Friend Trowbridge—*where is she?*"

He leant upon his billhook, looking questingly about the edges of the clearing while I played my searchlight's beam among the trees. At length:

"One sees it perfectly," he told me. "While we battled with that one, another of them set on her and we could not hear her cries because of our engagement. Now——"

"Do—do you suppose it killed her as it did her father?" I asked, sick with apprehension.

"We can not say; we can but look," he answered. "Come."

Together we searched the woodland in an ever-widening circle, but no trace of Audrey Hawkins could we find.

"Here's her billhook," I announced as we neared the house.

Sticking in the bole of a tree, almost buried in the wood, was the head of the girl's weapon, some three inches of broken shaft adhering to it. On the ground twenty feet or more away lay the main portion of the helve, broken across as a match-stem might be broken by a man.

The earth was moist beneath the trees, and at that spot uncovered by fallen leaves or pine needles. As I bent to pick up Audrey's broken billhook, I noticed tracks in the loam—big, barefoot tracks, heavy at the toe, as though their maker strained forward as he walked, and beside them a pair of wavy parallel lines—the toe-prints of Audrey's boots as she was dragged through the woods and toward the Putnam house.

"What now?" I asked. "They've taken her there, dead or alive, and——"

He interrupted savagely: "What can we do but follow? Me, I shall go into that *sacré* house, and take it down, plank by single plank, until I find her; also I shall find those others, and when I do——"

NO LIGHTS showed in the Putnam mansion as we hurried across the weed-grown, ragged lawn, tiptoed up the veranda steps and softly tried the handle of the big front door. It gave beneath our pressure, and in a moment we were standing in a lightless hall, our weapons held in readiness as we strove to pierce the gloom with straining eyes and held our breaths as we listened for some sound betokening an enemy's approach.

"Can you hear it, Trowbridge, *mon ami?*" he asked me in a whisper. "Is it not their so abominable squealing?"

I listened breathlessly, and from the pasageway's farther end it seemed there came a series of shrill skirking squeaks, as though an angry rat were prisoned there.

Treading carefully, we advanced along the corridor, pausing at length as a vague, greenish-blue glow appeared to filter out into the darkness, not exactly lightening into the darkness, making the gloom a little less abysmal.

We gazed incredulously at the scene

presented in the room beyond. The windows were all closed and tightly shuttered, and in a semicircle on the floor there burned a set of seven little silver lamps which gave off a blue-green, phosphorescent glow, hardly sufficient to enable us to mark the actions of a group of figures gathered there. One was a man, old and white-haired, disgustingly unkempt, his deep-set dark eyes burning with a fanatical glow of adoration as he kept them fixed upon a figure seated in a high, carved chair which occupied a sort of dais beyond the row of glowing silver lamps. Beside the farther wall there stood a giant form, a great brown-skinned man with bulging muscles like a wrestler's and the knotted torso of a gladiator. One of his mighty hands was twined in Audrey Hawkins' short, blond hair; with the other he was stripping off her clothes as a monkey skins a fruit. We heard the cloth rip as it parted underneath his wrenching fingers, saw the girl's slim body show white and lissome as a new-peeled hazel wand, then saw her thrown birth-naked on the floor before the figure seated on the dais.

Bizarre and terrifying as the mummy-creatures we had seen had been, the seated figure was no less remarkable. No mummy, this, but a soft and sweetly rounded woman-shape, almost divine in bearing and adornment. Out of olden Egypt she had come, and with her she had brought the majesty that once had ruled the world. Upon her head the crown of Isis sat, the vulture cap with wings of beaten gold and blue enamel, and the vulture's head with gem-set eyes, above it rearing upright horns of Hathor between which shone the polished-silver disk of the full moon, beneath them the uræus, emblem of Osiris.

About her neck was hung a collar of beaten gold close-studded with emeralds and blue lapis lazuli, and round her wrists were wide, bright bands of gold which shone with figures worked in red and blue enamel. Her breasts were bare, but high beneath the pointed bosoms was clasped a belt of blue and gold from which there draped a robe of thin, transparent linen gathered in scores of tiny, narrow pleats and fringed about the hem with little balls of gleaming gold which hung an inch or so above the arching insteps of her long and narrow feet, on every toe of which there gleamed a jewel-set ring. In her left hand she held a golden instrument fashioned like a T-cross with a long loop at its top, while in her right she bore a three-lashed golden scourge, the emblem of Egyptian sovereignty.

All this I noted in a sort of wondering daze, but it was her glaring, implacable eyes which held me rooted to the spot. Like the eyes of a tigress or a leopardess they were, and glowing with a horrid, inward light as though illumined from behind by the phosphorescence of an all-consuming, heatless flame.

Even as we halted spellbound at the turning of the corridor we saw her raise her golden scourge and point it like an aiming weapon at Audrey Hawkins. The girl lay huddled in a small white heap where the ruthless giant had thrown her, but as the golden scourge was leveled at her she half rose to a crouching posture and crept forward on her knees and elbows, whimpering softly, half in pleading, half in fear, it seemed.

The fixed, set stare of hatred never left the seated woman's eyes as Audrey crawled across the bare plank floor, groveled for an instant at the dais' lowest step, then raised her head and began to lick the other's white, jeweled feet as though she were a beaten dog which sued for pardon from its mistress.

I saw de Grandin's small, white teeth flash in the lamps' weird light as he bared them in a quick grimace. "I damn think we have had enough of this, by blue!" he whispered as he stepped out of the shadows.

While I had watched the tableau of Audrey's degradation with a kind of sickened horror, the little Frenchman had been busy. From the pockets of his jacket and his breeches he extracted handkerchiefs and knotted them into a wad, then, drawing out a tin of lighter-fluid, he doused the knotted linen with the liquid. The scent of benzine mixed with ether spread through the quiet air as, his drenched handkerchiefs on his billhook's iron head, he left the shadows, paused an instant on the door-sill, then struck a match and set the cloth ablaze.

"*Messieurs, Madame,* I think this little comedy is ended," he announced as he waved the fire-tipped weapon back and forth, causing the flames to leap and quicken with a ruddy, orange glow.

Mingled terror and surprize showed on the naked giant's face as de Grandin crossed the threshold. He fell away a pace, then, with his back against the wall, crouched for a spring.

"You first, *Monsieur,*" the Frenchman told him almost affably, and with an agile leap cleared the few feet separating them and thrust the blazing torch against the other's bare, brown breast.

I gasped with unbelief as I saw the virile, sun-tanned flesh take fire as though it had been tinder, blaze fiercely and crumble into ashes as the flames spread hungrily, eating up his chest and belly, neck and head, finally destroying writhing arms and legs.

The seated figure on the dais was cowering back in fright. Gone was her look of cold, contemptuous hatred; in its place a mask of wild, insensate fear had overspread her clear-cut, haughty features. Her red lips opened, showing needle-sharp white teeth, and I thought she would have screamed aloud in her terror, but all that issued from her gaping mouth was a little, squeaking sound, like the squealing of a mouse caught in a trap.

"And now, *Madame,* permit that I may serve you, also!" De Grandin turned his back upon the blazing man and faced the cringing woman on the throne.

She held up trembling hands to ward him off, and her frightened, squeaking cries redoubled, but inexorably as a mediæval executioner advancing to ignite the faggots round a condemned witch, the little Frenchman crossed the room, held out his blazing torch and forced the fire against her bosom.

The horrifying process of incineration was repeated. From rounded breast to soft, white throat, from omphalos to thighs, from chest to arms and from thighs to feet the all-devouring fire spread quickly, and the woman's white and gleaming flesh blazed fiercely, as if it had been oil-soaked wood. Bones showed a moment as the flesh was burned away, then took the fire, blazed quickly for an instant, glowed to incandescence, and crumbled to white ash before our gaze. Last of all, it seemed, the fixed and staring eyes, still gleaming with a greenish inward light, were taken by the fire, blazed for a second with a mixture of despair and hatred, then dissolved to nothingness.

"*Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin laid his hand upon the girl's bare shoulder, "they have gone."

AUDREY HAWKINS raised her head and gazed at him, the puzzled, non-comprehending look of one who wakens quickly from sound sleep upon her face,

There was a question in her eyes, but her lips were mute.

"Mademoiselle," he repeated, "they have gone; I drove them out with fire. But *he* remains, my little one." With a quick nod of his head he indicated Colonel Putnam, who crouched in a corner of the room, fluttering fingers at his bearded lips, his wild eyes roving restlessly about, as though he could not understand the quick destruction of the beings he had brought to life.

"He?" the girl responded dully.

"Précisément, Mademoiselle—he. The accursed one; the one who raised those mummies from the dead; who made this pleasant countryside a hell of death and horror; who made it possible for them to slay your father while he slept."

One of those unpleasant smiles which seemed to change the entire character of his comely little face spread across his features as he leant above the naked girl and held his billhook toward her.

"The task is yours by right of bereavement, *ma pauvre,"* he told her, "but if you would that I do it for you——"

"No—no; let me!" she cried and leapt to her feet, snatching the heavy iron weapon from his hand. Not only was she stripped of clothing; she was stripped of all restraint, as well. Not Audrey Hawkins, civilized descendant of a line of prudishly respectable New England rustics, stood before us in the silver lamps' blue light, but a primordial cave-woman, a creature of the dawn of time, wild with the lust for blood-vengeance; armed, furious, naked and unashamed.

"Come, Friend Trowbridge, we can safely leave the rest to her," de Grandin told me as he took my elbow and forced me from the room.

"But, man, that's murder!" I expostulated as he dragged me down the unlit hall. "That girl's a maniac, and armed, and that poor, crazy old man——"

"Will soon be safe in hell, unless I miss my guess," he broke in with a laugh. "Hark, is it not magnificent, my friend?"

A wild, high scream came to us from the room beyond, then a woman's cachinnating laugh, hysterical, thin-edged, but gloating; and the thudding beat of murderous blows. Then a weak, thin moaning, more blows; finally a little, groaning gasp and the sound of quick breath drawn through fevered lips to laboring lungs.

"And now, my friend, I think we may go back," said Jules de Grandin.

"ONE moment, if you please, I have a task to do," he called as we paused on the portico. "Do you proceed with Mademoiselle Audrey. I shall join you in a minute."

He disappeared inside the old, dark house, and I heard his boot-heels clicking on the bare boards of the hall as he sought the room where all that remained of Henry Putnam and the things he brought back from the dead were lying.

The girl leaned weakly against a tall porch pillar, covering her face with trembling hands. She was a grotesque little figure, de Grandin's jacket buttoned round her torso, mine tied kilt-fashion round her waist.

"Oh," she whispered with a conscience-stricken moan, "I'm a murderess. I killed him—beat him to death. I've committed murder!"

I could think of nothing comforting to say, so merely patted her upon the shoulder, but de Grandin, hastening from the house, was just in time to hear her tearful self-arraignment.

"Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle," he contradicted, "you are nothing of the kind. Me, once in war I had to head the firing-party which put a criminal to death.

Was I then his murderer? But no. My conscience makes no accusation. So it is with you. This Putnam one, this rogue, this miscreant, this so vile necromancer who filled these pleasant woods with squeaking, gibbering horrors, was his life not forfeit? Did not he connive at the death of that poor boy and girl who perished in the midst of their vacation? But yes. Did not he advertise for laborers, that they might furnish sustenance for those evil things he summoned from the tomb? Certainly. Did not he loose his squeaking, laughing thing upon your father, to kill him in his sleep? Of course.

"Yet for these many crimes the law was powerless to punish him. We should have sent ourselves to lifelong confinement in a madhouse had we attempted to invoke the law's processes. *Alors,* it was for one of us to give him his deserts, and you, my little one, as the one most greatly wronged, took precedence.

"Eh bien," he added with a tug at his small, tightly waxed mustache, "you did make extremely satisfactory work of it."

Since Audrey was in no condition to drive, I took the ancient flivver's steering-wheel.

"Look well upon that bad old house, my friends," de Grandin bade as we started on our homeward road. "Its time is done."

"What d'ye mean?" I asked.

"Precisely what I say. When I went back I made a dozen little fires in different places. They should be spreading nicely by this time."

"I CAN understand why that mummy we met in the woods caught fire so readily," I told him as we drove through the woods, "but how was it that the man and woman in the house were so inflammable?"

"They, too, were mummies," he replied.

"Mummies? Nonsense! The man was a magnificent physical specimen, and the woman—well, I'll admit she was evil-looking, but she had one of the most beautiful bodies I've ever seen. If she were a mummy, I——"

"Do not say it, my friend," he broke in with a laugh; "eaten words are bitter on the tongue. They were mummies—I say so. In the woods, in Monsieur Hawkins' home, when they made unpleasant faces at us through the window of our cabin, they were mummies, you agree? *Ha,* but when they stood in the blue light of those seven silver lamps, the lights which first shone on them when they came to plague the world, they were to outward seeming the same as when they lived and moved beneath the sun of olden Egypt. I have heard such things.

"That necromancer, von Meyer, of whom Monsieur Putnam spoke, I know of him by reputation. I have been told by fellow occultists whose word I can not doubt that he has perfected a light which when shone on a corpse will give it every look of life, roll back the ravages of years and make it seem in youth and health once more. A very brilliant man is that von Meyer, but a very wicked one, as well. Some day when I have nothing else to do I shall seek him out and kill him to death for the safety of society.

"Can you drive a little faster?" he inquired as we left the woods behind.

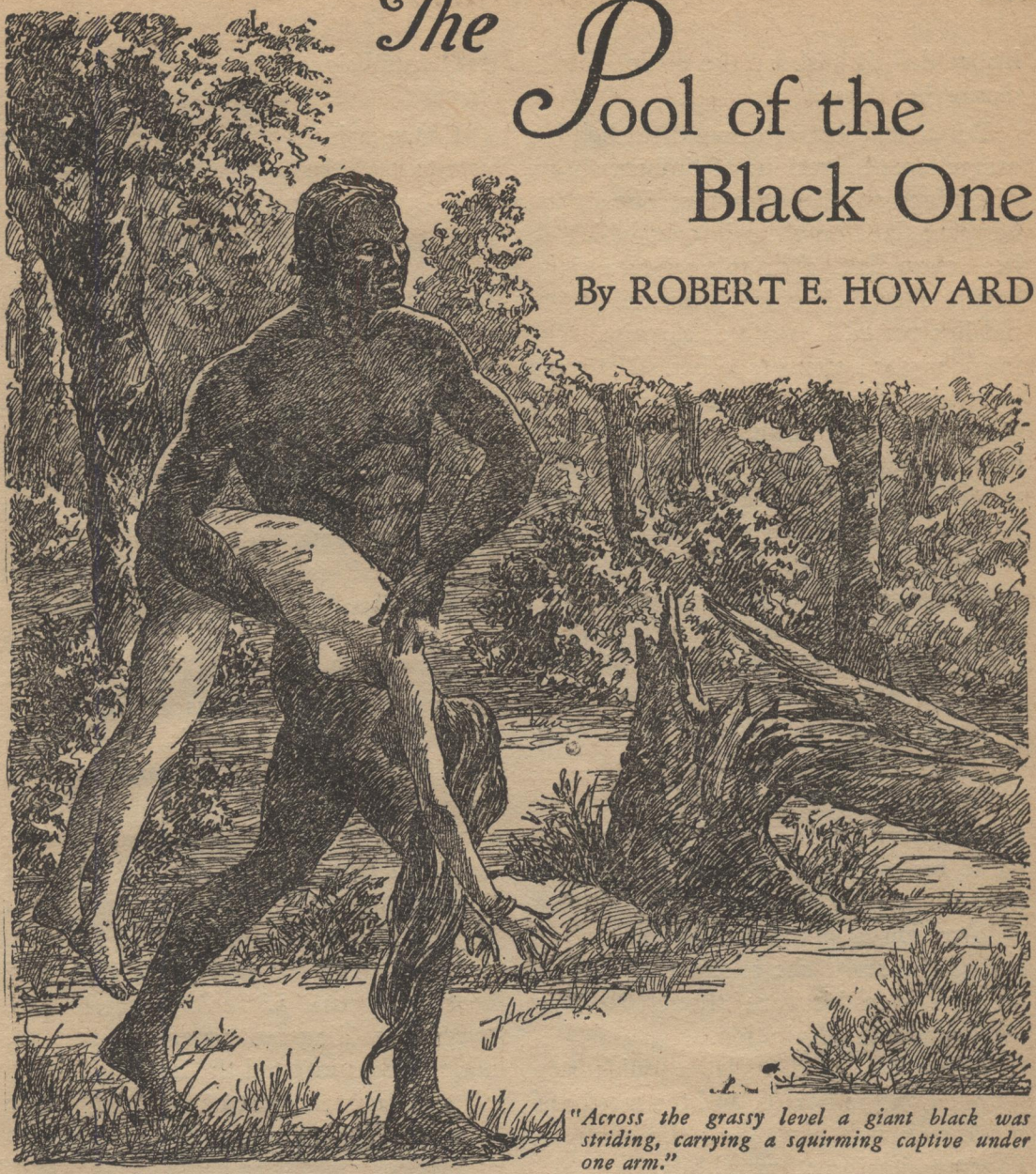
"Cold without your jacket?" I asked.

"Cold? *Mais non.* But I would reach the village soon, my friend. *Monsieur le Juge* who also acts as coroner has a keg of most delicious cider in his cellar, and this afternoon he bade me call on him whenever I felt thirsty. *Morbleu,* I feel most vilely thirsty now!

"Hurry, if you please, my friend."

The Pool of the Black One

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



"Across the grassy level a giant black was striding, carrying a squirming captive under one arm."

One of the strangest stories ever told—a tale of black giants, and the blood-freezing horror that awaited the buccaneers at the jade-green pool

Into the west, unknown of man,
Ships have sailed since the world began.
Read, if you dare, what Skelos wrote,
With dead hands fumbling his silken coat;
And follow the ships through the wind-blown wrack—
Follow the ships that come not back.

SANCHA, once of Kordava, yawned daintily, stretched her supple limbs luxuriously, and composed herself more comfortably on the ermine-fringed silk spread on the carack's poop-deck. That the crew watched her with burning interest from waist and forecastle she was lazily aware, just as she was also aware that her short silk kirtle veiled little of her voluptuous contours from their eager eyes. Wherefore she smiled insolently and prepared to snatch a few more winks before the sun, which was just thrusting

his golden disk above the ocean, should dazzle her eyes.

But at that instant a sound reached her ears unlike the creaking of timbers, thrum of cordage and lap of waves. She sat up, her gaze fixed on the rail, over which, to her amazement, a dripping figure clambered. Her dark eyes opened wide, her red lips parted in an O of surprize. The intruder was a stranger to her. Water ran in rivulets from his great shoulders and down his heavy arms. His single garment—a pair of bright crimson silk breeks—was soaking wet, as was his broad gold-buckled girdle and the sheathed sword it supported. As he stood at the rail, the rising sun etched him like a great bronze statue. He ran his fingers through his streaming black mane, and his blue eyes lit as they rested on the girl.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Whence did you come?"

He made a gesture toward the sea that took in a whole quarter of the compass, while his eyes did not leave her supple figure.

"Are you a merman, that you rise up out of the sea?" she asked, confused by the candor of his gaze, though she was accustomed to admiration.

Before he could reply, a quick step sounded on the boards, and the master of the carack was glaring at the stranger, fingers twitching at sword-hilt.

"Who the devil are you, sirrah?" this one demanded in no friendly tone.

"I am Conan," the other answered imperturbably. Sancha pricked up her ears anew; she had never heard Zingaran spoken with such an accent as the stranger spoke it.

"And how did you get aboard my ship?" The voice grated with suspicion.

"I swam."

"Swam!" exclaimed the master angrily. "Dog, would you jest with me? We are far beyond sight of land. Whence do you come?"

Conan pointed with a muscular brown arm toward the east, banded in dazzling gold by the lifting sun.

"I came from the Islands."

"Oh!" The other regarded him with increased interest. Black brows drew down over scowling eyes, and the thin lip lifted unpleasantly.

"So you are one of those dogs of the Barachans."

A faint smile touched Conan's lips.

"And do you know who I am?" his questioner demanded.

"This ship is the *Wastrel;* so you must be Zaporavo."

"Aye!" It touched the captain's grim vanity that the man should know him. He was a tall man, tall as Conan, though of leaner build. Framed in his steel morion his face was dark, saturnine and hawk-like, wherefore men called him the Hawk. His armor and garments were rich and ornate, after the fashion of a Zingaran grandee. His hand was never far from his sword-hilt.

There was little favor in the gaze he bent on Conan. Little love was lost between the Zingaran renegades and the outlaws who infested the Baracha Islands off the southern coast of Zingara. These men were mostly sailors from Argos, with a sprinkling of other nationalities. They raided the shipping, and harried the Zingaran coast towns, just as the Zingaran buccaneers did, but these dignified their profession by calling themselves Freebooters, while they dubbed the Barachans pirates. They were neither the first nor the last to gild the name of thief.

Some of these thoughts passed through Zaporavo's mind as he toyed with his sword-hilt and scowled at his uninvited guest. Conan gave no hint of what his own thoughts might be. He stood with

folded arms as placidly as if upon his own deck; his lips smiled and his eyes were untroubled.

"What are you doing here?" the Freebooter demanded abruptly.

"I found it necessary to leave the rendezvous at Tortage before moonrise last night," answered Conan. "I departed in a leaky boat, and rowed and bailed all night. Just at dawn I saw your topsails, and left the miserable tub to sink, while I made better speed in the water."

"There are sharks in these waters," growled Zaporavo, and was vaguely irritated by the answering shrug of the mighty shoulders. A glance toward the waist showed a screen of eager faces staring upward. A word would send them leaping up on the poop in a storm of swords that would overwhelm even such a fighting-man as the stranger looked to be.

"Why should I burden myself with every nameless vagabond the sea casts up?" snarled Zaporavo, his look and manner more insulting than his words.

"A ship can always use another good sailor," answered the other without resentment. Zaporavo scowled, knowing the truth of that assertion. He hesitated, and doing so, lost his ship, his command, his girl, and his life. But of course he could not see into the future, and to him Conan was only another wastrel, cast up, as he put it, by the sea. He did not like the man; yet the fellow had given him no provocation. His manner was not insolent, though rather more confident than Zaporavo liked to see.

"You'll work for your keep," snarled the Hawk. "Get off the poop. And remember, the only law here is my will."

THE smile seemed to broaden on Conan's thin lips. Without hesitation but without haste he turned and descended into the waist. He did not look again at Sancha, who, during the brief conversation, had watched eagerly, all eyes and ears.

As he came into the waist the crew thronged about him—Zingarans, all of them, half naked, their gaudy silk garments splashed with tar, jewels glinting in ear-rings and dagger-hilts. They were eager for the time-honored sport of baiting the stranger. Here he would be tested, and his future status in the crew decided. Up on the poop Zaporavo had apparently already forgotten the stranger's existence, but Sancha watched, tense with interest. She had become familiar with such scenes, and knew the baiting would be brutal and probably bloody.

But her familiarity with such matters was scanty compared to that of Conan. He smiled faintly as he came into the waist and saw the menacing figures pressing truculently about him. He paused and eyed the ring inscrutably, his composure unshaken. There was a certain code about these things. If he had attacked the captain, the whole crew would have been at his throat, but they would give him a fair chance against the one selected to push the brawl.

The man chosen for this duty thrust himself forward—a wiry brute, with a crimson sash knotted about his head like a turban. His lean chin jutted out, his scarred face was evil beyond belief. Every glance, each swaggering movement was an affront. His way of beginning the baiting was as primitive, raw and crude as himself.

"Baracha, eh?" he sneered. "That's where they raise dogs for men. We of the Fellowship spit on 'em—like this!"

He spat in Conan's face and snatched at his own sword.

The Barachan's movement was too quick for the eye to follow. His sledge-

like fist crunched with a terrible impact against his tormenter's jaw, and the Zingaran catapulted through the air and fell in a crumpled heap by the rail.

Conan turned toward the others. But for a slumbering glitter in his eyes, his bearing was unchanged. But the baiting was over as suddenly as it had begun. The seamen lifted their companion; his broken jaw hung slack, his head lolled unnaturally.

"By Mitra, his neck's broken!" swore a black-bearded sea-rogue.

"You Freebooters are a weak-boned race," laughed the pirate. "On the Barachas we take no account of such taps as that. Will you play at sword-strokes, now, any of you? No? Then all's well, and we're friends, eh?"

There were plenty of tongues to assure him that he spoke truth. Brawny arms swung the dead man over the rail, and a dozen fins cut the water as he sank. Conan laughed and spread his mighty arms as a great cat might stretch itself, and his gaze sought the deck above. Sancha leaned over the rail, red lips parted, dark eyes aglow with interest. The sun behind her outlined her lithe figure through the light kirtle which its glow made transparent. Then across her fell Zaporavo's scowling shadow and a heavy hand fell possessively on her slim shoulder. There were menace and meaning in the glare he bent on the man in the waist; Conan grinned back, as if at a jest none knew but himself.

Zaporavo made the mistake so many autocrats make; alone in somber grandeur on the poop, he under-estimated the man below him. He had his opportunity to kill Conan, and he let it pass, engrossed in his own gloomy ruminations. He did not find it easy to think any of the dogs beneath his feet constituted a menace to him. He had stood in the high places so long, and had ground so many foes underfoot, that he unconsciously assumed himself to be above the machinations of inferior rivals.

Conan, indeed, gave him no provocation. He mixed with the crew, lived and made merry as they did. He proved himself a skilled sailor, and by far the strongest man any of them had seen. He did the work of three men, and was always first to spring to any heavy or dangerous task. His mates began to rely upon him. He did not quarrel with them, and they were careful not to quarrel with him. He gambled with them, putting up his girdle and sheath for a stake, won their money and weapons, and gave them back with a laugh. The crew instinctively looked toward him as the leader of the forecastle. He vouchsafed no information as to what had caused him to flee the Barachas, but the knowledge that he was capable of a deed bloody enough to have exiled him from that wild band increased the respect felt toward him by the fierce Freebooters. Toward Zaporavo and the mates he was imperturbably courteous, never insolent or servile.

The dullest was struck by the contrast between the harsh, taciturn, gloomy commander, and the pirate whose laugh was gusty and ready, who roared ribald songs in a dozen languages, guzzled ale like a toper, and—apparently—had no thought for the morrow.

HAD Zaporavo known he was being compared, even though unconsciously, with a man before the mast, he would have been speechless with amazed anger. But he was engrossed with his broodings, which had become blacker and grimmer as the years crawled by, and with his vague grandiose dreams; and with the girl whose possession was a bitter pleasure, just as all his pleasures were.

And she looked more and more at the black-maned giant who towered among his mates at work or play. He never spoke to her, but there was no mistaking the candor of his gaze. She did not mistake it, and she wondered if she dared the perilous game of leading him on.

No great length of time lay between her and the palaces of Kordava, but it was as if a world of change separated her from the life she had lived before Zaporavo tore her screaming from the flaming caravel his wolves had plundered. She, who had been the spoiled and petted daughter of the Duke of Kordava, learned what it was to be a buccaneer's plaything; and because she was supple enough to bend without breaking, she lived where other women had died, and because she was young and vibrant with life, she came to find pleasure in the existence.

The life was uncertain, dream-like, with sharp contrasts of battle, pillage, murder, and flight. Zaporavo's red visions made it even more uncertain than that of the average freebooter. No one knew what he planned next. Now they had left all charted coasts behind and were plunging further and further into that unknown billowy waste ordinarily shunned by seafarers, and into which, since the beginnings of Time, ships had ventured, only to vanish from the sight of man for ever. All known lands lay behind them, and day upon day the blue surging immensity lay empty to their sight. Here there was no loot—no towns to sack nor ships to burn. The men murmured, though they did not let their murmurings reach the ears of their implacable master, who tramped the poop day and night in gloomy majesty, or pored over ancient charts and time-yellowed maps, reading in tomes that were crumbling masses of worm-eaten parchment. At times he talked to Sancha, wildly it seemed to her, of lost continents, and fabulous isles dreaming unguessed amidst the blue foam of nameless gulfs, where horned dragons guarded treasures gathered by pre-human kings, long, long ago.

Sancha listened, uncomprehending, hugging her slim knees, her thoughts constantly roving away from the words of her grim companion back to a clean-limbed bronze giant whose laughter was gusty and elemental as the sea-wind.

So, after many weary weeks, they raised land to westward, and at dawn dropped anchor in a shallow bay, and saw a beach which was like a white band bordering an expanse of gentle grassy slopes, masked by green trees. The wind brought scents of fresh vegetation and spices, and Sancha clapped her hands with glee at the prospect of adventuring ashore. But her eagerness turned to sulkiness when Zaporavo ordered her to remain aboard until he sent for her. He never gave any explanation for his commands; so she never knew his reason, unless it was the lurking devil in him that frequently made him hurt her without cause.

So she lounged sulkily on the poop and watched the men row ashore through the calm water that sparkled like liquid jade in the morning sunlight. She saw them bunch together on the sands, suspicious, weapons ready, while several scattered out through the trees that fringed the beach. Among these, she noted, was Conan. There was no mistaking that tall brown figure with its springy step. Men said he was no civilized man at all, but a Cimmerian, one of those barbaric tribesmen who dwelt in the gray hills of the far North, and whose raids struck terror in their southron neighbors. At least, she knew that there was something about him, some super-vitality or barbarism that set him apart from his wild mates.

Voices echoed along the shore, as the

silence reassured the buccaneers. The clusters broke up, as men scattered along the beach in search of fruit. She saw them climbing and plucking among the trees, and her pretty mouth watered. She stamped a little foot and swore with a proficiency acquired by association with her blasphemous companions.

The men on shore had indeed found fruit, and were gorging on it, finding one unknown golden-skinned variety especially luscious. But Zaporavo did not seek or eat fruit. His scouts having found nothing indicating men or beasts in the neighborhood, he stood staring inland, at the long reaches of grassy slopes melting into one another. Then, with a brief word, he shifted his sword-belt and strode in under the trees. His mate expostulated with him against going alone, and was rewarded by a savage blow in the mouth. Zaporavo had his reasons for wishing to go alone. He desired to learn if this island were indeed that mentioned in the mysterious *Book of Skelos,* whereon, nameless sages aver, strange monsters guard crypts filled with hieroglyph-carven gold. Nor, for murky reasons of his own, did he wish to share his knowledge, if it were true, with any one, much less his own crew.

Sancha, watching eagerly from the poop, saw him vanish into the leafy fastness. Presently she saw Conan, the Barachan, turn, glance briefly at the men scattered up and down the beach; then the pirate went quickly in the direction taken by Zaporavo, and likewise vanished among the trees.

Sancha's curiosity was piqued. She waited for them to reappear, but they did not. The seamen still moved aimlessly up and down the beach, and some had wandered inland. Many had lain down in the shade to sleep. Time passed, and she fidgeted about restlessly. The sun began to beat down hotly, in spite of the canopy above the poop-deck. Here it was warm, silent, draggingly monotonous; a few yards away across a band of blue shallow water, the cool shady mystery of tree-fringed beach and woodland-dotted meadow beckoned her. Moreover, the mystery concerning Zaporavo and Conan tempted her.

She well knew the penalty for disobeying her merciless master, and she sat for some time, squirming with indecision. At last she decided that it was worth even one of Zaporavo's whippings to play truant, and with no more ado she kicked off her soft leather sandals, slipped out of her kirtle and stood up on the deck naked as Eve. Clambering over the rail and down the chains, she slid into the water and swam ashore. She stood on the beach a few moments, squirming as the sands tickled her small toes, while she looked for the crew. She saw only a few, at some distance up or down the beach. Many were fast asleep under the trees, bits of golden fruit still clutched in their fingers. She wondered why they should sleep so soundly, so early in the day.

NONE hailed her as she crossed the white girdle of sand and entered the shade of the woodland. The trees, she found, grew in irregular clusters, and between these groves stretched rolling expanses of meadow-like slopes. As she progressed inland, in the direction taken by Zaporavo, she was entranced by the green vistas that unfolded gently before her, soft slope beyond slope, carpeted with green sward and dotted with groves. Between the slopes lay gentle declivities, likewise swarded. The scenery seemed to melt into itself, or each scene into the other; the view was singular, at once broad and restricted. Over all a dreamy silence lay like an enchantment.

Then she came suddenly onto the level summit of a slope, circled with tall trees, and the dreamily faery-like sensation vanished abruptly at the sight of what lay on the reddened and trampled grass. Sancha involuntarily cried out and recoiled, then stole forward, wide-eyed, trembling in every limb.

It was Zaporavo who lay there on the sward, staring sightlessly upward, a gaping wound in his breast. His sword lay near his nerveless hand. The Hawk had made his last swoop.

It is not to be said that Sancha gazed on the corpse of her lord without emotion. She had no cause to love him, yet she felt at least the sensation any girl might feel when looking on the body of the man who was first to possess her. She did not weep or feel any need of weeping, but she was seized by a strong trembling, her blood seemed to congeal briefly, and she resisted a wave of hysteria.

She looked about her for the man she expected to see. Nothing met her eyes but the ring of tall, thickly-leafed forest giants, and the blue slopes beyond them. Had the Freebooter's slayer dragged himself away, mortally wounded? No bloody tracks led away from the body.

Puzzled, she swept the surrounding trees, stiffening as she caught a rustle in the emerald leaves that seemed not to be of the wind. She went toward the trees, staring into the leafy depths.

"Conan?" Her call was inquiring; her voice sounded strange and small in the vastness of silence that had grown suddenly tense.

Her knees began to tremble as a nameless panic swept over her.

"Conan!" she cried desperately. "It is I—Sancha! Where are you? Please, Conan——" Her voice faltered away. Unbelieving horror dilated her brown eyes. Her red lips parted to an inarticulate scream. Paralysis gripped her limbs; where she had such desperate need of swift flight, she could not move. She could only shriek wordlessly.

2

WHEN Conan saw Zaporavo stalk alone into the woodland, he felt that the chance he had watched for had come. He had eaten no fruit, nor joined in the horse-play of his mates; all his faculties were occupied with watching the buccaneer chief. Accustomed to Zaporavo's moods, his men were not particularly surprized that their captain should choose to explore an unknown and probably hostile isle alone. They turned to their own amusement, and did not notice Conan when he glided like a stalking panther after the chieftain.

Conan did not underrate his dominance of the crew. But he had not gained the right, through battle and foray, to challenge the captain to a duel to the death. In these empty seas there had been no opportunity for him to prove himself according to Freebooter law. The crew would stand solidly against him if he attacked the chieftain openly. But he knew that if he killed Zaporavo without their knowledge, the leaderless crew would not be likely to be swayed by loyalty to a dead man. In such wolf-packs only the living counted.

So he followed Zaporavo with sword in hand and eagerness in his heart, until he came out onto a level summit, circled with tall trees, between whose trunks he saw the green vistas of the slopes melting into the blue distance. In the midst of the glade Zaporavo, sensing pursuit, turned, hand on hilt.

The buccaneer swore.

"Dog, why do you follow me?"

"Are you mad, to ask?" laughed Conan, coming swiftly toward his erstwhile chief. His lips smiled, and in his blue eyes danced a wild gleam.

Zaporavo ripped out his sword with a black curse, and steel clashed against steel as the Barachan came in recklessly and wide open, his blade singing a wheel of blue flame about his head.

Zaporavo was the veteran of a thousand fights by sea and by land. There was no man in the world more deeply and thoroughly versed than he in the lore of swordcraft. But he had never been pitted against a blade wielded by thews bred in the wild lands beyond the borders of civilization. Against his fighting-craft was matched blinding speed and strength impossible to a civilized man. Conan's manner of fighting was unorthodox, but instinctive and natural as that of a timber wolf. The intricacies of the sword were as useless against his primitive fury as a human boxer's skill against the onslaughts of a panther.

Fighting as he had never fought before, straining every last ounce of effort to parry the blade that flickered like lightning about his head, Zaporavo in desperation caught a full stroke near his hilt, and felt his whole arm go numb beneath the terrific impact. That stroke was instantly followed by a thrust with such terrible drive behind it that the sharp point ripped through chain-mail and ribs like paper, to transfix the heart beneath. Zaporavo's lips writhed in brief agony, but, grim to the last, he made no sound. He was dead before his body relaxed on the trampled grass, where blood drops glittered like spilt rubies in the sun.

Conan shook the red drops from his sword, grinned with unaffected pleasure, stretched like a huge cat—and abruptly stiffened, the expression of satisfaction on his face being replaced by a stare of bewilderment. He stood like a statue, his sword trailing in his hand.

As he lifted his eyes from his vanquished foe, they had absently rested on the surrounding trees, and the vistas beyond. And he had seen a fantastic thing—a thing incredible and inexplicable. Over the soft rounded green shoulder of a distant slope had loped a tall black naked figure, bearing on its shoulder an equally naked white form. The apparition vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving the watcher gasping in surprize.

The pirate stared about him, glanced uncertainly back the way he had come, and swore. He was nonplussed—a bit upset, if the term might be applied to one of such steely nerves as his. In the midst of realistic, if exotic surroundings, a vagrant image of fantasy and nightmare had been introduced. Conan doubted neither his eyesight nor his sanity. He had seen something alien and uncanny, he knew; the mere fact of a black figure racing across the landscape carrying a white captive was bizarre enough, but this black figure had been unnaturally tall.

Shaking his head doubtfully, Conan started off in the direction in which ne had seen the thing. He did not argue the wisdom of his move; with his curiosity so piqued, he had no choice but to follow its promptings.

Slope after slope he traversed, each with its even sward and clustered groves. The general trend was always upward, though he ascended and descended the gentle inclines with monotonous regularity. The array of rounded shoulders and shallow declivities was bewildering and apparently endless. But at last he advanced up what he believed was the highest summit on the island, and halted at the sight of green shining walls and towers, which, until he had reached the

spot on which he then stood, had merged so perfectly with the green landscape as to be invisible, even to his keen sight.

He hesitated, fingered his sword, then went forward, bitten by the worm of curiosity. He saw no one as he approached a tall archway in the curving wall. There was no door. Peering warily through, he saw what seemed to be a broad open court, grass-carpeted, surrounded by a circular wall of the green semi-translucent substance. Various arches opened from it. Advancing on the balls of his bare feet, sword ready, he chose one of these arches at random, and passed into another similar court. Over an inner wall he saw the pinnacles of strangely shaped tower-like structures. One of these towers was built in, or projected into the court in which he found himself, and a broad stair led up to it, along the side of the wall. Up this he went, wondering if it were all real, or if he were not in the midst of a black lotus dream.

At the head of the stair he found himself on a walled ledge, or balcony, he was not sure which. He could now make out more details of the towers, but they were meaningless to him. He realized uneasily that no ordinary human beings could have built them. There was symmetry about their architecture, and system, but it was a mad symmetry, a system alien to human sanity. As for the plan of the whole town, castle, or whatever it was intended for, he could see just enough to get the impression of a great number of courts, mostly circular, each surrounded by its own wall, and connected with the others by open arches, and all, apparently, grouped about the cluster of fantastic towers in the center.

TURNING in the other direction from these towers, he got a fearful shock, and crouched down suddenly behind the parapet of the balcony, glaring amazedly.

The balcony or ledge was higher than the opposite wall, and he was looking over that wall into another swarded court. The inner curve of the further wall of that court differed from the others he had seen, in that, instead of being smooth, it seemed to be banded with long lines or ledges, crowded with small objects the nature of which he could not determine.

However, he gave little heed to the wall at the time. His attention was centered on the band of beings that squatted about a dark green pool in the midst of the court. These creatures were black and naked, made like men, but the least of them, standing upright, would have towered head and shoulders above the tall pirate. They were rangy rather than massive, but were finely formed, with no suggestion of deformity or abnormality, save as their great height was abnormal. But even at that distance Conan sensed the basic diabolism of their features.

In their midst, cringing and naked, stood a youth that Conan recognized as the youngest sailor aboard the *Wastrel*. He, then, had been the captive the pirate had seen borne across the grass-covered slope. Conan had heard no sound of fighting—saw no blood-stains or wounds on the sleek ebon limbs of the giants. Evidently the lad had wandered inland away from his companions and been snatched up by a black man lurking in ambush. Conan mentally termed the creatures black men, for lack of a better term; instinctively he knew these tall ebony beings were not men, as he understood the term.

No sound came to him. The blacks nodded and gestured to one another, but they did not seem to speak—vocally, at least. One, squatting on his haunches before the cringing boy, held a pipe-like thing in his hand. This he set to his lips,

and apparently blew, though Conan heard no sound. But the Zingaran youth heard or felt, and cringed. He quivered and writhed as if in agony; a regularity became evident in the twitching of his limbs, which quickly became rhythmic. The twitching became a violent jerking, the jerking regular movements. The youth began to dance, as cobras dance by compulsion to the tune of the faquir's fife. There was naught of zest or joyful abandon in that dance. There was, indeed, abandon that was awful to see, but it was not joyful. It was as if the mute tune of the pipes grasped the boy's inmost soul with salacious fingers and with brutal torture wrung from it every involuntary expression of secret passion. It was a convulsion of obscenity, a spasm of lasciviousness—an exudation of secret hungers framed by compulsion: desire without pleasure, pain mated awfully to lust. It was like watching a soul stripped naked, and all its dark and unmentionable secrets laid bare.

Conan glared, frozen with repulsion and shaken with nausea. Himself as cleanly elemental as a timber wolf, he was yet not ignorant of the perverse secrets of rotting civilizations. He had roamed the cities of Zamora, and known the women of Shadizar the Wicked. But he sensed here a cosmic vileness transcending mere human degeneracy—a perverse branch on the tree of Life, developed along lines outside human comprehension. It was not at the agonized contortions and posturing of the wretched boy that he was shocked, but at the cosmic obscenity of these beings which could drag to light the abysmal secrets that sleep in the unfathomed darkness of the human soul, and find pleasure in the brazen flaunting of such things as should not be hinted at, even in restless nightmares.

Suddenly the black torturer laid down the pipes and rose, towering over the writhing white figure. Brutally grasping the boy by neck and haunch, the giant up-ended him and thrust him head-first into the green pool. Conan saw the white glimmer of his naked body amid the green water, as the black giant held his captive deep under the surface. Then there was a restless movement among the other blacks, and Conan ducked quickly below the balcony wall, not daring to raise his head lest he be seen.

After a while his curiosity got the better of him, and he cautiously peered out again. The blacks were filing out of an archway into another court. One of them was just placing something on a ledge of the further wall, and Conan saw it was the one who had tortured the boy. He was taller than the others, and wore a jeweled head-band. Of the Zingaran boy there was no trace. The giant followed his fellows, and presently Conan saw them emerge from the archway by which he had gained access to that castle of horror, and file away across the green slopes, in the direction from which he had come. They bore no arms, yet he felt that they planned further aggression against the Freebooters.

But before he went to warn the unsuspecting buccaneers, he wished to investigate the fate of the boy. No sound disturbed the quiet. The pirate believed that the towers and courts were deserted save for himself.

He went swiftly down the stair, crossed the court and passed through an arch into the court the blacks had just quitted. Now he saw the nature of the striated wall. It was banded by narrow ledges, apparently cut out of the solid stone, and ranged along these ledges or shelves were thousands of tiny figures, mostly grayish in color. These figures, not much longer

than a man's hand, represented men, and so cleverly were they made that Conan recognized various racial characteristics in the different idols, features typical of Zingarans, Argoseans, Ophireans, and Kushite corsairs. These last were black in color, just as their models were black in reality. Conan was aware of a vague uneasiness as he stared at the dumb sightless figures. There was a mimicry of reality about them that was somehow disturbing. He felt of them gingerly and could not decide of what material they were made. It felt like petrified bone; but he could not imagine petrified substance being found in the locality in such abundance as to be used so lavishly.

He noticed that the images representing types with which he was familiar were all on the higher ledges. The lower ledges were occupied by figures the features of which were strange to him. They either embodied merely the artists' imagination, or typified racial types long vanished and forgotten.

Shaking his head impatiently, Conan turned toward the pool. The circular court offered no place of concealment; as the body of the boy was nowhere in sight, it must be lying at the bottom of the pool.

Approaching the placid green disk, he stared into the glimmering surface. It was like looking through a thick green glass, unclouded, yet strangely illusory. Of no great dimensions, the pool was round as a well, bordered by a rim of green jade. Looking down he could see the rounded bottom—how far below the surface he could not decide. But the pool seemed incredibly deep—he was aware of a dizziness as he looked down, much as if he were looking into an abyss. He was puzzled by his ability to see the bottom; but it lay beneath his gaze, impossibly remote, illusive, shadowy, yet visible. At times he thought a faint luminosity was apparent deep in the jade-colored depth, but he could not be sure. Yet he was sure that the pool was empty except for the shimmering water.

Then where in the name of Crom was the boy whom he had seen brutally drowned in that pool? Rising, Conan fingered his sword, and gazed around the court again. His gaze focussed on a spot on one of the higher ledges. There he had seen the tall black place something—cold sweat broke suddenly out on Conan's brown hide.

Hesitantly, yet as if drawn by a magnet, the pirate approached the shimmering wall. Dazed by a suspicion too monstrous to voice, he glared up at the last figure on that ledge. A horrible familiarity made itself evident. Stony, immobile, dwarfish, yet unmistakable, the features of the Zingaran boy stared unseeingly at him. Conan recoiled, shaken to his soul's foundations. His sword trailed in his paralyzed hand as he glared, open-mouthed, stunned by the realization which was too abysmal and awful for the mind to grasp.

Yet the fact was indisputable; the secret of the dwarfish images was revealed, though behind that secret lay the darker and more cryptic secret of their being.

3

How long Conan stood drowned in dizzy cogitation, he never knew. A voice shook him out of his gaze, a feminine voice that shrieked more and more loudly, as if the owner of the voice were being borne nearer. Conan recognized that voice, and his paralysis vanished instantly.

A quick bound carried him high up on the narrow ledges, where he clung, kicking aside the clustering images to obtain room for his feet. Another spring and a scramble, and he was clinging to the rim of the wall, glaring over it. It was an outer wall; he was looking

into the green meadow that surrounded the castle.

Across the grassy level a giant black was striding, carrying a squirming captive under one arm as a man might carry a rebellious child. It was Sancha, her black hair falling in disheveled rippling waves, her olive skin contrasting abruptly with the glossy ebony of her captor. He gave no heed to her wrigglings and cries as he made for the outer archway.

As he vanished within, Conan sprang recklessly down the wall and glided into the arch that opened into the further court. Crouching there, he saw the giant enter the court of the pool, carrying his writhing captive. Now he was able to make out the creature's details.

The superb symmetry of body and limbs was more impressive at close range. Under the ebon skin long, rounded muscles rippled, and Conan did not doubt that the monster could rend an ordinary man limb from limb. The nails of the fingers provided further weapons, for they were grown like the talons of a wild beast. The face was a carven ebony mask. The eyes were tawny, a vibrant gold that glowed and glittered. But the face was inhuman; each line, each feature was stamped with evil—evil transcending the mere evil of humanity. The thing was not a human —it could not be; it was a growth of Life from the pits of blasphemous creation—a perversion of evolutionary development.

The giant cast Sancha down on the sward, where she grovelled, crying with pain and terror. He cast a glance about as if uncertain, and his tawny eyes narrowed as they rested on the images overturned and knocked from the wall. Then he stooped, grasped his captive by her neck and crotch, and strode purposefully toward the green pool. And Conan glided from his archway, and raced like a wind of death across the sward.

The giant wheeled, and his eyes flared as he saw the bronzed avenger rushing toward him. In the instant of surprize his cruel grip relaxed and Sancha wriggled from his hands and fell to the grass. The taloned hands spread and clutched, but Conan ducked beneath their swoop and drove his sword through the giant's groin. The black went down like a felled tree, gushing blood, and the next instant Conan was seized in a frantic grasp as Sancha sprang up and threw her arms around him in a frenzy of terror and hysterical relief.

He cursed as he disengaged himself, but his foe was already dead; the tawny eyes were glazed, the long ebony limbs had ceased to twitch.

"Oh, Conan," Sancha was sobbing, clinging tenaciously to him, "what will become of us? What are these monsters? Oh, surely this is hell and that was the devil——"

"Then hell needs a new devil," the Barachan grinned fiercely. "But how did he get hold of you? Have they taken the ship?"

"I don't know." She tried to wipe away her tears, fumbled for her skirt, and then remembered that she wore none. "I came ashore. I saw you follow Zaporavo, and I followed you both. I found Zaporavo —was—was it you who——"

"Who else?" he grunted. "What then?"

"I saw a movement in the trees," she shuddered. "I thought it was you. I called—then I saw that—that black *thing* squatting like an ape among the branches, leering down at me. It was like a nightmare; I couldn't run. All I could do was squeal. Then it dropped from the tree and seized me—oh, oh, oh!" She hid her face in her hands, and was shaken anew at the memory of the horror.

"Well, we've got to get out of here,"

he growled, catching her wrist. "Come on; we've got to get to the crew——"

"Most of them were asleep on the beach as I entered the woods," she said.

"Asleep?" he exclaimed profanely. "What in the seven devils of hell's fire and damnation——"

"Listen!" She froze, a white quivering image of fright.

"I heard it!" he snapped. "A moaning cry! Wait!"

He bounded up the ledges again, and glaring over the wall, swore with a concentrated fury that made even Sancha gasp. The black men were returning, but they came not alone or empty-handed. Each bore a limp human form; some bore two. Their captives were the Freebooters; they hung slackly in their captor's arms, and but for an occasional vague movement or twitching, Conan would have believed them dead. They had been disarmed but not stripped; one of the blacks bore their sheathed swords, a great armload of bristling steel. From time to time one of the seamen voiced a vague cry, like a drunkard calling out in sottish sleep.

Like a trapped wolf Conan glared about him. Three arches led out of the court of the pool. Through the eastern arch the blacks had left the court, and through it they would presumably return. He had entered by the southern arch. In the western arch he had hidden, and had not had time to notice what lay beyond it. Regardless of his ignorance of the plan of the castle, he was forced to make his decision promptly.

Springing down the wall, he replaced the images with frantic haste, dragged the corpse of his victim to the pool and cast it in. It sank instantly, and as he looked, he distinctly saw an appalling contraction—a shrinking, a hardening. He hastily turned away, shuddering. Then he seized his companion's arm and led her hastily toward the southern archway, while she begged to be told what was happening.

"They've bagged the crew," he answered hastily. "I haven't any plan, but we'll hide somewhere and watch. If they don't look in the pool, they may not suspect our presence."

"But they'll see the blood on the grass!"

"Maybe they'll think one of their own devils spilled it," he answered. "Anyway, we'll have to take the chance."

They were in the court from which he had watched the torture of the boy, and he led her hastily up the stair that mounted the southern wall, and forced her into a crouching position behind the balustrade of the balcony; it was poor concealment, but the best they could do.

SCARCELY had they settled themselves, when the blacks filed into the court. There was a resounding clash at the foot of the stairs, and Conan stiffened, grasping his sword. But the blacks passed through an archway on the southwestern side, and they heard a series of thuds and groans. The giants were casting their victims down on the sward. An hysterical giggle rose to Sancha's lips, and Conan quickly clapped his hand over her mouth, stifling the sound before it could betray them.

After awhile they heard the padding of many feet on the sward below, and then silence reigned. Conan peered over the wall. The court was empty. The blacks were once more gathered about the pool in the adjoining court, squatting on their haunches. They seemed to pay no heed to the great smears of blood on the sward and the jade rim of the pool. Evidently blood stains were nothing unusual. Nor were they looking into the pool. They were engrossed in some inexplicable con-

clave of their own; the tall black was playing again on his golden pipes, and his companions listened like ebony statues.

Taking Sancha's hand, Conan glided down the stair, stooping so that his head would not be visible above the wall. The cringing girl followed perforce, staring fearfully at the arch that let into the court of the pool, but through which, at that angle, neither the pool nor its grim throng was visible. At the foot of the stair lay the swords of the Zingarans. The clash they had heard had been the casting down of the captured weapons.

Conan drew Sancha toward the southwestern arch, and they silently crossed the sward and entered the court beyond. There the Freebooters lay in careless heaps, mustaches bristling, ear-rings glinting. Here and there one stirred or groaned restlessly. Conan bent down to them, and Sancha knelt beside him, leaning forward with her hands on her thighs.

"What is that sweet cloying smell?" she asked nervously. "It's on all their breaths."

"It's that damned fruit they were eating," he answered softly. "I remember the smell of it. It must have been like the black lotus, that makes men sleep. By Crom, they are beginning to awake—but they're unarmed, and I have an idea that those black devils won't wait long before they begin their magic on them. What chance will the lads have, unarmed and stupid with slumber?"

He brooded for an instant, scowling with the intentness of his thoughts; then he seized Sancha's olive shoulder in a grip that made her wince.

"Listen! I'll draw those black swine into another part of the castle and keep them busy for awhile. Meanwhile you shake these fools awake, and bring their swords to them—it's a fighting chance. Can you do it?"

"I—I—don't know!" she stammered, shaking with terror, and hardly knowing what she was saying.

With a curse Conan caught her thick tresses near her head and shook her until the walls danced to her dizzy sight.

"You *must* do it!" he hissed. "It's our only chance!"

"I'll do my best!" she gasped, and with a grunt of commendation and an encouraging slap on the back that nearly knocked her down, he glided away.

A few moments later he was crouching at the arch that opened into the court of the pool, glaring upon his enemies. They still sat about the pool, but were beginning to show evidences of an evil impatience. From the court where lay the rousing buccaneers he heard their groans growing louder, beginning to be mingled with incoherent curses. He tensed his muscles and sank into a pantherish crouch, breathing easily between his teeth.

The jeweled giant rose, taking his pipes from his lips—and at that instant Conan was among the startled blacks with a tigerish bound. And as a tiger leaps and strikes among his prey, Conan leaped and struck: thrice his blade flickered before any could lift a hand in defense; then he bounded from among them and raced across the sward. Behind him sprawled three black figures, their skulls split.

But though the unexpected fury of his surprize had caught the giants off guard, the survivors recovered quickly enough. They were at his heels as he ran through the western arch, their long legs sweeping them over the ground at headlong speed. However, he felt confident of his ability to outfoot them at will; but that was not his purpose. He intended leading them on a long chase, in order to give Sancha time to rouse and arm the Zingarans.

And as he raced into the court beyond

the western arch, he swore. This court differed from the others he had seen. Instead of round, it was octagonal, and the arch by which he had entered was the only entrance or exit.

Wheeling, he saw that the entire band had followed him in; a group clustered in the arch, and the rest spread out in a wide line as they approached. He faced them, backing slowly toward the northern wall. The line bent into a semicircle, spreading out to hem him in. He continued to move backward, but more and more slowly, noting the spaces widening between the pursuers. They feared lest he should try to dart around a horn of the crescent, and lengthened their line to prevent it.

He watched with the calm alertness of a wolf, and when he struck it was with the devastating suddenness of a thunderbolt—full at the center of the crescent. The giant who barred his way went down cloven to the middle of the breast-bone, and the pirate was outside their closing ring before the blacks to right and left could come to their stricken comrade's aid. The group at the gate prepared to receive his onslaught, but Conan did not charge them. He had turned and was watching his hunters without apparent emotion, and certainly without fear.

This time they did not spread out in a thin line. They had learned that it was fatal to divide their forces against such an incarnation of clawing, rending fury. They bunched up in a compact mass, and advanced on him without undue haste, maintaining their formation.

CONAN knew that if he fell foul of that mass of taloned muscle and bone, there could be but one culmination. Once let them drag him down among them where they could reach him with their talons and use their greater bodyweight to advantage, even his primitive ferocity would not prevail. He glanced around the wall and saw a ledge-like projection above a corner on the western side. What it was he did not know, but it would serve his purpose. He began backing toward that corner, and the giants advanced more rapidly. They evidently thought that they were herding him into the corner themselves, and Conan found time to reflect that they probably looked on him as a member of a lower order, mentally inferior to themselves. So much the better. Nothing is more disastrous than underrating one's antagonist.

Now he was only a few yards from the wall, and the blacks were closing in rapidly, evidently thinking to pin him in the corner before he realized his situation. The group at the gate had deserted their post and were hastening to join their fellows. The giants half crouched, eyes blazing like golden hell-fire, teeth glistening whitely, taloned hands lifted as if to fend off attack. They expected an abrupt and violent move on the part of their prey, but when it came, it took them by surprize.

Conan lifted his sword, took a step toward them, then wheeled and raced to the wall. With a fleeting coil and release of steel muscles, he shot high in the air, and his straining arm hooked its fingers over the projection. Instantly there was a rending crash and the jutting ledge gave way, precipitating the pirate back into the court.

He hit on his back, which for all its springy sinews would have broken but for the cushioning of the sward, and rebounding like a great cat, he faced his foes. The dancing recklessness was gone from his eyes. They blazed like blue bale-fire; his mane bristled, his thin lips snarled. In an instant the affair had changed from a daring game to a battle of life and

death, and Conan's savage nature responded with all the fury of the wild.

The blacks, halted an instant by the swiftness of the episode, now made to sweep on him and drag him down. But in that instant a shout broke the stillness. Wheeling, the giants saw a disreputable throng crowding the arch. The buccaneers weaved drunkenly, they swore incoherently; they were addled and bewildered, but they grasped their swords and advanced with a ferocity not dimmed in the slightest by the fact that they did not understand what it was all about.

As the blacks glared in amazement, Conan yelled stridently and struck them like a razor-edged thunderbolt. They fell like ripe grain beneath his blade, and the Zingarans, shouting with muddled fury, ran groggily across the court and fell on their gigantic foes with bloodthirsty zeal. They were still dazed; emerging hazily from drugged slumber, they had felt Sancha frantically shaking them and shoving swords into their fists, and had vaguely heard her urging them to some sort of action. They had not understood all she said, but the sight of strangers, and blood streaming, was enough for them.

In an instant the court was turned into a battle-ground which soon resembled a slaughter-house. The Zingarans weaved and rocked on their feet, but they wielded their swords with power and effect, swearing prodigiously, and quite oblivious to all wounds except those instantly fatal. They far outnumbered the blacks, but these proved themselves no mean antagonists. Towering above their assailants, the giants wrought havoc with talons and teeth, tearing out men's throats, and dealing blows with clenched fists that crushed in skulls. Mixed and mingled in that mêlée, the buccaneers could not use their superior agility to the best advantage, and many were too stupid from their drugged sleep to avoid blows aimed at them. They fought with a blind wild-beast ferocity, too intent on dealing death to evade it. The sound of the hacking swords was like that of butchers' cleavers, and the shrieks, yells and curses were appalling.

Sancha, shrinking in the archway, was stunned by the noise and fury; she got a dazed impression of a whirling chaos in which steel flashed and hacked, arms tossed, snarling faces appeared and vanished, and straining bodies collided, rebounded, locked and mingled in a devil's dance of madness.

Details stood out briefly, like black etchings on a background of blood. She saw a Zingaran sailor, blinded by a great flap of scalp torn loose and hanging over his eyes, brace his straddling legs and drive his sword to the hilt in a black belly. She distinctly heard the buccaneer grunt as he struck, and saw the victim's tawny eyes roll up in sudden agony; blood and entrails gushed out over the driven blade. The dying black caught the blade with his naked hands, and the sailor tugged blindly and stupidly; then a black arm hooked about the Zingaran's head, a black knee was planted with cruel force in the middle of his back. His head was jerked back at a terrible angle, and something cracked above the noise of the fray, like the breaking of a thick branch. The conqueror dashed his victim's body to the earth—and as he did, something like a beam of blue light flashed across his shoulders from behind, from right to left. He staggered, his head toppled forward on his breast, and thence, hideously, to the earth.

SANCHA turned sick. She gagged and wished to vomit. She made abortive efforts to turn and flee from the spectacle, but her legs would not work. Nor could she close her eyes. In fact, she

opened them wider. Revolted, repelled, nauseated, yet she felt the awful fascination she had always experienced at sight of blood. Yet this battle transcended anything she had ever seen fought out between human beings in port raids or sea battles. Then she saw Conan.

Separated from his mates by the whole mass of the enemy, Conan had been enveloped in a black wave of arms and bodies, and dragged down. Then they would quickly have stamped the life out of him, but he had pulled down one of them with him, and the black's body protected that of the pirate beneath him. They kicked and tore at the Barachan and dragged at their writhing comrade, but Conan's teeth were set desperately in his throat, and the pirate clung tenaciously to his dying shield.

An onslaught of Zingarans caused a slackening of the press, and Conan threw aside the corpse and rose, blood-smeared and terrible. The giants towered above him like great black shadows, clutching, buffeting the air with terrible blows. But he was as hard to hit or grapple as a blood-mad panther, and at every turn or flash of his blade, blood jetted. He had already taken punishment enough to kill three ordinary men, but his bull-like vitality was undiminished.

His war-cry rose above the medley of the carnage, and the bewildered but furious Zingarans took fresh heart and redoubled their strokes, until the rending of flesh and the crunching of bone beneath the swords almost drowned the howls of pain and wrath.

The blacks wavered, and broke for the gate, and Sancha squealed at their coming and scurried out of the way. They jammed in the narrow archway, and the Zingarans stabbed and hacked at their straining backs with strident yelps of glee. The gate was a shambles before the survivors broke through and scattered, each for himself.

The battle became a chase. Across grassy courts, up shimmering stairs, over the slanting roofs of fantastic towers, even along the broad coping of the walls, the giants fled, dripping blood at each step, harried by their merciless pursuers as by wolves. Cornered, some of them turned at bay and men died. But the ultimate result was always the same—a mangled black body twitching on the sward, or hurled writhing and twisting from parapet or tower roof.

Sancha had taken refuge in the court of the pool, where she crouched, shaking with terror. Outside rose a fierce yelling, feet pounded the sward, and through the arch burst a black red-stained figure. It was the giant who wore the gemmed head-band. A squat pursuer was close behind, and the black turned, at the very brink of the pool. In his extremity he had picked up a sword dropped by a dying sailor, and as the Zingaran rushed recklessly at him, he struck with the unfamiliar weapon. The buccaneer dropped with his skull crushed, but so awkwardly the blow was dealt, the blade shivered in the giant's hand.

He hurled the hilt at the figures which thronged the arch, and bounded toward the pool, his face a convulsed mask of hate. Conan burst through the men at the gate, and his feet spurned the sward in his headlong charge.

But the giant threw his great arms wide and from his lips rang an inhuman cry—the only sound made by a black during the entire fight. It screamed to the sky its awful hate; it was like a voice howling from the pits. At the sound the Zingarans faltered and hesitated. But Conan did not pause. Silently and murderously he drove at the ebon figure poised on the brink of the pool.

But even as his dripping sword gleamed in the air, the black wheeled and bounded high. For a flash of an instant they saw him poised in midair above the pool; then with an earth-shaking roar, the green waters rose and rushed up to meet him, enveloping him in a green volcano.

CONAN checked his headlong rush just in time to keep from toppling into the pool, and he sprang back, thrusting his men behind him with mighty swings of his arms. The green pool was like a geyser now, the noise rising to deafening volume as the great column of water reared and reared, blossoming at the crest with a great crown of foam.

Conan was driving his men to the gate, herding them ahead of him, beating them with the flat of his sword; the roar of the water-spout seemed to have robbed them of their faculties. Seeing Sancha standing paralyzed, staring with wide-eyed terror at the seething pillar, he accosted her with a bellow that cut through the thunder of the water and made her jump out of her daze. She ran to him, arms outstretched, and he caught her up under one arm and raced out of the court.

In the court which opened on the outer world, the survivors had gathered, weary, tattered, wounded and blood-stained, and stood gaping dumbly at the great unstable pillar that towered momentarily nearer the blue vault of the sky. Its green trunk was laced with white; its foaming crown was thrice the circumference of its base. Momentarily it threatened to burst and fall in an engulfing torrent, yet it continued to jet skyward.

Conan's eyes swept the bloody, naked group, and he cursed to see only a score. In the stress of the moment he grasped a corsair by the neck and shook him so violently that blood from the man's wounds spattered all near them.

"Where are the rest?" he bellowed in his victim's ear.

"That's all!" the other yelled back, above the roar of the geyser. "The others were all killed by those black——"

"Well, get out of here!" roared Conan, giving him a thrust that sent him staggering headlong toward the outer archway. "That fountain is going to burst in a moment——"

"We'll all be drowned!" squawked a Freebooter, limping toward the arch.

"Drowned, hell!" yelled Conan. "We'll be turned to pieces of petrified bone! Get out, blast you!"

He ran to the outer archway, one eye on the green roaring tower that loomed so awfully above him, the other on stragglers. Dazed with blood-lust, fighting, and the thunderous noise, some of the Zingarans moved like men in a trance. Conan hurried them up; his method was simple. He grasped loiterers by the scruff of the neck, impelled them violently through the gate, added impetus with a lusty kick in the rear, spicing his urgings for haste with pungent comments on the victim's ancestry. Sancha showed an inclination to remain with him, but he jerked away her twining arms, blaspheming luridly, and accelerated her movements with a tremendous slap on the posterior that sent her scurrying across the plateau.

Conan did not leave the gate until he was sure all his men who yet lived were out of the castle and started across the level meadow. Then he glanced again at the roaring pillar looming against the sky, dwarfing the towers, and he too fled that castle of nameless horrors.

The Zingarans had already crossed the rim of the plateau and were fleeing down the slopes. Sancha waited for him at the

crest of the first slope beyond the rim, and there he paused for an instant to look back at the castle. It was as if a gigantic green-stemmed and white-blossomed flower swayed above the towers, the roar filled the sky. Then the jade-green and snowy pillar broke with a noise like the rending of the skies, and walls and towers were blotted out in a thunderous torrent.

Conan caught the girl's hand, and fled. Slope after slope rose and fell before them, and behind sounded the rushing of a river. A glance over his straining shoulder showed a broad green ribbon rising and falling as it swept over the slopes. The torrent had not spread out and dissipated; like a giant serpent it flowed over the depressions and the rounded crests. It held a consistent course —*it was following them.*

The realization roused Conan to a greater pitch of endurance. Sancha stumbled and went to her knees with a moaning cry of despair and exhaustion. Catching her up, Conan tossed her over his giant shoulder and ran on. His breast heaved, his knees trembled; his breath tore in great gasps through his teeth. He reeled in his gait. Ahead of him he saw the sailors toiling, spurred on by the terror that gripped him.

The ocean burst suddenly on his view, and in his swimming gaze floated the *Wastrel,* unharmed. Men tumbled into the boats helter-skelter. Sancha fell into the bottom and lay there in a crumpled heap. Conan, though the blood thundered in his ears and the world swam red to his gaze, took an oar with the panting sailors.

WITH hearts ready to burst from exhaustion, they pulled for the ship. The green river burst through the fringe of trees. Those trees fell as if their stems had been cut away, and as they sank into the jade-colored flood, they vanished. The tide flowed out over the beach, lapped at the ocean, and the waves turned a deeper, more sinister green.

Unreasoning, instinctive fear held the buccaneers, making them urge their agonized bodies and reeling brains to greater effort; what they feared they knew not, but they did know that in that abominable smooth green ribbon was a menace to body and to soul. Conan knew, and as he saw the broad line slip into the waves and stream through the water toward them, without altering its shape or course, he called up his last ounce of reserve strength so fiercely that the oar snapped in his hands.

But their prows bumped against the timbers of the *Wastrel,* and the sailors staggered up the chains, leaving the boats to drift as they would. Sancha went up on Conan's broad shoulder, hanging limp as a corpse, to be dumped unceremoniously on to the deck as the Barachan took the wheel, gasping orders to his skeleton of a crew. Throughout the affair, he had taken the lead without question, and they had instinctively followed him. They reeled about like drunken men, fumbling mechanically at ropes and braces. The anchor chain, unshackled, splashed into the water, the sails unfurled and bellied in a rising wind. The *Wastrel* quivered and shook herself, and swung majestically seaward. Conan glared shoreward; like a tongue of emerald flame, a ribbon licked out on the water futilely, an oar's length from the *Wastrel's* keel. It advanced no further. From that end of the tongue, his gaze followed an unbroken stream of lambent green across the white beach, and over the slopes, until it faded in the blue distance.

The Barachan, regaining his wind, grinned at the panting crew. Sancha was

standing near him, hysterical tears coursing down her cheeks. Conan's breeks hung in blood-stained tatters; his girdle and sheath were gone, his sword, driven upright into the deck beside him, was notched and crusted with red. Blood thickly clotted his black mane, and one ear had been half torn from his head. His arms, legs, breast and shoulders were bitten and clawed as if by panthers. But he grinned as he braced his powerful legs, and swung on the wheel in sheer exuberance of muscular might.

"What now?" faltered the girl.

"The plunder of the seas!" he laughed. "A paltry crew, and that chewed and clawed to pieces, but they can work the ship, and crews can always be found. Come here, girl, and give me a kiss."

"A kiss?" she cried hysterically. "You think of kisses at a time like this?"

His laughter boomed above the snap and thunder of the sails, as he caught her up off her feet in the crook of one mighty arm, and smacked her red lips with resounding relish.

"I think of Life!" he roared. "The dead are dead, and what has passed is done! I have a ship and a fighting crew and a girl with lips like wine, and that's all I ever asked. Lick your wounds, bullies, and break out a cask of ale. You're going to work ship as she never was worked before. Dance and sing while you buckle to it, damn you! To the devil with empty seas! We're bound for waters where the seaports are fat, and the merchant ships are crammed with plunder!"

The House of the Worm

By MEARLE PROUT

A powerful story of a hideous blight that spread from an unholy forest and menaced mankind with destruction

"But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And the angels sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued."
—Edgar Allan Poe

FOR hours I had sat at my study table, trying in vain to feel and transmit to paper the sensations of a criminal in the death-house. You know how one may strive for hours—even days—to attain a desired effect, and then feel a sudden swift rhythm, and know he has found it? But how often, as though Fate herself intervened, does interruption come and mar, if not cover completely, the road which for a moment gleamed straight and white! So it was with me.

Scarcely had I lifted my hands to the keys when my fellow-roomer, who had long been bent quietly over a magazine, said, quietly enough:

"That moon—I wonder if even it really exists!"

I turned sharply. Fred was standing at the window, looking with a singularly rapt attention into the darkness.

Curious, I rose and went to him, and

"And the sounds, the cries to which they gave vent as our flaming torches smote full upon their sightless, staring eyes!"

followed his gaze into the night. There was the moon, a little past its full, but still nearly round, standing like a great red shield close above the tree-tops, yet real enough. . . .

Something in the strangeness of my friend's behavior prevented the irritation which his unfortunate interruption would ordinarily have caused.

"Just why did you say that?" I asked, after a moment's hesitation.

Shamefacedly he laughed, half apologetic. "I'm sorry I spoke aloud," he said. "I was only thinking of a bizarre theory I ran across in a story."

"About the moon?"

"No. Just an ordinary ghost story of the type you write. *While Pan Walks* is its name; and there was nothing in it about the moon."

He looked again at the ruddy globe, now lighting the darkened street below with a pale, tenuous light. Then he spoke: "You know, Art, that idea has taken hold of me; perhaps there *is* something to it after all. . . ."

Theories of the bizarre have always enthralled Fred, as they always hold a romantic appeal for me. And so, while he revolved his latest fancy in his mind, I waited expectantly.

"Art," he began at last, "do you believe that old theory about thoughts becoming realities? I mean, thoughts of men having a physical manifestation?"

I reflected a moment, before giving way to a slight chuckle. "Once," I answered, "a young man said to Carlyle that he had decided to accept the material world as a reality; to which the older man only re-

plied, 'Egad, you'd better!' . . . Yes," I continued, "I've often run across the theory, but——"

"You've missed the point," was the quick rejoinder. "Accept your physical world, and what do you have?—Something that was created by God! And how do we know that all creation has stopped? Perhaps even we——"

He moved to a book-shelf, and in a moment returned, dusting off a thick old leather-bound volume.

"I first encountered the idea here," he said, as he thumbed the yellowed pages, "but it was not until that bit of fiction pressed it into my mind that I thought of it seriously. Listen:

" 'The Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." From what did He create it? Obviously, it was created by thought, imagery, force of will if you please. The Bible further says: "So God created man in His own image." Does this not mean that man has all the attributes of the Almighty, only upon a smaller scale? Surely, then, if the mind of God in its omnipotence could create the entire universe, the mind of man, being made in the image of God, and being his counterpart on earth, could in the same way, if infinitely smaller in degree, create things of its own will.

" 'For example, the old gods of the dawn-world. Who can say that they did not exist in reality, being created by man? And, once created, how can we tell whether they will not develop into something to harass and destroy, beyond all control of their creators? *If this be true, then the only way to destroy them is to cease to believe.* Thus it is that the old gods died when man's faith turned from them to Christianity.' "

He was silent a moment, watching me as I stood musing.

"Strange where such thoughts can lead a person," I said. "How are we to know which things are real and which are fancies—racial fantasies, I mean, common in all of us. I think I see what you meant when you wondered if the moon were real."

"But imagine," said my companion, "a group of people, a cult, all thinking the same thoughts, worshipping the same imaginary figure. What might not happen, if their fanaticism were such that they thought and felt deeply? A physical manifestation, alien to those of us who did not believe. . . ."

And so the discussion continued. And when at last we finally slept, the moon which prompted it all was hovering near the zenith, sending its cold rays upon a world of hard physical reality.

NEXT morning we both arose early—Fred to go back to his prosaic work as a bank clerk, I to place myself belatedly before my typewriter. After the diversion of the night before, I found that I was able to work out the bothersome scene with little difficulty, and that evening I mailed the finished and revised manuscript.

When my friend came in he spoke calmly of our conversation the night before, even admitting that he had come to consider the theory a rank bit of metaphysics.

Not quite so calmly did he speak of the hunting-trip which he suggested. Romantic fellow that he was, his job at the bank was sheer drudgery, and any escape was rare good fortune. I, too, with my work out of the way and my mind clear, was doubly delighted at the prospect.

"I'd like to shoot some squirrels," I agreed. "And I know a good place. Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow; my vacation starts then," he replied. "But for a long time

I've been wanting to go back to my old stamping-grounds. It's not so very far—only a little over a hundred miles, and"—he looked at me in apology for differing with my plans—"in Sacrament Wood there are more squirrels than you ever saw."

And so it was agreed.

SACRAMENT WOOD is an anomaly. Three or four miles wide and twice as long, it fills the whole of a peculiar valley, a rift, as it were, in the rugged topography of the higher Ozarks. No stream flows through it, there is nothing suggesting a normal valley; it is merely there, by sheer physical presence defying all questions. Grim, tree-flecked mountains hem it in on every side, as though seeking by their own ruggedness to compensate this spot of gentleness and serenity. And here lies the peculiarity: though the mountains around are all inhabited—sparsely, of course, through necessity—the valley of the wood, with every indication of a wonderful fertility, has never felt the plow; and the tall, smooth forest of scented oak has never known the ax of the woodman.

I too had known Sacrament Wood; it was generally recognized as a sportsman's paradise, and twice, long before, I had hunted there. But that was so long ago that I had all but forgotten, and now I was truly grateful to have been reminded of it again. For if there is a single place in the world where squirrels grow faster than they can be shot, it is Sacrament Wood.

It was midafternoon when we finally wound up the last mountain trail to stop at last in a small clearing. A tiny shanty with clapboard roof stood as ornament beside the road, and behind it a bent figure in faded overalls was chopping the withered stalks of cotton.

"That would be old Zeke," confided my companion, his eyes shining with even this reminder of childhood. "Hallo!" he shouted, stepping to the ground.

The old mountaineer straightened, and wrinkled his face in recognition. He stood thus a moment, until my companion inquired as to the hunting; then his eyes grew dull again. He shook his head dumbly.

"Ain't no hunting now, boys. Everything is dead. Sacrament Wood is dead."

"Dead!" I cried. "Impossible! Why is it dead?"

I knew in a moment that I had spoken without tact. The mountaineer has no information to give one who expresses a desire for it—much less an outlander who shows incredulity.

The old man turned back to his work. "Ain't no hunting now," he repeated, and furiously attacked a stalk of cotton.

So obviously dismissed, we could not remain longer. "Old Zeke has lived too long alone," confided Art as we moved away. "All mountaineers get that way sooner or later."

But I could see that his trip was already half spoiled, and even fancied he was nettled with me for my unfortunate interruption. Still, he said nothing, except to note that Sacrament Wood was our next valley.

We continued. The road stretched ahead for some distance along the level top. And then, as we started the rough descent, Sacrament Wood burst full upon our view, clothed as I had never before seen it. Bright red, yellow, and brown mingled together in splashes of beauty, as the massive trees put on their autumnal dress. Almost miniature it appeared to us from our lookout, shimmering like a mountain lake in the dry heat of early fall. Why, as we gazed for a moment

silently, did a vague thought of uncleanness make a shudder pass through my body? Was I sensitive to the ominous words of the old mountaineer? Or did my heart tell me what my mind could not—that the season was yet too early to destroy every trace of greenery, and replace it with the colors of death? Or was it something else?—something not appealing to the senses, nor yet to the intellect, but yet sending a message too strong to be dismissed?

But I did not choose to dwell long upon the subject. The human mind, I have long known, in striving to present a logical sequence of events, often strains the fabric of fact for the sake of smoothness. Perhaps I really felt nothing, and my present conceptions have been altered by subsequent events. At any rate, Fred, although unnaturally pale, said nothing, and we continued the descent in silence.

NIGHT comes early in the deep valley of Sacrament Wood. The sun was just resting on the high peak in the west as we entered the forest and struck camp. But long after comparative darkness had come over us, the mountain down which we had come was illuminated a soft gold.

We sat over our pipes in the gathering dusk. It was deeply peaceful, there in the darkening wood, and yet—— Fred and I were unnaturally silent, perhaps having the same thoughts. Why were the massive trees so early shorn of leaves? Why had the very birds ceased to sing? Whence came the faint, yet unmistakable odor of *rottenness?*

A cheery fire soon dispelled our fears. We were again the two hunters, rejoicing in our freedom and our anticipation. At least, I was. Fred, however, somewhat overcame my feeling of security.

"Art, whatever the cause, we must admit that Sacrament Wood *is* dead. Why, man, those trees are not getting ready for dormance; they are dead. Why haven't we heard birds? Bluejays used to keep this place in a continual uproar. And where did I get the feeling I had as we entered here? Art, I am sensitive to these things. I can *feel* a graveyard in the darkest night; and that is how I felt as I came here—as if I was entering a graveyard. I *know,* I tell you!"

"I felt it, too," I answered, "and the odor, too. . . . But all that is gone now. The fire changes things."

"Yes, the fire changes things. Hear that moaning in the trees? You think that is the wind? Well, you're wrong, I tell you. That is not the wind. Something not human is suffering; maybe the fire hurts it."

I laughed, uncomfortably enough. "Come," I said, "you'll be giving me the jimmies, too. I felt the same way you did; I even smelt the odor, but the old man just had us upset. That's all. The fire has changed things. It's all right now."

"Yes," he said, "it's all right now."

For all his nervousness, Fred was the first to sleep that night. We heaped the fire high before turning in, and I lay for a long while and watched the leaping flames. And I thought about the fire.

"Fire is clean," I said to myself, as though directed from without. "Fire is clean; fire is life. The very life of our bodies is preserved by oxidation. Yes, without fire there would be no cleanness in the world."

But I too must have dropped off, for when I was awakened by a low moan the fire was dead. The wood was quiet; not a whisper or rustle of leaves disturbed the heavy stillness of the night. And then I sensed the odor. . . . Once sensed, it grew and grew until the air seemed heavy, even massive with the inertia of it,

seemed to press itself into the ground through sheer weight. It eddied and swirled in sickening waves of smell. It was the odor of death, and putridity.

I heard another moan.

"Fred," I called, my voice catching in my throat.

The only answer was a deeper moan.

I grasped his arm, and—my fingers sank in the bloated flesh as into a rotting corpse! The skin burst like an over-ripe berry, and slime flowed over my hand and dripped from my fingers.

Overcome with horror, I struck a light; and under the tiny flare I saw for a moment—his face! Purple, bloated, the crawling flesh nearly covered his staring eyes; white worms swarmed his puffed body, exuded squirming from his nostrils, and fell upon his livid lips. The foul stench grew stronger; so thick was it that my tortured lungs cried out for relief. Then, with a shriek of terror, I cast the lighted match from me, and threw myself into the bed, and buried my face in the pillow.

How long I lay there, sick, trembling, overcome with nausea, I do not know. But I slowly became aware of a rushing sound in the tree-tops. Great limbs creaked and groaned; the trunks themselves seemed to crack in agony. I looked up, and saw a ruddy light reflected about us. And like a crash of thunder came the thought into my brain:

"Fire is clean; fire is life. Without fire there would be no cleanness in the world."

And at this command I rose, and grasped everything within reach, and cast it upon the dying flames. Was I mistaken, or was the odor of death really less? I hauled wood, and heaped the fire high. Fortunate indeed that the match I had thrown had fallen in the already sere leaves!

When next I thought of my companion the roaring blaze was leaping fifteen feet in air. Slowly I turned, expecting to see a corpse weltering in a miasma of filth, and saw—a man calmly sleeping! His face was flushed, his hands still slightly swollen; but he was clean! He breathed. Could I, I asked, have dreamed of death, and of the odor of death? Could I have dreamed the *worms?*

I awoke him, and waited.

He half looked at me, and then, gazing at the fire, gave a cry of ecstasy. A light of bliss shone for a moment in his eyes, as in a young child first staring at the mystery of cleansing flame; and then, as realization came, this too faded into a look of terror and loathing.

"The worms!" he cried. "The maggots! The odor came, and with it the worms. And I awoke. Just as the fire died. . . . I couldn't move; I couldn't cry out. The worms came—I don't know whence; from nowhere, perhaps. They came, and they crawled, and they ate. And the smell came with them! It just appeared, as did the worms, from out of thin air! It just—became! Then—death! I died, I tell you—I rotted—I rotted, and the worms—the maggots—they ate. . . . I am *dead,* I say! DEAD! Or should be!" He covered his face with his hands.

How we lived out the night without going mad, I do not know. All through the long hours we kept the fire burning high; and all through the night the lofty trees moaned back their mortal agony. The rotting death did not return; in some strange way the fire kept us clean of it, and fought it back. But our brains felt, and dimly comprehended, the noisome evil floundering in the darkness, and the pain which our immunity gave this devilish forest.

I could not understand why Fred had so easily fallen a victim to the death, while I remained whole. He tried to explain that his brain was more receptive, more sensitive.

"Sensitive to what?" I asked.

But he did not know.

Dawn came at last, sweeping westward before it the web of darkness. From across the forest, and around us on all sides, the giant trees rustled in pain, suggesting the gnashing of millions of anguished teeth. And over the ridge to eastward came the smiling sun, lighting with holy clarity the branches of our wood.

Never was a day so long in coming, and never so welcome its arrival. In a half-hour our belongings were gathered, and we quickly drove to the open road.

"Fred, you remember our conversation of a couple of evenings ago?" I asked my companion, after some time of silence. "I'm wondering whether that couldn't apply here."

"Meaning that we were the victims of —hallucination? Then how do you account for this?" He raised his sleeve above his elbow, showing his arm. How well did I remember it! For there, under curling skin and red as a brand, was the print of my hand!

"I sensed, not felt, you grip me last night," said Fred. "There is our evidence."

"Yes," I answered, slowly. "We've got lots to think of, you and I."

And we rode together in silence.

When we reached home, it was not yet noon, but the brightness of the day had already wrought wonders with our perspective. I think that the limitation of the human mind, far from being a curse, is the most merciful thing in the world. We live on a quiet, sheltered island of ignorance, and from the single current flowing by our shores we visualize the vastness of the black seas around us, and see—simplicity and safety. And yet, if only a portion of the cross-currents and whirling vortexes of mystery and chaos could be revealed to our consciousness, we should immediately go insane.

But we can not see. When a single cross-current upsets the calm placidness of the visible sea, we refuse to believe. Our minds balk, and can not understand. And thus we arrive at that strange paradox: after an experience of comprehensible terror, the mind and body remain long upset; yet even the most terrible encounters with things unknown fade into insignificance in the light of clear day. We were soon about the prosaic task of preparing lunch, to satisfy seemingly insatiable appetites!

And yet we by no means forgot. The wound on Fred's arm healed quickly; in a week not even a scar remained. But we were changed. We had seen the cross-current, and—we knew. By daylight a swift recollection often brought nausea; and the nights, even with the lights left burning, were rife with horror. Our very lives seemed bound into the events of one night.

Yet, even so, I was not prepared for the shock I felt when, one night nearly a month later, Fred burst into the room, his face livid.

"Read this," he said in a husky whisper, and extended a crumpled newspaper to my hand. I reached for it, read where he had pointed.

MOUNTAINEER DIES

Ezekiel Whipple, lone mountaineer, aged 64, was found dead in his cabin yesterday by neighbors.

The post-mortem revealed a terrible state of putrefaction; medical men aver that death could not have occurred less than two weeks ago.

The examination by the coroner revealed no sign of foul play, yet local forces for law and order are working upon what may yet be a

valuable clue. Jesse Layton, a near neighbor and close friend of the aged bachelor, states that he visited and held conversation with him the day preceding; and it is upon this statement that anticipation of possible arrest is based.

"God!" I cried. "Does it mean——"

"Yes! It's spreading—whatever it is. It's reaching out, crawling over the mountains. God knows to where it may finally extend."

"It's coming from the wood," I said. "It's in the wood. It centers in the wood. It must be a terrible new disease. But—yes, God only knows to where it may finally extend."

"No. It is not a disease. It is alive. It's alive, Art! I tell you, I felt it; I *heard* it. I think it tried to talk to me."

For us there was no sleep that night. Every moment of our half-forgotten experience was relived a thousand times, every horror amplified by the darkness and our fears. We wanted to flee to some far country, to leave far behind us the terror we had felt. We wanted to stay and fight to destroy the destroyer. We wanted to plan; but—hateful thought—how could we plan to fight—nothing? We were as helpless as the old mountaineer. . . .

And so, torn by these conflicting desires, we did what was to be expected—precisely nothing. We might even have slipped back into the even tenor of our lives had not news dispatches showed still further spread, and more death.

Eventually, of course, we told our story. But lowered glances and obvious embarrassment told us too well how little we were believed. Indeed, who could expect normal people, with normal experiences, to believe the obviously impossible? And so, to save ourselves, we talked no more, but watched in dread from the side-lines the slow, implacable growth.

IT WAS midwinter before the first town fell in the way of the expanding circle. Only a mountain village of half a hundred inhabitants; but the death came upon them one cold winter night—late at night, for there were no escapes—and smothered all in their beds. And when the next day visitors found and reported them, there was described the same terrible advanced state of putrefaction that had been present in all the other cases.

Then the world, apathetic always, began to believe. But, even so, they sought the easiest, the most natural, explanation, and refused to recognize the possibilities we half outlined to them. Some new plague, they said, is threatening us, is ravaging our hill country. We will move away. . . . A few moved. But the optimists, trusting all to the physicians, stayed on. And we, scarce knowing why, stayed on with them.

Yes, the world was waking to the danger. The plague became one of the most popular topics of conversation. Revivalists predicted the end of the world. And the physicians, as usual, set to work. Doctors swarmed the infected district, in fear of personal safety examined the swollen corpses, and found—the bacteria of decay, and—the worms. They warned the natives to leave the surrounding country; and then, to avoid panic, they added encouragement.

"We have an inkling of the truth," they said, after the best manner of the detective agency. "It is hoped that we may soon isolate the deadly bacterium, and produce an immunizing serum."

And the world believed. . . . I, too, half believed, and even dared to hope.

"It is a plague," I said, "some strange new plague that is killing the country. We were there, first of all."

But, "No," said Fred. "It is not a plague. I was there; I felt it; it talked to

me. It is Black Magic, I tell you! What we need is, not medicine, but medicine men."

And I—I half believed him, too!

SPRING came, and the encroaching menace had expanded to a circle ten miles in radius, with a point in the wood as a center. Slow enough, to be sure, but seemingly irresistible. . . . The quiet, lethal march of the disease, the *death,* as it was called, still remained a mystery—and a fear. And as week after week fled by with no good tidings from the physicians and men of science there assembled, my doubts grew stronger. Why, I asked, if it were a plague, did it never strike its victims during the day? What disease could strike down all life alike, whether animal or vegetable? It was not a plague, I decided; at least, I added, clutching the last thread of hope, not a normal plague.

"Fred," I said one day, "they can't stand fire—if you are right. This is your chance to prove that you are right. We'll burn the wood. We'll take kerosene. We'll burn the wood, and if you are right, the thing will die."

His face brightened. "Yes," he said, "we'll burn the wood, and—the thing will die. Fire saved me: I know it; you know it. Fire could never cure a disease; it could never make normal trees whisper and groan, and crack in agony. We'll burn the wood, and the thing will die."

So we said, and so we believed. And we set to work.

Four barrels of kerosene we took, and tapers, and torches. And on a clear, cold day in early March we set out in the truck. The wind snapped bitterly out of the north; our hands grew blue with chill in the open cab. But it was a clean cold. Before its pure sharpness, it was almost impossible to believe that we were heading toward filth and a barren country of death. And, still low in the east, the sun sent its bright yellow shafts over the already budding trees.

It was still early in the morning when we arrived at the edge of the slowly enlarging circle of death. Here the last victim, only a day or so earlier, had met his end. Yet, even without this last to tell us of its nearness, we could have judged by the absence of all life. The tiny buds we had noted earlier were absent; the trees remained dry and cold as in the dead of winter.

Why did not the people of the region heed the warnings and move? True, most of them had done so. But a few old mountaineers remained — and died one by one.

We drove on, up the rocky, precipitous trail, leaving the bustle and safety of the normal world behind us. Was I wrong in thinking a shade had come over the sun? Were not things a trifle darker? Still I drove on in silence.

A faint stench assailed my nostrils—the odor of death. It grew and it grew. Fred was pale; and, for that matter, so was I. Pale—and weak.

"We'll light a torch," I said. "Perhaps this odor will die."

We lit a torch in the brightness of the day, then drove on.

Once we passed a pig-sty: white bones lay under the sun; the flesh was decayed and eaten away entirely. What terror had killed them while they slept?

I could not now be mistaken: the shade was deepening. The sun was still bright, but weak, in some strange way. It shone doubtfully, vacillating, as if there were a partial eclipse.

But the valley was near. We passed the last mountain, passed the falling cabin of the mountaineer who was the first to die. We started the descent.

Sacrament Wood lay below us, not fresh and green as I had seen it first, years before, nor yet flashing with color as on our last trip the autumn before. It was cold, and obscured. A black cloud lay over it, a blanket of darkness, a rolling mist like that which is said to obscure the River Styx. It covered the region of death like a heavy shroud, and hid it from our probing eyes. Could I have been mistaken, or did I hear a broad whisper rising from the unhallowed wood of the holy name? Or did I feel something I could not hear?

But in one respect I could not be wrong. It was growing dark. The farther we moved down the rocky trail, the deeper we descended into this stronghold of death, the paler became the sun, the more obscured our passage.

"Fred," I said in a low voice, "they are hiding the sun. They are destroying the light. The wood will be dark."

"Yes," he answered. "The light hurts them. I could feel their pain and agony that morning as the sun rose; they can not kill in the day. But now they are stronger, and are hiding the sun itself. The light hurts them, and they are destroying it."

We lit another torch and drove on.

When we reached the wood, the darkness had deepened, the almost palpable murk had thickened until the day had become as a moonlit night. But it was not a silver night. The sun was red; red as blood, shining on the accursed forest. Great red rings surrounded it, like the red rings of sleeplessness surrounding a diseased eye. No, the sun itself was not clean; it was weak, diseased, powerless as ourselves, before the new terror. Its red glow mingled with the crimson of the torches; and lit up the scene around us with the color of blood.

We drove as far as solid ground would permit our passage—barely to the edge of the forest, where the wiry, scraggly growth of cedar and black-jack gave place to the heavy growth of taller, straighter oak. Then we abandoned our conveyance and stepped upon the rotting earth. And at this, more strongly it seemed than before, the stench of rottenness came over us. We were thankful that all animal matter had decayed entirely away; there only remained the acrid, penetrating odor of decaying plants; disagreeable, and powerfully suggestive to our already sharpened nerves, but endurable. . . . And it was warm, there in the death-ridden floor of the valley. In spite of the season of the year and the absence of the sun's warmth, it was not cold. The heat of decay, of fermentation, overcame the biting winds which occasionally swept down from the surrounding hills.

The trees were dead. Not only dead; they were rotten. Great limbs had crashed to the ground, and littered the soggy floor. All smaller branches were gone, but the trees themselves remained upright, their naked limbs stretched like supplicating arms to the heavens as these martyrs of the wood stood waiting. Yet in even these massive trunks the worms crawled—and ate. It was a forest of death, a nightmare, fungous forest that cried out to the invaders, that sobbed in agony at the bright torches, and rocked to and fro in all its unholy rottenness.

Protected by our torches, we were immune to the forces of death that were rampant in the dark reaches of the wood, beyond our flaring light. But while they could not prey upon our bodies, they called, they drew upon our minds. Pictures of horror, of putridity and eldritch nightmare thronged our brains. I saw again my comrade as he had lain in his

bed, over a half-year before; I thought of the mountain village, and of the three-score victims who had died there in one night.

We did not dare, we knew, to dwell on these things; we would go insane. We hastened to collect a pile of dead limbs. We grasped the dank, rotten things—limbs and branches which broke on lifting, or crumbled to dust between our fingers. At last, however, our heap was piled high with the dryest, the firmest of them, and over all we poured a full barrel of kerosene. And as we lit the vast pile, and watched the flames roar high and higher, a sigh of pain, sorrow and impotent rage swept the field of death.

"The fire hurts them," I said. "While there is fire they can not harm us; the forest will burn, and they will all die."

"But will the forest burn? Will they let it burn? They have dimmed the sun; they have even dimmed our torches. See! They should be brighter! Would the forest burn of itself, even if they let it alone? It is damp and rotten, and will not burn. See, our fire is burning out! We have failed."

Yes, we had failed. We were forced to admit it when, after two more trials, we were at last satisfied beyond any doubt that the forest could not be destroyed by fire. Our hearts had been strong with courage, but now fear haunted us, cold perspiration flooded our sick, trembling bodies as we sent the clattering truck hurtling up the rocky trail to safety. Our torches flared in the wind, and left a black trail of smoke behind us as we fled.

But, we promised ourselves, we would come again. We would bring many men, and dynamite. We would find where this thing had its capital, and would destroy it.

And we tried. But again we failed.

There were no more deaths. Even the most obstinate moved from the stricken country when spring came and revealed the actual presence of the deadly circle. No one could doubt the mute testimony of the dead and dying trees that fell in its grip. Fifty, a hundred or two hundred feet in a night the circle spread; trees that one day were fresh and alive, sprouting with shoots of green, were the next day harsh and yellow. The death never retreated. It advanced during the nights; held its ground during the day. And at night again the fearful march continued.

A condition of terror prevailed over the populations in adjoining districts. The newspapers carried in their columns nothing but blasted hopes. They contained long descriptions of each new advance; long, technical theories of the scientists assembled at the front of battle; but no hope.

We pointed this out to the terror-ridden people, told them that in our idea lay the only chance of victory. We outlined to them our plan, pleaded for their assistance. But, "No," they said. "The plague is spreading. It began in the wood, but it is out of the wood now. How would it help to burn the wood now? The world is doomed. Come with us, and live while you can. We must all die."

No, there was no one willing to listen to our plan. And so we went north, where the death, through its unfamiliarity and remoteness, had not yet disrupted society. Here the people, doubtful, hesitant, yet had faith in their men of science, still preserved order, and continued in industry. But our idea received no welcome. "We trust the doctors," they said.

And none would come.

"FRED," I told him, "we have not yet failed. We will equip a large truck. No! We will take a tractor, a huge machine that will run even through the forest. We will do as we said. Take more kerosene, and dynamite; we will destroy it yet!"

It was our last chance; we knew that. If we failed now, the world was indeed doomed. And we knew that every day the death grew stronger, and we worked fast to meet it.

The materials we needed we hauled overland in the truck; more torches, dynamite, eight barrels of kerosene. We even took two guns. And then we loaded all these in an improvised trailer behind the caterpillar, and started out.

The wood was dark now, although it was not yet midday when we entered. Black as a well at midnight was the forest; our torches sent their flickering red a scant twenty feet through the obstinate murk. And through the shivering darkness there reached our ears a vast murmur, as of a million hives of bees.

How we chose a path I do not know; I tried to steer toward the loudest part of the roar, hoping that by so doing we would find the source itself of the scourge. And our going was not difficult. The tractor laid down its endless track, crushing to paste beneath it the dank, rotting wood which littered the forest floor. And from behind, over the smooth track crushed through the forest, lumbered the heavy trailer.

The gaunt, scarred trees, shorn of every limb, stood around us like weird sentinels pointing the way. And, if possible, the scene grew more desolate the farther we proceeded; the creaking trunks standing pole-like seemed more and more rotten; the odor of death around us, not the sickening odor of decay, but the less noxious yet more penetrating smell of rottenness complete, grew even more piercing. And *It* called and drew. From out of the darkness it crept into our brains, moved them, changed them to do its will. We did not know. We only knew that the odor around us no longer nauseated; it became the sweetest of perfumes to our nostrils. We only knew that the fungus-like trees pleased our eyes, seemed to fill and satisfy some long-hidden esthetic need. In my mind there grew a picture of a perfect world: damp, decayed vegetation and succulent flesh—rotting flesh—upon which to feed. Over all the earth, it seemed, this picture extended; and I shouted aloud in ecstasy.

At the half-involuntary shout, something flashed upon me, and I knew that these thoughts were not my own, but were foisted upon me from without. With a shriek, I reached to the torch above and bathed my arms in the living flame; I grasped the taper from its setting and brandished it in my comrade's face. The cleansing pain raced through my veins and nerves; the picture faded, the longing passed away; I was myself again. If only we had obeyed the call, gone forth into the shrilling forest! Yet, always after that, we could feel the obscene mind toying with ours, trying still to bend us to its purpose. And I shuddered when I recalled that those thoughts could well have been those of a worm!

Then, suddenly, above the roar from without and the steady beat of our engine, we heard a human chant. I idled the motor, jerked out the gears. Clear on our ears it smote now, a chant in a familiar, yet strangely altered tongue. Life! In this region of death? It was impossible! The chant ceased, and the hum among the poles of trees doubled in intensity. Someone, or something, rose to declaim. I strained my ears to hear,

but it was unnecessary; clear and loud through the noisome darkness rose its high semi-chant:

"Mighty is our lord, the Worm. Mightier than all the kings of heaven and of earth is the Worm. The gods create; man plans and builds; but the Worm effaces their handiwork.

"Mighty are the planners and the builders; great their works and their possessions. But at last they must fall heir to a narrow plot of earth; and even that, forsooth, the Worm will take away.

"This is the House of the Worm; his home which none may destroy; the home which we, his protectors, have made for him.

"O Master! On bended knee we give thee all these things! We give unto thee man and his possessions! We give unto thee the life of the earth to be thy morsel of food! We give unto thee the earth itself to be thy residence!

"Mighty, oh, mighty above all the kings of heaven and of earth is our lord and master, the Worm, to whom Time is naught!"

Sick with horror and repulsion, Fred and I exchanged glances. There was life! God knew what sort, but life, and human! Then, there in that forest of hell, with the odor, sight, and sound of death around us, we smiled! I swear we smiled! We were given a chance to fight; to fight something tangible. I raced the motor, snapped the machine into gear and pushed on.

And one hundred feet farther I stopped, for we were upon the worshippers! Half a hundred of them there were, crouching and kneeling, yes, even wallowing in the putrefaction and filth around them. And the sounds, the cries to which they gave vent as our flaming torches smote full upon their sightless, staring eyes! Only a madman could recall and place upon the printed page the litanies of hate and terror which they flung into our faces. There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; but nowhere this side of the pit of hell itself can be heard the raucous cries that issued from their straining throats as we grasped our tapers and raced toward them. A few moments only did they stand defiantly in our way; the pain of the unaccustomed light was too much for their sensitive eyes. With shrill shouts of terror they turned and fled. And we looked about us, upon the weltering filth with which we were surrounded, and—smiled again!

For we saw their idol! Not an idol of wood, or stone, or of any clean, normal thing. It was a heaped-up grave! Massive, twenty feet long and half as high, it was covered with rotting bones and limbs of trees. The earth, piled there in the gruesome mound, shivered and heaved as from some foul life within. Then, half buried in filth, we saw the headstone—itself a rotting board, leaning askew in its shallow setting. And on it was carved only the line: "The House of the Worm."

The house of the worm! A heaped-up grave! And the cult of blackness and death had sought to make of the world one foul grave, and to cover even that with a shroud of darkness!

WITH a shriek of rage I stamped my foot upon the earth piled there. The crust was thin, so thin that it broke through, and nearly precipitated me headlong into the pit itself; only a violent wrench backward prevented me from falling into the pitching mass of—worms! White, wriggling, the things squirmed there under our blood-red, flaring light, writhed with agony in the exquisite torture brought to them by the

presence of cleansing flame. The house of the worm, indeed. . . .

Sick with loathing, we worked madly. The roar of the alien forest had risen to a howl—an eldritch gibber which sang in our ears and drew at our brains as we toiled. We lit more torches, bathed our hands in the flame, and then, in defiance of the malign will, we demolished the quivering heap of earth which had mocked the form of a grave. We carried barrel after barrel of fuel, and poured it upon the squirming things, which were already spreading out, rolling like an ocean of filth at our very feet. And then, forgetting the machine which was to take us to safety, I hurled the box of black powder upon them, watched it sink through the mass until out of sight, then applied the torch. And fled.

"Art! The tractor—the rest of the oil we need to light our way out——"

I laughed insanely, and ran on.

A hundred yards away, we stopped and watched the spectacle. The flames, leaping fifty feet in air, illumined the forest around us, pushed back the thick unnatural gloom into the heavy darkness behind us. Unseen voices that howled madly and mouthed hysterical gibberish tore at our very souls in their wild pleading; so tangible were they that we felt them pull at our bodies, sway them back and forth with the unholy dance of the rocking trees. From the pit of foulness where the flames danced brightest, a dense cloud of yellow smoke arose; a vast frying sound shrilled through the wood, was echoed back upon us by the blackness around. The tractor was enveloped in flames, the last barrel of oil spouting fire. And then——

There came a deep, heavy-throated roar; the pulpy ground beneath our feet waved and shook; the roaring flames, impelled by an irresistible force beneath them, rose simultaneously into air, curved out in long sweeping parabolas of lurid flame, and scattered over the moaning forest floor. The powder!

The house of the worm was destroyed; and simultaneously with its destruction the howling voices around us died into a heavy-throated whisper of silence. The black mist of darkness above and about shook for a moment like a sable silk, caught gropingly at us, then rolled back over the ruined trees and revealed—the sun!

The sun, bright in all his noonday glory, burst out full above us, warming our hearts with a golden glow.

"See, Art!" my companion whispered, "the forest is burning! There is nothing now to stop it, and everything will be destroyed."

It was true. From a thousand tiny places flames were rising and spreading, sending queer little creepers of flame to explore for further progress. The fire, scattered by the explosion, was taking root.

We turned, we walked swiftly into the breath of the warm south wind which swept down upon us; we left the growing fire at our backs and moved on. A half-hour later, after we had covered some two miles of fallen forest and odorous wasteland, we paused to look back. The fire had spread over the full width of the valley, and was roaring northward. I thought of the fifty refugees who had fled—also to the north.

"Poor devils!" I said. "But no doubt they are already dead; they could not endure for long the brightness of the sun."

AND so ends our story of what is perhaps the greatest single menace that has ever threatened mankind. Science pondered, but could make nothing of it; in fact, it was long before we could

evolve an explanation satisfactory even to ourselves.

We had searched vainly through every known reference book on the occult, when an old magazine suddenly gave us the clue: it recalled to our minds a half-forgotten conversation which has been reproduced at the beginning of this narrative.

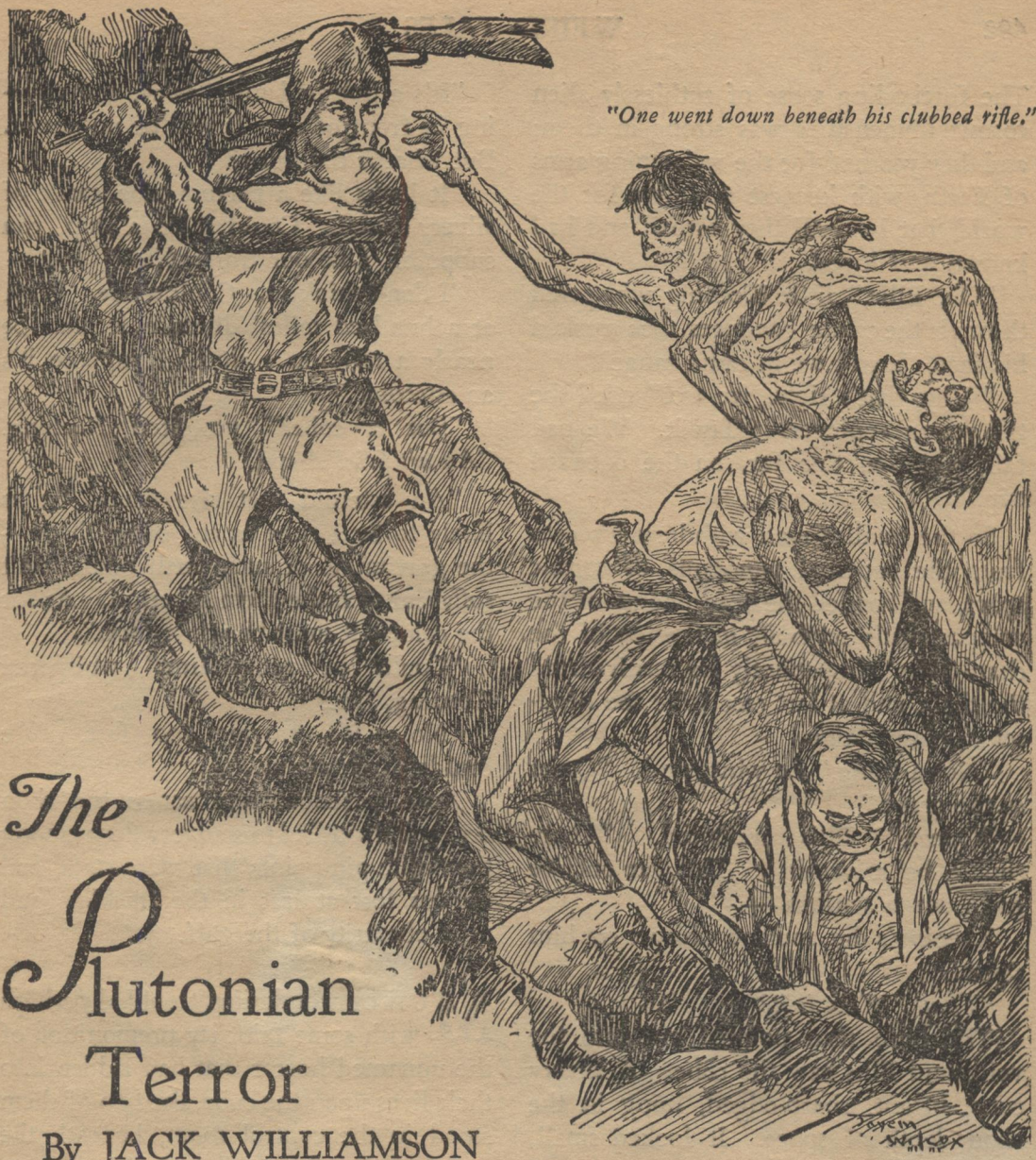
In some strange way, this Cult of the Worm must have organized for the worship of death, and established their headquarters there in the valley. They built the huge grave as a shrine, and by the over-concentration upon worship of their fanatical minds, caused a physical manifestation to appear within it as the real result of their thought. And what suggestion of death could be more forceful than its eternal accompaniment—the worms of death and the bacteria of decay? Perhaps their task was lessened by the fact that death is always a reality, and does not need so great a concentration of will to produce. At any rate, from that beginning, that center, they radiated thought-waves strong enough to bring their influence over the region where they were active; and as they grew stronger and stronger, and as their minds grew more and more powerful through the fierce mental concentration, they spread out, and even destroyed light itself. Perhaps they received many recruits, also, to strengthen their ranks, as we ourselves nearly succumbed; perhaps, too, the land once conquered was watched over by spirits invoked to their control, so that no further strength on their part was required to maintain it. That would explain the weird noises heard from all parts of the forest, which persisted even after the worshippers themselves had fled.

And as to their final destruction, I quote a line from the old volume where we first read of the theory: *"If this be true, the only way to destroy it is to cease to believe."* When the mock grave, their great fetish, was destroyed, the central bonds which held their system together were broken. And when the worshippers themselves perished in the flames, all possibility of a recurrence of the terror died with them.

This is only our explanation, and our belief. But Fred and I do not wish to engage in scientific debate; we only wish an opportunity to forget the chaotic experience which has so disrupted our lives.

Reward? We had our reward in the destruction of the vile thing we fought; yet to that satisfaction an appreciative world has added its wealth and its favor. These things we are thankful for and enjoy; what man does not? But we feel that not in adulation nor yet in pleasure lies our ultimate recovery. We must work, must forget the experience only by assiduous toil; we are stamping the horror, if not from our minds, at least from our immediate consciousness. In time, perhaps. . . .

And yet we can not entirely forget. Only this morning, while walking in the fields, I came across the dead carcass of a wild beast lying in a furrow; and in its thin, decaying body was another life—a nauseous, alien life of putrescence and decay.



"One went down beneath his clubbed rifle."

The Plutonian Terror

By JACK WILLIAMSON

The story of a gruesome horror on the planet Pluto, and a dread power that swept our Earth clear of human beings—a tale of interplanetary adventures and horrible death

THE strange, dead silence of the ether was the first grim hint of unconceived catastrophe.

Back to Earth the first explorers of space were slanting, returning from a perilous year on the barren moon, eager to feel again the poignant joys of human intercourse. Through the transparent ports of the *Cosmobile's* steel-domed bridge, the two first adventurers of the void scanned with proud joy their native planet. They were nearing home!

Earth swam before them, a swelling green-blue sphere, swathed indistinctly in the misty radiance of its atmosphere. Soft and warm and bright it shone, against the startling, frozen, eternal blackness of the star-set universal void.

The foreboding sense of ruthlessly alien cosmic immensities was strong in them; and they yearned for the welcoming arms of Earth, with keenest nostalgia for the world that held all they owned and had known and loved.

"Oh, Ellis," little Keening whispered through the white bandages that masked his face, "aren't we in radio range?"

"Why, that's right, we are!" cried the tall young engineer. "Try it. We had fair reception this far, on the outward trip."

So the smaller man withdrew his eyes from the supernal panorama of cosmic space, and donned the head-phones of the compact little set built in the top of the chart-table. Impatiently he manipulated the dials, and at last cast aside the head-set in exasperation.

"Not a thing," he whispered. "Quiet as the grave."

"Queer," Ellis muttered. "There should be *something*. This far out we got a dozen stations——"

Keening's dry, muffled whisper cut him short.

"That! What is it?"

The little man pointed out into the void, and Ellis saw the cube. A silvery cube, bright, sharp-edged, hung in the ebon depth of space. It looked small, and far off, so that it was not prominent among the still stars. Yet its sunward faces shimmered, and it crept across the firmament. Unmistakably cuboid it was, and relatively near.

Ellis hastened to consult his star-charts, and Keening went to the little telescope. A little time they were busy, the technician whispering his readings through the bandages over his face, Ellis plotting the position and orbit of the strange body upon his charts.

"Is there—*danger?*" Keening whispered, at last.

"It's a hundred miles away, and crossing in front of us. It will be no nearer. But what *is* the thing?"

"It looks like a perfect cube, made of silvery metal. Could it be a ship, you suppose? Like our *Cosmobile?*"

"I don't think so. Couldn't be. Why, at a hundred miles' distance, it must be nearly a mile on a side! I suppose it's an asteroid."

"But a cube?" protested Keening. "An *artificial* shape."

"An asteroid that size would be as likely to be a cube as any other shape—the gravitation of such small bodies isn't sufficient to make them spherical. As for the color—it must be white rock."

"Could we get nearer," whispered Keening, "see?"

"No. It's moving too fast. We couldn't overtake it."

And the cube crept across the ebon sky, and dwindled to a silvery fleck among the white pin-points that were stars, and so was lost at last in the trackless and utter obscurity of the gulf.

MUTELY wondering, troubled perhaps with some faint icy premonition of the unnamed horror that had ridden into their lives upon the cube, the two of them stood in the control room, beneath the curve of the *Cosmobile's* steel hull, gazing after the mysterious object through the small, steel-shuttered ports of laminated glass.

Ellis Drew. Robust, red-headed giant, with the big hands and the heavy jaw of a fighting-man. The dynamic, irresistible energy of his large-boned, steel-sinewed body was reflected in his piercingly blue, wide-set eyes. A man made for conquest, for defiance of the impossible. No other sort could have accomplished what he had done.

In six years out of engineering school,

his only resource at the beginning an idea, Ellis Drew had challenged accepted science, convinced skeptical financiers, met and conquered a hundred technological impossibilities. He had created the *Cosmobile,* and in it, with one companion, he had dared—victoriously—the uncharted perils of interplanetary space.

Keening was the one companion. A martyr to science, offering, on this mad voyage, his life to the same jealous mistress who had already robbed him of face and voice. A slight, frail-looking figure, face always bandaged to conceal the horror that X-rays had written there.

Toward western America the *Cosmobile* was dropping.

"Where shall we land?" Keening whispered—the same incautious experiments, Ellis understood, had cost him his face and his vocal organs; he never spoke above that dry and muffled whisper. "Back in the Mare Island yard, I suppose, where we started?"

"No, Keening," Ellis said, slowly. "No, I want to land at a house in the foothills east of San Jose."

The white-bandaged face looked at him curiously.

Ellis was a little while reflectively silent, and then he said:

"You see, Keening, a friend of mine lives there. The first scientific man to recognize that my ether-screw was more than a dream. Doctor Fredric Durand."

Keening whispered, "I see."

But Ellis was not thinking of Doctor Durand. His thoughts were all of a girl, the daughter of his friend. Something of a scientist herself, thanks to her father's training, she had been actually the first critic Ellis had convinced; and she had convinced her father.

More, she had decided to go with Ellis to the moon.

A picture of her came back to him, as she had looked when she asked to go. Slim and cleanly made, with the lithe elasticity of the disciplined athlete. Oval face flushed and eager, gray eyes burning.

"Sorry," Ellis had told her, disturbed and embarrassed. "I can't consider it. Why, you don't understand what you're proposing. The two of us together *alone,* for a year!"

"I think I could stand you, Ellis," said Tempest Durand.

"It isn't that!" he floundered desperately. "You must understand, Tempest, I have no animus against *you.* Instead, I am deeply grateful, both to you and your father, for what you have done. In fact," he stammered, "I like you."

"Then," Tempest mocked him, "if it's the conventions that worry you, why not *marry* me?"

Going red, Ellis restrained himself from ignominious flight.

"You must understand, Tempest," he blundered on, "there's no place in my life for women. And even if—if I—I loved you, do you think I'd be willing to take you out to the moon? To be smashed with a meteor, or asphyxiated, or frozen to death!"

"You'll find me stowed away on your old *Cosmobile!*" she had challenged him.

And then she began stormily to cry. With a disquieting feeling that she was weeping just to see the effect upon him, Ellis had risen and snatched his hat and fled.

It had not been easy to find a companion for the trip. Cranks in abundance had offered themselves, but none possessing the scientific training he required. He had come almost to regret his refusal of the girl's companionship. Had she spoken of the matter again, he might have thrust his scruples aside. But she avoided him.

Fortunately, just on the eve of the *Cos-*

mobile's scheduled departure, Keening had come to offer himself. A trained technician, he possessed the skill that Ellis required. He was willing, he said, to take any risk in the service of science. Incurable burns, resulting from injudicious experimenting with "hard" or high-frequency X-rays, had eaten his face away, destroyed his voice. Life meant nothing to him.

THE *Cosmobile* settled softly into the tangled shrubbery of the wide, Spanish-style *patio* of Doctor Fredric Durand's stuccoed dwelling, secluded in the foothills of the lovely Santa Clara valley. Ellis's heart was leaping. Many times, in the long year of exploration upon the lifeless moon, he had lived over this moment when he should see Tempest again. For in the loneliness of space he had seen life more clearly; he realized that women —or one woman—had gained a place in his being that could not be denied her.

The *Cosmobile* was a hollow ball of three-inch steel, twenty-four feet in diameter, divided horizontally by two floors or decks. Beneath the lower deck were the banks of storage batteries, the cylinders of liquid oxygen to keep the air breathable, and the compact apparatus of the ether-screw, or, as Ellis termed it in his technical monograph, the "electro-dynamic geodesic compensator." Above the upper floor was the crowded control room. The space between decks was divided into sleeping-compartments, store-rooms, and galley.

Keening was still working impatiently with the radio.

"Can't get a thing," he whispered, "or find anything wrong with the set. Static as usual. But not a human voice."

They descended from the bridge, and opened the circular valve in the side of the sphere. It was eight feet to the ground. Ellis dropped the folding metal ladder, and they climbed down into the *patio*.

"Hamilton Penn has apparently taken a holiday," Ellis observed when they stood beneath the bulging steel hull of the ether-car. He pointed at the dahlia-beds, neglected, weed-grown, wilted. "Penn," he explained, "was my friend's negro gardener."

He remembered Tempest Durand, as he had seen her standing among the fresh blooms, and looked hopefully toward the door. But she did not appear. Nor did any one else. The house was deserted, burdened with a heavy and ominous silence.

Wondering, both chilled with fatal apprehension, thinking of all that can happen in a year, Ellis and Keening entered the house.

The doors were open. Dust of months had settled upon the floors. The clock had stopped. In the dining-room a meal was on the table—but the food, half eaten, was dry, covered with white dust. The house had not been lived in for many days.

Keening went to the radio set in the living-room, tried to tune it. Crackle and sputter of static came from the speaker, but never a note of music nor a whisper of human speech.

Ominously, the ether was dead.

Then Ellis thought of the telephone and hastened to call Central. Though he tried for minutes, there was no response. The wires were also dead!

Together they ran out through the front door, and down the drive to the road. The valley below was empty of movement. Wind-smoothed, the road-dust revealed no mark of wheel. No traffic, obviously, had it known for many weeks.

"Something," Ellis muttered, "is wrong."

And Keening's whisper echoed, "*Dreadfully* wrong."

BACK in the steel ball of the *Cosmobile,* they floated slowly above the farms and orchards of the lovely Santa Clara valley. Fruit was unpicked, crops untended. Strangely lonely was the countryside, and they saw no human being.

In minutes they were above the roofs of San Jose. Below, the streets were empty. The sphere settled into a deserted thoroughfare. Once more they lowered the metal ladder, and descended.

The midday sun beat down upon dusty asphalt. As far as they could see, in either direction, pavement and sidewalks were bare. Neither vehicle nor pedestrian moved upon them.

They walked together across the street, to a dry goods store. The door was open, and a table of dusty garments stood in front of it, with a fading sign that announced the fact of a cut-price sale. Ellis shouted hopefully back into the room—and dead echoes mocked him.

Next door was a grocery and meat market. Impulsively, Ellis pushed open the unlocked door, thrust his head within. Stench of putrefying food greeted his nostrils.

Keening led the way ahead to a news stand at the corner. Its wares, exposed to wind and weather, were yellow, faded, tattered. He found a legible newspaper, read aloud the date: "May 19."

"May?" echoed Ellis. "Why, that's six months ago."

Anxiously they scanned the sheet in search of any item that might cast light upon this baffling, terrifying mystery of the city's desertion. But the dingy columns contained nothing extraordinary; the front page was largely devoted to the brutal details of a club murder.

"We have learned two things," Ellis said at last. "We know that it happened on May 19. And we know there was no warning—none, at least, that attracted newspaper attention."

"Do you suppose," Keening whispered —"do you suppose that something has happened to *all humanity?*"

"Of course not," Ellis said. "Just something frightened the people away from here. Earthquake? Epidemic? What could——"

He remembered the silent ether, and stopped.

Strange it was to feel that they might be alone—inexplicably alone—upon the Earth.

Two alone . . .

None to aid them or to criticize. None to applaud or jeer. None to welcome their return, or to listen to their story of adventure on the moon. None henceforward with whom to hold converse. It was terror and desolation.

Flying again, northward, they came over San Francisco Bay. It was gray with rafts of crowded shipping. The fleets of all the world were gathered there. Long gray dreadnaughts, low slim destroyers, furtive submarines. Proudly splendid liners and red-rusted, salt-caked ocean tramps. Trim, white-sailed yachts, and ancient wind-jammers with yellow, rotting canvas. Rafts and rowboats, canoes and catamarans, junks and proas.

From them flew tattered flags of every nation. The stars and stripes, the Union Jack, the tricolor of France. The red ball and the many-rayed sunburst of Japan. The German flag, with its swastika. Red, white and green of Italy. The dragon of new China, and the crosses of Scandinavia. The red flag of Russia, with its

golden sickle, hammer and star. And many more.

Fleets of death. No deck showed movement. No funnel belched smoke. No canvas was set nor signal hoisted.

How came the ships of all the world in San Francisco Bay, Ellis and Keening demanded of each other, abandoned, derelict? Why the ships here, when the men were gone?

Into Market Street the *Cosmobile* dropped. It was as San Jose had been. Eerily empty. Now it was late afternoon, the sun declining toward the sea beyond the lovely green Presidio and the Golden Gate. The hour when thousands were wont to throng the lower street, on their way to the Ferry Building and their homes across the bay.

But Market Street was deathly still. No man was in view, nor any vehicle save an abandoned push-cart, yet laden with fruit long decayed.

In the windows of a jeweler priceless gems blazed in vain allure. No purchaser to try their glow against satiny skin, nor salesman to offer them. No officer to guard them nor thief to snatch them.

Dust lay on the pavement, and the trolley tracks were rusty.

ELLIS and Keening went back aboard the iron globe, and drifted above the dead fleet upon the bay. Derelicts of many nations. Ferries of Charon abandoned on the Styx.

Over Alameda they flew—and it was mortally quiet as San Jose and San Francisco had been.

And then over Oakland. The streets of half that little city were black with motionless, crowded cars. Its railway tracks were lined unendingly with rolling stock. Its flying-field was thick with planes.

The other half of Oakland was gone. Between Broadway and the bay, the city had been razed, leveled, annihilated. Where buildings once had stood was now an open plain, scattered with structures and machines of silver-white metal.

The *Cosmobile* sank to earth once more, and the two men descended the ladder to bare and hard-packed soil. Before them lay the new-cleared field, stretching from Broadway to the bay, clustered with cumbrous mechanisms of unfamiliar aspect, all of some white metal, and all abandoned.

In the center of the field was a flat forest of massive white girders, interminable ranks of braced uprights, which carried to Ellis a curious suggestion of incompleteness, as if they had been merely a foundation for something not erected, deserted unfinished.

Walking close together and a little fearfully, Ellis Drew and little Keening left the foot of the ladder, and approached the nearest enigmatic mechanism. Its silver-blue metal, Ellis recognized, was aluminum. At one side of it, beneath two enormous claws of white metal, was a heap of red clay. Beyond its cumbrous, intricate bulk were stacks of aluminum ingots, new and bright.

The machine was motionless, silent, abandoned.

"A machine," Ellis murmured in awed tones, "for refining aluminum from common clay. And, Keening, human beings did not design it. In a thousand ways it shows the stamp of something alien. No bolts, you see, or screws or rivets. It is fastened together with slotted plates."

They went on toward the maze of girders. A forest of aluminum uprights, braced and trussed, all rising to a uniform height of perhaps fifty feet. A framework of mighty metal beams, covering a square nearly a mile on a side.

"Notice how thick those I-beams are?"

muttered Ellis, wonderingly. "The thing must have been designed to support a prodigious weight. But *why*—a foundation like that? A mile square! And you can see it's no human engineering. No rivets. The whole thing, except for the welding, is put together with U-staples and slotted disks."

"But human beings *must* have made it, Drew!" came the dry whisper of the man Keening, muffled in the bandages on his face. "People came here! The ships in the bay. The abandoned automobiles, the aircraft, the deserted trains. Couldn't a series of great inventions account for it? And then a disaster of some sort——"

"I tell you, Keening, those things weren't designed by men—at least, not by men of our civilization. The slotted disks are no better than bolts and rivets —merely different. No, Keening, those things were built by an alien science. But why? *Why?* What was the reason for building a foundation like that, strong enough to hold up all the cities of the Earth, if they were piled on it? And then abandoning the thing, unused? As you say, men must have come here. But where have they gone? *What has become of humanity?*"

"I think I know, Drew," the little man whispered softly through his bandages. "*I think the foundation was used.*"

Ellis faced him blankly. "What do you mean? What could——"

"Drew," Keening whispered, "you remember the cube?"

"Cube? Oh, *that* cube?"

"Yes, the cube we saw in space. It was nearly a mile on a side. About the right size to have rested on that trusswork. It was white—the color of aluminum. And we met it; *it must have been flying away from the Earth!*"

"That's it," muttered Ellis. In a dazed voice he repeated, "That's it!"

And he swung upon the little man with incredulous awe in his eyes.

"Yes, Keening, you've hit it. The human race congregated here while we were gone. Every man of it, perhaps; these ships and planes came from all over the Earth. They built that cube, and flew away into space."

"But *why?*" whispered Keening. "*Why?* Were they afraid? Some catastrophe foreseen? Was the cube a second ark?"

"No, Keening. We know that couldn't have been. There was no warning; you remember the papers we found. And no delay; they took no time to gather up their valuables, or to lock their houses, or even to finish their meals. No, Keening. They didn't go willingly. They were carried away by something—nameless, alien. Remember the slotted disks. They didn't design the cube. It was something else. Something, Keening, that called the human race away from the Earth as the Pied Piper called the rats from Hamelin town!"

"And we are left alone!" whispered the little man. "Saved, because we were on the moon. Alive, because we had dared the most dangerous thing . . ."

"Just think of it, Keening. All our friends, on that cube. All the people we ever knew. All we ever saw. Carried off . . ."

The little man had turned; he was staring silently into the strange vistas of white metal pillars.

"We've *got* to follow, Keening!" cried Ellis. "We have the *Cosmobile.* We must find what happened. And we might be able to save a few. Enough . . . so that men could have another chance . . ."

The bandaged face turned slowly back. "Must we go, Drew? It seems so—so terrible. Any power that could carry off all humanity! . . . What chance would

we have, against it? . . . And here we have all the world."

Ellis's blue eyes blazed on him suddenly.

"You want to *stay?* What would life mean to us, *here?* Growing old on a dead planet! Ghosts of the lost race all about us! Ghosts and dreams and memories! Surely, Keening, you aren't going to be a——" He checked the harsh word, and said in its place, "—to be afraid?"

The slight form stiffened, and the bandaged face looked at him quickly.

"Very well, Drew. We follow."

Ellis was instantly regretful. "Sorry, Keening. I didn't mean what I said. Guess all this is getting on my nerves." He nodded at the grotesque, white machines. "Lord, to criticize *your* courage, after all we've been through together! Don't mind it, Keening."

"That's all right," whispered the other. "I thought of staying. But I see now that we have to go."

By dusk they were back in the steel hull of the *Cosmobile*. Ellis went to the bridge and consulted upon the charts the notations he had made of the white cube's positions and velocity. At last he came down to the galley, where Keening was preparing a meal.

"You found out——" whispered the little man.

"Yes, Keening. We had enough of the elements to plot its course."

The technician stopped, with a platter of smoking ham in his hands, stared expectantly.

"Hard to believe it, Keening. But the cube is evidently bound for the ninth planet. For Pluto!"

"*Pluto?* . . . We must follow, *there?*"

"As soon as we can find supplies."

THE steel ball rose in the dawn, and crossed the bay again, to empty Market Street. For a week they were busy there. Canned food they discovered in abundance. In a machine shop, Ellis found cylinders of compressed oxygen. Keening visited a hardware store, and brought back sporting-rifles, revolvers, and ammunition.

But they did not often separate. They were held together by instinctive dread of the lonely, lifeless Earth.

Ellis had intended to find some small dynamo-generator, which he could run to re-charge the batteries of the ether-ship. But none came to his attention, and presently, with a better idea, he moved the *Cosmobile* to an electrical supply house, and there replaced the old cells with new ones.

The cylinders of oxygen and the heavy batteries had not been easy to handle, and both were exhausted at the beginning of the long flight to Pluto—the outermost planet. Standing watch and watch beneath the steel dome of the hull, staring out endlessly into the black vacancies of the star-powdered void, they had ample time to rest.

Four hours long were the watches—by the chronometer. They seemed four minutes, sometimes, or four thousand years. No sun rose and set; time hung motionless. Silently the chronometer ticked. Their hearts beat. They watched and sometimes ate and slept, and spoke only in infrequent monosyllables.

And the ether-car drove out into dark infinity. Into void inconceivable. Earth and moon were two bright points, small and white, larger and green. Against endless night they dwindled, crept into one.

The sun shrank. Argent Venus and Jupiter, red Mars and yellow Saturn drew toward it, and waned. The sun became

dimensionless. A bright star, lost and futile in the void of universal night.

Still they flew outward. To Pluto. The black planet. The border-world. The last outpost against night of void cosmos.

Pluto, the ultimate planet — and the eldest. It must have cooled enough for life when Jupiter was still a second sun, when Earth was not yet flung molten from the central star. Evolution—planetary and organic—must there have run its course.

Pluto, whose book of life should have been written to the end, sealed, forgotten. Star of darkness and death, was it yet undead? A vampire world, reaching from death across the void, to pluck from Earth the warm fresh fruit of the sun?

THE voyage was done.

A black landscape, beneath the *Cosmobile,* expanded into frozen, starlit desolation. Perilously, the iron ball settled upon a ragged ebon crag. All about, in pallid star-shine, tumbled bleak and elemental wilderness of barren stone.

Dark planet. Livid, jagged mountains leaping with savage teeth at cruel, star-jeweled sky. Titanic peaks, gigantic buttresses of dark rock, cleft with colossal canyons that were wells of ominous obscurity. Jet, cyclopean ranges, plunging into gigantic gorges.

Air there was none. The cold was unutterable; the sun merely a yellow star. Nothing lived or moved upon all this tangled, alpine desolation of darkness and doom.

Yet to this world humanity had come —in a cube of aluminum. Why? To what evil end?

The steel sphere rose from the peak, and circled above grim, cataclysm-born ranges—above titanic mountains reared in the last fierce convulsions of a dying planet. Above sheer and incredible twisted crags and black, fathomless abysms. A weary time slipped by, measured only by the restless, silent ticking of the chronometer. And then they looked into an illuminated pit.

A volcanic shaft, rimmed with black and monstrous peaks. Miles it was across, and scores — or hundreds — of miles in depth, piercing to the very heart of the black planet. Blue the rocks glowed in its depths, with eldritch fire of radio-activity.

In that ghostly phosphorescence, so dim that it looked a specter thing, they saw the cube. Tens on tens of miles below, upon the rugged, pallidly glowing floor of the azure abyss. Like a child's building-block painted silver and carelessly dropped among jagged boulders.

Did that cube, after all, contain the race of man?

Ellis wondered. And he wondered if one girl was in it, Tempest Durand. Once she might have been his, with her lithe, athletic beauty, her wit, her gay vivacity. And he had left her, because his work was too important, because he had no thought to spend upon a woman, because she disturbed his delicate mental processes. Had he then lost her? For ever?

The *Cosmobile* hung a long time over the rim of the pit.

"Must we go down?" whispered little Keening, watching Ellis Drew from his bandaged face. "Down into that blue flame? What can we do? What — against a power that could reach across to Earth?"

His whisper was frightened and pleading.

After all, Ellis asked himself, what *could* they do? What, when they did not even know the nature of the power they

must fight? But he remembered Tempest Durand.

"Yes," he told Keening. "We're going down."

The *Cosmobile* fell into the well. Past smooth, fire-glazed walls of volcanic obsidian. Past jagged ledges like threatening teeth. Past mysterious cavern-mouths.

The feeble gleam of starlight vanished from the rocks. And then the walls of the shaft were blue, glowing increasingly bright. Beneath was a field of boulders, cyclopean stones that had fallen from the sides of the chasm, a tumbled confusion of rugged masses, shimmering pallidly phosphorescent.

The opening above, a patch of cold stars, narrowed disquietingly. The black walls closed above the ether-car like a swallowing throat. And the blue bottom of the pit seemed to expand as it dropped.

At last the steel sphere was brought to rest upon the boulder-fields between two colossal masses of blue-glowing stone that offered it some concealment. Three miles away, perhaps, across ragged, luminescent rocks, rose the pale argent sides of the cube, smooth and unbroken. Beyond the cube, and in every direction, leapt up walls of shimmering rock, growing darker and narrowing at the top of this cyclopean well, about a tiny, star-flecked disk.

"We are here," whispered Keening.

"Here," repeated Ellis. "To do what we can. To find what has happened. And rescue a few—if we can. I had a friend . . .

"There is air here," he announced, consulting his instruments. "Breathable air, though thin and dry and cold. We won't need the atmospheric armor."

They descended from the bridge, hurriedly donned heavy clothing, and each selected from their racks a heavy rifle and a revolver. And at last Ellis opened the valve and unrolled his metal ladder, and they climbed down upon rocks that shone dimly, with chill blue radiance.

The air was scanty and bitterly cold. Both of them were panting a little, even from the exertion of climbing down the ladder. There was no wind; but the gelid chill of this dead and frozen world drove through their garments.

Furtively, they slipped away from the steel sphere, along the floor of the rugged ravine in which it was hidden, following in the direction of the gigantic aluminum cube.

THEY had gone perhaps a hundred yards, when Keening voiced through his bandages a muted, whispering scream. With an icy, shaking hand, he grasped Ellis Drew's arm, and pointed. Then both men dropped to their knees, and began to fire.

It is significant of their instinctive horror of the approaching *things* that they shot at once, without question or hesitation.

The little group of beings that came running toward them along the bottom of the ravine, between frowning walls of blue-shining stone, wore the shape of men. Men they were in form, but less than human and more than human. Weird metamorphosis had overtaken them since they had been snatched from the Earth.

Specters of elemental horror. Most of them were nude; a few wore foul and tattered scraps of garments. Like the rocks, their livid flesh glowed with pallid, bluish light. And it was translucent, so that their bones were visible.

Skeletons animated, clad in lucent flesh of ghostly blue.

They moved, though rapidly, with a curious stiffness, like inert and nerveless

marionettes. Their faces were fixed, lifeless—dead, transparent masks in front of grinning skulls.

They made no sound; they did not speak. Each seemed unconscious of his companions. Those who fell beneath the rifle bullets neither screamed nor groaned. They spun about and went down silently—and the others trampled inexorably over them.

The things revealed no fear. Unarmed, they came on in the face of barking rifles, moving with stark and uncanny automatism. They were machines, bent ruthlessly upon one single end. Death alone stayed their stalking advance.

The rifles were empty, and half a score of the things strode grimly on. Fumbling for cartridges, Ellis cried to Keening:

"Back to the ship! I'll stand them off!"

Loading his own rifle, the little man laughed through his bandages with a curious dry sound, and moved closer to Ellis.

The guns were empty again when the remnant of the band reached them—now reduced to four monstrous things, grappling at them with long-nailed, skeletal talons, clothed in blue light. Ellis had no time to load again, or even to find the revolver in his pocket.

One went down beneath his clubbed rifle; the stock of the weapon splintered upon its ghastly skull. Then hands grasped him from behind. Icy hands, fiendishly strong, colder than living flesh could be, freezing with the eldrich chill of this black world of death.

Ellis struggled savagely, vainly, in strange arms whose bones were visible through ghostly-blue flesh. Then Keening's revolver cracked; the arms relaxed and slipped from him.

The two then stood back to back. Again the rifle-barrel rose and fell in Ellis's hands, and Keening's revolver barked.

The battle abruptly was done, and they stood over sprawling skeletons that were clothed in translucent, shimmering flesh. No blood seemed to flow from the things. Dead, they were no more silent than they had been, living. Tense, waiting quiet reigned.

Ellis shuddered. "Sorry, Keening," he muttered. "I got you into this."

He heard the little man's whispered protest, "But we had to come, Drew. I understand that. Though I was *afraid*. . . . But why are these men like that?"

"I don't know, Keening." He looked down at ghastly, shimmering faces. "They weren't even *alive*. The one that touched me was *cold*."

"Let's get back into the ship," whispered Keening.

Ellis retreated with him. "The luminescence of these rocks," he muttered, "must be caused by radio-activity. And that is what makes them—transparent. A penetrating radiation."

"Must be," assented Keening. "They do look as if they were under the X-ray. Bones surrounded with shadows of flesh."

"But that doesn't explain what brought them here. Do you suppose——" and mute horror struggled in his voice, "Do you suppose all humanity is—*like these?*"

Keening never replied, for then the music smote them.

Music of madness!

It beat upon their brains. High, swift, *pizzicati* notes, strumming upon taut nerves like a crystal hail of sound. Tinkling, exciting, calling. A challenge and a lure.

Liquid, soothing rhythms, mellow sussurations, lulling, slumbrous.

Deep and throbbing infra-bass, booming, commanding, dominating.

Ellis realized from the first that he did not hear that music with his ears. It was not sound, but penetrating, all-pervading radiation. It pulsed through all his brain.

Music of madness. It swept him, conquered him, thrust aside his mind. *He* was pushed aside. His body was surrendered to the music, moving freely to its wild rhythm.

Keening was beside him. They had dropped the rifles; they were running. Running after the mystic music, the thought beat through his mind, as the rats and the children of Hamelin ran after the Piper—and in the contrast of the familiar legend with their own desperate plight, he found a peculiar horror.

The physiological effect of music is undeniable. And this was more than music. It was not sound, but a vibration that thrummed through all their bodies, impinging upon every fiber of their nervous systems. It was hypnotic.

Was it thus the human race had been drawn across the void? By mad music that had mastered their bodies, made them slaves of vibration?

Along the ravine they ran, their minds sitting helplessly apart in bodies ruled by that weird and soundless music. Past the looming, titanic mass of the silver-walled cube. And on, across what must once have been a city.

A level space, nearly circular, a mile wide. Surrounded with a curving ridge, it was scattered with heaps of crumbled stone. The piles, Ellis thought, were too regular to be anything save remains of buildings, but buildings that had been ruins five hundred thousand years, or a million. Where had the survivors gone—if there had been survivors?

The question was answered without words.

The silent music swept them on beyond the cube, and across the dead mounds, toward the cyanic-shining, vertical wall of the pit. It carried them out of the ruins, upon a worn and ancient road. And the road sloped downward, curved into a vast crevice whose jagged walls glowed with light of sapphires.

From the crevice they passed into lofty and interminable vaulted caverns, whose smoothed walls yet bore the mark of tools. Dust of eons lay thick upon the floor, swirled up chokingly about them.

The compelling, noiseless chords led them downward once more, and into a lower system of artificial caverns. Here the rock was brighter still, glowing with radiance softly electric-blue, shadowless and unearthly. The air was heavier here, and warmer, and the floor was clear of dust.

They were drawn into a colossal space, blue-walled, domed and circular, and far out across its floor. The mad music abruptly ceased its throbbing in their brains. The journey was ended.

FREE of the dread, hypnotic music, Ellis was yet strangely paralyzed. His body stood erect, stiff and oddly tingling. It took all the power of his will to turn his head, to survey this weird space into which the vibration had swept them.

The place was titanic. Not less than two thousand feet across could the circular floor have been; the dome was fully half that high.

Resting in the middle of the floor, and surrounded by colossal mechanisms, was a red, pulsating mountain. A monstrous, quivering mass, scarlet, cleft, convoluted, wrinkled, folded. A heap of red, palpitating flesh, a full hundred feet high, supported by frames and plates of metal.

From the strange and intricate apparatus that surrounded it rose two tall, cylindrical tanks, of glass or other transparent substance, filled with luminously

violet liquid. At the base of each cylinder was a throbbing pump, and a thick tube connected it with the mountain of flesh.

Soft, crimson mass, surrounded by weird and complex mechanisms. About it stood scores of men—or of *things* such as Ellis and Keening had fought. Monsters, with shining flesh translucent and grim skeletons visible.

Ellis, fighting that lingering paralysis, stared at the red mountain, and wondered. Then he saw the face of it, and understood.

The face was grotesquely and incredibly tiny, situated just above the blue floor, with quivering, wrinkled red folds bulging out above it. A thin, sharp, chinless beak, and two hideously malevolent, amazingly ancient eyes.

The eyes riveted his gaze. Two of them, protruding above the beak, at the corners of the tiny, triangular face. They were green. And compound, like the eyes of insects. Each had seven orbs. Age-old wisdom was writ cold in each septuple eye, and malign power, ruthlessly evil.

The scarlet mountain was a brain. A living brain, hypertrophied to the ultimate degree. It answered Ellis Drew's old question; it was the hideous consummation of organic evolution upon the oldest planet.

Body it had none. Metal plates and girders formed its supporting pan. Its face was fantastically tiny, pressed down against the floor.

Then he saw its arms.

The virescent, septuple eyes rested with cold and unutterable malignancy upon Ellis, and then moved to Keening. And the little man ran stiffly forward from beside Ellis, like one in a dream, toward the dwarfed and hideous face beneath the crimson, palpitating mountain.

Thin and eager tentacles reached out to meet him, from beneath the brain. The hands of the monster. They were four, white and whip-like and many yards long, writhing and twitching avidly.

They grasped little Keening, twisted snake-like about his limbs, drew him toward the face. Abruptly he was struggling with fierce, futile energy. And Ellis heard him scream—a gasping and inchoate sound bursting through the bandages on his face, thick and clotted with horror.

Just once he screamed. The twining white tentacles brought him up to the tiny face. And the thin black beak found his throat.

Ellis tried to move.

Tingling paralysis still held him. He surged forward vainly against it, in a terrible attempt to follow Keening. Lifeless muscles failed him, and he almost fell.

Through cold, stark lips he gasped out futile curses. He felt as if the black and hideous beak of the brain were sinking into his own throat. He and Keening had been long together. The little man had proved a true comrade, staunch and daring.

Must he stand and see his body drained by this red vampire-brain?

Ellis forced himself forward once more, in a vain battle against the rigor of his strange paralysis. Then, belatedly, he remembered the heavy revolver in his pocket.

His hands were numb and stiff and dead, tingling painfully. But at last they had grasped and lifted the weapon. Holding it clumsily in both hands, he shot into the mass of the red brain.

The scarlet mountain heaved and trembled. The white tentacles released Keening, dropped him inertly supine before

the tiny face. The septuple green orbs stared at Ellis with maleficent evil, with a *fear* that was terrible and a *hate* that was consuming.

Fighting the tingling numbness of his stark body, Ellis stumbled forward, firing at the virescent eyes. One of them became a pendulous smear of green jelly, and then another.

Then the revolver was empty. And the things that had been men were rushing at him. Skeletons swathed in ghostly blue, running with dumb and implacable automatism.

Ellis realized that he had not time to load again. The *things,* in seconds, would be upon him. And bullets, after all, might do little great or immediate hurt to the mountainous brain. What *could* he do? His thoughts raced wildly, and one idea leapt into his mind.

The body of the giant brain was the mechanism that surrounded it. The thick tubes were obviously its veins, the throbbing pumps its heart, the violet liquid in the tanks its blood. If the mechanism had some vulnerable part . . .

If he could break the glass tanks . . .

His body was still stiff with the icy, numbing deadness in which the soundless music had left him. And the stalking, mechanical, half-transparent men were near. He staggered toward the nearer tank, grasping the heavy revolver by the barrel.

He stumbled against the side of the tank, hammered desperately upon it with the gun. Apparently it was glass, but very thick and tough. White cracks radiated from the points of impact, but it did not shatter.

Then the monsters were clawing at him with gleaming, skeletal talons—shocking him with the contact of their death-cold bodies. They dragged him back.

He saw little Keening, lying limp and helpless on the blue floor before that malign, black-beaked face, the white, ophidian tentacles writhing over his body.

Ellis twisted in the cold, glowing hands that held him. Savagely he struck with the gun at grinning, blue-clad skulls. And once more, for a little time, he was free.

The glass was unbreakable. He flung himself at the mechanism of the throbbing pump—the heart of the red brain. It looked delicate enough. A few blows upon the gears and gliding plungers . . .

But he did not reach the pump.

The music of madness once more struck him, beat through all his body with its soundless and hypnotic melody. A helpless tool of weird vibration, he dropped the revolver. And he was swept toward the tiny, malevolent face of the red brain.

White, slender tentacles reached out, whipped around his body. With irresistible strength they tightened, contracted. Toward the shrunken, hideous face he was drawn. Toward the narrow black beak and the evilly green, seven-orbed eyes.

He saw Keening struggling to his feet, gasped at him:

"Run, Keening! I'll make a fuss! You might——"

A hard white coil wrapped around his neck, cut off his voice. He saw the little man running toward him, heard him cry out:

"Oh! Ellis! My——"

It was the first time Ellis had heard the whispering man speak aloud, or address him by his Christian name.

Another white tentacle darted out, coiled about the technician's body. The

two were drawn helpless toward the black-beaked face.

Then the brain rotted.

It had none of the immunity to terrestrial bacteria that has been developed by the higher life of Earth. Its soft tissues must have formed an ideal culture for the micro-organisms of decay introduced into them by Ellis Drew's pistol bullets.

It collapsed. It sloughed into a heap of writhing ruin. It flowed in rivers of red corruption.

The tentacles softened and broke. Ellis and Keening flung them off and staggered away.

The translucent, glowing men died with the brain—if they had not been already dead, and merely animated by the supernal will of that colossal intelligence.

Ellis and Keening ran out of the great room, pursued by the reeking stench of rapid dissolution.

ONCE again, and slowly, they crossed the circular plain that must have been the site of the planet's last city. Ellis whispered as they walked across it:

"That brain must have been alive when this city was inhabited. It was that old. It clung to an unnatural existence after its world and its kind were dead, gathering evil power of science, until it was able to reach across space with that music. It must have been something like radio. Vibration in the ether. Hypnotic suggestion borne on a carrying wave. It mastered the human race. Made them build the cube, and brought them here. For slaves? For food?"

"Now, Ellis, we can go back," Keening whispered through his bandages.

"I'm going," said Ellis, "to look into that cube. I had a friend; I told you when we were coming back from the moon——"

"Durand?"

"Yes, Durand."

They approached the mile-high cube. Midway of its silvery wall they found a broad stage leading up to a small, square door. Side by side they walked up, and entered the cube.

The interior was lit with cold, pallid, sourceless blue radiance. In it they saw infinite corridors of metal shelves, stretching to far distances, rising tier upon tier. The whole cube was filled with shelves.

And upon the aluminum shelves, side by side, lay human beings, the uncounted millions who had been carried from the Earth. They were motionless, deathly quiet. They lay in heavy, utter silence. Their flesh shone translucent and blue, and skeletal frames were visible beneath it.

Ellis stared at them, and touched the arm of one.

"Dead," he whispered. "All dead."

"Better that," breathed Keening, "than to live as those others did."

THE *Cosmobile* lifted above the ghostly blue radiance of the pit, and came once more into the clean light of the stars. A bright yellow point, the sun shone across the void, warm and welcoming. Ellis and Keening remained together upon the bridge until the course was set, until the grim and cragged desolation of the black planet had dropped for ever behind.

"We are left alone, of all humanity," Keening whispered solemnly. "Think of it."

"There's really no use in going back," Ellis said. "We can only grow old and die, the last men on a dead planet.

"I haven't ever told you, Keening. But there was a girl who wanted to go with me to the moon. It was *she* I wanted

to see, when we came back. If I had taken her——"

"You mean Tempest Durand?"

"Yes. But how did you know her name? I didn't tell you!"

Keening seemed to smile behind his bandages.

"I know," he whispered. "But do you mean you were looking for Tempest Durand—all the time?"

"Yes, Keening. No good to say so now, but I'd give my life for one moment with her. I was a fool. I left her for fear she would take my attention from my cursed work."

"Then you would really like to see her?"

"*Yes,* Keening!" Ellis spoke almost angrily. "But there's no use thinking what might have been. . . . Yet, that's all there is left for us to do."

"I'll go find her, then," whispered Keening. And he slipped away from the bridge, leaving Ellis puzzled at his words.

Ellis was staring through the ports at the pale, tiny point of the sun, when a clear, melodious and well-remembered voice rang out behind him.

"Ellis, won't you even look at me?"

He spun around, mouth sagging open in incredulous amazement.

Tempest Durand was standing behind him, slim and beautiful as she had ever been. Her oval face was pale, but it bore a roguish smile.

"Tempest!" he gasped. *"Tempest?"*

He choked, and a strangling tension came into his throat. Two strides across the floor, and he seized her slight shoulders, stared into her mocking eyes.

"Tempest, I'm not dreaming?" he cried, in poignant, dawning joy. "Speak to me, Tempest!"

For a time she gazed silently at him. And then tears broke into her quizzical eyes. She slipped forward into his arms, laughing almost hysterically.

"Oh, Ellis, I'm so *glad!"*

"Tell me," he demanded, holding her quivering body. "How did you get here? I don't understand. Did Keening have you hidden?"

"Lord, no!" she laughed, tearfully. "Don't you see? *There* is Keening!"

She held up the familiar mask of bandages.

"You were Keening? Of course not! I'd have known you!"

"But you didn't!" She laughed, reminiscently. "When you wouldn't let me go with you, I meant first to hide on board. Then I thought of the disguise. I had often played masculine parts in dramatics at college. The bandages hid my face, and the same story of the X-ray burns was the excuse for a different voice. Even then I gave myself away a hundred times, but you were so wrapped up in your science you hardly noticed poor Keening."

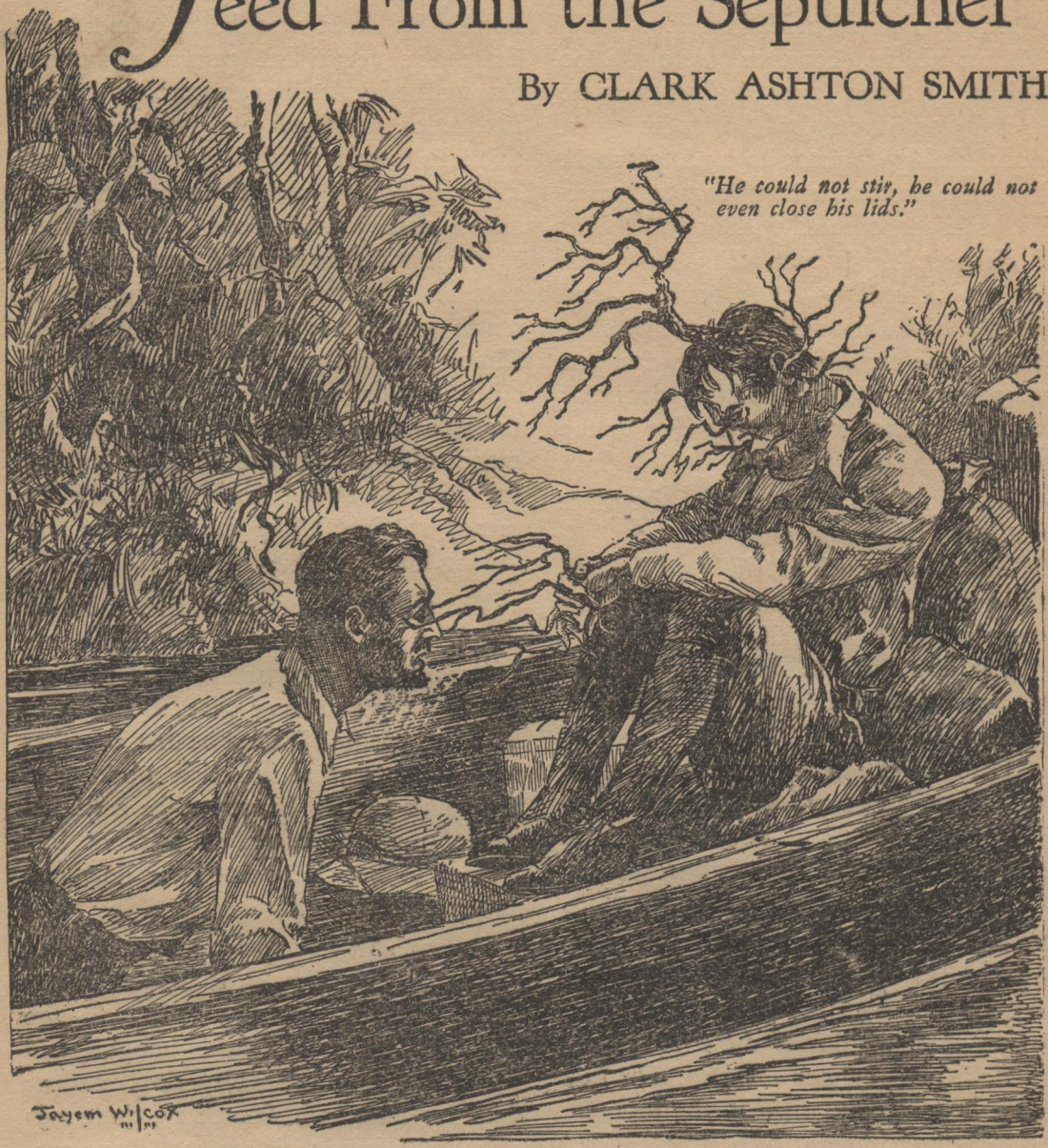
"But Tempest, why didn't you tell me, when we got back to the Earth?"

"I'd no way to know your—your attitude had changed. Anyhow, I was about to. And you called me a coward. Don't you remember? I wanted to show you. Anyhow, we had to come."

And thus the *Cosmobile* drove back to Earth, carrying an Adam and Eve, an Epimetheus and a Pandora, to lift the curtain on another act of the infinite and varied drama of Man.

The Seed From the Sepulcher

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH



"He could not stir, he could not even close his lids."

A horror-tale of the Venezuelan jungle, and a diabolical plant that lived on human life

"YES, I found the place," said Falmer. "It's a queer sort of place, pretty much as the legends describe it." He spat quickly into the fire, as if the act of speech had been physically distasteful, and half averting his face from the scrutiny of Thone, stared with morose and somber eyes into the jungle-matted Venezuelan darkness.

Thone, still weak and dizzy from the fever that had incapacitated him for continuing their journey to its end, was curiously puzzled. Falmer, he thought, had undergone an inexplicable change during

the three days of his absence: a change that was too elusive in some of its phases to be fully defined or delimited.

Other phases, however, were all too obvious. Falmer, even during extreme hardship or illness, had heretofore been unquenchably loquacious and cheerful. Now he seemed sullen and uncommunicative, as if preoccupied with far-off things of disagreeable import. His bluff face had grown hollow—even pointed—and his eyes had narrowed to secretive slits. Falmer was troubled by these changes, though he tried to dismiss his impressions as mere distempered fancies due to the influence of ebbing fever.

"But can't you tell me what the place was like?" he persisted.

"There isn't much to tell," said Falmer, in a queer, grumbling tone. "Just a few crumbling walls and falling pillars."

"But didn't you find the burial-pit of the Indian legend, where the gold was supposed to be?"

"I found it . . . but there was no treasure." Falmer's voice had taken on a forbidding surliness; and Thone decided to refrain from further questioning.

"I guess," he commented lightly, "that we had better stick to orchid-hunting. Treasure-trove doesn't seem to be in our line. By the way, did you see any unusual flowers or plants during the trip?"

"Hell, no," Falmer snapped. His face had gone suddenly ashen in the firelight, and his eyes had assumed a set glare that might have meant either fear or anger. "Shut up, can't you? I don't want to talk. I've had a headache all day — some damned Venezuelan fever coming on, I suppose. We'd better head for the Orinoco tomorrow. I've had all I want of this trip."

James Falmer and Roderick Thone, professional orchid-hunters, with two Indian guides, had been following an obscure tributary of the upper Orinoco. The country was rich in rare flowers; and, beyond its floral wealth, they had been drawn by vague but persistent rumors among the local tribes concerning the existence of a ruined city somewhere on this tributary; a city that contained a burial-pit in which vast treasures of gold, silver and jewels had been interred together with the dead of some nameless people. The two men had thought it worth while to investigate these rumors. Thone had fallen sick while they were still a full day's journey from the site of the ruins, and Falmer had gone on in a canoe with one of the Indians, leaving the other to attend Thone. He had returned at nightfall of the third day following his departure.

Thone decided after a while, as he lay staring at his companion, that the latter's taciturnity and moroseness were perhaps due to disappointment over his failure to find the treasure. It must be that, together with some tropical infection working in the man's blood. However, he admitted doubtfully to himself, it was not like Falmer to be disappointed or downcast under such circumstances.

Falmer did not speak again, but sat glaring before him as if he saw something invisible to others beyond the labyrinth of fire-touched boughs and lianas in which the whispering, stealthy darkness crouched. Somehow, there was a shadowy fear in his aspect. Thone continued to watch him, and saw that the Indians, impassive and cryptic, were also watching him, as if with some obscure expectancy. The riddle was too much for Thone, and he gave it up after a while, lapsing into restless, fever-turbulent slumber from which he awakened at intervals, to see the set face of Falmer, dimmer and more distorted each time with the slowly dying fire and the invading shadows.

THONE felt stronger in the morning: his brain was clear, his pulse tranquil once more; and he saw with mounting concern the indisposition of Falmer, who seemed to rouse and exert himself with great difficulty, speaking hardly a word and moving with singular stiffness and sluggishness. He appeared to have forgotten his announced project of returning toward the Orinoco, and Thone took entire charge of the preparations for departure. His companion's condition puzzled him more and more: apparently there was no fever, and the symptoms were wholly ambiguous. However, on general principles, he administered a stiff dose of quinine to Falmer before they started.

The paling saffron of sultry dawn sifted upon them through the jungle-tops as they loaded their belongings into the dugouts and pushed off down the slow current. Thone sat near the bow of one of the boats, with Falmer in the rear, and a large bundle of orchid roots and part of their equipment filling the middle. The two Indians occupied the other boat, together with the rest of their supplies.

It was a monotonous journey. The river wound like a sluggish olive snake between dark, interminable walls of forest from which the goblin faces of orchids leered. There were no sounds other than the splash of paddles, the furious chattering of monkeys, and petulant cries of fiery-colored birds. The sun rose above the jungle and poured down a tide of torrid brilliance.

Thone rowed steadily, looking back over his shoulder at whiles to address Falmer with some casual remark or friendly question. The latter, with dazed eyes and features queerly pale and pinched in the sunlight, sat dully erect and made no effort to use his paddle. He offered no reply to the queries of Thone, but shook his head at intervals with a sort of shuddering motion that was plainly involuntary. After awhile he began to moan thickly, as if in pain or delirium.

They went on in this manner for hours. The heat grew more oppressive between the stifling walls of jungle. Thone became aware of a shriller cadence in the moans of his companion. Looking back, he saw that Falmer had removed his sun-helmet, seemingly oblivious of the murderous heat, and was clawing at the crown of his head with frantic fingers. Convulsions shook his entire body, and the dugout began to rock dangerously as he tossed to and fro in a paroxysm of manifest agony. His voice mounted to a high, unhuman shrieking.

Thone made a quick decision. There was a break in the lining palisade of somber forest, and he headed the boat for shore immediately. The Indians followed, whispering between themselves and eyeing the sick man with glances of apprehensive awe and terror that puzzled Thone tremendously. He felt that there was some devilish mystery about the whole affair; and he could not imagine what was wrong with Falmer. All the known manifestations of malignant tropical diseases rose before him like a rout of hideous fantasms; but, among them, he could not recognize the thing that had assailed his companion.

Having gotten Falmer ashore on a semicircle of liana-latticed beach without the aid of the guides, who seemed unwilling to approach the sick man, Thone administered a heavy hypodermic injection of morphine from his medicine-chest. This appeared to ease Falmer's suffering, and the convulsions ceased. Thone, taking advantage of their remission, proceeded to examine the crown of Falmer's head.

He was startled to find amid the thick,

dishevelled hair a hard and pointed lump which resembled the tip of a beginning horn, rising under the still unbroken skin. As if endowed with erectile and resistless life, it seemed to grow beneath his fingers.

At the same time, abruptly and mysteriously, Falmer opened his eyes and appeared to regain full consciousness. For a few minutes he was more his normal self than at any time since his return from the ruins. He began to talk, as if anxious to relieve his mind of some oppressing burden. His voice was peculiarly thick and toneless, but Thone was able to follow his mutterings and piece them together.

"The pit! the pit!" said Falmer—"the infernal thing that was in the pit, in the deep sepulcher! . . . I wouldn't go back there for the treasure of a dozen El Dorados. . . . I didn't tell you much about those ruins, Thone. Somehow it was hard—impossibly hard—to talk. . . .

"I GUESS the Indian knew there was something wrong with the ruins. He led me to the place . . . but he wouldn't tell me anything about it; and he waited by the riverside while I searched for the treasure.

"Great gray walls there were, older than the jungle—old as death and time. They must have been quarried and reared by people from some forgotten continent, or some lost planet. They loomed and leaned at mad, unnatural angles, threatening to crush the trees about them. And there were columns, too: thick, swollen columns of unholy form, whose abominable carvings the jungle had not wholly screened from view.

"There was no trouble finding that accursed burial-pit. The pavement above had broken through quite recently, I think. A big tree had pried with its boa-like roots between the flagstones that were buried beneath centuries of mold. One of the flags had been tilted back on the pavement, and another had fallen through into the pit. There was a large hole, whose bottom I could see dimly in the forest-strangled light. Something glimmered palely at the bottom; but I could not be sure what it was.

"I had taken along a coil of rope, as you remember. I tied one end of it to a main root of the tree, dropped the other through the opening, and went down like a monkey. When I got to the bottom I could see little at first in the gloom, except the whitish glimmering all around me, at my feet. Something that was unspeakably brittle and friable crunched beneath me when I began to move. I turned on my flashlight, and saw that the place was fairly littered with bones. Human skeletons lay tumbled everywhere. They must have been very old, for they broke into powder at a touch.

"It was the burial-chamber of the legend. Looking about with the flashlight, I found the steps that led to the blocked-up entrance. But if any treasure had been buried with the bodies, it must have been removed long ago. I groped around amid the bones and dust, feeling pretty much like a ghoul, but couldn't find anything of value, not even a bracelet or a finger-ring on any of the skeletons.

"It wasn't till I thought of climbing out that I noticed the real horror. In one of the corners—the corner nearest to the opening in the roof—I looked up and saw it in the webby shadows. Ten feet above my head it hung, and I had almost touched it, unknowing, when I descended the rope.

"It looked like a sort of white lattice-work at first. Then I saw that the lattice was partly formed of human bones—a complete skeleton, very tall and stalwart,

like that of a warrior. A pale, withered thing grew out of the skull, like a set of fantastic antlers ending in myriads of long and stringy tendrils that had spread themselves on the wall, climbing upward till they reached the roof. They must have lifted the skeleton, or body, along with them as they climbed.

"I examined the thing with my flash-light. It must have been a plant of some sort, and apparently it had started to grow in the cranium. Some of the branches had issued from the cloven crown, others through the eye-holes, the mouth and the nose-hole, to flare upward. And the roots of the blasphemous thing had gone downward, trellising themselves on every bone. The very toes and fingers were ringed with them, and they drooped in writhing coils. Worst of all, the ones that had issued from the toe-ends *were rooted in a second skull,* which dangled just below, with fragments of the broken-off root-system. There was a litter of fallen bones on the floor in the corner. . . .

"The sight made me feel a little weak, somehow, and more than a little nauseated — that abhorrent, inexplicable mingling of the human and the plant. I started to climb the rope, in a feverish hurry to get out, but the thing fascinated me in its abominable fashion, and I couldn't help pausing to study it a little more when I had climbed half-way. I leaned toward it too far, I guess, and the rope began to sway, bringing my face lightly against the leprous, antler-shaped boughs above the skull.

"Something broke—possibly a sort of pod on one of the branches. I found my head enveloped in a cloud of pearl-gray powder, very light, fine and scentless. The stuff settled on my hair, it got into my nose and eyes, nearly choking and blinding me. I shook it off as well as I could. Then I climbed on and pulled myself through the opening. . . ."

As if the effort of coherent narration had been too heavy a strain, Falmer lapsed into disconnected mumblings. The mysterious malady, whatever it was, returned upon him, and his delirious ramblings were mixed with groans of torture. But at moments he regained a flash of coherence.

"My head! my head!" he muttered. "There must be something in my brain, something that grows and spreads. I tell you, I can feel it there. I haven't felt right at any time since I left the burial-pit. . . . My mind has been queer ever since. . . . It must have been the spores of the ancient devil-plant. The spores have taken root . . . the thing is splitting my skull, going down into my brain—a plant that springs out of a human cranium, as if from a flower-pot!"

The dreadful convulsions began once more, and Falmer writhed uncontrollably in his companion's arms, shrieking with agony. Thone, sick at heart, and shocked by his sufferings, abandoned all effort to restrain him and took up the hypodermic. With much difficulty, he managed to inject a triple dose, and Falmer grew quiet by degrees, and lay with open, glassy eyes, breathing stertorously. Thone, for the first time, perceived an odd protrusion of his eyeballs, which seemed about to start from their sockets, making it impossible for the lids to close, and lending the drawn features an expression of mad horror. It was as if something were pushing Falmer's eyes from his head.

Thone, trembling with sudden weakness and terror, felt that he was involved in some unnatural web of nightmare. He could not, dared not, believe the story Falmer had told him, and its implications. Assuring himself that his companion had imagined it all, had been ill

throughout with the incubation of some strange fever, he stooped over and found that the horn-shaped lump on Falmer's head had now broken through the skin.

With a sense of unreality, he stared at the object that his prying fingers had revealed amid the matted hair. It was unmistakably a plant-bud of some sort, with involuted folds of pale green and bloody pink that seemed about to expand. The thing issued from above the central suture of the skull.

A nausea swept upon Thone, and he recoiled from the lolling head and its baleful outgrowth, averting his gaze. His fever was returning; there was a woful debility in all his limbs; and he heard the muttering voice of delirium through the quinine-induced ringing in his ears. His eyes blurred with a deathly and miasmal mist.

HE FOUGHT to subdue his illness and impotence. He must not give way to it wholly; he must go on with Falmer and the Indians and reach the nearest trading-station, many days away on the Orinoco, where Falmer could receive medical aid.

As if through sheer volition, his eyes cleared, and he felt a resurgence of strength. He looked around for the guides, and saw, with a start of uncomprehending surprize, that they had vanished. Peering further, he observed that one of the boats—the dugout used by the Indians—had also disappeared. It was plain that he and Falmer had been deserted. Perhaps the Indians had known what was wrong with the sick man, and had been afraid. At any rate, they were gone, and they had taken much of the camp equipment and most of the provisions with them.

Thone turned once more to the supine body of Falmer, conquering his repugnance with effort. Resolutely, he drew out his clasp-knife, and stooping over the stricken man, he excised the protruding bud, cutting as close to the scalp as he could with safety. The thing was unnaturally tough and rubbery; it exuded a thin, sanious fluid; and he shuddered when he saw its internal structure, full of nerve-like fllaments, with a core that suggested cartilage. He flung it aside quickly on the river sand. Then, lifting Falmer in his arms, he lurched and staggered toward the remaining boat. He fell more than once, and lay half swooning across the inert body. Alternately carrying and dragging his burden, he reached the boat at last. With the remnant of his failing strength, he contrived to prop Falmer in the stern against the pile of equipment.

His fever was mounting apace. After much delay, with tedious, half-delirious exertions, he pushed off from the shore and got the boat into midstream. He paddled with nerveless strokes, till the fever mastered him wholly and the oar slipped from oblivious fingers. . . .

He awoke in the yellow glare of dawn, with his brain and his senses comparatively clear. His illness had left a great languor, but his first thought was of Falmer. He twisted about, nearly falling overboard in his debility, and sat facing his companion.

Falmer still reclined, half sitting, half lying, against the pile of blankets and other impedimenta. His knees were drawn up, his hands clasping them as if in tetanic rigor. His features had grown as stark and ghastly as those of a dead man, and his whole aspect was one of mortal rigidity. It was not this, however, that caused Thone to gasp with unbelieving horror.

During the interim of Thone's delirium and his lapse into slumber, the monstrous

plant-bud, merely stimulated, it would seem, by the act of excision, had grown again with preternatural rapidity from Falmer's head. A loathsome pale-green stem was mounting thickly, and had started to branch like antlers after attaining a height of six or seven inches.

More dreadful than this, if possible, similar growths had issued from the eyes, and their stems, climbing vertically across the forehead, had entirely displaced the eyeballs. Already they were branching like the thing that mounted from the crown. The antlers were all tipped with pale vermilion. They appeared to quiver with repulsive animation, nodding rhythmically in the warm, windless air. . . . From the mouth, another stem protruded, curling upward like a long and whitish tongue. It had not yet begun to bifurcate.

Thone closed his eyes to shut away the shocking vision. Behind his lids, in a yellow dazzle of light, he still saw the cadaverous features, the climbing stems that quivered against the dawn like ghastly hydras of tomb-etiolated green. They seemed to be waving toward him, growing and lengthening as they waved. He opened his eyes again, and fancied, with a start of new terror, that the antlers were actually taller than they had been a few moments previous.

After that, he sat watching them in a sort of baleful hypnosis. The illusion of the plant's visible growth and freer movement—if it was illusion—increased upon him. Falmer, however, did not stir, and his parchment face appeared to shrivel and fall in, as if the roots of the growth were draining his blood, were devouring his very flesh in their insatiable and ghoulish hunger.

THONE wrenched his eyes away and stared at the river-shore. The stream had widened and the current had grown more sluggish. He sought to recognize their location, looking vainly for some familiar landmark in the monotonous dull-green cliffs of jungle that lined the margin. He felt hopelessly lost and alienated. He seemed to be drifting on an unknown tide of madness and nightmare, companioned by something that was more frightful than corruption itself.

His mind began to wander with an odd inconsequence, coming back always, in a sort of closed circle, to the thing that was devouring Falmer. With a flash of scientific curiosity, he found himself wondering to what genus it belonged. It was neither fungus nor pitcher-plant, nor anything that he had ever encountered or heard of in his explorations. It must have come, as Falmer had suggested, from an alien world: it was nothing that the Earth could conceivably have nourished.

He felt, with a comforting assurance, that Falmer was dead. That, at least, was a mercy. But, even as he shaped the thought, he heard a low, guttural moaning, and peering at Falmer in horrible startlement, saw that his limbs and body were twitching slightly. The twitching increased, and took on a rhythmic regularity, though at no time did it resemble the agonized and violent convulsions of the previous day. It was plainly automatic, like a sort of galvanism; and Thone saw that it was timed with the languorous and loathsome swaying of the plant. The effect on the watcher was insidiously mesmeric and somnolent; and once he caught himself beating the detestable rhythm with his foot.

He tried to pull himself together, groping desperately for something to which his sanity could cling. Ineluctably, his illness returned: fever, nausea, and revulsion worse than the loathliness of

death. But, before he yielded to it utterly, he drew his loaded revolver from the holster and fired six times into Falmer's quivering body. He knew that he had not missed, but, after the final bullet, Falmer still twitched in unison with the evil swaying of the plant, and Thone, sliding into delirium, heard still the ceaseless, automatic moaning.

THERE was no time in the world of seething unreality and shoreless oblivion through which he drifted. When he came to himself again, he could not know if hours or weeks had elapsed. But he knew at once that the boat was no longer moving; and lifting himself dizzily, he saw that it had floated into shallow water and mud and was nosing the beach of a tiny, jungle-tufted isle in midriver. The putrid odor of slime was about him like a stagnant pool; and he heard a strident humming of insects.

It was either late morning or early afternoon, for the sun was high in the still heavens. Lianas were drooping above him from the island trees like uncoiled serpents, and epiphytic orchids, marked with ophidian mottlings, leaned toward him grotesquely from lowering boughs. Immense butterflies went past on sumptuously spotted wings.

He sat up, feeling very giddy and light-headed, and faced again the horror that companioned him. The thing had grown incredibly: the three-antlered stems, mounting above Falmer's head, had become gigantic and had put out masses of ropy feelers that tossed uneasily in the air, as if searching for support—or new provender. In the topmost antlers, a prodigious blossom had opened —a sort of fleshy disk, broad as a man's face and white as leprosy.

Falmer's features had shrunken till the outlines of every bone were visible as if beneath tightened paper. He was a mere death's-head in a mask of human skin; and beneath his clothing, the body was little more than a skeleton. He was quite still now, except for the communicated quivering of the stems. The atrocious plant had sucked him dry, had eaten his vitals and his flesh.

Thone wanted to hurl himself forward in a mad impulse to grapple with the growth. But a strange paralysis held him back. The plant was like a living and sentient thing—a thing that watched him, that dominated him with its unclean but superior will. And the huge blossom, as he stared, took on the dim, unnatural semblance of a face. It was somehow like the face of Falmer, but the lineaments were twisted all awry, and were mingled with those of something wholly devilish and non-human. Thone could not move —and he could not take his eyes from the blasphemous abnormality.

By some miracle, his fever had left him; and it did not return. Instead, there came an eternity of frozen fright and madness, in which he sat facing the mesmeric plant. It towered before him from the dry, dead shell that had been Falmer, its swollen, glutted stems and branches swaying gently, and the huge flower leering perpetually upon him with its impious travesty of a human face. He thought that he heard a low singing sound, ineffably, demoniacally sweet, but whether it emanated from the plant or was a mere hallucination of his overwrought senses, he could not know.

The sluggish hours went by, and a gruelling sun poured down its beams like molten lead from some titanic vessel of torture. His head swam with weakness and the fetor-laden heat, but he could not relax the rigor of his posture. There was no change in the nodding monstrosity, which seemed to have attained its

full growth above the head of its victim. But after a long interim Thone's eyes were drawn to the shrunken hands of Falmer, which still clasped the drawn-up knees in a spasmodic clutch. From the ends of the fingers, tiny white rootlets had broken and were writhing slowly in the air—groping, it seemed, for a new source of nourishment. Then, from the neck and chin, other tips were breaking, and over the whole body the clothing stirred in a curious manner, as if with the crawling and lifting of hidden lizards.

At the same time the singing grew louder, sweeter, more imperious, and the swaying of the great plant assumed an indescribably seductive tempo. It was like the allurement of voluptuous sirens, the deadly languor of dancing cobras. Thone felt an irresistible compulsion: a summons was being laid upon him, and his drugged mind and body must obey it. The very fingers of Falmer, twisting viperishly, seemed beckoning to him. Suddenly he was on his hands and knees in the bottom of the boat.

Inch by inch, with terror and fascination contending in his brain, he crept forward, dragging himself over the disregarded bundle of orchid-plants—inch by inch, foot by foot, till his head was against the withered hands of Falmer, from which hung and floated the questing roots.

Some cataleptic spell had made him helpless. He felt the rootlets as they moved like delving fingers through his hair and over his face and neck, and started to strike in with agonizing, needle-sharp tips. He could not stir, he could not even close his lids. In a frozen stare, he saw the gold and carmine flash of a hovering butterfly as the roots began to pierce his pupils.

Deeper and deeper went the greedy roots, while new filaments grew out to enmesh him like a witch's net. . . . For a while, it seemed that the dead and the living writhed together in leashed convulsions. . . . At last Falmer hung supine amid the lethal, ever-growing web. Bloated and colossal, the plant lived on; and in its upper branches, through the still, stifling afternoon, a second flower began to unfold.

The Black, Dead Thing

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, Jr.

A weird sea-tale, about the utterly horrible thing that came aboard a ship on the second night out

IT WAS past midnight when I left my stateroom. The upper promenade deck was entirely deserted and thin wisps of fog hovered about the deck chairs and curled and uncurled about the gleaming rails. There was no air stirring. The ship moved forward sluggishly through a quiet, fog-enshrouded sea.

But I did not object to the fog. I leaned against the rail and inhaled the damp, murky air with a positive greediness. The almost unendurable nausea, the pervasive physical and mental misery had departed, leaving me serene and at peace. I was again capable of experiencing sensuous delight, and the aroma of the brine was not to be exchanged for pearls and rubies. I had paid in exorbitant coinage for what I was about to enjoy—for the five brief days of freedom and exploration in glamorous, sea-splendid Havana which I had been promised by an enterprising and, I hoped, reasonably honest tourist agent. I am in all respects the antithesis of a wealthy man, and I had drawn so heavily upon my bank balance to satisfy the greedy demands of The Loriland Tours, Inc., that I had been compelled to renounce such really indispensable amenities as after-dinner cigars and ocean-privileged sherry and chartreuse.

But I was enormously content. I paced the deck and inhaled the moist, pungent air. For thirty hours I had been confined to my cabin with a sea-illness more debilitating than bubonic plague or malignant sepsis, but having at length managed to squirm from beneath its iron heel I was free to enjoy my prospects. They were enviable and glorious. Five days in Cuba, with the privilege of driving up and down the sun-drenched Malecon in a flamboyantly upholstered limousine, and an opportunity to feast my discerning gaze on the pink walls of the Cabanas and the Columbus Cathedral and La Fuerza, the great storehouse of the Indies. Opportunity, also, to visit sunlit *patios,* and saunter by iron-barred *rejas,* and to sip *refrescos* by moonlight in open-air cafés, and to acquire, incidentally, a Spanish contempt for Big Business and the Strenuous Life. Then on to Haiti, dark and magical, and the Virgin Islands, and the quaint, incredible Old World harbor of Charlotte Amalie, with its chimneyless, red-roofed houses rising in tiers to the quiet stars—the natural Sargasso, the inevitable last port of call for rainbow fishes, diving boys and old ships with sun-bleached funnels and incurably drunken skippers. A flaming opal set in an amphitheater of malachite—its allure blazed forth through the gray fog and dispelled my northern spleen. I leaned against the rail and dreamed also of Martinique, which I would see in a few days, and of the Indian and Chinese wenches of Trinidad. And then, suddenly, a dizziness came upon me. The ancient and terrible malady had returned to plague me.

Sea-sickness, unlike all other major afflictions, is a disease of the individual. No two people are ever afflicted with pre-

cisely the same symptoms. The manifestations range from a slight malaise to a devastating impairment of all one's faculties. I was afflicted with the gravest symptoms imaginable. Choking and gasping, I left the rail and sank helplessly down into one of the three remaining deck chairs.

Why the steward had permitted the chairs to remain on deck was a mystery I couldn't fathom. He had obviously shirked a duty, for passengers did not habitually visit the promenade deck in the small hours, and foggy weather plays havoc with the wicker-work of steamer chairs. But I was too grateful for the benefits which his negligence had conferred upon me to be excessively critical. I lay sprawled at full length, grimacing and gasping and trying fervently to assure myself that I wasn't nearly as sick as I felt. And then, all at once, I became aware of an additional source of discomfiture.

The chair exuded an unwholesome odor. It was unmistakable. As I turned about, as my cheek came to rest against the damp, varnished wood my nostrils were assailed by an acrid and alien odor of a vehement, cloying potency. It was at once stimulating and indescribably repellent. In a measure, it assuaged my physical unease, but it also filled me with the most overpowering revulsion, with a sudden, hysterical and almost frenzied distaste.

I TRIED to rise from the chair, but the strength was gone from my limbs. An intangible presence seemed to rest upon me and weigh me down. And then the bottom seemed to drop out of everything. I am not being facetious. Something of the sort actually occurred. The *base* of the sane, familiar world vanished, was swallowed up. I sank down. Limitless gulfs seemed open beneath me, and I was immersed, lost in a gray void. The ship, however, did not vanish. The ship, the deck, the chair continued to support me, and yet, despite the retention of these outward symbols of reality, I was afloat in an unfathomable void. I had the illusion of falling, of sinking helplessly down through an eternity of space. It was as though the chair which supported me had passed into another dimension without ceasing to leave the familiar world—as though it floated simultaneously both in our three-dimensional world and in another world of alien, unknown dimensions. I became aware of strange shapes and shadows all about me. I gazed through illimitable dark gulfs at continents and islands, lagoons, atolls, vast gray waterspouts. I sank down into the great deep. I was immersed in dark slime. The boundaries of sense were dissolved away, and the breath of an active corruption blew through me, gnawing at my vitals and filling me with extravagant torment. I was alone in the great deep. And the shapes that accompanied me in my utter abysmal isolation were shriveled and black and dead, and they cavorted deliriously with little monkey-heads with streaming, sea-drenched viscera and putrid, pupilless eyes.

And then, slowly, the unclean vision dissolved. I was back again in my chair and the fog was as dense as ever, and the ship moved forward steadily through the quiet sea. But the odor was still present —acrid, overpowering, revolting. I leapt from the chair, in profound alarm. . . . I experienced a sense of having emerged from the bowels of some stupendous and unearthly *encroachment,* of having in a single instant exhausted the resources of earth's malignity, and drawn upon untapped and intolerable reserves.

I have gazed without flinching at the

turbulent, demon-seething, utterly benighted infernos of the Italian and Flemish primitives. I have endured with calm vision the major inflictions of Hieronymus Bosch, and Lucas Cranach, and I have not quailed even before the worst perversities of the elder Breughler, whose outrageous gargoyles and ghouls and cacodemons are so self-contained that they fester with an over-brimming malignancy, and seem about to burst asunder and dissolve hideously in a black and intolerable froth. But not even Signorelli's *Souls of the Damned,* or Goya's *Los Caprichos,* or the hideous, ooze-encrusted sea-shapes with half-assembled bodies and dead, pupilless eyes which drag themselves sightlessly through Segrelles' blue worlds of fetor and decay were as unnerving and ghastly as the flickering visual sequence which had accompanied my perception of the odor. I was vastly and terribly shaken.

I GOT indoors somehow, into the warm and steamy interior of the upper saloon, and waited, gasping, for the deck steward to come to me. I had pressed a small button labeled "Deck Steward" in the wainscoting adjoining the central stairway, and I frantically hoped that he would arrive before it was too late, before the odor outside percolated into the vast, deserted saloon.

The steward was a daytime official, and it was a cardinal crime to fetch him from his berth at one in the morning, but I had to have some one to talk to, and as the steward was responsible for the chairs I naturally thought of him as the logical target for my interrogations. He would *know.* He would be able to explain. The odor would not be unfamiliar to him. He would be able to explain about the chairs . . . about the chairs . . . about the chairs . . . I was growing hysterical and confused.

I wiped the perspiration from my forehead with the back of my hand, and waited with relief for the steward to approach. He had come suddenly into view above the top of the central stairway, and he seemed to advance toward me through a blue mist.

He was extremely solicitous, extremely courteous. He bent above me and laid his hand concernedly upon my arm. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you, sir? A bit under the weather, perhaps. What can I do?"

Do? Do? It was horribly confusing. I could only stammer: "The chairs, steward. On the deck. Three chairs. Why did you leave them there? Why didn't you take them inside?"

It wasn't what I had intended asking him. I had intended questioning him about the odor. But the strain, the shock had confused me. The first thought that came into my mind on seeing the steward standing above me, so solicitous and concerned, was that he was a hypocrite and a scoundrel. He pretended to be concerned about me and yet out of sheer perversity he had prepared the snare which had reduced me to a pitiful and helpless wreck. He had left the chairs on deck deliberately, with a cruel and crafty malice, knowing all the time, no doubt, that *something* would occupy them.

But I wasn't prepared for the almost instant change in the man's demeanor. It was ghastly. Befuddled as I had become I could perceive at once that I had done him a grave, a terrible injustice. *He hadn't known.* All the blood drained out of his cheeks and his mouth fell open. He stood immobile before me, completely inarticulate, and for an instant I thought he was about to collapse, to sink helplessly down upon the floor.

"You saw—chairs?" he gasped at last.

I nodded.

The steward leaned toward me and gripped my arm. The flesh of his face was completely destitute of luster. From the parchment-white oval his two eyes, tumescent with fright, stared wildly down at me.

"It's the black, dead thing," he muttered. "The monkey-face. I *knew* it would come back. It always comes aboard at midnight on the second night out."

He gulped and his hand tightened on my arm.

"It's always on the second night out. It knows where I keep the chairs, and it takes them on deck and sits in them. I *saw* it last time. It was squirming about in the chair—lying stretched out and squirming horribly. Like an eel. It sits in all three of the chairs. When it saw me it got up and started toward me. But I got away. I came in here, and shut the door. But I saw it through the window."

The steward raised his arm and pointed.

"There. Through that window there. Its face was pressed against the glass. It was all black and shriveled and eaten away. A monkey-face, sir. So help me, the face of a dead, shriveled monkey. And wet—dripping. I was so frightened I couldn't breathe. I just stood and groaned, and then it went away."

He gulped.

"Doctor Blodgett was mangled, clawed to death at ten minutes to one. We heard his shrieks. The thing went back, I guess, and sat in the chairs for thirty or forty minutes after it left the window. Then it went down to Doctor Blodgett's stateroom and took his clothes. It was horrible. Doctor Blodgett's legs were missing, and his face was crushed to a pulp. There were claw-marks all over him. And the curtains of his berth were drenched with blood.

"The captain told me not to talk. But I've got to tell some one. I can't help myself, sir. I'm afraid—I've got to talk. This is the third time it's come aboard. It didn't take anybody the first time, but it sat in the chairs. It left them all wet and slimy, sir—all covered with black stinking slime."

I stared in bewilderment. What was the man trying to tell me? Was he completely unhinged? Or was I too confused, too ill myself to catch all that he was saying?

He went on wildly: "It's hard to explain, sir, but this boat is *visited*. Every voyage, sir—on the second night out. And each time it sits in the chairs. Do you understand?"

I didn't understand, clearly, but I murmured a feeble assent. My voice was appallingly tremulous and it seemed to come from the opposite side of the saloon.

"Something out there," I gasped. "It was awful. Out there, you hear? An awful odor. My brain. I can't imagine what's come over me, but I feel as though something were pressing on my brain. Here."

I raised my fingers and passed them across my forehead.

"Something here—something——"

The steward appeared to understand perfectly. He nodded and helped me to my feet. He was still self-engrossed, still horribly wrought up, but I could sense that he was also anxious to reassure and assist me.

"Stateroom 16 D? Yes, of course. Steady, sir."

The steward had taken my arm and was guiding me toward the central stairway. I could scarcely stand erect. My decrepitude was so apparent, in fact, that the steward was moved by compassion to the display of an almost heroic attentiveness. Twice I stumbled and would have

fallen had not the guiding arm of my companion encircled my shoulders and levitated my sagging bulk.

"Just a few more steps, sir. That's it. Just take your time. There isn't anything will come of it, sir. You'll feel better when you're inside, with the fan going. Just take your time, sir."

At the door of my stateroom I spoke in a hoarse whisper to the man at my side. "I'm all right now. I'll ring if I need you. Just—let me—get inside. I want to lie down. Does this door lock from the inside?"

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. But maybe I'd better get you some water."

"No, don't bother. Just leave me—please."

"Well—all right, sir." Reluctantly the steward departed, after making certain that I had a firm grip on the handle of the door.

THE stateroom was extremely dark. I was so weak that I was compelled to lean with all my weight against the door to close it. It shut with a slight click and the key fell out upon the floor. With a groan I went down on my knees and grovelled apprehensively with my fingers on the soft carpet. But the key eluded me.

I cursed and was about to rise when my hand encountered something fibrous and hard. I started back, gasping. Then, frantically, my fingers slid over it, in a hectic effort at appraisal. It was—yes, undoubtedly, a shoe. And sprouting from it, an ankle. The shoe reposed firmly on the floor of the stateroom. The flesh of the ankle, beneath the sock which covered it, was very cold.

In an instant I was on my feet, circling like a caged animal about the narrow dimensions of the stateroom. My hands slid over the walls, the ceiling. If only, dear God, the electric light button would not continue to elude me!

Eventually my hands encountered a rubbery excresence on the smooth panels. I pressed, resolutely, and the darkness vanished to reveal a man sitting upright on a couch in the corner—a stout, well-dressed man holding a grip and looking perfectly composed. Only his face was invisible. His face was concealed by a handkerchief — a large handkerchief which had obviously been placed there intentionally, perhaps as a protection against the rather chilly air currents from the unshuttered port. The man was obviously asleep. He had not responded to the tugging of my hands on his ankles in the darkness, and even now he did not stir. The glare of the electric light bulbs above his head did not appear to annoy him in the least.

I experienced a sudden and overwhelming relief. I sat down beside the intruder and wiped the sweat from my forehead. I was still trembling in every limb, but the calm appearance of the man beside me was tremendously reassuring. A fellow-passenger, no doubt, who had entered the wrong compartment. It should not be difficult to get rid of him. A mere tap on the shoulder, followed by a courteous explanation, and the intruder would vanish. A simple procedure, if only I could summon the strength to act with decision. I was so horribly enfeebled, so incredibly weak and ill. But at last I mustered sufficient energy to reach out my hand and tap the intruder on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, sir," I murmured, "but you've got into the wrong stateroom. If I wasn't a bit under the weather I'd ask you to stay and smoke a cigar with me, but you see I"—with a distorted effort at a smile I tapped the stranger again nervously—"I'd rather be alone, so if you don't mind—sorry I had to wake you."

Immediately I perceived that I was being premature. I had not waked the stranger. The stranger did not budge, did not so much as agitate by his breathing the handkerchief which concealed his features.

I experienced a resurgence of my alarm. Tremulously I stretched forth my hand and seized a corner of the handkerchief. It was an outrageous thing to do, but I had to know. If the intruder's face matched his body, if it was composed and familiar all would be well, but if for any reason——

The fragment of physiognomy revealed by the uplifted corner was not reassuring. With a gasp of affright I tore the handkerchief completely away. For a moment, a moment only, I stared at the dark and repulsive visage, with its stary, corpse-white eyes, viscid and malignant, its flat simian nose, hairy ears, and thick black tongue that seemed to leap up at me from out of the mouth. The face *moved* as I watched it, wriggled and squirmed revoltingly, while the head itself shifted its position, turning slightly to one side and revealing a profile more bestial and gangrenous and unclean than the brunt of its countenance.

I shrank back against the door, in frenzied dismay. I suffered as an animal suffers. My mind, deprived by shock of all capacity to form concepts, agonized instinctively, at a brutish level of consciousness. Yet through it all one mysterious part of myself remained horribly observant. I saw the tongue snap back into the mouth; saw the lines of the features shrivel and soften until presently from the slavering mouth and white sightless eyes there began to trickle thin streams of blood. In another moment the mouth was a red slit in a splotched horror of countenance—a red slit rapidly widening and dissolving in an amorphous crimson flood. The horror was hideously and repellently dissolving into the basal sustainer of all life.

IT TOOK the steward nearly ten minutes to restore me. He was compelled to force spoonfuls of brandy between my tightly-locked teeth, to bathe my forehead with ice-water and to massage almost savagely my wrists and ankles. And when, finally, I opened my eyes he refused to meet them. He quite obviously wanted me to rest, to remain quiet, and he appeared to distrust his own emotional equipment. He was good enough, however, to enumerate the measures which had contributed to my restoration, and to enlighten me in respect to the *remnants:*

"The clothes were all covered with blood—*drenched,* sir. I burned them."

On the following day he became more loquacious. "It was wearing the clothes of the gentleman who was killed last voyage, sir—it was wearing Doctor Blodgett's things. I recognized them instantly."

"But why——"

The steward shook his head. "I don't know, sir. Maybe your going up on deck saved you. Maybe it couldn't wait. It left a little after one the last time, sir, and it was later than that when I saw you to your stateroom. The ship may have passed out of its *zone,* sir. Or maybe it fell asleep and couldn't get back in time, and that's why it—dissolved. I don't think it's gone for good. There was blood on the curtains in Doctor Blodgett's cabin, and I'm afraid it always *goes* that way. It will come back next voyage, sir. I'm sure of it."

He cleared his throat.

"I'm glad you rang for me. If you'd gone right down to your stateroom it might be wearing your clothes next voyage."

HAVANA failed to restore me. Haiti was a black horror, a repellent quagmire of menacing shadows and alien desolation, and in Martinique I did not get a single hour of undisturbed sleep in my room at the hotel.

The Cat-Woman

By M. E. COUNSELMAN

A brief and unusual tale of anthropomorphism

THE first I heard of the strange Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche (I shall call her this as I can not remember her real name) was that incoherent, absurd tale told me by the landlady.

"She ain't like us," the old lady insisted, glancing fearfully over her shoulder and speaking in a low tone. "A furriner, she is, and a quare one! I don't like the looks of 'er. Them eyes of hers are full of evil!"

I suppressed a smile. "Oh now, Mrs. Bates—not that bad, is she?" I said soothingly. "And you say she lives right across the hall from me, huh? I'm looking forward to meeting the lady."

"You'll come to no good, Mr. Harper, if you have any truck with the likes o' her!" the old lady warned, and waddled off, shaking her head slowly.

It was not until the second night after moving into Bates Boarding House that I really saw the lady. I had come in rather late from a show and was fumbling with my door-key, when a slight noise behind me caused me to turn quickly and straighten up.

A woman, a tall and beautifully formed woman, stood in the half-open doorway across from mine. She was very fair, with a straight ash-blond bob that fitted close to her head. There was something about her—I could not place it, unless it was her perfectly round green eyes—that reminded me immediately of a cat.

I swept off my hat with an unwonted nervousness, and murmured some sort of apology for disturbing her. She did not answer me at all, but merely stood there staring at me in the dimly lighted hall with those large cat-like eyes. I opened my mouth to speak again, closed it foolishly, and turned, red with discomfiture, to fumble again with my lock.

Suddenly behind me I heard a gentle but quite audible "pr-rrr" like the whir of an electric fan, though not as loud. Glancing over my shoulder I noticed that the strange woman had gone back into her room, although she must have moved very quietly for me not to have heard her.

In her half-open door stood a large white cat, and it was its purring which I had noticed.

"Hello, kitty!" I murmured, holding out a hand.

The animal seemed very friendly, for it came to me at once and rubbed against

my legs, still purring loudly. I petted it a moment, then unlocking my door at last, I stepped inside, closed the door, and switched on my light. Glancing down I found that the cat had slipped in while I was not looking.

Scratching its head in a way cats love, I carried it across the hall and knocked timidly. There was no answer. I knocked again, then twice more, loudly. Still there was no answer. The lady must be out, or perhaps asleep, I told myself; and opening the door slightly I put the cat inside and shut it within. Then I returned to my room and went to bed.

I was wakened some hours later by something heavy on my feet. Sitting up and feeling about the covers, I touched something warm and furry. I switched on the bed lamp quickly, to find the white cat curled up contentedly on my feet. It must have come in through the window. Smiling slightly I went back to sleep, promising myself to return it to my queer neighbor in the morning .

EARLY the next day I knocked at the door, and receiving no answer put the cat inside as on the previous night. It was not until I was leaving for the office that I noticed with a start that all my windows were closed, as they must have been all night. I was sure, too, that my door had been locked against a chance thief. How, then, had the white cat gained admittance?

I was still wondering about this when I came home from the office. Mrs. Bates was dusting the stairs, and I paused a moment to speak to her. She mentioned again my queer neighbor, warning me to "keep shy" of her.

I smiled. "I saw her last night coming out of her door. Good-looking, isn't she?" The landlady shook her head ominously and cast her eyes toward heaven. "And she has a beautiful white cat," I added.

Mrs. Bates stiffened. "Cat?" she snapped. "I don't allow no pets kept in the boarders' rooms! I'll have to speak to her about that."

The front door opened just at this point and my strange neighbor came in. I was impressed once more with her odd beauty, the *feline* grace in her every motion. The word came inevitably to my mind—she reminded me so much of a sleek, well-fed cat.

"I'm told you keep a cat in your room, miss," began the landlady unpleasantly. "I thought you knew the rule——"

Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche turned her round green eyes upon Mrs. Bates in that disturbing unwinking stare of hers. "I haf no cat," she said.

Her voice was a purring, throaty contralto, very pleasant, with a slight accent —not French, not anything I had ever heard.

The landlady scowled. "But Mr. Harper here just tells me——"

"I'm sorry," I broke in hastily. "It must have been a stray cat. I saw it in your doorway, and naturally I thought ——" I floundered helplessly. That fixed green stare made me forget what I was trying to say.

"It iss all r-right," she murmured, and went upstairs to her room without another word. I followed suit in a moment; and there in the open door she stood as if waiting for me, motionless, silent, fixing me with her unwinking eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry," I began again, trying not to meet that disconcerting cat-like gaze. "You see, I put the cat——"

Suddenly she moved toward me, closing her eyes slightly like a pleased cat—and to my utter consternation, rubbed her head gently against my shoulder!

My first thought was that this was merely an amusing trick of a clever street-

woman, the advances of a *fille de joie* a little less blatant than those of her boldly dressed, loud-voiced sisters.

Then suddenly the feeling swept over me like a cold draft that she was not a woman at all, that she was not even a mortal—*that she was a cat!*

Moreover, as I drew myself away from her and entered my room queerly shaken, I could have sworn I heard, from the depths of that pale throat, the purring of a cat!

I strode across the room and stood a moment staring out the window, trying to collect my scattered wits, when I felt something rubbing against my ankle. It was the white cat, arching its furry back and purring loudly.

I was in no mood just then for anything resembling a cat, but its gentle wiles won me in spite of myself and I began playing with it. I rolled a ball of cord across the room and the animal bounded after it, tapping it playfully. Soon I had forgotten my upsetting encounter with Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche and was having quite a time with my furry visitor, when our romp was interrupted by a rap on my door and a familiar call, announcing Mrs. Bates.

As she came in, her smile vanished. "Oh, this is your white cat, eh? I never liked the critters. . . . Scat!"

As the animal crouched motionless with fear, the old lady seized it quickly by the scruff of its neck and dropped it from my window into the muddy alley below. "There! Maybe it'll go away now."

She talked for a moment, collected her rent, and was standing in my open door for a parting word, when beyond her in the hall I saw Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche.

She was strangely disheveled and spattered with mud; and she was directing upon the landlady's back such a look of concentrated hate that I shivered. Only a moment she stood thus; then she had disappeared into her room.

Next morning at breakfast (I ate alone, as I had to leave earlier than the other boarders) I noticed that Mrs. Bates' face was all but hidden behind a network of adhesive plaster, and bright red spots of mercurochrome.

"Why . . . why, what's the matter with your face?" I asked with concern as she served my breakfast.

"A cat got in my room last night," she wailed. "That big white one, it was! It jumped on me in bed and scratched me up terrible afore I could chase it out. I tried to kill it with the broom, but it got away. I never did like a cat . . . mean critters, they are! . . ." She prattled on until I left for the office.

IT WAS two days later that I saw Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche again. I confess I had avoided her in the hall; and as our meal hours were different, we had no occasion to meet. But on this afternoon she was standing in her door as usual, watching me as I came down the hall. Sensing that she was likely to repeat her disconcerting cat-caress, I nodded curtly and went straight into my room, stumbling over something soft as I did so.

There was the white cat again, purring and rubbing against my legs affectionately. Something impelled me to glance back where the woman across the hall had been standing, with an uncanny knowledge that she was there no longer.

She was gone.

I shut my door with a creepy feeling, which the pranks of the white cat soon dispelled, however. We played together for a while, when our romp was again interrupted by the voice and knock of Mrs. Bates.

The cat seemed to know it was she, for it fluffed up its long fur and hissed angrily. Then it turned as if frightened and leaped out of the open window. It was a second-story window—not a pleasant jump, even for a cat. I glanced down to see if the animal had landed safely—just in time to see a huge mongrel dash down the alley and pounce upon my unfortunate pet.

The cat fought furiously, but it had not a chance against the big dog. I saw the mongrel snap twice at my little friend, heard the kitten give an odd cry of anguish—a cry that sounded far more human than feline. A moment later, Mrs. Bates and I saw the limp, blood-spattered form of the white cat lying very still in the muddy alley.

And somehow, it has always seemed to me something more than a mere coincidence that on that very day Mademoiselle Chatte-Blanche disappeared mysteriously as smoke, without a word of farewell—and, as Mrs. Bates reiterated plaintively, without even paying her rent. And strangely, she left behind all her personal belongings (from which Mrs. Bates managed to collect slightly more than her rent, though she would never have admitted it). All her clothes, hats, shoes, toilet articles, every little personal belonging, our lady left behind her . . . and an absurd thing the landlady remarked upon at length curiously: a foolish plaything fond old maids fashion for their cats—a small worsted mouse stuffed with catnip.

The Ultimate Word

By MARION DOYLE

Always there has been something not quite said:
  Something that sunlight sifted down through leaves,
Starlight on water, and the echoes shed
  From slow rain's whisper in deserted eaves
Tried to interpret in my slower tongue. . . .

Once, long ago—oh, very long ago—
  Before the world was old, and I was young,
I *almost* grasped the Word in flakes of snow,
  In fireflies like golden spangles flung
Across a dancer's twilight-colored hair,
  In spider-webs miraculously strung
With a gnome-king's ransom in the morning air. . . .

But that was long ago—oh, long ago—
  Before the world was old, and I was young.

THE EYRIE

THAT weird novel of the hidden land beyond the Arabian desert, *Golden Blood* by Jack Williamson, continues to score heavily in the letters that flow to the editor's desk.

Writes E. Irvine Haines, from Long Island, New York: "In Jack Williamson you have discovered an author of great promise. His *Golden Blood* is one of the best stories of its kind that I have ever read, bar none. He is graphic in his descriptions, vivid in narrative, and writes with a dash and vigor that is certainly entertaining. I do not agree with many of your readers as to the attractiveness of your covers at present. The appearance of nude females gives the impression that WEIRD TALES is sexy and trashy, in my opinion, whereas its stories are anything but that. As to interplanetary stories: one now and then is well enough, but too many, like the old proverb about the cooks, spoil the broth. I never get tired of reading Seabury Quinn's fine stories. He has made personalities out of Jules de Grandin and Doctor Trowbridge, just as Conan Doyle did with Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. A real good ghost story, of which there have been very few of late, would be welcome. Variety, after all, *is* the spice of life. Having read WEIRD TALES since its early days, I want to congratulate you on the splendid progress this fascinating magazine has made during the past two years—this in a period of depression when many magazines have fallen by the wayside. To read WEIRD TALES is as refreshing as a glass of cold, sparkling spring water to a thirsty traveler. I only wish the magazine were a weekly."

Here is a word about our covers, from Lionel Dilbeck, of Wichita, Kansas: "I intend to read WEIRD TALES as long as I live or as long as the magazine is published, if you keep up the kind of stories you have always published," he writes in a letter to the Eyrie. "But whatever you do, do not continue to disgrace the magazine with naked women as you did in the June and July issues. If you think that the readers want them, have them vote on it. Personally I prefer any kind of monster that it is possible to think of rather than the sexy covers you have been having. And I really hate to tear the covers off the magazine, as that also spoils the looks of them."

"I have been reading WEIRD TALES for as long as I can remember," writes Mascall K. Perkins, of Chicago. "It certainly has improved in recent years. I like Brundage's cover on the August issue very much. As to the stories, first place should go to Seabury Quinn for *The Chosen of Vishnu;* second place to *The Supe-*

rior Judge by J. Paul Suter. Third place I give to *A Pair of Swords* by Carl Jacobi, which, though short, was one of the finest little stories you have ever printed."

A letter from T. J. Tucker, of Lindale, Georgia, says: "Your August issue was splendid. Especially good were *Dead Men Walk, The Vampire Airplane,* and *The Chosen of Vishnu.* Some readers do not like scientific stories in your magazine. Well, here's one that does. Give us more of them. The scientific stories and weird tales *can* be combined and still be imaginative. Keep publishing stories as good as those in the August issue, and keep up the serials. *Golden Blood* is especially good. There is one thing that I do not like your magazine for, and that is: it is not published often enough. I can hardly wait for my copy every month."

Alexander Ostrow, of New York City, gives us a sidelight on H. P. Lovecraft. "I have just finished reading your August number," he writes to the Eyrie. "All the stories were so equally excellent that I hesitate to cast my favorite stories ballot. In all the time that I have been reading WEIRD TALES I have never cast a ballot for the same reason, although when Howard Philip Lovecraft appears in any issue, there is no question as to which story is *the* best. Your readers might be interested in knowing that not only is Lovecraft a master of weird fiction, but that he is also an authority on Shakespeare. I have in my possession and have seen elsewhere a variety of essays on the works of Shakespeare written by Mr. Lovecraft when he was active in the affairs of the National Amateur Press Association."

"Please reprint in your reprint department only stories from back issues of WEIRD TALES," writes Charles Bert, of Philadelphia. "I would like to see the reprint question definitely settled for ever."

Here is another comment on our covers. This one comes from Duane W. Rimel, of Asotin, Washington.: "I have just read about the praise bestowed upon M. Brundage for his cover designs. I would like to add my vote in favor of them also. But why not laud J. Allen St. John? His illustrations seem to just fit fantastic literature, especially those of *Buccaneers of Venus.* His crayon sketches now appearing at the first of each installment of *Golden Blood* strike me as being singularly impressive. I am still a great fan of your magazine and I intend to continue being so. With the 'swell' stories one can't help being a bit enthusiastic."

"My business keeps me travelng continually from one side of the country to the other but I always find time to buy a copy of WEIRD TALES," writes E. R. Davey to the Eyrie. "I have read your magazine in California and Iowa and in many other states. On several occasions I have been tempted to drive to the next town when I find it impossible to obtain a copy in the burg I'm in. My favorite authors are Clark Ashton Smith, Hugh B. Cave, Robert E. Howard and Carl Jacobi. Jacobi's *Revelations in Black* is the greatest story of its kind since *Dracula.* The author shows his versatility in the little 'short-short' story in the August issue. *A Pair of Swords* was a mighty clever little weird tale and was beautifully written. As for the science type of story: I vote for one story of this kind in each issue. I suggest you use for your reprint department the Russian story, *The Red Laugh* by Leonid Andreyev."

Carl Belknap of Corpus Christi, Texas, writes to the Eyrie: "Ever since 1924 I have read every issue of WEIRD TALES, and as do most constant readers of any magazine, found and followed my favorite authors. Two men made the greatest impression on my mind in those days: Whitehead and Lovecraft. Today I find Robert E. Howard's type of yarn has an almost irresistible appeal. There is a quality about

his style or his approach that lifts something dead out of the reader's mind and replaces it with an exhilarating alcohol."

"Robert E. Howard gets better and better," writes H. J. Ervine, of Coleman, Texas. "Let's have a story by him in every issue of WEIRD TALES."

Robert E. Howard's stories have become so popular with the readers of WEIRD TALES and the MAGIC CARPET Magazine that a brickbat aimed at his stories is an extreme rarity. But here is a whole truckload of brickbats, flung by Sylvia Bennett, of Detroit, who writes to the Eyrie: "Will Robert E. Howard ever cease writing his infernal stories of 'red battles' and 'fierce warfare'? I am becoming weary of his continuous butchery and slaughter. After I finish reading one of his gory stories I feel as if I am soaked with blood. The first few of these kind of tales were mighty fine and truly exciting, well written and slightly weird. But apparently the 'hits' they proved to be gave Mr. Howard the mistaken idea that the readers would be weirdly thrilled month after month by his excessive slaughter. This last Howard concoction, *Black Colossus,* I dozed all through while reading it, and when I finished, it was with a feeling of 'at last the darned thing ends.' Now if Mr. Howard would write more stories like his *Red Shadows, Skulls in the Stars, Skull-Face, The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune,* and *Wings in the Night,* he would restore his old-time prestige which he has lost by turning out such bunk as *Black Colossus* and *The Tower of the Elephant.* Solomon Kane, next to Jules de Grandin, is my favorite character in WEIRD TALES. If Mr. Howard would incorporate Solomon Kane into his stories, instead of using this lousy, heroic Conan stuff, he would again find himself perched near the top of WEIRD TALES' outstanding authors instead of slipping swiftly away into oblivion as he surely is doing by turning out his present type of work. So all I dislike about WEIRD TALES is Howard's Conan, and Hamilton's Interstellar Patrol."

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "I found the August issue of WEIRD TALES a mighty good one. *Golden Blood* can not be given too much praise. Page after absorbing page the reader is carried through what is Jack Williamson's greatest piece of work. It certainly is good news that you have more stories by him on hand. *Dead Men Walk,* although not as good as *The House of the Living Dead,* is an excellent tale. Harold Ward surely knows his stuff when it comes to writing weird and weird-science stories. I like the soft tone of M. Brundage's covers. They are as real-looking as photographs. Jayem Wilcox probably didn't do it intentionally, when he drew the illustrations for the August issue: but did you notice the position of the hero's right hand in *The Owl?*"

A letter from M. P. Tuteur, of Toronto, Canada, says: "I have taken your magazine since the first number, and have often wished to write you a letter of thanks, because it is really the only magazine which, since the war, I have been able to obtain any pleasure from; as ordinary magazines, after having seen war service, are pretty tame. I take this opportunity of thanking you for the many hours of pleasure that your publication has given me, and would say in particular that your number of last July was the finest issue I have yet read."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? In our August issue, Seabury Quinn's *The Chosen of Vishnu* was tied with the August installment of Jack Williamson's serial, *Golden Blood,* for first place in your affections, as shown by your votes and letters.

My favorite stories in the October WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why?----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

The Festival*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

"Efficiunt daemones, ut quae non sunt, sic tamen quasi sint, conspicienda hominibus exhibeant."—Lactantius.

I WAS far from home, and the spell of the eastern sea was upon me. In the twilight I heard it pounding on the rocks, and I knew it lay just over the hill where the twisting willows writhed against the clearing sky and the first stars of evening. And because my fathers had called me to the old town beyond, I pushed on through the shallow, new-fallen snow along the road that soared lonely up to where Aldebaran twinkled among the trees; on toward the very ancient town I had never seen but often dreamed of.

It was the Yuletide, which men call

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1925.

Christmas, though they know in their hearts it is older than Bethlehem and Babylon, older than Memphis and mankind. It was the Yuletide, and I had come at last to the ancient sea town where my people had dwelt and kept festival in the elder time when festival was forbidden; where also they had commanded their sons to keep festival once every century, that the memory of primal secrets might not be forgotten. Mine were an old people, old even when this land was settled three hundred years before. And they were strange, because they had come as dark, furtive folk from opiate southern gardens of orchids, and spoken another tongue before they learnt the tongue of the blue-eyed fishers. And now they were scattered, and shared only the rituals of mysteries that none living could understand. I was the only one who came back that night to the old fishing town as legend bade, for only the poor and the lonely remember.

Then beyond the hill's crest I saw Kingsport outspread frostily in the gloaming; snowy Kingsport with its ancient vanes and steeples, ridgepoles and chimneypots, wharves and small bridges, willow trees and graveyards; endless labyrinths of steep, narrow, crooked streets, and dizzy church-crowned central peak that time durst not touch; ceaseless mazes of colonial houses piled and scattered at all angles and levels like a child's disordered blocks; antiquity hovering on gray wings over winter-whitened gables and gambrel roofs; fanlights and small-paned windows one by one gleaming out in the cold dusk to join Orion and the archaic stars. And against the rotting wharves the sea pounded; the secretive, immemorial sea out of which the people had come in the elder time.

Beside the road at its crest a still higher summit rose, bleak and wind-swept, and I saw that it was a burying-ground where black gravestones stuck ghoulishly through the snow like the decayed fingernails of a gigantic corpse. The printless road was very lonely, and sometimes I thought I heard a distant horrible creaking as of a gibbet in the wind. They had hanged four kinsmen of mine for witchcraft in 1692, but I did not know just where.

As the road wound down the seaward slope I listened for the merry sounds of a village at evening, but did not hear them. Then I thought of the season, and felt that these old Puritan folk might well have Christmas customs strange to me, and full of silent hearthside prayer. So after that I did not listen for merriment or look for wayfarers, but kept on down past the hushed, lighted farmhouses and shadowy stone walls to where the signs of ancient shops and sea taverns creaked in the salt breeze, and the grotesque knockers of pillared doorways glistened along deserted, unpaved lanes in the light of little, curtained windows.

I had seen maps of the town, and knew where to find the home of my people. It was told that I should be known and welcomed, for village legend lives long; so I hastened through Back Street to Circle Court, and across the fresh snow on the one full flagstone pavement in the town, to where Green Lane leads off behind the Market House. The old maps still held good, and I had no trouble; though at Arkham they must have lied when they said the trolleys ran to this place, since I saw not a wire overhead. Snow would have hid the rails in any case. I was glad I had chosen to walk, for the white village had seemed very beautiful from the hill; and now I was eager to knock at the door of my people, the seventh house on the left in Green

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Coming Next Month

THE priest's high forehead was beaded with sweat. Pierre's lean dark features were drawn. He muttered to himself as he calculated. The tension was heightening. At first I thought that it was the suppressed excitement of realizing that victory was around the corner. I sat clutching the arms of my chair, just as one watching men heaving at a heavy weight will contract his muscles in sympathy. Then I saw my error, and realized that it was not impending victory but the redoubled efforts of the Master that made the room vibrant with energy.

A mist was gathering and thickening the air. It swirled in eddies, and wraiths like wisps emerged from the corners. They were closing slowly in on the table. The lights were dimming. I could now look at the hundred-watt bulb and see its filament very clearly, so much was its incandescence obscured by the density of the air. Along the walls and in the shadows were shapes of spectral gray: vague blots whose quivering and twitching suggested monstrous forms seeking to assume substance.

We were walled in. The table was now an island in a fog-shrouded sea. The forms that lurked in the shadows were becoming more distinct. I could distinguish tall, bearded men with solemn faces. They regarded us menacingly, and rhythmically gestured toward us.

D'Artois, despairing but grim, thrust his chair aside as he rose.

"Look at them!" he cried as with a sweep of his arm he indicated the ever-shifting, weaving fog wisps and the silent presences that they but half obscured. "They have projected their *selves* into space to seek us, and their thought-force to beat us! We know all but the ultimate secret. And that we can not get. We are lost, unless——"

Don't miss this utterly strange thrill-tale of a malefic conqueror from the Fourth Dimension, whose plans for world conquest make Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde look like amateurs. This story will be printed complete in the November WEIRD TALES.

LORD OF THE FOURTH AXIS

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

—ALSO—

THE WAR OF THE SEXES

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Projected twenty thousand years into the future, Allan Rand finds himself in a loveless world in which the Males and the Females are waging a war of extermination against each other.

SHAMBLEAU

By C. L. MOORE

An utterly strange and startlingly different story, about an alluring female creature that was neither beast nor human, neither ghost nor vampire—a weird and eery story of many thrills.

THE ACCURSED ISLE

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

A hideous fear, a dread worse than death, clutched the hearts of the castaways on that accursed isle as they were slain, one by one, until at last—but read the story yourself.

THE HOLINESS OF AZEDARAC

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Another exquisite story of the forest of Averoigne —dark magic and evil necromancy send the soul of Brother Ambrose careering back through time.

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Lane, with an ancient peaked roof and jutting second story, all built before 1650.

There were lights inside the house when I came upon it, and I saw from the diamond window-panes that it must have been kept very close to its antique state. The upper part overhung the narrow, grass-grown street and nearly met the overhanging part of the house opposite, so that I was almost in a tunnel, with the low stone doorstep wholly free from snow. There was no sidewalk, but many houses had high doors reached by double flights of steps with iron railings. It was an odd scene, and because I was strange to New England I had never known its like before. Though it pleased me, I would have relished it better if there had been footprints in the snow, and people in the streets, and a few windows without drawn curtains.

WHEN I sounded the archaic iron knocker I was half afraid. Some fear had been gathering in me, perhaps because of the strangeness of my heritage, and the bleakness of the evening, and the queerness of the silence in that aged town of curious customs. And when my knock was answered I was fully afraid, because I had not heard any footsteps before the door creaked open. But I was not afraid long, for the gowned, slippered old man in the doorway had a bland face that reassured me; and though he made signs that he was dumb, he wrote a quaint and ancient welcome with the stylus and wax tablet he carried.

He beckoned me into a low, candle-lit room with massive exposed rafters and dark, stiff, sparse furniture of the Seventeenth Century. The past was vivid there, for not an attribute was missing. There was a cavernous fireplace and a spinning-wheel at which a bent old woman in loose wrapper and deep poke-bonnet sat back toward me, silently spinning despite the festive season. An infinite dampness seemed upon the place, and I marveled that no fire should be blazing. The high-backed settle faced the row of curtained windows at the left, and seemed to be occupied, though I was not sure. I did not like everything about what I saw, and felt again the fear I had had. This fear grew stronger from what had before lessened it, for the more I looked at the old man's bland face, the more its very blandness terrified me. The eyes never moved, and the skin was too like wax. Finally I was sure it was not a face at all, but a fiendishly cunning mask. But the flabby hands, curiously gloved, wrote genially on the tablet and told me I must wait a while before I could be led to the place of festival.

Pointing to a chair, table, and pile of books, the old man now left the room; and when I sat down to read I saw that the books were hoary and moldy, and that they included old Morryster's wild *Marvells of Science,* the terrible *Saducismus Triumphatus* of Joseph Glanvil, published in 1681, the shocking *Dæmonolatreia* of Remigius, printed in 1595 at Lyons, and worst of all, the unmentionable *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, in Olaus Wormius' forbidden Latin translation: a book which I had never seen, but of which I had heard monstrous things whispered. No one spoke to me, but I could hear the creaking of signs in the wind outside, and the whir of the wheel as the bonneted old woman continued her silent spinning, spinning.

I thought the room and the books and the people very morbid and disquieting, but because an old tradition of my father's had summoned me to strange feastings, I resolved to expect queer things. So I tried to read, and soon became trembling-

ly absorbed by something I found in that accursed *Necronomicon;* a thought and a legend too hideous for sanity or consciousness. But I disliked it when I fancied I heard the closing of one of the windows that the settle faced, as if it had been stealthily opened. It had seemed to follow a whirring that was not of the old woman's spinning-wheel. This was not much, though, for the old woman was spinning very hard, and the aged clock had been striking. After that I lost the feeling that there were persons on the settle, and was reading intently and shudderingly when the old man came back booted and dressed in a loose antique costume, and sat down on that very bench, so that I could not see him. It was certainly nervous waiting, and the blasphemous book in my hands made it doubly so. When eleven struck, however, the old man stood up, glided to a massive carved chest in a corner, and got two hooded cloaks, one of which he donned, and the other of which he draped round the old woman, who was ceasing her monotonous spinning. Then they both started for the outer door; the woman lamely creeping, and the old man, after picking up the very book I had been reading, beckoning me as he drew his hood over that unmoving face or mask.

WE WENT out into the moonless and tortuous network of that incredibly ancient town; went out as the lights in the curtained windows disappeared one by one, and the Dog Star leered at the throng of cowled, cloaked figures that poured silently from every doorway and formed monstrous processions up this street and that, past the creaking signs and antediluvian gables, the thatched roofs and the diamond-paned windows; threading precipitous lanes where decaying houses overlapped and crumbled

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together, gliding across open courts and churchyards where the bobbing lanthorns made eldritch drunken constellations.

Amid these hushed throngs I followed my voiceless guides; jostled by elbows that seemed preternaturally soft, and pressed by chests and stomachs that seemed abnormally pulpy; but seeing never a face and hearing never a word. Up, up, up, the eery columns slithered, and I saw that all the travelers were converging as they flowed near a sort of focus of crazy alleys at the top of a high hill in the center of the town, where perched a great white church. I had seen it from the road's crest when I looked at Kingsport in the new dusk, and it had made me shiver because Aldebaran had seemed to balance itself a moment on the ghostly spire.

There was an open space around the church; partly a churchyard with spectral shafts, and partly a half-paved square swept nearly bare of snow by the wind, and lined with unwholesomely archaic houses having peaked roofs and overhanging gables. Death-fires danced over the tombs, revealing gruesome vistas, though queerly failing to cast any shadows. Past the churchyard, where there were no houses, I could see over the hill's summit and watch the glimmer of stars on the harbor, though the town was invisible in the dark. Only once in a while a lanthorn bobbed horribly through serpentine alleys on its way to overtake the throng that was now slipping speechlessly into the church.

I waited till the crowd had oozed into the black doorway, and till all the stragglers had followed. The old man was pulling at my sleeve, but I was determined to be the last. Then finally I went, the sinister man and the old spinning woman before me. Crossing the threshold into that swarming temple of unknown darkness, I turned once to look at the outside world as the churchyard phosphorescence cast a sickly glow on the hilltop pavement. And as I did so I shuddered. For though the wind had not left much snow, a few patches did remain on the path near the door; and in that fleeting backward look it seemed to my troubled eye that they bore no mark of passing feet, not even mine.

The church was scarce lighted by all the lanthorns that had entered it, for most of the throng had already vanished. They had streamed up the aisle between the high white pews to the trap-door of the vaults which yawned loathsomely open just before the pulpit, and were now squirming noiselessly in. I followed dumbly down the footworn steps and into the dank, suffocating crypt. The tail of that sinuous line of night-marchers seemed very horrible, and as I saw them wriggling into a venerable tomb they seemed more horrible still. Then I noticed that the tomb's floor had an aperture down which the throng was sliding, and in a moment we were all descending an ominous staircase of rough-hewn stone; a narrow spiral staircase damp and peculiarly odorous, that wound endlessly down into the bowels of the hill, past monotonous walls of dripping stone blocks and crumbling mortar. It was a silent, shocking descent, and I observed after a horrible interval that the walls and steps were changing in nature, as if chiseled out of the solid rock. What mainly troubled me was that the myriad footfalls made no sound and set up no echoes.

After more eons of descent I saw some side passages or burrows leading from unknown recesses of blackness to this shaft of nighted mystery. Soon they became excessively numerous, like impious cata-

combs of nameless menace; and their pungent odor of decay grew quite unbearable. I knew we must have passed down through the mountain and beneath the earth of Kingsport itself, and I shivered that a town should be so aged and maggoty with subterraneous evil.

Then I saw the lurid shimmering of pale light, and heard the insidious lapping of sunless waters. Again I shivered, for I did not like the things that the night had brought, and wished bitterly that no forefather had summoned me to this primal rite. As the steps and the passage grew broader, I heard another sound, the thin, whining mockery of a feeble flute; and suddenly there spread out before me the boundless vista of an inner world—a vast fungous shore litten by a belching column of sick greenish flame and washed by a wide oily river that flowed from abysses frightful and unsuspected to join the blackest gulfs of immemorial ocean.

FAINTING and gasping, I looked at that unhallowed Erebus of titan toadstools, leprous fire and slimy water, and saw the cloaked throngs forming a semicircle around the blazing pillar. It was the Yule-rite, older than man and fated to survive him; the primal rite of the solstice and of spring's promise beyond the snows; the rite of fire and evergreen, light and music. And in that Stygian grotto I saw them do the rite, and adore the sick pillar of flame, and throw into the water handfuls gouged out of the viscous vegetation which glittered green in the chlorotic glare. I saw this, and I saw something amorphously squatted far away from the light, piping noisomely on a flute; and as the thing piped I thought I heard noxious muffled flutterings in the fetid darkness where I could not see. But what frightened me most was that flam-

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ing column; spouting volcanically from depths profound and inconceivable, casting no shadows as healthy flame should, and coating the nitrous stone above with a nasty, venomous verdigris. For in all that seething combustion no warmth lay, but only the clamminess of death and corruption.

The man who had brought me now squirmed to a point directly beside the hideous flame, and made stiff ceremonial motions to the semicircle he faced. At certain stages of the ritual they did groveling obeisance, especially when he held above his head that abhorrent *Necronomicon* he had taken with him; and I shared all the obeisances because I had been summoned to this festival by the writings of my forefathers. Then the old man made a signal to the half-seen flute-player in the darkness, which player thereupon changed its feeble drone to a scarce louder drone in another key; precipitating as it did so a horror unthinkable and unexpected. At this horror I sank nearly to the lichened earth, transfixed with a dread not of this nor any world, but only of the mad spaces between the stars.

Out of the unimaginable blackness beyond the gangrenous glare of that cold flame, out of the tartarean leagues through which that oily river rolled uncanny, unheard, and unsuspected, there flopped rhythmically a horde of tame, trained, hybrid winged things that no sound eye could ever wholly grasp, or sound brain ever wholly remember. They were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings, but something I can not and must not recall. They flopped limply along, half with their webbed feet and half with their membranous wings; and as they reached the throng of celebrants the cowled figures seized and mounted them, and rode off one by one along the reaches of that unlighted river, into pits and galleries of panic where poison springs feed frightful and undiscoverable cataracts.

The old spinning woman had gone with the throng, and the old man remained only because I had refused when he motioned me to seize an animal and ride like the rest. I saw when I staggered to my feet that the amorphous flute-player had rolled out of sight, but that two of the beasts were patiently standing by. As I hung back, the old man produced his stylus and tablet and wrote that he was the true deputy of my fathers who had founded the Yule worship in this ancient place; that it had been decreed I should come back; and that the most secret mysteries were yet to be performed. He wrote this in a very ancient hand, and when I still hesitated he pulled from his loose robe a seal ring and a watch, both with my family arms, to prove that he was what he said. But it was a hideous proof, because I knew from old papers that that watch had been buried with my great-great-great-great-grandfather in 1698.

Presently the old man drew back his hood and pointed to the family resemblance in his face, but I only shuddered, because I was sure that the face was merely a devilish waxen mask. The flopping animals were now scratching restlessly at the lichens, and I saw that the old man was nearly as restless himself. When one of the things began to waddle and edge away, he turned quickly to stop it; so that the suddenness of his motion dislodged the waxen mask from what should have been his head. And then, because that nightmare's position barred me from the stone staircase down which we had come, I flung myself into the oily underground river that bubbled somewhere to the caves of the sea; flung myself into that putres-

cent juice of earth's inner horrors before the madness of my screams could bring down upon me all the charnel legions these pest-gulfs might conceal.

AT THE hospital they told me I had been found half-frozen in Kingsport Harbor at dawn, clinging to the drifting spar that accident sent to save me. They told me I had taken the wrong fork of the hill road the night before, and fallen over the cliffs at Orange Point —a thing they deduced from prints found in the snow. There was nothing I could say, because everything was wrong. Everything was wrong, with the broad window showing a sea of roofs in which only about one in five was ancient, and the sound of trolleys and motors in the streets below. They insisted that this was Kingsport, and I could not deny it.

When I went delirious at hearing that the hospital stood near the old churchyard on Central Hill, they sent me to St. Mary's Hospital in Arkham, where I could have better care. I liked it there, for the doctors were broad-minded, and even lent me their influence in obtaining the carefully sheltered copy of Alhazred's objectionable *Necronomicon* from the library of Miskatonic University. They said something about a "psychosis", and agreed that I had better get any harassing obsessions off my mind.

So I read again that hideous chapter, and shuddered doubly because it was indeed not new to me. I had seen it before, let footprints tell what they might; and where it was I had seen it were best forgotten. There was no one—in waking hours—who could remind me of it; but my dreams are filled with terror, because of phrases I dare not quote. I dare quote only one paragraph, put into such English

(Please turn to next page)

(Continued from page 527)

as I can make from the awkward Low Latin.

"The nethermost caverns," wrote the mad Arab, "are not for the fathoming of eyes that see; for their marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind that is held by no head. Wisely did Ibn Schacabac say, that happy is the tomb where no wizard hath lain, and happy the town at night whose wizards are all in ashes. For it is of old rumor that the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fats and instructs *the very worm that gnaws;* till out of corruption horrid life springs, and the dull scavengers of earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great holes secretly are digged where earth's pores ought to suffice, and things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl."

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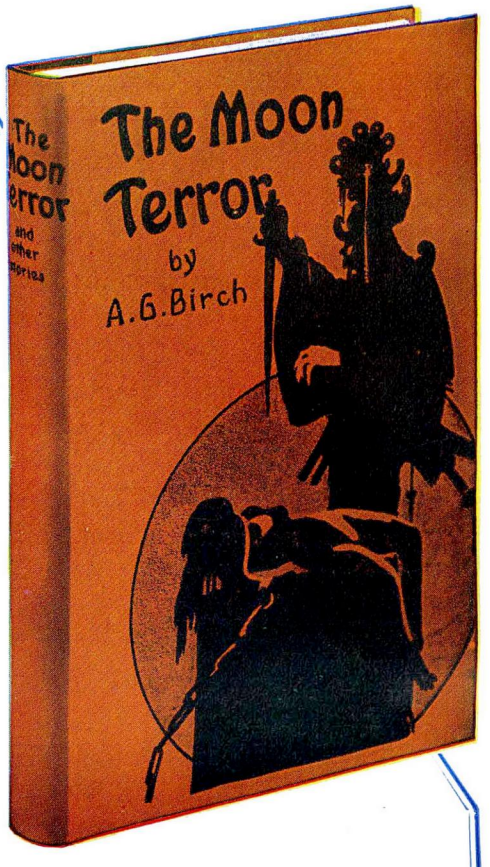

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