November

Weird Tales

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THINGS OF DARKNESS

MYSTERY

Can You Find Us?

NATURALLY, we have been very much interested in comments on the new size of WEIRD TALES. We are printing below some of the letters about it which have reached us. The most seem favorable from the reader standpoint. But there is another angle we have to watch very carefully—display on the newstands, which account for a large percentage of our sales. It has been this display angle which has caused us the greatest concern over the past months. In its large size no one seemed able to discover WEIRD TALES, and when you can't find a magazine, you are apt not to buy it. So, though we feel that in its new size and format WEIRD TALES is easier to read and carry and enjoy, we also hope that it will be easier to find and buy. So keep on the lookout for us, and let us know if you are able to buy WT when you want it.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

I have no complaints to register, and will devote this letter entirely to constructive criticism. First of all, every two months is just not enough. The average reader who has to spend eight hours a day working for a living can still finish one issue in two days' time. And what is he to do the other 58 days? It seems to me that you have a more or less definite group of subscribers and newsstand buyers who would buy the magazine every month, or even every two weeks, if it were there to buy.

Also, I read someone's suggestion in The Eyrie that you in-

(Continued on page 126)

Weird Tales

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

Way Station

Mary Elizabeth Counselman

RAIN whipped at the little car, plastering sheets of water against the windshield faster than the wipers could fan it clear. The man at the wheel, crouched forward to peer through the blinding storm, ran a palm quickly over the misted glass; then smiled and patted the knee of the girl pressed close to his side.

"Honey—we can't go on in this downpour. Better pull off the highway, at least until I can see three feet ahead! . . . Cold?" he inquired tenderly, as the slender body shivered against him.

The girl shook her head. "Just . . . nervous, I guess." She smiled back, with a studied attempt at gayety. "After all, this is my first honeymoon!"

"Some honeymoon!" The bridegroom, a tall stocky young man, whose army uniform contrasted grimly with his bride's frilly suit and flower-hat—laughed wryly. "For so long I've been dreaming of this, slogging

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Perhaps the young people hadn't read carefully enough the sign over the door.

Heading by H. W. Silvey

around in the rain in Korea . . . A furlough! Ah-h! We'd spend a wonderful, sunny week together in a musical-comedy setting! And what do I get?" He chuckled. "More rain! Besides," he added sheepishly, "I think I took a wrong turn back there someplace. Can't see any road-signs in all this . . ."

He broke off, slowing the car at sight of a byroad at right angles to the paved highway ahead. Pulling off into it, he discovered it to be the entrance of a gravel driveway, ill kept and deeply pitted with holes. As the car jolted to a standstill, deluged by a fresh downpour, a huge truck rumbled past—dangerously close as it hugged the edge of the pavement. The young soldier whistled; tipped back his cap; mopped his face.

"Whew! That was *close!* Can't tell when those trailers will sideswipe you on a wet road . . ."

"Like a dinosaur's tail?" His bride giggled, snuggling against him. "I wasn't worried, Tom. Not with you driving."

The boy grinned, and held her close for a moment. "No? I'm glad you have such confidence in me. Wish *I* had as much! And knew where the merry hell we are!"

HE ROLLED down a window glass. Rain lashed at him as he peered out, straining his eyes through the storm-hastened twilight. With a movable search-lamp he swept a yellow arc of brillance, like a finger pushing at the curtain of rain. It halted abruptly.

"Hey! Some kind of sign up there on a post . . . *FARADAY HOUSE,*" he read with difficulty. "*Miss Adelaide Faraday, Prop. Overnight . . .*" A grin curved his anxious mouth. "Well! How about that for luck? It's a tourist home!" The finger of light probed deeper into the rain, seeking out a dim white blur at the end of the gravel drive. "Doesn't look too bad. One of those old Gone-with-the-wind jobs. White-columned veranda, fanlight over the door. They probably serve wonderful meals; fried chicken and biscuits. How about it, Jean baby? Take a look . . ."

The girl was looking—not at the storm-blurred house, but at her husband's earnest expression.

"Anyplace," she whispered. "Any place at all, darling. So long as we can be together, even for . . . a little while." Her eyes misted over suddenly, like the rainy windshield, traveling from the boy's eager young face to the chevrons on his khaki sleeve. "A week! Just a *week* . . ."

THE shadow of fear rose between them abruptly at her words, the dark fear of all lovers

—that of being separated, of being torn apart by forces stronger than the love that bound them together. The boy reached out, snatched his young bride into his embrace, and held her tight. She clung to him, sobbing.

"Oh, Tommy! If only you didn't have to go back! So . . . so *soon!*"

"Hey, now! We promised to pretend. Remember?" His voice as he tried to comfort her was unsteady, but determinedly light. "Time is relative," he chanted the familiar ritual. "A day can be 24 hours—or a minute. Or *ten years!* We have seven days, huh? Seven times ten are seventy. . . . Why, we've already been married—let's see—fifteen years! Wednesday will be our Golden Anniversary! And by Friday, when I have to . . . to . . . say, how long can a guy *stand* being married to one old hag?"

The sobbing against his shoulder ceased. With a forlorn but game little sniff, the bride sat up and managed a wavery grin.

"Okay . . . " As the rain slacked briefly, she peered out, following the pointing finger of the searchlight. "It . . . it looks kind of . . . old and rundown. Maybe they won't charge as much as a motel," she added practically, "and we can have more to spend in Florida!"

"Women!" The bridegroom hooted, steering the car up the driveway. "Right in the middle of a tender love-scene, they start worrying about the budget! Can't you dames . . . ever . . . ?"

His voice trailed as the car, following the curve of the gravel drive, came to a halt in front of the big white house they had dimly glimpsed through the rain. On closer inspection, it was very badly in need of repair. Paint curled on the heavy fluted columns, one of which slanted at a dangerous angle. The fanlight over the door looked like a grinning mouth with several teeth out, and the ornate brass knocker was tarnished black; so black that the young couple could barely make out the name engraved on it: FARADAY. Somewhere a shutter creaked on a rusty hinge, with a sound like a groan of pain. Yet, in front of the door, a shabby *Welcome* mat gave a contrasting note of hospitality.

Drenched, shivering, the newlyweds hesitated on the wide veranda. They looked at each other, debating whether to knock or climb back into their car and drive on.

Their decision was made for them, quite without warning, the front door swung open, and a giant Negro in the worn livery of a butler towered over them. His short-cropped kinky hair was snow-white—as were the irises of his eyes, which remained fixed

on a point just above Tom's prickling scalp. Involuntarily, Jean gasped and edged closer to her husband, staring up at the man—who was almost seven feet tall. At her slight noise, the milky eyes followed her; and they realized that he was blind.

"We . . . we wondered if . . .? I mean, we saw your sign. And it was raining so hard . . ." Tom's hearty voice gave out.

For the sound of his vibrant young baritone seemed to startle the giant Negro. His eyes, like white agates with their film of cataracts, widened. His lips trembled, then pressed together firmly, as with an effort of self-control.

"S-sometime I kin hear 'em. . . I kin hear 'em real plain!" he mumbled, obviously talking to himself. Then, with a sweeping bow reminiscent of a more gracious era when the old mansion was new, he stood aside and gestured them into the hall. "Come in, Suh! And . . . and Ma'm; Faraday House makes you welcome! Miss Addie seen you th'ough a window o' de parlor, and say: 'Saul, you go open de door for our guests! Hit ain't a fit night for *ducks* to be out in!' Miss Addie say . . ."

Prattling on in a high child-like voice, the huge Negro ushered them through the door, bowing and scraping. With apprehensive lifts of the eyebrows, the newly-weds took off their wet coats and hung them on an ornate deer-horn hatrack. They followed uncertainly as the butler beckoned them toward a doorway down the long hall that was lighted only by candles in a series of shimmering crystal candelabra.

"Miss Addie right in here, in de parlor!" the tall Negro gestured again, with a bow. "Her and de . . . de other guests . . ."

Tom and Jean, walking very close together, trailed after him, and peered uncertainly through a door indicated by his sweeping black hand. At the threshold, they paused—aware first of a great paneled room; shabby now with its rotting brocades and velvet draperies, but still as beautiful and inviting as in the days when gray-uniformed soldiers and lovely women in crinoline must have laughed and chattered here.

A LOG fire burned in the fireplace, throwing distorted shadows over the room with its exquisite Colonial furniture and antique bric-a-brac. From a chair near the fire, as they entered, a little old lady rose with the quick fluttering motions of a bird, and came to meet them, smiling with a strange mixture of pleasure and regret on her wrinkled face. She wore a black-lace dress with a velvet collar, pinned at the neck by a handsome coral-and-pearl

brooch that matched the coral earrings in her pierced ears. Silvery hair was piled up on her head in a quaint style, many years out of fashion, and fastened thus with a pearl-and-coral comb. By her gala attire, also by their sudden awareness of several other people in the room, Tom and Jean were taken aback.

"Oh . . .!" Jean murmured. "I . . . we didn't mean to break in on a . . . a private party!" she apologized. "Perhaps you don't take tourists any more?"

"Tourists?" The old lady laughed gently at the word, as though she found it secretly amusing. "Oh! Oh, yes, my dear. You and your . . . your husband?" She glanced astutely from the ring on Jean's hand to Tom's uniform, then nodded. "You and your young soldier-husband are quite welcome here. Newlyweds?" She clucked her tongue at Jean's shy nod and Tom's flush. "How sad!" she murmured. "But at least you're together. Sometimes those who stop here alone are so frightened, so bewildered . . . !"

Tom and Jean looked at her blankly. Then Tom grinned, interpreting her queer words in terms of his uniform and the current war.

"Oh! Yeah. . . . And you say we can get a room for the night? Do you serve meals?"

"Anything you like." The old lady called Miss Addie nodded her head kindly. "Anything to make you . . . comfortable, until you're ready to . . . to go on. Would you like to register?" She gestured toward a dog-earred book on the table, beside which lay a quilled pen and an old-fashioned ink bottle quite empty of ink.

"Yes, of course!" Tom stepped briskly to the table, and flipped open the book. Riffling through the pages to find the last one bearing the present date, he frowned slowly . . .

The last page which bore signatures and addresses of registrants was yellow with age—and was dated ten years ago! He started to lift the pen, then laid it down again, puzzled.

If Miss Addie Faraday kept "overnight guests" for a living, Tom thought, she and her run-down tourist-home were not doing much business. Either that, or her guests—even those now moving restlessly around the friendly, firelit room—did not comply with the national law requiring all paying roomers to register. Something very odd was going on here.

"I . . . believe I'll register later," Tom said cautiously, glancing around at the other occupants of the room. "Will that be all right?"

"Quite all right," Miss Addie nodded amiably. "And now . . .

Would you like to go straight to your room? I see you have no luggage . . ."

Tom dug into his pocket at once. "It's . . . it's still in the car. But we want to pay in advance, anyway . . ." He fumbled in another pocket, a slow flush creeping over his face. "Gosh! Can't seem to find my . . . my wallet . . .! Could I have dropped it when we . . . we got out of the car?"

Old Miss Faraday's expression of gracious welcome did not change, except for a slight quirk of kindly amusement at the corner of her wrinkled mouth. She held up her hand, speaking calmly, soothingly, as to an upset child.

"Don't trouble yourself about it. You can pay me when you . . . check out. And Saul will take care of your luggage . . . *Saul?"* She raised her sweet, birdlike voice, and the giant Negro reappeared in the doorway. "This gentleman thinks he may have dropped his wallet outside. Will you look for it, please? And their luggage? Of course, there's no hurry . . ."

There was, Tom noted with growing suspicion and annoyance, a definite note of amusement in the old lady's voice, as though she were playing some sort of game—a secret game in which the tall butler shared, somewhat sulkily.

"Yas'm," he bowed. "Anything else, Miss Addie?"

"No . . . no." His mistress fluttered a hand pleasantly. "Not just now. Perhaps later the young people will like a snack served in their room. Honeymoon-style . . . eh?" From somewhere in the folds of her lace gown, she actually produced a little ivory fan, and pretended to tap Tom's wrist with it playfully. "Partridge? Saul shot two or three yesterday, out in the north pasture. His dog, Feather, has been trained to bark when she points. Saul fires at the sound of their wings. Partridge—he's quite lucky with partridge. They *whir,* you know . . ."

"No kidding?" Tom, a demon-hunter himself, could not help a boyish exclamation at her words. "Say, honey, did you hear what . . . ?"

HE TURNED to Jean—and broke off as their eyes met. The gracious air of hospitality about this old house, with its tiny silver-haired hostess and its giant black menial, was an insidious force disarming and relaxing him like the fire blazing on the hearth. His eyes traveled swiftly over the other occupants of the room—transients, evidently; a hodgepodge assortment of tourists who were acquainted neither with Miss Addie nor with one another.

His alert gaze singled out one —an elderly man wearing, of all things, a pair of stained overalls and a battered old straw-hat. He was pacing about nervously, a distraught look on his weather-beaten face, when Miss Addie moved to his side with the casual air of a good hostess drifting about among her guests.

"Can I get you something, sir?" she asked in that caroling voice like a songbird's. "Do sit down by the fire and rest yourself. You mustn't fret. Really, there's nothing to worry about . . . *now.*"

The old man, a farmer from his speech and dress, gave her a quick, seemingly desperate look, twisting his gnarled hands together.

"Ma'm—how'd I git here?" he blurted all at once, in a voice edged with hysteria. "I . . . I don't recollect *nothin'* . . .! Except, I went out to put the cow in the barn, h'it was a-rainin' so hard. And then that sharp pain struck me, right here in the chest! I called to Sarah, that's m' sister, she's bedridden . . . And I kinda remember walking along some dark *road* or other . . . Then, all at once, I'm *here!* . . . Who . . .? Where . . .? I got to git back to Sarah! She can't *do* for herself! She's paralyzed . . . !"

"There, there." Miss Addie's quiet voice edged into his outburst, like a lark's singing in a lull of gunfire. "You mustn't be frightened or worried about your sister. Someone will take care of her. I'll phone the county health officer, if you'll tell me your name and address. . . ."

"Wilkins. I got a little farm," the man blurted out eagerly. "Two mile east of Hopper's Ferry, on Highway 6. There's . . . there's just me and m' sister. But I got a boy in Atlanta! He'd come a-runnin' if he knew his aunt . . . if he knew I . . . *No!*" He shook his head stubbornly. "No, I got to git back someway! There's the stock, and there's my crop o' cotton. . . ."

"Please." The mistress of Faraday House spoke again, melting his hysteria with gentleness. "You must get hold of yourself. *And . . . you must realize that you can't go back. You can only go . . . on, Mr. Wilkins.*"

Frankly eavesdropping, Tom and Jean stared at each other in blank astonishment. *Why* couldn't this frantic old farmer go back to his work and his bedridden sister? Why was Miss Addie telling him that in such a sad, gentle manner? Her soothing voice was insistent, almost hypnotic. Under its spell, a drowsy peace pervaded the room. Its occupants stopped shifting about. Voices lowered to a calmer pitch. . . .

Jean started. Something like a chill breeze had brushed her bare arm. Looking down, she was

aware of a thin, hollow-eyed little girl, about seven years old, staring up at her with an almost terrifying intensity. She was wearing. . . . Jean gasped. Why, the child had on a pink flannel nightgown, and was barefooted! Perhaps she had wandered downstairs, she decided quickly, away from sleeping parents yet unaware that she had slipped out of bed.

The child's lips parted slowly in a vague, wistful smile.

"Are . . . are you my mother?" she whispered unexpectedly. "Daddy said I would . . . would see my Mommy soon! But I don't . . ." The thin mouth quivered. "I don't know what she *looks* like! She went away when I was borned, and . . . and there was only a snapshot Daddy had. Her hair was long and goldy, like yours!" she added, hopefully. "You *do* look kind of like the picture . . . !"

JEAN'S heart contracted. She reached out to gather the child into her embrace. *Poor little thing,* she thought fiercely. Deserted once by her mother, and now tossed back to her by a father who evidently did not want her either. . . ! Her reaching hands almost touched the thin arms. But shyly, fearfully, the little girl backed away at her words:

"Darling—no. No, I'm not your Mommy . . . But aren't you cold, running around in your little nightgown and bare feet?" Jean smiled and held out a hand coaxingly. "Come let me take you back up to your room. Is your Daddy asleep upstairs? Does he know you've slipped out . . . ?"

The child's dark eyes stared up at her. The pale lips puckered—with disappointment, or bewilderment, or something Jean could not define.

"I . . . don't know where my Daddy is, either!" she whimpered, near tears. "He was at the hospistle, right by my bed. And he . . . he was *crying!* And telling me about my Mommy, about how I'd be seeing her soon . . . You're *sure* you're not my . . .?" she asked again, with pathetic eagerness.

Tom and Jean exchanged a helpless look, torn with pity.

At that instant, Miss Addie drifted over to them, smiling kindly from the child to Jean in a way that puzzled the newlyweds.

"Look over there in that glass case!" the old lady said cheerily to the little girl. "It's just chockfull of china dollies I used to play with, when *I* was a little girl! That's the one. Yes! . . ." As the child, bemused, moved toward the cabinet across the room, the old lady sighed. "Oh *dear!*" she murmured. "It's always like this with the children.

Unless someone who's gone . . . on ahead comes back for them, to show them the way. Did she mention a mother?" Miss Addie asked hopefully.

"Why . . .why, yes!" Jean and Tom, over the silvery head, exchanged a shocked look. "A mother who deserted her as a baby! Who's supposed to meet her and . . . Look," Jean snapped. "You don't mean that poor little tike has nobody *with* her? She's traveling *alone?*"

"Most of them are." Miss Addie shrugged cryptically. "That's . . . that's why they stop here. Because they can't go back, of course—and they're afraid to go on. You're two of the *lucky* ones!" Her faded blue eyes traveled sadly from Tom to Jean. "You're together, so it isn't as . . . confusing. Oh *mercy!*" She broke off, fluttering her ivory fan in delicate agitation. "Can't you take the child on with you, if no one comes for her? The older ones do that, lots of times. Really, she'd be no trouble."

Jean gaped at her. *"Take . . .?* You're asking *us* to . . .?"

She broke off, startled, as wind or a sudden freshet of rain clattered a window of the firelit room. Glancing toward the sound, the honeymooners pointed and cried out at sight of a dim face pressed against the panes—a woman's face, framed by long flowing hair the color of Jean's.

AT THEIR exclamation, the little girl, peeking forlornly at Miss Addie's doll-collection, turned. An expression of wonder and delight illuminated her thin features at sight of the face outside the window.

"Mommy! There's my Mommy . . .! I'd know her anywhere . . . !"

The words seemed torn from her, a glad cry, trailing after her as she pelted, barefoot, into the hall. The dim face vanished from the window, and Jean and Tom heard the front door open and close. But what amazed them most was the look of beaming complacence on the face of old Miss Faraday, fluttering her dainty fan with a new composure.

"Well," the old lady said in pleased voice, *"that's* settled. And now, if I can only make that poor Mr. Wilkins understand! Saul tells me I *simply can't* afford any more long-distance calls, or I'd just phone that son of his in Atlanta . . . Hmm. There must be *some* way to help . . . !"

Pursing her wrinkled lips, Miss Addie bustled across the room to another guest—a disheveled youth with a nasty-looking bruise on his forehead. The honeymooners glanced at each other sharply as the old lady's clear, birdlike tones drifted to their ears:

"Young man . . .? Are you quite comfortable? Is there any-

thing you'd like? Anyone I can . . . notify?"

The boy, a defiant look on his face, glared up at her from where he sat, hunched on a brocade loveseat. He reached into his sport jacket, mouth quivering, then searched another pocket, muttering under his breath.

"Nah!" he snarled. "How'd I get here? Tell me that! I know when my jaloppy blew a tire . . . but after that, I . . . I . . . Who brought me here? What kind of a joint *is* this, anyhow? And how much is it gonna cost me? . . . And where the hell is my pint?" His voice rose, savagely defensive, like that of a wild creature trapped in an animal-pit. "I had almost half a pint left in my . . . !"

Miss Addie sat down beside him serenely, not ruffled in the least by his youthful belligerence.

"Your whiskey?" she said pleasantly. "Perhaps you drank it, son, and . . . and threw the flask away, just before your . . . your accident . . . So *many* of them these days!" She clucked her tongue sadly. "I've had seven this month, would you believe it? Young people, all of them. *So* young, like yourself—with so many good years ahead of you!"

The boy's face twitched. Bleary eyes peered at Miss Addie as through a fog, widening slowly as he seemed to understand more than her casual conversation offered on the surface.

"You . . . you mean I'm . . .?" Tom and Jean heard his hoarse, frightened curse. "That quick, huh?" His defiant mouth twisted wryly, his fingers snapping with a small *pop* that might have been a twig breaking on the hearth. "Just like that, and it's all over?"

OLD MISS FARADAY smiled. "All over? My *dear!* It's only the *beginning!* 'To sleep; perchance to dream . . .' That was what bothered Hamlet, you know. Because, he wasn't *sure* it was the end. Just *pouf!* Just . . . oblivion. Which, of course, it *isn't!*" The ivory fan fluttered, almost flirtatiously, in front of the young man's face. "That's what these poor—well, the ones who do it themselves, believing it's a way out—That's what *they* discover, almost at once! There was one who came here last April, a young girl who had . . . ah, made rather a mess of her life and had decided she couldn't face the music. But, naturally," Miss Addie's cheery laugh rose above the subdued murmur of other voices in the quiet room, "she still had the same problems. Only, she couldn't *get at* them. She couldn't go back and work them out, poor and . . . and fix things. She had around here, weeping and blaming herself, for weeks! Because there was a very simple solution

to her problem, if she'd only sat down and thought it out, instead of . . . But then, of course," the old lady shrugged placidly, "it was too late. She couldn't go back and . . .and fix things. She had to go on, with her life ahead complicated by what she had left undone. . . . Poor child! If she'd only used her . . . her body more constructively, while she had one."

The boy hunched beside her nodded miserably. "Yeah . . . That goes for me, too, huh?"

"That goes for everybody, at some time or another," Miss Addie said gently. "So, it's wicked to complicate . . . living for those we leave behind us to straighten out. You understand?"

The youth jerked his head in another helpless nod. "Sure, sure! *Now* you tell me—!" he burst out, bitterly sarcastic.

"Why, I'm pretty sure your parents told you the same thing," old Miss Faraday said, in a mildly chiding manner. "Or your pastor, or some favorite teacher. Or . . . well, if you had any gumption, you'd have just figured it out for yourself!"

The boy grinned sheepishly. "All right! So I knew better! What do I do now? How can I . . . ?" His face crumpled again in sudden youthful dismay. "How can I ever make it up to Mom? And . . . and Dad? What can I *do . . . ?"*

Old Miss Faraday gave a little shrug, oddly comforting in its finality, despite its gentle reproof.

"You'll have to leave it up to your brothers and sisters, if you have any," she said briskly. "Maybe *they* can make up for . . . the things you say you've done or left undone. As for now," she smiled at the boy, not unkindly, "you must go on. And try to do better at . . . the next place. You realize," she added sternly, "you won't be given the same chances as . . . as, say, that old Mr. Wilkins over there? Poor man, he's done his best. So I'm sure he'll be given wonderful advantages where he's going. If he can only reconcile himself to the fact that he *can't go back!"*

JEAN and Tom, still frankly listening in on these double-entendre conversations, nudged each other. Their puzzled eyes drifted to a little group of three oddly-assorted people near the fireplace: a crabbed old man, a leggy bobby-soxer chewing gum, and a wizened little man with slanted eyes who looked as if he might be a Chinese laundryman. As they stared, Miss Addie drifted back to them, following their look with a faint smile.

"The 'flu epidemic," she explained lightly. "They've been comparing symptoms all evening! Ah, well—it gives them something in common," she laughed

with a gay flutter of her fan. "*They* won't be lonely on the way, those three, for all they're so different!"

Tom cleared his throat nervously. "Uh . . . I wonder, could we go up to our room now? And have that little snack you promised? Partridge!" He smacked his lips, winking at Jean. "I don't suppose you'd have any wine? A dry wine, like Sauterne?"

"Why, yes," their tiny hostess bobbed her silver head graciously, "I believe there's a bottle or two left, down in the wine cellar. My brother was fond of good wine," she said pleasantly, "though he never drank too much for . . . safety, like that nice boy over there. Such a biddable lad!" Miss Addie glanced back at him, still hunched on the loveseat with his tousled head in his hands. What a pity!"

"He . . . was in some kind of car accident?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Yes." The blue eyes flitted from him to Jean, with a sad look of understanding. "Like you two," and before they could correct her, she hurried on: "Saul will bring up your luggage presently . . . er . . . as soon as he can. Did you see a door just at the head of the staircase? That room will do nicely for you. Just go on up, won't you? I . . . I really must stay down here with these other poor dears. Some of them are . . . really quite troubled, as I'm sure you've noticed. I must do what I can to . . . to comfort them. May I look in on you later in the evening?" She beamed at them, almost fatuously. "It's such a pleasure to have guests who have . . . well, as Saul says, decided to cooperate with the inevitable!"

"Yes . . . sure! D-drop up to see us later . . ." Tom gulped.

SWAPPING another bewildered look the honeymooners left the parlor with its queer collection of occupants, and mounted the great curving staircase that swept upward from the hall. Pressed close to his side, Jean whispered:

"What's going *on* here? That weird old lady! Telling everybody they 'can't go back', that they must 'go on'! And that little girl . . . ! Why, she ran out into the rain in her *nightgown,* Tom! And Miss Faraday didn't even try to stop her! And that poor old farmer—*why* can't he go on back to his sister who's bedridden? Did you ever *hear* anything like that old woman . . .?"

"No, I never did!" Her husband laughed shortly. "You know what I think?" he growled. "I think that big Negro picked my pocket as I came in the door! And . . . and they're going to steal our luggage and maybe sell the car. . . . Look, baby," he

stopped grimly on the stairway, listening to the faint voices below, "we're getting out of here! We . . . why, I wouldn't spend the night in a creep-joint like this for all the tea in . . . *Oh-oh!*"

His words ended in a curse. At the head of the dim-lighted stairway the giant Negro, Saul, was looming like a dark genie waiting to show them into their room. There was a tray in his great ham-like hand—a tray set for two, with a delicious-looking grilled partridge for each of them, and a wicker-covered bottle of Sauterne. In spite of how his stomach knotted with apprehension, Tom's mouth watered. They had not eaten, he remembered, since breakfast—many hours and miles away from this strange old house just north of the Florida Line.

"Miss Addie say, 'Put dem young honeymooners in de Lavendar Room'!" The tall servant was prattling, again bowing and gesturing them through an open door. "And here de partridge and de wine y'all done ordered, suh. Compliments o' de house! . . . *All dis-yeah good food,*" his childish voice sank to a mumble, *"goin to waste! Cook, cook, cook!"* Saul mumbled pettishly. *"Don' nobody but me and Miss Addie eat ary bite o' all dem victuals! Feather, he goin live high dis week! Us two cain't eat all dat stuff she tell me to fix for de guests . . . !"*

Hesitantly, rolling their eyes at eath other, Tom and Jean entered the bedroom, not daring to antagonize that giant black. Blind he might be—but he could crush them between those two great hands, wring their necks like chickens before they could cry out. *If,* Tom thought helplessly, any of those bizarre people downstairs would come to their aid . . . !

"Th-thanks," he stammered, as Saul lit a beautiful hand-painted lamp beside the tester-bed and set his loaded tray alongside it. "Er . . . I'd like to tip you, but I . . . I don't seem to have any change on me . . ." Tom fumbled in his pockets again, a reflex-action. "You didn't find my wallet outside in the drive did you? And what about our luggage?"

The agate-eyes of the blind Negro fixed on a point above his head, polite but sulky—as though Tom should have known better than to ask such a foolish question, As no doubt he should have, Tom thought grimly!

"Nawsuh. Ain't see no wallet, ain't had time to tote yo' luggage. . . . *Wallet! Luggage!"* the childish voice fell to mumbling again, pettishly. *"Be mighty nice, now, if we did git holt o' some change-money! What wid de taxes pilin' up, an' us needin' a new well-pump, an' . . . Ma'm?"* The white eyes fixed on Jean as she whispered something urgent-

ly to Tom about getting out of there, possibly by the back door.

"N-nothing!" Jean quavered. "I . . . I was just saying what a pretty room this is!" she chattered nervously. "This lovely old four-poster bed . . ."

"Yas'm," Saul bobbed politely. "Dis-yeah Miss Addie's room. Ain't no others cleaned up . . . *And I ain't fixin' to do no dustin,' and makin' beds nobody don't sleep in!*" the huge Negro was mumbling again. "*Miss Addie say, "Have everthing like it was jest nachel. But I say, ain't no sense in it! Dem guests o' her'n ain't goin' eat nothing', ain't goin' sleep in no bed, and de biggest balance of 'em don't stay no time a-tall . . . ! In and out, in and out . . . !*" The mumble continued irascibly, until at Tom's cough, Saul asked: "Anything else I can do for y'all, suh and ma'm? Miss Addie say, make you comf'able . . ."

"Oh, we're . . . very comfortable!" Tom managed, scanning the big high-ceilinged bedroom for another exit. There was only one, he saw with a sinking heart; and doubtless this ebon giant would station himself outside that door to make sure they did not escape.

"Den I'll bid you a good night, suh and ma'm!" Saul, with another old-world bow, backed through the door, but called back: "Miss Addie say she'll drap up to see y'all in a few minutes, after she 'tend to de other guests."

"Er . . . that's nice!" Jean said brightly, but as the door closed, her face took on an expression of dismay. "Oh, *Tom!*" she whimpered. "What are they planning? How can we get out of this . . . this . . . ? That old lady is as crazy as a loon; you realize that, don't you?"

Her young husband nodded grimly. He tugged at his collar. "Yeah! That's pretty obvious! The thing I *don't* know is, what she has that big ogre of a servant *do* to her 'overnight guests!' Is this one of those murder-for-profit inns you read about . . .? Aw, honey!" his tone changed quickly as Jean's eyes dilated with terror. "I didn't mean to scare you. We'll get out of this . . . somehow!"

His pretty bride sank down on the tester-bed, removing her little flower hat and kicking off her shoes. The feather mattress sank under her invitingly, and she lay back, closing eyes dark-circled with fatigue.

"This is wonderful! I'm so-o tired. . . . It seems we've been driving forever . . ."

Tom was eyeing the tray of partridge and wine. Tentatively he nibbled a piece, then shrugged and opened the wicker-covered bottle.

"If this is poisoned," he said

airily, "it's a pleasant way to go! Mm-*mm!*" He smacked his lips over the delicate fowl. "Have some, honey?"

Jean grinned, and held out her hand for a browned wing. "What can we lose?" she pointed out wryly. "Oh, darling, I'm . . . I'm *scared!* What if . . . if they mean to . . . ?"

She stopped speaking, with a gasp as a light knock sounded on the bedroom door.

"It's only I!" Miss Faraday's birdlike carol came through the closed portal. "May I come in?"

"Y-yes! Yes, come in . . . !" Jean called, sitting up with a panicky look at her husband.

They braced themselves as the door swung open, prepared for anything—even the sight of gigantic Saul following his mistress in with an axe in his great hands.

But Miss Addie was alone. She tiptoed in, still winnowing her small fan with coquettish grace, and sat down in a lovely old chair beside the bed. Tom and Jean watched her warily as she beamed up at them, sadness and humor an odd mixture in her expression.

"Well!" she said merrily. "I see you've made yourselves right at home. Saul will bring up your . . . er . . . luggage in a little while," she added in the placating voice of an adult promising a crying child the moon. "In the meanwhile, you just . . . rest. Hm? And . . . ah . . . accustom yourselves to . . . to . . . the realization that, although where you're going will be *different,* it won't necessarily be *worse* than . . . well, what you've just left behind!" she finished, like a diplomat carefully wording an important speech. "Are you beginning to understand? It's only that everyone fears change, and tries to cling to the familiar, the well-known . . ."

Tom did not dare look at his young wife. Elaborately casual, he strolled over to the bedside table again and took another delicious morsel from the tray. Somewhere he had heard that if one would humor a lunatic, and then carefully divert his attention from his obsession. . . .

"Wonderful food . . . !" he murmured, and was opening his mouth for another bite when he noticed Miss Faraday staring at him. Her expression was that of supreme shock, bordering on consternation. She stood up, pointing a shaky finger at him.

"Why, you . . . you're *eating!*" she gasped. "And . . . and drinking!"

Tom lowered the morsel of bird and the tiny wine glass, stiffening. He looked at Jean, who was clutching her throat.

"Yes!" Tom snapped. "Of course I'm eating. Is the food poisoned?"

"No! No, certainly not!" Miss Addie panted, sinking back into her chair as if the shock of what she saw was too much. "It's only that . . . that . . . none of them ever . . . I mean, they only *think* they're hungry. It's just a thought-habit carried over from . . . from . . ."

She was interrupted by a loud hammering on the door. It burst open, and the blind Negro, drenched to the skin, plunged into the room. A damp wallet—Tom's wallet—was clutched in his outthrust black hand.

"Miss Addie!" he burst out in agitation. "Dey's a *car* out yonder in de driveway! I run slap into it a minute ago, when I went out to call Feather in out'n de rain! And . . . and he was totin' somep'm around in his fool mouth, like he always do—a slipper, or anything he pick up." Dark sensitive fingers ran over the object, seeing what the blind eyes could not. "Feel like a man's wallet! And hit's plumb full o' foldin'-money!"

"It's mine," Tom snapped, reaching out and taking it from the trembling black hand almost bruskly. "I *told* you I must have dropped it when we . . ."

"*Saul*—!" Miss Addie was fluttering her fan again, with a visible effort at composure. "Saul," she interrupted, half in dismay, half in amusement, "these two guests aren't like the others. They . . . I realized it when I saw this nice young man eating your partridge."

"*Eatin'!*" The white eyes bulged in the ebon face. "Y-you mean dey ain't . . . ?"

"No," Miss Addie began to laugh weakly. "No, Saul, they're just like us." She turned to Jean and Tom then, with a gracious smile of apology. "You poor children! Stumbling out of the storm into a . . . a place like this! I naturally thought you were one of the usual . . . ah . . . travelers who stop here. We haven't had a genuine paying-guest," she confessed gaily, "for over ten years!"

THE tall Negro grinned feebly, nodding. "Naw'm. Sho' ain't." His face brightened as Tom shoved a damp bill into his hands. He felt it lovingly with a big calloused thumb. "*Money!*" he said with a happy grunt. "Us sho' could *use* some! Them as ain't alive might not need it no mo', Miss Addie. But us two is *still livin'!*"

"From hand to mouth," Miss Addie said cheerfully. "Still . . ." She lifted her silver head proudly, "I haven't had to mortgage Faraday House. We manage. Of course, my hospital bills took all our savings—everything but the place and a few acres. Saul hunts and farms, even raises a little livestock. Now and then I sell

off one of the family heirlooms when we're desperate for cash. . . . But, there!" she broke off, engagingly. "I mustn't burden two lovebirds with my silly troubles! I only hope," she smiled apology once more, "that what you've seen here hasn't . . . upset you too much?"

Jean and Tom smiled back at her unsteadily. There was something so disarming about this sprightly old lady. And yet, obviously, she was a mental case! They stiffened once more at her next words; offered in a light conversational tone as if she were talking about the weather.

"You see, *they've* been coming here—the lost, bewildered ones like those you saw downstairs in the parlor—for eight years. Or is it nine?" she interrupted herself to peer up, bird-wise, at the giant Negro. "How long, Saul? Wasn't it 1945 when that policeman wandered in here, saying he had been shot in a hold-up, in Traceyville? Poor thing! He kept trying to call headquarters, to give them a description of the bandit who shot him and wounded that gas-station attendant! As if it mattered to him *then!* Although," Miss Addie laughed, "we didn't realize . . . *what he was.* Not until after Saul took him upstairs. I called a doctor. But when we went up to the room, he was gone! There wasn't even any blood on the bedsheets and pillow, of course. Because . . . *they* have no substance. He only *thought* of himself as bleeding; so that's how I saw him, before he went on."

OVER her head, warily, Tom and Jean locked glances. *Crazy!* their eyes exchanged wordlessly. *But, harmless?* When would her lunacy take a dangerous turn . . . ?

"Entirely weightless and without force of any kind," Miss Addie went on brightly. "That business about chain-rattling is ridiculous! They can't move solid objects, any more than a . . . a TV image could! Why, they can't possibly harm anyone or help one, either. That's what bothers them. One minute they can eat, drink, move heavy objects, fight, and so on. Then . . . *pouf!* They're no more than smoke. A thought-form, as I said. What we see is simply a . . . a *picture* of them, as they remember themselves. If they thought of themselves naked," the old lady tittered naughtily, "why, that's how we'd see them! But they think *clothes,* as well as *hair* and *skin* and so on. Even watches and jewelry, sometimes! Anything they feel strongly was a part of their personality in the . . . the material world they have just left. Of course, to *see* them, one must be either psychic . . . or very tired, ill, or feverish—

any condition that would let the Sixth Sense come into play."

"Oh! I . . . I see," Jean gulped. "What you're trying to tell us," she stammered lamely, "is that . . . those people downstairs are . . . are all . . . ?"

"Yes," old Miss Faraday inclined her head daintily. "Quite right, my dear. I don't know why they come *here!*" She laughed, with a merry flirt of the little fan. "Unless," she pursed her lips pensively, "it's because *I* died, and they feel a . . . a sort of kinship . . ."

Jean rolled her eyes at her husband. Tom, sipping his wine, choked.

"You . . . *d-died?*" he coughed. "Then you think you . . . uh . . . I mean, you're like them, too?"

"Oh, no!" Miss Addie emitted a silvery laugh full of innocent merriment. "No, no, I'm very much alive *now*. As alive as you are, you two nice young people! But I did die, about ten years ago—1943, wasn't it, Saul? Medically, you understand. There are degrees of death, as it is accepted by . . . ha, ha! What we call scientific fact." The fan brushed away Science airily, as if it were an annoying insect. "Some years ago, if breathing stopped, one was considered dead. But then they found a way to use artificial respiration, and make the lungs work again. Before that, consciousness was considered 'life'—and the unconscious were medically 'dead.' Many people in a state of trance were even buried alive, during the early days of medicine. But medicine is making such strides, there may come a day when the soul can be switched from one body to another! Naturally, a body is only a clumsy container for one's real *self* . . ."

Tom ran his finger around under his collar, moving across the room to Jean's side. They sat, very close together, under the canopy of the big bead where General Beauregarde, or Robert E. Lee, might very well have slept once. The old lady's matter-of-fact voice, reeling out mad words that, somehow, sounded so amazingly sane, held them spellbound with attention.

"Later in this century," Miss Faraday was saying, "a person was not pronounced 'dead' unless he had no pulse. Stimulants were used to start it up again; but if they failed, that was all. And that," she announced blandly, "was what happened to *me*. My heart stopped beating during an emergency operation to remove my appendix. Right there on that very bed you're sitting on! It was too late to rush me twenty-eight miles to the hospital in Mentonia. So . . . I died. My spirit left my body."

The newlyweds gaped at her.

Miss Addie chuckled at their expressions.

"That is," she continued, her faded eyes twinkling, "I was dead for about thirty seconds. The doctor Saul phoned was out, and a young assistant came in his place. It was he who operated . . . and he had once happened to witness a miracle-operation by one of the big surgeons at Johns-Hopkins. A . . . a *tho* . . ."

The old lady wrestled with her failing memory, then came up with the medical term: "A *thoroctomy*. You know? Where the surgeon opens the chest cavity and massages the heart until it starts beating again? This young doctor of mine decided to try it on me. I was dead—so there was nothing to lose, he figured. And it worked!" Miss Addie bowed, fluttering her fan complacently. "I was brought back from the dead. Like Lazarus —poor man!" she added thoughtfully. "I know now why he was so *quiet,* afterward. There's so much I could tell you!" she sighed. "But I can't prove it, so nobody would believe me. Therefore, I've just learned to keep my mouth shut, and let them find out for themselves! Everyone will find out—sooner or later."

The newlyweds pressed closer together, disturbed yet soothed by an air of calm knowledge in their hostess's manner. Rain whispered against the windowpanes. Somewhere a dog howled mournfully, as though to emphasize the old lady's last sentence.

"Dat Feather!" Saul grunted suddenly, jolting them from their dream-like trance. "Hollerin' his haid off 'cause he wet and cold! I'm got to go down and fotch him into de kitchen . . ." Still mumbling, the blind giant lumbered out, groping his way with uncanny accuracy through the old house he had grown up in, and which was his whole world.

MISS ADDIE glanced after him fondly. She sighed. "My, I don't know how I'd get along without Saul! He's the grandson of a Faraday slave, and I'm willing this place to him when I die. . . . When I *really* die!" she added, with a twinkle of humor in her eyes. "He does put up with a lot from me, Saul

does. Especially about my . . . overnight guests! He can't see them, of course, and he *claims* he can't hear them! Whether it's only because they make so much extra work for him, I don't know," she smiled. "I . . . try to make them feel as natural as possible when they come here," she explained gently. "Poor things—they fight against going, some of them! Most are just . . . bewildered. All they want is . . . well, road-information. Or just a place to pause and think, until they get over the shock of suddenly being dead!"

"Oh! Oh, yes . . . I . . . I can see that," Jean managed a sickly smile. She squeezed Tom's hand, unseen by the old lady, signalling him as she said: "It's . . . been wonderful, stopping by here. And we want to pay for the full night. But . . . we really must go on, now that the storm has slacked up some. Er . . . . what we wanted, too, was road-information. Are we far from Eltonville? I have an aunt there," she lied desperately. "We . . . er . . . we promised to stay overnight with her, and if we don't do it, this near . . . I'm sure you understand?"

Old Miss Faraday's blue eyes searched Jean's face knowingly. She smiled, with a tiny, almost invisible shrug.

"Of course, dear," she said graciously. "Of course I understand. Eltonville is only eight miles on from here. A nice hotel there. Really, a haunted house," her eyes twinkled, "is no place for a honeymoon. Eh?"

"Oh, I . . . I didn't mean . . . !" Jean floundered. "It's only that . . ."

"Yes!" Tom came to her rescue. "This aunt of my wife's—she's expecting us. And if we don't come rolling in sometime tonight, she's liable to think . . . uh . . ."

". . . that you've joined my . . . my 'overnight guests?' " the old lady finished, with a sly wink. "You may have noticed my sign as you drove in," she added, with girlish giggle of mirth. "Did you look at it closely? You know, I sometimes wonder if *it* isn't the reason they use Faraday House as a . . . a sort of way station, I call it. I wonder if there are other way stations, like this one? Places where they . . . ? If I were sure it *wasn't* what brings them here, I'd take it down—that sign." She smiled. "We really don't take overnight guests any more. At least, not the kind who expect A-1 accommodations! I'm too old . . . and it makes too much work for Saul, cleaning and carrying luggage and the like. Besides," Miss Addie said complacently, "I manage to get along without money, in this little halfway house of mine!

Halfway between life and death, one might say. . . . Oh! You leaving now? I'll see you to the door . . ."

STEERING down the winding gravel drive a few moments later, Tom and Jean looked back through the rain at the big white-columned house. They had left, they realized, in rather an abrupt hurry—without even a glance into that peaceful, firelit parlor, where had been assembled such an unusual assortment of people. Bidding Miss Addie good-bye hastily, they had dashed out to the little car standing in the rain —almost tripping over a friendly-looking Irish setter, which trotted back into the house at a whistle from the butler. The great front door had not even closed before Tom started the motor and took off in second-gear.

But now, at the end of the driveway, Tom braked the car, strangely loathe to lose sight of that hospitable old mansion, with its quaint bird-like hostess and childlike black genie of a servant. They turned, looking back for a long thoughtful moment. Then Tom laughed shortly, patting his young bride on the knee.

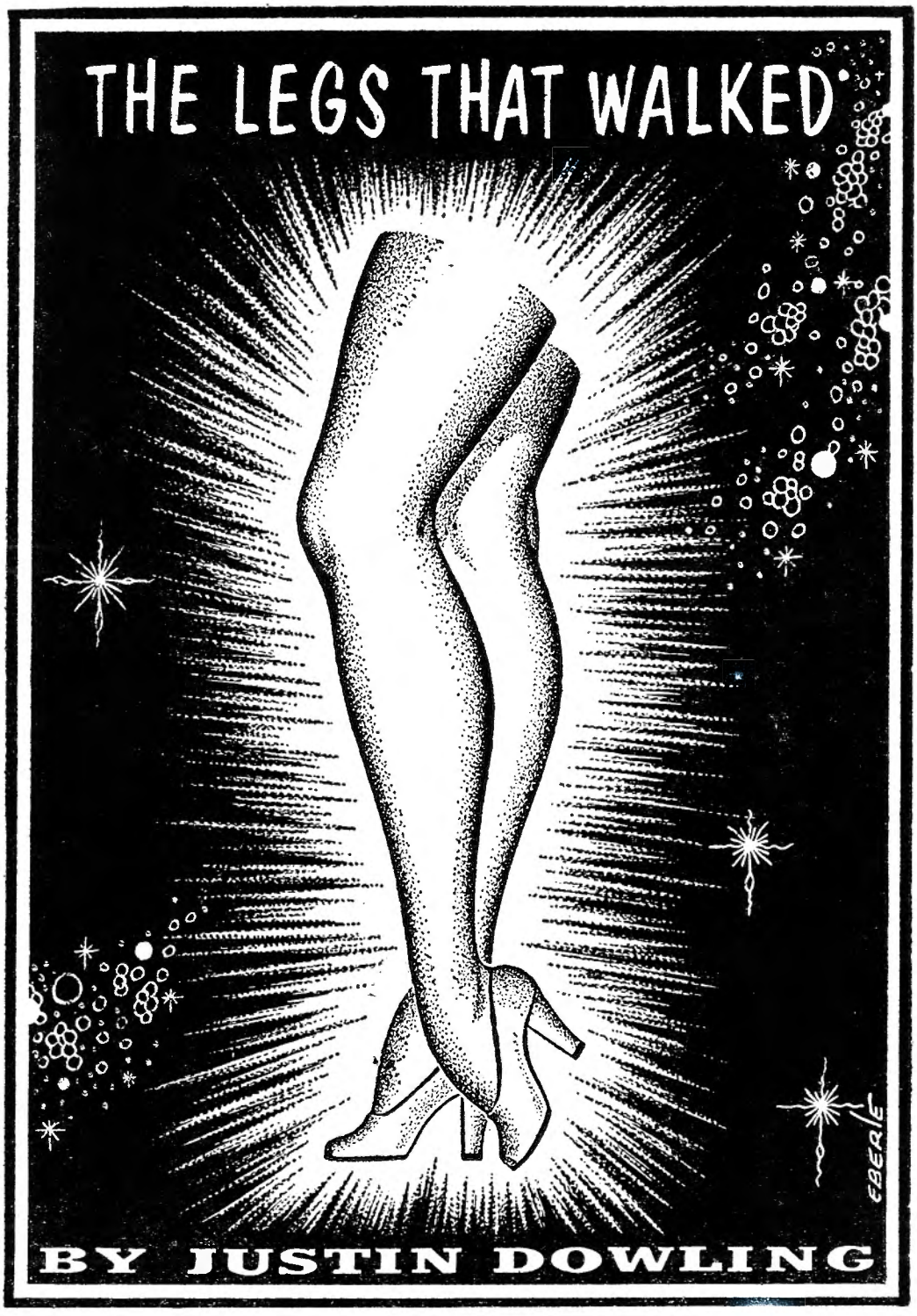
"Of course you know," he chuckled, "those . . . *guests* weren't there at all. We've been victims of mass-hypnosis. What with that old lady's insane play-acting, and our own exhaustion . . . why, we were a push-over!"

Jean laughed shakily, snuggling against him. "Hypnosis?" she echoed obediently. "She believed so firmly, she made us believe? Naturally—" Her tone became brisk and matter-of-fact, if still a bit quavery—"there is no such thing as a . . . a . . ." She broke off abruptly, pointing up at Miss Addie's gatepost, now more visible since the rain had slacked to a drizzle. *"Tom!"* she whispered. *"That sign of hers. . . .* Look at it! *That's* what she was talking about: that maybe *it* was what drew them here! . . . See what the wind and rain have done to those letters, the *u* and the *e* in *Guests . . .?"*

Her husband craned to see . . . and gave a yelp of mirth. Jean giggled. They were still laughing—gaily, intimately, somehow no longer afraid of being parted by a grim shadow called *Death*—as they drove on down the highway through the rain-swept night.

For, what the sign on the gatepost, on closer inspection, had seemed rakishly to advertise was:

FARADAY HOUSE
Miss Adelaide Faraday, Prop.
Overnight Ghosts



Heading by Joseph Eberle

When a man's hobby is collecting legs they should at least stay on their shelves.

I FIRST saw the legs that walked in a thunder storm. Which made it worse. But having seen them once I had to see them again.

They did that to you. They did it to Mr. Peach too who owned them.

I was one of the first to meet Mr. Peach when he bought the old widow's gloomy house on the corner. We became friendly and I used to drop in after supper for a chat and a cup of China tea with lemon.

He attracted me because there was something in his pale eyes which I could not fathom, something which I knew was haunting him but which he hid so cleverly.

It was not until I had known him nearly a year and had seen him grow old and gray under my eyes that he told me about his queer obsession.

(. . . *He collected legs!*. . .)

He said that he had collected hundreds of them—mostly of famous men and women. He had built them up from descriptions he had found in books while others he had created from photographs and statues.

He made them from a special wax which he had brought back from China.

Naturally I was interested and asked him to show them to me. That mysterious look kindled in his eyes. He said, "Sorrison. I am too scared!"

"Why?" I asked. "What on earth is there to be afraid of in a lot of legs?"

His eyes clouded; drops of sweat gathered on the back of his hands making the hairs blacker. The blood drained from his lips.

He said: "There is something to be afraid of. Something terrible. Something which is driving me insane. Something from which I cannot escape. You must not go down there!"

"Rot," I answered severely, "I am not frightened. There is not a leg in the world that can scare me."

"All right," he said, "tomorrow night. If I am still alive!"

On the way home I pondered over his queer hobby. There must be some reason for it. What would a psychologist do? Probe back to his youth? Find out that at some tender age someone had laughed at his legs —this gave him an inferiority complex. So he collected legs when he grew up to prove to himself that his were as good as anybody else's.

But this fear of his? What was that? Persecution mania? I gave it up.

When I arrived the next evening he seemed normal. "Well, I said, "you are still alive, I see." He laughed.

"I did not go down there last night."

"I cannot wait," I said.

While we had our cup of tea the storm came up suddenly, the first indication we had of it was a low rumbling and the dipping on and off of the lights.

"Let us go down," he said.

Mr. Peach kept his collection in the basement and as we went down a flight of stone steps to it I could hear the rain weeping against the walls outside while the wind rattled the windows.

The basement was a large room with low rafters. Stacked row upon row were his collection of legs. Each pair was neatly labeled with the birth and death of their owners.

He had divided them up into sections starting with the early days of Rome and Greece through to the Renaissance; Reformation and up to our twentieth century.

It would have been impossible to have looked at each pair. In any case I did not think it over interesting. Queer, decidedly qucer, but to me the legs held little fascination. I glanced at one or two as we walked through the room.

The early century chorus girls interested me for a moment. A flash of lightning and an extra loud crack of thunder dipped the lights again.

It was then that I had a feeling that something was alive but it passed as quickly as the lights came on again.

There was only one window in the basement and it was covered by a heavy, velvet curtain.

"Well," I said to him, "you have an extraordinary collection here. Unique I should say. But nothing of a frightening nature."

His face was the color of sawdust. Once more I saw the drops of perspiration springing up on the back of his hands, matting the black hairs.

Had he also sensed that aliveness? Absurd! It was the storm and all these stupid legs in their bodiless rows!

He whispered: "Come and see."

He led me to the far end of the room where in an alcove stood something covered in a cloth. Thunder shook the room. He flicked off the cloth. It was a glass case mounted on blocks with a gold rope ringing it.

The label read: "The Unknown Woman." I looked at the legs in the case.

They were perfect; exquisite in their symmetry; exact in their length; delicate in their coloring. I stared fascinated—the exotic curve from the knees to the thighs, a deeper white than the

rest of the legs; the calves flexed but smoothly supple; the ankles thin yet strong; the feet small and delicately formed.

Of all the legs I had seen these were the most realistic—almost alive!

Mr. Peach spoke startling me as a clap of thunder shook the room: "What do you think of them?"

HE STOOD close behind me breathing heavily down my neck. His eyes were wide and frightened. Water dripped off the back of his hands.

"I think they are wonderfully made," I answered. "They almost look alive!"

He caught me fiercely in the fleshy part of my thigh so that I cried out. He moaned: "Alive! Alive! You are right. They *are* alive!"

I thought: Had the man gone mad? Had continual staring at these legs affected his mind?

He pushed me back until I stood ten paces from the case. Then he went over to the switch. "Watch," he said.

The room was plunged into darkness. Thunder rumbled under my feet. Lightning flashing outside penetrated the curtain giving the case a weird look.

Inside the case lights came on vividly outlining the beautiful legs. I blinked. Then I stepped back horrified.

The legs came marching towards me!

Marching. Marching straight at me! I shouted. I tried to ward them off. But they came on. With each clap of thunder they came. Came until they were about me.

Round my throat. Squeezing . . . squeezing . . . a vice grip which bit deep into my flesh. Choking me. Squeezing. . . .

When I opened my eyes I was back in the study on the couch; Mr. Peach bending over me.

"So they did it to you too. They did it to you too! Marched until they were about your throat!" he whispered.

I scrambled up and rushed to the side-board mirror.

There were no marks on my throat! Then I laughed and said: "What an extraordinary hallucination. Thank God it was a hallucination. What with that storm and the lightning flickering on and off those legs I imagined the things walked."

"They did," said Mr. Peach.

"But it is impossible," I said.

"They have done it to me, often. That was why I was afraid to ask you to see them. Now you will have to go back. Go back for more!"

"I shall certainly not go back," I said. "Though of course there is nothing to it. It was a hallucination. And hallucinations never happen a second time."

He shook his head. "You will

go back. They do that to you. Each time the squeezing gets worse. One day they will squeeze too hard!"

"Do not talk such nonsense," I said severely. "If you are afraid of them—burn them. Get rid of them and you will rid yourself of this optical illusion."

"No matter what we do now," he answered, "they will always come marching—alive. Alive to squeeze the throat until . . . death! There is no escape from the curse of the legs!"

"Where did you get them?" I asked, "out of a tomb in Egypt?"

"No. They were sent to me through the post—anonymously. Their beauty attracted me so I put them in the special case. Then one night. . . . You know the rest."

When I left his home later I believed that I would never return.

BUT I did. I wanted to prove to Mr. Peach how wrong he was and the sooner he saw a psychiatrist the better. It was a month later that I called again.

What I found astonished me. Mr. Peach had changed so completely. His shoulders sagged, his hair was grayer, his eyes puffed and tired, his mouth curled down at the corners.

The man was mentally sick. So sick that he hardly recognized me. When he did he whispered: "So you came back. So you came back."

I felt guilty at having neglected him. Was I too late to save his mind? I said: "Heavens—what have you been doing to yourself?"

But he went on whispering: "So you came back. So you came back!"

"Look here," I said, "I wish I had come sooner. I am going down there to bust forever this mad thing that has gripped your imagination like this. This time there is no storm to play tricks. When I walk up from there you will be free. Do you understand? A free man!"

But he stared in front of him without answering. Saliva drooled unheeded down his mouth. I decided to act promptly.

I hurried down the steps to the basement. I realized how on the other occasion my fears had been magnified by the storm. Now it seemed laughable. There was nothing to be afraid of now.

I stopped to look at one or two legs before going over to the case to remove the cloth.

The legs were the same. They were certainly well made but I had lost my awe for them. Bits of wax in a glass case!

Then I went over to the switch and flicked off the light. The room was even darker than it had been on that other occasion because the curtain effectively shut

out any light from the outside and there was no lightning to flash on and off.

I stood before the case and waited for the lights inside it to come on. When they did I found I was too far away and moved closer.

I halted—stupefied. Horrified. The legs were marching! Marching straight at me! I tried to turn and run but found myself rooted to the ground.

They were out of the case. Walking on air. Walking at the level of my head towards me. Walking in perfect rhythm.

Then they were about my throat. Firstly they gripped me between their calves—squeezing. As my breath gasped from my lips they slipped up until the thighs smothered my face.

Tighter. Tighter—they gripped. I could feel the flesh, alive. Alive—biting into my neck until I could breathe no more and my lungs hurt with a bursting tightness.

As I twisted to the floor the grip loosened—gradually. I fell clawing at the floor my chest heaving in great convulsions as I fought for air. Then there was no more pain—only blackness.

Something cold hit me in the face. I opened my eyes. My head throbbed. Mr. Peach stood over me with a bucket of water.

"So it was my imagination, was it? So they could not walk? So it was an optical illusion? Well you do not think so now, do you?"

He laughed hysterically. I knew then that he had been watching and that his last shred of sanity had vanished. Then I discovered that my hands were tied behind my back.

I was alone with a madman and a pair of legs that walked until . . . death!

Every now and then he laughed insanely and shook his head violently. He gibbered and muttered. I heard a word or two: "Came back. Illusion. Marching. Squeezing."

He held an iron bar in his hand and with it pushed me backwards. He thrust his bloated face near mine and slobbered at me: "Watch! Watch and see them. See them march to my throat where they belong!"

He let out another crazy laugh and went to the switch. I was afraid to move in the dark. He may have struck me with the iron bar.

The lights came on in the case. He stood there arm raised. He was going to fight the legs!

The legs stirred. They were through the glass. They made straight for him. It was a fantastic sight. He swing at them viciously with the bar.

A blow raised a huge weal on the left leg. Then I saw the trickle of blood and heard a low moan.

With a sudden swiftness the legs were about his throat. He twisted and turned, dropping the iron bar with a clatter.

He tore at the legs with his hands until the blood ran down over his hands and down his arms. Then his fingers went stiff. He lurched forward and fell onto his knees.

I could see the muscles on the legs tightening. Tighter! Tighter! There was blood all over his purple face—his eyes were pressed from his head—his twisted mouth stayed wide open.

The legs released their grip—and were gone. I rushed over to him. By the light from the case he looked a horrible sight. He was dead!

The legs were back in the case. Already the fingers of madness were about me. I tugged insanely at the ropes—they slipped. I was free.

The legs had not moved again. I stared and waited for them.

I wanted to share his fate. His agonizing death. Then I realized. The legs would never march again. Never move again. Never squeeze again.

They too were dead!

I rushed from the room for help. My half insane shouting at the servants stirred them into action and they phoned for a doctor and the police.

The anti-climax had nearly the effect of turning my brain completely. When I led them down to the basement they found Mr. Peach slumped on the ground. But there was no blood on his face. Nor did his eyes protrude from his face as I had seen them. There were no signs that he had been strangled.

"Heart failure," said the doctor. "But I will tell you for sure after a post mortem."

Dazed I walked over to the case. The legs were the same as before. They were free from any marks or scratchings!

Had I imagined the whole thing? Blood pounded into my head and I reeled dizzily. Then I crashed to the ground.

My break-down was a severe one. And it took me months of rest before I became well. With the help of a psychiatrist I convinced myself that the whole thing was a colossal hallucination.

Then one day I picked up an old paper. I read. "A pair of legs among the late Mr. Peach's collection of legs has been identified. They were his wife's preserved in an ingenious way. It is now alleged he must have murdered his wife and. . . ."

I read no more. I knew now there had been no hallucination. I knew now why the legs had marched until . . . death. I knew, and once more I was afraid. . . .

Only facts would interest the head of the Homicide Bureau; not fantasy.

THE RED BALLOON

BY Q. PATRICK

THE receptionist at the Braeside County Hospital was decidedly snooty. Nor did she condescend to remove her high hat even when I showed my press card from the *Sentinel Courier.* She had orders, she said.

I had orders, too, said I, and I fingered in my pocket the Colt .32 which I always carried when

Heading by Vincent Napoli

calling on any case which had the least whiff of homicide. Finally, I told her that if I couldn't see either Lieutenant Trant or Dr. Beardsley quick, pronto, *tout de suite,* there'd be an explosion which—

So she said she'd see.

The explosion, as it happened, had occurred two hours earlier. And I had, quite unwittingly, heard of it first from my young daughter Barbara, when I fetched her from a special Sunday School Class, around noon. She had simply said, "Something awfully funny happened to the two Greiser kids when we came out of school just now. Miss Bedford shooed us away, but there was a red balloon, and well, Ellie Spence said that the Greiser kids were hurt or something."

I had not given the matter another thought until the middle of our Sunday dinner, when the telephone started shrilling like mad. It was the Big Boss himself, so I knew it was important. Howward Greiser's two daughters had—well he didn't know what, but I was to get myself to the Braeside County Hospital at once and ask for either Dr. Beardsley or Trant. And since Trant's name was synonymous with Homicide, I presumed the Greiser children had been murdered, or at best kidnapped. Anyhow, it must have been something pretty sensational to get the Big Boss so excited on a Sunday. Hence my belligerency and the gun.

MEANWHILE the receptionist had been "seeing"—and finally a female appeared and beckoned. I followed her along subterranean corridors until we reached a room which, from its smell of formaldehyde, I knew to be the morgue. It was full of doctors, arguing, discussing or merely staring. Amongst them was my celebrated uncle, Professor Edgar Saltus.

The attention of them all was fixed on two small figures lying on marble slabs. I took one glimpse, and that was enough. The things—for one could scarcely call them human bodies—were shrivelled and shrunken like two little old monkeys, or like corpses deep-buried centuries ago.

They were, I presumed—and presumed rightly—the remains of the two Greiser children to whom, as Barbara had put it, "something awfully funny" had happened that noon. Quickly, fearfully, I dismissed the shuddering thought that one of those "things" might have been Barbara herself.

I was glad when Tim Trant detached himself from the medicos and came over to me. Though a traditional terror to the malefactor, Trant was as pleasant a fellow as one could wish to meet. We had been friends at Prince-

ton, and he gave the *Sentinal Courier* a break whenever possible.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested, much to my relief. In the passage we lit cigarettes and inhaled deeply.

"When I first heard about it," he said, "it sounded like another of those darn flying saucer scares. But—" He shrugged—"you've seen for yourself. And there's no need for me to tell you who or what Howard Greiser is. He could break you and me, the *Sentinel Courier,* the whole New York Police Force if he wanted to."

Then Dr. Beardsley came out too, and between them they gave me the facts as they were known to date. And I report them as they later appeared in the evening edition of the *Sentinel Courier.*

SUNDAY SCHOOL TRAGEDY

A strange and, as yet, unexplained tragedy occurred today at the well-known Braeside School for Girls, when Mary (Minnie) and Eveline (Evie) Greiser, aged 9 and 10 respectively, lost their lives. The two children—daughters of Howard Greiser, widely known as a manufacturer and philanthropist—were taken to the school as usual by the old family chauffeur. Both were in excellent spirits and perfect health. The car waited outside the school gates—a little longer than usual, since the junior girls had been rehearsing a Nativity Play for the Christmas Festival, and there was also a short presentation of seasonal gifts by the school authorities. Shortly after noon the chauffeur (Joe Williams, 56) saw the children emerging, and opened the door of the car ready for Minnie and Evie. Snow was falling lightly at the time. The younger girl came alone to the car and, while waiting for her sister, remarked on the fact that there was a red balloon in the air, just by a low group of bushes, not fifteen feet from the school gates.

The chauffeur, as well as Miss Ethel Bedford, a Braeside teacher, and several children saw what they described as an ordinary, child's balloon. They paid no attention to it, thinking it had perhaps broken loose from one of the many Christmas trees that line the Braeside roads. Anyhow, Evie remarked to the chauffeur: "Someone's balloon is flying away. It's not very high. I'll go and catch it."

Impulsively, she ran across the snow-covered grass and disappeared behind the bushes. The chauffeur waited a few minutes, and then went to investigate. To his horror he found what seemed to be the lifeless bodies of Min-

nie and Evie, lying in the snow a few feet from each other. His cries brought the school porter and several staff members, who soon summoned aid from both doctors and police.

All this took place within the space of less than five minutes.

Who or what had been lurking behind those bushes to deal such swift and terrible destruction to two innocent children?

No intruder had been seen on the school grounds, and the Police have no theory to offer, since the falling snow had covered any potential footprints. There was no signs of violence and no visible wounds, external or internal, to account for the deaths.

The medical experts are equally baffled, since the disease—if disease it was—had struck so suddenly, and presented post-mortem symptoms unfamiliar to our pathologists. Mention was made of a type of galloping anaemia, sometimes concomitant with certain oriental maladies, but no case has ever been reported in this hemisphere.

That death was instantaneous and probably painless seems to be proved by the fact that numbers of children passed within a few yards of the fatal spot, and none of them heard a cry or even a faint moan.

Miss Ethel Bedford, the teacher who presented the gifts to the children, states that they were of a religious nature and certainly comprised no balloons, red or otherwise.

The bereaved parents are offering a reward of $10,000 for information leading to the arrest of any person or persons responsible for what must, we feel, be classed as a cruel and motiveless crime.

SUCH was the story I phoned in from the hospital. Trant was waiting for me at the receptionist's desk.

"It's all very well for you," he said gloomily. "You journalists can spin out yarns on vampires, murderous balloons, flying saucers, little men, unknown poisons, impossible maladies—anything your readers will swallow. But what am I to report to *my* hard-boiled chief on the Homicide Squad? He wants real facts to chew on."

"You might suggest that he start chewing on the works of Charles Fort." A familiar, rather squeaky voice sounded from behind me. "And perhaps even my own popular articles in the *Sentinel Courier.*"

My uncle, Professor Edgar Saltus, had moved noiselessly towards us and was staring at Trant over an antiquated pair of spectacles. He was an elfish, wizened little man with a large, baldish head, and clothes that looked as though he slept in them. I had adored him as a child, and now,

despite the crankiness that accompanied his increasing age, I respected him and enjoyed his company inordinately.

He had turned now and was addressing me severely.

"And as for you, Edgar James, you should tell that boss of yours to read his correspondence more carefully. I've written to him every day this week. I've warned him to have his correspondents all over the world on the look-out for something of this sort. I knew it would happen, and I told him so.

Of course, I couldn't guess that it would happen here—right in our own back yard, but—"

"You mean, you knew—?" I asked excitedly.

"Of course I knew; but those old fogies wouldn't understand if I told them." A contemptuous thumb designated the specialists —some of them really famous— whom I had seen in the morgue. "But if you *young* men really want to hear, you can come along with me to my laboratory."

Having left the necessary instructions with the now less-snooty receptionist, both Trant and I accepted the offer with delight.

MY UNCLE was one of the most colorful and certainly the most controversial figure in the scientific world. The letters after his name might have circled one of the astral spheres which he tossed about so lightly.

Some called him a charlatan, despite the fact that he had won the Nobel Prize before he was forty and held an honorary Chair in four or five of the world's greatest Universities. He had been distinguished as a biologist, pharmacologist, physicist and many other things in his time, shifting his interest as soon as he felt he had exhausted the possibilities of the science in question. I had often heard him say—and modesty was not one of his cardinal virtues—that he was the only man living who could talk intelligently with Einstein on his particular subject. But there was *no* man living who could talk to him, Professor Saltus, on all his numerous specialties. Recently he had chosen to style himself as the world's greatest astronomer.

And I was not the man to prove him wrong.

One great gift he had which is rare among great scientists. He could talk and write on the most recondite subjects accurately and scientifically, and yet so simply that an intelligent boy of fifteen could understand him. This gift, being usually considered incompatible with really expert scientific knowledge, had made him an outcast among his lesser contemporaries. But it had made him a fortune, and had, incidentally, tripled the circulation of the

Sentinel Courier's Sunday supplement, where, in kindness to me, he had contributed such famous articles as: *And Why not Life on Venus?, The "Lost" Planet, Out Goes Our Sun,* and many others. Although I was his normal heir, he was, as he often told me, leaving his money to increase in an enormous trust fund, to be used at some distant date when men would dare really to think for themselves, and when a trip to the moon would be no more than a one-block ride in a bus.

WE DROVE to his so-called laboratory in a nearby New York suburb. It was an enormous room, whose walls were so thickly lined with books that no self-respecting fly could have found sufficient wall-space. There were no intricate machines, no teleseopes, microscopes or other paraphernalia such as one might expect in a scientist's laboratory. The only sign of his astronomical interests was a ticker-tape which was connected with Mount Palomar in California.

He sat us down side by side like school children, and handed us a scrap-book containing newspaper clippings, either actual or as photostatic copies. These were in many languages, but in each case the English translation was typed neatly below.

While we studied them, he made fussy little preparations—for he had a childlike desire always to put on a good show, with himself "playing teacher"—and at last mounted a small rostrum between two screens.

He began a trifle bombastically:

"You are neither of you much over thirty, and you have witnessed today what seems to you an unpredictable and utterly unprecedented event. It is my intention to try and prove that it is neither unprecedented nor inexplicable —in fact it was perhaps predictable and certainly precedented."

He pointed to the scrap-book on our knees.

"You can hardly have taken proper cognizance of that first item, since it occured in Finland, and at a time when you were probably in your cradles. Perhaps you'd give me the high lights, Edgar James."

I read: "Strange malady epidemic among school-children in Trjon, a small village in Finland. Bloodless corpses found—mostly children—vampirism suspected. No marks on throat or body."

"And the next," said my uncle, "is from Nova Scotia, I believe, About the time I was in my cradle."

It was the same story again, and the next time in Colombo, Ceylon. Then, much earlier, a clipping from the Cape of Good Hope; another, dating back to the 18th century, from Turkey. They all told of sudden, unexplained

deaths among children; and each one, allowing for changing styles of journalism, might have been the same story as was even then on the *Sentinel Courier's* presses for the midnight edition.

"My attention was drawn to these gruesome little incidents by my late and very much lamented friend Mr. Charles Fort. All similar of course, but—I wonder if you notice any other point of similarity?"

My uncle screwed up his puckered little face and stared at us like a hopeful school-teacher.

"Well, they seem to be about thirty years apart," put in Trant.

"Good boy." My uncle beamed. "Actually it's twenty-eight of our years and forty-seven weeks: very good. That's what put me on the track. You've read, of course, my article on what the *Sentinel Courier* was pleased to misname "The 'Lost' Planet?"

Had I read it? Had I not had to defend it against not only my own better judgment but against that of scientist and layman alike? Had I not—or well—anyhow, I suppose my uncle saw disbelief in our faces.

"And, of course, you don't believe it. You wouldn't because I could not prove it—at least, not with any figures that our modern scientists could understand. And —more important—I could not show it, even though I *could* plot its orbit. I could compute roughly that this planet, when at its closest proximity to us and to Mars, as it is at present, would appear to us terrestrials as slightly smaller than the moon. But—" He flicked on a light, illuminating a small screen. "Here's the Solar System; not in scale of course, but as our ignoramuses tell us and think it to be."

I saw the ordinary chart of the sun with its revolving planets, such as I had seen them (excepting the parvenu Pluto) since childhood. Then my uncle clicked on another switch, and a large circle of light started on a moving orbit, beyond the asteroid belt, somewhere between the paths of Mars and Jupiter.

"There," exclaimed my uncle, "is Saltus, the invisible planet; and that is approximately its orbit. When I wrote that article for the *Sentinel Courier* I had no actual proof of its existence—at least no visible proof. Now I have what, to me, is visible proof. You have heard of Dr. Hans Wertherberg, the great German archaeologist,— unquestionably the greatest that ever lived?"

WE BOTH nodded, perhaps a trifle vaguely. But somewhere the name rang a bell in connection with mammoths.

"He was captured in Germany and sent to Siberia by the Russians. Being old and feeble they let him tinker about in his own

way. There is a heart-rending story of how he discovered in an ice-flow the frozen body of a whole, perfectly preserved mammoth. He couldn't speak Russian so as to tell his guards and the neighboring peasants of the immense value of their find. To those half starved, ignorant people it meant meat—fresh meat—and he was obliged to watch them gorge themselves on a carcass which was probably millions of years old. Finally, seeing the hopelessness of his plight, he ate some too, and declared to me it tasted as fresh and palatable as any steak from the butcher's!

"But it served its purpose. After that he became a sort of pet of the Soviets, and they even gave him men and supplies to help him with his excavations. This enabled him to discover something of far more interest archaeologically than the mammoth. He unearthed certain pre-prehistoric drawings, scratched on the walls of buried caves. These drawings, in his opinion and my own, antedate by millions of years anything discovered hitherto. When released, he smuggled photographs of them out, and brought them to me before he died. You shall see for yourselves."

He switched on another light, and we saw on a small screen what might have been a sketch by a young child.

"There is Man—our earliest ancestor by an incalculable number of years—but without a doubt he is Man. He stands upright, bearing on his shoulder some primitive tool or club. And there is our sun—the same sun we see today: and we recognize it as the sun rather than the moon by the lines emanating from it which express its rays." The picture was changed.

"And there is Man, this time lying asleep beneath a full moon: and we distinguish the moon from the sun by the fact that it has no emanating rays. You will notice, too, that there is what looks like a small sun in the corner. It is far too large to be either Venus or Mars, our nearest known neighbors. I believe it to be the planet Saltus, depicted at a point in its orbit far from the earth. Look again. The man is lying asleep, and there is the moon, a crescent now; but you see another globe, almost as large as the moon or the sun. That, I believe, is Saltus, the so-called 'lost' planet, as it appeared to our ancestors when in closest proximity to the earth. It is exactly as we should see it now, this very evening, if it were not—invisible."

HE TURNED his attention to the other chart of our solar system. "Here we have its present position, near Mars, and with Mars at its nearest to the earth.

Such a proximity, according to my calculations, occurs once every twenty-eight years and forty-seven weeks."

He stopped, waiting for a torrent of questions, which I for one was too stunned to put. Finally Trant's voice came, haltingly, like a schoolboy's.

"But, sir? If it *was* there, and if it is there still, as you say, why can't we see it? Planets don't just disappear—?"

"How do you know they don't, young man? Take the group of stars and planets which we call Andromeda. Although nearly a million light-years away from us, it is constantly changing. Stars larger than our sun explode, disappear and re-appear like fireworks.

So do their families of planets—each one, perhaps larger than our Jupiter. Nothing is impossible, and nothing 100% predictable. The so-called comet of Halley, due in 1896—but I am off the point. Your question was a good one and I can give you only my guess in answer.. Saltusians are, scientifically, aeons ahead of us. Some millions of years ago they possibly discovered the secret of invisibility, and, for reasons best known to themselves, they decided to make their world invisible—or more probably they moved it and themselves into another dimension. Imagine the consternation of our earliest forbears when their 'second moon' suddenly disappeared!

"That they had learnt the secrets of space-navigation is obvious. My own belief is that they colonized the planet we call Mars and abandoned it for some reason, using it merely as a sort of fuelling station. Perhaps they found it lacking in some basic element they needed. Certainly they have never to our knowledge been much interested in our earth, except as an object of curiosity."—

"But why—? I just don't get that," I put in.

"Let me try and explain myself better." My uncle sighed patiently. "Try to imagine yourself as Christopher Columbus. Europe is a planet moving on a fixed orbit. The Azores Islands are another planet, and America another more distant planet. There are times when your Europe orbit brings you very close to the Azores orbit—a mere ride in a speed-boat, but nothing much to see when you get there. And there are inevitably times, though less frequent, when, by merely re-fuelling at the Azores (Mars) planet, you can take another little jaunt in a speed-boat to the America (Earth) planet. Perhaps its potentialities have been exhausted millions of years ago, by your ancestors. It is not worth exploitation on a large scale: but there are always Columbuses,

fired by nothing more than curiosity, or a desire for a short trip—"

"You mean," said Trant, "that when this invisible planet, Mars and the earth are in closest conjunction, which arrives roughly every twenty-nine years, we are favored with a visit?"

"Exactly," said my uncle. Probably nothing more than a Saltusian kid on an Earth spree."

"And we can't see them because they are in a different dimension, but they can see us, and they can nourish themselves by—"

Trant broke off at the sound of the telephone. My uncle picked up the receiver. "It's for you, Mr —er—"

Trant seized it from him. "Yes, yes . . . still in Braeside . . . a little boy . . . Bobby Needick . . . trimming a Christmas-tree on the lawn. . . ."

I felt a cold sweat breaking out all over me. The Needicks were near neighbors, and Bobby was a close pal of Barbara's. No one except those few concerned were aware of the awful danger. Our evening edition had not yet appeared, and no police warning had been given so far as I knew. The children in our garden suburb might well be running about as freely as ever.

"His mother left him for less than two minutes to answer the phone. When she came back—same thing. Even the red balloon." Trant took up his hat. "Better get going."

I MUST hand it to Uncle Edgar that he did not let scientific curiosity entirely outweigh his humane feelings at this third tragedy. He even made vague, clucking noises of sympathy. But as we piled into the car, he could not help saying: "Perhaps there will be visible tracks if those idiotic policemen. . . ."

Personally I was not thinking of tracks or policemen. I was thinking only of Barbara—for it was not yet her bedtime, and she might well be putting the finishing touches to our modest Christmas-tree on the lawn. I requested to be dropped off at my home.

When we reached our surburb it was light as day, with a full moon, street lights and the rows of illuminated Christmas-trees. It was only two days before the great festival of love and goodwill, but I was gripping the revolver in my pocket and there was murder in my heart—murder for that Saltusian "kid on an Earth spree," as my uncle had put it.

As I reached the house, my worst fears were realized. Barbara was on the lawn alone, gaily tossing the last strips of tinsel on to the branches of our tree, from which hung balls of red and silver amongst the electric candles.

I jumped out of the car, falling on to the snow that banked the side-walk. But I did not lose my grip on my revolver.

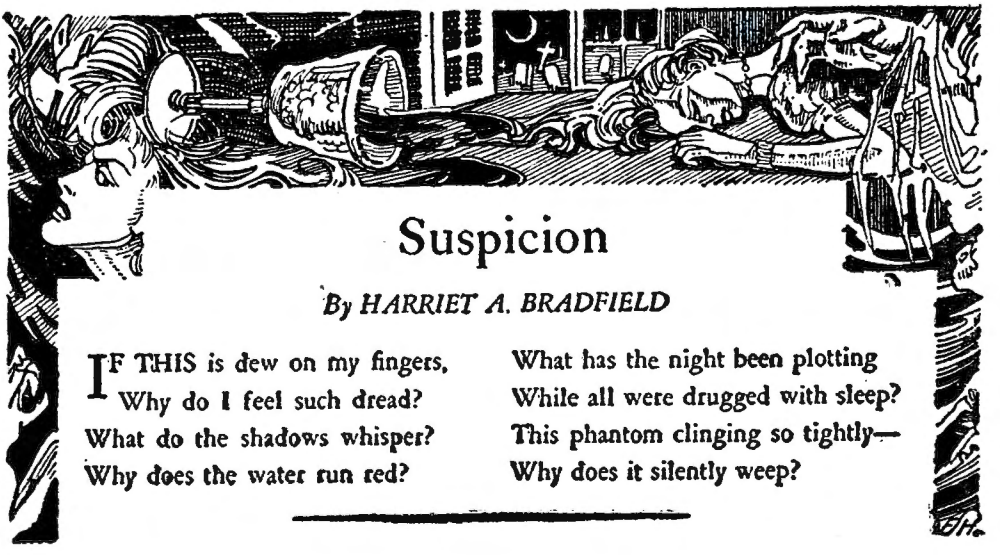
"Oh, Daddy—you do look funny—" she began, and ran towards me. And as she did so a red, or rather, a pinkish globule seemed to detach itself from the tree and follow her. I flung my left arm around her, pressing her to me, but even as I raised my revolver with my right hand, I felt Barbara being lifted from my grasp by some powerful and invisible force. The sphere, or whatever it was, was a yard or two away from the tree now, and hung just above my daughter's head.

I fired twice, three times over Barbara's shoulder, full into that pinkish globule. Then, gradually, I felt the tension on her relax. The sphere had vanished, but—and this I hardly dare to set down—I distinctly saw my three bullets hanging in the air, motionless, on a level with my head. They were discovered later, near the Christmas-tree, in a small patch of pinkish snow.

But my first interest was to get my poor bewildered Barbara safely into the house, and then to ossify myself with half a tumbler of neat Bourbon.

NOT long afterwards my uncle arrived. He had witnessed the shooting from the car, and had spent a happy half hour peering about in the snow.

He seemed satisfied, and not at



Suspicion

By HARRIET A. BRADFIELD

IF THIS is dew on my fingers,
Why do I feel such dread?
What do the shadows whisper?
Why does the water run red?

What has the night been plotting
While all were drugged with sleep?
This phantom clinging so tightly—
Why does it silently weep?

all upset by the tragedy which had nearly overtaken his great-niece.

"I think," he said, rubbing his knotty old hands together, "that we have proved they are vulnerable to even such simple terrestrial implements as a revolver."

"Thank God for that," I said fervently.

"And this time I have prints—prints which enable me to add something to the composite picture I have in mind."

Then he went over to my desk and started what looked like a doodle.

Finally he handed the result to me. "Not accurate, of course—and I imagine the size would be roughly equivalent to that of *Homo Sapiens*. We shall never know, I fear. Those filaments are what we would call "arms," and also the—er—tubes by which it nourishes itself. Even if visible, they would be thinner than the thinnest needle."

I looked in horror at the gruesome and quite undescribable creature he had sketched, and labelled: "YOUNG (?) SALTUSIAN."

It had the three-toed feet of an ostrich, and thinnish legs, surmounted by a box-like torso from which emanated numerous fine filaments. In the center of the box, in a position roughly equivalent to that of the human stomach, was a round circle. The head was shrouded and indistinct except for two wing-like ears. The general aspect was improbable and sinister.

"And the red balloon?" I asked. "Where does that come into the picture?"

My uncle looked at me with mock severity over his spectacles. "You haven't read your H. G. Wells, young man: otherwise you'd know that when an invisible creatures nourishes itself on a visible substance, that substance remains visible until it is digested by the invisible stomach. There was a pinkish material under your Christmas-tree: I think that will be found to be human blood, partly digested. Remember that our friend had visited the Needicks before coming to you, and—"

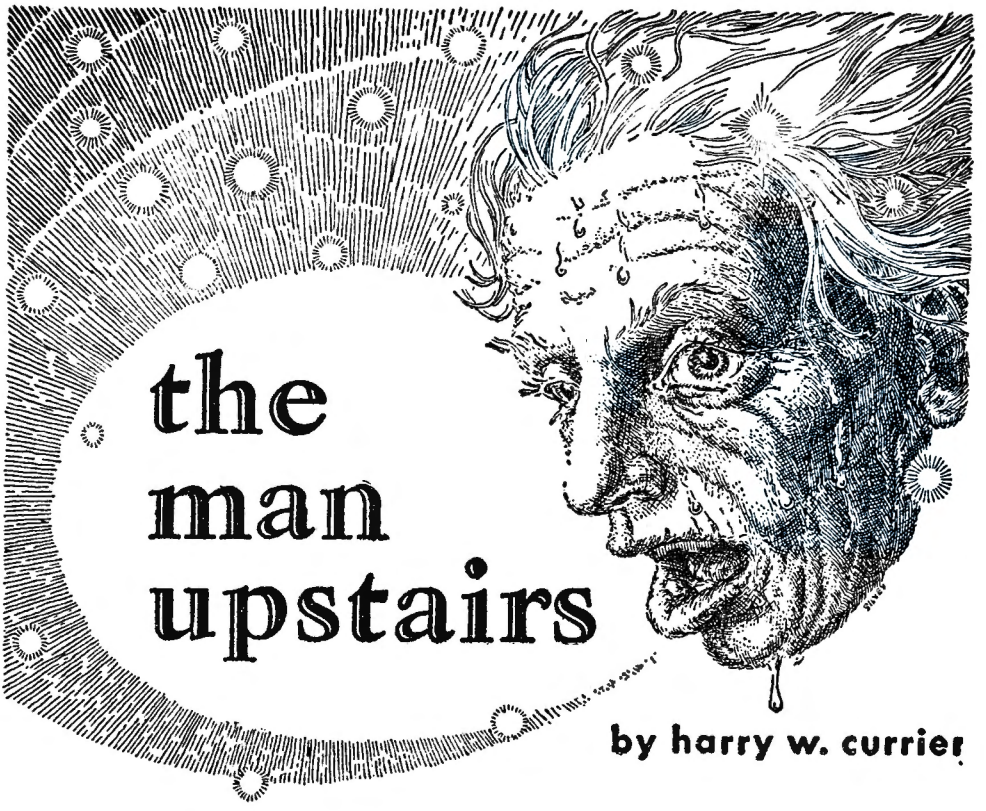
"Stop!" I cried in utter revulsion.

"It's—it's too ghastly!"

My uncle spread out his hands and shrugged. "But we've got a lot to be thankful for. So far they've 'come but single spies'—young Columbuses, urged by curiosity to visit a decadent world. In twenty-eight yeras, forty-seven weeks, they may decide to come in battalions. Perhaps—"

But he did not finish the sentence, because at that moment my wife came in and cheerfully announced supper.

It was the same man; I recognized the scar across his left cheek.



the man upstairs

by harry w. currier

I

PROFESSOR DORE

THE first time I ever saw him was the day I moved into the apartment directly above his. I passed him in the lower corridor on my way to the stairs—a small elderly man with thinning gray hair and a stoop to his shoulders. As he looked into my eyes, he stopped dead in his tracks. All the color drained from his face. He cowered against the wall. I thought he was going to faint. I wondered, and wondering, passed on.

"Queer old bird," I mused. I began unpacking and, as I tossed a soiled straw hat on a closet shelf, dismissed the seemingly unimportant incident with a shrug. Had I known what shocking events were to follow that chance meeting, I should not have taken the matter so lightly.

At the moment I had more important matters to occupy my mind. I had signed a contract

Heading by H. W. Silvey

with the University to begin teaching duties the following September as a Professor of Chemistry, but owing to the sudden illness of my predecessor, had been prevailed upon to take over his classes in this, the middle of the Spring term. This, I assure you, was no mean task. I had but a short time to familiarize myself with a thousand and one things.

I was in one of those old mansions on a quiet, tree-lined, side street. It had been remodeled for income property, but a genteel atmosphere, redolent of a by-gone day, still pervaded the house and grounds. I smiled to myself as I spied the old-fashioned air vent in the living room floor near the center table. It obviously had been installed before centralized heating came into general use. Its purpose was to allow the warm air from below to penetrate the upper floors. It was now permanently closed; the house was heated from a basement furnace.

In addition to the living room, there was a comfortable bedroom with bath, and a kitchenette with every modern convenience.

I naturally assume this personal history is dull and uninteresting, but find it necessary to explain who I am and how I happened to move into these rooms above the man I . . . But I am digressing.

I saw him only once again. So far as I know, it was the second time in my entire existence. It was the next evening and our meeting was much the same as the first. I was approaching the stairs and as I was opposite his door, it opened. He wore a hat and coat and apparently was on his to the street. When he saw me, the terrified expression returned.

He shrank back into the room and slammed the door. I heard him fumble the lock hurriedly into place. That is all I know except that is the night I brought home from the laboratory the fatal bottle of oxalic acid.

II

DOCTOR WELLS

I have met with another of those terrifying experiences. He has come back as I have always known he would. I could not be mistaken. There could be no two men in the world with the same beak-like nose and deep-set, burning black eyes; the same identical scar across the left cheek. I have seen him twice before and then only for an instant, but how the memory of each meeting burns into my very soul! I have seen him only twice before and each time one dear to me has suffered a violent death.

A million times I have conjured up in my mind the things

I would say and do when that inevitable third meeting transpired. I did exactly nothing. The suddenness of the encounter turned my blood to water. Oh, he was amiable enough! He merely stared at me curiously for a moment, and passed me with what was meant to be a pleasant smile. That was last evening, just twenty-four hours ago. Since then, I have been unable to eat or sleep or to think clearly. Otherwise I should not have been such a blind fool as to furtively enter his apartment.

After a nerve-wracking night, I had summoned courage in the bright light of day to glean from the housekeeper the information that he called himself Professor Dore and that he had been appointed to the Chemistry Department to replace Doctor Carlton. Innocently enough my informant enlarged on my inquiry by saying the Professor had requested his apartment be attended to in the afternoons as it would then be unoccupied. He would be in his laboratory from one until after five o'clock.

I sat thinking for a long time. I made a desperate resolve. He called himself Professor Dore. To me that only was a name. I, and only I, knew what a vile menace lay behind that name. And yet actually what did I know about the man himself? I contemplated going to the police and proving to them the person I had seen on those two tragic occasions really existed and was not a figment of my imagination as they had claimed. But what evidence had I? I might point to any man on the street faintly resembling my description of four years ago and say, "That is he," but they would not believe me—any more than they believed me then.

It was at that moment, remembering the housekeeper's mention of his purported daily absence, the wild idea took possession of me. I would enter his apartment in search of evidence. I broke into a cold sweat at the thought of such action but stuck valiantly to my purpose. There was no other way.

IT WAS a little after three. Summoning every ounce of courage I possessed, I made my way up the stairs. The house was quiet. There was no one in sight.

Gaining entrance to his rooms was easy. Too easy! The door was unlocked. Had I been in a normal frame of mind, I might have wondered.

I entered stealthily and snapped the spring lock into place behind me. I could not risk being disturbed. I assured myself I was alone.

I began my search in the bedroom which had not yet been made up. I searched the clothespress, the suits on the hangers,

the bags. I looked through every compartment in the chest of drawers and the bureau. I searched the medicine cabinet. I even lifted the mattress. There was nothing except the usual articles one would expect to find in a man's room.

I looked at my watch. I had consumed ten minutes. I had plenty of time. I turned to the living room.

I searched the desk. There were papers, many of them, but nothing to indicate Professor Dore was anything but what he pretended to be. I was replacing the last drawer when. . . .

"Looking for something, Doctor?"

I whirled. He was standing with his back to the closed entrance door, smiling cynically.

"How—how did you. . . ." I stammered inanely.

"How did I get in without you hearing me? I live here. Remember?"

"But I thought you . . ."

"Yes, I know. You thought I'd be busy for the rest of the day. Very nice of you to call on me—when I'm out."

I sank weakly down on the settee near the window.

"That's right, Doctor. Relax and we'll have a sociable little chat. I've been looking forward to this visit."

He moved a straight backed chair from the wall, placed it not more than four feet in front of me and sat on it reverse-wise. He gazed at me meditatively for a long moment.

"You seem shocked, Doctor. But don't be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you. Let's discuss this matter from the very beginning, shall we? I think you'll see how preposterous the whole thing really is." His voice was soft and soothing, a tone one might use to allay the fears of a frightened child.

I did not answer. There was nothing for me to say even though I had been capable of speech. He seemed perfectly at ease. When he spoke again his voice still carried that low insinuating quality.

"It will be four years ago this August, will it not, Doctor, since you, with your wife and very lovely daughter, drove up to Lake Forest to spend that hot, sultry afternoon at the lakeside resort. You'd had your picnic lunch and the three of you were sunning yourselves on the sandy beach when suddenly your daughter rose and said it was too stifling, that she was going to swim to the raft a quarter of a mile out in the lake. There was no one swimming at that particular moment but the beach was lined with sun-bathers. Many a head was turned admiringly to watch as her beautiful body plunged into the water. You and

your wife had also been watching proudly, when suddenly a man dashed past you toward the lake —a man in bathing trunks. You did not think much about it at the time but one-half hour later you were giving his description to the police.

"You had seen a tall man with dark curly hair, deep-set black eyes, a hawk nose and most important of all, a vivid crescent-shaped scar on his left cheek. You had seen this man enter the water directly behind your daughter. You had seen him catch up with her. You had watched through your binoculars until they were almost to the raft. You saw the man dive. Immediately your daughter began thrashing about and screaming for help. The fifty-odd people on the shore dashed to the water's edge. Several expert swimmers rushed to her rescue. But they were too late.

"When they recovered the body some time later, she was beyond help."

I WAS speechless. I sat as in a trance, living again the grief of that tragedy. The low voice went on.

"You told the police what you had seen. They questioned the other bathers, who swore no one had entered the water with your daughter. Even your wife, grief-stricken as she was, made an emphatic statement the girl was alone.

"The verdict of the coroner's jury, that one Jean Wells had come to her death by accidental drowning, officially closed the case. But not for you, did it, Doctor? You knew what you had seen and you were frightened. Because why should a man be visible to you and only you—a man whom no one else could see?" I felt a cold sweat oozing from my body.

"A year and a half went by. Then the blow fell again." He paused and lit a cigarette, never taking his eyes from mine. He inhaled deeply and blew a thick cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. He was enjoying himself immensely.

"It was mid-December. You and your wife were at your summer cottage high up on the mountain. You had gone there because you wanted quiet while you prepared an important paper for the Psychical Research Society. But now a snowstorm was threatening and, though it was late in the afternoon, you thought it advisable to return home before the one narrow road was blocked and you were trapped by the snowfall.

"Your wife was driving. You were half way down the mountain when the car went out of control. It smashed through a guard rail and plunged a hundred

feet down into the canyon. When they found the wreck, your wife was dead. You were unconscious for hours, but when you were able to talk, you told what the police later described as a wild and fantastic tale.

"But you knew what you had seen, didn't you, Doctor? You knew that the man who was with your daughter when she drowned, and the man who reached over your wife's shoulder and wrenched the wheel from her grasp, were one and the same. You were certain now such a man existed.

"But there was one thing about the car you had forgotten. You had forgotten you were using your wife's single-seated coupe. That's why the police wouldn't believe you—because there was no back seat. There was only a two foot covered space where it would have been impossible for anyone to have hidden and performed the murderous act you claim to have seen.

"Yes, for the second time in the short period of a year and a half, the great Doctor Wells, the undisputed authority on the occult, had made a complete fool of himself before the police, the newspapers, and the general public."

I could listen no longer.

"I'm getting out of here," I cried childishly, "and you're not going to stop me."

I MADE a wild dash for the door. He did not move.

How I got down the stairs to my own rooms, I shall never know. It was hours later before my mind began to function properly. Who was this man? Why had he taken my daughter's life? Why had he murdered my wife and nearly murdered me?—I, who had never harmed a human being in my life. Why had the authorities not believed my story? Have I gone completely mad? I believe not. I am positive beyond any doubt whatsoever, I had seen that man at the lake and in the car as clearly and distinctly as I had seen him in the apartment above.

It is seven o'clock in the evening, now. A short time ago, I thought of making one last desperate effort to convince the police a murderer is at large. It was no use; he was in the corridor watching my door. There is no escape. I know now it is only a matter of time.

I have prepared a pot of strong, black coffee, thinking it might help quiet my nerves. I have been sipping it as I sit here at the table writing this chronicle.

I feel ill. It has been so long since I have eaten solid food, this coffee does not agree with me. I am having difficulty swallowing and my mouth is paining severely. Perhaps I burned myself with the hot liquid.

I HAVE returned from the bathroom, where I vomited blood. My lips and mouth feel stiff like clay, and I find it difficult to swallow. I am terribly ill.

It seems strange, but my mind is undergoing a lucid transition. Past events which seemed blurred and unreal, like a motion picture out of focus, are now becoming clear-cut and distinct. The lake—the man with the scar! The car coming down the mountain side—the man with the scar! And now upstairs—the man with the scar!

What a blind fool I've been! Now I know who he is. I know—I know! The man—upstairs—is . . ."

III

INSPECTOR JONES
Of the Homicide Bureau

I WAS finishing dinner that evening, when I received a telephone message from headquarters, a death had taken place over at 1020 Oak Avenue in the University district. It was suspected homicide. Boyd and Roth, two of my ace assistants, had already been notified. Also, a patrol car had answered the call. Kissing my wife goodbye and telling her not to wait up for me, I got into my car.

The early evening cross-town traffic was heavy. It took me a good forty minutes to reach the house.

As I entered the front door, the Medical Examiner was just completing his examination. The body of a frail wisp of a man was lying half out of the open doorway of a front apartment. After viewing the situation I turned to the Doctor.

"Well, Doc, what do you make of it?"

He rose and shook his head.

"Poison administered orally. I can't tell what kind until I make a more thorough examination."

"Maybe this would help, Inspector." Boyd stepped gingerly over the body and handed me a coffee cup with about an inch of the black liquid remaining. "We found this on the center table along with a percolator partially empty. Not only that, but . . ."

I held up a restraining hand. "Not so fast. Let's take one thing at a time." I gave the cup to the Doctor.

"I'll have the coffee analyzed," he said. "It shouldn't take long If it contains the lethal dose, we can check that against the results of the autopsy and make a positive decision as to the cause of death."

Within a few minutes the ambulance had come and gone, and the Police photographers and finger-print experts had finished their work and departed. I was seated in the book-lined living

room of the apartment, which looked more like a study, listening to the details of the case from my assistants.

"I placed that piece of paper exactly where the cup and saucer were sitting on the table," said Roth in conclusion. "And these papers were lying beside them. You should read them immediately. They tell a whale of a story." He handed me a couple of sheets of paper covered with writing in long-hand.

While they busied themselves about the place in search of any type of poison or poison container, I read and re-read the amazing document. Their search revealed nothing, but this paper certainly did. It told a whale of a story, as Roth had put it.

"It seems this is going to greatly simplify matters," I said. It was a lead a homicide officer gets once in a lifetime. It would considerably shorten the investigation. I lost no time in following it up.

FIRST I had Roth phone the Medical Examiner and give him a detailed description of the symptoms suffered by the victim before death. Next I wanted to get a line on this mysterious man upstairs. The whereabouts of every tenant in the house would have to be checked for the hours in which I was interested, but that could come later. I had one of the patrolmen bring in the housekeeper.

She was a refined-looking woman in her middle fifties. Her attractive face was molded in grief. Tears glistened in her eyes but otherwise she was quite composed.

"Now, Mrs. Estes, what about this Doctor Wells? What can you tell me about him?"

"Well," she began hesitantly, "there really isn't much to tell. After the death of his wife and daughter, he decided to give up his home. He came to me highly recommended as a quiet, studious type. That's the only kind of people I take—the quiet type. He seemed quite pleased with the apartment; he wanted a peaceful atmosphere in which he could study and write to his heart's content. He has . . ." She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and corrected herself. "He had been here over two years. He had few visitors, and though he was only across the corridor, I saw very little of him."

"He rarely went out, then?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Did it ever seem to you he appeared afraid of something or somebody?"

"To tell you the truth, I never thought about it one way or another. But since you mention it, it could be that his timidity bordered on apprehension. On the few occasions I came in contact

with him, his eyes were forever darting about like a frightened bird's."

"Did you see him at all yesterday or today?"

"Yes, I did. He came to my door this morning ostensibly to pay his rent. He asked many questions about Professor Dore, the new tenant."

I switched my interrogation.

"You say you rent only to people with excellent recommendations. By whom was this Professor Dore recommended?"

"The University, sir. I get mostly University people."

"My men tell me he is not now in his rooms. Do you have any idea where he might be at this time of night?"

"It so happens I do. The outside door is kept locked after ten o'clock in the evening and each tenant has his own key. I had forgotten to give him one. A few minutes before this—this dreadful thing happened, he knocked on my door to remind me. He said he and Dean Brownell were on their way to a faculty dinner at Memorial Hall and he didn't know how late he'd be out."

"Dean Brownell!" I exclaimed. "Do you, by any chance, mean the Dean of Chemical Engineering?"

"I do, sir. I know him well. He was a close friend of my late husband."

This was a break for me. I also knew him well. In fact, we had both belonged to the same Country Club for years and had played many a round of golf together. He was held in high esteem by acquaintances and colleagues alike.

I immediately gave Roth orders to take the patrolmen and the radio car and bring the Dean and the Professor back to the house.

"And you might acquaint them with a few facts of the case," I added. "It'll save time."

I returned my attention to the woman.

"Mrs. Estes, did you see or hear anything unusual between three and four o'clock this afternoon?"

"No, I didn't. I was busy in my apartment and heard nothing. But perhaps Mrs. Small, the maid, can help you," she offered. "She's on duty at that time."

"Thank you, Mrs. Estes. That will be all. Will you ask Mrs. Small to come in, please."

MRS. SMALL'S personal appearance belied her name. She was a tall, raw-boned, incongruous-looking woman with thin gray hair, a large nose, a tiny red mouth and snapping black eyes. I sized her up as a very determined female, sure of herself, and with a mind nobody could change, once it was set. An excellent witness in any court.

"Mrs. Estes tells me you are on duty part of every afternoon," I began without preamble. "Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you here this afternoon between three and four o'clock?"

"I was."

"Now, Mrs. Small, I want you to think carefully and tell me as nearly as you can what time you came on duty and what you did between the hours of three and four.

"That's easy. I live just around the corner. I get paid by the hour. I come to work at exactly three and leave at exactly four-thirty. I do the same things at the same time every day. I take clean linen to the apartments; I make the beds. I dust the furniture. I open the windows and air the place. I do what any other maid does. Anything else?"

I drew a long breath.

"But sometimes something unusual happens," I suggested helpfully. "Like for instance . . ."

"Like for instance the time I entered Mr. Birdwell's bedroom and found him standing stark naked in front of a full length mirror? Yeah, sometimes something unusual does happen," she agreed dryly.

I was getting nowhere fast. I could see I'd have to pin her down with yes or no questions.

"Let's get back to this afternoon," I ventured meekly. "While you were working on the second floor, did you notice anything you might wonder at?"

"Yes."

"Did you see someone who did not belong there at that time of day?"

"Yes."

"Professor Dore?"

"No."

"You didn't see Professor Dore?"

"No."

"Doctor Wells?"

"Yes."

"What was he doing?"

"He was coming out of Professor Dore's apartment."

"Let's go back to the beginning and start over.

"Tell me what happened and how."

She seemed to loosen up a little.

"Well, I was coming along the hall with clean linen over my arm. I was just about to fit my passkey into the lock of Mr. Dore's apartment, when the door suddenly flew open and little Doctor Wells whished past me like a cyclone. Small as he is, he almost upset me. But he didn't pause for an instant. I don't think he even saw me, he was that frightened. He rushed down the stairs. I passed it off as just one of those queer things, and entered the apartment. I thought sure Professor Dore would be there and that Doctor Wells had

been visiting him, but there was nobody in the whole place."

I SAT up at that.

"Do you mean to say," I ejaculated, "that a few seconds after Doctor Wells rushed from the room, you entered and there was no one there?"

"I do say it. And I thought it was funny like you do, that a man like the Doctor would be in someone else's rooms where he didn't belong, when there was no one home."

"Mrs. Small, I want you to think carefully. When you entered Professor Dore's living room, did you notice any article of furniture out of place, such as a chair? Or did you detect any odor of cigarette smoke?"

"It's part of my job to put misplaced furniture back where it belongs. Everything was already in place. I detest the odor of cigarette smoke, and would have noticed it immediately. There was none."

"What about the windows? Were they all closed?"

"Every one. I had to unlock them before I could open them to let in the fresh air."

The whole incident was unbelievable, and yet I had no reason to doubt her word. She seemed firm enough in her convictions.

"Then you say there was no one in the apartment; the windows were closed and locked; there was no disarranged furniture; there was no odor of cigarette smoke."

"How many times do I have to answer that? That's exactly what I say."

"And you're absolutely sure of that?" I pressed, the dead man's last words before my eyes.

She bristled, and I could imagine the porcupine quills rising along her spine.

"Listen, Mister. I know what I know and I know what I see and what I don't see. When I say there wasn't any of those things in that apartment, there just wasn't any, that's all."

I was forced to agree with her. That was all.

A few moments after I had dismissed her, Boyd and the patrolmen arrived with Brownell and Dore.

I DECIDED it would be better to first talk to the scholarly Dean. There was perplexity in his mild blue eyes. After friendly greetings, I got down to business.

"You have already been informed as to what took place here tonight.

"Were you acquainted with Doctor Wells?" I asked.

"Only by reputation. He was an avid student of the occult and had written many books on the subject."

"How well do you know this Professor Dore?"

He smiled. "Very well, indeed. It so happens we grew up together in the same small eastern town, and became bosom pals. Later, we roomed together at college, and after graduation, obtained teaching positions at the same University. Eventually, I decided to come West; he preferred to stay in the East. That was ten years ago."

"Then until recently, you hadn't seen him for ten years?"

"Oh yes, many times. I usually spend my annual vacation in the East, so we managed to get together every year for a few weeks. When we weren't together, we corresponded constantly—at least twice a month."

"Had he ever visited you out here?"

"Not until now, when I secured for him the position he now holds. But why this interest in Fred? Surely, you don't think he had anything to do with this regrettable death?"

I ignored the question. I had Professor Dore brought in.

As he hesitated in the entrance, I scrutinized him carefully. Doctor Wells' description fitted him perfectly—except for for one thing. There most assuredly was nothing vicious or sinister in his demeanor or attitude. Quite the opposite; he seemed shy and awkward in my presence. He sat timidly on the edge of the chair I offered, and his gaze flitted nervously about the room. I came to the point immediately.

"Professor Dore, where were you this afternoon?"

He seemed startled by the abruptness of the question.

"Why—why I was in the laboratory."

"You have classes at that time?"

"Yes, sir, from one until five o'clock."

I looked at the Dean. He nodded in confirmation. I turned back to Dore.

"I'm interested only in the hour between three and four. Do you have the names of the students who were present at that time?"

"Yes, I do. I wrote their names and addresses in my classbook. They are segregated according to hours."

"Where is this book now?"

"It is in the top drawer of the desk in my classroom office."

"Would it be possible for me to obtain it now—tonight?"

It was the Dean who answered.

"I'm sure it would." He glanced at his watch. "There are three janitors now working in the building. If you care to send for it, I'll phone and give orders to admit your men."

While he was phoning, I told

Boyd and Roth to get that book and check Dore's alibi with every student in that three o'clock class. They were on their way immediately.

The Dean broke the connection. The phone rang; I answered. It was the Medical Examiner. I listened carefully.

"Oxalic acid!" I exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. There can be no doubt about it." I thanked him and hung up.

"Doctor Wells was poisoned with oxalic acid," I said.

Professor Dore's face turned a sickly yellow. The two men stared at each other in stark consternation.

"It couldn't be," muttered the Dean, more to himself than to anyone. "Why that's impossible."

It was my turn to be surprised. There evidently was something here I didn't know about. I followed his gaze to the air vent in the ceiling.

"I wonder," he murmured thoughtfully. He turned to me. "Inspector, if you'll come upstairs with us, I think we can solve this whole deplorable affair. If you'll have one of your patrolmen bring a screw driver," he added.

I learned early in my career that when a suspect or a witness wants to talk, let him talk without interruption; when he wants to act, let him act without asking questions. I did so now.

Professor Dore was in a bad state of nerves. The Dean had to assist him from his chair.

Except for the book lined walls, the apartment above was almost an exact counterpart of the one below.

Professor Dore sat with his head in his hands. No one spoke. The Dean took the screw driver from the patrolman. He got down on his knees and removed the screws that held the grating of the air vent in place. He laid the grating to one side and bent over, scrutinized the inside of the opening carefully, and emitted a soft exclamation. He rose, dusted his knees with meticulous care, then looked up at me. He was slightly pale and his forehead was beaded with perspiration. He pointed to the opening.

"There it is, just as I suspected. If you'll get down and look closely, you'll see a hole in the corner of that vent."

I did as he requested. It was there, almost a quarter of an inch in diameter. Looking more closely, I could see, directly below, the paper on the table in the Wells' apartment—the paper which had been placed in the exact spot of the coffee cup from which the Doctor had drunk the lethal potion. But what did that portend? I had been patient. It was time to ask questions.

"What about it?" I asked. "I don't get it."

"You will," he answered weakly, "when I get through explaining. It's just one of those grotesque tragedies that might happen to anyone." He walked over and put a protective arm about Dore's shoulders.

"Regardless of what the general public thinks," he began, "we of the teaching profession do not receive enormous salaries. It is sometimes necessary to economize and cut corners where we can. That's what Fred had in mind when he brought home the oxalic acid."

He bent over his stricken friend. "Where is it?" he asked softly. The Professor nodded toward the bedroom.

I EXPECTED the Dean to return with a bottle of liquid, but he held in his hand a slightly soiled straw hat. He placed it on the table before me.

"I don't know whether you are familiar with the conducive qualities of oxalic acid, but it is used commercially as a straw bleach. To save the expense of professional cleaning, Fred was going to bleach that straw hat himself. When we came up here tonight, he had with him the bottle of acid solution. We were in a great hurry because we were already late for the dinner. As he passed, he removed the bottle from his pocket and placed it on the edge of the center table. He tossed his coat over a chair and went into the bedroom to change clothes."

He paused and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

"When he returned to the room, he grabbed up his coat and was putting it on while on his way to the hall door. Somehow, as he passed the table, the tail of the coat swished around and knocked the bottle, with a crash, onto the grating of the air vent. We got a towel and sopped up the liquid as best we could, but most of it had run through the grating. He said he'd clean it up when he returned. Of course, had we foreseen what was to happen . . ." His voice broke slightly. "And that's the way it was," he finished lamely.

WELL, there was my case all wrapped up in a neat little package with a pink ribbon around it, and handed to me on a golden salver. Or was it? I knew what poison had been used; I knew how it had been administered. I knew who the killer was; I knew it was an apparent accident. But I was far from satisfied. I still had the last written words of a dying man burning a hole in my pocket—words that could not be ignored.

After Professor Dore had been lodged in a cell for the night,

I entered my office as the phone was ringing. It was Boyd.

"We found twelve of the fifteen students listed, Inspector, and Dore's alibi stands up. He wasn't out of anyone's sight for more than two or three minutes at a time."

"Somehow, I wasn't surprised. I told Boyd and Roth to go home and get some rest.

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, I was in the District Attorney's office. I placed all the facts before him.

He read and re-read the Wells document.

"Seems incredible," he said, "do you suppose the old boy could have been screwey?"

"If he was, it was because of fear. He was a brilliant man—a student and an author."

"That's no criterion. Many a brilliant mind has been known to snap under the strain of overwork and for other reasons."

"That's true," I countered, "but he was sane enough to know he was going to die and who was going to do away with him. He practically named the killer."

"What about this Professor Dore? Could he possibly have staged the whole thing?"

"Absolutely not. Although the heads were clean and shiny, the screws of that grating were rusted in place. It took all of Brownell's strength to remove them. That grate hadn't been lifted in years; I'll guarantee that."

"And this hole? Was it easily discernable?"

"It was not. It was so located that when the grate was replaced, it was impossible to see it. I tried it. Anyhow, how would Dore know a cup of coffee would be in that exact spot at that precise moment?"

He could see I was becoming angry at his doubts of the thoroughness of my investigation.

"Keep cool," he admonished. "I don't question your ability. It's up to you to do the investigating and get the evidence, not I. But there's certain legal angles to this case I'll have to look up. I'll call you later."

AT ONE o'clock that afternoon, the coroner's jury brought in a verdict that Doctor Wells had come to his death by accidental poisoning. There were no recommendations.

At three o'clock, the Prosecutor phoned me.

"Due to certain legal technicalities in this state," he announced judicially, "there is absolutely no charge on which we can hold Professor Dore responsible for the death of Doctor Wells."

I ordered the prisoner's immediate release.

I sat for a long time after that, gazing at the ceiling. I had a restless, dissatisfied feeling. Homicide cases ordinarily are from a cut and dried pattern. We follow a patterned investigation and reach a logical conclusion. I had followed that pattern up to a certain point; beyond that, events had taken charge of themselves. There were too many loose ends; too many unanswered questions. Somewhere there was something I had missed. I felt it; I knew it.

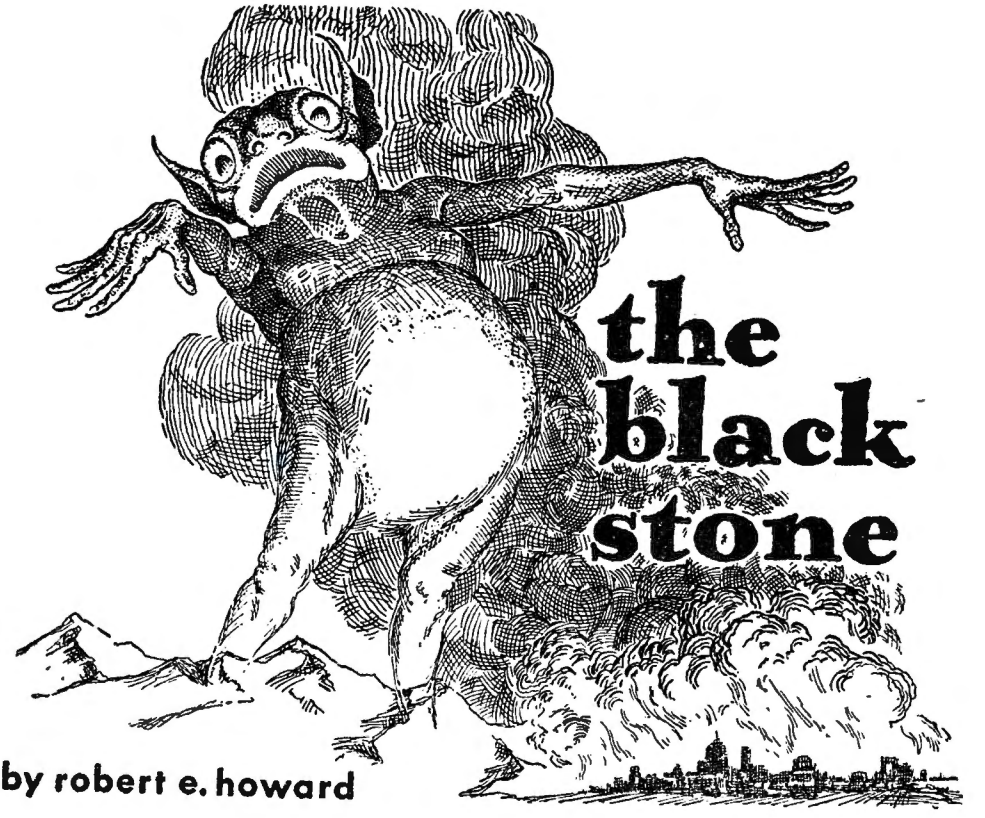
I started at the lake and went over the case again. The man with the scar rushing past the little Doctor to the water's edge, yet no one else could see him; the same man with the scar leaning from the back seat and twisting the wheel of a car from a woman's grasp—a car which had no back seat; the man with the scar sitting in a room talking to another man—a room which the maid declared had been empty; the frightened Doctor Wells, alone at the table in his book-lined living room, writing what proved to be his obituary and drinking the poisoned coffee. His book-lined living room; books pertaining mostly to the occult! The occult!

IT HIT me like a blow between the eyes. I had the solution. It was the only answer to every unanswered question. And yet I was awed by its very import. It couldn't be, but it was; it fit every phase of the case like the proverbial glove.

We of the police are required of necessity to be a hard-headed, practical, down-to-earth lot. We go after cold, hard facts and we get them. I am no exception, but in this instance I was forced to accept as fact, a fantastic and illogical fantasy.

Had Doctor Wells been allowed to finish the last sentence before being overcome by the effects of the poison and groping blindly for help, beyond doubt that last sentence would have read . . .

"Now I know who he is. I know! I know! The man upstairs is—Death."



the black stone

by robert e. howard

"They say foul things of Old Times still lurk
In dark forgotten corners of the world,
And Gates still gape to loose, on certain nights,
Shapes pent in Hell.

—Justin Geoffrey

I READ of it first in the strange book of Von Junzt, the German eccentric who lived so curiously and died in such grisly and mysterious fashion. It was my fortune to have access to his Nameless Cults in the original edition, the so-called Black Book, published in Dusseldorf in 1839, shortly before a hounding doom overtook the author. Collectors of rare literature were familiar with Nameless Cults mainly through the cheap and faulty translation which was pirated in London by Bridewall in 1845, and the carefully expurgated edition put out by the Golden Gob-

Heading by H. W. Silvey

lin Press of New York, 1909. But the volume I stumbled upon was one of the unexpurgated German copies, with heavy leather covers and rusty iron hasps. I doubt if there are more than half a dozen such volumes in the entire world today, for the quantity issued was not great, and when the manner of the author's demise was bruited about, many possessors of the book burned their volumes in panic.

Von Junzt spent his entire life (1795-1840) delving into forbidden subjects; he traveled in all parts of the world, gained entrance into innumerable secret societies, and read countless little-known and esoteric books and manuscripts in the original; and in the chapters of the Black Book, which range from startling clarity of exposition to murky ambiguity, there are statements and hints to freeze the blood of a thinking man. Reading what Von Junzt dared put in print arouses uneasy speculations as to what it was that he dared not tell. What dark matters, for instance, were contained in those closely written pages that formed the unpublished manuscript on which he worked unceasingly for months before his death, and which lay torn and scattered all over the floor of the locked and bolted chamber in which Von Junzt was found dead with the marks of taloned fingers on his throat? It will never be known, for the author's closest friend, the Frenchman Alexis Ladeau, after having spent a whole night piecing the fragments together and reading what was written, burnt them to ashes and cut his own throat with a razor.

But the contents of the published matter are shuddersome enough, even if one accepts the general view that they but represent the ravings of a madman. There among many strange things I found mention of the Black Stone, that curious, sinister monolith that broods among the mountains of Hungary, and about which so many dark legends cluster. Van Junzt did not devote much space to it—the bulk of his grim work concerns cults and objects of dark worship which he maintained existed in his day, and it would seem that the Black Stone represents some order or being lost and forgotten centuries ago. But he spoke of it as one of the keys—a phrase used many times by him, in various relations, and constituting one of the obscurities of his work. And he hinted briefly at curious sights to be seen about the monolith on midsummer's night. He mentioned Otto Dostmann's theory that this monolith was a remnant of the Hunnish invasion and had been erected to commemorate a victory of Attila over the Goths. Von Junzt contradicted this as-

sertion without giving any refutory facts, merely remarking that to attribute the origin of the Black Stone to the Huns was as logical as assuming that William the Conqueror reared Stonehenge.

THIS implication of enormous antiquity piqued my interest immensely and after some difficulty I succeeded in locating a rat-eaten and moldering copy of Dostmann's Remnants of Lost Empires (Berlin, 1809, "Der Drachenhaus" Press). I was disappointed to find that Dostmann referred to the Black Stone even more briefly than had Von Junzt, dismissing it with a few lines as an artifact comparatively modern in contrast with the Greco-Roman ruins of Asia Minor which were his pet theme. He admitted his inability to make out the defaced characters on the monolith but pronounced them unmistakably Mongoloid. However, little as I learned from Dostmann, he did mention the name of the village adjacent to the Black Stone—Stregoicavar—an ominous name, meaning something like Witch-Town.

A close scrutiny of guidebooks and travel articles gave me no further information—Stregoicavar, not on any map that I could find, lay in a wild, little-frequented region, out of the path of casual tourists. But I did find subject for thought in Dornly's Magyar Folklore. In his chapter on Dream Myths he mentions the Black Stone and tells of some curious superstitions regarding it—especially the belief that if anyone sleeps in the vicinity of the monolith, that person will be haunted by monstrous nightmares for ever after; and he cited tales of the peasants regarding too-curious people who ventured to visit the Stone on Midsummer Night and who died raving mad because of something they saw there.

That was all I could gleam from Dornly, but my interest was even more intensely roused as I sensed a distinctly sinister aura about the Stone. The suggestion of dark antiquity, the recurrent hint of unnatural events on Midsummer Night, touched some slumbering instinct in my being, as one senses, rather than hears, the flowing of some dark subterraneous river in the night.

And I suddenly saw a connection between this Stone and a certain weird and fantastic poem written by the mad poet, Justin Geoffrey: The People of the Monolith. Inquiries led to the information that Geoffrey had indeed written that poem while traveling in Hungary, and I could not doubt that the Black Stone was the very monolith to which he referred in his strange verse. Reading his stanzas again, I felt

once more the strange dim stirrings of subconscious promptings that I had noticed when first reading of the Stone.

I had been casting about for a place to spend a short vacation and I made up my mind. I went to Stregoicavar. A train of obsolete style carried me from Temesvar to within striking distance, at least, of my objective, and a three days' ride in a jouncing coach brought me to the little village which lay in a fertile valley high up in the fir-clad mountains.

The journey itself was uneventful, but during the first day we passed the old battlefield of Schomvaal where the brave Polish-Hungarian knight, Count Boris Vladinoff, made his gallant and futile stand against the victorious hosts of Suleiman the Magnificent, when the Grand Turk swept over eastern Europe in 1526.

THE driver of the coach pointed out to me a great heap of crumbling stones on a hill nearby, under which, he said, the bones of the brave Count lay. I remembered a passage from Larson's Turkish Wars. "After the skirmish" (in which the Count with his small army had beaten back the Turkish advance-guard) "the Count was standing beneath the half-ruined walls of the old castle on the hill, giving orders as to the disposition of his forces, when an aide brought to him a small lacquered case which had been taken from the body of the famous Turkish scribe and historian, Selim Bahadur, who had fallen in the fight. The Count took therefrom a roll of parchment and began to read, but he had not read far before he turned very pale and without saying a word, replaced the parchment in the case and thrust the case into his cloak. At that very instant a hidden Turkish battery suddenly opened fire, and the balls striking the old castle, the Hungarians were horrified to see the walls crash down in ruin, completely covering the brave Count. Without a leader the gallant little army was cut to pieces, and in the war-swept years which followed, the bones of the noblemen were never recovered. Today the natives point out a huge and moldering pile of ruins near Schomvaal beneath which, they say, still rests all that the centuries have left of Count Boris Vladinoff."

I found the village of Stregoicavar a dreamy, drowsy little village that apparently belied its sinister cognomen—a forgotten black-eddy that Progress had passed by. The quaint houses and the quainter dress and manners of the people were those of an earlier century. They were friendly, mildly curious but not inquisitive, though visitors from

the outside world were extremely rare.

"Ten years ago another American came here and stayed a few days in the village," said the owner of the tavern where I had put up, "a young fellow and queer-acting—mumbled to himself—a poet, I think."

I knew he must mean Justin Geoffrey.

"Yes, he was a poet," I answered, "and he wrote a poem about a bit of scenery near this very village."

"Indeed?" mine host's interest was aroused. "Then, since all great poets are strange in their speech and actions, he must have achieved great fame, for his actions and conversations were the strangest of any man I ever knew."

"As is usual with artists," I answered, "most of his recognition has come since his death."

"He is dead, then?"

"He died screaming in a madhouse five years ago."

"Too bad, too bad," sighed mine host sympathetically. "Poor lad—he looked too long at the Black Stone."

My heart gave a leap, but I masked my keen interest and said casually: "I have heard something of this Black Stone; somewhere near this village, is it not?"

"Nearer than Christian folk wish," he responded. "Look!" He drew me to a latticed window and pointed up at the fir-clad slopes of the brooding blue mountains. "There beyond where you see the bare face of that jutting cliff stands that accursed Stone. Would that it were ground to powder and the powder flung into the Danube to be carried to the deepest ocean! Once men tried to destroy the thing, but each man who laid hammer or maul against it came to an evil end.

"So now the people shun it."

"What is there so evil about it?" I asked curiously.

"It is a demon-haunted thing," he answered uneasily and with the suggestion of a shudder. "In my childhood I knew a young man who came up from below and laughed at our traditions—in his foolhardiness he went to the Stone on Midsummer Night and at dawn stumbled into the village again, stricken dumb and mad. Something had shattered his brain and sealed his lips, for until the day of his death, which came soon after, he spoke only to utter terrible blasphemies or to slaver gibberish.

"My own nephew when very small was lost in the mountains and slept in the woods near the Stone, and now in his manhood he is tortured by foul dreams so that at times he makes the night hideous with his screams and wakes with cold sweat upon him.

"But let us talk of something

else, Herr; it is not good to dwell upon such things."

I remarked on the evident age of the tavern and he answered with pride: "The foundations are more than four hundred years old; the original house was the only one in the village which was not burned to the ground when Suleiman's devils swept through the mountains. Here, in the house that then stood on these same foundations, it is said, the scribe Selim Bahadur had his headquarters while ravaging the country hereabouts."

I LEARNED then that the present inhabitants of Stregoicavar are not descendants of the people who dwelt there before the Turkish raid of 1526. The victorious Moslems left no living human in the village or the vicinity thereabouts when they passed over. Men, women and children they wiped out in one red holocaust of murder, leaving a vast stretch of country silent and utterly deserted. The present people of Stregoicavar are descended from hardy settlers from the lower valleys who came into the upper levels and rebuilt the ruined village after the Turk was thrust back.

Mine host did not speak of the extermination of the original inhabitants with any great resentment and I learned that his ancestors in the lower levels had looked on the mountaineers with even more hatred and aversion than they regarded the Turks. He was rather vague regarding the causes of this feud, but said that the original inhabitants of Stregoicavar had been in the habit of making stealthy raids on the lowlands and stealing girls and children. Moreover, he said that they were not exactly of the same blood as his own people; the sturdy, original Magyar-Slavic stock had mixed and intermarried with a degraded aboriginal race until the breeds had blended, producing an unsavory amalgamation. Who these aborigines were, he had not the slightest idea, but maintained that they were "pagans" and had dwelt in the mountains since time immemorial, before the coming of the conquering peoples.

I attached little importance to this tale; seeing in it merely a parallel to the amalgamation of Celtic tribes with Mediterranean aborigines in the Galloway hills, with the resultant mixed race which, as Picts, has such an extensive part in Scotch legendary. Time has a curious foreshortening effect on folklore, and just as tales of the Picts became intertwined with legends of an older Mongoloid race, so that eventually the Picts were ascribed the repulsive appearance of the squat primitives, whose individuality merged, in the telling, into Pict-

ish tales, and was forgotten; so, I felt, the supposed inhuman attributes of the first villages of Stregoicavar could be traced to older, outworn myths with invading Huns and Mongols.

THE morning after my arrival I received directions from mine host, who gave them worriedly, and set out to find the Black Stone. A few hours' tramp up the fir-covered slopes brought me to the face of the rugged, solid stone cliff which jutted boldly from the mountainside. A narrow trail wound up it, and mounting this, I looked out over the peaceful valley of Stregoicavar, which seemed to drowse, guarded on either hand by the great blue mountains. No huts or any sign of human tenancy showed between the cliff whereon I stood and the village. I saw numbers of scattering farms in the valley but all lay on the other side of Stregoicavar, which itself seemed to shrink from the brooding slopes which masked the Black Stone.

The summit of the cliffs proved to be a sort of thickly wooded plateau. I made my way through the dense growth for a short distance and came into a wide glade; and in the center of the glade reared a gaunt figure of black stone.

It was octagonal in shape, some sixteen feet in height and about a foot and a half thick. It had once evidently been highly polished, but now the surface was thickly dinted as if savage efforts had been made to demolish it; but the hammers had done little more than to flake off small bits of stone and mutilate the characters which once had evidently marched in a spiraling line round and round the shaft to the top. Up to ten feet from the base these characters were almost completely blotted out, so that it was very difficult to trace their direction. Higher up they were plainer, and I managed to squirm part of the way up the shaft and scan them at close range. All were more or less defaced, but I was positive that they symbolized no language now remembered on the face of the earth. I am fairly familiar with all hieroglyphics known to researchers and philologists and I can say, with certainty that those characters were like nothing of which I have ever read or heard. The nearest approach to them that I ever saw were some crude scratches on a gigantic and strangely symmetrical rock in a lost valley of Yucatan. I remember that when I pointed out these marks to the archeologist who was my companion, he maintained that they either represented natural weathering or the idle scratching of some Indian. To my theory that the rock was really the base of a

long-vanished column, he merely laughed, calling my attention to the dimensions of it, which suggested, if it were built with any natural rules of architectural symmetry, a column a thousand feet high. But I was not convinced.

I will not say that the characters on the Black Stone were similar to those on that colossal rock in Yucatan; but one suggested the other. As to the substance of the monolith, again I was baffled. The stone of which it was composed was a dully gleaming black, whose surface, where it was not dinted and roughened, created a curious illusion of semi-transparency.

I spent most of the morning there and came away baffled. No connection of the Stone with any other artifact in the world suggested itself to me. It was as if the monolith had been reared by alien hands, in an age distant and apart from human ken.

I returned to the village with my interest in no way abated. Now that I had seen the curious thing, my desire was still more keenly whetted to investigate the matter further and seek to learn by what strange hands and for what strange purpose the Black Stone had been reared in the long ago.

I SOUGHT out the tavern-keeper's nephew and questioned him in regard to his dreams, but he was vague, though willing to oblige. He did not mind discussing them, but was unable to describe them with any clarity. Though he dreamed the same dreams repeatedly, and though they were hideously vivid at the time, they left no distinct impression on his waking mind. He remembered them only as chaotic nightmares through which huge whirling fires shot lurid tongues of flame and a black drum bellowed incessantly. One thing only he had seen the Black Stone, not on a mountain slope but set like a spire on a colossal black castle.

As for the rest of the villagers I found them not inclined to talk about the Stone, with the exception of the schoolmaster, a man of surprising education, who spent much more of his time out in the world than any of the rest.

He was much interested in what I told him of Von Junzt's remarks about the Stone, and warmly agreed with the German author in the alleged age of the monolith. He believed that a coven had once existed in the vicinity and that possibly all of the original villagers had been members of that fertility cult which once threatened to undermine European civilization and gave rise to the tales of witchcraft. He cited the very name of the village to prove his point; it had not been originally named

Stregoicavar, he said; according to legends the builders had called it Xuthltan, which was the aboriginal name of the site on which the village had been built many centuries ago.

This fact roused again an indescribable feeling of uneasiness. The barbarous name did not suggest connection with any Scythic, Slavic or Mongolian race to which an aboriginal people of these mountains would, under natural circumstances, have belonged.

That the Magyars and Slavs of the lower valleys believed the original inhabitants of the village to be members of the witchcraft cult was evident, the schoolmaster said, by the name they gave it, which name continued to be used even after the older settlers had been massacred by the Turks, and the village rebuilt by a cleaner and more wholesome breed.

He did not believe that the members of the cult erected the monolith but he did believe that they used it as a center of their activities, and repeating vague legends which had been handed down since before the Turkish invasion, he advanced the theory that the degenerate villagers had used it as a sort of altar on which they offered human sacrifices, using as victims the girls and babies stolen from his own ancestors in the lower valleys.

He discounted the myths of weird events on Midsummer Night, as well as a curious legend of a strange deity which the witch-people of Xuthltan were said to have invoked with chants and wild rituals of flagellation and slaughter.

He had never visited the Stone on Midsummer Night, he said, but he would not fear to do so; whatever had existed or taken place there in the past, had been long engulfed in the mists of time and oblivion. The Black Stone had lost its meaning save as a link to a dead and dusty past.

It was while returning from a visit with this schoolmaster one night about a week after my arrival at Stregoicavar that a sudden recollection struck me—it was Midsummer Night! The very time that the legends linked with grisly implications to the Black Stone. I turned away from the tavern and strode swiftly through the village. Stregoicavar lay silent; the villagers retired early. I saw no one as I passed rapidly out of the village and up into the firs which masked the mountain slopes with whispering darkness. A broad silver moon hung above the valley, flooding the crags and slopes in a weird light and etching the shadows blackly. No wind blew through the firs, but a mysterious, intangible rustling and whispering was abroad. Surely on such nights in past centuries, my whimsical

imagination told me, naked witches on magic broomsticks had flown across the valley, pursued by jeering demoniac familiars.

I came to the cliffs and was somewhat disquieted to note that the illusive moonlight lent them a subtle appearance I had not noticed before—in the weird light they appeared less like natural cliffs and more like the ruins of cyclopean and Titan-reared battlements jutting from the mountain-slope.

Shaking off this hallucination with difficulty I came upon the plateau and hesitated a moment before I plunged into the brooding darkness of the woods. A sort of breathless tenseness hung over the shadows, like an unseen monster holding its breath lest it scare away its prey.

I shook off the sensation—a natural one, considering the eeriness of the place and its evil reputation—and made my way through the wood, experiencing a most unpleasant sensation that I was being followed, and halting once, sure that something clammy and unstable had brushed against my face in the darkness.

I came out into the glade and saw the tall monolith rearing its gaunt height above the sward. At the edge of the woods on the side toward the cliffs was a stone which formed a sort of natural seat. I sat down, reflecting that it was probably while there that the mad poet, Justin Geoffrey, had written his fantastic People of the Monolith. Mine host thought that it was the Stone which had caused Geoffrey's insanity, but the seeds of madness had been sown in the poet's brain long before he ever came to Stregoicavar.

A GLANCE at my watch showed that the hour of midnight was close at hand. I leaned back, waiting whatever ghostly demonstration might appear. A thin night wind started up among the branches of the firs, with an uncanny suggestion of faint, unseen pipes whispering an eerie and evil tune. The monotony of the sound and my steady gazing at the monolith produced a sort of self-hypnosis upon me; I grew drowsy. I fought this feeling, but sleep stole on me in spite of myself; the monolith seemed to sway and dance, strangely distorted to my gaze, and then I slept.

I opened my eyes and sought to rise, but lay still, as if an icy hand gripped me helpless. Cold terror stole over me. The glade was no longer deserted. It was thronged by a silent crowd of strange people, and my distended eyes took in strange barbaric details of costume which my reason told me were archaic and forgotten even in this backward land. Surely, I thought, these are vil-

lagers who have come here to hold some fantastic conclave—but another glance told me that these people were not of the folk of Stregoicavar. They were a shorter, more squat race, whose brows were lower, whose faces were broader and duller. Some had Slavic or Magyar features, but those features were degraded as from a mixture of some baser, alien strain I could not classify. Many wore the hides of wild beasts, and their whole appearance, both men and women, was one of sensual brutishness. They terrified and repelled me, but they gave me no heed. They formed in a vast half-circle in front of the monolith and began a sort of chant, flinging their arms in unison and weaving their bodies rhythmically from the waist upward. All eyes were fixed on the top of the Stone which they seemed to be invoking. But the strangest of all was the dimness of their voices; not fifty yards from me hundreds of men and women were unmistakably lifting their voices in a wild chant, yet those voices came to me as a faint indistinguishable murmur as if from across vast leagues of Space—or time.

Before the monolith stood a sort of brazier from which a vile, nauseous yellow smoke billowed upward, curling curiously in a swaying spiral around the black shaft, like a vast unstable snake.

On one side of this brazier lay two figures—a young girl, stark naked and bound hand and foot, and an infant, apparently only a few months old. On the other side of the brazier squatted a hideous old hag with a queer sort of black drum on her lap; this drum she beat with slow, light blows of her open palms, but I could not hear the sound.

The rhythm of the swaying bodies grew faster and into the space between the people and the monolith sprang a naked young woman, her eyes blazing, her long black hair flying loose. Spinning dizzily on her toes, she whirled across the open space and fell prostrate before the Stone, where she lay motionless. The next instant a fantastic figure followed her—a man from whose waist hung a goatskin, and whose features were entirely hidden by a sort of mask made from a huge wolf's head, so that he looked like a monstrous, nightmare being, horribly compounded of elements both human and bestial. In his hand he held a bunch of long fir switches bound together at the larger ends, and the moonlight glinted on a chain of heavy gold looped about his neck.

A smaller chain depending from it suggested a pendant of some sort, but this was missing.

The people tossed their arms violently and seemed to re-

double their shouts as this grotesque creature loped across the open space with many a fantastic leap and caper. Coming to the woman who lay before the monolith, he began to lash her with the switches he bore, and she leaped up and spun into the wild muzes of the most incredible dance I have ever seen. And her tormentor danced with her, keeping the wild rhythm, matching her every whirl and bound, while incessantly raining cruel blows on her naked body. And at every blow he shouted a single word, over and over, and all the people shouted it back. I could see the working of their lips, and now the faint far-off murmur of their voices merged and blended into one distant shout, repeated over and over with slobbering ecstasy. But what that one word was, I could not make out.

In dizzy whirls spun the wild dancers, while the lookers-on, standing still in their tracks, followed the rhythm of their dance with swaying bodies and weaving arms. Madness grew in the eyes of the capering votaress and was reflected in the eyes of the watchers. Wilder and more extravagant grew the whirling frenzy of that mad dance—it became a bestial and obscene thing, while the old hag howled and battered the drum like a crazy woman, and the switches cracked out a devil's tune.

Blood trickled down the dancer's limbs but she seemed not to feel the lashing save as a stimulus for further enormities of outrageous motion; bounding into the midst of the yellow smoke which now spread out tenuous tentacles to embrace both flying figures, she seemed to merge with that foul fog and veil herself with it. Then emerging into plain view, closely followed by the beast-thing that flogged her, she shot into an indescribable, explosive burst of dynamic mad motion, and on the very crest of that mad wave, she dropped suddenly to the sward, quivering and panting as if completely overcome by her frenzied exertions. The lashing continued with unabated violence and intensity and she began to wriggle toward the monolith on her belly. The priest —or such I will call him—followed, lashing her unprotected body with all the power of his arm as she writhed along, leaving a heavy track of blood on the trampled earth. She reached the monolith, and gasping and panting, flung both arms about it and covered the cold stone with fierce hot kisses, as in frenzied and unholy adoration.

The fantastic priest bounded high in the air, flinging away the red-dabbled switches, and the worshippers, howling and foaming at the mouths, turned on each other with tooth and nail,

rendering one another's garments and flesh in a blind passion of bestiality. The priest swept up the infant with a long arm, and shouting again that Name, whirled the wailing babe high in the air and dashed its brains out against the monolith, leaving a ghastly stain on the black surface. Cold with horror I saw him rip the tiny body open with his bare brutish fingers and fling handfuls of blood on the shaft, then toss the red and torn shape into the brazier, extinguishing flame and smoke in a crimson rain, while the maddened brutes behind him howled over and over the Name. Then suddenly they all fell prostrate, writhing like snakes, while the priest flung wide his gory hands as in triumph. I opened my mouth to scream my horror and loathing, but only a dry rattle sounded; a huge monstrous toadlike thing squatted on the top of the monolith!

I SAW its bloated, repulsive and unstable outline against the moonlight and set in what would have been the face of a natural creature, its huge, blinking eyes which reflected all the lust, abysmal greed, obscene cruelty and monstrous evil that has stalked the sons of men since their ancestors mowed blind and hairless in the tree-tops. In those grisly eyes were mirrored all the unholy things and vile secrets that sleep in the cities under the sea, and that skulk from the light of day in the blackness of primordial caverns. And so that ghastly thing that the unhallowed ritual of cruelty and sadism and blood had evoked from the silence of the hills, leered and blinked down on its bestial worshippers, who groveled in abhorrent abasement before it.

Now the beast-masked priest lifted the bound and weakly writhing girl in his brutish hands and held her up toward that horror on the monolith. And as that monstrosity sucked in its breath, lustfully and slobberingly, something snapped in my brain and I fell into a merciful faint.

I opened my eyes on a still white dawn. All the events of the night rushed back on me and I sprang up, then stared about me in amazement. The monolith brooded gaunt and silent above the sward which waved, green and untrampled, in the morning breeze. A few quick strides took me across the glade; here had the dancers leaped and bounded until the ground should have been trampled bare, and here had the votaress wriggled her painful way to the Stone, streaming blood on the earth. But no drop of crimson showed on the uncrushed sward. I looked, shudderingly, at the side of the monolith against which the bestial priest had brained the stolen

baby—but no dark stain nor grisly clot showed there.

A dream! It had been a wild nightmare—or else—I shrugged my shoulders. What vivid clarity for a dream!

I returned quietly to the village and entered the inn without being seen. And there I sat meditating over the strange events of the night. More and more was I prone to discard the dream-theory. That what I had seen was illusion and without material substance, was evident. But I believed that I had looked on the mirrored shadow of a deed perpetrated in ghastly actuality in bygone days. But how was I to know? What proof to show that my vision had been a gathering of foul specters rather than a nightmare originating in my brain?

As if for answer a name flashed into my mind—Selim Bahadur! According to legend this man, who had been a soldier as well as a scribe, had commanded that part of Suleiman's army which had devastated Stregoicavar; it seemed logical enough; and if so, he had gone straight from the blotted-out countryside to the bloody field of Schomvaal, and his doom. I sprang up with a sudden shout—that manuscript which was taken from the Turk's body, and which Count Boris shuddered over—might it not contain some narration of what the conquering Turks found in Stregoicavar? What else could have shaken the iron nerves of the Polish adventurer? And since the bones of the Count had never been recovered, what more certain than that the lacquered case, with its mysterious contents, still lay hidden beneath the ruins that covered Boris Vladinoff? I began packing my bag with fierce haste.

THREE days later found me esconced in a little village a few miles from the old battlefield, and when the moon rose I was working with savage intensity on the great pile of crumbling stone that crowned the hill. It was back-breaking toil—looking back now I cannot see how I accomplished it, though I labored without a pause from moonrise to dawn. Just as the sun was coming up I tore aside the last tangle of stones and looked on all that was mortal of Count Boris Vladinoff—only a few pitiful fragments of crumbling bone—and among them, crushed out of all original shape, lay a case whose lacquered surface had kept it from complete decay through the centuries.

I seized it with frenzied eagerness, and back in my tavern chamber I opened the case and found the parchment comparatively intact; and there was something else in the case—a small squat object wrapped in silk. I was wild to plumb the secrets

of those yellowed pages, but weariness forbade me. Since leaving Stregoicavar I had hardly slept at all, and the terrific exertions of the previous night combined to overcome me. In spite of myself I was forced to stretch myself on my bed, nor did I awake until sundown.

I snatched a hasty supper, and then in the light of a flickering candle, I set myself to read the near Turkish characters that covered the parchment. It was difficult work, for I am not deeply versed in the language and the archaic style of the narrative baffled me. But as I toiled through it a word or a phrase here and there leaped at me and a dimly growing horror shook me in its grip. I bent my energies fiercely to the task, and as the tale grew clearer and took more tangible form my blood chilled in my veins, my hair stood up and my tongue clove to my mouth.

At last when gray dawn was stealing through the latticed window, I laid down the manuscript and took up and unwrapped the thing in the bit of silk. Staring at it with haggard eyes I knew the truth of the matter was clinched, even had it been possible to doubt the veracity of that terrible manuscript.

And I replaced both obscene things in the case, nor did I rest or sleep or eat until that case containing them had been weighted with stones and flung into the deepest current of the Danube which, God grant, carried them back into the Hell from which they came.

It was no dream I dreamed on Midsummer Midnight in the hills above Stregoicavar. Well for Justin Geoffrey that he tarried there only in the sunlight and went his way, for had he gazed upon that ghastly conclave, his mad brain would have snapped before it did. How my own reason held, I do not know.

No—it was no dream—I gazed upon a foul rout of votaries long dead, come up from Hell to worship as of old; ghosts that bowed before a ghost. For Hell has long claimed their hideous god.

By what foul alchemy or godless sorcery the Gates of Hell are opened on that one eery night I do not know, but mine own eyes have seen. And I know I looked on no living thing that night, for the manuscript written in the careful hand of Selim Bahadur narrated at length what he and his raiders found in the valley of Stregoicavar; and I read, set down in detail, the blasphemous obscenities that torture wrung from the lips of screaming worshippers; and I read, too, of the lost, grim black cavern high in the hills where the horrified Turks hemmed a monstrous,

bloated, wallowing toad-like being and slew it with flame and ancient steel blessed in old times by Muhammad, and with incantations that were old when Arabia was young. And even staunch old Selim's hand shook as he recorded the cataclysmic, earth-shaking death-howls of the monstrosity, which died not alone; for half-score of his slayers perished with him, in ways that Selim would not or could not describe.

And that squat idol carved of gold and wrapped in silk was an image of himself, and Selim tore it from the golden chain that looped the neck of the slain high priest of the mask.

Well that the Turks swept out that foul valley with torch and cleanly steel! Such sights as those brooding mountains have looked on belong to the darkness and abysses of lost eons. No—it is not fear of the toad-thing that makes me shudder in the night. He is made fast in Hell with his nauseous horde, freed only for an hour on the most weird night of the year, as I have seen. And of his worshippers, none remains.

But it is the realization that such things once crouched beast-like above the souls of men which brings cold sweat to my brow; and I fear to peer again into the leaves of Von Junzt's abomination. For now I understand his repeated phrase of keys!—aye! Keys to Outer Doors—links with an abhorrent past and—who knows?—of abhorrent spheres of the present. And I understand why the tavern-keeper's nightmare-haunted nephew saw in his dream, the Black Stone like a spire on a cyclopean black castle. If men ever excavate among those mountains they may find incredible things below those masking slopes. For the cave wherein the Turks trapped the—thing—was not truly a cavern, and I shudder to contemplate the gigantic gulf of eons which must stretch between this age and the time when the earth shook herself and reared up, like a wave, those blue mountains that, rising, enveloped unthinkable things. May no man ever seek to uproot that ghastly spire men call the Black Stone!

A Key! Aye, it is a Key, symbol of a forgotten horror. That horror has faded into the limbo from which it crawled, loathsomely, in the black dawn of the earth. But what of the other fiendish possibilities hinted at by Von Junzt—what of the monstrous hand which strangled out his life? Since reading what Selim Bahadur wrote, I can no longer doubt anything in the Black Book. Man was not always master of the earth—and is he now? What nameless shapes may even now lurk in the dark places of the world?

. . . a thin plaintive sound above the storm.

THE CRYING CHILD

BY DOROTHEA GIBBONS

IT HAD happened again. In the dim maze of half sleep, Tamar Forrest had thought it a dream, the restless imagining of an overtired mind. But now it was different and she was fully awake and conscious of the sounds of night. The light wind barely moved the stifle of leaves near the window, an owl hooted in the woods below the garden and there were the creaking sounds which an old house makes at night.

But from among those faint sounds it came again and it stabbed her brain for all it was such a little noise. Thinly and far off she could hear the crying of a child.

She sat up in bed, every sense alert while she fumbled for the switch of the lamp, but when the light flooded her room the crying had ceased.

She thought she knew each room in the house, every cupboard, and the only other living thing in it beside herself was her West Highland terrier, Flora, who lay on the bed, her eyes fixed on the door.

There it was again, and Flora growled softly. A cold feeling slid into Tamar's heart for surely something, someone must be trapped here in this house, for the crying had an insistent and heartbreaking quality.

But a search of the old house brought no solution. Tamar looked into every room and cupboard, every corner. Her torch roamed emptily on dust and disuse, but nothing human could be found, and she had to own to herself that she was afraid.

She returned to bed. "An owl in the wood," she said aloud, "they often sound like people, like a child crying."

But she was not comforted and fell into uneasy sleep.

"THE house is in a bad state of repair but I intend to work at it until it's fit to live in. I do admit, however, that it will be very difficult with things as they are today."

Tamar's voice had echoed drearily in the forlorn room, empty of everything but dust and cobwebs and the hot slanting rays of the sun on the dirty floor. Without lay the sad parched garden, untidy and derelict.

The man who was looking out of the window had turned his head.

"It will break your heart," he had said sourly, "as it has broken mine."

Tamar had laughed. "My heart," she answered, "is fairly well toughened against heartbreak. It will take more than Abegale to do it."

The dark sullen face opposite her half smiled, and something like appreciation had come into the man's eyes for a moment. He had lit a cigarette, throwing the match out of the window before he answered her.

"I sold you Abegale because I was hard up and because—of other things. Why an attractive young woman like you wants to live in this old place beats me." His voice was quite impersonal. "That, however, is none of my business," he went on, "and now you'd better ask me any questions about the house, which is the reason, I gather, that you asked me here today."

"I want to know quite a lot of things," said Tamar, note book in hand, "and among others I'm interested in Abegale itself, its history. I want the house to

be happy so that I can have people here who aren't," she ended bravely, flushing under the man's derisive grin.

He threw his cigarette on the floor, crushing it under his heel.

"You'll never succeed at Abegale, never," he said. "Do it up, fill it with your friends who like drinking parties. That's the only hope for the place. Never give it time to think or to remember—"

"To remember what?" cried Tamar sharply.

The man turned away as if he was tired of the conversation.

"Oh, I meant nothing. Now is there anything else you want to know?"

"I want to know everything, Mr. Montfichet," Tamar had said.

But Simon Montfichet left Abegale five minutes later and strode off down the drive in the sweltering heat and Tamar had watched him go, a frown between her eyes. She pushed back the hair from her hot brow, staring down at her note book, open at the front page which was blank.

THE hot August days drew on towards September and still the weather showed no sign of breaking. Plumbers and decorators arrived and the air was filled with the noise of hammering and Tamar measured and sewed and gradually the spacious rooms of Abegale became inhabited with furniture, old and lovely. But for all the outward show that Tamar put up, both to herself and to other people, something quite outside her own personal affairs was making her uneasy.

Simon Montfichet found her one evening sitting in a chair by the open window, her hands idle in her lap and her little dog beside her.

"Are you sleeping better?" he asked abruptly, which was his usual way of speaking. "You told me the other day you lie awake a lot."

"Not very well," she answered him sighing. "The heat doesn't help."

"Some weeks ago you told me also a ridiculous story that you heard a child crying in the house and you mentioned it again a few days ago," said Simon irritably. "Is your imagination still playing you tricks."

Tamar turned on him with a hot anger which surprised her.

"You wouldn't tell me anything about Abegale, not about the things I wanted to know—the history of it, things you could tell and which are not in the guide books. You could have told me and you wouldn't. Why?"

Simon looked at her flaming cheeks and angry eyes with an odd expression. But he merely said, "You know as much about

the history of Abegale as I do. As for my own personal experiences while I lived here, I hardly feel you can expect me to tell you those. You know I was married and that my wife died here. I must admit I find your curiosity rather vulgar."

His curt words cut her and she bit her lip. "I do assure you I'm not in the least vulgarly curious, as you so aptly put it," she answered coldly. "Your affairs are nothing to me, Mr. Montfichet. Naturally I'm very sorry for the trouble which came on you here. But there's something in the house, something I don't understand. I keep on thinking about it and I can't sleep because I hear it, you see. I'm always listening for it—it grieves me so that I should hear a child crying. It's so horrible!"

Simon made an exclamation of annoyance. "Oh for heaven's sake!" he said. "Look here, you must be fearfully overwrought or something. D'you usually get like this? I mean, do stupid things prey on your mind, things which aren't there?"

A tinge of concern had crept into his voice but Tamar didn't notice because she was crying. She cried in a brave way, letting the tears run down her face and not trying to wipe them away.

"There, you see what you've done!" she said angrily, "I never thought any man or woman either, could ever make me cry again."

"Oh God!" said Simon Montfichet and he turned sharply away and was gone.

ALL the next day the heat was worse than ever. Not a breath of wind stirred the tired trees and the late summer flowers drooped, too dispirited to raise their heads to the burning sun. Wasps and flies buzzed ceaselessly against the windows and from the overloaded apple trees the fruit thumped to the earth. They seemed to fall with infuriating frequency and Tamar waited for the thud which she knew was coming, wincing when it came. The apples should be picked, she thought feverishly, but the initiative to see to it had left her.

The evening light crept into the airless room and still Tamar sat there, the sweat running down her face, though her hands were clammy. The shadows took shape behind the chairs and tables. The gracious colors of the rugs and cretonnes faded to gray, and as the light faded, so the heat and the silence grew.

Little Flora climbed up beside Tamar to lick her hands and then through the heat a sound came, faintly and far away. From beyond the woods she heard it, sullen and menacing. Presently the still air was rent with noise,

as a roar sounded much nearer and a gust of wind tore past the house, taking Abegale in its grasp, shaking her old timbers till the bricks and tiles chattered like teeth in an ancient face. Ernormous drops of rain were hurled against the windows with the noise of a thousand hail stones and a terrific crash outside brought Tamar to her feet. Evidently a branch of a tree had struck the side of the house.

With a noise louder than the thunder something banged to the floor of the room, and in the weird half light she saw that an old corner cupboard had been wrenched from its fastenings and was lying face downwards in clouds of dust and rubble.

An odd lethargy stole over Tamar, in spite of the spattering rain and roar of thunder. The light faded to blackness which was lit by greenish flashes of lightning, and the dust settled quietly on everything in the room. Though she had eaten nothing all day she felt no thirst or hunger, but just a sorrow, deep and penetrating, and a fear as she waited for something which she knew she would hear.

The storm grew louder and the old house bowed its head before it. Within it the wind raised sounds as boards creaked where a light foot might have pressed; a curtain flapping could have been a woman's dress moving as she ran terrified across the hall. What was her fear and who pursued her? Then in a lull of sound came the thing for which Tamar had listened and it jolted her into stark terror.

From away up near the roof tops came the thin, high cry of a child. Tamar screamed, but a deafening roar of thunder drowned the noise so that she scarcely knew she was doing it, and she called out something without knowing what she said.

She ran, still screaming from the room. She wrenched open the front door and seizing the little dog cowering beside her, staggered out into the drive. The sheets of rain stung her face like a whip and the winding whiteness of the way before her flickered wetly in the ghastly light of lightning. The thunder roared above her head and flashes of light tore the sky in half in gaping wounds. The sweet smell of the grateful thirsty earth was all about her, but she heeded nothing. With her dog in her arms she ran, leaving Abegale behind her, its ancient head bowed before the storm.

The rain and her hair streaked wetly across her eyes prevented her from seeing, and so unknowing she bumped into something which held her fast. A flash of lighting revealed who it was.

"Simon! Oh Simon!" sobbed

Tamar, and her wet arms still clutching poor little draggled Flora were held up to him.

PRESENTLY at Abegale a certain normality took shape. Simon lit a fire, fetched dry clothes and produced whiskey for Tamar and a towel for Flora. The storm was gradually abating.

"You'd better change by the fire while I fetch some logs," he said, "go on, don't mind me, I shall be quite a while. I'll boil up some coffee—yes, I know what you were going to say, but I've eyes in my head and can find it. Lucky I discovered these candles, because the electric light has fused."

When Simon returned with cups of steaming hot coffee, he found Tamar huddled in her dry clothes rubbing Flora with a large towel, but her eyes were on the cupboard lying on the floor, the rusty nails sticking out of its back like ancient claws. They were of a pattern which had not been used for perhaps two hundred years. Dust lay everywhere and still wreathed round the room where the candle flame caught it.

"Now," said Simon, leaning forward to throw another log on the fire, "now that I've saved you and Flora from drowning, I think we shall have to talk to one another, not just say things which we've done up to the present." His voice was different and very kind.

Tamar caught her breath. "Have you heard—the crying?" she asked him quickly. Simon looked at her queerly, then gave attention to his pipe which needed filling.

"It cries at night," Tamar persisted, her hands clasped together, "It cried sometimes in the day as well. It—did it tonight in the storm. That's why I ran out of the house. I'm ashamed, but it was awful. It's—as if it were unhappy and neglected and alone."

A SUDDEN gust of wind blew open the long doors into the garden, driving in the wet leaves like little creatures coming in to shelter from the rain.

Then from away upstairs they heard it, plaintive and thin, a thread of sound which chilled their hearts.

Tamar gave a shuddering sob and Simon was beside her, his arms holding her.

"Don't listen," he said urgently. "Don't listen. It can't hurt you, it can't and—wouldn't want to." He held her tighter and again it came, but fainter now and emptied itself into the air.

The rain hissed against the window and a log fell spluttering to the hearth. Simon bent to

put it back and then drew Tamar close to him again.

"Stay still and listen," he said, and his voice had some of the rough urgency which Tamar remembered so well. "I ought to have told you something before, but I tried to think you were imagining things. Part of it's an odd story and some people might think I was mad to attach any importance to it. I've never wanted to believe these sort of tales but the war taught me something—about things you can't account for—and I've no option but to wonder whether what I'm going to tell you is possible, to say the least of it."

"Tell me, Simon," said Tamar.

"The Montfichets have mostly been an evil lot," said Simon. "Several hundred years ago they had a bad reputation for theft and rape and even witchcraft. Latterly they haven't gone to those extremes, but there's usually a few rotters in each generation. I don't know in what category you'd put me," he added grimly. "He sighed sharply and held Tamar still more tightly.

"There's a story — about a child," he said, picking his words with difficulty. "I rather hate telling it because I loathe it so. I'm afraid there was a small girl who was delicate and hadn't kind parents. She'd got a mother who was no good and a father who was an evil fellow. It happened about two hundred years ago and the poor little kid was supposed to have lost something—at least that's the story, a plaything of some kind I should imagine, and no one would look for it.

She died and I know there's always been a story of a child crying. I never heard it till I got married and then I thought I was imagining things. I was—blown up at sea during the D-Day business and it made me jumpy. But I hated the story, hated thinking I heard the crying, particularly as my wife was going to have a baby. She didn't want it and she never heard the crying, I'm sure of that or I'd have taken her away. Avice—my wife, died. I think she hated children."

SIMON cleared his throat. "I like them and I wanted the baby. I don't know exactly what this part of the story has to do with the little girl of two hundred years ago—only that I think the crying has been worse since Avice lived here. She—tried to get rid of the baby. That's why she died. There was an awful woman living in the village who'd been a nurse, a gaunt ghastly woman who used to tramp the damp woods that autumn with a pack of half-breed wolf hounds as raffish as herself.

I met her in the clearing be-

low the house just after Avice died. The doctor had told me why she was so ill and I accused this woman of having been the cause of it. She denied it, of course, but I knew it was true and that she was afraid. I can see her long viperish face now, with the rain running down it and those damned wolf dogs snarling round my heels. I love dogs but these were awful. It seemed that more evil had come to Abegale when there had been so much."

"Can't you forget that woman and the evil, Simon?" asked Tamar gently.

"I always wanted a son," he answered hardly, "and Avice cheated me out of it."

"No good can come out of bitterness," said Tamar gently.

Simon put his mouth against hers. "It's like this with me," he said as if he was exhausted. "I've tried not to let it because I'm a hard man and very bitter, and you'll think I want to marry you because you've bought Abegale. That's not true, I love you and not Abegale. I hate it."

In the flickering candlelight the white face and soft brown eyes of Flora peered at them as she rested her two front paws on Tamar's knee with something in her mouth.

Taking it from her, Tamar held it out to Simon.

"It's a doll, isn't it?" she asked and her voice was awed. "It must be very old. The cupboard, you see. It must have been pushed behind it many years ago, and when the cupboard came down it must have fallen out. And now Flora's found it."

The odd little painted thing lay in Simon's large hand, its garish face smiling at him. The crude colors were blotched and worn, but here they knew lay the plaything which had been lost two hundred years ago, and for which a little child had cried in an evil house where no one cared.

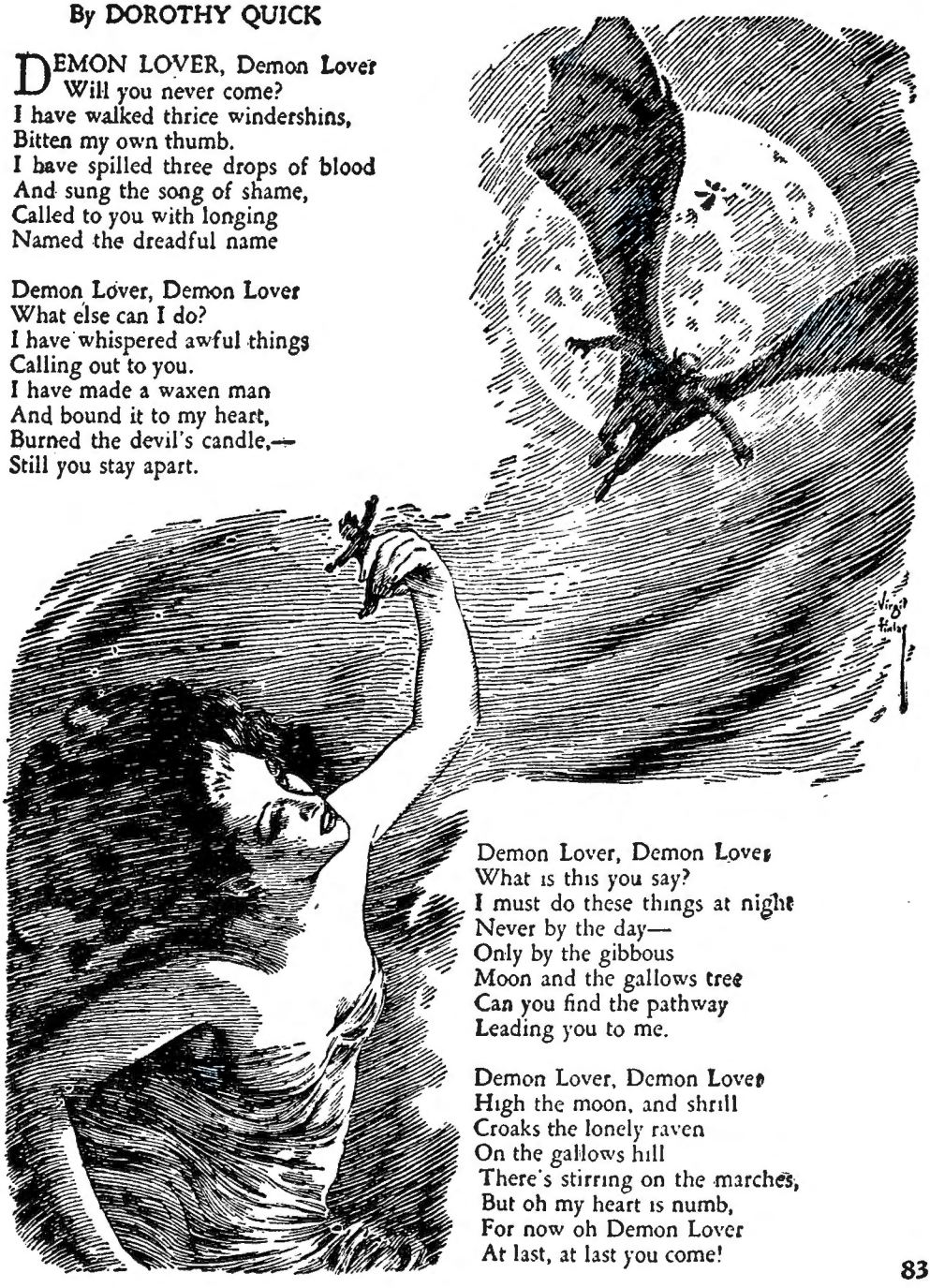
They also knew, each of them in their hearts, that because the beloved toy had been found that the child was comforted and would cry no more. Where the evil of Abegale had been the two of them would build up something grand and good in its place.

Demon Lover

By DOROTHY QUICK

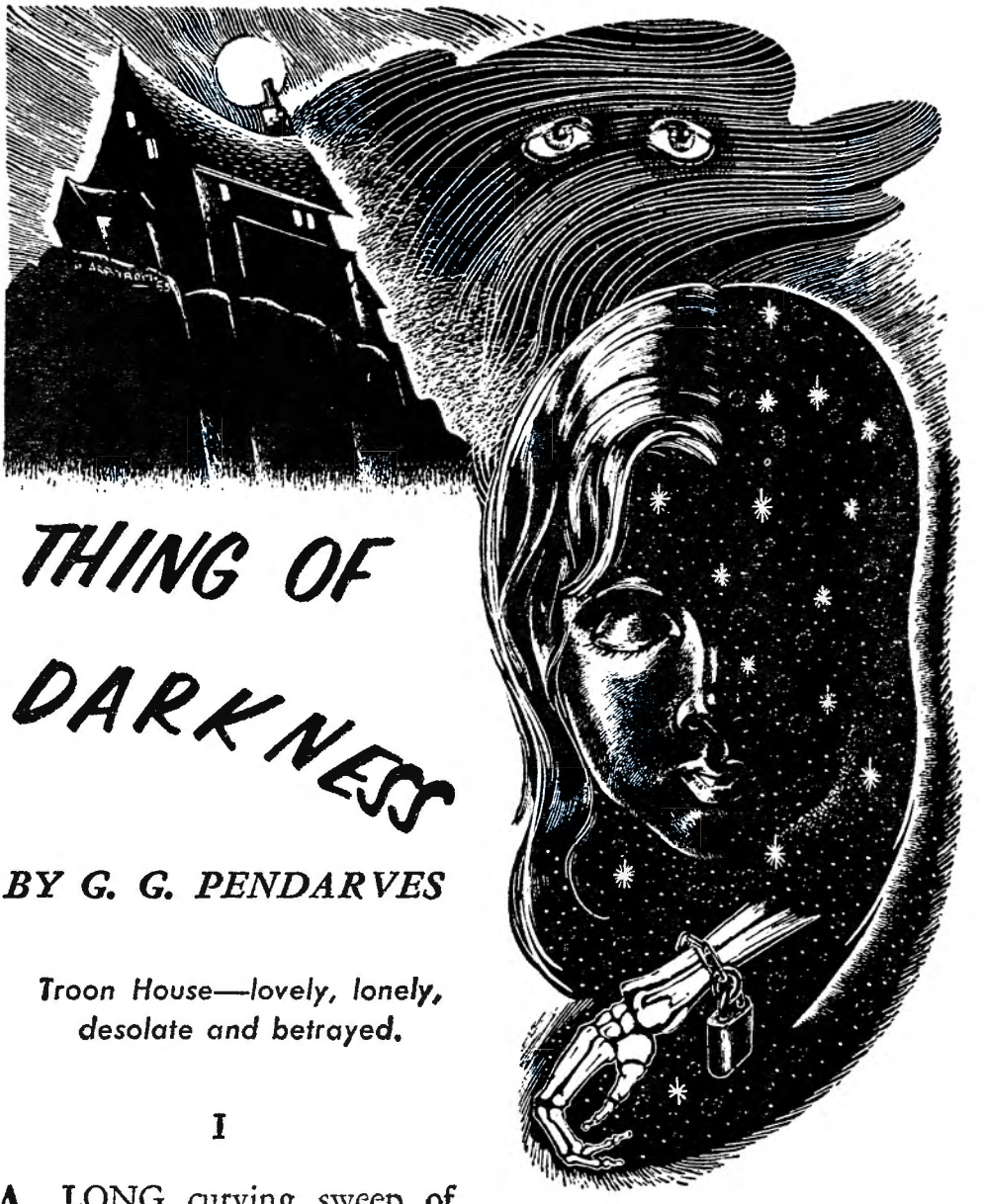
DEMON LOVER, Demon Lover
Will you never come?
I have walked thrice windershins,
Bitten my own thumb.
I have spilled three drops of blood
And sung the song of shame,
Called to you with longing
Named the dreadful name

Demon Lover, Demon Lover
What else can I do?
I have whispered awful things
Calling out to you.
I have made a waxen man
And bound it to my heart,
Burned the devil's candle,—
Still you stay apart.



Demon Lover, Demon Lover
What is this you say?
I must do these things at night
Never by the day—
Only by the gibbous
Moon and the gallows tree
Can you find the pathway
Leading you to me.

Demon Lover, Demon Lover
High the moon, and shrill
Croaks the lonely raven
On the gallows hill
There's stirring on the marches,
But oh my heart is numb,
For now oh Demon Lover
At last, at last you come!



THING OF DARKNESS

BY G. G. PENDARVES

Troon House—lovely, lonely, desolate and betrayed.

I

A LONG curving sweep of tall gray houses. At their feet the old parade, its worn sea-wall banked up against wind-driven tides. Troon House, grayer, gaunter than the rest, stood empty. A signboard creaked on rusted hinges, advertising it For Sale or To Let.

Lonely. Lovely. Deserted.

Seagate was proud of Troon

Heading by Virgil Finlay

House. Seagate was afraid of it. People came by the score to see it, always in broad daylight. They were careful to keep in groups, silent, timid, turning a sharp corner, entering each unexplored room with that sudden jolt that a clumsily manipulated elevator gives to one's heart.

They stared at beautiful restorations, at blackened beams, at vast wall-cupboards, and at brick fireplaces whose ancient clay showed every tint of umber, rose and purple-brown. They bunched together closely going up the last steep narrow stairs to the west attic. They looked at its deep recess, recently and fatally uncovered — looked and shuddered.

They went in close order downstairs again, escaped through low-roofed, retiled kitchens to a long untended garden behind the house and thence to a broad lane and main road at last. Shaken, nervously loquacious, they didn't speak of Troon until the old place was out of sight. Over tea and famous Seagate shrimps they exchanged impressions.

Going home after sunset, if they stayed so long, they glanced in passing along the road, at Troon's blank front windows, shivered, looked quickly away.

Troon—gray old house, left to hideous memories of the Thing of Darkness. Day by day, night by night, through the years, through the centuries Troon had stood. Old, forsaken, betrayed. Old Troon—shell of death—old Troon.

Low sullen clouds. A cold northwest wind. Fierce squalling gusts of rain. A high angry tide, gray-green flecked with bitter white, roaring up the estuary. Seagate was a mile of wet gray road and blank-faced houses. Wind and sea . . . wind and sea.

At the village-church of Keston, a fifteen minutes walk away on the hill behind, the broken body of Joe Dawlish with its staring tortured eyes and twisted face of fear was being buried. And in another grave, a sad small grave, the bones of Lizzy Werne were being laid to rest after three hundred years delay.

People thronged the small churchyard to its broad low moss-stained walls. From Seagate, from Keston, from all over the Wirral peninsula, and even from Liverpool and Chester they had come to witness this double funeral. Reporters, psychic investigators, university professors rubbed wet shoulders with fishermen, farmers, shop-keepers and local gentry.

At the end, the very end when the last words of the service were said and it only remained for the gaping graves to be filled in, the vicar stood with uplifted hands.

His somber gaze looked out over the crowd to tossing trees and lowering sky. His lined face, wet with rain, was worn and anxious.

SUDDENLY his voice rang out again, a cry from the heart of this shepherd of a stricken flock . . . "Deliver us, O Lord, from all assaults of the devil! In thine infinite mercy, protect and succor us! Stretch forth thy hand against this Thing of Darkness and set us free from fear! In the name of Him who died for us—Amen."

There was a murmurous response like water breaking on a distant shore. Then, slowly, silently, pelted by spiteful icy rain, the crowd dispersed.

At the lich-gate Doctor Dick Thornton was pushed up against two people he wanted to avoid: Edith and Alec Kinloch. Alec's heavy sallow face showed distinct traces of emotion. He looked quite appealingly at Doctor Dick.

" 'Fraid I didn't take all this quite seriously before," he confessed. "I don't understand what it's all about, but—"

Edith put a restraining hand on his arm. He was having one of his emotional moments, she could see. Heaven knew what he might say! Probably he would double his already absurdly generous offer of five pounds to the widow. What a blessing she could count on herself never to lose her head! Queer sort of service it had been. These villagers adored emotional orgies. Well, poor things, they must have some pleasure in their dull stupid lives. Clever of the vicar to stage such a good show for them. He knew how to cater for a rural diocese.

To deflect her husband from possible weakness she turned to the young girl behind her.

"Lynneth, this is Doctor Thornton. He's a sort of uncle to all the fishermen of Seagate. Miss Lynneth Brey, Doctor Thornton. A connection of my husband's. She's going to spend a month or so with us—at Troon."

There, Edith thought, that'll let him know right off that they've not succeeded in scaring us. Her tactics were wasted. The doctor didn't even hear her. He was looking down into Lynneth's uplifted rosy face. Black eyes, soft, sooty, heart-catching. Eyes made for tears and laughter and —oh, yes! he knew at once—made for love. He looked deep, deeper into them; young, radiant, kindled with recent deep emotion. Eyes to light a man's path, to draw him on and up, above life's dusty sordid clamor. Eyes that promised and withheld.

Doctor Dick's feet were treading air, his heart thumped with the beat-beat-beat of hooves on a hollow road, his head felt full

of fizzy champagne. But no one guessed it. He heard his voice, it didn't seem to surprise anyone, replying to the introduction. He waited with parted lips, eyes a clear tender blue, listening—listening for her voice.

"Oh!" She considered him. A smile drew her lips in an adorable sideways quirk. "You make me feel homesick, although I've only been here a day. You speak like a Highlander."

"I am one. From Gairloch."

She put out a small hand to be enveloped in his close grip, and laughed in quick delight.

"That's my place. My own darling funny village. My mother's birthplace. We've got a cottage there. D'you remember it—the one like a brown loaf at the head of Glen Ruach?"

THEY drifted from the churchgate, away down the twisting road. The crowd of people might have been blown wet leaves. The two Kinlochs, left behind, exchanged long glances.

"Let 'em go." Alec took his wife's arm. "Birds of a feather—eh? She and Pills can keep each other amused. Looks like a case to me. You won't be bothered with her long."

"Really, Alec! There's the garage—what on earth are you dragging me on for? I'm certainly not going to hang about for that silly girl. Going off with a man she's just met, like that! She behaves like a child. No idea of appearances."

"What odds? Nobody's going to notice a kid like that."

"Nonsense! She's connected with us. D'you want him for a permament relation?"

"Why not? Get the girl off your hands while the going's good. She and Pills would run a dispensary or a nursing-home and be too busy to interfere with us. This yearly visit's beginning to pall."

She glanced shrewdly at him.

"Something in that. And even if he's queer, quite important people have taken him up. Come on, then. I'm perishing with cold. This sensed fuss! Seagate doesn't seem to have altered since Troon House was first built."

They clambered into their car and splashed down the lane to their bungalow by the marshes.

"QUITE! Quite! However, there are always two sides to everything."

Mr. Alec Kinloch presented a large bulwark of flesh from behind which his schoolboy's mind issued bulletins to the outside world. He kept a store of such ready-made bulletins within, stereotyped responses calculated to give intimation of a subtle discerning intellect at work. He would employ such tactics indefinitely if conducting a conversa-

tion unaided. If his wife was with him she manned the big guns while he posed as an impregnable fortress.

Doctor Dick regarded the large dull pretentious creature with patience born of his profession rather than his temperament. Doctor Dick was a Highlander. Alec Kinloch a Lowland Scot. This, in itself, was a deep fixed gulf between them, apart from gulfs of breeding and intellect, and today the doctor found his host peculiarly trying. He'd made a point of calling when he knew Lynneth would not be at Sandilands. He wanted to spare her the grim tale he had to tell. It had been an effort, however; to miss a chance of seeing her, and his mood grew steadily darker.

"What," he demanded, "would you consider the other side of this horror at Troon?"

Baffled at such direct attack, Alec poked at his pipe with an air of grave reserve. He and Edith always were careful to be non-committal in their attitude until they discovered the trend of popular feeling with reference to a new idea. This Troon ghost notion now! If Seagate took it seriously, and yesterday's funeral service seemed to indicate so, then they would follow suit. Alec had been swayed by the vicar yesterday. Now, however, he knew Edith's view was the really intelligent and logical one. The vicar had been simply playing up, doing what the villagers expected of him. Jolly good thing no one but his wife knew that he'd actually got the wind up yesterday. The "Thing of Darkness!" Uh! Nasty phrase that! He'd felt like chucking up everything—selling Troon to any fool who wanted the old place. Well, he could laugh at himself and his fears now.

But this young Pills! He seemed officious. Trying to interfere. Pulling all this stuff about haunts and devils at Troon. Warning him that the workmen restoring the old house were in danger and that he and Edith ought to give up all idea of living there. Damned young whippersnapper, sitting there at his ease and telling a man of the world what was what! He'd tell him where he got off all right!

The door opened to admit his wife. Alec crossed his legs, resumed his pipe, took up the fortress-pose as Doctor Dick rose to his feet. Edith Kinloch progressed with ceremony to a chair.

"How nice of you to call again —so soon, Doctor Thornton."

"Doctor Dick" corrected the visitor. "My father is still in practise here. We have to make a distinction."

"Oh! How awkward for you!"

Edith was slim and tall and neat. She was invariably bright

and kind too. It was part of her chosen role to stoop kindly to her inferiors. The Lady Bountiful was her favorite part, to be gracious, to condescend. She'd been these things infuriatingly and increasingly ever since she cut free from her decent but quite uneducated family at the age of fourteen. Alec never knew to this day that her mother had a fish-and-chips shop in Edgware road, that her father was crippled and on the dole, that her younger sisters were working in a glue factory.

"My wife," Alec would tell you, believing it to be a fact, "lost both her parents—died in India when she was a child. Friends made themselves responsible for her education" (the Local Educational Council as represented by Edith's adaptable mind) "a branch of the Dorsetshire Frome-Stoddarts, you know. Good old family but impoverished—impoverished."

Edith smiled brightly on the two men sitting before the study fire.

"I'm sure you must be cold and hungry, Doctor—Dick, if you insist on the familiarity. I just went to tell cook she must drop everything and make some of her famous hot cakes for tea. Cook is so difficult, but really I find the best thing is to alter her routine every now and then. I do it on principle."

She proceeded to stage-manage a background for an afternoon-tea act. Doctor Dick was used as scene-shifter. Edith directed him with firm smiling competence. He pulled up tables and pushed away chairs. She conveyed atmospherically that he was young and insignificant enough to do these things rather than Alec.

"And now do let's go on with all that too adorable tale you were telling us about Troon just now. So like a story of Edgar Allan Poe's. Now don't say you finished that tale while I was out of the room! No? That's right!"

She beamed approval.

"Now. We're all settled. Tea—and put on another log, Alec, the basket's beside you there—a real Christmas fire to warm you up, Doctor Dick. And eat up the scones; you must be needing something. No use calling at tea-time and not taking advantage of the fact."

Glittering gracious hostess. Her varnished toffee-brown eyes shone in the firelight. She addressed the doctor as if he were a schoolboy out for a treat. She was convinced he'd arranged purposely to call at their tea hour. So lean and hungry-looking! She plumed herself on the observation! She plumed herself on the observation which thus misread Doctor Dick's rigidly disciplined muscular body.

"This is the only time I can

call," the doctor was young enough to feel not amused at her patronage. "I pass this bungalow on my way up to Keston. Due at the hospital at five, you know."

Edith smiled her best worldly understanding smile. Let the young man get away with his excuses, poor dear. She didn't grudge him his tea. Pity Lynneth was out. It would have been easy then to sidetrack him from the mission he felt he had concerning Troon and its restoration. She must make things plain, perfectly plain, once and for all. She leaned forward. Her glistening eyes, her perfectly smooth face, her small ungenerous mouth registered smiling cordiality.

"Now do tell me all about it."

DOCTOR DICK'S blue eyes grew black and gray as the November afternoon. He told her. Told her details of Joe Dawlish's death. Told her of daily increasing peril at Troon. Implored her to give up the whole thing, to leave the gray haunted old house to its evil.

"The men are in hourly danger—horrible danger. You are letting loose forces that have been pent up in the place for centuries. The men should come off the job at once."

At his increasingly urgent manner, Alec and Edith Kinloch stiffened simultaneously. After all, dash it all, the house is mine, ran Alec's thoughts, and there's a limit to the interference one can stand! Edith's eyes answered his unspoken protest, agreeing with it.

Alec voiced his ideas. His tone was a subtle reproach.

"Was this Joe Dawlish working on the house when he died?"

"He was." The doctor's clipped reply roused all Alec's fathomless obstinacy.

"I suppose he was insured."

Alec's own instant perception of the vital core of this queer fuss about Dawlish gratified him enormously. He was moved, without waiting for his wife's lead, to make a gesture.

"Well, I might give the wife a little extra. Ten pounds would pay for the funeral—handsomely. These people love a ghoulish sort of feast, don't they? 'Buried him with ham'—what!"

"Ham? Er, yes . . . quite. Ham."

Doctor Dick looked his host up and down as if he saw some connection between him and the word he reiterated. He got to his feet.

He was out of the room, out of the little entrance-hall, out of the house—stalking like a long-legged bird down the garden and on to the road almost before Edith and Alec could reply to his swift farewell. He'd been so quick, so cumbered with hat,

stick and a knobby untidy parcel, that he didn't even shake hands.

ALEC threw himself down in his armchair by the fire, took up a brass toasting fork and began to warm up the remaining scones. Edith watched him absent-mindedly.

"Shut Pills up, didn't I?" he spoke with his mouth full of scone. "Nothing like getting down to brass tacks with these fellows. Driveling about spooks and Troon! Neat dodge for collecting for Dawlish's widow. Better do the thing handsomely, as we're strangers here. Living at the big house, we'll be obliged to play up a bit."

Edith continued her pursuit of abstract thought.

"Well?"

"Yes, dear."

She came out of her trance, sat forward inelegantly, a thin hand on either knee. Strong emotion did occasionally uncover the past.

"Alec, there's more in this than meets the eye. Mark my words, there's someone else after Troon. They want to turn us out, force us to sell. I dare say they've found how old and much more valuable the property is than they believed. Let 'em try!"

He wolfed the last scone, pulled out a large white linen handkerchief, polished his lips, arranged his mustache, hitched up his trousers at the knee and lighted a fresh pipe.

"Let 'em!" he echoed in profound sepulchral tones.

SIX o'clock on a late November evening. Rain and a squalling wind from the east. A high tide slapping and hissing against the mile-long ancient seawall.

Jim Sanderson drove at his job in the cold drafty house with nervous hurry. A highly intelligent able workman was Jim, the best workman of the gang at Troon House.

Well over three hundred years old the house was. Of late it had fallen into bad disrepair. Its landlord lived in Ireland and had rented his fine old derelict to one careless tenant after another until roof and walls let in as much weather as they kept out.

The Liverpool agent happened to love the house. He had done his best, wrested small sums from its owner for patching here and patching there for forty odd years. But he and Troon could bluff no longer.

Would-be tenants kept on coming, for a genuine old Seagate house for sale was rare. Their verdict was unanimous. Damp! Rain drove in through deep cracks and faulty windows. Salt water used in the cement made ugly discolorations everywhere. Timbers were rotting.

One roof had curvature of the spine. Toads and spiders had taken over ruined outbuildings and kitchens. Weeds, coarse grass, overgrown hedges and dumps of rubbish made a desert of the long garden at Troon's back.

At last, the agent had put up enormous startling bills in each of Troon's front windows. And, suddenly, he sold the house.

The two Kinlochs had seen it. They had money. They needed an old and mellow background. They got a first-class architect to vet the place, found a reasonable sum would make it weatherproof, beat the Irish landlord down a little—very little, for he was savage as a cornered rat. Followed a flurry of contracts, plans, and agreements, then parleyings with the local council, who mistrusted haste and people with money to spend on a damp derelict house in Seagate. And the Kinlochs were in a hurry: they wanted to settle in before Christmas.

At last Troon House legally changed hands. The Kinlochs rented a bungalow lurking a mile away by the marshes. Troon was delivered up to the builders and decorators.

And so we return to Jim Sanderson on this gloomy November evening.

HE HAD an electric torch, for no light was yet installed in the house. By its beam he prodded furiously at a patch of decayed timber by the hearthstone. A specimen was demanded by the Mycology Section of the Forest Products Research Laboratory. Dry rot was suspected in this large front room on the ground floor. Sanderson had to send his specimen by that night's post. The other workmen were gone. He was working overtime — alone.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Somewhere in the drafty darkness upstairs a door banged persistently. It got on his nerves. He was a sensitive man in spite of his big muscular frame. Temperament, imagination, nerves were part of his quick flexible intelligence. He hated this night job. He felt queer and jumpy.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

There! The damned door had shut itself at last. He heaved a sigh of relief. Then his scalp prickled. Was someone up there? Had they shut the door? Was that someone coming down the broken creaking staircase?

The whites of his eyes showed like those of a frightened horse as he glanced up at the rain-blurred glass of a large bay-window on his right. Impulse seized him to dash himself at the panes, to escape to the friendly old parade just outside. Overwhelmingly he wanted to be out in the open—to exchange this dusty musty shelter for rain and salt

wind and flying scuds of foam.

He'd had enough. Things had got worse ever since Joe Dawlish had pulled down the cupboard in the big west attic a week ago. The wall and chimney-breast had crumbled and broken with its removal. A few stout blows, and the whole false facade had come down, revealing a deep recess reaching from rafters halfway to floor. On the broad stone shelf thus formed, a skeleton lay.

The bones of a child. Skull smashed in. A staple and chain padlocked round the bone of the left arm. The padlock was the strangest thing of all, of black smooth heavy stone with queer red markings chalked on it.

The vicar had been summoned in a hurry. He'd brought Doctor Dick with him. They were in a great taking about the affair, and carried off the poor little bones for burial.

From that hour things had gone wrong at Troon. Joe, who'd found the bones, was dead and buried inside a week—and what a week, too!

SANDERSON'S big brown hands fumbled as he tugged and strained at the flooring. He felt suddenly hot and weak. There was a flurry in his brain. He wrenched out the piece of wood he needed, stowed it roughly away in a torn capacious pocket of his old coat. Still on his knees, he gathered up his tools.

He rattled and banged things about, trying to shut out other sounds . . . sounds on the stairs . . .

The breath seemed to stop in his big body.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

It was someone cautiously stealing downstairs.

Crack!

He knew that sound. It was broken step, third from the bottom. He tried to call out. It must be that damned oaf, Walter! The fool must have gone to sleep up there. Sanderson couldn't make his stiff dry tongue obey him. He couldn't hail whoever it was out there. He couldn't—he daren't.

His hunted eyes sought the window. Power to move, to jump for it, had left him. He knelt there, powerful shoulders hunched, hands on the floor for support, crouched like a big frightened animal. He fought to prevent himself looking over his shoulder at the door behind. He knew it was opening. He heard stealthy fingers on the old loose knob. He heard the harsh scrape of wood on wood as the sagging door was pushed back.

Ice-cold wind blew in, rustled bits of paper and shavings on the floor.

Sanderson's head jerked back to look. The door stood widely open. His eyes, filmed with terror, focussed achingly on the gap

between door and wall. Darkness moved there. A Thing Of Darkness. On the threshold it bulked in shapeless moving menace. Darkness made visible . . . blotting out everything . . . blotting out life itself.

The crash of a small wooden crate on which his heavy hand rested saved Sanderson from fainting. He leaped for the window. Glass cracked and fell in sharp tinkling showers. A thick cloth cap protected his lowered head. He was through. He fell on the strip of trampled grass outside, among a tangle of ladders and buckets. He vaulted the pointed iron railing and was in the road—running—running—breath coming in deep sobbing gusts—deathly face splashed with rain and blood.

Ahead shone the cheerful red and white lamp of the Three Mariners. He went straight for it as a fox for a familiar burrow.

Mr. and Mrs. Burden—old Tom and old Mary to most—who kept the Three Mariners were sitting in their vast red-tiled kitchen before a blazing fire. Black hand-made rugs were spread. Oil lamps of heavy brass hung from massive black oak rafters. At a round walnut table covered with a crimson cloth, Mrs. Burden was working placidly through a pile of stockings to be mended. Solomon, a great tawny Persian cat, dozed with its leonine head on her instep. Mr. Burden, smoking a long churchwarden, sat in a wide Windsor chair glossy with age and use, his stockinged feet on a gleaming wrought-brass stool.

Doctor Dick sprawled on a settle near by. Two or three fishermen, warming up before the tide turned and they put out for their night's catch, completed the little company of friends.

They all looked up at the loud bang of the outer door. Every face was turned toward the kitchen entrance when Jim Sanderson burst in.

"For God's sake—a drink!"

He collapsed into a big chair and sat with head down on his hands, shivering and gasping before the hot fire. Doctor Dick was at his side in a moment. Mrs. Burden ran for a drink. Mr. Burden dropped his favorite pipe and stared. The fishermen sat forward, hands on knees, consternation on their weathered red-brown faces. Solomon stood with arched back, great feathery tail waving nervously, before seeking shelter under a distant chair to await developments.

Sanderson told his experience in jerks between sips of the Three Mariners' best Jamaica rum. His audience blinked, muttered, stared. Doctor Dick, that brilliant modern young man, listened with flattering and tremendous concentration, seablue

eyes and keen face losing every trace of their habitual friendly good-humor.

Mrs. Burden sat immobile. She had, as always, a flavor of the wild, of a remote and more instinctive age, of ancient beliefs and wisdom. She moved like a feather in a draft of wind—so light, so frail, so incalculable. She always seemed curiously unrelated to furniture and rooms and human dwelling-places in spite of making the Three Mariners the coziest inn in the whole county of Cheshire. She had the quality of some dear deep peat-brown river, nourishing the earth and nourished by it.

Her husband, rocklike as she was fluid and quick, turned to her now.

"What d'yer say to that, old woman? That there Troon house was always what you might say queer-like. I reckon it's had queer folk in it and all. But I never heard tell of anything out and out bad."

"No? Well, I did, then."

Doctor Dick leaned forward, pipe in hand, his eyes bright as blue steel in the lamp-glow.

"Now this isn't treating me on the level, old Mary." He waved his pipe in reproach. "You know very well the vicar and I are trying to rake up Troon's past history. I've been here for the last hour and you've never let out one solitary squeak."

"No, and I wouldn't have done it if Jim hadn't seen what he has seen this night." Her bright dark eyes flashed round the intent faces.

"I've been thinking over that business you've been telling about, Doctor Dick, that skeleton Joe dug out of the walls last week. Seems like as if that must have been her skeleton."

No one contradicted this dark surmise.

"I'll tell you the story as my grandfeyther's grandfeyther wrote it. He was a scholar. Kept village school up at Keston. He'd got an old book with everything put down that happened since Seagate began. I read this story when I was a girl and never forgot a word. I can get the book from my uncle's niece by marriage that works in a big library up to London to prove I'm right."

CHAIRS were hitched up, pipes relit. Old Tom flung a log that roused the fire to crackling flame. Solomon emerged, paced majestically back to his mistress, stretched at her feet with his yellow chin supported on them.

"The year 1600 saw Troon put up at the end of the parade, only a low seawall then. Course Troon was naught but a little tavern then: Troon Tavern. Even for those rough times it was a

bad place. They had miners over from Flint across the water—dark little devils, those Welshmen, always scrapping and more handy with knives than a butcher himself. Mostly it was miners went to Troon Tavern. The man that built it was Thomas Werne, a Seagate man that got hold of money somehow. Smuggling, most like.

"Werne, the book said, was nothing but a block brute of a man. Treated his young wife wors'n dog. When she died he got downright savage, and the child, Lizzy, left to him, came in for it all. I'm not going to harrow your feelings nor my own by telling what that innocent suffered. Laws weren't much then when it came to looking after poor people's children.

"But there was a gentleman came to stay here at this very inn, the Three Mariners, and he was that angry when he saw Lizzy and learned about her from Seagate talk, he threatened he'd have Werne put in prison. The gentleman went back to London after that and told Werne he'd hear more about it. Well, next thing that happened was—Lizzy Werne disappeared."

"Ah!" Doctor Dick's voice poignantly expressed his thought.

"Yes. Every one was certain sure Werne had done it, same as you're thinking yourself," responded old Mary. "But nothing could be proved. The body of the child, not much more of it than bones Joe found, never turned up, search though they might and did! The law made a great fuss when it was too late. The gentleman from London came back and he stayed for weeks, he was that set on getting Werne hanged for murder."

"And he walled the child up in his own house, then!" Doctor Dick's eyes blazed.

"Aye. After three hundred years we've found what Werne did, I b'lieve!"

"Eh, think of that!" Old Tom spat into the red fire. "And what did the murderin' fellow say had happened to the child? What did he tell 'em?"

"Said she was drowned. No one ever knew whether or not she was, the tides being mortal quick and dangerous here at Seagate. An' 'twas worse then. There were quicksands down by the marshes, and more than Werne's Lizzy had been caught and drowned. No one believed Werne's tale, only nothing could be done to him because Lizzy's body was never found."

"Quite. What I don't see," put in Doctor Dick, "is why he walled the body up. After smashing her skull, why not have taken the corpse out to sea and dropped it overboard one dark night?"

Old Mary shook her head.

"You mean he hadn't a boat?"

"No, I don't mean that, Doctor Dick. All the Seagate men had boats in those days, same as you and me have a pair of shoes. Reckon you're the only one here doesn't know why he couldn't put that body in the sea."

There were confirmatory nods all round the silent spellbound circle. Doctor Dick frowned in bewilderment.

"Why?"

"Well, seeing you don't know, I'll say the verse that was in the old book my grandfeyther's grandfeyther wrote out;

"A murdered body cast to sea
May never there lie quietly,
But every night is washed ashore,
And standing by the murderer's door
It cries to be let in.

"Of course that's put in rhyme and it's not quite right about the tides, not being a high tide every night anyhow. But the tide or no tide, the ghost would come back to the man who did the murder every night of his life."

Jim Sanderson shivered and looked with haunted eyes at the old woman.

"You reckon I saw her then—the ghost?"

"No. There's one, and it's a downright dangerous one. The child escaped, thanks be! But Werne's caught himself now and he's going to make people suffer for it."

She turned to Doctor Dick.

"That padlock you told me about, with the red marks on it. Magic that was, black magic to keep the child's soul a prisoner all these years. Sold her to the devil, did her father! Just so long as the child was promised, Werne himself was free."

Sanderson made an abrupt movement.

"I don't know as I get your meaning, old Mary."

"Plain enough. He'd sold his child to the devil, same as you'd bind an apprentice. The devil, he taught Werne how to lock her up safe so as her little ghost couldn't escape and go wandering round, making people suspect. Well, that spell was broken when Joe Dawlish broke down the wall and the padlock and chain."

"As far as that goes," Doctor Dick's crisp voice interrupted the old woman's uncomfortably clear exposition, "the vicar and I are equally to blame."

"And Werne's not going to forget it," warned old Mary. "Now Lizzie's bones lie in the churchyard all safe and sound there'll be trouble—black trouble. That's how I see it, anyways."

Jim sucked in his breath on a

long tremulous hiss. The fishermen got to their feet.

"Reckon the tide's right enough now," said one.

"Wait! I'll come along." Jim lunged clumsily in the wake of the retreating men. "You're going my road and I'll be glad of company tonight."

Old Mary's serious withdrawn look followed the group out. As the heavy outer door banged to, she shook her head.

"Jim Sanderson's in for it," she said in a low voice. "After sunset it's asking for trouble to set foot in Troon. He'll go like Joe Dawlish went. Poor fellow . . . poor fellow!"

THE next afternoon, Troon stood in a blaze of sunlight. The sky was mother-of-pearl. A slow full tide gleamed like gray satin. Troon confronted it—cold, indifferent, implacable.

Inside its strong walls an army of workmen went about like busy scurrying ants. They were desperate to finish this job. Work that would ordinarily have lingered on for weeks was being rushed through at treble speed. One week more would see painting and decorations complete. Even the long wilderness of a garden was being dug and planted and trimmed and sown at a pace contrary to all Seagate tradition.

Doctor Dick lingered outside the strip of grass and iron rail protecting Troon's tall front windows on the ground floor. Lynneth had told him she was coming with the Kinlochs about three o'clock this afternoon. Elaborate juggling with his day's appointments brought him to Troon on the stroke of the hour.

"Afternoon, doctor!"

A joiner called Frost touched his cap. He carried a big woven basket of tools over his shoulder. His face looked bleached. He glanced back over his shoulder as he stepped from Troon's front door and blinked in the clear light outside the house.

"Knocking off already?"

"Aye, sir. Not worth going to fetch more tools for half an hour."

Doctor Dick stared. Laughed.

"You don't mean your day finishes at three-thirty, Frost? I envy you."

"There's none of us works there," he jerked a backward thumb, "after three-thirty, sir. Not these short days. All on us goes at three-thirty — before dusk," he added with significance.

"I see. How do you square that up with regulations?"

"We begins at seven 'stead of eight o' mornings, sir. That's how we does it. The boss is agreeable so long as we does a regular day all told."

"Leave before sundown. Yes, I see."

"We've got good reasons for it."

"I believe you."

"Aye. Not a man would stay in Troon after dusk. No—not for a ransom, not since Jim Sanderson went. A cruel death! Went like Joe Dawlish — just the same."

Seeing the doctor's grave expression, Frost began speaking again.

"Mark my words, sir, if them two iggerant foreigners—if you'll excuse me putting it so bald-like —wot are renting the bungalow over by the marshes—"

"Mr. and Mrs. Kinloch?"

"Aye. If them two move into Troon next week, all I say is they'd do better to go down marsh-walk and be drowned comfortable. Might as well die natural deaths like! That's wot I says and wot I sticks to."

Doctor Dick took this with gratifying seriousness. He went to his car and fiddled about with it for a minute or so to gain time, then returned with a thought he appeared to have found under the car's hood.

"Look here, Frost! Believing in anything makes it real. If the Kinlochs have no faith at all in old Werne and his power to hurt them, well, perhaps he can not."

Frost poked his head forward like a turtle emerging from its shell.

"Noa," his north-country accent marked strong emotion, "I doan't hold wi' thot and thee doesn't neether, Doctor Dick! Thot oogly Thing a-grinnin' and a-murderin' there in the dark like, it's naught to it what we b'lieves! It just bides quiet—same as a beast or summat—and then——"

The man's gesture, brawny fist smashing downward, was eloquent.

Other workmen began to emerge from Troon. They mounted a fleet of bicycles leaning up against the iron railing and made for home and tea. Doctor Dick frowned. Surely the Kinlochs wouldn't—yes. There they were.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Thornton. Oh, I mean Doctor Dick—it's so difficult to bring myself to say that. In town, of course, one's so much more formal. D'you remember Doctor de Tourville, Alice? Imagine if we'd called him Doctor Henry! Of course he was really a consultant. A very big man. A personal friend of ours."

Doctor Dick let Edith's flow gush right over his head. She'd thought out her speech carefully in order to make two distinct impressions; first as to his regrettable lack of professional dignity, second as to the standing she and Alec had enjoyed in Liverpool.

She saw him turn to Lynneth. His rising color she attributed to having got home with her two little stabs. It was always inconceivable to Edith that anyone could just ignore her. She gave them credit for ordinary intelligence.

"You're not—not going over the house so late?"

Doctor Dick had eyes and ears for Lynneth only. Alec, on his way to the front door, turned back and surveyed the doctor with a dull eye of one whose liver is perpetually ill-treated.

"So late!" he echoed. "Late for what? Was old Werne expecting us earlier?"

HE BURST into a high-pitched laugh, disconcerting in a man of his size. Doctor Dick's glance went to the windows of the house before which they stood. He thought he heard a louder, gruffer laugh within—a workman, perhaps. Yes, something dark passed one of the bedroom windows at that moment.

Edith ran forward to the front door, all girlish abandon to take up her husband's witty remark. She lifted the knocker and gave a smart rat-tat-tat.

"We'll ask him if he'll give us tea."

She cast a glassy brown look over the shoulder of her pony-skin coat. Alec, fumbling for his key, laughed again, louder and longer. Edith gave vent to a selection of well-rehearsed "outbursts of merriment." Doctor Dick, alert and listening with painful intentness now, was convinced he heard a hoarse, coarse echo within the walls of Troon. It must be a workman—and—yet—. As he stood there, wondering how on earth he was going to prevent Lynneth from following the two Kinlochs inside, a further shock assaulted his nerves. Alec was still clumsily rooting for his mislaid key.

The heavy front door swung silently, widely open without a touch.

Edith blinked, frowned, assumed a bright tone of playfulness.

"We are invited for tea!" she laughed. "I suppose the men didn't pull the door to. How careless! I shall report it tomorrow to the foreman. These country yokels! Oh, well, one must be patient, I suppose."

Alec followed his wife inside. Doctor Dick drew Lynneth back.

"Look here—no right to interfere with you and all that—but don't go in!"

Her eyes were fathomless, shining. In the golden dusk her vivid eager face had a transparent look, as if it were wrought glass, golden-tinted, exquisite, through which rare wine sparkled and bubbled and gleamed.

"I—but why do you ask that?"

"Because it's dangerous. It's deadly. Your cousins don't or won't believe anything against Troon. But I tell you the truth. The place is haunted. There's a devil in it."

She looked at him very straightly under the fine beautiful arch of her brows. She knew truth when she heard it. She trusted this man. More than trusted—much, much more than that. For a moment her whole heart responded. Her hands were gripped in his.

"Lynneth! Oh, my dear!" he breathed.

"But—but—" she stammered in surprise. "Is it like this—like this? To feel so sure, when only yesterday——"

The front door banged violently. For a second their startled eyes questioned each other. Then they rushed forward. They had no key. Doctor Dick plied the knocker. Lynneth ran back to the front of the house to peer through the long windows. She returned to Doctor Dick.

"It's all right. Alec's there. He's talking to Edith from the hall. She must be upstairs."

They looked together. Yes, Alec was there safe and sound. He seemed annoyed. Under the hanging unshaded light his face was unhealthily sallow and fretful. His head was flung back. He was talking to someone above, but no sound was audible to the watchers.

They felt a queer chill of apprehension. His side of the conversation seemed acrimonious, to judge by his expression. His frown became a sullen scowl. He turned from the stairway up which he'd been looking, jammed his hat down, stalked away. Next moment he came outside, leaving the front door open behind him.

"Too damned cold in there to hang about. Edith's as obstinate as—"

He scowled at them, pulled out a pipe, clamped strong yellow teeth on its stem, and began to fill the bowl. After a few puffs he relaxed. Recent and surprising discomfort urged him to speech.

"Chill on my liver or something," he vouchsafed. "Edith insisted—well, you know what she is!" He turned to the girl. "Today's plans included a visitation here," he jerked a thumb inelegantly. "No consideration for my health—must go over the place. Doesn't matter that the house reeks of gas or something. And colder than a tomb. Damn it all, if she must see it, she'll see it without my company!"

Lynneth stared. Never, no, never had she heard him come so near a criticism of his wife. Even when absent in the flesh, her mind ruled his, subjugated it

to her opinions. He must be extraordinarily upset.

INSIDE Troon's heavy old walls, Edith went confidently to and fro, snapping on lights, snapping off lights, rubbing a finger on surfaces of wood, raising an eyebrow at a pile of tools and shavings in the middle of a bathroom floor, opening every door in order that air should circulate. The house seemed strangely stuffy, although windows and ventilators were all opened this mild day to dry up paint and varnish and new plaster. And how much colder it was indoors than out! A great golden sun flung a path of light across five miles of sea and sand. Its clear shining reached Troon's gray western face. Six tall west windows met the golden light—and repelled it.

"But how absurd!"

Edith stared about with indignation. Her high heels clicked smartly on woodblock floors as she tried another room. Her room, the room she meant to call her boudoir. The most perfectly preserved in the whole lovely house with its south and west windows, its beams, its old, old corner fireplace so laboriously restored.

"What have they been doing—idiots!" The toffee-brown eyes took on a glaze of anger. "I told them vita-glass in this room. Do they think they can fob off this gray clouded stuff on me? I'd make them come back and change it right away if I were in charge. I shall ring up the contractor tonight. The very idea! These country bumpkins—tiresome things!"

The windows darkened and darkened as she glared about her. So angry was she that a voice from the doorway behind did not startle her at all; it merely represented a person on whom she could vent her vicious mood.

At sight of the big hulking weatherbeaten figure in stained ragged jersey and sea-boots, she let fly:

"You're not a workman here?"

The grizzled ugly head made gesture of denial.

"I'm Mrs. Kinloch."

The man stared, unenlightened by the great news. He was like some great dark bull with his lowered head and bloodshot savage eyes. Edith caught sight of the trail of leaf-mold, mud and dust that marked the intruder's path across polished flooring beyond the doorway.

"Look at the mess you've made. How dare you come tramping about here? Who are you?"

"Thomas Werne."

"Werne! Werne! Why, that's the same name as some unpleasant old man who's supposed to have lived here centuries ago!

The one there's such a silly fuss about."

The man appeared uninterested.

"Well! You can go away—at once! D'you hear? Don't imagine because you've the same name as that creature that you've a right of entry to these premises. Be off at once."

He regarded her with a fixed glare. Abruptly he burst into a loud long hoarse laugh. It echoed and re-echoed through the hollow rooms.

Edith drew up her thin person in disgust.

"Really!" She soliloquized without troubling to lower her voice. "Must be a half-wit. These fisherman are the limit. Unpleasant dirty animals. Phew! How dark it's getting. I wish I hadn't stayed after all."

Her glance took in the blank windows, frowned at them. It was almost like an eclipse of the sun, something so queer and sudden and unnatural was in the gloom that spread . . . and spread.

She looked beyond the burly figure in the doorway. An immense skylight was set in the roof above the staircase. When she'd come up only ten minutes ago, clear strong light had shone down. She remembered thinking how well the oak-grain of the steep old stairs showed up after treatment. Now, a wall of impenetrable darkness lay behind the intruder.

Secret inadmissable fear lent a barb to her tongue. Baffled, furious, uncertain, she tried to assume the glacial manner of an aristocrat as she conceived one.

"I don't wish to get you into trouble, my good man, but unless you go—at once—I shall feel it my duty to report you to the police."

A noisy bellow answered her. "Report old Tom Werne, eh! Thot's a good 'un—a reet down dom good 'un!"

His great bulk shook like a jelly. Walls and floor and windows—the whole structure of old Troon seemed to strain and shake and quiver with its uncontrolable amusement.

She stamped her high-heeled shoe, so neat and polished.

"Oh, how dare you! Impertinent—I shall send Mr. Kinloch back to speak to you."

She took a few steps in the gray gloom toward the darker gloom outside, and stopped short. Raging inwardly, she was forced to realize that she couldn't, she positively couldn't make up her mind to go nearer that unpleasant filthy chuckling old beast in the doorway. Should she throw up a window and call to Alec? It would put her in a perfectly idiotic light. Infuriating impasse! She hesitated, summoned her reserves.

"I shall certainly give you in charge," she began. "The moment I—I—"

She blinked, stuttered. Was she mad, or blind, or ill?

Through the windows, golden sun streamed in across the floor, long gleaming ladders of light upon the beautiful wood. The landing outside shone in a yellow haze of cross-lights from open doors on every side. The doorway was empty before her. Empty! The flooring beyond was bare of every trace of dust or leaves.

She stood shivering, spellbound in the quiet sunset glow. Downstairs a door banged like a gun going off. Heavy feet resounded on the red-brick yard at the side of the house. They echoed, died away, swallowed up in the green shadowy depths of the long garden beyond.

RELEASED from a spell, she ran downstairs, out the front door, and pulled it after her with an angry bang. She poured out to the waiting three her recent experience. Gesture and phrasing harked back to pre-Lady Bountiful days. Doctor Dick recognized hysteria. Lynneth recognized that sub-Edith she'd always felt but never heard before. Alec did not recognize anything. He regarded her with mulish lack-luster eye.

"You would go over the house! You are so damned obstinate! Must have been old Werne himself you were up there chatting to."

Edith's laugh rose shrill in the cool winter dusk.

"I can believe the doctor might say a thing like that. But you, Alec! Really! What are we coming to!"

"That's what I think. Old Werne himself. I've changed my mind since I went in just now. Not been in such a funk since I was a kid."

"So you left me to face it!"

"I did not. You did all the leaving part. Skipped up the stairs and left me cold. And cold's the word, too. I told you not to go. I knew something beastly was prowling around. Damn it all, you've got nerves of chromium-plated steel."

"Alec! How can you be so silly and so vulgar! Actually using language — in the public street—and to your own wife!"

The shock of it pulled her together quite effectually. She shot across the wide road and began to canter homeward. Alec turned to the doctor and grinned, a shamefaced but quite a human friendly grin.

"See you again, my boy. Looks as if you'd be needed at Troon to give us all nerve tonics and soothing-powders. Well — so long!"

He looked down at Lynneth.

One of his more perceptive moments dawned.

"Better get a spot of walk after that scene, my child. I'll toddle home and see to Edith."

He lumbered off, a burly blot of all-British respectability against a sheet of silver water. Doctor Dick turned, eager, ready to make the most of every precious moment. The girl was standing with flower-like face entranced, lips parted, her whole attention absorbed.

"Lynneth! Lynneth darling! What are you looking at inside that horrible old house?"

She did not reply, did not seem to hear. She stood as in a dream, her hands gripping the pointed arrowheads that tipped the iron railing.

"What on earth—?"

He went to her side and peered in through dark blank panes of glass to Troon's lower floor. Darkness. Shadowy darkness.

Chill touched the leaping flame of joy in his heart. He put a hand on hers. She did not move.

"Lynneth! Lynneth!"

The shining of a street lamp showed her face clearly. It was smiling in happy wonder. She seemed intent on some marvel, some vision beyond the big blank windowpanes.

He hesitated. Short of force he couldn't wrench away those small hands that clutched the iron railing. He put an arm about her shoulders, tried to draw her to him, but she did not yield an inch. Her slim soft body might have been one of the iron uprights of the railing. Her eyes didn't flicker from their rapt gaze.

He made up his mind, put out his arms to exert full force, to drag her from Troon, from whatever she saw inside its haunted wall. Abruptly she sighed, loosed her grip, her eyes faded to disappointment, to sick misery.

"Oh, it's gone! The lovely, lovely thing! I can't tell you how lovely. But it's gone. It won't come back. Not now. But I'll watch for it again. I must see it soon again."

The man froze. His blood turned to ice. What deadly perilous thing had she seen? A trap —a snare had been set. For Lynneth—for Lynneth! Oh, God!

To all his anguished questioning she shook her head. Her eyes were sad, full of longing. Remote, distraught, she walked beside him.

"There are no words for it. I can't tell, even if I would. Clouds . . . clouds . . . and a new lovely world. I must go back there—go back——"

He shivered. A devil's trick. Old Werne had played a devil's trick to get her fast. She'd been afraid before. She would have been on guard. Now she only

longed to be inside that cursed place, dreamed of it as a wanderer dreams of home.

Their precious hour together was a grim ordeal to him. She, withdrawn and silent, he sick with fear for her. And the end of the nightmare walk was as strange as any of it.

At the black and white gate of Sandilands the two took formal farewell. A rising moon lighted the dark road. On one side of it crouched the little bungalow, looking like a child's toy with its gables, and its fir-trees on either side of the straight formal garden-path. Opposite the odd little dwelling stretched a long meadow. Beyonud lay half-drowned marshes—beyond them sand and shining pools left by the tide where seabirds clamored in the moonlight.

Doctor Dick strode away from the gate. He hadn't dreamed such black despair was possible. A voice called him.

"Dick! Dick! I want you. Come back!"

Next moment he had her in his arms. So close, so safe against his heart, it seemed nothing could hurt her again. She put him away at last, laughing, tears gleaming in her eyes.

"What happened to you—darling—darling?" she whispered. "I feel as if I'd waked from a nightmare. Kiss me! Again! Oh, Dick, you do care after all!"

II

"THERE now, Doctor Dick! Sit down and make yourself at home. It's a week since you've been in. What's worrying you, sir? Tom—a glass of sherry for the doctor."

The host, in blue striped shirt-sleeves, apron girt about his beaver waistcoat, clattered off across the red-tiled room. Mrs. Burden looked with keen old eyes at her guest's shadowed face.

"Nothing wrong, so far?"

"No."

His monosyllable dropped like a stone into a deep well. "Nothing. And it's unbearable. The suspense. Waiting—waiting—"

He sprang up, paced to and fro in the leaping firelight, stopped before the quiet watchful old woman, his hands clasped behind his back, legs astride, head thrust forward. She met his searching look and answered his agonized unspoken question in her unhurried fashion.

"Aye. There is danger for the lass every hour she's there. But there's just a gleam of hope to my mind, too."

"For Lynneth! You think so? Why, Mary?"

"That great dark Thing at Troon seems as if it settles on one at a time."

He frowned, stared.

"Then, if so—if so it's Mrs.

Kinloch who's in the line of fire. I told you that she saw him—old Werne—and insists he was a drunken fisherman."

Old Mary was emphatic. "It was him. He came with the darkness that's part of him."

"Yes. Mrs. Kinloch admitted the darkness—at first. Went back on it later, though. Said she'd only imagined it got dark."

"She saw Werne. It's my belief she'll go next. Then you can take your lass away."

"But, good heavens! D'you mean I'm to wait until that devil murders Mrs. Kinloch?"

"What other way is there?"

Her calm matter-of-factness roused in him a sudden hysterical desire to roar with laughter. And after all, he had to wait! If that obstinate woman——

"I've asked her a dozen times to leave Troon. She's on the point of forbidding me the the house," he admitted.

"Waste no more words," advised the old woman. "They'll take you nowhere. Your job is to save the lass. Never mind fretting over them as are blind and deaf as stones."

Old Tom returned and poured the wine. Doctor Dick sat down, glass in hand.

"How about the servant lassies at Troon?" asked Mr. Burden.

"From Liverpool," the doctor said. "They've heard nothing so far, Dressed up town girls, too superior to be friendly with Seagate fishermen. They've only one complaint so far."

"Aye!"

"They say Troon's dark. Grumble about the windows—that the glass is always gray and clouded even when the sun's shining outside."

"Darkness. 'Thing of Darkness'—that's what parson called it the day he buried Joe Dawlish."

"Thing of Darkness." Doctor Dick rose. His face was drawn and stern. "Well, I must be off. I'm dining at Troon. A housewarming. I'll call in again after it's over. It's likely to be a housewarming that leaves me cold."

The heavy door clanged behind him.

"He'll not come back this night." Mrs. Burden turned a solemn face to her husband. He sat in his favorite chair, drawing on his churchwarden. "Friday, 'tis! And full moon. And—I didn't tell Doctor Dick purposely—he's enough on his mind—but it's the anniversary of the day Lizzie Werne disappeared. It's written in that old book I told you of. December 2nd, 1636."

"You think old Werne'll—?"

"Aye. I think he will."

"YOU must excuse this picnic meal." Edith's eyes were ablaze with triumph. Hard bright

color dyed her thin cheeks. "I warned you it would be a case of roughing it. The maids have done their best, but you know what they are!"

Four sat at the gate-legged table of Jacobean oak for dinner that night, the seventh night of the Kinloch's arrival at Troon. Edith had worked like a beaver, had driven cook and housemaid before her whirl of energy like galley-slaves. The big gaunt house was furnished from wide shadowy attics to scrubbed and scoured kitchens and pantries.

Doctor Dick remembered the Biblical story of the man possessed of a devil, who swept and garnished his house. He remembered and shivered.

He made the reply his hostess expected of him. The well-pointed table, the gleaming silver and dinnerservice chosen to harmonize with the house, the five-course dinner, the well-trained maids imported from town, were all elaborate and overemphatic in perfection. Not the natural and dignified background of a well-bred hostess, but a show. Herself the blatant complacent showman!

"Alone I did it," her voice, manner, and conversation implied.

"You know," she reproached the visitor, "I really believe you're disappointed. I think I see—yes, I'm sure I do—a sort of 'I'd rather that my friend should die than my prediction prove a lie' expression on your face."

Alec intervened. He, at least, had the advantage of early discipline that had planted certain fixed rules of conduct in him. Doctor Dick looked ill at ease. He must be soothed. Hang it all, you didn't rub things in at your own dinner-table! Edith was a bit above herself tonight. She'd got her way. They were living at Troon. Things were all right too—at least—He brushed away suspicion. Just an effect of lighting. He wasn't used to the queer old house yet.

"Noticed the fireplace?" he asked. "It's part of the original tavern. Sort of bakehouse. The whole inglenook, arches and chimney breast and the little iron door to shove ashes through, were covered up by a kitchen-range. Lovely old stuff that brick—three hundred years old."

Thankfully, the guest accepted the diversion.

"Makes a wonderful dining-room. That window too, I like the square panes—different from the silly imitations they make. Set in that battered old framework it's — hello! Who's that looking in? D'you keep a gardener working at this hour?"

Edith glanced up quickly, wished she'd drawn the curtains after all. She'd decided, on such

a romantic moonlight night, that the vista of garden enhanced the room's perfection. Impatiently she tinkled a small copper bell at her hand. No one answered it. She rang again, waited. No sound from outside.

Lynneth ventured a suggestion. She was in one of the strange dreamy moods that the doctor dreaded—moods that had recurred again and again since that night of her "vision," as she called it. Her dinner-gown of smoke-gray velvet with its gleam of gold thread, the jewel—Tiger's Tear—glinting tawny-yellow on her breast, the thick shining hair like folded wings about her head, all gave Doctor Dick a pang of terror and dismay. She looked unreal tonight, held in dreams, unaware of evil, of danger coming stealthily nearer as she slept.

"I think," the girl's voice was only a whisper, "I think they've gone away. Someone—came for them."

Edith's answer was sharp with vexation. "My dear girl, what an idea! Go away in the middle of my dinner party? Why? They don't know a soul here. Really, Lynneth! You look half asleep. You'd better go and look for them. It might rouse you."

Doctor Dick sprang to his feet. "No. Let me go, please!"

Edith raised resigned exasperated brows. He would behave like this. How irritating these unconventional people were! He seemed to think this was a picnic, after all. Taken her literally. So stupid! Spoiling the whole tone of her dinner. Now they'd all have to get up. She and Alec couldn't sit still and let a guest chase about the house.

She rose, stood with finger-tips on the table, lifted her chin, looked around from under lowered lids in what she knew to be a really compelling pose. Her Queen Elizabeth look, she termed it privately. More privately still, she was sure there was some strain of royal blood in her. Some ancestor of hers had been —er—naughty! Oh, she was sure. How else did she come by the profound conviction of her own superiority? She knew she was different — an aristocrat deep down.

"I will go myself," she pronounced. "I insist. The maids are my province, after all."

Lynneth was unmoved by majesty's withdrawal. She seemed to be listening to some far-off entrancing sound. The two men looked uncertainly at each other. Alec assumed a boisterous hearty manner.

"Drink up, drink up! Fill your glass, my boy, and pass the claret along. The girls are new to Seagate. Heard something and dashed out to investigate, I expect.

You know how pin-headed they are."

Minutes passed. No sound from hall or kitchens. Then came the tap-tap of high heals just overhead.

"Edith! Girls must've gone upstairs, not outside. I wonder—"

"We ought to go up, too."

Doctor Dick was on his feet. Alec, puzzled and uncomfortably disturbed by something he did not begin to understand, rose also. They made for the door. The doctor turned back, to see Lynneth sitting peacefully at the table, dreaming, indifferent.

"Stay there. Don't move from this room," he called back. "Lynneth! Lynneth!"

She responded with a vague absent smile. Doctor Dick followed his host with a last anxious look of love at the girl. A sense of mortal deadly peril threatened. The whole house seemed growing dark and suffocating and evil.

A cry came from above. Every light dimmed, went out. Thick choking darkness muffled Troon from kitchens to attics. Blindly, Doctor Dick fought his way up.

"Where are you?" he called.

From the stairs above, he heard Alec's voice, muffled, cursing.

"What's wrong? What are you doing? Can't you answer me, man?"

"I'm trying—to—get down."

Alec's voice came thicker, fainter now. A stumble. Curses and sound of hoarse hurried breathing in the darkness above. Then there was a yell — the crack of splintering wood — a heavy body came slithering and sprawling down the stairs as if flung with immense force. It knocked against Doctor Dick as he was stumbling upward, and he fell too, slipping down until an angle in the wall stopped him. Winded, uninjured, uncertain what to do next, he called out.

"Lynneth! Lynneth! Are you all right? Can you find matches? I left my lighter in my overcoat."

No answer from the profound darkness below.

"Lynneth!"

A voice, a vague faint echo of the girl's clear tone, floated down from above, it seemed to him. He made his way up the steep narrow old stairs again. "Lynneth! Lynneth!"

Edith Kinloch, cinnamon-brown silk flounces rustling her indignation, pursued her search. The kitchens, the pantries, were ablaze with light. And the hall. And the landing upstairs. She looked quickly into the rooms on the ground floor. No one there. But every room was brilliantly lighted.

She stamped her annoyance. Was this some low silly joke? Had the two maids gone off for

some reason, leaving on all the lights merely to upset her? But why? Why? There had been no trouble over anything. Later perhaps, when they knew she did not intend to get more help——

She ran upstairs. Here again all lights were on. Every bedroom door was flung widely open. The blood rose to her head. In a rage now, she went up the last steep twisting staircase to the attics, and once more found the same silly prank had been played. True the lights were less brilliant. Fifteens were good enough for maids to waste! They'd only read in bed and be late in the morning if she gave them stronger lamps.

She hadn't thought fifteens were quite so poor though. Why, one candle would give more light than these things. Must be faulty bulbs. She'd ring up and complain tomorrow. They seemed to be getting dimmer as she looked at them. One died right out overhead. The one over the stairwell. She'd turn her ankle getting down again.

But where were those fools of girls? She stalked across to the wardrobe. There hung the tweed coats they wore, and a lot of other clothes. They couldn't have run off. They must be in the garden. She'd go down and send Alec out to find them.

Lynneth would have to make coffee and serve it, to cover the gap. Thank heaven, they'd finished the last course, anyhow. She turned about on the square landing, a mere three-foot platform, from which the attics opened.

In the big west room a sound brought her head about with a jerk.

"Who's there? Is that you, Beasley? Parkes?"

A shuffle. A heavy tread. She went back to the room. A light clicked off in the room as she entered it. She wheeled with a little squeal of anger.

"How dare you——"

IN THE darkness, a blacker deadlier darkness moved. Held rigid in sudden cold fear, her eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. The window stood widely open. No. Not open. She looked at the thing. No window or even frame was there. Merely a ruinous irregular break in the crumbling wall.

She went to it, dizzy, sick, her nostrils filled with dusty choking stench. Her eyes followed the swelling shapeless Thing of Darkness that moved in the moonlit darkness of the room. A sudden red light shone from a foul little lantern that stood on a stone shelf formed by the chimney-breast's irregularities. Bare crumbling brick, the chimney was.

"But this"—she spoke aloud

in a hoarse amazed voice—"this is what it was before we restored it. This isn't our Troon!"

"No. It's mine."

Loud voice and louder laughter answered her. She recognized them. In the smoking lamplight, she saw the vast ugly bulk, the bloated face, the small cruel eyes set under matted hair.

"You! You here again! I thought I told you——"

Her voice died. Her cold hands flew to her throat. She pressed back—back against the dirty old wall behind. The other attic was darkened now; her frightened eyes glanced across to it. She was up here in the dark, shut up with this brutal mad old man. It was a trick! Those servants! She'd have them punished. A monstrous experience! How dare they let her be subjected to it!

Ah!—he was moving nearer—nearer—darkness, thick black choking darkness, rolled forward like a tidal wave.

Now it touched her. She shrieked. Ice-cold, wet, like rotting slime, it touched her—closer about her—closer! Backward she went before the stifling death—back to the gaping ruinous wall. If she could get to that—call for help! Yes! Yes! She was on her knees on the dusty uneven broken flooring. With desperate effort she twisted, thrust her head outside.

"Help! Help!" she shrieked. "Help!"

The word choked in her throat. She was drawn back, as if the room were a quicksand into which she sank—down—down—silken flounces ripped—hair fallen all about her face of idiot terror — down — down — through the door of life—down through hell's dark gates—down—down—the Thing of Darkness pressed closer—closer still. . . .

IT SEEMED to Doctor Dick, fighting his way in the unnatural darkness, as if he struggled up through clouds of poisonous gas whose fumes took strength from his limbs, sight from his eyes. Gasping. Dragging himself up one stair at a time. A cold numbness invaded him.

Then a frightful bubbling shriek pierced his senses. It came from above. Another—and more horrible cry. He groaned. He couldn't hurry. He felt consciousness being blotted out. Darkness pressed on him like solid walls. A stench of rotted decay filled his nostrils, choked the breath in his throat . . . it failed him . . . he fell forward.

Darkness flowed over him like the river of death itself.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying on the stairs just below the first-floor landing. Electric lights winked on all

sides. Gray dawn met his aching bewildered eyes through a vast skylight overhead.

He tried to think, to remember as he struggled to rise. How had he come there? Why did such heavy desperate weariness weigh him down?

Sick, trembling with effort, he stood clinging to the baluster-rail. Below, under the glare of a droplight, he caught sight of a man sprawled untidily across a glowing Persian rug. Groaning, he stumbled down to investigate.

It was Alec who lay there. Doctor Dick's professional instinct pricked him from lethargy as he examined the man. "Broken leg, slight concussion," he murmured. Suddenly full recollection flashed in his clouded mind.

"Lynneth! Lynneth!" he called aloud.

He made for the dining-room where he had left her last night. The place was deserted. Lights gleamed dismally in the half daylight. The dinner-table's bravery of silver and glass mocked his distraught gaze. He searched the lower rooms. No one.

He passed Alec as if he'd been part of the hall furniture, and went upstairs. Lights burned everywhere. The air was chill but clean. Empty room after empty room greeted him vacantly. Only the last narrow stairs now to the wide attics above.

"Lynneth!"

He sprang up the topmost flight, and crouched beside the crumpled heap of gray velvet.

HER dark head was against the wall, blood stained her face, her soft white neck, the bosom of her dress. The Tiger's Tear had fallen back against her parted lips—gleaming golden bauble.

Wild meaningless phrases shot into his distraught mind. Bits of Ecclesiastes: "The silver cord is loosed . . . the golden bowl—"

He touched her, bent closer. Ah, it was not death after all! Not death. He was all physician now. The healer. Dare he lift her to examine further? That headwound was very deep—blood still welling. His eyes grew cold with fear once more as he explored it. The skull was crushed at one place. How could he move her from that awkward corner? It would be fatal to jolt her wounded head.

He hesitated only a moment. He must do it, of course. He daren't leave her alone in Troon while he got help. And every second counted. If ever he thanked heaven for his strength, it was now. When, with infinite care, he'd laid her down at last on a bed in the nearest room on the floor below the attics, he went to the bathroom.

From an elaborately fitted-out medicine chest there, on

which Edith had greatly plumed herself, he dug out what he could. Gray dawn brightened to day as he fought to save Lynneth. He used what makeshift medicaments he had. Dark hair he'd cut away was strewn on a pale costly rug beside the bed. The girl's face looked carved from frozen snow beneath its bandages. Her pulse beat ominously slow beneath his touch.

Her life hung balanced by a thread, and he watched with increasing fear. She must lie undisturbed now for another twenty-four hours at least. There was a slim, a very slim chance of life —no chance at all if she moved.

BUT there was another night to face—another night at Troon. How could he protect her? What weapons could a man use against the Thing of Darkness? Brooding, pondering, dazed with the terrific strain of the past hours, he sat. A creaking sound startled him.

It was Mrs. Burden. She was coming upstairs. He took her hands, kissed her withered cheek, tears of relief in his eyes at sight of the old woman's calm face and faithful eyes.

"You're a miracle. No one in the world but you would have come. Now perhaps——'

He poured out in brief hurried whispers what he'd seen and heard last night.

"Servants gone. Kinloch's smashed up. Edith Kinloch's gone. I couldn't look for her. I daren't leave Lynneth alone for a minute in this house."

"Best look now, sir. I'll bide with your lass."

She settled down beside the patient like a little brown bird, watching the unconscious girl, taking in the room with clear thoughtful old eyes.

Doctor Dick went upstairs to begin his search. She heard him coming slowly down at last; heard his heavy breathing as if he carried some awkward weight. He had to pass the open door of the room where she sat. She saw what it was he carried.

Its broken neck revealed what once had been a human face—now a darkened dreadful mask. A few tattered wisps of silk clung to the broken body. Jeweled rings glittered on limp and dusty hands.

Doctor Dick passed on, went into a room near by. When he came in to her again he looked like an old man.

"You saw—it?"

Mrs. Burden nodded solemnly.

"Wait here, sir. Coffee laced with brandy is what you need. We'll talk when you're better, my lamb—sir, I mean—begging your pardon!"

"Wait!" His hoarse voice detained her. "There's Kinloch, poor chap! Must see to him.

Help me lift him. I don't think he's seriously hurt."

"There's no way out. We've got to spend this coming night at Troon. The chances are we'll go"—Doctor Dick made a gesture to the bedroom across the landing—"like . . . that!"

"No. Not like that. Whatever comes, not like that. It's true, as you said, 'tis no good letting any other body come inside this place. 'Tis for you and me—this night's work. No one else can help. Even the vicar himself couldn't. 'Tis for you and me. But no one of us will go—the way she did! No. If we have to die, I can take the three of us an easier road than that."

Day faded. Its last gold shone above the distant hills. A gleaming path lay across the water. The gold dimned, and died. Darkness began to fall. Shadows thickened within the walls of Troon.

Mrs. Burden got up from her chair, beckoned the doctor to the door of Lynneth's room.

"You must leave things to me from this hour on. Keep your door fast bolted inside. Don't open it, not even if you think you hear my own voice call. 'Twould be a trick of old Werne that—to get you out of here. For God's sake, Doctor Dick, heed what I'm telling you. Stay inside until daylight comes. Bide with your lass here, if you want her to live, and want to live yourself."

"If you'd only tell me what you're up to, Mary! It's horrible to shut you out, to leave you alone—with that devilish thing."

"Eh, haven't we talked enough o' that? All the day long you've argued wi' me, Doctor Dick, and I tell you mind's made up. I'm old, too old to fear death. And I know things—things I can't tell you, sir. Bolt the door—and leave it fast till daylight."

MOVING with sure unhurried purpose outside the bolted door, Mrs. Burden went to and fro among the shifting looming shadows. She had all prepared. She made no mistake.

There was only one way to shut out a damned soul. The cross itself. A cross of living flesh and blood.

In the wood-frame of the door, outside, four great hooks had been screwed in by Doctor Dick that day. Iron hooks that Mrs. Burden had brought prepared for her purpose, two at the top corners of the cross-piece, and one on either side of the door. From these hooks she hung four plaited loops of hair and hempen rope—two long loops from the top, two very short ones on either side.

She stood with back against door and slipped the long right-hand loop beneath her left arm

pit, and the long left-hand loop beneath her right armpit. Then, supported so that fatigue should not make her fall, she thrust her hands through the small handcuff loops on either side to keep her arms straight out from her body.

So she stood, a small light bird-like figure. Through the big-roof-window, glimmering stars and rising moon showed her in the dusk, a human crucifix past which the Thing of Darkness might not go.

Facing Troon and its evil. Frail old body. Staunch old soul.

DAYLIGHT. Daylight and Lynneth had passed the crisis! She was safe. Doctor Dick opened the door. The light worn body of Old Mary hung there still.

It was an empty shrine, too old, too tired to survive the night's long vigil and shock of battle—an empty shrine, but not marred, not touched by hurt or evil. The Thing Of Darkness had left no shadow in the calm sightless eyes, no lines of terror or dismay on the peaceful worn old face; only deep exhaustion. A victor fallen at the goal.

A victor. Yes, Doctor Dick knew that. For long minutes he looked at the frail triumphant figure, assurance of her victory deep in his heart; giving homage to the dead, giving thanks for her divine courage.

His eyes, blinded with tears, lifted to see something else at last. A hulking black-haired man stood against an opposite wall. As the doctor stared, red sunrise dyed the skylight window above, touched the ugly brutal figure with flame.

It shrank, quivered. Its purple lips opened in soundless rage. Its dark bulk glowed like molten metal. White-hot . . . sullen red . . . dissolving . . . writhing . . . twisting in the sun's merciless fire to inhuman appalling decay—to a rag and wisp of a thing—to a shriveled black mummy that grinned in age-old death.

That too dissolved and was split like sand running through an hourglass. It lay on the jade-green Chinese carpet, a drift of gray dust, last grim symbol of mortality.

The shadow-life that Werne had bargained for was finished. Soul, will, poisonous hate were blotted out. The blackest magic could perpetuate his borrowed existence no longer. The deepest hell could offer no shelter for his furious ghost. Werne — Thing of Darkness — was no more.

But the old house still fronts sea and sky hills. Troon—old Troon. Shell of death. Desolate. Betrayed.

...post-pig—and ante-pig....

The Disc Recorder

BY AUGUST DERLETH

"I CAN hardly let you have the house for more than a year," said the agent. "Mr. Nason expects his wife back from the Orient soon after, and he himself will be back by then. He's letting the place furnished, with the exception of the single

Heading by Virgil Finlay

closed room in which they've stored their more personal belongings."

At least a year, mused Lorin Harcourt. Solitude and relative isolation in a modern house on the edge of Brancaster.

"But can I be assured of that year?" he asked. "What about Mrs. Nason? Suppose she decides to return earlier?"

"She won't. She's a writer of travel books, you know. She's gone to Asia after material. I think he said she had an assignment, and couldn't very well finish it before then. In any case, he has the renting of the house, and she's not likely to interfere."

"And the closed room is that one on the ground floor?"

The agent nodded. "It's not as if you'd be shut out of it, or anything like that. It's locked, but you'll have the key to it with the others. Though there's nothing in it you'd like, I'm sure." In the face of Harcourt's indecision, he added, "I don't see why you're hesitating, Mr. Harcourt. The fact is, the place seems ideal for your purpose. You need to get away after a bit of trouble like yours, and the Nason house looks like the ideal place."

Nor did Harcourt himself quite understand why he hesitated. He had looked over the house, and it had indeed seemed the right place. He wanted to get away somewhere in order to cut himself off from all familiar places. He was a retired teacher, who had recently suffered the sudden, accidental death of a son and his wife, and, being a sentimentalist, he preferred to remove himself for a while from the milieu associated with them. Moreover, he hoped to write a book himself, on the theory of education, and it seemed appropriate that he should do so in a house which had sheltered a published writer.

Just the same, however much the house suited him, there had been an air of tension about it, as if it were not restful, belying its appearance. Now, pressed by the agent, he shrugged and resigned himself to the inevitable; there was no other house which came close to satisfying him.

"Very well, I'll sign," he said.

He moved in within a week.

THE house was built on the side of a hill. Gardens and lawn sloped down toward a little pond at its foot, and the second story of the house opened out on to the ground farther up the slope. The room which Harcourt chose as his own was a gracious one on the second floor. He had no doubt it had been used by Bertha Nason, as well. It was a room which stretched all the way along the house, with a wide picture window facing the pond and the rolling country beyond,

and, on the other end, french doors opening out to the slope near the top of the hill.

In but a few days he was settled and in comfort. In a few more he had thoroughly explored the pleasant country and familiarized himself with Brancaster. In a fortnight he had begun to set down an outline for his projected book, the subject of which, though insufferably dull to the average reader, was nevertheless of singular interest to him, as he imagined it would certainly be to every other educator in the country.

Harcourt was a man of methodical habits. He set himself to work just three hours every day. He spent an additional hour hiking, two more hours puttering in the garden and grounds, and, apart from time for his frugal meals, he spent the balance of his day and evening reading. He slept just eight hours, neither more nor less, and very few sounds disturbed his sleep.

One night, however, during his fourth week at the Nason house, Harcourt's rest was troubled. He had partaken too heavily of oysters, and his stomach, unaccustomed to such rich food, protested. He went to bed with misgivings, which were adequately justified. He found it possible to close his eyes, to will himself to sleep, but not to go to sleep. After two hours of trying, he got up and put on his dressing-gown, with the intention of walking out into the moonlit summer night until the edge of his distress should have worn off and he might return with more assurance of being able to sleep.

It was just as he was stepping from his bedroom that he heard sounds from below. He stopped in amazement and listened.

HE HEARD a peculiarly flat, nasal voice speaking. Unquestionably a human voice, he told himself. But try as he might, he could distinguish no word.

Harcourt was a woefully imaginative man. He conceived instantly that burglars had broken into the house and were systematically looting it. He perceived in the following instant that he might be held responsible for anything which was taken. Like many men, danger to life and limb held little terror for Harcourt; but an assault on his purse was another matter entirely.

Heedlessly, he plunged down the stairs, pausing only long enough to take up his stout walking stick. He turned on lights as he went and called out maledictions on the malefactors he expected to encounter.

He went from room to room and met no one.

He tried all the doors and

windows. There was no sign of illegal entry.

Harcourt was thus left with but one possibility. Somehow someone must have jimmied a window of the closed room and got in.

Forthwith he went back upstairs and got his keys.

Despite the dangers his imagination conjured up before his mind's eye, he did not hesitate to unlock the closed room. Since there had been nothing but a grave silence following his noisy descent of the stairs, he felt that he was justified in assuming that the miscreants, whoever they were, had made good their escape through the same window by which they had gained entry.

The room sprang to life under the glow of the lights.

Somehow, Harcourt had expected it to be packed full of things. Instead, he saw that it was only an ordinary sitting-room, with a lounge, now shrouded and covered against lint and dust, several chairs, a desk, and some other items of furniture. The door of a small closet stood open, revealing large hangers which evidently held many of Mrs. Nason's dresses, all carefully encased in stiff paper to prevent deterioration during her stay in the Orient. But what caught Harcourt's eye almost immediately was a disc recorder standing near the desk, together with stacks of discs, some manifestly used, others clearly not yet touched, ready for anyone who might care to use the recorder.

In his excitement at this discovery, the further discovery that the windows of this room, too, bore no signs of tampering, was lost to Harcourt. He foresaw immediately how useful the disc recorder might be to him, as soon as he was ready to do the actual writing of his work on education. Moreover, the recorder was not the kind of property which could be harmed or worn down by his use of it; if Bertha Nason had known, furthermore, that another writer of even such modest pretensions as Harcourt were to occupy the house in her absence, he was firmly of the opinion that she would have expected and intended him to use the disc recorder.

All else immediately became secondary to this prize. Without further ado, Harcourt moved the recorder upstairs to his study. He came back down for the discs, taking some of each along.

Back in his room, he plugged the recorder in, selected a disc at random from the stack of used ones, and put it on. The clear, mellifluous tones of a woman's voice sprang to life in the room.

"The Mexican landscape and that of the American Southwest are in a great many respects similar. Heat dominates both—the

shimmering of heat waves, perhaps even small mirages, and that constant kind of heat haze which is so prevalent wherever there is more sunlight than rain, more heat than temperate weather. There is an aura of great age about both—sometimes caught in monolithic rocks, sometimes in ancient Indian structures . . ."

He shut off the machine, removed the disc, and dug deep down into the stack for another, which he put on in place of the first.

He settled back to listen to this, though presumably, since Mrs. Nason wrote travelogues, it, too, would concern some corner of the earth with which the lady hoped to make her readers familiar.

But no, he decided after a moment of listening, this was fiction.

"But what, I often wonder, am I to do with Baxter? He dogs my days, literally. I can hardly tell you, Elisa, what a bore he has become. I suppose divorce is the answer, but he would fight it tooth and nail, for which I am realist enough hardly to blame him, for he has never had it so decent and good as now. Yet, when all is said and done—and will it ever be, I wonder? He is sometimes morose and brooding, sometimes exhilarated and effervescent, one never knows from day to day; when all is said and done, as I said, what must come of it all?"

He shut this off, too. He had not realized that Mrs. Nason wrote fiction, but evidently she did. As a matter of fact, until he had come to look at the house, Harcourt had never even dreamed of the existence of Bertha Nason. The names he knew were virtually all in properly academic fields.

This time he put on an unused disc, and prepared to speak.

His words rolled out ponderously. "The proper course for the educator of the future to follow lies midway between the so-called progressive thought and the traditional curriculum. Somewhere there is a middle course; it must be found, and if it must be found at the expense of the greatly augmented extra-curricular activities which prevail in our time, then away with such activities, for schools are not, after all, playgrounds . . ."

He played his words back, and listened with dreamy satisfaction.

What a happy discovery, indeed! Harcourt shut off the machine, and went back to bed filled with roseate dreams of all he would accomplish, beginning tomorrow. The finding of the disc recorder had absolutely cured his indigestion and left him with a dizzy, happy feeling of remarkable exhilaration.

He fell asleep at once, and

slept happily free of his previous apprehension about burglars.

But not for long. In scarcely no time at all, he was awakened again.

He heard a voice, and it sounded frighteningly nearby.

Harcourt lay motionless under his sheet, and beads of perspiration popped into existence on his brow. He did not dare to stir. The voice he heard seemed to come from within this room, for all that it had a peculiarly disembodied sound, as if it were actually rising far away and being projected into this room by an accomplished ventriloquist.

He listened.

"Baxter! Baxter!" So much was clear, perfectly clear. And in a woman's voice, too. The next sounds were utterly confounding. Gurgling, gasping sounds, strangled cries. And then, amazingly, a fragment of a song.

"Water, water everywhere, all I need to drink; what I want is clean, pure air, and not this murky drink! One live man on my dead breast—oh, ho ho! and a bank account, too!"

As if this were not enough, the voice immediately thereafter became professional and smooth. "The area of my present sojourn is remarkable for its moisture. London fogs have nothing on this muddy site—small wonder that the inhabitants wear fins. The temperature, however, seems never to vary; it is always pleasantly cool, since, of course, the water circulates . . ."

With a strangled cry, Harcourt sprang up and snapped on the bed-lamp.

Complete and utter silence fell on him like a sandbag.

There was no one in the room. Harcourt knew intuitively there was no one in the house.

He tried to take hold of himself, though he was shaking badly. "What I have done," he said in a firm, clear voice, "is left that recorder going. Somehow I must have put back one of her records . . ."

So saying, he got up somewhat unsteadily, and made his way to the overhead light switch, turned on the brighter lights, and went to examine the disc recorder. It was just exactly as he had left it. The record in the machine was the one he himself had dictated, for it was only partially used.

HARCOURT did not know what to do next. Undeniably, the house was now as still as the night. He looked at his watch. Four o'clock in the morning. Already there was a faint glow in the east announcing the coming day. There was nothing for it but to make another tour of the house, just to be sure no one was concealed in it.

Armed this time with a stout poker, Harcourt examined the

house from ceiling to cellar. Nothing had been disturbed, with a single exception. There was a kind of dampness leading from the french doors across the floor of his own room, the study which he used both for work and sleep, as if someone with wet feet had walked there. Yet there was no water—only an almost indefinable moisture, and a not unpleasant smell of damp places.

There was only one conclusion left for Harcourt to assume; so he assumed it. "Someone is playing a trick on me," he told himself.

He went to bed once more and this time slept without interruption until eight.

HOWEVER, by an hour past his breakfast, he began to think again uneasily of possible burglars, and, weighing his own responsibilities in the matter, he walked into the village and found the sole minion of the law in Brancaster. To him he duly reported that there had been an attempt to break into the Nason house in the night. The constable listened gravely to all he had to say, but, as he spoke, Harcourt realized he could not say everything that had happened to him. Even to his own ears, what he was saying sounded like a nightmare or a fantasy of his own creation. He ended up lamely saying that he did not know what his legal responsibilities were in case of burglarly.

"Don't think you'd be responsible," said the constable laconically. "Needn't to worry about that." As an afterthought, he added, "Anything else happen, you let me know. Always anxious to serve. My duty, you know. Getting paid for it."

Thus reassured, Harcourt returned to his temporary domicile, and made preparations to dictate a disc or two.

He was in the midst of his first disc when he caught sight of a large pig rooting around in his garden. With a cry of dismay, he left off dictating and ran outside, shouting angrily at the pig, which had evidently strayed from a neighboring farm. The pig regarded him with insolent boredom, and waited until Harcourt had almost reached it, before it turned and ran squealing for a cornfield which adjoined the property on the south. Harcourt followed and found the break in the pasture fence through which the animal had come, and by means of which it had returned to its fellows. Harcourt blocked it, somewhat indignant that the fences were not kept up.

He returned to his dictation. The machine had kept on running in his absence; he had forgotten to turn it off. No matter, Harcourt decided, and went right

on dictating. He was in fine fettle. Before he stopped, he had dictated on less than four discs, and he had begun to feel that he had his book well in hand.

He struggled against his vanity and refrained from playing his discs back to himself.

When he went to bed that night, he did so with some proper apprehension, lest he be awakened again.

His sleep, however, was untroubled for several hours.

It was well past midnight when a voice startled him from sleep.

This time, he recognized the voice without the least trouble. It was his own. It was coming from the disc recorder.

"Several recent studies have made, in effect, violent attacks on the theories of progressive education, some of them going so far as to disparage the late John Dewey as the author of all aspects of progressive education. This gross libel has gone unchallenged in many places, and the late great leader in the field of education has thus been unjustly blamed for the so-called 'improvements' which have been forced upon educators by lesser minds unable to believe that the primary function of education is to educate, not to entertain."

How good it sounded! thought Harcourt, listening in the darkness of the room. Despite his now subsiding alarm, he was very much pleased with the sound of his voice and the weight of his theories. His voice rolled on and on; had it been any other voice but his own, it would have put him to sleep.

Then suddenly it stopped.

Harcourt recognized the break. "The pig in the garden," he murmured.

THERE should have been a long silence from the machine. There was not. Instead there came once more a strange voice, a woman's voice, saying, "Please notify Carl Malam. Repeat: please notify Carl Malam."

Harcourt had hardly time to feel the prickling in his scalp before his own voice rolled out of the darkness at him once more.

As in the previous night, he leaped from bed, and turned up the light. He bounded over to the disc recorder and turned it off. It was true, he had left a record on the machine. It was the fourth of his dictation; this one which he had heard was the first. So, however incredible it might seem, someone had been in the room.

Now he felt again along his bare feet a moisture as of the previous night. Whoever had come had walked through dewey grass. Whoever had entered the house, he discovered after an-

other examination, must have had a key with which to lock the door behind him again, for once more nothing was disturbed in the tiniest degree.

When Harcourt went back to bed, he did so regretfully, convinced that the Nason house was proving too much for him. His first impression of the house had, after all, been correct. It was not restful—anything but. Before he slipped under the covers this time, he made sure of the disc recorder and disconnected it.

In an hour's time he knew how vain this had been.

Once again that disembodied woman's voice came huskily out of the darkness.

"My opportunities for travel in this region are severely limited. As in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, there are such restrictions here as to amount to virtual imprisonment. If Mr. Malam were here, I am sure that he might effect my release . . ."

With a howl of anguish, Harcourt sprang from bed for the second time. What devilish trickery made him its victim? Under the light he examined the disc recorder minutely. It offered him no clue.

There was nothing about it to distinguish it from any other machine of its kind.

Deliberately now, he connected the machine again, turned it on, and played back the first of the discs he had made the previous day. He listened with tense anxiety to his own words coming back to him. Yes, he had spoken them. Indeed, the record recreated the moments gone by—now he had turned, now he had caught sight of the pig—his voice duly stopped.

He waited.

Punctually came that other voice. "Please notify Carl Malam. Repeat: please notify Carl Malam."

And then, after a further pause, his own voice, post-pig.

Under the light, one fact registered with crystal clarity. It had escaped him before. Carl Malam was the name of the phlegmatic constable to whom

he had spoken in Brancaster only the past day.

He did not go to bed again.

AS SOON as the sun was up, he made his way into Brancaster and got Malam out of bed.

"Now what?" asked Malam, not yet dressed. "More burglars?"

"I want you to come along with me," said Harcourt.

"Are you laying a charge?"

"I'm obeying an order—but don't ask me who gave it. I don't know. You may. We'll see."

The constable looked at him shrewdly, decided in his favor, and dressed to go along with Harcourt.

At the house, Harcourt put his first disc on the recorder.

"Now listen, please."

Malam did so, without comment. He was manifestly not happy with Harcourt's academic and somewhat pompous dictation. He brightened visibly when, in the middle of the record, Harcourt's voice ceased to sound.

"At that point I got up, leaving the machine running, and chased a pig out of the garden," said Harcourt. "Now listen."

Out came the adjuration to notify Carl Malam.

The effect on the constable was extraordinary. He jumped to his feet and faced Harcourt.

"That's Mrs. Nason's voice. I'd know her voice anywhere. How'd you manage that, Harcourt? She's in Bombay. Elisa Cobbett had a letter from her last week."

"Mr. Malam, no matter how ridiculous it may sound, I want to tell you every single thing that's happened to me in this house since I moved here . . ."

Thereupon Harcourt narrated his experiences in the house with the same meticulous care with which he was writing his work on education, and Malam listened.

Fortunately, the constable's imagination worked along somewhat different lines from Harcourt's. He lost no time.

By nightfall, with the help of fellow-villagers, he had grappled up from the lake bottom, where it had been buried in shallow water and weighted with rocks, the trunk containing the body of Bertha Nason. She had been strangled into unconsciousness and drowned. Baxter Nason, certain that he had disposed of his troublesome wife beyond discovery, with the consummate egotism so much a part of many murderers, was taken with ease.

Harcourt was so bewildered and upset by the whole affair that he abandoned his projected book; fortunately, this was no loss to education.

THE EYRIE

(Continued from Second Cover)

augurate a companion magazine. Because your publication is unchallenged in the field of weird fiction, I believe this suggestion to be worthy of your sincerest consideration. I would elaborate upon that suggestion to the extent that you call the companion publication Weird Novels *Magazine, and that in it you publish one book-length novel every month, together with the required short stories to fill the issue.*

Next, with reference to WEIRD TALES *itself, you need more novelettes of 15,000 to 20,000 word length. The short stories you use are excellent, but it is a fact that the short story is nothing more than a single incident or situation with a beginning, a crisis, and a climax required to make it a complete story. I like body in the stories I read, and I am sure most of your readers will agree with me. Give us a series of situations and events woven skillfully together into a pattern that will hold us spellbound for much more than a mere 15 minutes at a time. I would like to see at least three novelettes in each issue of the magazine.*

With regards to the type of material I like to read in WEIRD TALES, *the more Gothic the flavor the better! A current editor in the fantasy field recently wrote: "The Gothic horror story shall find favor as long as darkness falls." I could never express the sentiment more aptly than that. The stories I have found most interesting in recent years are Derleth's "Keeper of the Key"—here is old Cthulu with a savory, original flavor; Matheson's "Slaughter House"—this one had that creepy old country fireside flavor: Grendon's "Mr. George"—here is the lovable little girl and a guardian ghost; you'll never find a better replete-with-human-interest weird tale than this; Worrell's "Once There Was A Little Girl"—this is a witchcraft tale of classic proportions, reminiscent of Machen's "The White People"; and Shaw's "The Watcher Awakes" —there is always a mysterious something about a haunted Egyptian tomb which never fails to strike a responsive chord.*

Here is a suggestion which might merit your serious consideration. Besides the two magazines which I have suggested, why not issue a special edition for WEIRD TALES *reprints exclusively. Fill 170 pages with the classical weird fiction in your ancient files and charge us $1.00 a copy for it.*

Henry D. Barnatt,
Crystal City, Mo.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

I received my subscription copy of WEIRD TALES *the other day and I want you to know how pleased I am that you have switched the format to its handy new size. May this new* WEIRD TALES *presage many more such happy developments.*

As long as your tales remain weird and bizarre, and as long as they remain short, you will keep me as a reader.

Charles D. Minogue,
West Orange, N. J.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

In your September issue you mention that you were publishing August Derleth's story, but did not know how many you had printed. I have a complete record of many authors in your magazine, and can tell you that you have published exactly 116 stories of his to date. I have a complete file of WT from December, 1924, to the last issue.

Edward W. Hartung
630 W. Upsal St.
Phila. 19, Pa.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

—As an old reader-subscriber, I feel qualified to speak in the manner of the Dutch uncle. You are hereby commended for having abolished ads. No commendation, however, if you open your columns to the sundry villains with old WT's to sell. The camel's nose is under the tent. Better they should pay for it in a classified section, if we have them at all.

Joseph V. Wilcox
Albion, Michigan

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

May I extend my sincere congratulations to you for the grand idea of changing the format of WEIRD TALES *to its new, handy, easy to read, compact size.*

I also like your idea of abolishing advertising but I think, you should keep the type of ad that you have inside your back cover in the last issue. I'm sure that many of your readers are interested in obtaining books relating to the subjects covered in the stories in WEIRD TALES.

I especially enjoyed August Derleth's "The Ebony Stick" and "The Watcher Awakes" by Kirk Shaw in the September issue. These were exceptionally good. Please keep up the fine work.

Tommy Inge
Richmond, Virginia

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

Enclosed please find a 2-year subscription to WEIRD TALES. *I never subscribed when it was pulp size because every pulp I ever got on subscription came through the mails looking like it had been through a meat-grinder. Digest size pulps fare better, though.*

I am pleased to see the Eyrie developing into a discussions column, while not too long ago it was composed merely of opinions on the stories. Here's something for the discussers. What, you science fiction haters, is the exact difference between scf and weird?

M. McNeil
Houston 19, Texas

SHASTA PUBLISHERS

Space Platform by Murray Leinster • A good adventure story, a man's dream of the conquest of Space and the courage, alertness and resource that were needed to bring it about.

The Demolished Man by Alfred Bester • Not just science fiction, not just a murder mystery, but an interesting study of an interplanetary empire pitted against crime detecting devices of the future—mind reading among them.

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

World out of Mind by J. T. McIntosh • Perpetual threat, perpetual challenge, perpetual need to put first things first—that's what will keep human beings going in their conflict with menace from Outer Space.

MCBRIDE COMPANY

Prize Science Fiction, Selected and Edited by Donald Wollheim • A collection of variety in science fiction from various magazines; some of it very good.

Fantastic

Horror

Werewolves

Weird

Ghosts

Haunting

Goblins

●

Makes your eyes pop . . . your spine chill . . . your flesh crawl

WEIRD TALES