Weird Tales

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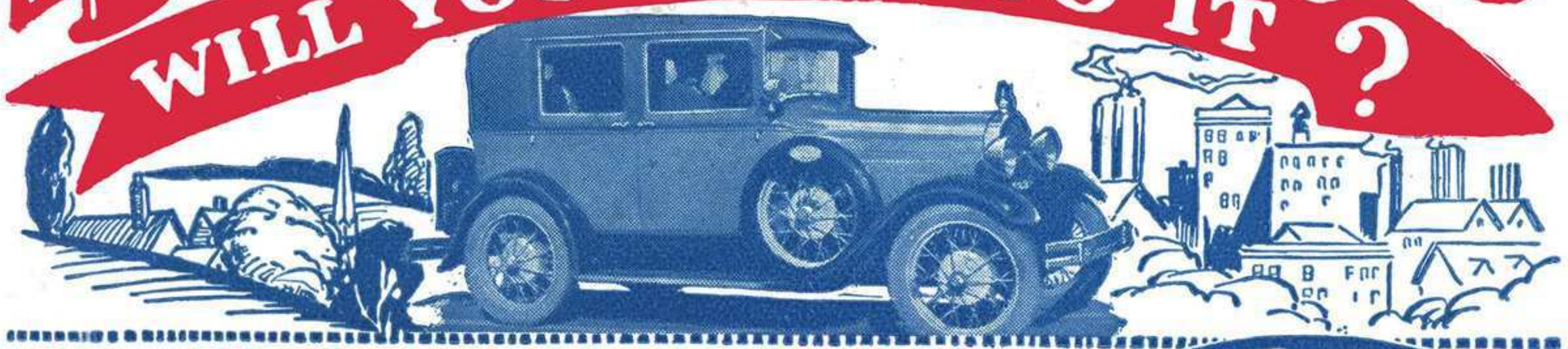

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Try this wonderful VIX Moisture Humidifier and Carbon Eliminator AT MY RISK on YOUR OWN CAR to prove that VAPOR MOISTURE (drawn from Radiator to Engine) gives you that wonderful night driving effect ALL THE TIME with MORE mileage from gas and oil—eliminates hard carbon accumulation—gives MORE power, a SNAPPIER, PEPPIER motor, FASTER acceleration, a SMOOTHER, QUIETER running engine and HIGHER top speed.

VIX will PROVE ITS MONEY SAVING MERIT on your own car by 8 DEMONSTRATIONS —conducted by yourself AT MY RISK—the most SENSATIONAL, most ASTOUNDING, most CONVINCING DEMONSTRATIONS you ever saw. If you don't find from your tests that it does MORE than I claim; return it and it COSTS YOU NOTHING. **I want wide-awake hustling, County, State, Province and National Agencies everywhere, part or full time, to make $350 to $1500 per month filling the great DEMAND for this wonderful invention wherever introduced. Write for my FREE TRIAL and MONEY MAKING OFFER. Use coupon below.**

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The Man I Pity Most

POOR OLD JONES. I see him now, standing there, dejected, cringing, afraid of the world. No one had any use for him. No one respected him. Across his face I read one harsh word—FAILURE. He just lived on. A poor worn out imitation of a man, doing his sorry best to get on in the world. If he had realized just one thing, he could have made good. He might have been a brilliant success.

There are thousands and thousands of men like Jones. They, too, could be happy, successful, respected and loved. But they can't seem to realize the one big fact—that practically everything worth while living for depends upon STRENGTH—upon live, red-blooded, he-man muscle.

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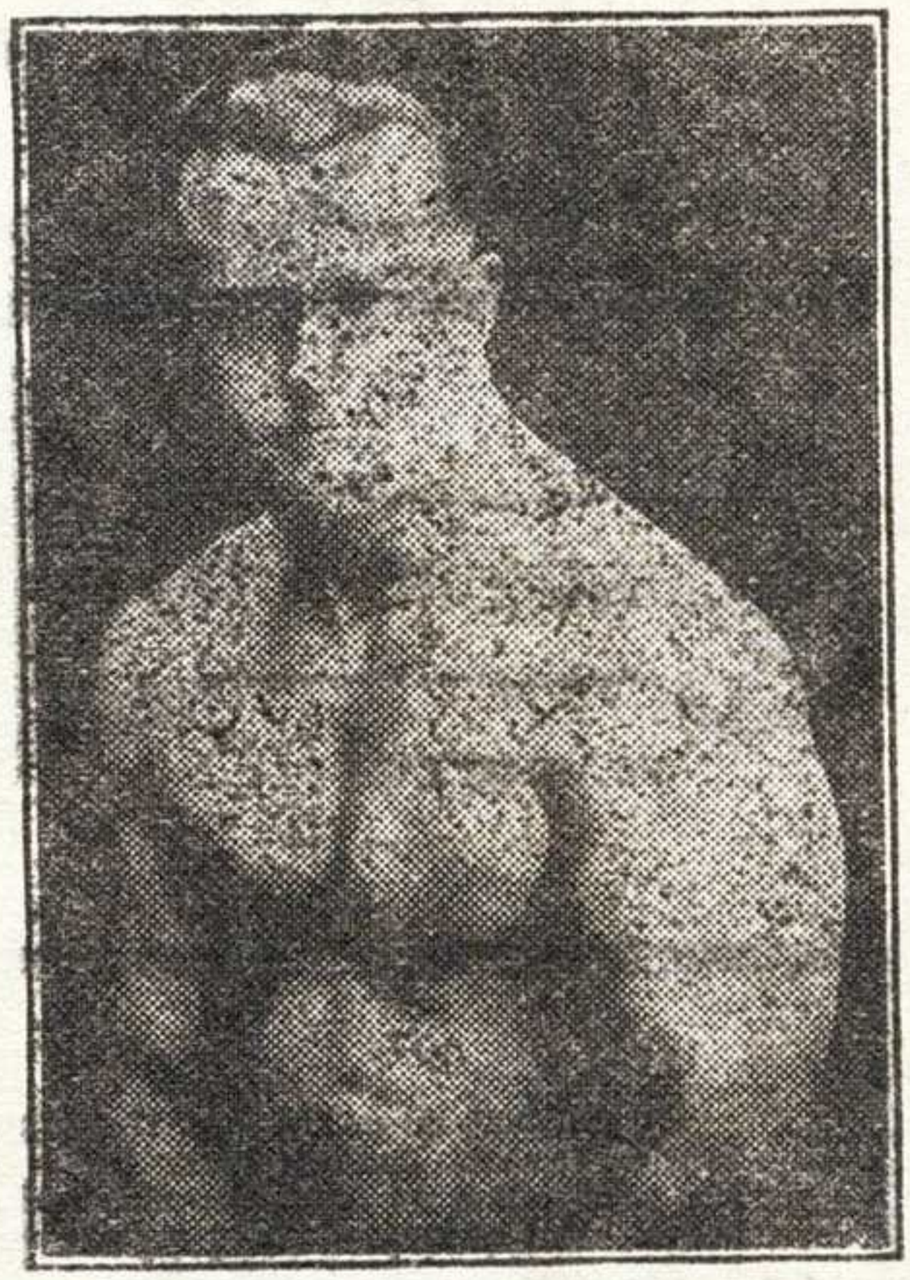

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But I'm not through with you. I want ninety days in all to do the job right, and then all I ask is that you stand in front of your mirror and look yourself over.

What a marvelous change! Those great squared shoulders! That pair of huge, lithe arms! Those firm, shapely legs! Yes, sir. They are yours, and they are there to stay. You'll be just as fit inside as you are out, too, because I work on your heart, your liver—all of your inner organs, strengthening and exercising them. Yes, indeed, life can give you a greater thrill than you ever dreamed. But, remember, the only sure road to health, strength and happiness *always demands action*. Fill out the coupon below and mail it today. *Write now!*

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Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XV NUMBER 3

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, $2.50 a year in the United States, $3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Sunken Land ---------- **George W. Bayly** **414**

A story from one of the old issues of WEIRD TALES*—about a forest of trees filled with malignant hatred*

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RESPONDING to your requests, in January of last year we began reprinting some of the best stories from old issues of WEIRD TALES. These have been appearing in every third issue in place of the monthly Weird Story Reprint. Thus far this policy has found favor with you, the readers. We want your suggestions as to which stories you want us to reprint in this series. We have republished *When the Green Star Waned,* by Nictzin Dyalhis, *The Phantom Farmhouse,* by Seabury Quinn, *The Wind That Tramps the World,* by Frank Owen, *The Hound,* by H. P. Lovecraft, *The Stranger from Kurdistan,* by E. Hoffmann Price; and in this issue George W. Bayly's strange story of a forest of trees moved by malignant hatred: *The Sunken Land.* Among the stories of six and seven years ago, you have most frequently asked for *Beyond the Door,* by Paul Suter, and *The Rats in the Walls,* by H. P. Lovecraft. We will republish both these stories soon. Among the more recent stories, you seem to want *The Woman of the Wood,* by A. Merritt, *The Outsider,* by H. P. Lovecraft, *The Night Wire,* by H. F. Arnold, and *Lukundoo,* by Edward Lucas White. Eventually we shall reprint these also for your benefit. What else do you want to see in this series?

"I was delighted with *The Stranger from Kurdistan* in the December issue," writes N. J. O'Neail, of Toronto, "and hope you will soon reprint *The Outsider,* which is now nearly four years old. And we haven't heard from H. P. Lovecraft in ten months, except for one reprint. Hope he'll have something to offer soon; to say 'something good' would be redundancy. I was very much interested in tracing the apparent connection between the characters of Kathulos, in Robert E. Howard's *Skull-Face,* and that of Cthulhu, in Mr. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu.* Can you inform me whether there is any legend or tradition surrounding that character? And also Yog-Sothoth? Mr. Lovecraft links the latter up with Cthulhu in *The Dunwich Horror* and Adolphe de Castro also refers to Yog-Sothoth in *The Last Test.* Both these stories also contain references to Abdul Alhazred the mad Arab, and his *Necronomicon.* I am sure this is a subject in which many readers besides

(Continued on page 294)

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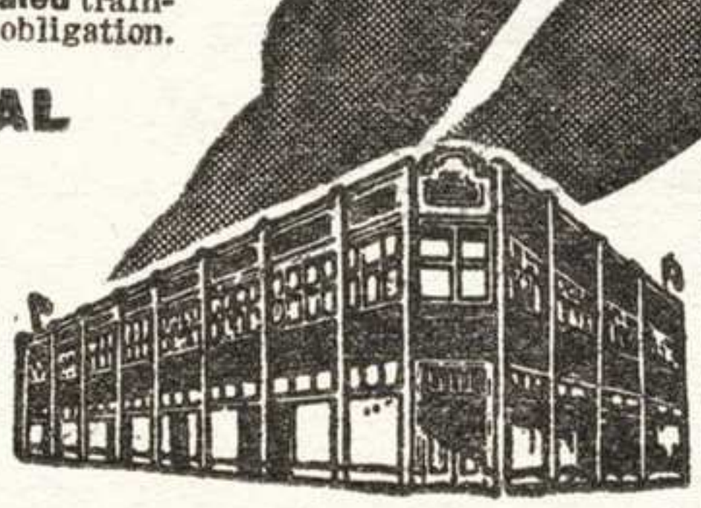

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(Continued from page 292)

myself would be interested; something which could be reviewed in a series of articles similar to those written by Alvin F. Harlow."

"Undoubtedly the best story in your December issue is *The Dancer in the Crystal*, by Francis Flagg," writes C. Harry Jaeger, of Oakland, California. "That alone was worth the price of the magazine. I have been eagerly looking forward to another story by Flagg since reading his *Chemical Brain*, which was certainly an entertaining yarn. Can't you give us more stories by this splendid author?"

"I am sold one hundred per cent and then some on your magazine," writes George C. Kern, of Buffalo. "Funny how I came to read my first copy of WEIRD TALES some three years ago. As I was rather a skeptic in regard to cheap literature, it was with a feeling of doubt that a friend of mine I was visiting induced me to read a copy of WEIRD TALES while he was shaving, and the first story I started was by Seabury Quinn about Jules de Grandin; and believe it or not I made my friend dig up all his old copies. I have been reading WEIRD TALES ever since. I wish you would publish WEIRD TALES twice a month; I am sure it would go over big."

"WEIRD TALES seems to be maintaining its standard through the years," writes Donald Coneyou, of Petoskey, Michigan, "although as a rule the illustrations are poor. Your best artist is Senf, whose covers are usually good and who averages best in the inside pictures. As to the regular reprint department: You started to alternate reprints from the magazine with other reprints, which I thought a good idea, but lately you have changed to one in three issues for reprints from the magazine, which is not so good. Please keep the reprints at least six years old."

Conrad Ruppert, of Angola, Indiana, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been a reader of your magazine for the last three months. Up to this time the name scared me away. Finally I decided I would take a look inside the magazine, and I was agreeably surprized to find that it contained many stories of the type I enjoy most, science fiction. I shall continue to buy it regularly until I have to go to a poorhouse from lack of funds. I need hardly say that the story I enjoyed most was *Skull-Face*, by Robert E. Howard. I thought at first that it was Sax Rohmer writing under a new name. I shall let you know how I like the story begun in this issue three months from now. I am going to keep it until I have it complete before reading it. The name, *Behind the Moon*, sounds interesting."

"Is H. de Vere Stacpoole the author of *The Blue Lagoon?*" asks Clare Winger Harris, of Lakewood, Ohio. "I read that story in book form a number of years ago and enjoyed his style greatly. Do you have many regular English contributors? Outside of E. F. Benson I don't know of any, and yet a number of them sound quite English. A little general information of that nature in the Eyrie in regard to the authors would be very

(Continued on page 296)

More marvelous than the power of the *Magician's Wand*, is the power that can be developed in the newly discovered cosmic areas of your own mind.

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(Continued from page 294)

acceptable to the readers.'' [Yes, Stacpoole is author of *The Blue Lagoon.* A number of prominent English authors write for WEIRD TALES, among them E. F. Benson, G. G. Pendarves, Arlton Eadie, Harold Markham, S. Fowler Wright, Oscar Cook, and E. R. Punshon.—THE EDITOR.]

James E. Quinn, of San Francisco, writes to the Eyrie: ''Four years ago a friend introduced me to my first copy of WEIRD TALES, and I can assure you he proved a worthy friend indeed. I have not missed a copy since then, and I value my back numbers more than I would a library of morocco-bound tomes. In all those years I have not found fault with a single story. Seabury Quinn, Gaston Leroux and Robert E. Howard certainly wield charmed and facile pens. My favorite story of the December issue is *Children of Ubasti*, by Seabury Quinn. Your new serial, *Behind the Moon*, by Backus, starts out fine, and I look forward to the next two installments.''

''WEIRD TALES is the most interesting magazine of fiction on the market,'' writes Maurice Johnson, of Patten, Maine. ''My favorite authors are Edmond Hamilton, Robert E. Howard, Arlton Eadie, and Eli Colter. Please get Colter to write another story soon, as his stories are fine. I would like to get an opportunity to read *The Outsider*, by H. P. Lovecraft, which appeared in an early issue of WEIRD TALES. I suggest that you publish it again as a reprint.''

E. L. Mengshoel, of Minneapolis, writes to the Eyrie: ''Your January issue contained a good number of well-written and well-spun yarns. Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner's *The Net of Shamlegh* is in my opinion the finest story in the issue, aside from the reprint. Excellent also are *The Murderer*, by Murray Leinster, Seabury Quinn's petit monsieur Jules' stunt, and *Dead Girl Finotte*, by H. de Vere Stacpoole. In an earlier issue you had a story *(The Curse of Yig)* about the curse of some Indian snake-god which very strongly reminds me of an actual occurrence in the district of Helgeland, in the northern part of Norway, three or four decades ago. It was related to me by a woman who had come to the United States from that same district, the daughter of a government official there. The incident shows that at least one of W. T.'s weirdest tales is far from improbable or impossible.''

Gordon R. Pugh, of Stratford, Ontario, writes to the Eyrie: ''I have just finished the December issue. Seabury Quinn, Francis Flagg and Gaston Leroux are fine, especially the former, who is ever giving us better and better stories. The story I do not like, and I am sorry it is a serial, is *Behind the Moon.* I believe we are all getting tired of moon stories ever since Jules Verne wrote his. I just pass them by, though I suppose others like them. Keep up the horror and really weird stories, I say, and leave interplanetary traveling alone.''

''Seabury Quinn's stories are all good,'' writes George P. Harradon, of Goffstown, New Hampshire. ''I prefer them to ghastly horror, as they

(Continued on page 298)

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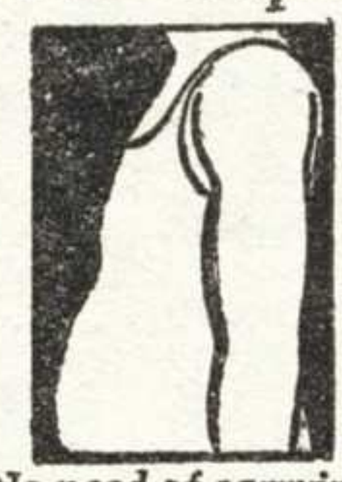

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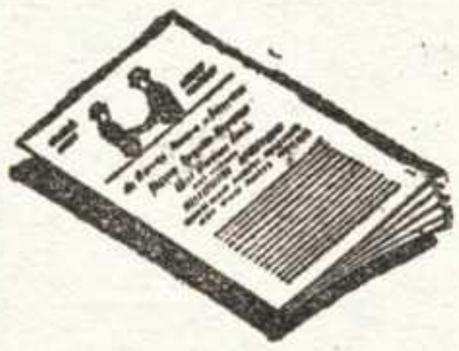

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(Continued from page 296)

make the hair stand on end just the same, and he always has a bit of truth in them. I am particularly interested in your astronomical stories. In your issue of September, 1928, you had a story by John Murray Reynolds called *The Devil Plant.* At the end of the story the monster was roaming at large in the jungles of South America. It seems to me some writer with imagination could write some more on this subject."

A letter from Edmond Esko Abelson, of Chicago, reads: "I have read WEIRD TALES for quite a time and enjoy it hugely. You are the first large firm I have ever come across that follows its ads to the letter. You call WEIRD TALES 'the unique magazine,' and it is. You mention elsewhere that it is 'a magazine of the bizarre and unusual'; it sure is. I greatly enjoyed *The Curse of the House of Phipps.* I always did admire Jules de Grandin and 'by the death of the little blue man' I swear this is true. *The Bird-People* is a great story and I hope to see a sequel in the near future. Congratulations, Mr. Kline; another pennant for you."

Writes Fred Krumboldt, of Clifton Heights, Pennsylvania: "I just finished reading WEIRD TALES for this month, and I must say it is the best issue of the year. The stories that I liked best are, first, *The Curse of the House of Phipps,* by Seabury Quinn; second, *The Bird-People,* by O. A. Kline. Tell Mr. Kline to please write a sequel to this story. It was great."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Your first choice among the January stories was *The Curse of the House of Phipps,* by Seabury Quinn. Second and third places went to *The Life-Masters,* by Edmond Hamilton, and *Dead Girl Finotte,* by H. de Vere Stacpoole.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE MARCH WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) _____	_____
(2) _____	_____
(3) _____	_____

I do not like the following stories:

(1) _____ Why? _____

(2) _____ _____

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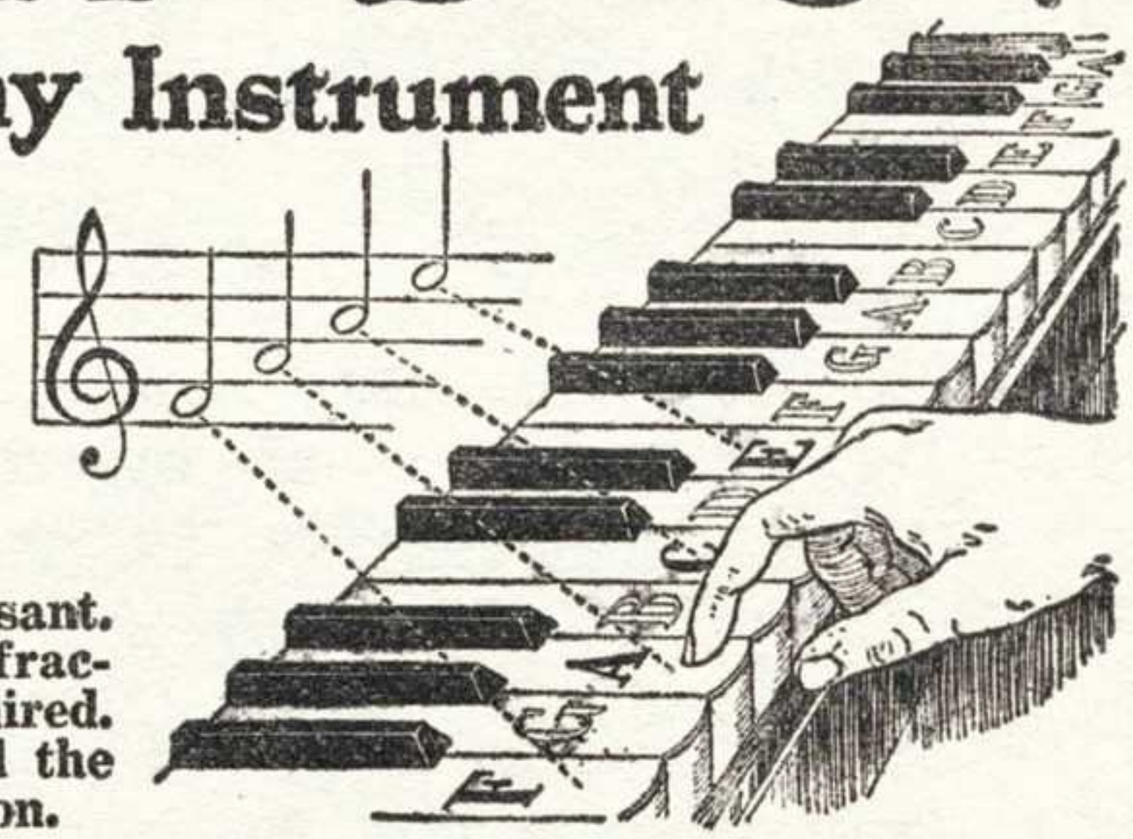

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The Ancient Track

By **H. P. LOVECRAFT**

There was no hand to hold me back
That night I found the ancient track
Over the hill, and strained to see
The fields that teased my memory.
This tree, that wall—I knew them well,
And all the roofs and orchards fell
Familiarly upon my mind
As from a past not far behind.
I knew what shadows would be cast
When the late moon came up at last
From back of Zaman's Hill, and how
The vale would shine three hours from now.
And when the path grew steep and high,
And seemed to end against the sky,
I had no fear of what might rest
Beyond that silhouetted crest.
Straight on I walked, while all the night
Grew pale with phosphorescent light,
And wall and farmhouse gable glowed
Unearthly by the climbing road.
There was the milestone that I knew—
"Two miles to Dunwich"—now the view
Of distant spire and roofs would dawn
With ten more upward paces gone. . . .

There was no hand to hold me back
That night I found the ancient track,
And reached the crest to see outspread
A valley of the lost and dead:
And over Zaman's Hill the horn
Of a malignant moon was born,
To light the weeds and vines that grew
On ruined walls I never knew.
The fox-fire glowed in field and bog,
And unknown waters spewed a fog
Whose curling talons mocked the thought
That I had ever known this spot.
Too well I saw from the mad scene
That my loved past had never been—
Nor was I now upon the trail
Descending to that long-dead vale.
Around was fog—ahead, the spray
Of star-streams in the Milky Way. . . .
There was no hand to hold me back
That night I found the ancient track.

NEXT MONTH

A superb array of gripping weird masterpieces is scheduled for the April issue of WEIRD TALES, on sale March 1.

The Dust of Egypt

by Seabury Quinn

Weird was the attack of the mummy of the Egyptian priest on the despoiler of his tomb—an uncanny adventure of Jules de Grandin.

The Plant Revolt

by Edmond Hamilton

On a mountain-top in Pennsylvania was created a horror that set the plant kingdom in wild revolt against man and animals.

Silver Bullets

by Jeremy Ellis

Ordinary weapons were powerless against the weird creature that tore and mangled the living corpse of Lomba Ravski.

Creation Unforgivable

by David H. Keller

A tragic and fascinating story about an author who lived so vividly in his work that his characters came to life.

Sola

by W. K. Mashburn, Jr.

A grisly story about a female Robot—a mechanical woman who was capable of ferocious jealousy.

Suzanne

by J. Joseph-Renaud

A grisly, gruesome plant-horror was spawned in the steaming vapors of Dr. Salzmann's nursery—a giant Nepenthes that fed on men and animals.

The Shut Room

by Henry S. Whitehead

The English highwayman was caught red-handed in "The Coach and Horses" inn on the Brighton Road, and a century later weird manifestations began. A vivid ghost-story.

These are some of the super-excellent stories that will appear in the April issue of WEIRD TALES

April Issue on Sale March 1

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WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Ill.

The DRUMS of

"AND so, good friends, I bid you Happy New Year." Jules de Grandin replaced his demitasse on the Indian mahogany tabouret beside his easy chair and turned his quick, elfin smile from Detective Sergeant Costello to me.

"Thanks, old chap," I returned, taking the humidor which Costello had been eyeing wistfully ever since we adjourned to the drawing-room for coffee and passing it toward him.

The big Irishman selected one of the long, red-and-gold belted Habanas and fondled it between his thick, capable fingers. "Sure, Dr. de Grandin,

DAMBALLAH

by Seabury Quinn

"Coq blanc! Coq blanc!" the cry rose insistently.

sor," he muttered, "'tis meself that wishes th' same to you, an' many more of 'em, too."

"*Eh bien,* my friend," de Grandin bit a morsel of pink peppermint wafer and held it daintily between his teeth as he sipped a second draft of the strong, black coffee, "you do not appear in harmony with the season. Tell me, are you not happy at the New Year?"

"Yeah," Costello returned as he struck a match and set his cigar alight, "I got lots o' cause to be happy right now, sor. Happy like it wuz me own wake I'm goin' to. To tell ye th' truth, sor," he added, turning serious blue eyes on the little Frenchman, "'tis Jerry Costello that'll be lucky if he ain't back in uniform, poundin' a beat before th' New Year's a month old."

"*Parbleu,* do you tell me?" de Grandin demanded, his smile vanishing. "How comes it?"

Costello puffed moodily at his

cigar. "There's been hell poppin' around the City Hall for th' last couple o' weeks," he returned, "an' they've got to make a example o' someone, so I reckon old Jerry Costello's elected."

"Eh, you are in trouble? Tell me, my friend; I am clever, I can surely help you."

The big detective gazed moodily at the fire. "I only wish ye could, sor," he answered slowly, "but I'm afraid ye can't. There's been more devilment goin' on in town th' last two weeks than I ever seen in a year before, an' there ain't no reason for anny of it. I just can't make head nor tail of it, an' th' mayor an' th' newspapers is ravin' their heads off about police inefficiency. Lookit this, for example: Here's young Mr. Sherwood, just th' slip of a lad he is, right out o' divinity school. First thing he does when he gits ordained is to open a little chapel over in th' East End, workin' night an' day amongst th' colored folks. He gits th' men to lay off th' gin an' razors, an' even bulls some of 'em into going to work instead o' layin' around all day an' lettin' their women support 'em. That's th' kind o' lad he wuz; fine an' good enough to be a priest—God forgive me for sayin' it! An' what happens? Why, just last week they find him in th' little two-by-four room he used for a study wid his head all bashed in an' his Bible torn to shreds an' th' pieces layin' all around th' place.

"All right, sor, that's th' first, but it ain't th' last. That same night th' little Boswell gur-rl—as pritty a bit o' wee babyhood as ye ever seen—she disappears. Th' nurse has her out in th' park, ye understand, an' is hurryin' home, for it's turnin' dark, an' right while she's passin' th' soldiers' monument, out pops someone an' swipes her over th' head so hard she's laid up for three days wid concussion o' th' brain.

"We searched high an' low for th' little one; but never hide nor hair o' her do we find. Rewards are posted, an' th' papers is full of it; but no one steps up to claim th' money. 'Twarn't no ordinary kidnappin', either, for whoever stole her tried his level best to kill th' nurse at th' time, an' would 'a' done it, too, if she hadn't been one o' them old fashioned gur-rls wid long hair piled on top o' her head, so's th' coil of it broke th' force o' the blackjack he hit her wid.

"An' lissen here, sor: 'Twas on th' same night some dirty bums breaks into St. Rose's Church an' steals a crucifix from one o' th' altars —bad cess to 'em!

"Now, crimes is like 'most everything else: they don't happen just because, sor. There's got to be some motive back of 'em. That's what's makin' a monkey out o' me in these cases. Nobody had annything agin th' pore young preacher. He didn't have a relative, much less an enemy, in th' world, as far as we could find out, an' as for money, if he'd 'a' had two nickels to jingle together, he'd 'a' been out givin' one of 'em to some worthless, no-account darky to buy food or coal oil, or sumpin' like that. It couldn't 'a' been an enemy that kilt him, an' it couldn't 'a' been robbery; yet there he wuz, cold an' still, wid his head mashed in like a busted punkin an' his Bible all torn to scraps."

"*Ah?*" de Grandin sat forward in his chair, his little, round eyes narrowed to slits as he gazed intently at the big policeman. "Say on, my friend; I think, perhaps, I see some sense to these so senseless crimes, after all."

Costello gave him an astonished look as he continued: "We might set pore Mr. Sherwood's murder down to some crazy man, sor, an' we might think Baby Boswell was just kidnapt by someone who wuz holdin' her for ransom, waitin' till her parents gits even more discouraged before he puts in his bid for money; but who th' divil would want to burglarize a

church? An' why didn't they break open th' pore box while they wuz about it, 'stead o' stealin' just one little brass crucifix? I tell ye, sor, there ain't no reason to none of it; an' I can't make head nor tail——"

"Yo're wanted on th' tellyphone, Dr. Trowbridge, sor," announced Nora McGinnis, my household factotum, thrusting her head through the drawing-room door and casting a momentary glance of unqualified approval toward the towering bulk of Sergeant Costello.

"Dr. Trowbridge?" an agitated voice called in response to my curt "Hello?"

"Can you come over to Mrs. Sherbourne's at once, please? One of the guests has fainted, and——"

"All right," I cut in, hanging up the receiver, "I'll be right over.

"Want to come?" I called to de Grandin and Costello. "There's a fainting woman over at Sherbourne's, and they seem to need a licensed practitioner to administer aromatic ammonia. Come along, Sergeant; a drive in the air may cheer you up."

THE old year was dying hard as we drove toward the Sherbourne mansion. A howling wind, straight from the bay, tore through the deserted streets, flinging sheets of razor-sharp sleet against the windshield and overlaying the pavement with a veneer of gleaming, glass-smooth ice. Though our destination was a scant quarter-mile away, we were upward of half an hour covering the course, and I swore softly as I descended from the car, feeling certain that the young woman had long since recovered from her swoon and we had had our freezing drive for nothing.

My apprehensions proved unfounded, however, for a frightened hostess met us in the hall and conducted us to the upper room where her unconscious guest lay upon the snowy counterpane, an eiderdown quilt thrown lightly over her and a badly demoralized maid struggling ineffectually to force a hastily mixed dose of aromatic spirit between her blanched lips.

"We've tried everything," Mrs. Sherbourne twittered nervously as de Grandin and I entered the room; "aromatic spirit and sal volatile don't seem the least good, and——"

"When did the young *mademoiselle* swoon, and where, if you please?" de Grandin cut in softly, slipping out of his fur-lined greatcoat and taking the unconscious girl's thin, lath-like wrist between his fingers.

"Just before we called you," our hostess replied. "She seemed in the highest spirits all evening, singing, playing the old-fashioned games, dancing—oh, she was having an awfully good time. Just a little while ago, when Bobby Eldridge wanted someone to do the tango with him, she was the first to volunteer. The music had hardly started when she fell over in a heap, and we can't bring her to. It wasn't till all the home-made remedies had failed that I called you, Dr. Trowbridge," she added apologetically.

"U'm," de Grandin consulted his watch, comparing its ticks with the girl's pulsation. "She has eaten unwisely this evening, perhaps?"

"No. She hasn't eaten anything. That's the queer part of it. Everyone was eating and—I'm sorry to say—drinking considerably, too. We have to serve liquor to keep the young people satisfied since prohibition, you know. But Adelaide didn't touch a thing. I asked her if she were unwell, and she assured me she wasn't, but——"

"Precisely, *Madame*," de Grandin dropped the girl's wrist and rose with a business-like gesture. "If you will be so good as to leave us alone a moment, I think we shall revive Mademoiselle Adelaide without great difficulty." To me he whispered as our hostess withdrew:

"I think it is another case of fool-

ish pursuit of the slender figure, Friend Trowbridge. This poor one seems half starved, to me, and—*barbe d'un chat,* what is this?'' As he broke off he seized my hand and guided it to the unconscious girl's solar plexus.

Beneath the flimsy chiffon of her party frock I felt the hard, unyielding stiffness of a—corset.

''*Morbleu,*'' de Grandin chuckled. ''Not content with starving herself to the thinness of an eel, the poor foolish one must needs encase herself in a corset so tight her breath can not find room to fill her lungs. Come, let us extricate her.''

Deftly as though he had served as lady's maid all his life, he undid the fastenings of the girl's frock, laid back the silken folds and leaned above her to unloose the corset-hooks which bound her torso; but:

''*Sacré nom d'un poisson aveugle,* what in damnation's name have we here?'' he demanded sharply. From hips to breast the girl was tightly bound in a corselet of some coarse, fibrous substance, irritant as the hair-shirt of a Carmelite nun, and sewn upon the scarifying garment was a crazy patchwork of red, black and checkered cloth, not arranged in orderly or symmetrical design, but seemingly dropped at random, then fastened where it fell.

''S-o-o-o?'' the little Frenchman let his breath out slowly between his teeth. ''What connection has this one with this devilish business of the monkey which has so puzzled our good friend——

''Quick, my friend,'' he ordered, turning sharply to me, ''bring up the good Costello, at once, right away, immediately. Do not delay; it is important.''

Bewildered, I descended the stairs, hailed the sergeant from my waiting car and led him to the room where de Grandin waited.

''*Très bon,*'' the little Frenchman nodded as we entered. ''Do you stand by the door, *cher sergent;* display your badge prominently. Now, Friend Trowbridge, let us to work!''

Drawing a tiny gold-handled pocket-knife from his waistcoat, he slit the queer-looking corset lengthwise and drew it from the girl's slim body, inviting my attention to the network of deep, angry scratches inflicted by the raw fiber on her tender white skin as he did so. ''Now——'' he put a wide-mouthed vial of smelling-salts to her nostrils, waited till her lids fluttered slightly, then seized the half-filled glass of aromatic spirit and held it to her mouth.

The girl half choked as the restorative passed her lips, then put a thin, blue-veined hand up, pushing the glass from her. ''I''—she stammered sleepily—''where am—oh, I must have fainted. Did anyone — you mustn't undo my dress—you *mustn't,* I tell you! I won't have——''

''*Mademoiselle,*'' de Grandin's usually suave voice grated unpleasantly as he cut through her hysterical words, ''your gown has already been unloosed. This gentleman''—he indicated Costello with a nod—''is of the police. I have summoned him, and here he remains until you have given satisfactory answers to my questions. Upon your replies depends whether he leaves this house alone or——'' He paused significantly, and the girl's dark hazel eyes widened in terror.

''Wha—what do you want?'' she faltered.

''Await us in the hall, if you please, my sergeant,'' de Grandin bade; then, as the door closed behind the big policeman: ''First of all, you will please tell us how comes it that you wear this so odious thing.'' He touched the patchwork-covered corset with the tip of his forefinger, gingerly, as though it had been a venomous reptile.

''It—it was a bet, a silly, foolish wager,'' she returned. ''I wore it tonight just to prove I could stand the irritation a whole evening.'' She paused, looking questioningly at the Frenchman's stern-set face to note

the effect of her explanation; then, with sudden vehemence: "You've got to believe me," she almost screamed. "It's the truth, the truth, *the truth!*"

"It is a lie, and a very clumsy one, in the bargain," de Grandin shot back. "Come, *Mademoiselle*, the truth, if you please; we are not to be trifled with."

The girl gazed back defiantly. She was thin as almost fleshless bones could make her, yet gracefully built, and her long, oval face had that tantalizing pale olive complexion which in certain types of woman proclaims abundant health as surely as florid coloring does in others. Her deep hazel eyes, tragic with terror, turned questioningly toward the window, then the door beyond which Costello waited, and finally came to rest on de Grandin's glowing blue orbs. "I—won't—tell——" she began with deliberate emphasis; then, "Oh!" The interruption was half cry, half gasp, and came simultaneously with the crashing clatter of broken glass.

Shattered to a dozen fragments, one of the small panes of the bedroom window fell inward on the margin of hardwood floor bordering the Persian rug, and the girl wilted forward as though pushed from behind, then slid back with a slow, twisting motion, one hand fluttering upward toward her breast like a wounded white bird vainly trying to regain its nest.

Two inches below and slightly to the right of the gentle swell of her left bosom the hard, polished haft of a dagger protruded, and on the flimsy chiffon of her frock there spread with terrifying rapidity a ruddy, telltale stain. She was dead before we could ease her back upon the pillows.

"On guard, *Sergent*, close the doors, permit none to enter and none to leave!" de Grandin shouted, leaping to the window and tearing open the sash. "Call the station, have a cordon of police thrown round the house—another murder has been done, but by the beard of a bullfrog, the guilty one shall not escape!"

The big Irishman took charge with characteristic efficiency. Under his energetic guidance the guests and servants were gathered in the main drawing-room; within five minutes a siren shrieked its strident warning and a police car deposited a squad of uniformed men at the Sherbourne door. Assisted by powerful hand-searchlights brought from the station house, we scoured every inch of the grounds surrounding the mansion, and while a police stenographer stood by with pencil and notebook, Costello interrogated one after another of the horrified merrymakers. Half an hour's work convinced us we were up a blind alley. Not a hint or track of foot-print showed on the hard-frozen sleet covering the lawn and encasing the tall poplar tree which stood beside the window through which the deadly missile had been hurled; not a guest at the party, nor a servant in the house, had left the building for a moment since de Grandin's shouted warning rang through the night; nowhere was there even the shadow of a clue at which the finger of suspicion could be pointed.

"Well, I'm damned; I sure am!" Costello ruefully admitted as he completed the investigation and prepared to notify Coroner Martin. "This looks like another one o' them cases wid no reason a-tall for happenin', Dr. de Grandin, sor. Ye can see for yerself how it is, now. Why should annyone want to murder that pore young gur-rl like that, an——" He lapsed into moody silence, drumming silently on the polished top of the telephone table as he waited for central to make his connection with the coroner.

"H'm, one wonders," de Grandin murmured, half to Costello, half to himself, as he snapped the mechanism of his pocket lighter and thrust the tip of an evil-smelling French cigarette into the cone of blue flame. But

from the dancing lights in his small round eyes and the quick, irritable manner in which the ends of his carefully waxed blond mustache twitched, I knew he had already formulated a theory and bided his time to put it into words. "Come, Friend Trowbridge," he urged, tugging at my elbow. "There is nothing more we can accomplish here; besides, I greatly desire a drink. Let us go."

2

"*TIENS*, my friend, it seems the old year died in a welter of blood last night," de Grandin remarked the following morning as he pushed back his coffee cup and lighted an after-breakfast cigarette. "Regard this in the morning's news, if you please." He passed a copy of the *Journal* across the table, indicating the article occupying the right-hand column of the front page. Taking the paper, I read:

TORTURERS KILL GUARD IN ROBBERY

Novice Yeggs Slash Watchman to Learn Safe Combination He Did Not Know

The body of William Lucas, 50-year-old colored night watchman at the Eagle Laundry, 596 Primrose Street, was found early this morning on the company's loading platform. He had been tortured to death because he would not reveal the combination of the firm's safe. The safe had not been opened.

When found, the body had a slash on each hand, one on the sole and instep of each foot, another across the throat under the chin, and a deep knife wound in the back. In a vacant lot behind the laundry detectives found a stained paper bag containing a brace and bit, a glass cutter, a wire cutter, a metal trimmed stiletto sheath and a pair of low shoes.

The attempted safe robbery was so wholly the work of novices that police were able to reconstruct the crime in its entirety. The murderers, police said, left a multitude of clues. At least two men entered the building in Primrose Street before the last truck was parked in the sheds at 9 o'clock last night. The robbers evidently knew that heavy collections were made by drivers on their final routes and that the money could not be banked until after the holiday, hence there would be a substantial amount in the office safe.

The yeggmen laid out their kit of cheap tools some time after midnight, took off their shoes and tiptoed after the watchman as he made his rounds. They found him in the rear of the building as he was punching the clock in the dynamo room, and forced him to accompany them to the office, where the torture began.

While one of the burglars tortured and questioned Lucas in vain the other turned to the safe and tampered with it. The lifted handles bear the impress of red-stained fingers.

Some time during the torture Lucas died. The coroner's physician will say today whether he died as a result of the slash in his throat, the wound in his back, or whether he bled to death from the many smaller wounds inflicted on different parts of his body.

The murderers dumped the body into a laundry basket and dragged it through the building to the landing platform. A trail of stains led the police along the way. On the loading platform, where the body was abandoned, one of the thugs left a most incriminating clue. The floor bore the mark of a large foot with long, prehensile toes, clearly outlined in crimson. This print definitely establishes the fact that there were at least two robbers, as the low shoes found in the bundle with the burglars' tools were too small to fit the footmark. They must have belonged to the other robber, who also tiptoed in stockinged or bare feet after the unfortunate watchman.

Lucas, police said, was tortured to reveal something he did not know. The combination of the safe had not been entrusted to him.

"Why," I exclaimed, "that's villainous! The idea of torturing that poor fellow! It——"

"Sure, Dr. Trowbridge, sor, 'tis bad enough, th' blessed saints know, but 'tis sumpin' we can sink our teeth into, at anny rate," announced Costello's heavy voice from the doorway. " 'Scuse me for sneakin' in on ye like this, gentlemen," he apologized, "but it's crool cold outside this mornin', an' I thought as how ye wouldn't mind if I let meself in unannounced-like, seein' th' door wuz unlocked, annyhow."

"*Bien non,* by no means," de Grandin assured him, motioning to a chair. "Tell me, my friend, is this press account accurate?"

The detective nodded over the rim of the cup of steaming coffee I had poured him. "Yes, sor," he returned. "I wuz in charge at th' laundry, an' checked th' facts up wid th' reporters before they shot their stuff in. They're right this time—for a wonder. Praise be, we've got clear sailin' in a case at last. None o' yer mysterious, no-motive crimes here, sor. Just a case o' plain petermen's wor-rk, an' done be amatoors, in th' bargain. It looks open-an'-shut to me."

He fumbled in his pocket a moment, producing two narrow slips of paper. "I got a couple o' subpenas from th' coroner for you gentlemen," he announced, handing us the summonses to appear at the inquest on the death of Adelaide Truman, "but if ye'd like to run over to th' Eagle Laundry an' look th' place over before ye tell what ye know to Coroner Martin, I'd be happy to take ye. I've got a police car waitin' outside."

"By all means," de Grandin assented eagerly. "This latest case of yours, my friend, it is a bit too obvious. It is altogether possible that someone makes the practical joke at our expense."

THE dead night watchman was not a pretty sight. However inexperienced they might have been as burglars, his assassins had done their murdering with the finesse of veterans. To me the only question was whether the unfortunate man had died from the gaping slash across his throat or the deep incision which pierced his back just under the vertebral extremity of his left scapular. Either would have been almost instantly fatal.

De Grandin gave the body little more than passing notice. Instead he hastened to the office where the atrocity had been committed, and cast a fierce, searching glance about, rushed to the single window and sent the shade sailing upward with a jerk of the cord, finally dropped to his knees and began examining the floor with the nervous intensity of a terrier seeking the scent of a vanished rat.

I watched him in amazement a moment, then turned to rejoin Costello, but his sudden elated exclamation brought me to a halt. "*Voilà!*" he cried, springing to his feet. "*Triomphe;* I have found it; it is here! *Pardieu,* did I not say so? Assuredly. Behold, my friend, what the good Costello and his fellows failed to see, and would not have recognized, had they done so, was not hidden from Jules de Grandin. By no means. *Regardez-vous!*"

In the palm of his outstretched hand lay a tiny cruciform thing, two burnt matches bound together in the form of a cross with a wisp of scarlet silk.

"Well?" I demanded, for the little man's shining eyes, quivering nostrils and excited manner indicated he placed great importance on his find.

"Well?" he echoed. "*Non,* my friend, you are mistaken; it is not well, or rather it is very well, indeed, for I now begin to understand much. Very damn much, indeed. This so detestable thing"—he indicated the crossed matches in his palm—"it is the key to much which I began dimly to perceive last night when Friend Costello strung together his so strange series of seemingly meaningless and unrelated crimes. Certainly. I now think, at least I believe——"

"All ready, gentlemen?" Sergeant Costello called. "We'll be gittin' over to th' coroner's, if ye're all done. Th' boys are finished wid th' fingerprints an' measurements, an' they'll be comin' from th' morgue for th' pore felly out yonder before long."

DE GRANDIN sat wrapped in moody silence as the big police car bore us toward the coroner's. Once or twice he made as though to speak, but appeared to think better of it, and leaned back in his seat with tightly

compressed lips and knitted, thoughtful brows. At last:

"What d'ye think of it all, Dr. de Grandin, sor?" Costello asked tentatively. "Have ye formed anny theory yet?"

"U'm," de Grandin struck a match, carefully shielding its orange flame with his cupped hands as he set his cigarette alight, then expelled a double column of smoke from his nostrils. "I shall not be greatly astonished, *mon vieux,* if the man who slew Mademoiselle Truman last night and the miscreant who did the unfortunate Lucas to death shortly afterward prove one and the same. Yes, I am almost convinced of it, already, though a careful search of the poor dead ones' antecedents must be made before we can be certain."

"Arrah!" Costello looked his incredulity. "D'ye mean th' felly that murdered th' pore gur-rl an' tried to rob th' laundry wuz th' same?"

"*Précisément.* Furthermore, I am disinclined to believe that any robbery was intended at the Eagle Laundry. Rather, I think, it was a carefully calculated murder—an execution, if you please—which took place there. The bloody hand-prints on the safe door, the new and wholly inadequate burglars' tools so left that the police could not help but find them, the very obviousness of it all—it was the camouflage they made, my friend. *Mordieu,* at this very moment the miscreants lie snugly hidden and laugh most execrably at our backs. Have a care, villains, Jules de Grandin has entered the case, and you shall damn laugh on the other side of your mouths before all is done!" He struck his knee with his clenched fist, then continued more quietly: "There is much more to this case than you have seen, my Sergeant. By example, there is that patchwork corset, and the two burned matches——"

"A corset—two burnt matches!" Costello's tone indicated rapidly waning confidence in de Grandin's sanity.

"Exactly, precisely; quite so. In addition there is the murder of the innocent young clergyman, the stealing away of a helpless little baby, and much more devilment, which as yet we have not seen. Sergeant, my friend, these crimes without reason, as you call them, are crimes with the best—or worst—reason in the world, and this latest killing which you so stubbornly persist in thinking part of an unsuccessful burglary, it too is a link in the chain. These things are but the tail-tip of the serpent. His monstrous body we have yet to glimpse."

"Glory be to God!" ejaculated Costello with more force than piety as he bit off an impressive mouthful of chewing-tobacco and set to masticating it in methodical silence.

3

I saw but little more of Jules de Grandin that day. As soon as his brief testimony before the coroner had been concluded he excused himself and disappeared on some mysterious errand. Dinner was long over and I was preparing to turn in for some much-needed sleep when his quick step sounded in the hall and a moment later he burst into the study, eyes gleaming, mustache fairly on end with excitement. "*Mort d'un bouc vert!*" he exclaimed as he dropped into a chair and seized a cigar from the humidor; "this day I have run back and forth and to and fro like a hound on the trail of a stag, my friend! Yes, I have been most active."

"Find out anything?" I asked.

"Assuredly yes. More than I had hoped; much more," he declared. "Attend me: The poor Mademoiselle Truman whose so tragic death we witnessed, she was not born here. No, she was a native of Martinique.

Her parents, Americans, lived in Fort de France, and she was but the merest babe when Pelée erupted so terribly in 1902, killing nearly every living being in the capital. Both her father and mother perished in the catastrophe, but she was rescued through the heroism of a native *bonne* who fled inland and found such shelter as none but she and her kind could. For the next five years the child dwelt as a native peasant among the blacks, speaking Creole, wearing native clothes, nourished by native food and—*worshiping native gods.*

"Do you know Martinique, my friend? It is most beautiful; lovely as the island where Circe dwelt to change men into swine before destroying them utterly. A curse lies on those lovely islands of the Antilles, my friend, the curse of human bondage and blood drawn by the slave-driver's lash. Wherever Europe colonized and brought black slaves from Africa she brought also the deadly poison of the jungle Obeah. In North America it was not so. Your negroes grew up beside the whites, a pleasant, loyal, glad-hearted race; but in the islands of the Caribbean they interbred with the savage Indians and grew into fiends incarnate. Yes. Consider how they rose against their masters, exterminating man and woman and tender, helpless babe; how they marched on the European settlements with the bodies of white infants impaled upon their pikes for standards, and slew and slaughtered till even their insatiable blood-lust was slaked.

"Very well. That they had just cause for revolt no one can deny. It is not pleasant, even for a savage, to be stolen from his home and made to serve as slave in distant lands, and the sting of the whip is no less painful to a black back than to a white one; but the dreadful aspects of their revolts, the implacable savagery with which they killed and tortured, that is something needing explanation. Nor is the explanation far to seek. Beside their bonfires, far back amid the hills, they practised weird rites and made petition to strange and awful gods—dread, bestial gods out of darkest Africa, more savage still than the savages who groveled at their altars. It was from these black and blood-dewed altars that the insurgent slaves drew inspiration for their atrocities.

"Nor is that dread religion—*Vôdunu, Obeah,* or by whatever savage name it may be called—dead by any means. Today the Marines of your country fight ceaselessly to put it down in Haiti; the weak-spined Spanish government, and after it the forces of the Republic, have been powerless to stamp it out from the Cuban uplands; the Danish West Indies and the Dutch colonies turned their faces and declared there was no such thing as Voodoo in their midst; and France has had no better luck in Martinique. No. The white man governs there; he can never hope to rule.

"Now, the aborigines of Martinique were known as the Caribs. A terrible folk they were—and are. Your very English word 'cannibal' comes from them, since *caribal* was what Columbus' sailors said when referring to the abominations of the Caribs when they returned to Spain. There are those who say that the Caribs were rooted out in the war waged on them by the French in 1658. It is, *hélas,* not so. They fled back to the hills, and there they mated with the blacks, producing a race tenfold more terrible than either of its parents. These are those who keen the voodoo chant before black altars in the uplands, who burn the signal fires at night, and, upon occasion, make sacrifices of black goats, or white goats without horns, to their deities. They keep the flame of hatred for the white man undying, and it was because of that the native

nurse-woman risked her life to save poor little Baby Adelaide from the volcano.

"Ha, I see your question forming. 'Why,' you ask, 'should she have risked her life to bear away the offspring of her master; why should she so carefully rear that little girl-child when the holocaust of Pelée's eruption was done?' Ah, my friend, subtle revenge is sweet to the half-breed Carib as to the white man. That child of the dominant and hated *blancs* should be reared as a Carib, taught their language, imbued with their thoughts, finally trained and initiated into their abominable religion and made to serve as priestess at their dreadful sacrificial rites—ah, that, indeed, would be a fit requital for all the woes her ancestors had undergone at the white man's hands. Yes.

"And so it was. For five years—the formative period of her life—poor Mademoiselle Adelaide lives as a Creole. When she was at last so steeped in savage lore that never, while life should last, could she throw away the influence, the 'faithful nurse' returned to Fort de France with her story of having rescued and nurtured the orphaned child of her employers. Relatives in America were located by colonial authorities and the little girl brought here—and with her came her faithful *bonne*, her foster-mother, old Black Toinette of the Caribs."

He rose abruptly, took half a turn across the study floor, then stopped and faced me almost threateningly.

"*And Toinette was a mamaloi of the voodooists!*" he fairly hissed.

"Well?" I demanded, as he continued to stand staring fixedly at me.

"'Well' be everlastingly burned in the lowest subcellar of hell!" he flared back. "It is not well. It is most damnably otherwise, my friend.

"Mademoiselle Adelaide was never allowed to forget that whatever gods she might pay outward homage to, the *real* gods, the great gods, were Damballah, Legba and Ayida-Wedo. When she was but a little child she astonished her Sunday School teacher by making such an assertion in answer to a catechism question, and when she was a grown young woman, eighteen years of age, her aunt, with whom she lived, surprized her and her aged nurse fantastically dressed and making worship to an obscene thing carved in the likeness of a serpent. The old negress was instantly dismissed; though, in gratitude for her services, she was given a pension; but poor Mademoiselle Adelaide's aunt tells me her niece paid many secret visits to old Toinette's dwelling, and what went on behind the closed doors of that house can better be conjectured than described, I fear.

"Now, attend me: Those who have traveled in Haiti have often been struck by certain oddnesses of dress sometimes exhibited by the peasant women, dresses sewn over with crazy-quilt patterns, not beautiful, but most bizarre. Such patchwork is worn as penance, sometimes, sewn to a corset of irritative substance, as by example, the fiber of certain species of gourds. When so worn it is at once an evidence of penance and purification, like the hair-shirts of certain monastic orders in mediæval times. Now, undoubtlessly, for some reason old Toinette ordered Mademoiselle Adelaide to wear that damnable garment of voodoo penance last night. Remember, the old nurse never for an instant lost her dominance over the poor child. No. The constant irritation of the sharp-pronged corset against her tender skin induced a fainting fit. I, who have traveled much and observed much, at once recognized the thing for what it was, and bade her tell us how it came that she wore it. She refused, but one who watched her through the window feared she was

about to speak, and stopped her mouth with blood."

"Well," I cut in, "if this is so, why not go round to this old woman's house and arrest her? She can be made to talk, I suppose."

"Ah bah," he returned. "Do you think I have not considered that? You do me small courtesy, my friend. To the old one's house I went post-haste, only to find that she and her son—a hulking brute with arms as long as those of any ape—had decamped sometime during the night, and none knows where they went."

He paused a moment, drawing at his cigar with short, quick puffs; then: "How high would you say the lowest limb of the tree which grows beside Madame Sherbourne's house is from the ground—the tree from which an evilly disposed one might easily have hurled a dagger and slain Mademoiselle Adelaide?"

"H'm," I made a hasty mental calculation. "All of fifteen feet, I'd say. It's absurd to think anyone climbed it, de Grandin; he couldn't have reached the lowest limb without a ladder, for the trunk was literally glazed with ice, and no one could have swarmed up it. Nothing but an ape could have climbed that tree, thrown a knife and scuttled down again before the police came, at least not without leaving some trace, and——"

"Precisely, exactly, entirely so," he agreed, nodding vigorously. "*Tu parles, mon vieux*—you have said it. No one but an ape—or an ape-man. Did you examine the bloody footprint at the laundry where the ill-fated Lucas met his death?"

"Why, no; but——"

"Of course not; but I did. It might almost have been made by a gorilla, so great and long-toed was it. Only one accustomed to going barefoot, and much accustomed to using his toes in climbing, could have made that track. It took but a single glance to tell me that the maker of that footprint has arms of most extraordinary length. Such an one could have leaped the distance from the earth to catch that tree-limb, and climbed the icy trunk without great trouble. Such an one it was, undoubtlessly, who watched outside to see that Mademoiselle Adelaide made no betrayal, and who did the needful when he feared she was about to break beneath my questioning. Yes. Certainly."

"But see here," I expostulated. "Aren't you going pretty far in your assumptions? Because a man has an abnormally long foot is no sign he has unusually long arms like this hypothetical ape-man of yours."

"Do you say so?" he demanded sarcastically. "The great Alphonse Bertillon says otherwise. It was he who fathered the science of anthropometry—the science of measuring man—and it is one of his cardinal rules that the length of a man's foot from calyx to great toe-tip is the exact distance between the inner bend of his elbow and his radius. Here, let us test it!"

Reaching suddenly he snatched off one of my house-slippers, and grasping my ankle bent my right foot upward to the inner side of my left arm. Dubiously I fitted the heel against the inner bend of my elbow, then stared in incredulous amazement. It was as he said. No ruler could have measured my arm from wrist to elbow more accurately than my own foot!

"You see?" he asked with one of his quick smiles. "The *Sûreté Général* long since adopted the Bertillon system, and the *Sûreté Général* makes no mistakes.

"Very well; to proceed with my day's discoveries: Having unearthed the poor *mademoiselle's* unhappy history, I turned my attention to the unfortunate Monsieur Lucas. Here, again, the trail of Africa's stepdaughters lay across my path. In his younger days Lucas had been an American soldier, and served with distinction against the Spaniards in '98.

Remaining in Cuba after peace was declared, he married a native woman and moved inland. There he became involved in certain of the less savory native mysteries, and served a term in prison. He moved to Haiti without the formality of divorcing his Cuban wife and found another companion for his joys and sorrows. *Tiens,* I greatly fear the latter far outweighed the former. His wife, an unlettered peasant woman, was but a step removed from savagery. She initiated him into the voodoo religion, and once more he worshiped in the *Houmfort,* or voodoo mystery-house.

"Anon he tired of life in Haiti and came to this country. *But so did others.* My friend, in this very city of Harrisonville, New Jersey, there is a well-organized chapter of votaries of the Snake-Goddess. What they purpose doing I do not know for sure; that it portends no good I am most abominably certain. Lucas, homesick for the days in the Caribbean, perhaps, perhaps for some other reason, sought out these voodooists, and was recognized by some of them. He attended one or more of their meetings, and was there either branded as a traitor, or refused to countenance such inimical schemes as they broached. In any event, he was considered more valuable dead than alive, nor were they slow to carry out his death sentence. Everything points that way—the multiple wounds, the torture before the *coup-de-grâce,* most of all the two crossed matches which we found. They are a sign well recognized wherever voodoo is dominant. On one occasion, as I well know, the sight of such a silly, inconsequential object in the Palace at Port-au-Prince so frightened the president of Haiti that he remained indoors for two whole days! It was a bit of bravado, leaving those matches beside the body of their victim; but then they could not know that anyone here would recognize them; they could not know that Jules de Grandin would enter the case. No.

"Undoubtlessly the murder of the poor young clergyman was another link in this sinister chain. He labored lovingly among his dusky flock; they loved him. More, they trusted him. Beyond question some of them had heard of the voodoo hell-broth brewing in their midst and had consulted him. He knew too much. He is dead. *"Alors——"*

The sharp, cachinnating chatter of the telephone bell cut through his low, earnest words. *"Allo?"* he called irritably, snatching up the instrument. "Ah, Sergeant, yes. What? Do you say it? But certainly; right away; immediately; at once.

"Friend Trowbridge," he turned to me, his eyes flashing with anticipation, "it has come. That was the good Costello. He asks that we go to him at once."

"What did he say?" I asked.

" 'Dr. de Grandin, sor,' " the little Frenchman's imitation of the big Irishman's excited brogue was a masterpiece of mimicry, " 'hell's broke loose over in Paradise Street. Th' nagers are shootin' th' night full o' holes an' two o' me men is hit hard, a'ready. We're nadin' a couple o' good doctors in a hurry, an' we 'specially nade a felly as can be handy wid th' guns. Come a-runnin', sor, if ye plaze.' "

4

GREATLY to my relief, there was no longer need of "a felly who could be handy wid th' guns" when we arrived at that dingy thoroughfare ironically labeled Paradise Street by the city fathers. Reserves from half a dozen precincts and police headquarters, armed with riot paraphernalia, had drawn a cordon round the affected area, and riot guns, tear-gas bombs and automatic rifles had cowed the recalcitrant blacks by the time I drew up at the outer line of policemen

and made our errand known. De Grandin was furious as a hen under a hydrant when he saw the last patrol wagon of arrested rioters drive off. With a pair of heavy French army revolvers holstered to the cartridge belts which crossed his womanishly narrow waist, he marched and countermarched along the sidewalk, glaring into the darkness as though challenging some disturber of the peace to try conclusions with him.

"Dam' funny thing, this," Costello remarked as he joined us. "I know these here black boys, an', speakin' generally, they're an orderly enough lot o' fellies. 'Course, they shoot craps now an' agin, an' git filled up wid gin an' go on a rampage, 'specially of a Saturday night; but they ain't never give us no serious trouble before.

"Tonight, though, they just broke out like a rash. Kelley, from Number Four, wuz poundin' his beat down th' lower part o' th' street, when he noticed a strange smoke sort o' scuttlin' down th' walk, an' not likin' th' felly's looks, started after 'im. Ye know how it is, Dr. de Grandin, sor, ye've mingled wid th' Paris police yerself. It's just natural for boys, dogs an' policemen to chase annything that runs from 'em, so when this here dinge started to run, so did Kelley.

"'Th' felly slips into a doorway, wid Kelley right behind him, when *zingo!* there comes a charge o' buckshot an' Kelley goes down wid enough lead in 'im to sink a ship.

"He sounds his whistle before he goes out, though, an' a couple o' th' boys come a-runnin', an' I'm damned if th' whole street ain't full o' bullets in less time than ye can rightly say 'Jack Robinson,' sor. Th' riot call goes out, an' we round 'em up in pretty good shape, but three o' th' boys is hit bad, Kelley especially. He'll not pound a beat for many a long day, I'm thinkin'."

"H'm," de Grandin took his narrow chin between his thumb and forefinger and gazed thoughtfully at the snow-covered pavement, "did Monsieur Kelley, by any happy chance, describe the man he pursued before he was so villainously assaulted?"

"Only partly, sor. 'Twas a shortish sort o' felly, wid extra-ordinary long arms, accordin' to Kelley, an'——"

"A thousand maledictions! I did know it!" de Grandin shouted. "It is the ape-man, Friend Trowbridge; the one who slew Mademoiselle Adelaide, and poor Lucas, the watchman; undoubtlessly the one who killed the clergyman, as well. *Nom d'un chameau,* we must find him! He and his twenty-times accursed dam are the keys of this whole so odious business, or Jules de Grandin is a perjured liar!"

"Would ye be after givin' me an' a couple o' th' boys a lift, Dr. Trowbridge, sor?" Costello asked as de Grandin and I prepared to depart. "Th' doin's here is about over, an' I'd like to git back an' report before I hit th' hay."

With Costello behind me, and two uniformed men standing on the running board, I set out for police headquarters, choosing the wide, unfrequented roadway of Tuscarora Avenue in preference to the busier thoroughfares. Although it was not late the darkened avenue had a curiously deserted aspect as I drove slowly beneath the bare-limbed trees, and the sudden appearance of a hatless man, waving his arms excitedly, stung my startled nerves almost like the detonation of a shot in the quiet night.

"Police!" the stranger cried. "Is that a police car?"

"Well, sor, it is an' it ain't," Costello responded. "There's a load o' bulls ridin' in it; but ye couldn't rightly call it a departmental vehicle. What's on yer mind? I see yer hat ain't."

"My daughter," the other answered, almost sobbing. "My daughter Marrien—she's disappeared!"

"Ouch, has she now?" the detective soothed. "Sure, that's too bad. How long's she been gone—a week, maybe?"

"No—*no;* now, just a few minutes ago!"

"Arrah, sor, how d'ye know she ain't gone to th' movies, or visitin' a friend, or sumpin'? Don't ye go gittin'——"

"Be quiet!" the distraught man cut in. "I'm Josephus Thorndyke; I think you know me; by name, at least."

We did. Everybody knew the president of the First National Bank of Harrisonville and director of half the city's financial enterprises. Costello's bantering manner dropped from him like a cloak as he jumped from the car. "Tell us about it, sor," he urged deferentially.

"She was complaining of a headache," Thorndyke replied, "and went to her room half an hour or so ago. I went up to ask if I could do anything, and found her door locked. She never did that—never. I knocked and got no answer. I went away, but came back in ten minutes and found her door still locked, though the light was burning. I had a pass key, and when I couldn't get an answer I let myself in. Before I could unlock the door, I had to push the key out; her door was locked on the inside—get that."

"I'm listenin'," Costello assured him. "Go on, sor."

"Her room was empty. She'd undressed, but hadn't changed her clothes—the window was open, and her room was empty. I ran down the back stairs and asked the cook, who'd been in the kitchen all the time, if Miss Marrien had gone through. She hadn't. Then I ran outside and looked on the ground, fearing she might have been seized with faintness and fallen from the window. It's a thirty-foot drop to the ground, and if she'd fallen she'd have been killed or so badly injured that she couldn't have moved, but there was no sign of her outside. I know she didn't come down the front stairs, for I was reading in the hall, and I've searched the house from top to bottom; but she's not there. There's not a piece of her clothing missing; but she's gone—vanished!"

"U'm, an' did ye call th' precinct, sor?"

"Yes, yes; they told me all the men were out on riot duty, and they'd send someone over in the morning. In the morning! Good God! Do you realize my child's gone—faded into the night, apparently? And they talk of sending someone round tomorrow!"

"Sure, it's lucky ye saw us when ye did," Costello muttered. Then: "This is right in your line, Dr. de Grandin; will ye be after goin' in wid me an' takin' a look around?"

"Assuredly, by all means, yes," the Frenchman agreed. "Lead on, my old one; I follow close behind."

THE tall, hatchet-faced man with the mane of iron-gray hair who had accosted us seemed to take a fresh grip on his self-control as he led the way toward the house. "It may seem queer that I should be so positive about my daughter's not having changed her clothes," he suggested as we filed up the path toward the oblong of orange light which marked the mansion's open door, "but the fact is Marrien and I are nearer to each other than the average father and daughter. Her mother died when she was a wee baby—only three years old—and I've tried to be both father and mother to her since. There isn't a dress or hat, hardly a pair of gloves or hose, in her whole wardrobe that I don't know by sight, for she consulted me before buying anything. I've studied women's magazines and fashion books and even trailed round to dressmaker's salons with her in order to keep posted on such things and be able to discuss clothes in-

telligently with her. She's the speaking image of her sainted mother when I married her thirty years ago, and—she's all I've got to love in the world; all I have to think of or live for!

"Now you understand," he added simply, as he led us to the white-enameled door of a spacious bedroom on the second floor and stood courteously aside to let us enter.

We glanced quickly about the apartment. The scent of gardenias lay heavy in the air; a crimson Spanish shawl, embroidered in brilliant silk, which trailed across the back of a carved Italian chair, was redolent with the perfume. A cheval-glass in a gilded frame reflected the ivory walls and the ormolu dressing-table set with ivory and gold toilet articles. Above the ivory-tiled fireplace where piled beech logs snapped and crackled cheerfully on polished brass firedogs, there hung a magnificent life-sized copy of Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*, the closed eyes and parted, yearning lips of the figure suggesting, somehow, the motherless girl's vague, half-understood longings. On the bed's white counterpane lay a long-skirted evening gown of rose tulle and satin; a pair of tiny silver-kid sandals lay beneath an ivory slipper chair, one standing on its sole, the other lying on its side, as though discarded in extremest haste. A pair of moonlight-gray gossamer silk stockings lay crumpled wrong side out beside the shoes. It was a lovely, girl-woman's room, as expressive of its owner as a Sargent portrait; but empty now, and desolate as a body from which the soul has fled.

Unconsciously, instinctively, de Grandin bowed quickly from the hips in his quaint foreign manner as he entered this atmosphere supercharged with femininity; then, with Gallic practicality, he began a swift appraisal of the place.

The window was open a few inches from the bottom—a cat would have had difficulty in creeping through the opening—and, as Thorndyke had told us, there was no other exit from the room, save the door by which we entered, for the adjoining bath was without window, light and air coming from a skylight with adjustable side-slats that pierced the ceiling. "U'm; you are positive the door was locked on the inside when you made entrance, *Monsieur?*" de Grandin asked, turning to the distrait father.

"Of course I am. I had to push the key——"

"Be gob, there's a drain-pipe runnin' down th' house widin three feet o' th' windy," Costello interrupted, drawing back from his inspection of the outside walls, "but it's crusted wid ice a quarter-inch thick. 'Twould take a sailor to slip down it an' a gorilla or sumpin' to climb it, I'm thinkin'."

"Ha?" de Grandin paused in his stride across the room and joined the detective at the window. "Let me see—quickly. Yes, you have right, my friend; the most athletic of young women could not have negotiated that descent. Yet——" He paused in silent thought a moment, then shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Let us proceed," he ordered.

We searched the house from cellar to ridgepole, questioned the servants, confirmed Thorndyke's assertion that the back stairs could not be descended without the user being seen from the kitchen. At length, with such lame assurances as we could give the prostrated father, we prepared to leave.

"You have, perhaps, a picture of Mademoiselle Marrien for the *sûreté's* information?" de Grandin asked as we paused by the drawing-room door.

"Yes; here's one," Thorndyke replied, taking a silver-framed portrait from a console table and extending it to the Frenchman. "Be careful of it; it's the only——"

"*A-a-ah?*" the sharp, rising note of de Grandin's exclamation cut short the caution.

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated.

"Mother o' Moses; would ye look a' that?" Costello added.

As mirrored likeness counterfeits the beholder, or twin resembles twin, the photograph of Marrien Thorndyke simulated the fine-cup, delicate features of Adelaide Truman, whose tragic death we had witnessed not twenty-four hours earlier.

Moving nearer the light to examine the picture, de Grandin paused in midstride, his sensitive nostrils contracting as he glanced sharply at a corsage bouquet of pale-lavender orchids occupying a silver vase on a side table. Cautiously, as though approaching some living thing of uncertain temper, he lowered his nose toward the fragile, fluted-edged blossoms, then drew back abruptly. "These flowers, *Monsieur;* they came from where, and when, if you please?" he demanded, regarding Thorndyke with one of his fixed, unwinking stares.

Our host smiled sadly. "We don't know," he returned. "Some unknown admirer sent them to Marrien this evening; they came just before dinner. Queer thing; there was no card or message with them, and nobody saw the messenger who delivered them. The bell rang, and when Parnell answered it, there was an unmarked flower-box waiting in the vestibule, but no sign of any messenger. That struck me as especially odd; those chaps usually hang around in hope of a tip."

The little Frenchman's shrewd eyes had lost their direct, challenging look. He was staring abstractedly toward the drawing-room wall with the expression of one attempting to recall a forgotten bar of music or a half-remembered line of verse. "It is," he muttered to himself, "it is—*parbleu,* but certainly!" Of Thorndyke he demanded:

"You say *Mademoiselle* your daughter went to her chamber complaining of *mal de tête* shortly after dinner?"

"Yes; as a matter of fact we hadn't quite finished when she excused herself. It struck me as strange at the time, too, for she hardly ever suffers with headache. I think——"

"*Précisément, Monsieur;* so do I. I think this whole business has the odor of deceased fish on it. Sergeant"—he turned to Costello—"your suggestion concerning the difficulty of ascending that drain-pipe was well made."

"How's that, sor? D'ye mean——"

"I mean the yokel finding a rib buried here, a vertebra interred there, and a clavicle hidden elsewhere in the earth would say, 'Behold, I have found some bones,' while the skilled anatomist finding the same things would declare, 'Here we have various parts of a skeleton.' My friends"—he swept us with a quick, challenging stare—"we are come to the door of a most exceedingly dark closet in which there rattles a monstrous skeleton. No matter, Jules de Grandin is here; he will turn the light upon it; he will expose the loathsome thing. *Parbleu,* he will drag it forth and dismember it piece by piece, or may the devil serve him as mincemeat pie at next Thanksgiving dinner!

"*Bon soir, Monsieur,*" he bowed to Thorndyke, "I know not the location of your vanished daughter; but I can damnation guess the sort of place where she lies hidden.

"Come, my friends," he motioned Costello and me before him, "there are thoughts to think, plans to make, and afterward, deeds to do. Let us be about them."

ONCE more in my study, he fell to pacing the floor with long, silent strides, soft-footed and impatient as a prisoned panther. "*Cordieu,*" he murmured; and, "*Morbleu,* they were clever, those ones. They used the shrewd psychology in baiting their trap. Yes."

"What the dickens are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Of Mademoiselle Marrien and her orchids," he replied, pausing in his

restless walk. "Consider, my friend: When Monsieur Thorndyke gave us his daughter's picture and I moved to examine it beneath the light, my nose was assailed by a so faint, but reminiscent, odor. I looked about for its source. Such a smell I have found upon the lips of those drugged that their houses might be robbed—once, even, I discerned it on certain fowls which had been stolen without making outcry. This was in Guiana. I recognized that smell, but at first I could not call it by name. Then I perceived the orchids, and bent to smell them. It was there. I am 'warm,' as the children say when they play their hide-away game. I ask to know concerning the bouquet. What do I learn? That they have come all mysteriously for Mademoiselle Marrien, none knows whence, or by whom brought. Thereupon I see everything, all quickly, like a flash in the dark. Being a woman, Mademoiselle Marrien can not help but thrust her nose into those flowers, even though she knows that orchids possess no perfume. It is a woman's instinctive act. Very good. The ones who sent those orchids traded on this certainty, and dusted the petals of those flowers with a powder made from the seeds of the *datura stramonium.* These seeds are rich in atropin and scopolamin. Taken internally, in sufficient quantity, they cause headache, giddiness, nausea, unconsciousness, finally death. Inhaled in the form of powder, they adhere to the mucous membrane of the nose and throat, and within a short time cause violent headache, even unconsciousness, perhaps. That is sufficient for the miscreants' purposes. They would not slay Mademoiselle Marrien—yet. No, beside the roadway she must tread, the path into the grave would be a thoroughfare of joy."

"You're raving!" I assured him. "Granting your fantastic theory, how did Marrien Thorndyke manage to evaporate from her room and leave the door locked on the inside?"

For a long moment he stared at me; then: "How does the fledgling, which can not fly, manage to leave its nest when the serpent goes ravening among the tree-tops?" he returned as he pivoted on his heel and departed for bed.

5

IT WAS something after five o'clock next evening when my office telephone rang. "Trowbridge, *mon vieux,* come at once, immediately, this instant!" de Grandin's excited voice commanded. "She is found, I have located her!"

"She? Who?"

"Who but Mademoiselle Marrien, *par l'amour d'un bouc?*" he returned. "Come, I await you at police headquarters."

Quickly as possible I made my way to City Hall, wondering, meanwhile, what lay behind the little Frenchman's excited announcement. All day he had been off on some mysterious business of his own, a note beside my plate informing me he could not wait for breakfast, and would not return "until I do arrive."

In the guardroom at headquarters I found him, smoking furiously, talking excitedly, gesturing strenuously; obviously in his element. Beside him were Sergeant Costello, four plain-clothes men and a dozen uniformed patrolmen, armed with an imposing assortment of gas-bombs, riot guns and automatic rifles.

"*Bienvenu, mon brave!*" he greeted. "But now I was telling the good Costello of my cleverness. Wait, you too shall hear: All day I have haunted the neighborhood of Paradise Street, searching, looking, seeking a sign. But an hour since I chanced to spy a conjun store, and——"

"A *what?*" I asked.

"A conjun shop—a place where charms are sold. By example, they had there powdered bones of black cats; they are esteemed most excel-

lent for neutralizing an enemy's curse. They had also preserved bat wings, love potions, medicines warranted to make an uncongenial wife or husband betake himself elsewhere with greatest celerity—all manner of such things they had.

"I engaged the proprietor in talk. I talked of many things, and all the while I looked about me. The street was well paved and cleanly swept before the shop, there was no patch of muddy earth about the neighborhood, yet the fellow's boots and trouser-knees, even his hands, were stained with new, fresh clay. '*Parbleu,*' I say to me, 'this will bear investigating!'

"Forth from that shop I went, and walked quickly up the alley which runs behind it. The rear of the yard was fenced, but, *grâce a Dieu,* the fence contained a knothole, and to it I did glue my eye. Nor was my patience unrewarded. No. Anon I saw the dusky dispenser of charms come from his back door and scuttle across his *paved* back yard, entering a tiny shed of rough boards which stood near the rear of his lot. There was no chance for his feet to become muddied that way, my friend.

"I wait for him to emerge. My watch counts fifteen minutes, but still he does not come. 'Has he died in there?' I ask me. At last it is no longer to be endured. All silently I leap the fence and cross the yard, then peer into the little house. *Pardieu,* what do I see? A hole, my friend; a great, gaping hole, like the open top of a newly digged well, and leading into it there is a ladder. Nothing less.

"Into that hole I lower myself, and when I reach the bottom I find the end is not yet. No; by no means. From the hole there runs a tunnel through the earth, and Monsieur the Black Man, whom I have followed, is nowhere to be seen. 'Very well,' I tell me, 'where he has gone, I, too, may go.' And so I do.

"That tunnel, my friend, it leads me across the street to the cellar of an old, long-disused house, a house whose doors have been boarded up and which has apparently been so long unused that even the newest of the many 'For Sale' signs which decorate its façade is quite illegible.

"*Tiens,* I look into that cellar, but I do not long remain to see what is there, for to be surprized in that place is to bid a swift adieu to life, and I have no desire to die. But in the little while I squat there like a toad-frog I hear and see so much that I can guess much more.

"I do not wait, not I; instead I come here with all speed and gather reinforcements. *Voilà.*

"Sergeant, the sun has set, already there is that beginning to commence which needs our early intervention. Friend Trowbridge and I will go first—it is a matter for no gossip where doctors go—do you and several of your men come shortly afterward, and guard the exits to the old, dark house. Anon, let the machine-gunners come, and take position all round the premises. When I whistle, or you hear a shot, come, and come quickly, for there will be great need of you.

"WE ARE arrived, my friend," he whispered as he led the way up a particularly malodorous alley and paused before a rickety board fence. "Come, let us mount."

We scaled the creaking barrier and dropped as quietly as possible to a brick-paved yard scarcely larger than an areaway. Guided entirely by memory, for we dared not show a light, de Grandin led the way to a wooden outhouse, paused a moment, then began to descend a flimsy ladder reaching down a ten-foot hole in the earth.

For some distance we crept along a narrow, clay-floored tunnel, and finally came to a halt as the faint, reflected glow of a wavering light reached us. And with the light came the unmistakable acrid odor of crowded, sweating humanity, raw, pungent gin and

another faint, indefinable stench, foul, nauseating, somehow menacing, as though, itself unrecognized, it knocked upon the long-forgotten door of a dim ancestral memory—and fear.

Inch by cautious inch we crept forward until at last we looked through a jagged opening into a low-ceiled, brick-walled cellar, illuminated by the smoke-dimmed rays of a single swinging oil lantern.

About the room in crescent-formation were ranged, four or five deep, eighty or more negroes, men and women. They differed from each other in both kind and degree, heavy-featured, black-skinned full-bloods crouching cheek by jowl with mulattoes, coarsely clothed laborers huddled beside dandified, oily-haired "sheiks," working-women herded in with modishly dressed she-fops of the dance halls and restaurants. Only in the singleness of purpose, the fixed intentness of their concentrated stares, did they seem held together by any sort of bond.

At the far side of the cellar was erected a grotesque parody of an altar. On it were saucers containing meal, salt and whole grains of corn, a bottle of square-face gin, a roughly carved simulacrum of a half-coiled snake, several tin cups, a machete honed to a razor edge and, turned upside down, a heavy, beaten brass crucifix. With a start I recalled Costello's story of the ravished church and the cross which had so strangely disappeared.

But I had no time for reflection, for my attention was quickly drawn to the group before the altar; two men and a woman squatting cross-legged before wide-topped kettle-drums, an aged and unbelievably wrinkled negress arrayed in gaudy, tarnished finery resembling the make-up of a gipsy fortune-teller, and a young white woman, nude save for the short kilt of scarlet cloth belted about her waist, the turban of bandanna tied round her head and the inane, frivolous bands of crimson ribbon which circled her wrists and ankles.

She was squatted tailor-fashion facing the drums, and swayed slightly from the hips as the musicians kept up a constant thrumming rumble—a sort of sustained, endlessly long-drawn note—by beating lightly and with incredible quickness on the parchment drumheads with the padded drumsticks. There was something curiously unlifelike in the way her hands were folded in her scarlet lap, a sort of tired listlessness wholly out of keeping with the strained, taut look on her face.

The aged negress was whispering to her with cracked, toothless sibilance, and, though I could not catch the words, I knew she urged some act which the girl stubbornly refused, for time and again the old hag wheedled, argued, cajoled, and as often the girl shook her head slightly but doggedly, as though her nerves and body were almost worn to the point of yielding, but her spirit struggled doggedly on.

But each time the crone repeated her request the drummers increased the volume of their racket ever so little, and, it seemed to me, the very persistence of sustained vibration was wearing the girl's resistance down. Certainly she was already in a state bordering on hypnosis, or else bound fast in the thrall of some potent drug; every line of her flaccid, unresisting body, the droop of her bare white shoulders, the very passivity with which she crouched upon the chill, bare earth proclaimed it.

At length the tempo of the drums increased and the volume of the rumble rose till it shook back low yet deafening echoes from the walls. The girl gave one final stubborn headshake, then nodded slowly, indifferently, as though too tired to hold her chin up for another instant. Her head sank forward, as though she napped, and her sloping shoulders drooped

still further. The concentrated thought of the circling audience, the ceaselessly repeated importunities of the hag and the never-ending rumble of the drums had worn down her resistance; her psychic strength was broken, and she was but a mute and helpless tool, a helpless, mindless instrument without conscience or volition.

A quick, sharp order from the aged hag, who now assumed the rôle of priestess or mistress of ceremonies, and the girl rose slowly to her feet, put forth her hand and lifted the hinged top of a small square box reposing underneath the altar. As she turned her profile toward us I felt my heart stand still, for she was the counterpart of Adelaide Truman, the girl from Martinique. More, she was the original of the picture Thorndyke showed us, the missing Marrien!

A frightened squawk sounded as her groping hands explored the opened box. Next instant she straightened to her fullest height, two game cocks, one black, the other red, held firmly by the feet in her outstretched hands. For a moment she swayed, like a reed shaken in the wind, then, with a sinuous, side-stepping, sliding motion, described a narrow circle before the altar.

From its place before the reversed cross the ancient negress snatched the machete, the blade flashed once, twice, in the lantern light, and the fowls beat the air tumultuously with their wings as their heads fell to the earthen floor.

And now the girl whirled and pirouetted frenziedly, the flapping roosters in her hands showering her with blood from their severed necks, so that her white shoulders and breast, even her cheeks and lips, were red as the flaunting cloth of her scanty costume.

The old high priestess snatched the dying cockerels from her hierophant's hands and held their spurting necks above a tin cup, pressing on their breasts and sides to force the flow of blood as one might press a leather water-bottle. When the last drop of blood was emptied in the cup, the gin bottle was uncorked and its fiery contents mingled with the chickens' gore.

Then followed a sort of impious travesty of communion. From hand to hand the reeking cup was passed, men and women sucking at it eagerly, slopping its ruddy contents on their clothes, smearing their faces with the sanguine mixture.

The drink drove them to frenzy. White eyes rolled madly in black faces, jaws dropped, lips slavered, as they swayed drunkenly from side to side. "*Coq blanc, le coq blanc*—the white cock!" they screamed. A young girl half rose from her seat on the floor, clutched her dress with both hands and ripped the garment down the front, exposing her bronze bosom, then fell to the floor again, rolling over and over, gibbering inarticulately, foaming at the mouth like a rabid she-dog. The drums roared and thundered, men howled and shouted hoarsely, women screamed or groaned in a perfect ecstasy of neuro-religious fervor—the bestial, unreasoning hysteria which sent the Sudanese fanatics fearlessly into Kitchener's shrapnel barrages at Khartoum. "*Coq blanc—coq blanc,*" the cry rose insistently.

The blood-spattered girl ceased her rhythmic whirling a moment and reached once more into the covered box. Again she straightened before the lines of frantic blacks, and in her upstretched hands she held displayed for all to see a trembling white rooster —the *coq blanc* for which they clamored.

Once more the machete flashed in the lantern light, and the poor bird struggled convulsively in its death spasm between her upraised hands, its blood douching her hair, brow and cheeks as she turned her face up to bathe it in the gory cataract.

A pause fell on the crowd as she flung the cockerel's corpse contemptu-

ously behind her and wheeled about until her outstretched finger tips all but touched the altar's edge. So still it was that the labored nasal breathing of the audience rasped gratingly as we lay in our covert, wondering what new obscenity was next.

THE drums halted their sullen muttering and the withered hag began a high-pitched, singsong chant of invocation.

From a door at the farther side of the cellar shambled the vilest thing I had ever seen in human form. Short, hardly more than five feet tall, he was, but with a depth of chest and breadth of shoulder like those of a gorilla. Like a giant ape's, too, were his abnormally long-toed feet and his monstrous arms, which hung so far below his knees that it seemed he might have touched his knuckles to the earth; yet he scarcely stooped an inch to do so. Slope-headed, great-mouthed, half beast, half human he seemed as he advanced with a rolling gait and paused before the altar, then, bending quickly, dragged forth a heavy wooden chest bound round with iron reinforcement. I did not need de Grandin's nudge to call attention to the dozen or more augur-holes piercing the top and ends of the box; I saw them at first glance, and in the same moment my nostrils caught the strengthened odor of that stench which had first appalled me as we crept along the tunnel.

The drums began again, and with their rhythmic mutter came the muted moaning of the audience, a sound half fearful, half eloquent of adoration, but wholly terrifying.

The girl before the altar crouched and genuflected, her head bowed low, her arms uplifted, as though she were a postulant bending to receive the veil which makes her sacrosanct from the world and undisseverable bride of the Church. And from the iron-bound chest the hideous ape-man dragged forth a squirming, white-bellied snake, a loathsome, five-inch-thick reptile with wicked, wedge-shaped head and villainous, unwinking eyes, *and laid it like a garland round the girl's uncovered shoulders!*

Sluggishly, as though but partially aroused from a torpor, the monstrous reptile coiled its length—it was all of fifteen feet—about the bare arms of its holder, slid its twining bulk about her breast and torso, its tail encircling her slender waist, its head protruding underneath her left arm and swinging pendulously from side to side as its evil, changeless eyes glared viciously in the lantern light and its forked, tea-colored tongue flickered lambently.

So heavy was the serpent's weight the girl was forced to plant her naked feet apart as she smoothed the dully gleaming scales with her taper finger tips and massaged the white-armored throat gently as slowly, slowly, she forced the horrid face upward, turned it toward her face and—my stomach retched at the sight—*kissed it on the mouth!*

The throng of worshipers went wild. Men and women clung together in strangling embraces and rolled and wallowed on the floor. Some rose erect and tossed their arms aloft, screaming peals of triumphant laughter or unmentionable obscenities. "She has kissed the Queen! She kisses the Queen! The prophecy is fulfilled!" I heard one votary shout, and, mingled with the drums' unceasing roar came cries of "*Ybo, lé, lé; Ybo, c'est l'heure de sang*——"

I almost screamed aloud as de Grandin's elbow struck me in the ribs. The ape-man had left the room, returning with a burlap sack flung across his shoulder, a sack in which something tiny moved and struggled and whimpered with the still, small voice of a little child in fear and pain. He tossed the sack upon the floor and, grinning horribly, turned toward the girl, handling the noisome

reptile with the skill of an adept as he uncoiled it from her white body and placed it, wound into a writhing knot, upon the altar by the desecrated cross.

Into the girl's hands he put the gleaming, razor-edged machete, then turned once more to the struggling, whimpering something in the sack.

"*Le bouc, le bouc sans cornes—le bouc blanc sans cornes*—the goat without horns—the white goat without horns!" howled the congregation frenziedly. "*Le b- c sans cornes——*"

"My friend," de Grandin whispered, "I damn think the time is come!"

A crashing double report shattered the atmosphere as his heavy army revolvers bellowed almost in unison. There was a scream from the region of the altar, a yell of apprehension from the congregation, and the sharp tinkle of broken glass as a bullet smashed the chimney of the lantern illuminating the place, plunging us into instant impenetrable darkness.

Sharp as acid, piercing as a knife-thrust, de Grandin's shrill whistle sounded through the dark, followed by the deafening roar of his pistols as he fired point-blank into the milling mass of humanity in the darkened cellar.

A crash like all the thunders of heaven let loose at once roared over us, followed by the tramping of heavy-soled boots on the empty floors of the old house, then the pounding of hurrying feet upon the cellar stairs. Costello, with unerring efficiency, had hurled two hand grenades at the outer door of the house, then charged through the opening thus created, taking no chances of delay while his men battered down the stout oak panels.

"Are ye there, Dr. de Grandin, sor?" he shouted as half a dozen powerful bull's-eye lanterns lighted the place. "Are ye all right, sor?"

A choking, rasping gurgle beside me answered. Turning sharply I saw the little Frenchman struggling frantically in the coils of the monster snake. With reptilian instinct the thing had crawled from the altar when darkness came, and made for the tunneled exit, encountering de Grandin in its course, and wrapping itself about him.

I snatched the machete from the altar and aimed a blow at the creature's head, but:

"The tail, Friend Trowbridge, strike off its tail!" he gasped.

The keen steel sheared through the reptile's tail, leaving eight inches of it wrapped about a ceiling beam, and with a writhing crash the great, gray-spotted tubular body unloosed its hold upon the Frenchman's trunk and slipped twisting to the earth like a monstrous spring released from its tension.

Half consciously, half instinctively, I realized the wisdom of de Grandin's advice. Had I lopped off the serpent's head, muscular contraction would have tightened its coils about him, and he would inevitably have been crushed to pulp. By striking off its tail I had deprived it of its grip on the ceiling beam, which it used as a fulcrum for its hold, and thereby rendered it impotent to tighten itself about his body.

The little Frenchman's execution had been terrible. Four of the snake-worshipers lay stark and dead upon the floor, four more were nursing dreadful wounds, the rest were huddled together in abject terror and made no resistance as Costello's men applied the handcuffs.

In a crumpled heap before the altar lay Marrien Thorndyke, her eyes fast closed, her respiration so light I had to listen a second time at her blood-smeared breast before I could detect the faintest murmur of her heart.

"An overcoat for her, Friend Costello, if you please, or she will surely take pneumonia," de Grandin ordered. "Wrap her warmly and bear her to the hospital. By damn, I

greatly fear her nerves have had a shock from which they will not soon recover, but she is in better case than if we had not arrived in time. At the worst she will recover from her illness and live; had we not found her, I greatly fear there would not have remained enough for *l'entrepreneur des pompes funèbres* to bury."

"The *entrepreneur des pompes funèbres*—the undertaker?" I demanded. "Do you mean *she* would have been killed?"

"No less," he returned shortly, then:

"*Holà*, my little cabbage, is it hide-and-go-seek you play in there?" he cried as from the rough sack he lifted a tiny morsel of pink, baby flesh and folded it against his bosom. "Ha, my little goatling," he chuckled, "it is better that I find you thus than that you serve as 'the goat without horns' for these abominations. Attend me, Sergeant. Wrap this one warmly and see that she is given milk to drink, then bid Monsieur and Madame Boswell come to police headquarters to see what they shall see. Name of a cannon, but I think the sight of this one will surely stop their eyes from weeping!

"Now"—he turned to survey the cellar with a fierce glance as he reached again for his heavy pistols—"where is that misbegotten *sacré bête*, that ape in half-human shape? Is it possible I missed him with my first shot."

It was not. Stretched on his back, his short, bandy legs and long, monkey-like arms twisted grotesquely, lay the ape-man, a gaping wound in his temple telling eloquently of the accuracy of de Grandin's marksmanship. The creature's shattered head was pillowed in the lap of the aged hag, who bent above him, dropping tears upon his ugly countenance and wailing, "*A-hé, a-hé, mon beau, mon beau brave fils; mort; mort; mort!*"

De Grandin looked uncertainly at the weeping crone a moment, then removed his hat. "Mourn for your Caliban, Sycorax," he bade, not ungently, and, turning to Costello:

"Leave her a little while with her dead before you make her arrested, my friend," he begged. "Ill-favored as an ape he was, and wicked as the foul fiend's own self, but he was her son, and to a mother every son is dear, and beautiful, though he be ugly as a pig and vicious as a scorpion."

Costello regarded him in open-eyed amazement. "Dr. de Grandin, sor," he announced at length, "you're sure one hell of a felly."

"*Précisément, exactement*, quite so," the Frenchman agreed with a serious nod of his head.

6

"NO, NO, my friend," Jules de Grandin shook his head in vigorous denial, "it was but the ability to recognize what I did behold which enabled me to lead us to the snake-worshipers' den. When Sergeant Costello mentioned the ravishing away of the blessed cross from the church was when I first began to suspect what now we know to be the facts. Consider, if you please——" he checked the items off upon his fingers:

"First comes the murder of the excellent young clergyman, a murder without motive, it appears, and most cruelly executed. That meant little; a madman might have done it.

"Then we have the stealing of little Baby Boswell; by itself that, too, meant little; again a maniac might be to blame.

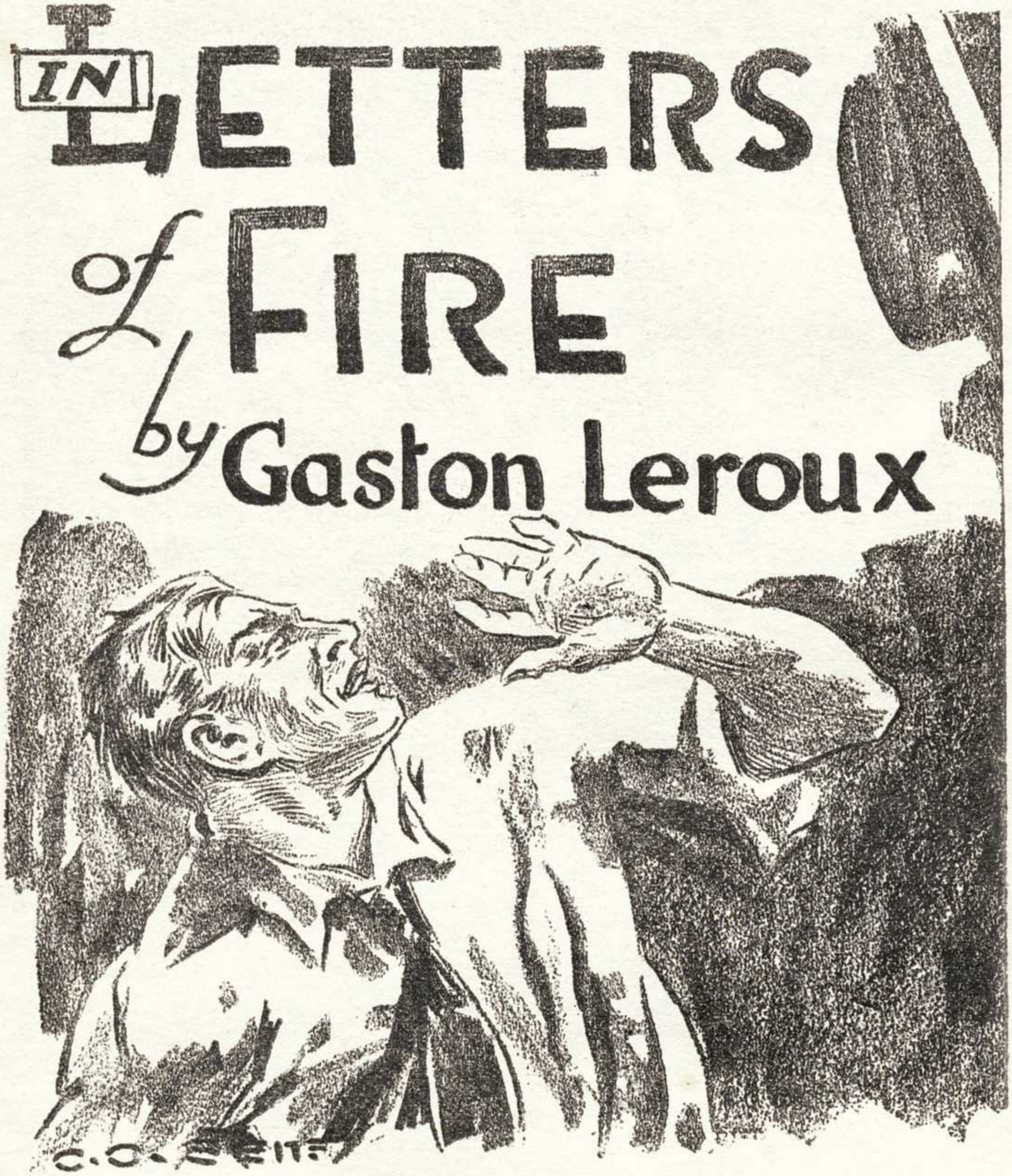
"Next comes the stealing of a part of the sanctified furniture from the altar. Once more our hypothetical crazy man may be responsible; but would the same lunatic commit all three crimes, or would three separate madmen decide to act so near together? Possibly, but not likely.

"Considered separately, these are

(Continued on page 426)

IN LETTERS of FIRE

by Gaston Leroux



WE HAD been out hunting wild boars all day, when we were overtaken by a violent storm, which compelled us to seek refuge in a deep cavern. It was Makoko, our guide, who took upon himself to give utterance to the thought which haunted the minds of the four of us who had sought safety from the fury of the tempest—Mathis, Allan, Makoko, and myself.

"If the gentleman who lives in yonder house, which is said to be haunted by the devil, does not grant us the shelter of his roof tonight, we shall be compelled to sleep here."

Hardly had he uttered the words when a strange figure appeared at the entrance of the cavern.

"It is *he!*" exclaimed Makoko, grasping my arm.

I stared at the stranger.

"In three words the devil had expressed in characters of fire the fate that awaited me."

He was tall, lanky, of bony frame, and melancholy aspect. Unconscious of our presence, he stood leaning on his fowling-piece at the entrance of the cavern, showing a strong aquiline nose, a thin mustache, a stern mouth, and lack-luster eyes. He was bareheaded; his hair was thin, while a few gray locks fell behind his ears. His age might have been anywhere between forty and sixty. He must have been strikingly handsome in the days when the light shone in those time-dimmed eyes and those bitter lips could still break into a smile —but handsome in a haughty and forbidding style. A kind of terrible energy still lurked beneath his features, spectral as those of an apparition.

By his side stood a hairless dog, low on its legs, which was evidently barking at us. Yet we could hear nothing! The dog, it was plain, was dumb, and *barked at us in silence!*

Suddenly the man turned toward us.

"Gentlemen," he said in a voice of the most exquisite politeness, "it is out of the question for you to re-

turn to La Chaux-de-Fonds tonight. Permit me to offer you my hospitality."

Then, bending over his dog, he said: "Stop barking, Mystère."

The dog closed his jaws at once.

Makoko emitted a grunt. During the five hours that we had been enjoying the hunt, Mathis and Makoko had told Allan and me, who were strangers to the district, some strange and startling stories about our host, whom they represented as having had, like Faust, dealings with the Evil Spirit.

It was not without some trepidation, therefore, that we all moved out of the cavern.

"Gentlemen," said the stranger, with a melancholy smile, "it is many a long year since my door was thrown open to visitors. I am not fond of society, but I must tell you that one night, six months ago, a youth who had lost his way came and knocked at that door and begged for shelter till the morning. I refused him his request. Next day a body was found at the bottom of the big marl-pit—a body partly devoured by wolves."

"Why, that must have been Petit-Leduc!" cried Makoko. "So you were heartless enough to turn the poor boy away, at night and in the midst of winter! You are his murderer!"

"Truly spoken," replied the man, simply. "It was I who killed him. And now you see, gentlemen, that the incident has rendered me hospitable."

"Would you tell us why you drove him from your door?" growled Makoko.

"Because," he replied, quietly, "my house brings misfortune."

"I would rather risk meeting the powers of darkness than catching a cold," I retorted, laughing, and without further parley we set off, and in a short while had reached the door of the ancient mansion, which stood among the most desolate surroundings, on a shelf of barren rock, swept by all the winds of heaven.

The huge door, antique, iron-barred, and studded with enormous nails, revolved slowly on its hinges, and opened noiselessly. A shrunken little old woman was there to welcome us.

From the threshold we could see a large, high room, somewhat similar to the room formerly styled the retainers' hall. It certainly constituted a part of what remained of the castle, on the ruins of which the mansion had been erected some centuries before. It was fully lighted by the fire on the enormous hearth, where a huge log was burning, and by two petrol lamps hanging by chains from the stone roof. There was no furniture except a heavy table of white wood, a large armchair upholstered in leather, a few stools, and a rude sideboard.

We walked the length of the room. The old woman opened a door. We found ourselves at the foot of a worm-eaten staircase with sunken steps. This staircase, a spiral one, led to the second story of the building, where the old woman showed us to our rooms.

TO THIS day I can recall our host—were I to live a hundred years I could not forget that figure such as it appeared to me, as if framed by the fireplace—when I went into the hall where Mother Appenzel had spread our supper.

He was standing in front of my friends, on the stone hearth of the enormous fireplace. He was in evening dress—but such evening dress! It was in the pink of fashion, but a fashion long since vanished. The high collar of the coat, the broad lapels, the velvet waistcoat, the silken knee-breeches and stockings, the cravat, all seemed to possess the elegance of days gone by.

By his side lay his dog Mystère,

his massive jaws parted in a yawn—yawning, just as he had barked, *in silence.*

"Has your dog been dumb for long?" I ventured to ask. "What strange accident has happened to him?"

"He has been dumb from his birth," replied my host, after a slight pause, as if this topic of conversation did not please him.

Still, I persisted in my questions.

"Was his father dumb?—or perhaps his mother?"

"His mother, and his mother's mother," he replied still coldly, "and *her* mother also."

"So you were the master of Mystère's great-grandmother?"

"I was, sir. She was indeed a faithful creature, and one who loved me well. A marvelous watch-dog," added my host, displaying sudden signs of emotion which surprized me.

"And she also was dumb from her birth?"

"No, sir. No, she was not born dumb—*but she became so one night when she had barked too much!*"

There was a world of meaning in the tone with which he spoke these words that at the moment I did not understand.

Supper was served. During the meal the conversation did not languish. Our host inquired whether we liked our rooms.

"I have a favor to beg of you," I ventured to say. "I should like to sleep in the haunted room!"

No sooner had I uttered the sentence than our host's pale face became still paler.

"Who has told you that there was a haunted room in this house?" he asked, striving with difficulty to restrain an evident irritation.

Mother Appenzel, who had just entered, trembled violently.

"It was you, Mother Appenzel?"

"Pray do not scold the good woman," I said; "my indiscreet behavior alone must bear the blame. I was attempting to enter a room the door of which was closed, when your servant forbade me to do so. 'Do not go into the haunted chamber,' she said."

"And you naturally did not do so?"

"Well, yes; I did go in."

"Heaven protect us!" wailed Mother Appenzel, letting fall a tumbler, which broke into pieces.

"Begone!" cried her master. Then, turning to us, he added, "You are indeed full of curriosity, gentlemen!"

"Please pardon us if we are so," I said. "Moreover, permit me to remind you that it was you yourself who alluded to the rumors current on the mountainside. Well, it would afford me much pleasure if your generous hospitality should be the occasion of dispersing them. When I have slept in the room which enjoys so evil a reputation, and have rested there peacefully, it will no longer be said that, to use your own expression, 'your house brings misfortune'."

Our host interrupted me: "You shall not sleep in that room; it is no longer used as a bedroom. No one has slept there for fifty years past."

"Who, then, was the last one to sleep in it?"

"I myself—and I should not advise anyone to sleep in it after me!"

"Fifty years ago, you say! You could only be a child at the time, at an age when one is still afraid at nights——"

"Fifty years ago I was twenty-eight!"

"Am I committing an indiscretion when asking you what happened to you in that room? I have just come from visiting it, and nothing whatever happened to me. The room seems to me the most natural of rooms. I even attempted to prop up a wardrobe which seemed as if it were about to fall."

"You laid hands on the ward-

robe!" cried the man, throwing down his table-napkin and coming toward me with the gleam of madness in his eyes. "You actually laid hands on the wardrobe?"

"Yes," was my quiet answer; "as I say, it seemed about to fall."

"But it can not fall! It will never fall! Never again will it stand upright! It is its nature to be in that position for all time to come, trembling with fear for all eternity!"

We had all risen. The man's voice was harsh as he spoke these most mysterious words. Heavy drops of perspiration trickled down his face. Those eyes of his, which we had thought dimmed forever, flashed with fury. He was indeed awful to look at. He grasped my wrist and wrung it with a strength of which I would have deemed him incapable.

"You did not open it?"

"No."

"Then you do not know what is in it? No? Well, all the better! By heaven, I tell you, sir, it is all the better for *you!*"

Turning toward his dog, he shouted: "To your kennel! When will you find your voice again, Mystère? Or are you going to die like the others—*in silence?*"

He had opened the door leading to a tower, and went out, driving the dog before him.

WE WERE deeply moved at this unexpected scene. The man had disappeared in the darkness of the tower, still pursuing his dog.

"What did I tell you?" remarked Makoko, in a scarcely audible tone. "You may all please yourselves, but, as for me, I do not intend to sleep here tonight. I shall sit up here in this hall until daybreak."

"And so shall I," added Mathis.

Makoko, bending over us, his eyes staring out of their sockets, continued: "Don't you see that he is crazy?"

"You two fellows with your death-mask faces," exclaimed Allan, "are not going to prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Supposing we start a game of écarté. We will ask our host to take a hand; it will divert his thoughts."

An extraordinary fellow was Allan. His fondness for card-playing amounted to a mania. He pulled out a pack of cards, and had hardly done so when our host re-entered the hall. He was now comparatively calm, but no sooner had he perceived the pack of cards on the table than his features became transformed and assumed such an expression of fear and fury that I myself was terrified.

"Cards!" he cried. "You have cards!"

Allan rose and said, pleasantly, "We have decided not to retire for the night. We are about to have a friendly little game of écarté. Do you know the game?"

Allan stopped. He also had been struck with the fearful expression on our host's face. His eyes were bloodshot, the sparse hairs of his mustache stood out bristling, his teeth gleamed, while his lips hissed out the words: "Cards! Cards!"

The words escaped with difficulty from his throat, as if some invisible hand were clutching it.

"Who sent you here with cards? What do you want with me? The cards must be burnt—they must be burnt!"

Of a sudden he grasped the pack and was about to cast it into the flames, but he stopped just on the point of doing so, his trembling fingers let drop the cards, and he sank into the armchair, exclaiming hoarsely: "I am suffocating; I am suffocating!"

We rushed to his help, but with a single effort of his bony fingers he had already torn off his collar and his tie; and now, motionless, holding his head erect, and settling down in the huge armchair, he burst into tears.

"You are good fellows," he said at last, in milder tones. "You shall know everything. You shall not leave this house in ignorance, taking me for a madman—for a poor, miserable, melancholy madman.

"Yes, indeed," he continued; "yes, you shall know everything. It may be of use to you."

He rose, paced up and down, then halted in front of us, staring at us with the dimmed look that had given way to the momentary flash.

"Sixty years ago I was entering upon my eighteenth year. With all the overweening presumption of youth, I was skeptical of everything. Nature had fashioned me strong and handsome. Fate had endowed me with enormous wealth. I became the most fashionable youth of my day. Paris, gentlemen, with all its pleasures, was for ten years at my feet. When I had reached the age of twenty-eight I was on the brink of ruin. There remained to me between two and three hundred thousand francs and this manor, with the land surrounding it.

"Just at that time, gentlemen, I fell madly in love with an angelic creature. I could never have dreamt of the existence of such beauty and purity. The girl whom I adored was ignorant of the passionate love which was consuming me, and she remained so. Her family was one of the wealthiest in all Europe. For nothing in this world would I have had her suspect that I aspired to the honor of her hand in order to replenish my empty coffers. So I went the way of the gambling dens, in the vain hope of recovering my vanished millions. I lost all, and one fine evening I left Paris to come and bury myself in this old mansion, my sole refuge.

"I found here an old man, Father Appenzel; his granddaughter, of whom later on I made a servant; and his grandson, a child of tender years, who grew up to manhood on the estate, and who is now my steward. I fell a prey, on the very evening of my arrival, to despair and ennui. The astounding events that followed took place that very evening.

"When I went up to my room—the room which one of you has asked to be allowed to occupy tonight—I had made up my mind to take my own life. A brace of pistols lay on the chest of drawers. Suddenly, as I was putting my hand on one of the pistols, my dog began to howl in the courtyard—to howl as I have never heard the wind howl, unless it be tonight.

" 'So,' thought I, 'here is Mystère raising a death-howl. She must know that I am going to kill myself tonight.'

"I toyed with the pistol, recalling of a sudden what my past life had been, and wondering for the first time what my death would be like. Suddenly my eye lighted on the titles of a few old books which stood on a shelf hanging above the chest of drawers. I was surprized to see that all of them dealt with sorcerers and matters appertaining to the powers of evil. I took up a book, *The Sorcerers of the Jura,* and, with the skeptical smile of the man who has defied fate, I opened it. The first two lines, printed in red, at once caught my eye:

" '*He who seriously wishes to see the devil has but to summon him with his whole heart, and he will come.*'

"Then followed the story of an individual who, like myself, a lover in despair—like myself, a ruined man—had in all sincerity summoned to his help the Prince of Darkness, and who had been assisted by him; for, a few months later, he had once more become incredibly rich and had married his beloved. I read the story to the end.

" 'Well, here was a lucky fellow!' I exclaimed, tossing the book on to the chest of drawers. Mystère was still howling in the grounds. I parted the window-curtains, and could not help shuddering when I saw the dog's

shadow dancing in the moonlight. It really seemed as if the slut was possessed of some evil spirit, for her movements were inexplicably eccentric. She seemed to be snapping at some invisible form!

"I tried to laugh over the matter, but the state of my mind, the story I had just read, the howling of the dog, her strange leaps, the sinister locality, the old room, the pistols which I myself had loaded, all had contributed to take a greater hold of my imagination than I dared confess.

"Leaving the window I strolled about the room for awhile. Of a sudden I saw myself in the mirror of the wardrobe. My pallor was such that I thought that I was dead. Alas, no! The man standing before the wardrobe was not dead. It was, on the contrary, a living man who, with all his heart, was summoning the King of Lost Souls.

"Yes, then, in the mirror, side by side with my form, something superhuman—a pale object—a mist, a terrible little cloud which was soon transformed into eyes—eyes of fearful loveliness. Another form was standing resplendent beside my haggard face; a mouth—a mouth which said to me, 'Open!' At this I recoiled. But the mouth was still saying to me, 'Open, open, if you dare!'

"Then something knocked three times upon the door inside the wardrobe—and the door flew open of its own accord!"

JUST at that instant the old man's narrative was interrupted by three knocks on the door, which suddenly opened, and a man entered.

"Was it you who knocked like that, Guillaume?" asked our host, striving in vain to regain his composure.

"Yes, master."

"I had given you up for tonight. You saw the notary?"

"Yes; and I did not care to keep so great a sum of money about my person."

We gathered that Guillaume was the gentleman's steward. He came to the table, took a little bag from the folds of his cloak, extracted some documents from it, and laid them on the table. Then he drew an envelope from his bag, emptied its contents on the table, and counted out twelve one-thousand-franc notes.

"There's the purchase-money for Misery Wood."

"Good, Guillaume," said our host, picking up the bank-notes and replacing them in the envelope. "You must be hungry. Are you going to sleep here tonight?"

"No; it is impossible. I have to call on the farmer. We have some business to transact together early in the morning. However, I do not mind having a bit of supper."

"Go to Mother Appenzel, my good fellow; she will take good care of you," adding, as the steward strode toward the kitchen, "Take away all those rubbishy papers."

The man picked up the documents, while the gentleman, taking a pocket-book out of his pocket, placed in it the envelope containing the twelve notes and returned the book to his pocket. Then, resuming his narrative, in reply to a request from Makoko, he continued:

"You wish to know what the wardrobe contained? Well, I am going to tell you. There was something which I saw—something which scorched my eyes. There shone within the recess of the wardrobe, written in letters of fire, three words:

"*'Thou Shalt Win!'*

"Yes," he continued, in a gloomy tone, "the devil had, in three words, expressed in characters of fire, in the depths of the wardrobe, the fate that awaited me. He had left behind him his sign-manual, the irrefutable proof of the hideous pact into which I had entered with him on that tragic night. 'Thou shalt win!' In three short words he granted me the world's wealth. 'Thou shalt win!'

"Next morning old Appenzel found me lying unconscious at the foot of the wardrobe. Alas! when I had recovered my senses I had forgotten nothing. I was fated never to forget what I had seen. Wherever I go, wherever I wend my steps, be it night, be it day, I read the fiery phrase, 'Thou shalt win!'—on the walls of darkness, on the resplendent orb of the sun, on the earth and in the skies, within myself when I close my eyes, on your faces when I look at you!"

The old man, exhausted, ceased speaking, and fell back, moaning, into the armchair.

"I must tell you," he resumed, after a few moments, "that my experience had had so terrifying an effect on me that I had been compelled to keep my bed, where Father Appenzel brought me a soothing potion of herbs. Addressing me, he said: 'Something incredible has happened, sir. Your dog has become dumb. *She barks in silence!*'

"'Oh, I know, I understand!' I exclaimed. 'She will not recover her voice until *he* shall have returned!'

"Father Appenzel looked at me in amazement and fright, for my hair was standing on end. In spite of myself, my gaze was straying toward the wardrobe. Father Appenzel, as alarmed and agitated as myself, went on to say:

"'When I found you, sir, on the floor this morning the wardrobe was inclined as it is now, while its door was open. I closed it, but I was unable to get it to stand upright. It seems always on the point of falling forward.'

"I begged old Appenzel to leave me to myself. I got out of bed, went to the wardrobe, and opened its door. Conceive, I pray you, my feelings when I had done so. The sentence, that sentence written in characters of fire, was still there! It was graven in the boards at the back; it had burnt the boards with its imprint; and by day I read what I had read by night—the words: 'Thou shalt win.'

"I flew out of the room. I called for help. Father Appenzel returned. I said to him: 'Look into the depths of that wardrobe, and tell me what you see there!'

"My servant did as I bade him, and said to me: 'Thou shalt win!'

"I dressed myself. I fled like a madman from the accursed house, and wandered in the mountains. The mountain air did me good. When I came home in the evening I was perfectly calm; I had thought matters over; my dog might have become dumb through some perfectly natural physiological phenomenon. With regard to the sentence in the wardrobe, it had not come there of itself, and, as I had not had any previous acquaintance with that piece of furniture, it was probable that the three fatal words had been there for countless years, inscribed by someone addicted to the black art, following upon some gambling affair which was no concern of mine.

"I ate my supper, and went to bed in the same room. The night passed without incident.

"Next day I went to La Chaux-de-Fonds, to call on a notary. All that this adventure with the wardrobe had succeeded in doing was to imbue me with the idea of tempting fate, in the shape of cards, one last time, ere putting into execution my idea about suicide. I borrowed a few thousand francs on the security of the estate, and went to Paris. As I ascended the staircase of the club I recalled my nightmare, and remarked to myself ironically, for I placed no faith in the success of this supreme attempt: 'We shall now see whether, if the devil helps me——' I did not finish the sentence.

"THE bank was being put up to auction when I entered the salon. I secured it for two thousand francs. I had not reached the middle of my

deal when I had already won two hundred and fifty thousand francs! But no longer would any of the players stake against me. *I was winning every game!*

"I was jubilant; I had never dreamt that such luck would be mine. I threw up the bank; that is, what remained of it for me to hold. I next amused myself at throwing away chances, just to see what would happen. In spite of this I continued winning. Exclamations were heard on all sides. The players swore I had the devil's own luck. I collected my winnings and left.

"No sooner had I reached the street than I began to think and to become alarmed. The coincidence between the scene of the wardrobe and of my extraordinary success as a banker troubled me. Of a sudden, and to my surprize, I found myself wending my way back to the club. I was determined to probe the matter to the bottom. My short-lived joy was disturbed by the fact that I had not lost once. So it was that I was anxious to lose just once.

"When I left the club for the second time, at six o'clock in the morning, I had won, in money and on parole, no less than a couple of millions. But I had not once lost—not a single, solitary time! I felt myself becoming a raving madman. When I say that I had not lost once, I speak with regard to money, for when I had played for nothing, without stakes, to see, just for the fun of the matter, I lost inexorably. But no sooner had a punter staked even as low as half a franc against me, I won his money. It mattered little, a cent or a million francs. I could no longer lose. 'Thou shalt win!' Oh, that terrible curse! that curse! For a whole week did I try. I went into the worst gambling-hells. I sat down to card-tables presided over by card-sharpers; I won even from them; I won from one and all against whom I played. I did nothing but win!

"So, you no longer laugh, gentlemen! You scoff no more! You see now, good sirs, that one should never be in a hurry to laugh! I told you I had seen the devil! Do you believe me now? I possessed then the certainty, the palpable proof, visible to one and all, the natural and terrestrial proof of my revolting compact with the devil. The law of probabilities no longer existed as far as I was concerned. There remained only the supernatural certainty of winning eternally—until the day of death. Death! I could no longer dream of it as a desire. For the first time in my life I dreaded it. The terrors of death haunted me, because of what awaited me at the end!

"My uppermost thought was to redeem my soul—my wretched, my lost soul. I frequented the churches. I saw priests. I prostrated myself at the foot of church steps. I beat my delirious head on the sacred flagstones! I prayed to God that I might lose, just as I had prayed to the devil that I might win. On leaving the holy place I was wont to hurry to some low gambling-den and stake a few louis on a card. But I continued winning for ever and ever! 'Thou shalt win!'

"Not for a single second did I entertain the idea of owing my happiness to those accursed millions. I offered up my heart to God as a burnt-offering, I distributed the millions I had won to the poor, and I came here, gentlemen, to await the death which spurns me—the death I dread!"

"You have never played since those days?" I asked.

"I have never played from that time until now."

Allan had read my thoughts. He too was dreaming that it might be possible to rescue from his monomania the man whom we both persisted in considering insane.

"I feel sure," he said, "that so great a sacrifice has won you pardon.

Your despair has been undoubtedly sincere, and your punishment a terrible one. What more could heaven require of you? In your place, *I should try*——"

"You would try—what?" exclaimed the man, springing from his seat.

"I should try whether I were still doomed to win!"

The man struck the table a violent blow with his clenched fist.

"And so this is all the remedy you can suggest! So this is all that the narrative of a curse transcending all things earthly has inspired you with? You seek to induce an old lunatic to play, with the object of demonstrating to him that he is not insane! For I read full well in your eyes what you think of me: 'He is mad, mad, mad!' You do not believe a single word of all I have told you. You think I am insane, young man! And you, too," he added, addressing Allan, "you think I am insane—mad, mad, mad! I tell you that I have seen the devil! Yes, your old madman has seen the devil! And he is going to prove it to you. The cards! Where are the cards?"

Espying them on the edge of the table, he sprang on them.

"It is you who have so willed it. I had harbored a supreme hope that I should die without having again made the infernal attempt, so that when my hour had come I might imagine that heaven had forgiven me. They are yours. Shuffle them—deal me which you please—stack them as you will. I tell you that I shall win. Do you believe me now?"

Allan had quietly picked up the cards.

The man, placing his hand on his shoulder, asked, "You do not believe me?"

"We shall see," replied Allan.

"What shall the stakes be?" I inquired.

"I do not know, gentlemen, whether you are well off or not, but I feel bound to inform you—you who have come to destroy my last hope—that you are ruined men."

Thereupon he took out his pocket-book and laid it on the table, saying: "I will play you five straight points at écarté for the contents of this pocket-book. This just by way of a beginning. After that, I am willing to play you as many games as you see fit, until I cast you out of doors picked clean, your friends and yourself, ruined for the rest of your lives—yes, picked bare."

"Picked bare?" repeated Allan, who was far less moved than myself. "Do you want even our shirts?"

"Even your souls," cried the man, "which I intend to present to the devil in exchange for my own."

Allan winked at me, and asked: "Shall we say 'Done,' and go halves in this?"

I agreed, shuffled the pack, and handed it to my opponent.

He cut. I dealt. I turned up the knave of hearts. Our host looked at his hand and led. Clearly he ought not to have played the hand he held—three small clubs, the queen of diamonds, and the seven of spades. He took a trick with his queen, I took the four others, and, as he had led, I marked two points. I entertained not the slightest doubt that he was doing his utmost to lose.

It was his turn to deal. He turned up the king of spades. He could not restrain a shudder when he beheld that black-faced card, which, in spite of himself, gave him a trick.

He scanned his hand anxiously. It was my turn to call for cards. He refused them, evidently believing that he held a very poor hand; but my own was as bad as his, and he had a ten of hearts, which took my nine—I held the nine, eight, and seven of hearts.

He then played diamonds, to which I could not respond, and two clubs

higher than mine. Neither of us held a single trump. He scored a point, which, with the one secured to him by his king, gave him two. We were "evens," either of us being in a position to end matters at once if we made three points.

The deal was mine. I turned up the eight of diamonds. This time both of us called for cards. He asked for one, and showed me the one he had discarded—the seven of diamonds. He was anxious not to hold any trumps. His wish was gratified, and he succeeded in making me score another two points, which gave me four.

IN SPITE of ourselves, Allan and I glanced toward the pocket-book. Our thoughts ran: "There lies a small fortune which is shortly to be ours, one which, in all conscience, we shall not have had much trouble in winning."

Our host dealt in his turn, and when I saw the cards he had given me I considered the matter as good as settled. This time he had not turned up a king, but the seven of clubs. I held two hearts and three trumps—the ace and king of hearts, the ace, ten, and nine of clubs. I led the king, my opponent followed with the queen; I flung the ace on the table, my opponent being compelled to take it with the knave of hearts, and he then played a diamond, which I trumped. I played the ace of trumps; he took it with the queen, but I was ready for him with my last card, the ten of clubs. He had the knave of trumps! As I had led he scored two, making "four all." Our host smothered a curse which was hovering on his lips.

"No need for you to worry," I remarked; "no one has won yet."

"We are about to prove to you," said Allan, in the midst of a deathly silence, "that you can lose just like any ordinary mortal."

Our host groaned, "I can not lose."

The interest in the game was now at its height. A point on either side, and either of us would be the winner. If I turned up the king the game was ended, and I won twelve thousand francs from a man who claimed that he could not lose. I had dealt. I turned up the king—the king of hearts. I had won!

My opponent uttered a cry of joy. He bent over the card, picked it up, considered it attentively, fingered it, raised it to his eyes, and we thought he was about to press it to his lips. He murmured:

"Great heavens, can it be? Then—then I have lost!"

"So it would seem," I remarked.

Allan added, "You now see full well that one should not place any faith in what the devil says."

The gentleman took his pocket-book and opened it.

"Gentlemen," he sighed, "bless you for having won all that is in this book. Would that it contained a million! I should gladly have handed it over to you."

With trembling hands he searched the pocket-book, emptying it of all its contents, with a look of surprize at not finding at once the twelve thousand francs he had deposited in its folds. They were not there!

The pocket-book, searched with feverish hands, lay empty on the table. *There was nothing in the pocket-book! Nothing!*

We sat dumfounded at this inexplicable phenomenon—the empty pocket-book! We picked it up and fingered it. We searched it carefully, only to find it empty. Our host, livid and as one possessed, was searching himself, and begging us to search him. We searched him—we searched him, because it was beyond our power to resist his delirious will; but we found nothing—nothing!

"Hark!" exclaimed our host.

(Continued on page 429)

THE HAUNTED CHESSMEN

by E. R. PUNSHON

"All about was fury, a hurrying to and fro of strange, evil things."

1. The Black Queen

IT WAS in Fred Kerr's rooms that I saw them first. For a wonder Kerr was by himself; he was the most popular man I ever knew, I think, and it was the rarest thing in the world to find him alone. But that I had done so this evening rather pleased me, for I was very full of my success against Jenoure Baume, and very anxious to tell Kerr all about it. Even he had never yet beaten Jenoure Baume.

Of course, Baume isn't a master of chess in the sense that are Lasker and Capablanca. Still, for a common or garden player like myself, with a purely local reputation, to beat him is something of an achievement, and I wanted very much to tell Kerr of my success. He was very sympathetic and very interested, and in analyzing the game with me he pointed out a move Jenoure Baume might have made which would almost certainly have cost me my queen. Fortunately Baume had not seen it—nor had I for that matter—and I told Kerr he really ought to go in for chess seriously.

"Not enough open air about it for me," he answered laughingly. "I'll take it up when I'm sixty." When I rose to go he mentioned that the date of his wedding had been fixed for the following month.

I congratulated him warmly—Lady Norah was a charming girl, and the match most suitable in every way—and in one of his little confidential outbursts that everyone found charming he told me how happy he was and how fortunate he counted himself.

"And is that one of the wedding presents?" I asked, nodding toward a set of chessmen standing on a board on a small side-table.

I had noticed them as soon as I entered the room. Of Indian workmanship as I guessed, they were very beautifully carved and polished, and when I looked at them again I was conscious of a curious impression. I can not define it exactly—but it was almost as though they moved and stirred, as though they all watched eagerly, intently. The idle thought came to me that those inanimate carved pieces of polished bone were watching me as a spider from its web watches a fly hovering near.

Vexed with myself for having such foolish fancies—I remember I thought they were due to the strain of my game with Jenoure Baume—I went over to look at them more closely.

"Awfully fine carving!" I said, picking up one of the white pieces. "Indian, isn't it? Are they a wedding present?"

"No," Kerr answered. "The fact is, I bought them from poor Will Lathbury's widow."

"Oh, indeed!" I said.

I had only met Lathbury once or twice, but, of course, I knew him well by reputation as a sound, steady player, and the mysterious tragedy that had ended his life had been a great shock to me.

"Those were the pieces they found near him," Kerr added.

Poor Lathbury had been discovered one morning lying dead across his chessboard, on which he had apparently been working out some problem, or analyzing a game. The razor with which he had cut his throat was in his hand, and there was no faintest explanation possible of his miserable deed. It was certainly shown in evidence that for a day or two before the end he had seemed slightly worried, and had spoken about some game of chess or problem that appeared to be troubling him. And he had complained of not sleeping very well, a most unusual thing with him. But that was all. The coroner suggested that his mind had become affected by his intense application to his favorite game, but that was all rubbish. However, the jury returned the usual verdict, and there the matter had to rest.

"Are they ivory?" I asked, looking more closely at the piece I was handling.

"Well, the story goes," answered Kerr, with a touch of hesitation—"the story goes that they are made from human bones."

"Oh, Lord!" I said, putting down a little quickly the piece I was holding.

"I don't know if it's true," Kerr added; "very likely it isn't. It may be just a yarn. But the tale is that an Indian raja some time in the Middle Ages captured a hated enemy, killed him, and had these made from his bones."

"Ugh!" I said. "What an idea! What on earth made you get them?"

"I hardly know," he answered. "Mrs. Lathbury wanted to get rid of them—naturally. They hadn't very pleasant associations for her. She asked me what they ought to fetch. I said I would take them if she liked. I thought it was a way to help her, and then it's lovely carving."

"Rather too lovely for me," I said, and I could have sworn that the black queen turned her head and shot at me a glance of malignant and deadly hatred.

Of course, the notion was absurd, and when I looked again I saw the piece as immobile as any other bit of carved bone. And yet when I looked a third time I was once more aware of that air of cruel and furtive waiting as of some evil thing lurking patiently which before had seemed to me to hover over those two double rows of carved figures.

Determined to conquer my fancies, I picked up the black queen and, examining it more closely, I thought I made out that it was a trick in the

arrangement of the eyes which gave the piece that aspect of alert watchfulness I had noticed.

"Carved out of human bones!" I repeated, weighing the piece in my hand. "What an idea! Well, shall we have a little game?"

I thought Kerr looked startled and even a little alarmed. He shook his head quickly without speaking. I felt relieved; for the idea was powerfully in my mind that it was not against him that I must play, but against some other—some unknown—antagonist.

I said good-night a little hurriedly and took myself off. The fact is, I had wanted to play so badly that I felt that if I stayed there much longer with that black queen in my hand and the pieces drawn up ready, I should find myself making the first move—against whom, I wondered? Whom or what?

I remembered very plainly that as I went out of the room I had a last impression of those pieces drawn up in line as though waiting—waiting with a malign and dreadful patience.

I know my heart was beating faster than usual, and my forehead was a little damp as I came out into the street. The idea was with me that I had escaped some great danger, but what or why I had no idea.

2. *A Soul in Torment*

A WEEK or two passed, and I remembered my experience of that night only to be ashamed of the inexplicable agitation I had felt. Then one day I happened to meet Baume. He knew Kerr fairly well, and declared he was wasting on other pursuits talents that had been meant for chess alone. Then I chanced to mention those curious carved bone chessmen.

"He says they are made of human bone," I remarked with a laugh. "Gruesome idea, isn't it?"

To my surprize Baume looked very grave. Apparently the old man knew those chessmen well—and did not like them. Finally he blurted out: "You tell your friend to drop them in the river. That is best for them."

Going home that night I noticed on the placard of one of the evening papers, "Mysterious Suicide," and on that of another, "Strange West End Tragedy." I paid no attention just then, but the next morning over breakfast I noticed a column headed, "Mysterious Death of Well-known Sportsman," and, on glancing at it, I saw that it referred to poor Fred Kerr.

He had been found first thing in the morning lying dead with a bullet through his brain. The pistol with which he had committed the miserable deed was still clasped in his right hand, and the account mentioned that the body lay across a chessboard on which the pieces were arranged in what seemed an unfinished game.

It was a frightful shock to me—indeed it must have been so to all who knew Kerr. I could hardly believe that a man so full of life and spirit, so richly dowered with all good gifts, had ended his life in such a way. There was no explanation. At the inquest a verdict of accidental death was returned, the idea being that Kerr had shot himself while cleaning or examining his pistol.

An attempt was made to suggest foul play on the grounds that the position of the pieces on the chessboard showed that a game had just been concluded, that this game must have been played with someone, and that that someone had disappeared and was, therefore, under suspicion.

Conclusive evidence showed, however, that the unhappy man had been alone all that evening. Of course, the position of the pieces might be accounted for in many ways. He might have been working out an end game, or analyzing some position. It was not a problem he had been working

on, though, as black was winning and, of course, the problem convention is for white to win.

However, not much attention was paid to the chessmen; and as foul play was ruled out and suicide seemed incredible, the jury fell back on the idea of accident, though there was not the least support for such a theory.

Poor Kerr! I called to leave a wreath and express my sympathy. I asked if I might see my old friend for the last time, and they agreed. With feelings of the utmost sadness I looked my last on my friend's face, and as I did so there came upon me slowly, irresistibly, the idea that he had died in terror and anguish of soul and body.

I felt this impression slowly invade and possess my mind, till I shook and trembled with the knowledge that I stood in the presence of unnamable dread. I began to edge slowly away toward the door, very slowly, for I knew that if I went quickly my panic would overcome me, and I should run, and I knew that would be very dangerous, fatal perhaps. By an intense effort of will I kept my face toward the bed in which lay that which I no longer regarded as the earthly frame of my friend, but felt was changed into something unspeakably horrible and foul. My hair bristled; the flesh crept upon my bones; I forced myself to keep my eyes fixed steadily on the still form upon the bed, though I was sure it was watching me with an intent and evil patience as a spider in its web watches the fly fluttering near—the very sensation I had had before.

Somehow or other, I don't know how, I got to the bottom of the stairs. I stood there, a little dizzy, a little faint, trying to recover myself.

Presently I got out into the street somehow, and I know that for some time afterward I had no liking for the dark and no taste for being alone.

3. *The Gates of Hell*

Poor Kerr had been the owner of a good many curios he had collected, some of them of value, and when I heard after a time that his friends had decided to sell them at auction, I thought I would go and see if I could pick up some little memento of one I had so much admired and liked.

I bought two rather fine engravings by Meryon; very cheap they were, too. I noticed Mark Norand, the captain of our class chess club match team, and after speaking a word or two to him, I was thinking of going when the auctioneer put up the carved bone chessmen.

He did not repeat the tale that they were of human bone—perhaps he thought that wouldn't sound very attractive, or he may not have known the story—but he laid great emphasis on the excellence of the carving. Mark Norand made the first bid, and I know I was very startled. Somehow I hadn't thought of anyone actually buying the things. I said to him:

"I wouldn't have them if I were you."

He looked at me with rather a puzzled and slightly suspicious air.

"Why, do you want them yourself?" he asked.

"Good heavens, no!" I answered, but I could see he did not quite believe me.

In the auction room everyone is inclined to be suspicious of everyone else. It is a warfare there without quarter and without scruple. Mark Norand was a friend of mine, but he did not mean to be done out of any bargain that was going. He bought the chessmen for three guineas—cheap enough, considering the excellence of the carving.

He was very pleased with himself and his purchase, and his idea that he had got ahead of me. He asked me to go round and play a game with his new possessions. I refused pointblank, and he laughed. I think he believed I

was a little piqued at losing the chessmen.

We got busier than ever at the office, and I was kept very much occupied for some time. I could not even get a spare hour to slip round to the club for a game, and it was quite by accident that I happened to hear someone mention Mark Norand and say that he was looking very ill.

I knew where it was he generally lunched. The place was out of the way for me, and I didn't like the cooking there, but I went the next day. Almost the first man I saw when I entered was Norand. He was sitting at one of the tables with food before him, but he had pushed it away untasted and was pouring over a chessboard.

"Hullo, Norand," I said, "working out a problem?"

He looked up at me. I could not help starting. He was greatly altered, but it was not that I noticed so much as the horrid fear I saw peeping out from his bloodshot eyes and lurking in the new lines that had come about his mouth.

"Oh, you?" he said, and to mingle with the fear I read in his eyes there came a fierce dull resentment, so that he looked at me as though he held me for his deadliest enemy.

"You knew, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Knew what? Tell you what?" I asked.

"Those chessmen," he muttered, shuddering. He added: "Why did you let me buy them?"

"I told you not to; I warned you," I said.

"Told me not to, warned me not to!" he repeated, and gave me a look of deadly hate. "If you saw a man knocking at the gate of hell without knowing it, would you just tell him not to do that and then walk away?"

"Why, what's the matter?" I asked.

He did not answer, and the waiter came up just then. I ordered the first thing I saw on the bill. Norand had become intent on his game again. I noticed it was a position in a game and not a problem he was working at—and the waiter, who knew him as an old customer, and saw I was a friend, observed to me:

"The gentleman's worrying too much over his chess. He hardly eats anything now."

"Has he been long like this?" I asked.

"Only about a week, sir," the man answered.

He brought me what I had ordered, and Norand looked up presently.

"What do you think of this position?" he asked.

"Well, white looks in rather a fix," I answered. "Good Lord, what's the matter?"

I really thought he was going to have a fit; he fell back in his seat, panting for breath and ghastly pale. I might have pronounced his death warrant. I jumped up with some vague idea of getting a doctor, but he stopped me.

"No, no, I'm all right," he said—croaked, rather. "For God's sake, look at the board, and see if you can find any way out!"

"For white?" I asked.

"For white," he repeated.

I bent over the board. It seemed to me mate was pretty sure to come in three or four moves. I said:

"Is it a game you're playing?"

He nodded.

"Who's your opponent?" I asked.

He did not answer, and I could see well that a secret and terrible agitation possessed him.

"I don't know," he stammered.

And the idea came to me that he did know but that he dared not say. This seemed to me highly absurd and at the same time quite reasonable.

He wiped his face again.

"You see," he argued, "the thing's impossible."

"I don't know what you mean; I

don't know what you are talking about," I said angrily.

But the idea burnt in my mind like fire, that I did know and that I also dared not say.

He leant across the table, his eyes alight with that mingled desperate fear and deadly hate I had seen in them before.

"You ought to have warned me," he muttered. "Mind this, if I lose I will leave you the things in my will."

I remember it did not seem in any way absurd that he should couple together the ideas of losing the game and of making his will.

I was studying the position of the pieces so intently that I, like him, pushed aside my lunch almost untasted. Gradually there was coming back to me a memory of the move poor Kerr had suggested Jenoure Baume might have tried in the game he lost to me. It seemed to me a variation of Kerr's idea might be effective in Norand's present position.

I explained the move. Norand jumped at the idea. We developed it together and, so far as we could see, an attack pressed on those lines was practically sure to win the game. Norand's relief was tremendous, mine scarcely less so. Then all at once his expression changed. He said:

"Suppose when I play the knight it slips of itself on to some other square when I'm not looking?"

I stared at him and laughed. The suggestion seemed so absurd I could not help it.

"Well, of course," I said, "if your pieces do that, I don't see much chance."

He did not answer, and I left the restaurant and went back to the office feeling relieved in one way, but a good deal worried about poor Norand all the same. His obvious terror, my own odd impressions, all seemed to me fanciful and even ridiculous in the face of his wild suggestion of pieces that moved of their own volition.

All the same I was not surprized when, a day or two later, I heard that the poor fellow had drowned himself in a small pond that lay at the foot of his garden. The account in the papers said he had been sitting up late at chess and that he must have gone straight from the chessboard to his doom.

4. The Invisible Antagonist

I COULD not help making some inquiries about the position of the men on the board. I found, as I had half expected, that they indicated the close of a game in which black had just brought off a mate. My informant told me that presumably poor Norand had been analyzing some game. He had not been working out a problem, as black was the winning side; and he had not been playing with anyone, as the evidence showed conclusively that he had been alone all the evening.

The usual verdict was returned, and I wrote to Norand's solicitor to say that I absolutely refused to accept any legacy he might have left me.

But I did not post the letter. At one time I had the feeling that the whole thing was pure fancy and that it would be foolish and cowardly to refuse the chessmen if he had really left them to me. And then, again, the idea would come to me that it was all true, but that I was forewarned, and forearmed.

As it happened, they were delivered one evening while the vicar was with me. While he was there I opened the parcel and showed him the chessmen. He was mildly interested and mildly shocked when I told him the tale that they were carved from human bone. He thought it a most repulsive idea, but remarked on the excellence of the carving.

"That black queen, for example," he said, "what an idea of—of—well, vitality, almost, that figure has."

I agreed, and after I had seen the vicar to the door I went back to my room. I found those chessmen I had

left lying on the table where the vicar had been looking at them, now all drawn up in position on the board.

No living soul, I knew well, had been in the room during my short absence. I stood for a moment or two on the threshold, a little daunted, a little confused, and as I watched I understood that I was expected to play—I saw, too, a thrill of sinister impatience run through the drawn-up lines of the pieces.

I sat down in front of them. I could not help myself. Each separate piece, from king to pawn, showed animate, palpitating, ready, one and all a-quiver with desire and greed, like hungry beasts of prey waiting for their living victim to be thrown to them. The impression grew in my mind that I was in a more dreadful and more imminent danger than any other living man that night, and that this danger was one that threatened not my life only.

I would have fled, but flight, I knew well, was no longer possible. I tried to mutter a prayer, but the words would not come. I tried to lift my hand to push board and pieces to the ground, but I seemed to have lost control of my arm. The quivering, eager, evil impatience of the pieces increased; I should not have been surprized to see them break into some wild dance of hideous ritual.

All at once they grew quiet, though still instinct with vivid, hungry eagerness, and I felt come upon me a sudden awe and fear and horror as I realized that my antagonist was there.

I could see nothing, I heard nothing, only I knew well that he was there, that he had come and was seated opposite.

I understood the game was about to begin.

I could not help myself. Slowly I lifted my hand. I swear I did not touch it, but the king's pawn it had been my thought to move slid forward two squares.

A moment's pause and then the black king's pawn, untouched, moved forward in reply. I made my next move, or rather, when I raised my hand with the intention of doing it, the piece transferred itself untouched to the position I had in mind. The answering move came almost at once. And so the game was played on.

All the time I never touched a piece; once I had made up my mind and raised my hand the piece I was thinking of immediately took up the position I wished. The black pieces did the same; they moved, advanced, retreated, but all in harmony and all in evident obedience to the will of my unseen, unknown antagonist.

Invisible, but not unknown.

For I was very sure there sat opposite me a man long dead, with an evil face and cruel eyes and hungry, slobbering mouth, wearing the jeweled robes of an Indian prince, and playing with all his skill this game for his master in which the prize was—myself.

I knew that now the game had begun, it had to be finished. I called up all my powers to my aid. I felt my mind grow clear; my nerves were calm and steady. I played my best. I played as I had never played before; I believe I played that night a game that would not have disgraced a master.

More than once I felt I had my antagonist in difficulties, but each time he retrieved himself. I won a pawn, but lost it again. Still, I began to believe I had a chance of winning.

I pressed hard. I felt a clearness in my brain, a vividness of thought and clearness of vision I have never known before or since. Once or twice, when I was tempted to make a move that might have been dangerous, it was as though I heard a secret whisper warning me to be careful. I knew, too, that my antagonist was troubled, and I understood that the pieces themselves, both black and white, felt this, and were troubled also.

I had begun a hot attack on the black queen. If I could win her I

felt the game would be mine. It was not only that the queen is the most powerful piece, but I realized also that in her lay the focus of the opposing power, that from her or through her there radiated a sort of vigor and encouragement all the other pieces felt—and not the black only but my own white as well.

My attack on the queen failed. I was a move too late, and she slipped out of the net I had so nearly drawn around her. The failure left my position less strong, and I found myself attacked in my turn. I rallied my forces, but the pressure grew stronger and stronger.

The critical point was on my left, where I was beginning to plan a counter-attack. It promised well, and I was beginning to make progress when I found a return thrust aimed at me.

I was puzzled, and, on looking, found that the position of my pieces was no longer as it had been, but a much weaker one. I could not understand, for I was sure I had not moved them. As I looked and wondered I was aware that my unseen antagonist smiled evilly to himself, and the black queen shook with a horrid, secret merriment that spread and spread till every piece upon the board, black and white, was laughing wickedly to itself, rejoicing in the prospect of my defeat.

I realized in a flash that one of my pawns had turned traitor and, when I was not looking, had slipped back from the square where I had placed it to the one behind, where it was so much less effective.

5. *At the Eleventh Hour*

It cost me my bishop before I could re-establish my position, and the small inner voice I had seemed to hear before whispered to me that I must watch closely and unceasingly, or the same thing would happen again. I understood that my antagonist, smiling evilly to himself, could make any one of my pieces betray me, and that this foul play he kept ever in reserve to help him at need. No wonder that he always won his games all through the centuries!

I was a piece to the bad now, and I had the double strain of playing and of watching to see that none of my men slipped from the squares on which I had placed them. I set my teeth and played my best. I lost another piece, and my king, hotly attacked, was pinned into one corner. Still I fought on, though my brow was wet and my hands shook, and upon me lay the consciousness of impending doom.

I made one last feeble attempt at a counter-attack. I do not think it could possibly have saved me, but it was audacious, a little disconcerting, and meant delay at the least. And that was something, for I knew that if I could hold out till cock-crow I should earn at least a day's respite. That my antagonist knew also, and he grew, one must suppose, impatient.

I was watching my pieces intently, since there was not one of them but would have played the traitor had chance offered. My new attack hinged on the one rook I had remaining, and suddenly I saw it sliding away from where it stood to an adjoining square, where it would have been comparatively useless. It stopped when my eye fell on it, for apparently they had no power to move when I was watching, and then something made me look away again. Instantly the rook slipped off to the adjoining square, and at once again all the other pieces, black and white alike, shook with a passion of secret, evil laughter.

For a moment despair overcame me, for now it was only a question of mate in two moves.

But, as before a tiny voice had whispered to me to be cautious when I had contemplated an unsound move, so now again I heard that small, still voice sound clear and vivid in my ear. I knew that my one hope was to do as it advised.

I sprang to my feet.

Pointing at the rook that had moved I cried with a loud voice:

"I appeal."

I was aware of an instant, fierce commotion all around me; I saw the pieces, black and white, all palpitant; I heard no sound, but I knew that my antagonist was dismayed and troubled.

Again I cried:

"I appeal."

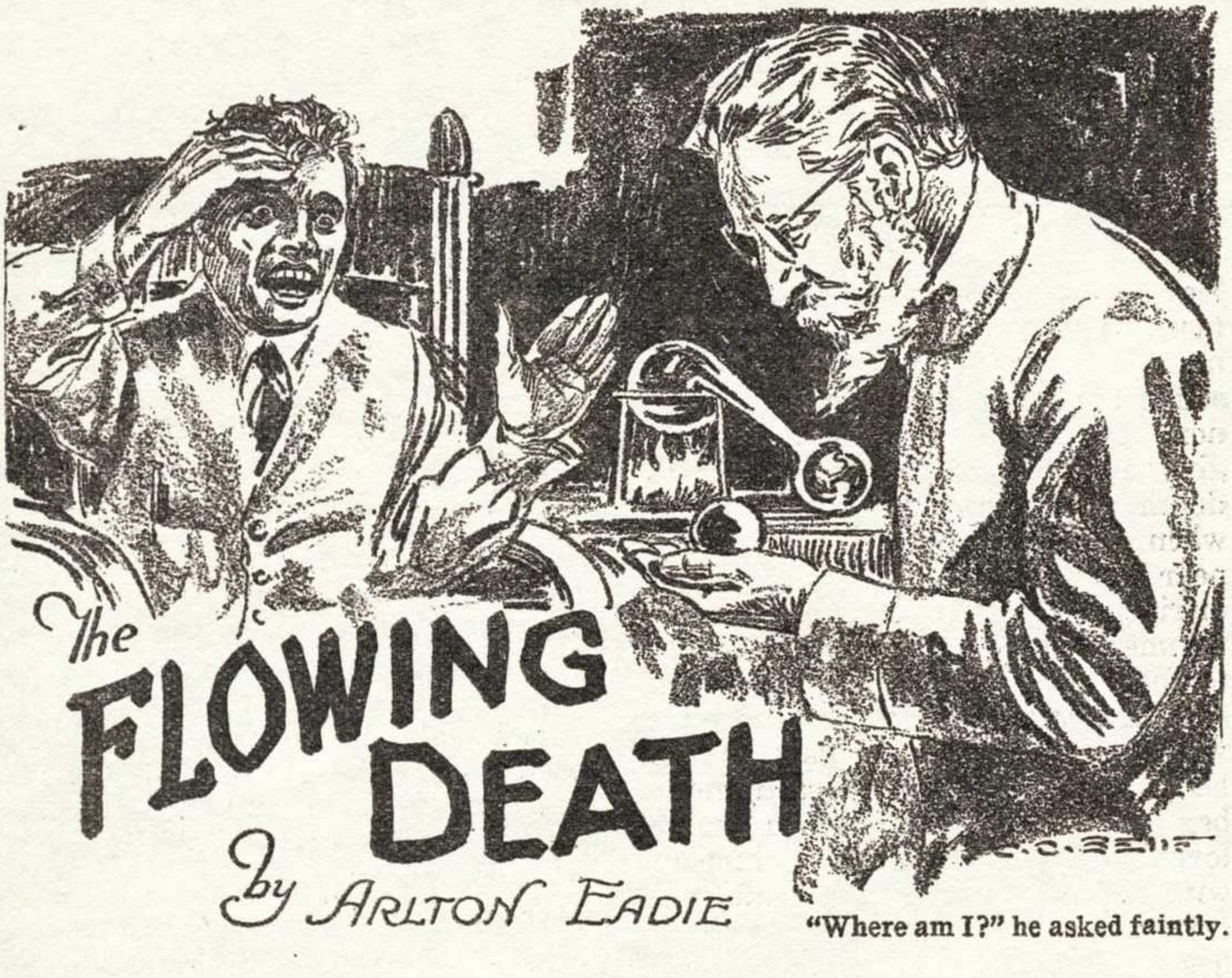
The fierce tumult and commotion I was aware of all round, grew yet wilder and more fierce. Though I heard nothing, saw nothing, I knew that all about was fury, dismay, excitement, a hurrying to and fro of strange and evil things, a passage of vast and awful shadows. The pieces were all quivering with hatred and alarm. My dread, long-dead antagonist seemed to me to be screaming hoarsely in an agony of protest and pain. Though still I heard, saw, felt nothing, I was somehow conscious that I stood in the very center of a chaos of invisible, conflicting powers; that unimaginable forces were aimed against me, but that nevertheless I stood protected. For the third time I cried out very loudly:

"I appeal."

That strange and awful tumult passed. All was still and silent, all that had filled my small room so dreadfully fled swiftly far away. The chessmen were no longer animate and palpitant, but were quiet as any other bits of carved bone; I had a vision of my antagonist, baffled, howling, far in the depths of the nethermost space.

I knew I was safe now, and I knew also what next I had to do. The still, small voice I had heard before had whispered that to me also, and I hurried to obey. I swept the chessmen into their box, and carrying it carefully in my hands, I went into the garden, out by the side gate, and up the lane that leads to the churchyard.

Dawn was gray in the east; the cocks were crowing as I reached it. There amidst the graves, in the earth consecrated by holy words for the last resting-place of men, I dug with my bare hands and buried deep the box and the pieces of carved bone it held, deep in the shadow of a cross reared on a grave near by. There I left them to rest for ever; and so, drunk with weariness and terror, went back to my home to rest in peace and thankfulness and safety.



The FLOWING DEATH

By ARLTON EADIE

"Where am I?" he asked faintly.

"HAROLD! Harold! I really think Uncle has discovered something at last!" came in loud, excited accents from the terrace overlooking the tennis-court.

I paused in the act of tightening the net, and looked up at the entrancing vision in white leaning over the stone balustrade.

Speaking candidly, the news she had just announced failed to awake in me anything like the surprize and delight that it evidently had done in her. When a man, old enough to know better, spends the whole of his days—and occasionally half his nights—messing about with mysterious concoctions in a laboratory whose unspeakable atmosphere would at times leave a soap-factory a very bad second, it is scarcely surprizing if, in the course of time, he does "discover something." But when I hinted as much to Mavis it did not have much effect in dampening her enthusiasm.

"But I think it must be something really important this time," she persisted. "He did not remain in his laboratory later than half past 10 last night, and he ate his breakfast this morning after being only twice reminded that it was getting cold. And he has just asked me to tell you that he wishes to see you in the laboratory at once."

I may as well confess that what scientific knowledge I happen to possess is of the most sketchy description. The only recollection I treasure of the much-boomed technical course of my school days is the manufacture of hydrogen (or was it oxygen?) on a non-commercial scale over a bowl of water. Probably I should not have remembered even that, had it not been for the painful after-effects of the explosion which ensued on the application of a lighted match to the stuff at the conclusion of the experiment. But with Professor Owen

Boyd-Phulger, Sc.D., LL.D., F.R.S., F.S.A., the case was, naturally, different. The only things he didn't know about chemistry and biology were the things that hadn't been discovered! But the fact that several learned societies had allowed him to tack half the alphabet behind his name did not prevent the man himself from being a well-meaning, but none the less deadly, bore. It may give some slight indication of the depth of my affection for his niece when I say that it was solely to be near her that I witnessed innumerable intricate, but to me unintelligible, experiments and submitted like a lamb to form the audience to the old fossil's interminable lectures. Indeed, so well had I played my part that he had at last come to regard me as being as much interested in his beloved researches as he was himself; with the result that he now confidently expected me to forego a set with the dearest little girl on earth in order to listen to yards of his twaddle in a stuffy laboratory. Truly has it been said that duplicity brings its own punishment!

Something of the nature of my inward musings must have betrayed itself on my face, for there was a glint of mischievous amusement in Mavis' eyes as she went on: "I'm afraid, however, that you'll soon have to tear yourself away from the scientific atmosphere you love so much! I shall send an urgent message for you in about twenty minutes."

"Remember, that's a promise!" I retorted, as I made my way toward the house.

THE moment I entered the laboratory I could see that Mavis had not exaggerated the importance of the occasion. Instead of being in his customary state of dreamy absent-mindedness, the old boy was dancing about all over the place. As a rule I find it politic to encourage him to do most of the talking, but on this occasion there was not the slightest need for any such exercise of tact. Before I could utter a word he had jammed me down on a most uncomfortable wooden seat in front of a high-power microscope.

"I shall be famous, Harold—famous!" He appeared to be almost hysterical with delight as he chortled out the words. "I have made the discovery of the century—nay, more—the greatest discovery of all time! Look for yourself, my boy!"

I accordingly looked, but all I could make out was a small, irregular-shaped blob of dirty-looking gray jelly. Having been prepared to behold something really exciting, I experienced a distinct sense of having been sold, and I had a good mind to tell him so. On second thought, however, I contented myself with inquring what the thing was.

Instead of returning a simple answer to my simple question, the old fossil must needs lean over the bench as though he were addressing a conclave of highbrows, clear his throat, and launch into a lecture.

"Of all the problems that have exercised the mind of mankind since the first glimmerings of the dawn of science, there is none that has been the cause of so much research, controversy, and—I regret having to add—bitterness, as the problem of the origin of life. I have only to mention the illustrious names of Huxley, Von Bunge, Schwann, Balbiani, Roux and Le Dantec"—he rolled the names round his mouth as though he relished the taste of them—"to convince you that some of the finest intellects in Europe have been brought to bear on the subject. Yet, in spite of this, the solution seemed as remote as ever until I made my startling discovery last night."

That made me open my eyes a little. "What?" I exclaimed; "you mean that you have solved the problem yourself?"

The professor shook his head. "My

dear Harold," he answered, with an almost pitying smile, "I should have thought that even the most superficial acquaintance with the English tongue would have told you that my words were intended to convey no such claim. Are you not aware that the immortal Darwin himself had declared that one might as reasonably seek for the origin of matter as that of life?"

Frankly, I had not been aware of the fact. But I thought it best to let him ramp on in his own sweet way in order not to prolong the interview.

"What I have succeeded in doing," he went on presently, "is to determine the actual living protoplasm which is the physical basic material of which ourselves and all other living things on this planet are composed. Even your intelligence will grasp the fact that to discover the bricks of which a building is composed is a very different thing from determining how those same bricks came to be in existence. That simple analogy applies to my discovery. I have separated the highly complex material which forms the basic principle of life; I have ascertained that it is composed of millions of microscopic animalcules which live, breathe, assimilate food and multiply—but the great problem of how this protoplasm came originally to be endowed with life remains as far from solution as ever."

A flash of inspiration came to me. "The cell theory!" I cried; and the old man's beaming face told me that my chance shot had indeed hit the mark.

"You're right, Harold. Ah, I have hopes yet — hopes," he muttered, rather inconsequentially, I thought. "Yes, it is the cell theory, as you say. But it is the cell theory adapted and changed."

I thought it best not to jeopardize my newly-won laurels by venturing another suggestion; so I contented myself with murmuring "Really?" in as impressed a manner as possible.

"The organism you have just examined in that microscope — if, indeed, one may so describe a speck of matter which, though undoubtedly alive, possesses neither heart, lungs, stomach, brain nor even skin, consisting as it does of one homogeneous substance — this animalcule represents the earliest, the lowest, the most simple and primitive form of life yet known to science. I am of course aware that several similar organisms have been previously discovered; in fact, one species of ameba, the *Proteus animalcule*, is quite a common object observed under the microscope. It abounds in stagnant ponds, or may be readily acquired by infusing ordinary hay in water and allowing it to stand. But these"—he waved a triumphant hand in the direction of the things I had been looking at—"are a species of infusoria entirely different. Not only do they transcend all others in their tenacity of life and the extreme rapidity with which they multiply, but they are infinitely more adaptable to their environment and the conditions of food obtainable—I was almost about to say more educative. It is an absolute fact that in the short space of three years I have transformed this animalcule from a vegetable-consuming species to a carnivorous one."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed, thinking that some expression of wonder at his achievement was evidently expected of me. "Professor, you're a marvel!"

Professor Boyd-Phulger reddened like a young girl at her first compliment.

"You see, everything was in my favor," he explained diffidently. "My success is not so surprizing when you consider the extreme rapidity with which they increase and the simplicity of their bodily structure. They have no highly specialized organs

needing to become adapted, as have other animals higher in the scale. To such a pitch of perfection have I brought them''—he fingered the jar containing the loathsome stuff almost lovingly as he held it up for my inspection—''that they will assimilate almost anything in the way of animal food. But you shall see for yourself.''

Disregarding my hasty assurance that I would be only too pleased to accept his word on the subject, he directed me to apply my eye to the instrument while, with a pair of delicate forceps, he placed an infinitesimal scrap of meat on the observation slide.

''Now observe what happens,'' he said, with the air of a conjurer performing his star trick.

For a while it seemed as if nothing were going to happen. The shapeless outline of the ameba remained inert and motionless, and near its outer edge I could see the smaller, pinkish speck which represented the meal the professor had so kindly provided for its enjoyment. But it did not seem as if the giddy little animalcule felt peckish that afternoon. I was just on the point of venturing a remark to that effect, when I began to notice a slight movement in the thing. Then, so slowly that at first the motion could scarcely be detected, but with ever-increasing speed, a slender feeler-like mass took form and slid out from the side nearest the morsel of food. With a kind of horrible, blind purposefulness it encircled its meal, the creature's body moving forward as it did so; until at last it had entirely enveloped it. For a time I could see the speck of meat through the semi-transparent, jelly-like substance of its body; then it rapidly grew fainter, fading away like a lump of sugar in a tumbler of water, until finally it disappeared altogether.

''The food has been assimilated,'' explained Professor Boyd-Phulger. ''In a moment the organism will divide in two. That is how these protozoa multiply—by simple fission.''

Even as he spoke, a cleft appeared across the body of the ameba—if one may use such a term in respect of a thing which might be equally correctly described as being all body or possessing none at all—and presently it completely divided.

Boyd-Phulger laughed as he noted the astonishment pictured on my features.

''That process will go on indefinitely,'' he told me, ''and it invariably takes place more rapidly after the organism has eaten. You can see for yourself that, in place of the single ameba there are now two. One can hardly call them mother and daughter, for the terms could be interchanged with the same amount of truth. Those two will divide into four, the four into eight, the eight into sixteen; until—provided a plentiful supply of animal food be procurable—you will have the thousand splitting into two thousand, the million into two million, and so on indefinitely. I assure you that the rapidity with which they increase is little short of marvelous. They are the simplest, the most primitive, and the most prolific organism on this globe. And they are immortal——''

''Immortal?'' I echoed, staring.

''Inasmuch as they never die,'' asserted the professor solemnly. ''They merely divide, each half continuing to live until it in turn divides. There is for them no death as we know it. It really seems as if these lowly creatures, alone of all the myriads of varieties of created life, continue to put off forever the payment of the debt of nature.''

I stared again at the two motionless gray specks. I was bewildered and only half credulous. How could it be possible for living matter to go on living, feeding, multiplying forever? The professor must have

sensed my skepticism, for he continued eagerly:

"I assure you that what I state is correct. The contents of these jars"—he reached up and took one off the row of shelves as he spoke—"are destined to live forever. Although each individual is, of course, indistinguishable by the naked eye, there are literally millions of amebas within this jar."

I took the jar in my hand and gazed at the contents, fascinated almost in spite of myself. Then a sudden thought struck me.

"Here, I say," I remarked, "if what you've told me is correct—about them being fond of animal food, and increasing so quickly, you know—then it would be jolly awkward if——"

"Harold," interrupted Mavis' voice from the other side of the door, "are you ready to play that set you promised?"

"Rather!" I cried eagerly. "Please excuse me, Professor."

I hastily handed the glass jar back to him—so hastily, indeed, that it slipped through his fingers and smashed into fragments on the tiled floor.

"I'm awfully sorry," I said. "I suppose I've killed all your little animalcules." And, like a fool, I went down on my hands and knees to scrape the filthy things up.

"Oh, they are not so easy to kill," laughed the professor easily. "But you need not worry about them. I have plenty more—and they increase like wildfire."

Later on I had good reason to know that he spoke the truth!

NIGHT was already beginning to fall when I quitted the professor's house to return home—a night heavy, hot, and windless, with a threat of approaching rain in the low-lying clouds to the north.

But I was in no mood to criticize the weather. Between the time of my accident in the laboratory and my departure I had found opportunity to put the greatest question of all to Mavis—and her answer had certainly not been in the negative. I trod on air as I turned off the main road and struck into the narrower one which runs athwart the crest of Shooters Hill, on whose summit the professor's house stands. Half-way along I came to a halt and, leaning over a low fence stretching between two of the villas which line the road, lighted a cigarette. The ground here stands extremely high, and the prospect below lay spread almost maplike before me. Beyond the jumble of houses which covers the lower slopes of the hill on this side lay the denser mass of roofs, topped here and there by some spire or clock-tower, marking the site of the busy town of Woolwich. Directly ahead, the rays of the rising moon silvered the streak of the distant Thames as it showed here and there in its winding course. Beyond that again, the serried rows of masts and funnels spoke of the crowded docks on the northern shore.

Lights began to appear from the street-lamps and houses below as I stood smoking and musing over the events of the day. Although I, as an accepted lover, should have been in the seventh heaven of delight, I was conscious of a feeling of gloomy apprehension. Try as I might, I could not shake off the recollection of what I had viewed through that confounded microscope. There had been something so horribly repulsive in that slow, emotionless, yet remorseless seeking of food by those "educated" amebas, that I found myself involuntarily shuddering at the thought of it. Could it be possible that Professor Boyd-Phulger was right, and this thing, without brain, stomach, nerves, or even heart, was in reality the first beginning of all known life?

And as I mused thus, I recalled to mind the remark of the professor when I had smashed the jar: "They

are not so easy to kill . . . and they increase like wildfire. . . .''

The words were still ringing through my brain when at last I turned to resume my homeward journey; but little did I dream of the seeds of widespread death and destruction which were even at that moment hatching at their fell maturity within the house I had just quitted.

2

I DID not go near the professor's house for a week after that night. When I explain that Mavis was also absent on a visit to relatives in Scotland, the intelligent reader may perceive cause and effect in the two circumstances. Consequently it was not until the morning of the seventh day that I became aware that anything was amiss. The professor himself brought the news. He burst in upon me unannounced as I sat at my solitary breakfast. Knowing his usual punctiliousness in matters of dress, I stared open-mouthed at the figure he presented. He had not shaved that morning; his tie was awry and his vest half-buttoned; his frock coat and trousers were smeared with dried mud. But it was the look of frozen horror on his ashen features which struck me dumb with a sense of impending calamity.

For a moment we remained staring at each other. Then, with something like a dry sob in his throat, he lurched forward and fell into the chair I pushed toward him.

''A terrible thing has happened,'' he gasped. ''Those amebas—you remember the jar you smashed?—they have increased enormously — the grounds are swarming with them—I can do nothing! And——'' He broke off abruptly in his almost incoherent explanation, shuddered, and sank his head upon his arms, too overcome to continue.

''Yes, yes!—go on. What else?'' I prompted, fearing I know not what.

''They—they've commenced to eat things!'' he answered with a kind of dull helplessness.

''*Things?* What kind of things?''

''Living things: chickens—the dog in the next house—and—my God! Harold—there's a child missing from next door but one! They haven't seen it since yesterday evening. They do not suspect the truth as yet, but I'm morally certain those cursed amebas have got it—would to heaven I had never set eyes on the things! It's terrible!—terrible!''

I could distinctly feel the hair rising at the back of my scalp. ''You really mean to say that slimy stuff has devoured a child?'' I asked.

A travesty of a smile twisted his trembling lips. ''They've proved my theory, all right; they've accustomed themselves to their environment fast enough. They're adaptable—oh yes! —infernally, fiendishly adaptable!'' And he gave vent to peal after peal of shrill, mirthless laughter.

I quickly crossed to the sideboard and poured out a stiff glass of the only restorative I had handy. He appeared calmer after I had persuaded him to drink it off, and a little color began to steal into his ashen face. Then, by dint of much questioning, I got the account of what had happened.

It seems that he had not attached the slightest importance to the smashing of the jar containing the amebas; he had allowed the fragments, with their slimy contents still adhering, to lie there until his man-servant had swept them up and deposited them in the dust-bin with the other rubbish. During the following days he had been busily engaged on the monograph which was to announce his discovery to the world. To the liberated amebas he never gave a single thought.

''I simply forgot all about them, Harold,'' he explained with an almost pathetic simplicity. ''Even when Timson came to me with tales about the mysterious demise of his chickens,

I did not suspect the truth. I went to bed that night without the slightest misgiving. I arose early, and, happening to glance from my window, I saw what appeared to be a heavy frost on the stone edging of the lake and the lawns which adjoin. A moment's reflection, however, convinced me that this could not be the explanation of the strange, grayish-white hue which covered everything. At the same moment I perceived that the ground itself seemed to be in motion. It was a slow, steady, billowing movement, slight but unmistakable—something like the flowing of the tide upon a river. As I looked the horrible truth burst upon me! It was my amebas increased and multiplied beyond measure!

"Instantly I connected their augmented numbers with the fate of the chickens and the dog next door, and hard upon this discovery came the full realization of the gravity of the matter. Now that these things were loose, given sufficient moisture and food—and you know how much rain we have had lately—there would be no saying where they would end. They must be destroyed immediately. But how?

"My heart sank as I looked at the slowly moving, slimy mass—there must have been millions upon millions of the creatures there. They had enjoyed a week of unrestricted freedom, remember; and you have seen with your own eyes how rapidly the things increase. Clearly I must act at once if I were to avert the consequences of my folly.

"I dressed, throwing on my clothes anyhow; then I descended to the margin of the lake. Such was the state of consternation into which my unexpected discovery had thrown me, that I did not even realize the personal danger I courted in placing myself within reach of that teeming horde of hungry organisms. It was not until—following that unerring instinct to move toward animal food which the things possess—a stream of them was approaching to cut off my retreat, that I saw my peril. I fled, and at once determined to come to you for your advice and help.

"But there was another shock awaiting me. The first person I encountered on emerging from my front gate was the maid from the house two doors away. She was about to call on me to inquire if I had seen anything of their little girl, who had not been seen since she went out in the garden to play the previous evening. I suppose I must have mumbled some reply to her question—heaven alone knows what I said!—then I pushed past her and hurried off. The girl was still staring after me when I looked back from the corner of the road. I am positive she must have suspected something. You must come back with me, Harold, at once. If those things get beyond my grounds there is no saying what mischief they will do!"

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded the agitated man to swallow a little breakfast; after which we at once set out for Shooters Hill. Before leaving, however, an instinctive desire to take some weapon assailed me. I accordingly made my way to my bedroom, loaded an old revolver I happened to possess, and slipped it into the side pocket of my coat; though exactly of what use that would have been against a swarm of microscopic creatures was not quite clear in my mind.

THE wild fears to which my mind had been a prey during the journey began to abate as we drew near the professor's house. Everything seemed as usual. It was still early in the morning; there had been rain overnight, and the newly burst foliage showed up fresh and green in the bright spring sunshine. Below, somewhere in the marshy woods to the right, a thrush was warbling as though in answer to the clear notes of a lark in the cloudless blue above.

Except for the songs of these feathered minstrels a deep and peaceful quiet reigned.

The house also appeared unchanged; not a trace of the gray slime could I detect either on the well-kept lawns or graveled pathways. The professor must have guessed the unspoken suspicion in my mind as I looked toward him.

"No, it was not a delusion," he assured me hastily. "The stuff was there all right; the question is—where is it now? The amebas have a great partiality for water, and I confess I am surprized that they should have quitted the vicinity of the lake. I wonder if it is possible——" He broke off short and pointed excitedly. "Yes! Look there!"

A narrow, but deep, ditch ran along the edge of the woods, and from it, barely discernible against the darker gray of the roadway, there overflowed a dully glistening stream which I knew could be nothing else but the dreaded slime. In itself the thing did not appear very alarming; in fact, from where we stood it might have passed entirely unnoticed were it not for the luster of its surface where it reflected the rays of the sun. Yet it covered the road from side to side and stretched downhill as far as the eye could reach.

The professor drew in his breath sharply.

"There it is," he said. "Luckily there is not much traffic so early in the day, otherwise——"

As he spoke we heard the sound of a motor ascending the opposite side of Shooters Hill. It must have been traveling at considerable speed, in spite of the steepness of the incline, for it came into sight over the crest almost immediately—a big green limousine resplendent with glittering fittings and immaculate enamel.

"We must stop them!" Boyd-Phulger cried, suddenly awakening to action. The next moment we were both standing in the track of the oncoming car with arms outstretched. It came to a standstill with grinding brakes, and a bloated, black-bearded face appeared at the near-side window.

"Vat 'sh matter, Morry?" the face inquired, addressing the driver in an accent certainly not acquired in these islands. "Vat 'sh stopping for?"

Professor Boyd-Phulger came forward, gesticulating vaguely.

"You can not go on," he cried. "It's not safe."

"Vat d'ye mean—not safe?" demanded the man at the window.

"Why, I've been down this hill hundreds of times," put in the liveried chauffeur with a grin. "It's as safe as houses!"

"But not now," the professor answered. "I assure you it is dangerous now."

The driver turned from regarding us and looked down the hill. "It's a clear road," he declared.

The professor shook his head. "It is far from being a clear road," he said gravely. At the same time he stepped nearer and laid his hand on the handle of the door.

"What's the matter with it, anyway?"

"There is death on it!"

"*Vot's* on it?" The passenger was palpably startled—as well he might be.

"Death!" repeated Professor Boyd-Phulger solemnly.

There was a pause in the conversation after this. Then another voice was heard, coming from the interior of the car.

"I'm surprized at you vasting time listening to a drunken cadger like 'im," came in thick, but unmistakably feminine accents. "Don't yer know ve're late already?"

The professor recoiled a pace and his face changed.

"You think I am drunk?" he asked very slowly.

The face at the window grinned. "Eider dat or mad."

I think it must have been at this moment that the professor realized for the first time the figure he was cutting; unshaven, dirty and dishev-eled, with his muddy frock-coat flap-ping in the wind. I thought it high time to intervene.

"It's quite true." I came forward as I spoke. "You can not possibly proceed."

The man's fat-encircled eyes nar-rowed to two suspicious slits. "You'd better be careful, young feller," he shouted truculently. "Dere's a police-station at der bottom of the hill."

"But you'll never live to reach it if you attempt to go on!" interrupted the professor, and his words must have sounded like a threat in the other's ears.

"A hold-up, eh?" He drew back from the window as he rapped the words out. "Ve'll soon see about that!"

"For heaven's sake be advised——" I began; then my voice died away in dismay. In pulling out my handker-chief to wipe the moisture from my forehead I had inadvertently caught my finger in the trigger-guard of the revolver, with the result that the luckless weapon came clattering out on the roadway in full view of every-body.

"Drive over der scoundrels, Mor-ry!" came the terrified roar to the driver, and I must admit that the man made a zealous effort to obey.

The near wheel missed me by inches as I sprang back when the car jerked into motion. The next instant it was swooping downhill as swiftly as its unbraked wheels could carry it.

"I tried to stop them—I did my best—didn't I, Harold?" wailed the professor, wringing his hands in hope-less despair. Then he suddenly fell silent, and together, like men en-tranced by some grim tragedy on the stage, we watched the progress of the rapidly dwindling car.

From our station on the brow of the hill we could see every detail of the scene which ensued. Swiftly and noiselessly as a swooping bird, the limousine drew nearer to the fatal stretch of roadway. At the last min-ute something of his previous cock-sureness must have evaporated from the driver's mind. No sooner had he crossed the margin of the slime than he applied his brakes suddenly. The car swerved, and then stopped. At such a distance it appeared to us no larger than a toy; the driver, as he alighted to ascertain what was amiss, looked like a tiny shadowgraph figure outlined against the shining back-ground. We saw him stoop, and fi-nally kneel down by the rear wheel. The next instant he was on his feet again, slipping, staggering, waving his arms wildly as though he battled with unseen foes.

Presently he was down again, this time full-length. Again and again he rose from that slimy mass, and after each fall it seemed to my excited imagination that the man was literal-ly disappearing before our eyes, though it was probably merely the ac-cumulating layer of slime on his uniform that made it appear so. Slower and slower grew his move-ments, until at last he fell and rose no more. At the same moment the other occupants emerged from the interior of the car. . . .

I averted my eyes. I had seen enough. When I took courage to look again the road appeared to be empty. Except for the derelict car at the foot of the hill the whole thing might have seemed but a ghastly nightmare.

A trembling grip upon my arm re-called me to myself.

"Quick!—pull yourself together!" cried the professor. "You must get downhill and warn the town before the slime reaches it."

"Downhill?" I repeated dully. "*There?*" I shook my head impa-tiently, for it seemed as if he were sending me to certain death.

"Not by that road," he explained quickly. "There are other ways of

reaching Woolwich. You must 'phone the Home Office from the first public call-box you pass. Then make your way to London and explain personally to the authorities. For myself, I must return to my laboratory."

"That may be dangerous," I objected. "If any of the slime is still remaining there——" I completed the sentence with a significant shrug.

But the professor was not to be deterred. "I have brought this menace into existence, and it is my duty to find some means of destroying it; otherwise the stuff will depopulate London."

"Barriers could be erected——" I began.

"Barriers?" cried Boyd-Phulger with a snort of contempt. "These organisms are capable of ascending a perfectly perpendicular surface. No mere mechanical means will prevent their progress toward the food they covet. But we are wasting precious time. Get to your task of warning the metropolis, and I will get to mine. Good-bye!"

Then he turned and left me without another word.

3

THE result of my endeavors to warn the authorities of the threatened peril may be summed up in two words: utter failure. First of all I called at Scotland Yard and told my story; but all they did was to read me a long lecture on the by-law which deals with straying farm stock.

". . . and of course all ferocious animals have to be under proper control whilst on the public highway," the official wound up gravely. "You'll be liable for any damage done by these here—what-d'ye-call-'em—hambones?"

"Amebas," I corrected.

He scratched his head with the handle of his pen. "Never heard of sech things," he confessed. "How many of them have got loose?"

"Oh, a few hundred millions," I answered wearily.

The man regarded me fixedly for a full minute. "How big are they?" he then asked.

"You would need a strong microscope to distinguish each one——" I commenced to explain, but he cut me short by rising suddenly to his feet.

"That's enough!" he told me sternly. "You'll find yourself in the wrong shop if you try to play your practical jokes here!"

Then he ordered me out and called a constable to accelerate my departure.

Though I fared no better at the Home Office, the clerk there was more tactful in his incredulity. At any rate he condescended to take my name and address before dismissing me with what was evidently his stock phrase.

"Your communication will be attended to in due course," he assured me blandly. "Good-morning."

As a last desperate resort I tried the newspaper offices—and narrowly escaped being arrested as a wandering lunatic. Weary and disheartened, I resolved to return to Shooters Hill.

I bought an early edition of an evening paper in Cannon Street Station, and scanned its pages eagerly during the journey down. The fact that there was no mention of the appearance of the slime raised my hopes considerably, though I could see that the brief account of the "Motor Fatality on Shooters Hill" referred to the tragedy I had witnessed that morning. But the moment I alighted at Woolwich Arsenal Station I noticed signs that something unusual was afoot. There was a knot of khaki-clad infantrymen lounging about the door of the waiting-room, whilst one of their number, in full equipment down to steel helmet and gas mask, marched up and down the platform with fixed bayonet.

It seemed that gun-fire had been heard during the afternoon, coming

from the direction of the Common, and everybody was talking about the cordon which the military had drawn round Shooters Hill, diverting all traffic, including the tram and motor services. My cautious inquiries went to show that the general public had no suspicion of the real state of affairs.

"Manoovers—that's what it is," declared one man with whom I entered into conversation. "The sojers have been marchin' about and firin' all the arternoon. I heard 'em meself. Foolishness I calls it—sending all the traffic miles out o' their way a busy day like this. Just red tape and foolishness."

Further inquiry on my part elicited the fact that it was no unusual occurrence for the military to perform their evolutions on the stretch of common which abuts on Shooters Hill; consequently the firing and warlike preparations had occasioned no alarm.

On quitting the station, I found the usual Saturday market to be in full swing in the adjoining Beresford Square. Turning to the right, I walked up the hill between the barracks until I came to the picket which held the road. For a while I chatted with the sergeant in charge; but he either could not, or would not, give me any inkling of what was going on.

"Road stopped, sir; C. O.'s orders," was all I could get out of him; so, mainly to distract my thoughts, I retraced my steps to the crowded market-square; afterward wandering into the side streets where old clothes, eatables, cheap drapery and mock jewelry were being noisily vended. At one corner a quack doctor was holding forth the merits of his highly colored cure-all; at another, a Salvation Army band added its music to the clamor.

It was while I was listening to the witticisms of a raucous-voiced cheapjack that I became aware of the sound of rapidly approaching hoof-beats. The next moment a party of cavalrymen came galloping down Wellington Street, shouting their loudest as they rode:

"Clear out! Get out of the way!" they were crying. "The slime!—the slime is coming! The slime!"

Those in the crowd stared at them uncomprehendingly.

"Wot's the trouble nah?" asked a man near me.

"Blimy! is it anuvver war?" ventured another.

"The slime!—the slime is coming!"

Uselessly the soldiers repeated the words as they forced a passage with their horses through the crowd. As they came nearer I saw that each man wore his gas mask in position. This puzzled me at the time, for it was only later that I learned of the futile attempt that had been made earlier in the evening to destroy the advancing swarm by means of poison gas. The soldiers passed out of sight in the direction of Plumstead Road, still repeating their monotonous slogan, and in the path they had made I forced my way through the press until I reached a spot where I could obtain an uninterrupted view of the direction whence they had come. This was a long, straight, inclined thoroughfare stretching up toward Woolwich Common and the barracks, forming one of the main streets of the town.

For a time I could see nothing unusual; then, as I continued to look, I noticed the people on the pavements turning and gazing up the hill.

A woman at my side suddenly addressed me. "Wot's up, guvnor?" she whimpered. " 'Ave they all gone barmy? Wot wiv——"

A hoarse murmur of apprehension from a thousand throats broke in upon her words. A yard-high tide of gray had come into sight on top of the hill and was creeping downward toward the densely packed crowd below. The murmur swelled louder and ever louder; cries and shrill screams began to mingle with it. On the hill before

us people were running—slipping—falling. . . .

"Run! run!—all of you!" I shouted to those around me, and tried with hurried words to make them understand their danger. But for all the attention they paid I might just as well have saved my breath. For ten precious minutes I wasted my warnings on the air, and all the while the sea of slime rolled down toward us. Not until it had passed the Hippodrome did I bethink myself of my own safety. Then I turned to the right and ran in the direction of the Free Ferry Pier, intending to lose no time in putting the width of the river between myself and that deadly, creeping mass.

Well it was for me that I acted in time. I was barely half-way along Powis Street when a long-sustained crying arose from the direction of the square I had just quitted. Commencing with a low wail, it rose abruptly to a shrill crescendo of mortal fear, punctuated every now and again by a sharp staccato rattle of rifle shots, the whole forming such a harmony of horror as I trust never to hear again. The sounds died away as I halted to listen, only to be replaced by the thunder of many approaching feet. Trapped on three sides, the mob in the square had taken its only avenue of escape and was even then pouring down the street which lay parallel to the one I was in. I again began to run, reaching the ferry approach in time to mingle with the vanguard of the fleeing mob as it swerved round from the right, evidently making for the same means of safety as myself.

This being a Saturday night, two boats were running. One, already filled with its usual complement of foot-passengers and vehicles, was waiting at the pier with steam up, ready to cast off in time to pass her sister-ship in midstream. As I raced across the gangway I could see the captain on the bridge staring in surprize at the crowd running toward his boat.

"What the blazes is the matter?" he called to me as I passed.

"The slime! Death!" was all I could pant out; for I was almost breathless.

"What?" he yelled back, and repeated his question as the ever-increasing crowd began to throng across the gangways. But the only answer he received must have served only to make his bewilderment greater:

"The slime! the slime! Cast off! Hurry!" they shouted, "The slime!—the slime is coming!"

Now I am very loth to seem to cast an imputation on the conduct of a man who is no longer able to defend himself; yet I can not help thinking that the captain of the ferry fell into a grave error of judgment in not casting off immediately. Even granting that the frenzied cries of the crowd were meaningless to him, their obvious terror—to say nothing of the rifle-fire—should have warned him of the urgent need for haste. In spite of this, it was not until the foremost wave of the pursuing slime had actually reached the pier, and had commenced to pour down the broad gangways on the upper deck which admit the vehicular traffic, that he awoke to a full realization of the peril.

"Cast off all!" he bawled suddenly. "Cast off, I tell you!"

At the same time he jammed the engine-room telegraph over to "Full speed ahead."

But the men who should have been standing by the hawsers were no longer at their posts. The huge paddle-wheels began to churn the dun-colored waters to a creamy froth; the hawsers strained and groaned; but the heavy, broad-beamed vessel remained immovably fastened to the pier.

The trickling rivulets of slime had become a broad, fast-flowing stream, which, having covered the upper deck,

now dripped and splashed on the deck below. Shrieks began to mingle with the hoarse orders and the grinding of the engines. . . .

At this I hesitated no longer. If I must die, I preferred a cleaner and more merciful fate than that which awaited me on that boat. Not a score of yards away was a string of moored barges. I ran forward to the bow—in order to be as far as possible from the seething maelstrom set up by the revolving paddles—sprang upon the grating, and plunged head foremost into the river.

Striking out with all my might under the surface, I rose well clear of the deadly suction, and in a few minutes had reached the nearest barge and clambered aboard. Then I dashed the water from my eyes and looked back at the ferry-boat.

One of the mooring warps had already been cast off, or severed, for her stern swung well clear of the jetty. Beside the lower gangway, a man—a laborer by his clothes—was sawing at the forward hawser with a jack-knife. The strands began to part even as I looked. Then the weakened rope gave way with a report like a cannon-shot, and the ferry, under the impulse of her powerful paddles, shot out into the river, steering erratically and rending the air with long, frightened blasts from her siren.

The slime had accomplished its work only too well; it was clear that the vessel was completely out of control. Alarmed, and probably not a little puzzled, at the extraordinary evolutions of her consort, the other ferry-boat had approached in order, it seemed, to render assistance, and now lay about a cable's length away, with her paddles slowly flapping to keep her in position against the strongly running tide. Straight toward it the other vessel was driving at full speed! A collision seemed inevitable; yet the steersman must have retained some glimmering of consciousness still. At the last minute the helm was swung hard over to port and the ship veered round, rushing past the other's stern with only a few feet of clear water showing between. But it must have been the last expiring effort of the man at the wheel. Instead of straightening out on her course again, the boat continued to swerve in response to her ported helm; until, having described a complete circle with undiminished speed, she crashed into the other ship's broadside, just abaft the paddle-box.

The heavy bluff bow seemed to cut through sponson and plating like a knife through cheese. In a few seconds the rammed ship had a list so great that the vehicles on the upper deck came rushing down the incline, to plunge, one after another, through the bulwarks into the water beneath. Presently she turned completely over, wrenching herself free from her destroyer as she did so, and the roar of her exploding boilers preceded the final plunge.

Then the other ship, apparently undamaged and with engines still slowly revolving, described yet another stately circle, until, her progress growing slower and ever slower by reason of the diminishing head of steam in the unstoked boilers, she finally came to rest with her horrible cargo near the wharf belonging to the Beckton Gas Works.

In such tragic fashion was the slime transferred to the north bank of the Thames.

4

I THINK it must have been some purely subconscious instinct that directed my footsteps homeward, for of my movements immediately after the destruction of the ferry I retain only a vague and confused memory. I have a dim recollection of having rowed ashore to some steps near the Dockyard, in a dingey which I found moored to the barge, and I remember seeing the advancing slime not a hundred yards off as I crossed the

Lower Woolwich Road. But what route I pursued between that point and my house at Eltham I have not the faintest idea.

Certain it is that I must have tramped throughout the whole night, for the east was already gray with the dawn when I found myself seated at my upstairs window, gazing dully out at the country around. It was not until the pangs of hunger asserted themselves that I arose to seek food, and a strange assortment it was that I at last collected: half a loaf of stale bread, a tin of pineapple, and a bottle of ale. As I sat down at the table I realized with a start that I had not broken my fast since that hurried meal with Professor Boyd-Phulger, in that same room, twenty-four hours earlier. Twenty-four hours!—I seemed to have lived through an eternity of horror since he had brought the news to me. I wondered what was happening now. Had the progress of the slime been checked, or was it even now pouring through the streets of London?

Moved by a sudden thought, I left my meal half eaten and, crossing to the radio set, connected up the batteries. The first words which issued from the loud-speaker were part of the personal proclamation by King George ordering the immediate and systematic evacuation of the capital.

It would be superfluous for me to give the full text of that amazing speech; sufficient to say that I listened to each word with a sense of incredulous bewilderment. The idea of the largest, wealthiest, and most populous city in the world being abandoned to the very lowest form of organic life seemed utterly fantastic. Yet, even then, I could not but admire the prudence and foresight with which every detail had been thought out and every contingency provided for. Section by section, beginning with those districts nearest the slime, the inhabitants were to lock up and leave their houses and shops. Every motor vehicle within the Greater London area was to be requisitioned to convey them, street by street, parish by parish, to the various railway termini, where special trains would be waiting ready to leave at once for the great camps and improvised billets which were being prepared in the Midlands and North of England. Squadrons of military airplanes were to be dispatched at once to rescue those unfortunate families who had already been hemmed in by the advancing gray tide. General mobilization was ordered. Heavy artillery, tanks, gas, liquid fire—in short, all the resources of modern warfare—were to be brought into play to destroy the deadly menace. Calmness and orderly conduct were enjoined upon all. Ex-service men were appealed to that they might enrol themselves in the new emergency battalions which were being formed to assist the police and military in their twofold task of destroying the slime and preserving order. All coming forward were to receive rations and infantry pay. Looting would be punished by death.

Three times I heard this epochal speech repeated, each time on a different wave-length. Shortly after the conclusion of the third repetition I heard the well-known voice of Professor Boyd-Phulger issue from the instrument before me.

"Boyd-Phulger calling! Hullo! Hullo everybody—anybody! Professor Boyd-Phulger calling from Shooters Hill!"

It was the merest ghost of a whisper, but it thrilled me like a trumpet-call. My hands were shaking with excitement as I turned the knobs to tune in to the wave-length on which he and I were accustomed to communicate. Little did we dream, when we had fitted up those sets as a mere spare-time hobby, what desperate issues would one day hang upon them!

"Hullo!" I shouted into the microphone when I had made the adjustment. "It is I—Harold—calling."

Something that sounded like a sigh of relief floated back from the ether. "Thank heaven, I have got you at last! I've been trying to make you hear, off and on, all through the night."

"Where are you speaking from?" I queried.

"The laboratory at my house. The place is surrounded by the slime. I am entirely cut off. My batteries are running down—I can't get London at all, and there's not much time to waste——"

"Yes, yes—go on," I urged in an agony of apprehension as the voice faltered.

"I've barricaded the place and stopped all crevices as well as I was able, but the stuff is finding ways to enter in spite of my efforts. It can only be a question of time now. I know it is impossible for me to escape, but I have been experimenting continuously since I parted from you, and I have made a discovery which will save London yet. You must take my message and try to communicate with headquarters. If you succeed it will mean the entire destruction of the terrible scourge I have brought upon humanity. . . ."

His voice had tailed off weakly and finally ceased altogether. I shouted frantic appeals into the microphone for several minutes before he spoke again:

"I was forced to leave the instrument"—his voice was but a husky whisper—"the slime has found entrance to this room. Ah! . . ."

A deadly fear gripped my heart as the voice again ceased.

"But your discovery?" I cried. "Tell me of the discovery which will destroy the slime."

He could not have understood my question, for he went on aimlessly: "By the sounds which have reached me I surmise that the military have been shelling the stuff with high explosives. Such a proceeding is worse than useless. Without actually killing the organisms, it will but serve to spread them over a wider area in which to increase and multiply. It is impossible to kill them by ordinary methods; even if you cut them in pieces you but hasten their natural increase by fission. Nothing but the combination of chemicals that I discovered last night will exterminate them utterly."

Ever since the professor had first commenced to speak I had been conscious of an increasing weakness in his voice. Had the slime, I wondered, already begun its deadly work on him? I waited in an agony of impatience. Would he carry to the grave, untold, the secret that would save humanity?

"Tell me the formula of the antidote," I called to him. "Tell me at once—before it is too late."

I waited his answer breathlessly. Twice an indistinct murmur issued from the loud-speaker, as though the man essayed to speak but could not. Then in a gasping, jerky whisper came the words:

"They've got me, Harold! . . . I'm done for! . . . Tell—the authorities—the formula to—destroy the slime—is——"

"Yes?" I prompted.

But the only reply was an unintelligible babble of words and moans; and when these died away there came a noise like that made by a falling body; then a deep silence which no entreaty of mine could break.

5

EXACTLY how long elapsed between the death of the professor and the coming of Mavis I have never been able to determine. The event had plunged me into a stupor almost as complete as that which follows a violent physical blow; so that seconds, minutes and hours might have passed alike unheeded.

So humanity was doomed! Such was the tenor of my vague and confused thoughts. The victorious ame-

bas, invigorated and augmented in numbers by the death of each fresh victim, would sweep unchecked over London, a flood of destruction as remorseless as it was irresistible, as deadly as it was unkillable. And after London—what then? What guarantee was there that the slime would not continue on its way, eating up village after village, town after town, city after city, from one end of the kingdom to the other? And who could say that the mischief would end even then? Only twenty-one miles separate the coasts of England and France; and it seemed as if the amebas were as much at home in water as on land. They might dominate Europe — perhaps the whole world.

There is nothing new or strange in the fact of whole species of highly specialized mammals being entirely wiped off the face of the earth. The study of paleontology brings to light thousands of instances where such forms have, in past ages, become utterly extinct; indeed, so much so that we are only aware that they ever existed by the fossilized bones which have been occasionally dug up. Could it be possible, I mused, that the mighty, ever-changing cycle of nature was at that moment nearing the end of another revolution? Was man—the highest and most advanced type of life upon the earth—about to be in his turn supplanted by another form, and that the very humblest of known organisms—nay, the primitive ooze from which all life had been slowly evolved during those countless ages that stretch between the present day and that far-off, unknown period, when the cooling earth was first rendered habitable to organic life? The very thought was overwhelming. And yet, why should it not be true? Virtually every form of life has had its day and then perished utterly and completely. That was the law of nature. Why should mankind be an exception to the rule?

I was aroused from these pessimistic meditations by the sound of a motor-car drawing up before the front garden gate, followed immediately afterward by a ring at the bell. Throwing open the door, I found myself, to my unbounded amazement, face to face with Mavis.

"You?" I almost shouted. "I thought you safe in Scotland. Why have you ventured here?"

"I read about the slime in the papers, and returned this morning. I tried to get to Shooters Hill, but the roads are impassable. So I made my way here, hoping to find my uncle with you."

It is a strange fact that her presence brought home to me something which I should have realized long before: namely, the great danger I courted in remaining so near the area occupied by the slime.

"How far were you able to get toward Shooters Hill?" I asked quickly.

"Not beyond that bend in the road," she answered, pointing to a curve about three hundred yards distant.

So near? I felt my blood run cold at the imminence of the peril.

"There is no time to lose," I told her. "We must get to London at once. There we can get a train which will carry us far from all danger."

"But—my uncle?" she cried. "Is he not here with you?"

I shook my head and averted my eyes. "He is beyond the reach of the slime." I could not summon up courage to tell her the truth. "Do not worry about him, but come before it is too late."

Fearing further questions, I gently took her hand and led her down the hall toward the front door. Suddenly I stopped dead and a groan of despair broke from my lips.

Stretching between ourselves and the waiting car was a broad stream of heaving gray, which, following the contour of the ground, had already

joined another stream coming from the rear of the house, cutting off our retreat. We were trapped!

It was a mere instinctive action with which I shut and locked the door. It was futile to hope that such a barrier would be effective against that all-pervading, living sea. The instincts of the animalcules would lead them to worm their way through crevices, scale perpendicular surfaces, anything, in fact, to gain access to the food they coveted, which —my blood froze at the thought—in this case meant my own living body and that of the woman I loved!

In a few hurried sentences I explained the peril in which we stood. Her face grew white as death, but there was no tremor in her voice as she asked: "Then it is the end?"

"Yes." I hardly recognized the sound of my own voice.

"There is no hope whatever?" she went on.

I pointed to the film of gray that was beginning to obscure the lower window-panes. "In two hours, at the most, all will be over."

Beyond nodding her head slightly she made no sign that she had heard.

Death. . . . Would it come like the closing of a tiny door, or as the opening of a far greater one? For a long time I strove to keep my mind from contemplation of the manner in which the end would come; yet, in spite of my resolution, my eyes would return to the slight, graceful figure opposite me. The thought of that foul, creeping slime enveloping those fair limbs almost goaded me to frenzy. I leaped to my feet.

"No, by heaven!" I cried aloud. "Any way but that!"

Even as I said the words I was conscious of a sagging weight at my hip. It was the revolver. Half mechanically I drew it out, and our eyes met above the glittering barrel. There was no need for words on my part.

"Yes," she said slowly, answering the question in my eyes. "Kiss me. Then shoot me dead."

And as she spoke a slender stream of gray entered beneath the door.

I raised the weapon until it touched the sunny curls, and then closed my eyes. With an unspoken prayer for forgiveness in my heart, I pulled the trigger.

I dared not look upon my handiwork. My eyes were still closed tightly as I raised the weapon to my own temple.

Simultaneously with the crash of the explosion came blessed oblivion. . . .

"FEELING better?" asked a voice near me.

I slowly opened my eyes. Above me, looking blurred and indistinct, hovered the face of Professor Boyd-Phulger. For a while I gazed stupidly; then recollection rushed upon me. I staggered unsteadily to my feet as the explanation of his presence dawned slowly on my mind.

"Of course—you, too, are dead."

"Dead?" he repeated, blinking behind his glasses. Then he stepped forward and forced me back into the chair. The grip of his hand on my shoulder seemed a trifle too heavy for that of a disembodied spirit.

"Where am I?" I asked faintly.

"In my laboratory. I was just about to ascertain the extent to which the amebas were susceptible to anesthesia when you happened to catch a whiff of the nitrous oxide. It sent you off to bye-bye as peacefully as an infant in its mother's arms."

I placed my hand to my throbbing head. Was it possible that my horrible experience was but a drugged nightmare?

"Tell me," I said suddenly, "how long have I been unconscious?"

Professor Boyd-Phulger glanced at his watch.

"Exactly eight minutes," he said.

The THIRD MAN

by George Norsworthy

"A wonderful serenity came over the bearded face."

THIS announcement appeared in the personal column of the *Times* and Kenneth Warwick read it a second and a third time:

Wanted, a "down and out," age 22-30, to act as private secretary to a wealthy and eccentric old man. Public School and Oxford University education essential. Only those who would be prepared to face death with perfect fortitude, should the occasion arise, need consider the matter. Apply, in the first instance, by letter, enclosing evidence of age and education, to Henry Pogmack, Dean's Court, near Lewes, Sussex.

"Well, I'm——;" then, realizing that he was not alone, he finished the remark to himself.

Kenneth had been coming to the public library day after day in the hope that he might read of someone requiring a young man, like himself, with no other qualifications but a public school and university education. He was still attending Bart's medical schools and the fees were paid for another year, but that would not help him unless he could earn sufficient money to enable him to live.

He had hoped that he might get work which he could do in the evenings, and perhaps on Sundays, so that he would be free to continue at the hospital, but no such good luck came his way; in fact it seemed very doubtful if he would be able to get employment of any kind. He had answered innumerable advertisements, but all with the same depressing result. His education did not seem to attract anyone, and he had come to the conclusion that he would have to regard his two years at Bart's as so much lost time, think no more about

Beryl Summers (he could not expect her to wait for him indefinitely), and betake himself to Canada, where he would attempt to drown his misery in hard manual work.

Kenneth's case was certainly a hard one. Not only was he keen on his studies, but he had just won a scholarship when his father died with dramatic suddenness, leaving nothing but a bankrupt business and a number of personal debts. Kenneth had only one living relative, an uncle, whom he had not seen for several years, and there were very good reasons why he would not think of seeking help in that direction.

When he got back to his little room in Guildford Street, Kenneth wrote to Mr. Henry Pogmack offering his services as a private secretary. He enclosed evidence of his age and education and explained his position in detail. He stated that his total fortune amounted to less than a pound, that he had no qualifications whatever beyond being able to drive and look after a car, and he ended by saying that he was quite prepared to face death with fortitude, should the occasion arise.

Five days later Kenneth received the following reply:

Dean's Court,
Nr Lewes,
Sussex.

December 11th, 1928.

Dear Mr. Warwick,

I thank you for your letter of the 6th inst. with enclosures. It appears to me that you are the very man I want and I shall, therefore, be glad if you will be so kind as to call on me here at 4 o'clock in the afternoon of Friday 13th.

Please find a one pound note enclosed. I trust that this will cover the expenses of your journey.

Believe me yours sincerely,

HENRY POGMACK.

Kenneth read the letter with trembling hands and eyes that looked as if they might drop out of his head at any moment. Was it really possible that he might get the job? Of course he would be one of dozens who would be applying, but he might have a chance. There was no mention of salary; perhaps it would not be very much, and he would almost certainly have to give up the hospital work, but he would be self-supporting, it might lead to something better, and it would at least enable him to remain in England and see Beryl occasionally.

The following day Kenneth arrayed himself in his least shabby clothes and took an afternoon train to Lewes, where he learned that Dean's Court was on the other side of the Ouse valley; so he set out to walk the five miles.

IT WAS an uninteresting walk and it was not made more pleasant by a drizzling rain. From time to time he asked his way and eventually came to the house, which stood alone in a sheltered hollow of the Downs, shut in by a semicircle of trees. It was approached by a long carriage drive which was overgrown with weeds and grass. Everywhere there was evidence of neglect. Trees and shrubs needed cutting back; fences lay where they had fallen; leaves lay in rotting heaps where the wind had swept them; and the house itself appeared to be in the same dilapidated state as the grounds.

Dean's Court was a long, low building, faced with cement which was cracking and, in places, showed the bricks beneath. All the windows were closed and curtainless, giving the place the appearance of being uninhabited; but smoke was curling lazily upward from one of the squat chimneys.

Kenneth advanced up the drive with fast-falling spirits. He shuddered at the thought of having to come and live in this decaying and lonely place, but he realized that he was in no position to choose. He mounted the short flight of mossy steps which led to the front door and he pulled at the bell. It gave easily

in his hand, but there was no sound within. The bell was, presumably, broken; so he knocked upon the sun-blistered panel with his stick and stood listening.

After a few minutes there was a sound of a door closing, then shuffling footsteps, the turning of a key in the lock, and bolts being shot. The door opened a few inches and an old man, who must have stood well over six feet and was proportionately broad, with massive, square-set shoulders, stood looking at him with an inscrutable expression. He had a large, sallow face which was partly concealed by a short, shaggy beard; he had thick, bushy eyebrows, gray, penetrating eyes, and thin, colorless lips, behind which Kenneth could see two broken and tobacco-stained teeth. He wore no collar; his shirt was open at the throat; his shabby trousers hung down about his ankles; and the old dressing-gown which he was wearing was in need of much repair.

For a moment Kenneth stared at this strange-looking person without speaking; then he asked, "Is Mr. Pogmack at home?"

In reply the old man opened the door wide and, without uttering a sound, motioned Kenneth to enter. Then he closed the door, locked it and shot the bolts.

Kenneth found himself in a large, almost dark hall which smelt damp and musty and was bare of all furnishings. To the right and at the far end were several doors; on the left was a broad staircase up which the old man led the way. On reaching the landing they passed down a long corridor, and, opening a door, the old man stood aside to allow Kenneth to enter a room.

As he entered Kenneth looked round and was a little surprized to find that the room was comfortably if shabbily furnished as a sitting-room; a striking contrast to the hall and carpetless stairs. The furniture was old and much worn, and the faded rugs on the floor were threadbare in many places. In the center of the room stood a large table, littered with books and papers. There was an armchair on each side of the fireplace where a cheerful fire was burning. Between the two chairs was a small table upon which tea was laid. A kettle was singing merrily on the hob.

"You wish to see Mr. Pogmack?" said the old man, speaking for the first time. His voice was soft and cultured and he smiled pleasantly. Kenneth noticed that he had closed the door.

"Yes, I have an appointment with him."

"I am Mr. Pogmack. Won't you sit down?" indicating one of the chairs.

Kenneth accepted the invitation.

"I am afraid that you must have had a very unpleasant walk," said Mr. Pogmack, as he began to make the tea. "We are rather out of the world here, but it is an extremely pleasant spot for anyone who wishes to be quiet. Do you take sugar?"

"Please."

"Pray help yourself to whatever you may want and do not stand on any ceremony."

Mr. Pogmack handed Kenneth a cup and then sat down in the other armchair. He was scarcely seated when he leant back with a groan and his huge, hairy hands clutched violently at his chest. His eyes were closed, his lips compressed, and his breathing came in labored spasms.

"Can I do anything?" cried Kenneth, as he got up.

There was no reply, but after some moments the old man shook his head. His face was distorted with the agony which he was suffering.

There was a pause and then he murmured, "It will pass."

Kenneth sat down again and gazed with horror at the huge form that lay back helplessly before him. Pres-

ently Mr. Pogmack opened his eyes and uttered a sound which was half groan, half sigh, and he looked across at Kenneth as if he did not see him.

"It comes on like that, quite suddenly," he said in jerks, as he tried to drag himself into a more upright position. "I never know when it is coming. My God! I shall be glad when it is over."

"What is it?" Kenneth asked.

Mr. Pogmack did not reply for some moments; he just sat there with his eyes closed, a cold sweat trickling from his forehead.

"Ah! you have not seen it before?" he said at length. "You will when you start your clinical work. Angina, mild attacks as yet. Each one is worse than the last, and so it will go on until one of them finishes me off. My only hope is that the end will come soon. Go on with your tea, Mr. Warwick; don't take any notice of me. The pain has gone now, but it leaves me much exhausted. I shall be all right in a minute."

KENNETH took a slice of the beautifully cut bread and butter and wondered if the old man had cut it himself. The tea-table was as carefully arranged as if it had been prepared by a butler, but Kenneth had a feeling that Mr. Pogmack was alone in the house.

"You see," said Mr. Pogmack, as he sat up and poured out his own tea, "I am better now, but it is absolute hell while it lasts."

"Can nothing be done?" asked Kenneth.

"No, Mr. Warwick, nothing can be done. I have just got to put up with it until the end comes, and that may be any time now."

"Have you no one to look after you?"

"No. I do not want anyone fussing round. The less I am worried the sooner I shall go, and that's all that I care about. Now, tell me a little more about yourself. Of course you told me a great deal in your letter, but not everything. I understand that your chief concern is that you should be able to continue your medical studies?"

"Yes; I want that more than anything."

"You would scarcely be able to go on with them if you came here?"

"No, but I have got to live."

"Of course, of course. Are you—er—keen because you want to make money or because you like the work?"

"I like it."

"You mean that you would still go on if, say, you suddenly inherited a small fortune?"

"I most certainly should."

"And there is not much chance of that happening?"

"None whatever," declared Kenneth.

Mr. Pogmack sipped at his tea and then leant back in his chair. For a while he was silent.

"I think that you mentioned something about a girl in your letter," he said at last.

"Yes."

"You are engaged to be married?"

"More or less."

A look of annoyance came into Mr. Pogmack's face.

"You must forgive me if I appear to be impertinently inquisitive," he said, "but, as you will realize before you leave this house, it is of the utmost importance that I should understand your position. What do you mean, exactly, when you say that you are more or less engaged?"

"I should marry at once if I could afford to keep a wife, but at the moment I can not even keep myself any longer."

"And you have no prospects?"

"None whatever."

"Have you no relatives who might help you?"

"Only an uncle who quarreled

with my father some three or four years ago."

"What did they quarrel about?"

"Over some matter connected with their business. They were partners, and it was due to my uncle's behavior that my father failed."

"And you do not wish to ask your uncle for help?"

"I would sooner shoot myself," declared Kenneth, convincingly.

"You are determined to fight your own battle?"

"Yes. I do not want charity or favors from anyone."

"I congratulate you, Mr. Warwick, I congratulate you," said Mr. Pogmack with an approving nod of his head. "There is a modern tendency, which I deprecate, for young people to rely too much upon their elders. I admire your viewpoint, Mr. Warwick. I feel that yours is a very hard case and that you deserve encouragement."

Mr. Pogmack leant back again and gazed into the fire. The room had become almost dark except for the glow from the flickering flames. Kenneth sat watching the old man, wondering what was passing through his mind. The thought of having to come and live in this house was almost as unpleasant as the prospect of the Canadian prairies; and yet there was something about this strange person that appealed to Kenneth. He was a gentleman, he had understanding and he could sympathize with those who were less fortunate than himself.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Pogmack, suddenly sitting upright and fixing his eyes upon Kenneth, "you wonder why I have troubled you to come all this way?"

"I—I understood that you wanted a secretary," replied Kenneth, with some surprize.

"A secretary! But of what use would a secretary be to me? An old man, my life's work is done, I stand on the threshold—the great, mysterious, dreaded threshold of the unknown, ready to pass over when the word of command reaches my ears."

Mr. Pogmack's voice had risen in pitch and volume, and a strange radiance had come into his massive face.

"But you advertised for a secretary," Kenneth pointed out.

"Yes, that is true, perfectly true," said Mr. Pogmack, calmly, as he got up and poked the fire. "You compel me to admit that I got you here on false pretenses. I apologize, but I can assure you that I had a very good reason for asking you to come."

"Then will you kindly tell me what you require of me?" said Kenneth, making no attempt to disguise his annoyance.

"Most certainly I will," replied the old man, returning to his chair and sitting back with his hands thrust into the pockets of his dressing-gown. "I fear that you will regard me as a very strange person, but I warned you that I was eccentric, did I not? I asked you to come here for one reason and one reason only."

Mr. Pogmack paused and looked very straight at Kenneth.

"I wonder if you could guess what that reason was, Mr. Warwick?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," Kenneth replied, shortly.

"I am not at all surprized; I will tell you; I asked you to come here in order that I might murder you."

KENNETH sat perfectly motionless, gazing at Pogmack, who was smiling at him benignly. It seemed incredible that this pleasant, gentle, courteous man could be a lunatic, and, apparently, a homicidal lunatic. And why, Kenneth asked himself, had he chosen him as his victim?

For some moments neither of them spoke. There was not a sound in the room except the crackling of the fire. Mr. Pogmack continued to hold Ken-

neth with that benign smile. Kenneth's eyes passed from the old man's face to the pockets of the dressing-gown. What were those pockets concealing besides the two hands?

"You are wondering why I should want to murder you," Mr. Pogmack said, at length.

"The thought did cross my mind."

Kenneth strove to appear perfectly calm. He instinctively felt that it would be wise if he could show no signs of fear. He had never come into contact with an insane person but he had always understood that such people were sometimes amenable to being humored and that opposition only tended to aggravate their madness. He made a mental note of Mr. Pogmack's size and compared it with his own. The old man was by far the bigger, and Kenneth knew that lunatics are often vested with Herculean strength. No, he would try to avoid a physical conflict. Leaving individual strength out of the question, he felt certain that a weapon of some kind was concealed in one of those pockets.

"I will tell you why I want to kill you," said Mr. Pogmack, speaking perfectly calmly and at the same time drawing a small automatic pistol from his dressing-gown pocket, and allowing it to rest upon his knee. "As I have already told you, I am suffering from an agonizing and incurable disease. I can not possibly live for more than a few weeks, at the most, and the end may come at any moment. My condition, so the doctors say, has been brought about by overwork. I will not tell you how I have made my money or what my real name is. Pogmack, as you may have guessed, is merely a *nom-de-guerre*, which I have assumed because I am particularly well known in certain circles and I wish to pass out without attracting any attention. When I go no one will know who I really am. It is all arranged. I have realized all my property; this house I rent, my modest fortune, which has practically killed me in the making, lies in a bank in the name of Pogmack."

He paused and sipped at his tea. His face had become drawn and his forehead was moist with perspiration.

"May I give you some more tea?" he asked, casually.

"No, thanks."

"This does not bore you—what I am telling you?"

"I am most interested," Kenneth said, with an effort.

"Well, for close on fifty years I have worked like a Trojan, and, although I have spent my money freely, I have managed to accumulate a nice little fortune. I have traveled all over the world; I have entertained lavishly; I have mixed with the highest personages in the land; I have sat in the House of Commons; I have owned race-horses and racing-yachts; I have been married; I have had children and I have lost them; in fact I have experienced most of the joys and sufferings of life, but never that of seeing a man killed, and, moreover, seeing a man killed by my own hand."

Mr. Pogmack paused and mopped his forehead with a large colored handkerchief.

"Would that be counted as a joy or a suffering?" Kenneth forced himself to say.

Mr. Pogmack looked a little surprized. "That I can not tell you until the experiment is made, Mr. Warwick," he replied. "It might be either. I particularly wish to see how a man behaves at the moment when death is about to descend upon him."

"May I ask if I am the first would-be secretary whom you have interviewed?" Kenneth asked as he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket.

In a moment Mr. Pogmack was on his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in

the most courtly manner, as he reached to the table for a cigarette case, which he handed to Kenneth. "I had not realized that you had finished eating. You can afford to smoke?"

"You sent me a pound, Mr. Pogmack."

"To be sure I did," said the old man as he sat down again. "I had quite forgotten. Now, what was it that you asked me? Ah, yes! Have I interviewed anyone else? Yes, you are the third man whom I have interviewed."

"Did you kill the others?"

"No, they were not worthy of the trouble."

"In what way?" asked Kenneth.

"I can hardly explain to you, for I doubt if you would appreciate the subtleties of my requirements."

"And you think that I am suitable?"

Kenneth fully realized the fatuousness of his questions, but he was playing for time. He did not for a moment question the genuineness of the sudden heart attack, of which he had just been a witness, and he was hoping that there might be another which would give him an opportunity of making his escape.

"I think that you are eminently suitable," replied Pogmack, so calmly and with such sincerity that it was indeed difficult for Kenneth to believe that he was in the presence of a madman.

"Are you seeing anyone else, after me?"

"No. I have made my choice and I am confident that it will prove to be a very good one."

"What happened to the other men?" Kenneth asked. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to think of things to ask.

Mr. Pogmack smiled. "The first gentleman came yesterday morning, and I very soon saw that he was not at all the sort of person who could face death with fortitude, so I sent him off. The second one came in the afternoon and he took to his heels the moment he saw me." Mr. Pogmack paused and laughed. "It really was the funniest sight in the world. I wish you could have seen the fellow's face."

Mr. Pogmack leant back and laughed again until the tears were streaming from his eyes. Suddenly an inspiration came to Kenneth and he got up.

"Well," he said as he stood with his hand extended. "I think that I ought to be making a move or I shall miss my train back to town."

He had hoped that he might be able to take advantage of the old man's joviality, but the latter was not to be put off so readily.

"But—but, my dear fellow," he said, as he slowly leveled the pistol at Kenneth's chest. "How can I—er—well, you know why I asked you to come here."

"Then for heaven's sake get on with it," Kenneth demanded. He decided that the time for humoring the old man was past.

Mr. Pogmack smiled. "I apologize, Mr. Warwick, if I appear to keep you waiting, but I assure you that one can not take an important step like this in a hurry. Things have to be arranged. Please sit down."

"I will stand, thank you."

Mr. Pogmack shrugged his massive shoulders. "As you wish. I am sorry that I should have to keep this thing pointed at you but I think you will agree that it is a wise precaution on my part——"

"Oh, for God's sake get on with it!" cried Kenneth, who felt that he could not control himself much longer. "Why don't you fire the damned thing? Are you scared of it?"

"Scared!" exclaimed Mr. Pogmack, with a little, hard laugh. "No, oh dear, no, I am not scared of it. You see, I should like you to choose."

"Choose what?"

"How I am to kill you."

"I don't think that it makes the slightest difference to me," Kenneth replied.

"Oh, come, come, you must have a preference," Pogmack coaxed, with the gentleness of a parent trying to persuade a child to take its medicine. "There are so many ways open to me and it is only fair that you should have the choice. For example, I could shoot you, I could strangle you or drown you, or——"

"Drown me! drown me!" cried Kenneth, whose self-control was all but spent.

"It should make a great deal of difference to you, Mr. Warwick," Pogmack went on. "However, since you choose death by drowning it is fortunate that I can accommodate you. You are sure that you will not have another cup of tea bef——?"

"Look here!" Kenneth cried, starting forward, then he stopped short as a shot rang out and there was a shattering of glass at the far end of the room.

FOR a short space the two men glared at each other. Pogmack was standing, the smoking pistol in his hand. His previously sallow cheeks were flushed; his jaw stuck out menacingly; and as he drew himself up to his full height Kenneth felt like a dwarf beside him.

"That was your fault, you young idiot," he growled. "The next time you play the fool the bullet will go into you."

"Do it then, you old swine," Kenneth shouted as he took a step forward, his hands clenched.

Pogmack did not shoot; he swiftly raised his free hand and drove it out against Kenneth's shoulder. Kenneth went spinning back to the wall. Again they glared at each other.

"I admire your pluck, young man," Pogmack grinned, "but I warn you not to play any more of your mock heroics on me. If you do as I tell you, you shall go out as you have chosen, but if you don't I'll riddle your body with lead. There are five of 'em left and you won't be dead until you've had the fifth."

"You mean it?" gasped Kenneth, involuntarily.

"Mean it? Of course I do. What d'you take me for, a sane person? It's only sane people who say what they don't mean. Yes, I know what you've been wondering all this time: whether I'm mad or not, and now you know. Oh yes, I'm mad, all right, but not so mad that I don't know how to carry out a simple little job like this. Now, Mr. Warwick, you're made of pretty sound stuff, so let us see some barrack-room discipline. About turn and slow march out of the room."

Kenneth did not move.

"If I have to issue another order a second time I shall put a bullet into your thigh and that'll hurt like hell."

Kenneth turned slowly and walked toward the door. Pogmack followed so closely that the muzzle of the pistol was pressed into the small of Kenneth's back. In the other hand he held an electric torch.

"Right turn—down the stairs."

Kenneth had to feel his way, for the torch was dim and only cast a small circle of light. The house was otherwise in complete darkness.

"Left turn—halt!"

They had come to the end of a long passage which ran almost the whole length of the house.

"Open that door — down the stairs."

They were stone stairs, and Kenneth had to grope his way. The muzzle of the pistol never ceased to be pressed into his back, and Kenneth was obeying each command without a moment's hesitation. The time would come, he felt sure, when the automatic would be momentarily withdrawn and he would be able to

seize his opportunity, spring round upon his tormentor and overcome him with a sudden blow.

"HALT!" They had reached the bottom of the stairs. The atmosphere was dank and evil-smelling. From somewhere came the faint drip, drip, drip of water.

"In front of you there is a door; open it."

Kenneth obeyed. The door opened outward. The torch had faded altogether, and everywhere was intense darkness. The pistol was pressed, as if by way of a warning, more firmly into Kenneth's back.

"Take three paces forward into the cellar."

Kenneth hesitated and he felt the pressure in his back increase. He took three steps; the pressure had relaxed; he swung round and struck out savagely with his clenched fist. It crashed against the closed door, and at the same moment he heard the shooting of a bolt and the mocking laugh of Pogmack.

"Wait one minute," came the old man's voice. "I'll go upstairs and turn the cock, and then you'll have as much water to splash about in as you want."

Kenneth staggered back as he realized the truth. What an idiot he had been to allow himself to be trapped like this without being able to put up a fight! No wonder that Pogmack had laughed at him. He had been a child in the madman's hands.

Kenneth searched his pockets for matches but he had left them upstairs on the tea-table. For a moment he stood listening, but no sound reached his ears except the rhythmic drip, drip, drip of water. He felt for the wall and passed his hands up and down its rough surface, from floor to ceiling, which was only a few inches above his head; then he began to move slowly round the cellar, hoping that he might find an opening somewhere, but there was none. His hand—the one which had struck against the door—was paining him and it felt as if it were bleeding, and he wound his handkerchief about it. He felt in all the corners and along the angle between floor and wall; he went down on his hands and knees and felt all over the floor but there was nothing but the rough concrete. He could find no place where water might enter.

The cellar seemed to be quite small, perhaps not more than ten feet square, and it was not long before the air began to be vitiated. Kenneth felt his way back to the door. It was studded with large nails. He stepped back a pace, measured his distance and then threw his whole weight against it. To his amazement it yielded easily, so easily, in fact, that he found himself sprawling on the floor outside.

Kenneth sat up and reflected. Had the old man's diabolical plot failed, or was this only the beginning and was there more to come?

After a moment he got up and groped his way up the stairs. He reached the passage and paused to listen. There was not a sound anywhere. Slowly he crept toward the hall, expecting every minute that Pogmack would spring upon him from some corner. But Pogmack did nothing of the kind.

Kenneth reached the front door. He felt for the bolts and pulled them back but the door would not open. It was locked and there was no key. He tried all the other doors in the hall and passage, but they were likewise locked, with the exception of the one that led to the cellar. The only window was one high up above the stairs. Even now escape seemed impossible. But where was Pogmack hiding? Or had he left the house?

Kenneth went back to the hall and stood looking about him. Suddenly

he heard a noise coming from upstairs and he could see a faint light. Cautiously he went up, and when he reached the landing he paused again to listen. Yes, someone was moving about in the lighted room—the room where he had had tea. Then he heard the sound of a chair being moved and the rattle of the shovel in the coal-box, and then the gentle voice of Pogmack.

"Don't stand there in the cold, Mr. Warwick. Come in."

KENNETH never knew why it was, but for some strange reason all sense of fear left him and he walked along the passage and entered the lighted room. Pogmack was standing with his back to the fire.

"See that slip of paper there?" he said, pointing at the table which separated them. "It's for you."

Kenneth advanced and picked up the slip and examined it. It was a banker's check, made out in his favor for £50,000 and signed H. Pogmack. Kenneth was still gazing at it when a chuckle from the other end of the room caused him to look up.

"Mr. Warwick," said Pogmack, "I fear that I owe you an apology and an explanation?"

His tone indicated a question, but Kenneth was too much surprized to say anything.

"Sit you down, sit you down," Pogmack went on; then, as Kenneth remained motionless, "It's all right. I'm not armed. There's the gun. It only had one cartridge in it and I used that to complete the stage effects Yes, I'm mad all right"—he was speaking slowly and wearily and his expression as he looked across at Kenneth was one of intense sadness—"hopelessly mad, more mad than you ever imagined, but not in the way that you thought I was mad. Sit down and I will tell you all——"

Again he clutched at his chest and uttered a loud groan. For a second he stood there, convulsed with agony, then he lurched forward and fell across one of the armchairs. Kenneth rushed round and tried to move him into a sitting position, but it was impossible. He took hold of one of the wrists and felt the pulse; it was quick and irregular and scarcely perceptible at times.

For some while Kenneth stood looking down at the huge prone figure. He wondered if he should go for a doctor, but where would he find one nearer than Lewes? and it would take him an hour to walk there. He might try to find a house where there was a telephone . . . Mr. Pogmack was moving.

"Let me help you," said Kenneth, as he leaned down.

Pogmack made an effort and with Kenneth's aid he succeeded in getting into the chair, but it was some while before he was able to speak and then his voice was so feeble that Kenneth could scarcely hear what he said. He spoke very slowly and there were long pauses between the words.

"This is—end—thank God! Listen. Your trouble's over now. P'raps you don't believe me—true—told bank to pay out to anyone who presents check, so be careful. Finish your studies; marry girl and good luck. No one to leave money to except scamp of nephew; rotter, coward—funked the war—never went out—can't stand funks. Had two sons — fine fellows — they weren't funks, no, by God!—They went—both killed—fine fellows. Given lot to charities—wanted to help someone who wanted it—rotten time I gave you but you went through it like a man—didn't lose your head. Not like other rotters who came—no spunk. Take check to bank tomorrow. Glad you've got it. Don't say anything 'bout me to anyone. All I ask. Old woman'll be in sometime tomorrow. She'll tell police."

Pogmack paused. His eyes were closed and his head was sunk upon his chest.

"Everything settled," he went on. "Letter to coroner and money to finish up with. No relatives except nephew—rotter—funked war—pots o' money.—Happy now—you go off—there's key of front door—don't say anything to anyone. No one knows who I am." A long pause and then, very feebly: "Goo' luck—you deserve it—you——"

The voice trailed away, and as Kenneth looked down at the old man he saw a wonderful serenity come over the huge, bearded face.

Kenneth remained for awhile and then, when he knew for certain that Pogmack was dead, he took up the lamp and the key and passed out of the room.

Swamp Symphony

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

What do they croak about all the night long—
The frogs in the swamp—is it sorrow or song?
Who wields the baton as it marks the slow time
For the shadowy phantoms who dwell in the slime?

Do wraiths haunt the marshland and dance to the tunes
The wind in the reeds plays among the gray dunes?
And why does the moon hide her face in the fog
As shapes wrapped in darkness glide over the bog?

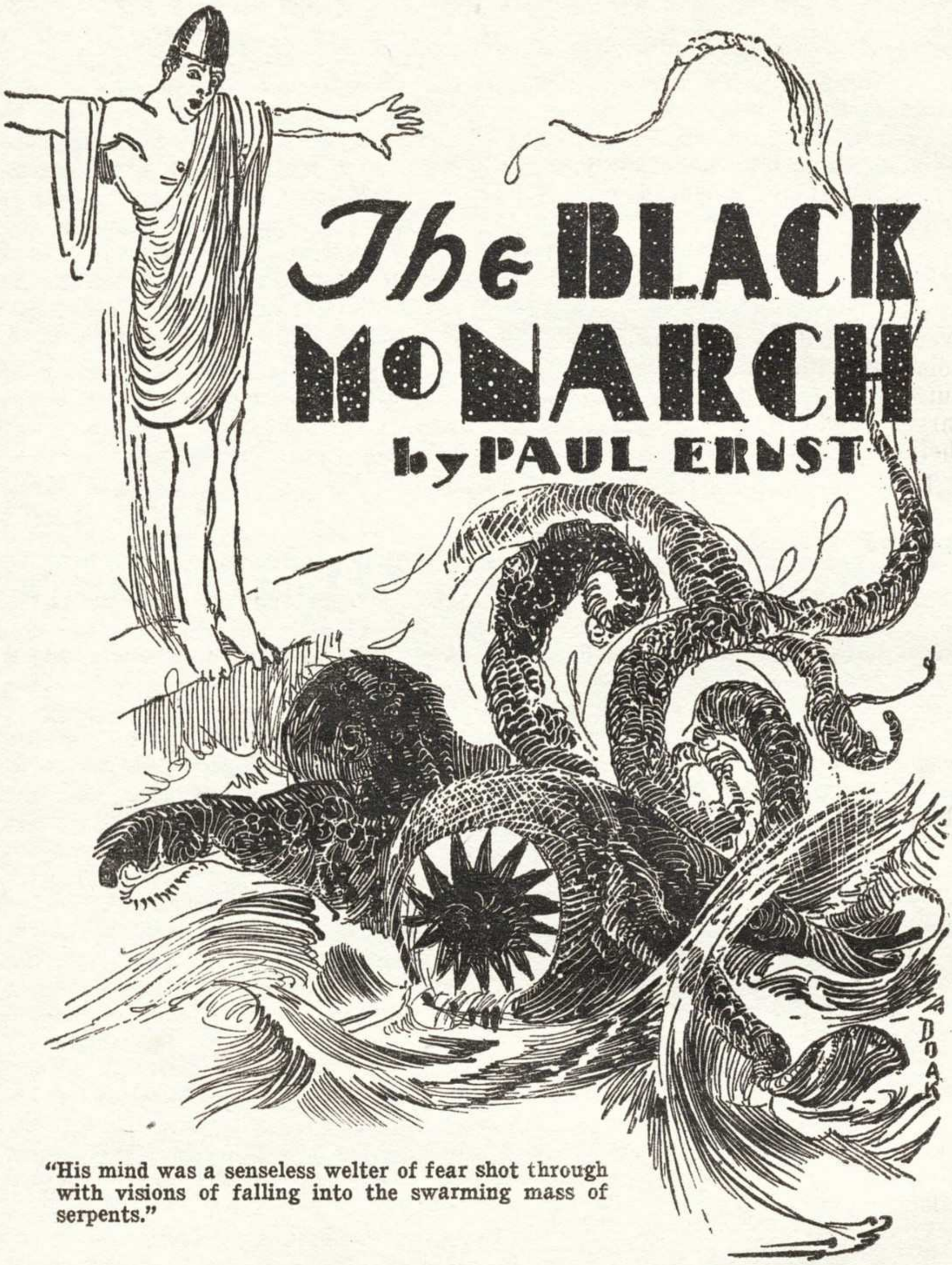
What is the sighing and moaning that sounds
Like thin vapor whispers from grass-matted mounds?
What stirs the glazed surface of waters long dead—
And what is that Thing without eyes in its head?

The clammy winds whimper and wail in their fright,
Making a dirge of the low sounds of night;
Loneliness grasps the thin throat of a ghost
And shakes till it rattles the bones of its host.

All through the shrill night the frogs drum their lay
And pipe the slow measures for shapes, dim and gray,
Until reckless dawn sends an arrow of light
To still the mad opera that haunted the night.

The BLACK MONARCH

by PAUL ERNST



"His mind was a senseless welter of fear shot through with visions of falling into the swarming mass of serpents."

The Story Thus Far

IN HIS distant laboratory Professor Eden photographs and locates a hitherto unsuspected Evil Genius who rules the world from an underground palace in North Africa. At his death he sends his adopted son, Professor Sanderson, on a crusade against him. Sanderson joins forces with Neal Emory, whose father has been murdered by the machinations of the Black Monarch. Neal emerges alone from the perils of the passage into the Evil Being's domain, and wanders alone among the wonders of the Black Kingdom.

6. The Automatons

THE cave into which Neal gazed was incalculably large, acres in extent. Unlike the first cave, however, it was not elaborately painted and refinished. Its purpose was strictly utilitarian and the Evil

This story began in WEIRD TALES for February

Power that reigned here had evidently felt no need for its decoration. Low-roofed it was, seeming even lower because of its almost endless extent. Rough pillars of rock had been left every few feet to brace the weight of earth and stones above; and these extended row on row like a well-ordered, petrified orchard.

In even lines between the pillars, plants were growing—apparently out of the solid stone. A closer look, however, revealed the fact that there were holes about two feet square hollowed out of the rock floor and filled with earth in which the strange blooms had their roots.

These were like no plants Neal had ever seen before. Large, stemmed and opaquely transparent, gray-white in shade, they resembled fat stalks of paraffin, and no leaves or branches depended from the fat stems. There was a suggestion of death in their oily white sheen, and the thought of eating them was nauseating. Yet they probably were grown for food; carefully tending them were men, the sight of whom had caused Neal to dodge back into the tunnel entrance so hurriedly.

With ever-growing wonder he peered from his hiding-place at these men, working in the odd garden spot of their odd land. Here were no weird monstrosities with misshapen features and limbs, no nightmare creations come to life. And yet there was something very disturbing about the sight of them, something he could not at first define—something that was made more than ever disquieting by the fact that the feeling of repulsion they evoked was for awhile inexplicable.

To the casual glance they seemed to be average human beings as normal in appearance as those who walked under the light of sky instead of under the light of metal plates. They were neither unusually short nor unusually tall. Each wore a conical helmet of some grayish alloy, sandals of the same metal, and a tunic of rough white cloth with the letters **R E Z** in purple across the chest. Their faces—seen individually—were neither repellent nor attractive.

Seen individually! That gave a clue to the reason why they were vaguely terrifying to the spectator. Regarded separately each was a stolid, plodding laborer—dressed in queer garb, it is true, and laboring in queer fields, but not otherwise abnormal. Seen collectively it was gradually to be perceived that they were not men at all! They were machines, supposedly made of flesh and blood, but with no more self-volition than so many cogwheels or so many automatically moving subjects of the power of a master hypnotist!

Like shadowy creatures of a dream they moved—efficient somnambulists, mindless and empty bodies. As one they bent and straightened, turned and bent again. An unheard, invisible tom-tom might have been beating to enforce their ordered rhythm, like the galley drum that directed the slaves on the rowers' benches long ago. Not a ripple of expression betrayed itself on any face. Not a man stopped for an instant to stretch cramped muscles or wipe the perspiration from his wooden forehead. It was as though some dread fate awaited the one who first dared to make an original move.

Then abruptly, as if in answer to a signal—though Neal had heard no sound—all stood erect, moved in ordered files, and formed in a column as though repeating an often rehearsed drill. Now that they were assembled in one place he could see that there were over fifty of them; though at first, because of the maze of rock pillars, he had only observed half that number. Marking time they waited for some event that was evidently part of the day's schedule.

In a moment or so, marching down between the rows of waxy plants, a duplicate column appeared. In rhythm that was uncanny in its perfection,

the replacing group moved toward the others. They marched with intricate strides; at each step their knees were brought up to the level of their waists and straightened out for the next step much in the manner of the figures on Egyptian temple decorations. There wasn't a fraction of an inch of variation in the united performance of the difficult stride. Also there wasn't a shade of difference in the height, width of shoulders, or set of countenance of any one figure from any other. Inhabitants in a hell of monotones. Machines of the same fleshly substance in the same pattern.

As they drew nearer, the first set of men began to march with the same stilted step done with the same coordination. The two lines passed each other—and no face was turned in greeting or recognition as they went by. The second group stationed themselves in the places left by their fellows; and again began the ordered bending and turning and straightening as though to the beat of an invisible tom-tom as they cut the waxy vegetable stalks and placed them in rough white cloth bags at their sides. If one had not actually seen the substitution it would have been impossible to realize that these were not the same men who had been pruning the noxious plants in the first place. Mechanical men. Wire-ordered puppets.

LEANING back against the rock wall of the tunnel, Neal watched the white-garmented figures spellbound. And finally, so forcible was the impression given that these were automatons incapable of varying from their ordered motions, so profound the conviction that the creatures were not men but merely efficient puppets produced in dozen lots by some master chemist—that he conceived an astounding idea.

He believed he might walk directly past the rows of clockwork figures and on through the cave without being molested in any way!

It was a dubious gamble, of course. If he were wrong in his opinion he could not help but be caught; and that would be terrible in the manner that it would be terrible to be caught in the cogged teeth of a machine. But after watching them for a little longer, he decided to stake his life that nothing would make any of them vary from the incessant bending and turning and straightening in time with the rest.

Stepping from his hiding-place he walked openly toward the nearest automaton. It was a breath-taking venture, this open approach toward one who must inevitably be an enemy. He prepared to hit out and run if he were attacked. . . .

By no sign did the worker betray knowledge of his presence! His movements continued as uninterruptedly as before, as perfectly timed to the movements of the figure next to him. He didn't even turn his head. Yet he must have known that Neal was a stranger to that grim underground world. He was naked. His eyes were blue instead of the uniform brown of the laborers. He walked like a man and not like a machine. He was an interloper, a trespasser. His presence spelled discovery of the secret kingdom; and discovery spelled menace to all who dwelt there. Yet the man bent and pruned a piece from the stalk beneath him, turned and deposited it in the sack, straightened and moved to the next plant—as though there were no one in all that great cavern but the other laborers whose movements he *must* duplicate!

The others were the same. In plain view Neal walked the entire length of the cave and no hand was raised to touch him. It was as if he were made of air, a shadow invisible to the dull eyes of the creatures. To judge by their actions, a whip might have been held over the back of each in a constant threat against an original move

—yet there wasn't an overseer or person of authority in sight.

Leaving the great agricultural cave, he went along another of the innumerable tunnels; and here he presently forgot the puzzle of the mechanical men in the awakened need of his body. For here he found water—a canal that extended down the center of the passage between banks of dressed stone built up waist-high. Near the cave the water slid into a hole in the floor and disappeared, evidently to form a subterranean irrigation system for the carefully tended plants.

Heedless of all but his thirst, he bent over the canal and drank his fill.

His next thought was of clothing. It was not unbearably cool in the system of caves and tunnels, but clothing he must have. Man has draped himself in some sort of garment for so many centuries that, nude, he feels helpless and unarmed though he may have a weapon in each hand. However, there was a more definite and immediate reason than this for his need of a body covering: if he could obtain one of the standard outfits it might serve to disguise him a little. Clad in a white tunic, with a conical metal helmet to cover the difference in the cut of his hair and with metal sandals clinking on his feet, he might pass at a distance as a laborer. At least he wouldn't be defined as alien so quickly as in his present state.

But the problem of getting a costume loomed as a difficult one. So supremely mechanical were the motions of the workmen he had seen that it was almost possible that he might walk up to one and strip his tunic off over his head without resistance. But this was too grave a chance to take. All he could do was to wander along as unobtrusively as possible and seize opportunity when it should offer itself.

It shortly became clear to him that he had blundered into the industrial section of the kingdom.

As he approached the end of the passage he became aware of different-colored beams of light invading the tunnel mouth and mixing with the eternal sun yellow. The beams were intensely bright, of all colors of the spectrum, and they played lambently over the walls as though they were reflections of varicolored fires. With them rolled waves of warm air; and as he drew nearer the air grew hotter and the light increased in brilliance.

Arrived at the end of the passage, he peered out at a curious spectacle. Here was another monstrous hand-smoothed cavern nearly as large as the one beside the steam chamber; but this was in gloom, only lightened by the uneven glare generated by the peculiar labor it housed. Neal was looking at the foundry of the realm.

Placed at regular intervals in three long rows that occupied the whole of the cavern, were large crucibles filled with molten metal. Under the crucibles there was no fuel of any kind to keep them bubbling and emitting the intense heat that made the great cave into a furnace; but near each side of each crucible was one of the yellow metal plates. At first glance these looked identical with the plates that supplied light, but a closer inspection showed that they were slightly larger and cast in concave form. They were placed at an unvarying distance from the crucibles they faced and, thus focused, directed fierce rays of mysteriously generated heat at the molten metal that bubbled violet and green and white in the cauldrons.

In attendance on each crucible were two men, stripped save for a cloth around their waists, fabric sandals on their feet, and cloth protectors on their heads. Outlined in silhouette as they were against the fiery glare of the cauldrons, the effect was that of dozens of human-sized dolls cast and colored in pairs; for each crucible

glowed with a different hue, indicating a different metal or alloy contained in it, and shed its rays on its attendant twins. Thus two puppets here were violet-purple, two there were blue-green, and the two next them were bright crimson. They were like men made of brightly colored, glazed china set on pedestals formed of their own shadows which moved as they moved, huge and distorted, on the dingy walls behind them.

Here as in the agricultural cave strict uniformity of motion was observed. It was impossible for the whole group of men to move unanimously, for the different metals in the various crucibles required diversified attention; but they could, and did, move identically in pairs.

At each cauldron four arms reached and four legs moved the same number of inches through the same arcs at the same time. And it was in this cavern that Neal first saw the ghastly lengths to which the automatons were prepared to go in the preservation of their incredible discipline.

As he watched, at the crucible nearest to where he stood, the twin attendants squatted as one man and peered at the tint of the boiling metal through a slotted eye-shield. Evidently it was judged ready for pouring, for—again in perfect unison—they rose, turned, and grasped long-handled ladles in which the glowing mass was to be transported to a row of small molds behind them.

It was then that the mishap occurred—a mishap that would seem at first to be of no importance whatever. For as they rose one of the attendants lost his balance for an instant and dropped behind the other, though the rhythm of their movement had not been broken. However, the one who had faltered could not regain his place without moving faster than the other; and apparently this was an unthinkable breach of discipline. In consequence, when both turned back to the crucible, he was a foot and a half ahead of his twin—still moving in perfect time.

A single twitch of fear disturbed the mask-like face of the man who was out of place. One terrified gleam appeared in his dull eyes as he saw what was going to happen. Then both men reached for the geared cranks at either side of the crucible, which were used to tilt it. . . .

As one their two arms went forward in a straight line—and for the same number of inches. But, like a misplaced machine unable to change its orbit voluntarily to adapt itself to error, the arm of the puppet in front went a foot and a half too far!

Beyond the crank-handle he reached—and hand and forearm were thrust squarely in front of the nearest heating-plate!

For one instant the bare flesh showed clear and distinct in the rays that sufficed to heat metal till it bubbled like water. Then the arm disintegrated, seeming to shred to pieces like a column of smoke in a wind.

From somewhere three more of the automatons appeared. One took the vacant place at the crank-handle, falling instantly into step with the remaining laborer. The other two bore away the limp figure of the cog that had slipped in its stride for a fraction of a second. And on their faces was no trace of emotion, sorrow or anger, pity or horror.

In the tunnel mouth, Neal leaned back against the wall and put his hands before his eyes. What terrible fear could inspire such discipline? What unspeakable punishment must threaten a man who chose to lose an arm rather than break ranks and face it? What punishment could possibly be worse than what he had just seen?

At length he managed to pull himself together and force his mind back to the problem of getting a disguising outfit. Since the foundry

laborers were working without their customary tunics, it might well be that there was some spot near by where they left these garments until relieved of their daily task. If he could find this spot, he might quickly get one to fit——

But here he remembered that all the men he had seen were of identical height and build, so that any one tunic would serve him as well or as poorly as the next. Such unbelievable uniformity! Was it possible that these creatures really were artificially-made things—puppets in actuality as well as in action? Sanderson might have told him, if only he had not been stopped at the threshold of the place he had given his life to find. . . .

Remembering the immunity accorded him in the agricultural cave, Neal stepped boldly into the inferno of blazing heat and light before him, and walked toward a tunnel opening on the farther side. Again he had the feeling of being invisible as he strode among those who were naturally his enemies and who yet did not even glance in his direction.

As he approached the opening he could make out white things hanging from pegs along the wall in either direction; and as he drew nearer he saw they were tunics, with a helmet hung over each and with sandals placed geometrically beneath.

He slipped a tunic over his shoulders and adjusted the corresponding sandals to his feet. Then he tried the helmet and found it too small. The next one was also too small, and the next; but the fourth fitted him fairly well. There was, then, in this devilish kingdom one feature—head size—in which the subjects were not entirely identical.

Feeling more secure, he wandered on again through the maze of tunnels. He did not know what else to do. If he kept walking he might eventually find a way out of the labyrinth; certainly he would not if he stayed in one place. Also he was tired and hungry, and was hoping his luck might hold till he found something to eat and some kind of a place to sleep.

In the course of his search for eating and sleeping apartments, he saw several more caves devoted to various industries; and in each—although there was never overseer or disciplinarian in sight—the grotesque and unnatural mass movement prevailed. Step for step and inch for inch these men were parts of a machine.

And finally, in one of the caverns, he got some hint of the quick retribution that followed the breaking of that iron law of rhythm.

IT WAS in a small chamber devoted to the making of the metal sandals that the break occurred. Here the gray castings were brought from the foundry cave to be finished off and punched for fabric straps. In one row were men laboriously grinding the rough edges against flat stones in front of them. In another row the holes for the straps were being perforated with mallet and punch. With the inevitable rhythm they moved—hands up, hands down, at identical angles and distances. A row of gear wheels revolving on the same shaft could not have moved more in unison.

But these gears were after all of softer substance than steel, and one of them broke formation. . . .

His descending mallet sent the punch entirely through the piece of metal before him, and a deep gash showed in his finger. Involuntarily, with the reflex nervous action of the animal that draws away from pain, he started—and lost step with his fellows.

Instantly he sat rigid, as motionless as though paralyzed, and waited.

The man on either side of him laid down his tools, rose, and approached him. Between them as between guards the culprit marched toward the tunnel by which Neal had entered. His knees came smartly to the level of his waist in perfect time with the knees

of his stolid escorts; but on his face was the look of one who, in anticipation, has already died. Somewhere, in some manner, he was to undergo the punishment reserved for those who moved out of the general design drawn up by the Black Monarch for whom they slaved!

Again Neal leaned against the wall for support as the doomed puppet marched by without a sidelong glance. What inhuman things were these—and where did the monster responsible for them hide his fantastic head?

A few moments later the workmen all rose and formed in a column as he had seen them do in the other cave. A replacing column marched from the tunnel near him. Evidently work went on in continuous shifts.

As the others filed evenly out, he fell in line at the rear and followed to see if they were going to some kind of retiring-quarters for food and rest that he might unobtrusively share. He watched them intently, as he marched along, trying to move as they moved and act as they acted. His skin was lighter than theirs, he was an inch taller even when he slouched down, and there was a swing to his movements that he could not suppress and that marked him as different from the rest; but he hoped, by duplicating their lifeless movements as well as he could, to be able to evade detection a little while longer.

Eventually, of course, if he did not find a way of escape he must be caught. Indeed, he might be going to capture at that instant. Inevitably the machines must relax a trifle when off duty. Out of formation they would at last be free to deal with him as they chose. And they would quickly discover him as a stranger. The moment they began to talk to him, in whatever weird language they might use, they would find him out. After that? He shrugged resignedly. Having gone untouched for so long he might somehow continue in his odd immunity—unless someone in authority should notice him. For there must be superintendents of some kind in charge, even though he had seen none as yet.

At length the marching men filed into the somber, cheerless caves that were evidently their living-quarters. There were three of these. The smallest one was equipped with washing-apparatus, showers, which consisted of nothing but perforated pipes that crisscrossed the ceiling and dribbled water smelling strongly of some chemical. The second contained a long table already set with platters, and around which were metal benches. The third was lined with metal bunks in tiers three high, on each of which was a single covering of the same white material used in the making of tunics. The caves were amazingly small to house the thirty or thirty-five men who lived there; but the explanation lay in the fact that no space was wasted by furnishings other than the table and its plain benches, and the tiers of bunks. With nothing in the way of bookcases, chairs, dressing-cabinets, lockers, or chests for personal possessions, very little space was required.

But poor and bare as the chambers were, once inside them the workers had reached sanctuary of a sort. Shoulders drooped and arms hung limp. No longer was it imperative to move in mass formation. Here no penalty was reserved for the unfortunate who lifted leg or arm when his fellows did not.

AS THEY relaxed, Neal grew more watchful and tense. The time was at hand when the puppets were no longer entirely puppets. Would they continue stupidly oblivious to his presence?

It soon became apparent that he was to be let alone; that, although this was sanctuary, it was a very limited one. The men could move as they chose, but habit held them. Dully they continued to act as though yet

bound by the rules of their daily routine. They were puppets still; and when one raised his hand to his forehead for an instant, he glanced quickly around at his fellows, abashed at his discordant independence. Several of them stared at him with incurious eyes, but made no threatening move. Also his fear that his ignorance of their language might betray him proved to be ungrounded.

Not a man in the group said a single word, or recognized fellowship with another by the flicker of an eyelid! Silent as mutes, they rested a little while, and then shuffled in to dinner.

On one of the metal benches drawn up to the long table there was a vacant place, probably that of the man who had been led away under guard to answer for his breach of discipline; and into this place Neal dropped unnoticed. The meal, eaten with round pointed knives from metal platters, was as simple as a meal can be. It consisted of one thing only: a preparation of the waxy-looking vegetables. The roots were the main part of the plant, bulbs like colorless apples; and these were garnished with the thick stalks. There was a cloying sweetness to the tasteless mass, but it satisfied the appetite.

The silence continued unbroken. There was no word spoken during the entire meal. The diners might have been animals at a feed box, save that animals occasionally express their feelings with grunts or other noises of content or discontent. These two-legged animals fed themselves like self-stoking furnaces.

When they were through they rose without a glance at each other and lined up against the wall as though about to stand some sort of an inspection. Neal joined the line and gazed apprehensively at the entranceway. With the dinner over, he had expected the men to retire at once to the bunks. There was nothing else to do —no conversation, no reading, nothing. This unexpected maneuver suggested that at last one of the rare persons in charge was about to appear. If so, it might not be so easy to pass his notice unquestioned as it had been to merge in with the workmen!

He slouched as low as possible to conceal his superior height, glanced at the figure next to him to see if in any way he was not conforming to the general appearance—and waited.

STEPS were heard in the tunnel outside, steps that had a more determined ring than the shuffling stride of the workers. The line of waiting men stiffened a little more. Every head was turned at a forty-five degree angle, and eyes slanted toward the entranceway.

The man who entered was evidently of authority, a super-puppet in this place of mindless men. He was taller by two inches than the others, broader across the shoulders, and had in his walk a little less of the awkward knee action that was the common step. His tunic was of a finer white, his sandals were of a smooth yellow metal instead of the commoner gray alloy; and in the center of his helmet was set a darkly transparent, blue diamond.

Silently he marched into the room where the men were lined up for his coming, and halted before them with a click of his sandals. His eyes passed down the row of motionless figures, paused on Neal for an instant, passed on—and returned in a cold stare. Carefully he noted the difference in the texture of his skin, the hang of his tunic, the set of his helmet. Under that gaze, though he managed to keep his face expressionless, Neal knew he was found out.

For a moment longer the man maintained his chill scrutiny. Then he spoke—the first words Neal had heard uttered in all the hours he had wandered through the dismal underground kingdom. Neal was evidently

being asked a question, as the words ended on an upward note. But what the question might be, he could not guess. It was phrased in a language unknown to him; a language that had a faintly familiar sound but which he was unable to identify. He kept silent and looked woodenly ahead in an effort to seem as the others.

The question was repeated. Still he followed the only course possible, and looked straight ahead as though he had not heard the words. The inspector gave an order to the men on each side of him. They fell out of rank and stood motionless, leaving a space between them that he was evidently to fill.

A remembrance came to him of the terrified expression on the face of the man whose place he had filled at the table. He too had marched away between guards just as Neal himself was now about to do. But he had known what was in store for him—and had been horrified by the knowledge!—while Neal could only guess at his destiny, an ignorance which was perhaps more torturing than certainty.

The two appointed guards moved toward the door and he followed docilely enough. In the passage, away from interference, he might be able to overcome them in a swift attack. . . .

As though his mind had been read, the leader gave another command and four more men stepped from the line to surround the prisoner in a hollow square. He was helpless. Escape was now out of the question.

Surrounded by the stiffly marching figures, down winding tunnel systems and through ganglions of caves, he went to face in his turn whatever fate it was that made a man prefer to have his arm burned off rather than endure it.

7. The Cave of Water Serpents

NEARLY half a mile must have been traversed before they turned down a short passage that was barred at the end by a great door. They stopped in front of this, and Neal's heart sank as he watched them prepare to open it.

Solidly built of the prevailing gray metal, crisscrossed with heavy reinforcing panels, it was at least twenty feet square and swung on hinges as thick as a man's arm. Four heavy bolts slid in toward the center with the turn of a handle, withdrawing from metal-lined slots in floor, ceiling and walls. Once that door was closed and its bolts locked into their companion grooves, an army with a battering-ram could hardly knock it down.

Two of the expressionless puppets pulled the massive barrier around on its hinges, disclosing the fact that its inside surface was different from the outside. Here were no geometric patterns of reinforcing panels. There were no projections of any kind to break its purposeful smoothness. A solid sheet of metal, as even as a pane of glass, it defied all attempts at finger holds. Only one irregularity showed: Along the bottom, just high enough up to clear the tunnel floor when the door was swung open, there was a metal shelf fastened into the door. The shelf was about a foot wide, and sloped down at a slight angle.

The cave barred off by this peculiar door was in darkness, but gazing intently into it, Neal could barely catch a glint of water. And as he stepped toward the darkened chamber he saw that the rock of the tunnel floor ended with the threshold and dipped sheer into a pool.

For an instant the six guards crowded close to him as the impulse to fight for escape was plainly written on his face. Then they relaxed as he shrugged and as palpably changed his mind. If he tried to struggle against this sextet of machinery he would either be killed at once, or stunned and thrown unconscious into the pool, which would be nearly as instantaneous an ending. If he entered

the water of his own accord he could at least keep on the surface for a time, and—well, when one is dead it is the end, and while one is still alive there is a percentage of hope no matter how small. He signified his decision to obey by starting reluctantly toward the water. After all, drowning was not the worst of deaths. . . .

It developed that there was something in store for him more complicated than drowning!

Pointing toward the shelf at the bottom of the door, one of the guards made it clear that he was to stand on it. He mounted it resignedly, finding that he was forced to flatten back against the smooth surface to maintain a footing. After he had taken his place, the door was slowly closed, bearing him spread-eagled with it. He faintly heard the rasp of the heavy bolts as they moved into place outside, and felt the slight vibration of their movement through the metal against his back. Then, for a moment, he was left in utter silence and darkness.

It was only for a moment. With blinding abruptness the cave was flooded with the yellow mock-sunlight —light that, because of what it disclosed, was more cruel than darkness! Glaring light deliberately designed to flood with brilliance, and force the eye to see, every appalling detail of the compartment in which he now found himself! And at sight of what the light revealed, he pressed back against the door in terror lest he slip from the narrow shelf.

The room was like a large, tiled vault. The natural rock of the walls was slippery with moisture as though glazed, and extended unbroken by apertures of any kind to the peaked arch of the ceiling. The door fit so tightly into its frame that it was discoverable only by a slender line hardly thicker than a pencil mark. Around the base of the walls, extending in continuation of the door shelf on which he stood, was a narrow ledge of smooth rock about a foot wide, and only a few inches above the level of the water that covered the entire sunken floor from wall to wall for a depth of eighteen or twenty feet.

There was no place to stand except on the narrow, slanting ledge that fringed the pool. If a man lost his balance for one instant and leaned away from the slippery walls, he would fall into the water. . . .

At this point he closed his eyes and tried not to think any more about it. For there were reasons why one should make an effort to keep out of the pool—reasons having to do with great, snaky things with sinuous, steely tails!

In the narrow confines of the pool twenty or more of the grotesque, sulfur-colored water-monsters coiled and uncoiled blindly upon themselves, feeling from side to side with their whiplash tails. Imagination drew back from the picture of what would happen if one of them flicked for an instant against alien, human flesh! He shut his eyes tighter against the sight, but continued to see behind closed eyelids the gaping funnel-mouths and sharp, backward-pointing teeth.

For moments his mind was a senseless welter of fear and confusion, shot through with visions of himself falling from the ledge and into the swarming mass of serpents. He flattened back against the door as though he would force his body into the solid metal, then gasped aloud as one foot slipped from the slanting shelf in his excess of caution. This wouldn't do! He must try to compose himself, try to grapple reasonably with the situation into which he had been thrust.

But the mind is not so easily controlled. His first thoughts raced off to a problem of time. How long could he balance on that narrow, treacherous ledge? What was the limit of his endurance? Assuming that he did not crack under the strain and throw himself voluntarily into the pool—for how many hours could he remain in

a rigid upright position without closing his eyes in the sleep of exhaustion? One instant of relaxation——

That kind of reflection wouldn't do, either! If he were to keep his mind he must distract it from useless and terrifying imaginings, and apply it to the problem of making himself as secure as possible from the blind, writhing shapes just a few inches below his feet.

He scrutinized the walls foot by foot, but saw no crevice or finger hold. The ledge was uniformly narrow, offering no more footing at any other point than that of the shelf on which he stood. However, it was continuous, which fact held out a ray of comfort —in a corner, if he could edge his way there without falling off, he could brace his legs at an angle and lean back with less painful rigidity than was required to keep his present footing. The corner nearest him, then, would be his goal.

Cautious not to lose his balance, he kicked off his sandals. His bare feet would grip the stone more surely than the smooth metal soles. Attracted by the splash of their fall into the water, five or six of the nightmare fish shot toward the spot. For an instant he shut his eyes again and pressed instinctively back against the door.

There were other sandals in the bottom of the pool!

It was less than twenty feet to the corner, but it seemed as though he would never get there. He tried gazing at a spot on the opposite wall to avoid looking down into the water, but the effort made him dizzy. He closed his eyes and felt his way, but a continuous conviction that he was about to fall over forced him to open them again. He could only edge along, inch by inch, gazing directly down at the things that would swarm over his body if he made a misstep.

When he finally reached the corner his legs felt weak and numb, and a conscious effort of will was required to keep them stiffened to support his weight. He leaned back, breathing unevenly, and tried to get what relaxation he could from the greater security of his footing.

The reptiles in the water beneath held his attention inflexibly. It was impossible for him to look away from them. Their continual sinuous movements; the tentacles along their sides like long fingers; the thick studded teeth; these held his stare with unbreakable fascination. Imprisoned in the tank, they had evidently become too sluggish or too accustomed to their kind to fight among themselves. But the way they had raced ravenously to the spot where his sandals had splashed into the pool——

With his legs spread wide apart and his cramped body forced back in the corner, Neal fought for his life. How many hours he managed to balance himself on the narrow ledge, he never knew. But it must have been a good many, for the point at which a man's supreme effort to keep awake is conquered by imperative need of rest occurs far along the line of sustained, tremendous exertion. And now, finally, like an overwhelming sea, came the dreaded enemy. Sleep!

His head rang with the need of sleep. His eyes, aching with the constant yellow glare of light, would close for an instant's relief. And once closed——

He prodded himself awake on the instant of falling from the viciously slanting ledge. His brain pleaded for oblivion. His body, tried in nerve and muscle to its last limits, begged for rest.

The constant gazing at the coiling, never motionless serpents was hypnotic in its effect. The eye followed their undulating, restless lines until a coma was produced like that dream-ridden sleep forced on a convalescent who gazes for hours at the endlessly inter-

lacing pattern of some bizarre wallpaper.

Conscious mind continued to picture to him the death that these monsters represented. But unconscious mind, that inert major part of a man's nervous system, was lulled by the savage grace of the looping bodies —lulled as though by continual, monotonously beautiful music. . . .

He hit his head against the wall, eager for the pain that should force his eyes to remain open. He dug the nails of his fingers into the palms of his hands. Unblinking, he stared at the wall across the pool from him, trying to find irregularities in the smooth stone that should arrest his eyes for a moment and keep them open.

The wall swayed crazily through a gray fog. The light seemed gentler, less piercing. Gentler. His eyes closed. Closed . . .

WAVERING mistily in a dream-broken space where time was destroyed and irrelevant faces appeared only to be blotted out by shadowy, twining coils, Neal grasped for the consciousness that was just out of reach.

He swayed toward water that was less like water than like gray fog shot through with sulfur-colored lightning streaks fringed with blood-red tentacles. The water advanced, receded, came toward him with a rush. He thrust out his arms to ward it off, and touched solidity as a dripping bridge came up to receive him.

Just above him was a puppet workman—but set on his shoulders was the bearded face of Sanderson! At one moment it was near enough to touch, and in the next it soared far above. And now the bearded face changed into a blank cylinder that was somehow a head. He shrank back from the apparition, only to come to rest on the dripping bridge that he knew was a dream and could not save him from the sulfur-yellow lightning flashes in the water.

And during all his dream he knew he was lying in perfect safety on a solid support that felt like a bed! He struggled for wakefulness; and finally succeeded in opening his eyes.

HE WAS in a big room of undraped, cut stone walls in which were several large metal doors. There were no window openings, and the chamber was lighted by the usual metal plates. On the floor was a carpet of coarse, linen-like material; and scattered about were two long metal tables and several metal chairs of odd design. The rough couch on which he lay, a low wide bench softened by several layers of the fabric he had seen on the laborers' bunks, was in the center of the room.

His dream, then, had approached reality. In some manner a section of the floor of the pool had been raised like a bridge; and several of the workmen had crossed it, caught him as he fell from the ledge, and carried him to this room.

And then one of the metal doors swung open, and he knew that he was still dreaming!

A giant figure appeared in the doorway, clad in one of the white tunics. The head was bare and covered with a familiar-looking growth of spiky black hair. The face was heavily bearded, and from under the bushy eyebrows light gray eyes peered anxiously at him. It was the ghost of Sanderson, tricking his eyes which he had thought were wide-open and awake!

The next instant his ears were tricked, too, as he seemed to hear the rumbling voice of the man he had believed was dead.

"I thought it was about time for you to wake up," were the prosaic words uttered by the phantom. Then, "Don't look so startled—I'm real enough. Are you hungry?"

8. *The Kingdom of Rez*

FEELING his way along in the steam-laden air, Sanderson had supposed that Neal was right beside him. As he went he watched warily lest he fall into the source of the white, hot vapor. He moved slowly, testing each step in advance with outstretched foot; and he was aware of the chasm before he reached it, notified of its presence by a slight access of rising steam.

Pausing a moment he took stock of the situation. The water from the falls swept under here somewhere, and there was no roar to indicate that it poured into the crevice. Either it turned at right angles, or the crevice did not extend very far. He turned to the right and started off to discover if there might be an end to it.

He called to Neal to notify him of the change in direction, but received no answer. However, as the steam muffled his voice, he decided to go on regardless, calling every few moments so that Neal could follow him.

As he went, the light at the other side of the crevice grew dimmer; but just as he was despairingly convinced that he must turn back or lose himself hopelessly, it shone again, not so strongly, but seeming even nearer at hand. At the same time the chasm narrowed till he could reach the opposite side with his outstretched foot. He stepped across it, walked quickly forward, and emerged into a smooth-walled tunnel flooded with clear yellow light.

Here he lay down to rest and wait for Neal to join him. For moments he lay there, his eyes on the patch of steam at the tunnel mouth. Then, somberly, he realized that nothing could live in the strangling vapor for so long a time. Neal must have fallen to his death in the chasm. One more charge to lay at the door of the devilish Thing whose realm he had entered!

With the thought he straightened up. He had passed the gates! He was actually within the domain of the evil being he and Eden had worked so hard to define and locate! Somewhere near, that monstrous Power was waiting to be overcome by the hands that had been trained to that purpose for a lifetime! Perhaps at the end of this tunnel——

But here he realized that he was going too swiftly in his eagerness. He would have to do more than merely traverse a tunnel before he reached the owner of the cylindrical head. The way would be long and tortuous still. Perhaps the creature knew of his arrival—was somehow watching him at that very moment! If so he might never find him, unless a path were deliberately made for him. . . .

Curiously he examined the tunnel, the inner gateway to the subterranean kingdom. The first things to attract his notice were the metal plates that gave out the warm yellow light. With growing wonder he inspected the nearest of these.

It was a plain disk of some yellow alloy, with no wires or external device to hint that electricity might be the source of its illuminating power. By reaching up he could touch it. The thing was quite hot, and its light was precisely like clear sunlight. A piece of rock lay near one wall, and with this he battered the plate from its setting in the ceiling. It fell with a clang—but its properties remained unhurt. The mild warmth and clear light continued to radiate from it. He formed several tentative theories to account for the power of the strange metal, but had to dismiss them all. Undoubtedly it was a reflection of some parent source; but it was as puzzling as reflection of dazzling light from a mirror in a darkened room. His antagonist, it seemed, was a scientist of marvelous ability!

The construction of the tunnel drew his further grudging respect. He decided at once that it was artificial; and it indicated that the Black Mon-

arch, in order to have had such a quantity of rock removed, must own many subjects. The struggle before him loomed more difficult. One man against a kingdom!

CAUTIOUSLY he started walking down the passage, till at length, rounding a corner, he heard a distant murmuring sound—the sound of many voices. Straight ahead of him the tunnel extended till it was lost in distance, and in all that length he could see no sign of human life. Yet the sound of voices persisted. He was almost ready to believe there was a supernatural cause until, a little distance away, he saw where the voices were coming from.

Cut through the wall of the passage was a row of apertures; and, gazing through one of them, he found that he was peering down into an immense cavern. There were many figures moving about—all women and children. And these were like no other mortals he had ever seen.

The women were all dressed alike, each in a coarse white garment that shrouded head and body. Their faces were blank, wooden in lack of expression. Every move was listless, and every pair of shoulders was hopelessly bent. Dragging aimlessly from spot to spot in their cowled single garments, they seemed more like tormented spirits of the dead than living individuals.

The children were as listless as the women. There was no effort at play, none of the spontaneity that children should have. No voices were raised in enthusiasm over some game. They seemed to play no games at all. They walked slowly, dully, like little elders.

After a few moments, Sanderson saw that the two sexes kept to themselves and acted differently. The girls merely sat in small groups or wandered patiently about like spirit-broken little animals. But the boys seemed to be making curiously earnest efforts to move in unison as though on perpetual drill. They walked and stopped and sat down together, constantly watching each other to see that each did as the group did, and accomplishing a uniformity of motion, a rhythm of mass movement that was as perfect as it was puzzling.

Those of the occupants of the cave who were speaking at all, spoke in half whispers as though afraid to raise their voices to normal pitch; and the continuous, secretive murmur more than ever heightened the impression that this was some mythical infernal pit filled with souls of the damned, rather than a very real rock cavern housing some hundreds of flesh-and-blood mortals. As he watched them, Sanderson was almost persuaded that he could look through the wraith-like bodies as one might gaze through the shades of a convention of ghosts!

Disregarding surroundings, possible danger, everything, he stood gazing absorbedly through the two-foot-thick aperture at the uncanny spectacle below him. So intent was he that he did not hear the sound of marching feet behind him nor the measured clink of metal sandals against stone as a line of men filed to a position in a semicircle behind him that cut off all chance of escape. A curt syllable of command that halted the line was the first hint he had that he was not alone.

Then, turning swiftly with a startled exclamation, he saw that he had been trapped.

THE thought of resistance flashed instantly into his mind, only to be rejected as quickly. There were a score of the white-garmented figures in the conical helmets; he would certainly be overcome regardless of his superior strength. But it was not this cautionary reasoning that decided him so much as the hope that if he allowed himself to be captured it might be the one sure way of being brought to the presence of the monarch of this under-

ground world! That capture meant eventual death, he knew; but before his death he must surely have one moment near the throne, one fraction of time in which he might come to grips with the gigantic figure with the distorted head! And so he bowed submissively and signified by his passive attitude that he was ready to go where they should lead him.

A man who was taller than the rest and who wore a blue diamond set in the front of his helmet, gave an order. The others promptly closed around him, moving in machine-like fashion with an awkward, exaggerated knee action.

Then the leader addressed his prisoner. He spoke in sonorous, weightily inflected language; and at the sound of the words, Professor Sanderson stared amazed. Memories of lessons taught him by Eden recurred to him, and of long phrases in italics that speckled the pages of the scientific books he had studied. They were of the same language as this now enunciated by the leader of the band; though Sanderson was probably the only man living in modern times who had ever heard them used as a common vehicle of speech, clearly and correctly pronounced.

His knowledge of it was fairly comprehensive, though his vocabulary inclined more to the technical than the common words; and when the man, in answer to his halting request to speak more slowly, repeated his words, he was able to catch the meaning. The problem of why he should use the language of dusty antiquity was a mystery he put aside for the moment.

"You are captive," repeated the stolid lieutenant. "You will come to where we lead you, and await further orders from our ruler."

IT WAS dream-like, marching down those endless tunnels, tramping in the center of the hollow square of puppets with their sandals clinking against the rock floor in perfect unison. The light shed from the disks that studded the arched roof was lulling in its even monotony; and the dead, still air seemed to absorb sound rather than transmit it. The moment was like that period of half wakefulness after a sound sleep, when one stands at a distance and watches parades of figures that are part actuality and part manufactured by sleepy imagination. In this fashion Sanderson could see himself now—a naked, bearded giant led down interminable dream paths by impossible dream men.

He shook himself to break the dulling illusion, and turned to the leader. Here was one who must be in more or less direct contact with the being who ruled over this glorified colony of moles. Perhaps he could get some information from him.

The man's attitude was peculiar. He wasn't surly or overbearing; he seemed incapable, indeed, of acting so humanly. He replied to every question Sanderson's curiosity prompted him to ask, speaking in the mechanical and concise way in which an automatic phonograph answers to the pull of a lever or the weight of a dropped coin. His lack of reticence, in fact, was so great that it prophesied disaster: No prisoner would have been informed so fully if there were a scrap of a chance of his getting away alive!

And yet he professed ignorance on some subjects it seemed impossible he should not know about. All Sanderson's inquiries concerning the evil being he was so grimly anxious to see, for example, remained evaded or unanswered.

"How old is your ruler?" the professor asked, among other fruitless questions.

"I do not know," replied the man. "Many, many years, I think," he added, in the manner of one who has no conception of what the word, curiosity, means.

"What does he look like?"

"I have never seen."

Sanderson refused to believe this.

"His head is different from the heads of other men. Is that not true?"

"I have never seen," was the toneless repetition.

"But—you take your orders from him?" the professor insisted. "Surely you have seen him then?"

"Our ruler speaks through the round blue stone. No one has ever looked behind the stone."

"The attendants who serve him personally?"

"No one enters the grand apartment save by command, or at a certain hour. Once one came too quickly—and saw. That one was taken at once to the cave of the water beasts."

"Is your ruler a god or a mortal?"

"Our ruler is truly a god, and speaks with many voices."

Sanderson had to give it up, more perplexed than ever by the vague uncertainty of the man's replies. Also his imperfect speaking knowledge of the language was a tremendous handicap; his questions being much more incoherent and his understanding of the answers much more sketchy than the doubtful translation of them he made in his mind.

His informant, for instance, had never spoken of the reigning power as He or She. The formal title, Ruler, was always applied—and the ending seemed to denote feminine sex. Yet the man had not troubled to correct him when he defined the sex as masculine in his questions.

THE tunnel had gradually heightened and broadened as they marched along; and the branching passages at either side showed smaller and smaller in comparison, indicating that they were in an important main artery and near to its conclusion. Also at this point the professor was struck by a slight change in the texture and shading of the rock about them. It was now exactly of the same grain and color as the rock of Block Mountain. Evidently their path had lain back along the side of the underground lake, and they were now directly under the huge cube that had been the starting-point of the expedition!

And then the tunnel ended, and he saw for the first time the hub of this underground maze, the central point of the kingdom, the vast heart of all the subterranean system.

Stretching out before him was a great, circular cave nearly three hundred yards in diameter. The walls, of the solid rock that was Block Mountain's foundation, were smoothed and painted a dim, misty red; and almost indistinguishably outlined against the flat color were enormous figures of mythical animals and reptiles. There wasn't a column in the entire space, the weight of the tremendous span of the ceiling being carried by an arch construction of gray metal beams proportionate with the great area of the floor. In accordance with that architectural ratio the oval dome rose to heights that stunned the eye. An average fourteen-storied building could have been erected under the dome—and could have toppled to its side without touching walls or ceiling in its fall!

In the center of the dome was set a single yellow metal illuminating-plate; but this was mammoth, with dimensions appropriate to the size of the cavern in which it was the sole source of light. Fifty feet across, it poured its warm yellow beams over the vast chamber, and bathed in its rays the curious structure directly beneath it.

This was a large building constructed of heavy blocks of the prevailing native stone. It was a sort of double edifice, with one section set atop the other. The lower part was round, and the upper tower was much smaller and square, giving the general impression of a gigantic square pencil stub set in a spool. Leading around

the lower building was an ascending ramp; but the upper structure was sheer-walled, indicating inside stairways. There were doors opening onto the ramp of the lower building; but there were no windows or other apertures in the blank walls.

At the entrance to the ramp the guards who had escorted Sanderson thus far relinquished him to the charge of other guards who were stationed like statues around the foot of the structure; and these led him up till a level had been reached just below the roof of the round, foundation building. Here they turned into a large doorway and went down a low-roofed hall that ended in a metal door. With a complicated unlatching of bolts and bars this was opened, and the automatons stood aside for him to enter.

For an instant he hesitated indecisively. He had submitted peaceably to capture in the hope that he would be led directly to the presence of the creature he sought. His hope had been thus far fulfilled—now, in all probability, he stood under the same roof that covered the nightmare conical head. But behind such a door as this he would be securely held! Should he attempt to overpower the guards before they could close it on him, and try to find a way to the evil genius by himself? It might be that he could blunder around until he came across the door leading into the throneroom—or wherever it was that the monster hid—and meanwhile keep these mock-men at bay till he had accomplished his purpose. . . .

A voice cut across his hesitation with a command—a voice that seemed to come from nowhere, and that was all the more startling in that it couched its order in perfect English.

"You will enter and await my will!"

Professor Sanderson stared at the guards. Plainly none of them had spoken. There were no other persons in the hall but himself and the puppet soldiers. He gazed, dumfounded, at walls and ceilings. Of perfectly bare, undraped stone, they would have revealed at once any trace of openings or speaking-tube devices through which the command might have issued. There was nothing of the kind to be seen.

Again he heard the voice. And this time, unidentifiable in tone or volume, it seemed in some way to come *from within himself!*

"You will enter and await my will."

He found himself walking slowly across the threshold, and behind him the heavy door was swung and bolted.

9. The Rule of Rez

AFTER a meal of the waxy, tasteless vegetables, Sanderson resumed his account of what had happened to him since their separation in the steam chamber.

"I also learned a few things from the leader of the band that brought me here," he said. "Fortunately my Latin was good enough to allow me to catch the gist of his words if he spoke slowly——"

"So that's the language they speak!"

"Yes, pure Latin. This underground colony has been here since the days of Rome, with no outside influence to adulterate the language or habits."

"Did you learn anything about the ruler?" Neal asked eagerly.

"Practically nothing," admitted the professor. "He is called Rez, and it follows that this is the Kingdom of Rez. But the guard leader didn't know what he looked like—he said that anyone who set eyes on him died immediately. I got some other interesting information, however, some general statistics.

"There are over six thousand human beings in the kingdom. An even thousand of these are men, all of whom look exactly alike, as you

have seen. It is by the will of Rez that they are identical—a result produced by many centuries of ruthless breeding and careful selection. At the age of five the males are examined for uniformity of feature and mind. Those that show promise of conforming to type are allowed to grow up. The rest are—discarded!

"When the males are twelve years old their training begins. They are housed in a certain cavern and drilled in marching and mass movement. At fifteen they move to another cavern and go through a more rigorous training. At eighteen their quarters are near those of the adult laborers, and they are put under full discipline which means death for breaking formation. At twenty they start work in the industrial caves. By this process of selection and education they are made into such mechanical things that a dozen overseers, themselves hardly less stupid than the automatons they direct, can manage the thousand with no trouble at all.

"Out of every fourteen male children born—only one lives to reach the age of twenty by virtue of looking and acting exactly as the rest look and act!

"At thirty-eight a workman's life is over. I suppose at that age he begins to look a little different from his younger fellows. So he is scrapped. As there seems to be no place set aside for men over thirty-eight, I presume they are killed——"

"But why do they stand for such inhuman treatment?" interrupted Neal.

"I got the answer to that, too," said the professor. "One reason is that the men are forbidden ever to talk. Thus there is no chance for revolt. Another reason is that the standard of intellect is very low. The quality most rigorously weeded out in this strange land is intelligence. The creatures that are left haven't mind enough for concerted rebellion, and individual stubbornness is quickly dealt with—probably in the cave of the water serpents."

"Devil is certainly the term for Rez!" said Neal. Then, "I wonder if we'll ever see him."

"We'll be brought before him, I think, though he'll probably keep himself concealed. The voice that addressed me as I stood outside this door surely came direct from Rez. And the voice said that I was to enter and await his will. That sounds as though we would be called to account to him for our presence here."

He held his hands out and slowly clenched them till knots of muscle quivered and stood forth on his great arms.

"And if I ever get near enough to him——" he muttered fiercely.

Neal got to his feet and paced restlessly back and forth across the room. "Rez certainly knows we're here," he mused aloud. "How is it that we are allowed to live at all? Why was I saved from the cave of the snakes? Why were you captured instead of being killed——"

"I've asked myself the same questions," said Sanderson. "Before we got here I had an idea I might approach him by stealth, never dreaming he lived in a large and well-ordered kingdom. I can see now, of course, how laughable such a plan was! And, entirely in his power as we are, I don't see why we haven't been killed long ago."

"I wonder what his purpose was in letting us live."

"That," said the professor, "is something we won't know till we're taken into the presence of Rez. And I don't imagine that time is very far off now!"

JUST over their heads, in a long narrow chamber at the top of the tower, a four-foot circle of deep blue light pulsed in the surrounding darkness. Steadily it grew brighter. Then the light wavered in intensity, shad-

ows appeared, and a picture stood forth.

The picture showed a nightmare surgical laboratory. The rock walls were tile-smooth, and painted flat white to reflect light without glare. There were wheeled stands, with rows of surgical instruments—of different design and shape from those conventionally known to science, and fashioned of a silvery gray metal.

In addition to the surgical instruments there were other things not commonly found in dissecting-rooms. There was a complicated motor with tubes attached to several glass bells, that seemed to be a vacuum-inducing device. There were batteries of the yellow metal plates all shielded by glass lenses of different tints. These were grouped about something that seemed designed for an operating-table, but which was most unlike the usual table in that it consisted of a single oblong slab of glass about seven feet long and standing waist-high.

Parts of the laboratory had an unfinished look, as though it were being remodeled or added to. Several workmen were moving about, and the great glass block had been shifted from its usual place. A man was fixing an illumination plate in the floor to shine up through the glass when it should be replaced. But in general the chamber was trimly arranged, showing that the repairs were nearing completion.

The picture faded from the disk, and it resumed its sullen deep blue light. For an instant a grotesque figure was outlined against it as a huge body moved in the dark of the room and crossed in front of the dim circle. There was a rustling of the drapes behind the disk, and the figure vanished.

A moment later the room was flooded with clear amber light; and shortly after that, as though in answer to a summons, an attendant appeared at one of the concealed doorways, advanced, and bowed low before the disk. Words of command flowed from the stone, words spoken by a glorious feminine voice.

"You will go to door ten," came the beautiful, even voice in the round phrases of the kingdom's language, "and bring me to the man with the gloves."

The attendant bowed again, wordlessly, and withdrew. In a little while he returned with the occupant of room ten.

In any place or gathering the subject commanded to appear before the disk would have seemed odd; and in this community of mindless men as like as waves in the sea, he stood out bizarre in his individuality. He was very tall and thin, with dull eyes set in his cadaverous face like bits of brown earth in a skull. His bony shoulders stooped, and he walked lifelessly as though he had long ago been broken mentally and physically. His skin was a colorless gray as if it had once been very dark and had faded to its present neutral tint through an incredible number of years. On his hands were fabric gloves.

He did not bow before the round blue stone, but stood motionless, his eyes dull and vacant, his lips moving with soundless muttering. His attitude hinted at familiarity with the disk, and the voice that spoke through it, and the master of the voice; and the knowledge seemed to rob him of the awe possessed by other subjects.

At last came words from the blank, indigo-blue stone.

"Number Ten, droned the sweet, expressionless voice, "you are soon to operate."

With the word a ferocious change came over the face of the man with the gloves. A red glint appeared in the muddy depths of his brown eyes. His swathed fingers coiled and uncoiled restlessly.

"You will perform the brain selection operation soon on patients with a more normal skull development than those you have worked on in the past."

Words tumbled from the loose lips, guttural, awkwardly formed, as though the speaker were in danger of forgetting speech entirely.

"Why must I wait, thou Rez? Why not begin the cutting now?"

"The equipment is not yet prepared," was the response. "In the meantime you will hold yourself in readiness. How are your hands?"

In answer Number Ten stripped off one of his gloves, revealing long thin fingers. They were beautiful in their strength, but beautiful in a repulsive way as reptiles might be called beautiful.

"They have not lost their cunning?" probed the voice.

"They have not!" was the fierce reply. "They are ready and anxious for tasks to do—for flesh to cut and bone to sever."

"You will continue to exercise them and protect them with gloves. They must be sure and wise when the day comes. You know that on the success of this next trial of ours rests my whole ambition?"

"I know. And I will not fail, Rez. But who are these objects of experiments—not more of your manikins of the kingdom?"

"Have I not said they possess more normal skull development? Two men from the outside world have been kind enough to come here just in time for my needs. They wait in the rooms below."

"And I also wait!" said Number Ten, his fingers twitching. "The days be swift in passing!"

He turned from the disk, his ancient eyes again dull and expressionless, and he passed listlessly through the doorway, which was covered again as soon as he had left.

THE professor and Neal had no way of timing the long interval of waiting in their apartment: The light from the metal plates never varied; there were no windows through which might be seen dusk or dawn—nor, indeed, any dawn or dusk to see even if there had been windows to look through. But several meals had been brought to them before the thread of their monotony was broken.

It was shortly after their fourth meal that the door opened and one of the leaders with the diamond of authority in his helmet entered and faced the professor.

"You are to be brought to the room of the disk," he said in his toneless voice. "It is the will of Rez."

"What is he saying?" Neal demanded.

Sanderson translated. "Though what the room of the disk may be is more than I can imagine. It's probably the private apartment of Rez. I think we're going to learn our fate at last!"

Turning to the guard leader, he indicated that the order was understood. Soberly they rose to follow him—to go into the presence of the mighty, evil being who held them powerless.

As they stepped out into the corridor, they saw twenty of the automatons drawn up to guard them from escaping. At a word from the guard leader these preceded them to the entrance leading out onto the broad ramp. There they halted in close double file on the down slope, so that the prisoners had no choice but to ascend to the tower in obedience to the leader's order to Sanderson.

Up the ramp they went, to the roof of the lower building. At the foot of the tower was an arch; they were led through this and into a huge room which was dotted with more guards as still as blocks of stone. From this chamber a flight of stairs ascended; and toward this they were conducted, the guards among whom they moved never turning their heads to look at these intruders from the upper, unknown world.

At the top of the stairs was a narrow entrance, and closing this there was no door—only a heavy drape of white cloth. Evidently Rez was one

despot who knew no fear of his tyrannized subjects. Either he was assured that all spirit had been drained from his people, or he relied on some protection more subtly powerful than bolts or bars!

The guard leader held aside the drapes and they entered.

They were in the presence of **Rez**!

The atmosphere, charged with repulsion and horror, told them that somewhere shut in between these walls with them was the Black Ruler.

Neal and Sanderson looked somberly at each other. Then they clasped hands for an instant as men do when they take leave of each other, and waited to hear the will of Rez.

The terrible power of Rez makes itself manifest in next month's fascinating chapters of this story

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WITCHES' EVE

By A. LESLIE

The wind sighs through the grasses,
  The shadows flow and flutter,
A dour owl plains to a gibbous moon
  With quavering moan and mutter.

Moonlight shudders through the trees
  In grave-white splotch and bar,
And a rosebud droops and closes
  In the shadow of a star.

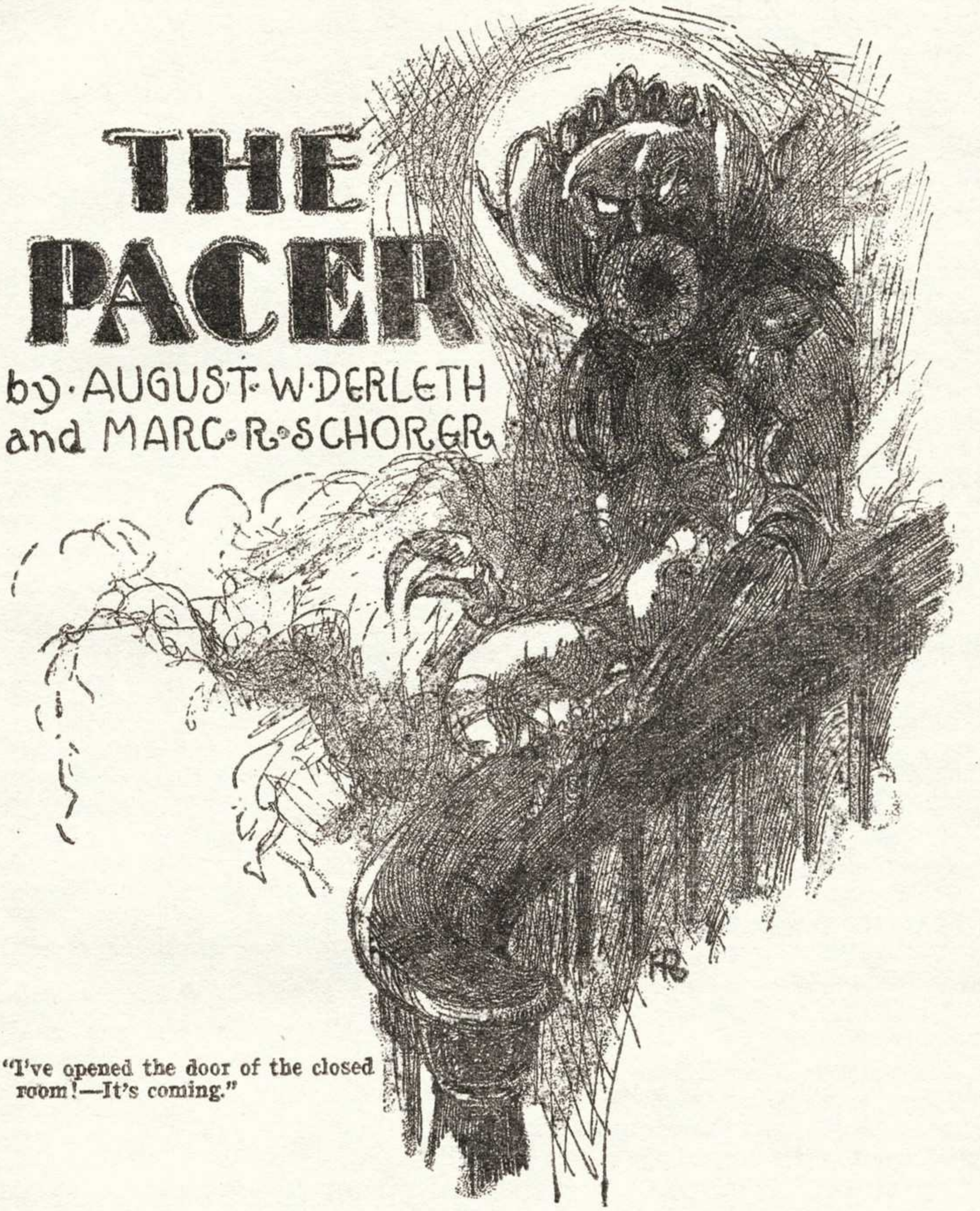
A leprous toad with jewel eyes
  Squats on a heap of bones,
While fleshless fingers scratch and claw
  Beneath the moldy stones.

A nameless thing with gory head
  And awful lipless grin
Rocks and slithers through the air,
  And a bat hangs to its chin.

Athwart the moon in silhouette,
  Flickering from the gloom,
An eery glimpse of a high-peaked cap,
  A long cloak, and *a broom!*

THE PACER

by AUGUST W. DERLETH and MARC R. SCHORER



"I've opened the door of the closed room!—It's coming."

MR. WILLIAM LARKINS adjusted his monocle with a very determined air. Then he brushed an imaginary thread from his lapel, raised his eyebrows slightly, and turned to the house agent, still talking volubly.

"It is people in my business, Mr. Collins," said Mr. Larkins somewhat icily, "who start rumors of this sort. This is by far the most desirable of the houses you have yet shown me, and I am determined to take it for the winter at the price you quoted me."

"You authors are a funny lot," answered the agent somewhat testily. "But we take no responsibilities

—especially in regard to anything out of the ordinary that may happen while you're in the building."

Mr. Larkins regarded the agent for a moment; then he removed his monocle, polished it, and returned it to his eye. The agent shuffled his feet nervously. "I should think that the modern businessman would have something else on his mind than stories of haunted houses," remarked Mr. Larkins dryly.

Mr. Collins became suddenly apologetic. "It's not that we believe these things, Mr. Larkins," and he spread his hands and smiled deprecatingly, "but the amount of complaints we've received from other people who've rented this place can't be entirely disregarded. Then there's that closed room; a lot of people object to that, but one fellow opened it, and—well, he died shortly after." Mr. Collins coughed.

"It will not be necessary that I use the second floor at all," put in Mr. Larkins. "So you need have no fear about that closed room. As long as it doesn't bother me, I'll not bother the room."

"Of course," said Mr. Collins, and "Of course," again, and would perhaps have gone on, but Mr. Larkins interrupted him.

"If I may ask, on what are these rumors based?"

"Just noises—as if someone were walking around up there." The agent made a vague sort of gesture that included the entire second story.

"I see," said Mr. Larkins thoughtfully.

"Of course, all these stories go back to the time when John Brent lived here," the agent went on.

"You refer to the scientist Brent? The man who died insane?" asked Mr. Larkins, absently tapping the wall with his stick.

"Yes, that's the man. Perhaps you knew him, Mr. Larkins?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Collins. It is not a practise of mine to associate with people who are slightly unbalanced mentally. I can say that I remember him, however; the man and his ridiculous theories attracted quite a bit of public attention."

"He died here in this house."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Larkins, for the first time showing interest. "And is it his ghost that walks?"

"No! No! Mr. Larkins. It's quite a different story; we—none of us fully understand it, and it's supposed that this man Brent had a hand in what's haunting the house."

"Something to do with one of his theories?"

"Yes, that's it. I'm not quite sure what it's all about, Mr. Larkins, but I can find out, if you wish."

"Oh! no, don't go to any trouble. The matter doesn't worry me in the least, Mr. Collins. It's merely a passing interest. Don't trouble yourself."

"As far as I know," continued Mr. Collins, "it had something to do with some theory about drawing spirits out of the ether—or some such idea."

"I think I've heard of it," interrupted Mr. Larkins. "I understand it was not quite a success."

"I couldn't say, Mr. Larkins; I'm sure I couldn't say."

"No," said Mr. Larkins rather sharply, "I didn't suppose you could. But as I said before, the matter is inconsequential, of very little importance, indeed, and I believe that we can dismiss it. Shall we, Mr. Collins?"

"Oh! yes, Mr. Larkins. Yes, sir; of course."

"Good!" said Mr. Larkins, and was about to go on, when the agent interrupted him.

"And you're still certain you want this house?"

"Quite," said Mr. Larkins in a cold voice edged with reproof. "And the sooner, the better. In fact, I suggest that we attend to the matter at once, without further delay."

"Anything you say, Mr. Larkins."
"Very good. We shall go at once."

MR. WILLIAM LARKINS' forte was the romantic novel, and he had just succeeded in arousing the literary critics of the Continent to a sense of his importance. At the appearance of his first book they hailed him as "Just another new writer," which so irritated Mr. Larkins that he produced his masterpiece, *Ysola*, which caught and held the veneration of such capable men as Alonso Compson of the *Mirror*, to say nothing of Carlo Jenkins of the *Times*.

Mr. Larkins was engaged on his third novel, *Island Gods*, when he discovered the necessity of quiet and unassuming winter quarters. Whereupon he departed at once for St. John's Wood, a section of London that he had before been pleased with. Not quite a week later, he descended with his belongings on Number 21 and took quiet possession.

Mr. William Larkins had quite forgotten all about the rumors concerning the haunting of Number 21, when the matter was brought to his mind in a very irritating manner. It was six days after he had taken up occupation, and Mr. Larkins was engaged on his third novel—as a matter of fact, he had just succeeded in depositing his hero on a desert island, with no immediate thought of how to rescue him—when he became aware of a most annoying disturbance on the second floor. For a moment Mr. Larkins forgot his surroundings; he began to curse the tenants above under his breath in no very genteel manner. But suddenly he bethought himself of the emptiness of the floor above. It took him some moments more to think of the rumors he had heard from the agent.

Mr. Larkins was distinctly not a believer in any form of the supernatural. For some time he sat very still, listening. The sound seemed to be that of a man pacing to and fro in a narrow space; Mr. Larkins had a mental picture of the closed room. The pacing was not, however, very regular; it was punctuated at odd intervals by a furious pounding sound—as if the tenant were hammering on the door or the walls, reflected the author. Usually such an interval was followed by a curious padding sound, as if the tenant were running in a circle around the room. Eventually this resolved into the steady pacing, which became to Mr. Larkins more and more monotonous as he sat there listening.

Another of Mr. Larkins' attributes was an unshakable bravery. Torn between the impossibility of writing with such an annoying disturbance above his head, and investigating, leaving his hero to languish for some unpremeditated hours on the island, Mr. Larkins decided upon the latter course. Arming himself with a revolver and a flashlight, he made his way carefully into the hall and up the stairs. The first door to his right as he mounted the last step was that of the closed room. Before this room he paused, listening. Certainly it was from here that the sound came. It was more subdued now, but still recognizable. Mr. Larkins argued with himself: should he enter, or not? The agent's warning came to his mind. He decided that, just as a matter of surety, he would look into the other rooms first.

There was nothing in them, and when he had finished, the annoying pacing had stopped. Consequently Mr. Larkins decided to put off his investigation of the closed room until he had fortified himself with more data in regard to the late Brent and his theories. Mr. Larkins was not admitting to himself the possibility of the supernatural; he was still convinced that there was something perfectly natural behind this disturbance. In any event, he reflected, it would do no harm to know a little more about the house. He resolved

on the spur of the moment to look up the case of the man who had died after opening the closed room.

In accordance with his decision, Mr. Larkins descended to his floor and went directly to the typewriter, where he removed his hero bodily from the machine. Then he sat down and wrote a letter to the late Mr. Brent's co-worker, Jonathan Roberts.

On the following day Mr. Larkins wandered casually down to the offices of the *Times*, where he spent a considerable part of the afternoon. He emerged at last, and he carried under his arm a number of newspapers. When he reached Number 21 he was pleasantly surprized to find that Mr. Jonathan Roberts had replied to his letter of the preceding night by special messenger.

It was the letter, quite a lengthy document, which first engaged Mr. Larkins' attention. Of special interest were these paragraphs, constituting the latter half of the letter:

. . . Those are a number of his theories, which I have come to regard as fully as ridiculous as the press regards them. But I believe the particular theory you refer to is his theory of the predestination of souls. This was engrossing his attention at a time when I was spending some weeks at Liverpool, in attendance upon my mother, who was, at the time, seriously ill. However, I will tell you what I can in regard to the theory.

It was his idea that such places as heaven and hell did not exist for the soul; he did not mean to say that he believed that good and evil were also non-existent for the soul after death. On the contrary, his entire theory hinged on this point. He believed that all souls, good and bad alike, were projected into the ether at the moment of death, to roam there for the remainder of their existence, to which he designated no end. For the good souls happiness abounded; for the evil, only evil.

He developed this theory by advancing another; that since these souls were merely passing to and fro in the ether, it would be a comparatively easy thing to draw them back, *if one had a body to put them into.* The last time I saw him—just before I left for Liverpool—he had actually found a young man who had consented to his plan of driving from the subject's body his soul, and drawing another from the ether to replace it.

He admitted that the chief argument against this latter theory was, in the light of his first theory, that in drawing a soul from the ether, one could make no distinction between a good and evil soul. Also, one could not tell to what proportions the evil and good had expanded. He believed, as many of us do, that evil breeds evil, and he said he had the chance of one in a hundred of drawing a soul of cosmic evil from the ether. In my presence, one day, he made certain vague references to ancient gods of evil—I candidly admit that what he said went over my head.

How this experiment of his came out, I can not say. It was the last he worked, for he was dead when I returned from Liverpool. The papers contained no mention of it; he himself, in his letters to me—letters, often as not, very incoherent—was very sparse with information regarding it. I gathered, however, that the experiment was a success, or that he believed it so; most likely the latter, for to admit the former would be to admit his grossly improbable theory to the realm of the probable. Beyond that I can say nothing. I don't think he ever gave me the name of the young man, for I should certainly have looked him up. It was consistently my idea that the fellow was a derelict, or surely his relatives would have some knowledge of him; or, having none, would certainly raise a devil of a row over his disappearance.

I was under the impression also, from his letters, that Brent kept a diary in his last days, but I could find nothing at the time when I looked about Number 21 after his death. However, I remember being in a rush; if you searched, you might find something of interest.

Another thing that rather puzzles me: have you ever wondered about that peculiar bare spot beneath the lilac bush at the back of the house?

Very cordially yours,

JONATHAN ROBERTS.

P. S.—If you should want me, call Picadilly 49-A.

The last paragraph of the letter caught Mr. Larkins' eye; he resolved to investigate the matter the first thing in the morning, regretting somewhat that dusk had fallen so early. The mention of a diary, too, stimulated his interest; he mentally noted that this was another factor to absorb his attention on the following day.

Then he gave his attention to the newspapers, going over them one by one and discarding them. From the

last he clipped a column which contained a summary of the affair; this clipping he placed beside the letter and proceeded to reread it:

LONDON, August 7—The death of Mr. Holman Davitt at Number 21 St. John's Wood was last night declared due to heart failure caused by severe shock. Physicians in charge of the inquest were led by the Honourable Seymour Lawlor.

Mr. Holman Davitt was found dead at his lodgings on August 1. He was found at the foot of the stairs under circumstances that aroused immediate suspicion and caused an investigation to be made. Nothing, however, was discovered, save that Mr. Davitt seemed to have fallen down the stairs, as several bruises on his body indicated. There were no broken bones. Doctors were loth to declare death due to failure of the heart because Mr. Davitt's attending physician, Dr. Sax Borden, declared his condition tip-top.

It is Dr. Lawlor's opinion, as expressed at the final inquest last night, that Mr. Davitt died of fright; Dr. Borden, on the other hand, cites specific instances of Mr. Davitt's bravery and nerve. A peculiar feature of the affair is the curiously hardened and cold condition of the corpse; it is still in the condition in which it was discovered.

By way of mention, Number 21 was the residence of the late John Brent, who was found dead under very similar conditions.

Mr. Larkins pondered over the excerpt for a moment; then he took up the letter and began to reread it. He noticed with gathering astonishment that neither the clipping nor the letter made mention of the closed room. Did the matter seem too flippant for the respective writers? Or was it merely an oversight? The closed room, as something of importance, began to deteriorate in the eyes of Mr. Larkins.

But he could not escape the fact that the body of Mr. Davitt had been found at the foot of the stairs, down which it had evidently fallen. And Dr. Lawlor had mentioned fright. Mr. Collins, the agent, had said that the tenant died soon after opening the door of the closed room. Perhaps—it was quite possible—Collins deceived him. Mr. Larkins observed that Mr. Davitt might very well have died the same night he opened the door. Could it not then be possible that something in that room so frightened Mr. Davitt as to bring on heart failure? Mr. Larkins admitted it to himself; he was much disposed to believe it. It would be natural for a realtor to suppress any such story, of course.

A clock on the mantel struck 10 and Mr. Larkins shot an enlightened glance toward his bed chamber. He rose, stretched himself, and yawned. He placed the letter and clipping under a paperweight on the top of his table, where he would not fail to see them first thing in the morning. As he turned the light out, he reflected with a half-smile, that the hero of *Island Gods* was still languishing on a desert isle.

MR. LARKINS rose much earlier than usual the next morning, but since it was Sunday, he had first to go to mass. Directly on his return he went out into the garden behind the house. At the end of the cobblestone walk he found the lilac bush, and beneath it the spot that Roberts had mentioned. He stopped and frowned down at it. It was nothing more than a vague, irregular patch of ground on which the grass grew very sparsely, in scraggly clumps of thin blades, which appeared at first to be dried, but were instead of some dark color that Mr. Larkins could not identify. To Mr. Larkins it seemed at first glance only the usual bare space that one finds in places where the sun does not shine, where there is continual shadow. Mr. Larkins polished his monocle meditatively and screwed it into his eye. Then, looking upward, he caught the line of the lilac bush. It was then that he noticed that the bare spot was not directly under the bush—certainly it was not always in its shadow. Mr. Larkins bent to one knee to inspect the area more closely.

In no place under the bush was the grass exceptionally heavy; the

strange thing was that the barest spot was that at the extreme outer edge and that it must be this portion that Robert had reference to. Mr. Larkins cast a sudden glance at the sky; in less than an hour the sun would be shining directly upon the spot before him. With an exclamation, he bent again to the scrutiny. Then he noticed that there was a suggestion of definite form to the spot, despite the inroads of grass: something more distinct than he had at first imagined. It was a shape inexplicably suggestive of something he knew—something he could recognize.

Then suddenly he started up; his monocle fell from his eye and swung on its ribbon. He bent forward once more. Yes, certainly, it was as if a human body were crouched there on its side—its knees pressed into its breast. For a moment Mr. Larkins stared at it. Did Roberts mean—could it be that this spot marked a grave? Mr. Larkins shuddered, and turned his face full into the sunlight.

IN THE house once more, Mr. Larkins began his search for the diary of the scientist. He looked thoroughly in every room; he even penetrated the dismal cellar. But he found nothing. Coming back to his study at last he considered opening the closed room, but the clipping before him did not argue favorably. It was then that he caught sight of the boarded-up fireplace. He hesitated only for a moment; then he began to tear the boards away.

He was not disappointed, though his find was meager. Almost covered with ashes, he found two charred pieces of paper, which were most certainly from Brent's diary. He carried them carefully over to his table and placed them side by side with the letter and clipping. But his disappointment rose, when he found that the writing was almost illegible, and the contents were most incoherent. The excerpts were dated a week apart. The first read, as well as Mr. Larkins could decipher the script:

May 10—I did it today—it was all I could do. Who would have thought it? One chance out of one hundred! What annoys me is that I have succeeded, and can not announce it to the world. . . . I buried him in the back . . . I wonder if . . . neighbors will see? I shall never forget . . . his face . . . his air of unholy . . . of sinful glee . . . his first strugglings for . . . life . . . and the expression . . . face, such cosmic . . ."

The remainder of the paper was burnt away. Mr. Larkins would have liked to have known what word followed "cosmic." He turned his attention to the second excerpt.

May 17—I know he is dead! It was with my own hands! And still he paces—one, two, three, four, and over again. And that hellish pounding. My God! Will he never stop? It is driving me mad; people on the street turn and give me curious stares.

If I had not locked his room? But surely I am safe here? . . . He can not come here. How could it be? It is to defy all the laws that mankind has been brought up to revere—but have I not myself proved the folly of those very laws I now champion? . . . What am I writing? As if the atmosphere of this old house could harm me! It is all my imagination. But no, there he goes again; pounding and pacing . . . pacing! Seeking for substance for a new body—for a new material entity. He will need three—three living bodies. . . . What have I done? His room must not be opened. It establishes a link—a contact with that thing out there—it will draw him closer and closer . . . and closer. God! that devilish, devilish pacing! Always! Always! *Always! What if he should come out?*

Mr. Larkins was startled, to say the least. His natural conservatism urged him to take these excerpts as proof of Brent's insanity; but something in him, was inclined toward the opposite view. It was the second excerpt that seemed to awaken a long-dead memory in Mr. Larkins' mind. It was of something he had read long ago, something that drummed insistently through his consciousness. He could not recall the title of the work, but it seemed to him to be an old paper on certain forms of ancient, barbaric magic mingled with designated rit-

ualistic rites of old Chinese ancestor-worshipers. It seemed to him that there had been certain notes, certain cryptic comments, that virtually underscored a sentence in the second excerpt of Brent's diary:

> Seeking for substance for a new body—for a new material entity. He will need three—three living bodies.

There was something of age-old gods of evil, genii older than those of the *Arabian Nights*, who inhabited the nethermost spaces of the cosmos. And there were paragraphs of weird, horrible rites—of materialization of these ancient demons—and certainly there was something of three living sacrifices, from whom all life was extracted, leaving them cold and stiffened as arctic stone.

Mr. Larkins was stunned by the immensity of his speculations. His mind was channeled—it led but to one thing. Could it be that the fingers of Mr. Brent's ghastly experiment had reached out much farther than intended?—that the experiment had reached through space into the cosmos and touched upon——? Mr. Larkins shook off the impression, and slipped the excerpts together with the letter and clipping under the paperweight. Then he rose, donned his topcoat and stick, and went for an afternoon in Hyde Park.

SOMEWHAT delayed on the underground, Mr. Larkins arrived at Number 21 shortly after dark had fallen. He had forgotten all about the matter of the closed room, and approached his work, eager to rescue the hero of *Island Gods* from the desert island.

He had moved his hero approximately twenty miles into midocean when the pacing began. Mr. Larkins stopped work at once; he cast a sidelong glance at his flash and revolver, still where he had put them two nights before. His conservatism urged him to investigate; again some opposing factor urged him to flee—to leave the house.

But his conservatism won. Mr. Larkins took up his flashlight and revolver and crept cautiously up the stairs. Half-way up, he stopped and listened. The disturbance was exactly the same as that of the night before. Then, tightening his grasp on his weapon, he went resolutely on.

It was only natural that he should stop a moment to listen before the door, before he took from his key-ring the key to open the room. For an interval he heard nothing; then the slow, monotonous pacing sound again. He threw open the door and shot his flash around.

There was nothing in the room—but the pacing continued! Suddenly, inexplicably, Mr. Larkins felt frightened. Had he but found some living thing—something to challenge! But this inexplicable nothingness—and that awful pacing!

Then abruptly his flashlight went out. For a moment Mr. Larkins was stunned. Then he noticed that the window at the end of the room looked directly down on the lilac bush, and above the bare spot hung a shadow, distinct in the glow of the street lamp—a shadow that was not of the lilac bush.

Mr. Larkins watched as if fascinated. The shadow rose like a cloud, hung for a moment suspended in the air, then shot swiftly toward the window. Mr. Larkins turned to flee, and at that instant he saw before him, limned against the window, an awful thing.

He ran headlong into the hall and down the stairs. As he fumbled at the door of his library, he threw over his shoulder a quick, scared glance. Then the door opened, and he stumbled into the room. At once he slammed the door to, and stood with his back against it, breathing heavily. Leaning there, he listened. From upstairs came a sound as of some heavy lumbering object pacing

—and almost immediately after, an ominous creak of hall boards. Suddenly the monophone on the table caught Mr. Larkins' eye—and close by, the letter from Roberts.

The letter from Roberts—in a flash the postscript:

If you should want me, call Picadilly 49-A.

He found himself at the instrument, frantically repeating a number to the operator. Then from over the wire, a voice. "Roberts? Larkins! Listen, I've opened the closed room—and it's coming—down the stairs—a horrible thing—from that spot—the grave under the bush.—I can hear it coming—a great, awful thing. What ungodly creation is buried there?—It towers—ghoul-like—but with a face—a human face that glows hellishly—a glow that lights its every contour. It is evil—cosmic evil—and cold as arctic stone. There are ancient gods.—It is all clear now—your letter, the diary, Brent. It is still on the stairs—but it is coming—coming. There is something wrong—I can not move—as if I were chained. But I will shoot this thing!—It is in the hall now.—The knob is turning.—Oh! Christ!"

The monophone struck the table with a loud clatter; immediately after, a shot echoed through the house.

It was the shot that brought the "bobby" who discovered the author's body. The "bobby" says that the body was very cold and rigid, as if something vital had been drawn from it; yet he affirms that he entered the house immediately after the shot: this certainly can not be true. He also asserts that there was someone else in the house, for he distinctly remembers a ghastly chill about his throat, a sudden draft—as if someone had opened a door somewhere—and a steady, low pacing sound creeping away into the distance.

MASQUERADE

By **R. JERE BLACK, JR.**

Last night I started from a dream,
And saw within the moonlight's gleam
A shrouded figure by my bed,
All robed in black, with muffled head.
I stared awhile with fearful eyes
Before I pierced my friend's disguise;
Then, banished all my foolish fear,
I welcomed him with hearty cheer:
"Hast come at last, old friend?" I cried.
"Long for thy greeting have I sighed;
My house is empty, pleasures few;
The only friend now left is you.
And art thou really come for me,
To bid me journey forth with thee?"
With solemn nod my friend replied,
Then touched my brow—and so I died.

A Pathetic Little Story Is

GERARD 7932

By SARAH NEWMEYER

ABOVE the battered table an anemic gas flame made dully visible the squalor of the dingy, narrow room. The bare floor had long since been scuffed paintless, and a gaunt cot sagged along one wall where age-browned paper peeled in jagged, leprous spots.

Close beneath the flickering light stood a woman, scanning the *London Times* with feverish intensity. The hands that gripped the newspaper were translucently thin, blue veins showing flat as though penciled on their surface. She was small, and slender to emaciation, so slender that the threadbare dress, drab as despair, seemed to hang on her very bones. Yet the fragile body suggested the exquisite proportions of a Tanagra statuette, and in the pallor of the still beautiful face smoke-blue eyes flamed dimly, like guttering candles.

Those eyes, the only living things in the waxy face, were fixed now on a "Personal" half-way down the agony column:

> 7932—May we meet in eternity, where the truth alone will be known and believed, and calumnies and false judgments cease.

It was mid-morning, but the heavy blanket of a London fog pressed darkly against the window-pane. For days the city had been shrouded in that yellow-gray pall. For years the woman's life had been wrapped in a chill fog of treachery and despair. Night itself would be better. That was what she had desperately decided, and the "Personal" was her last message.

He would see it and read it, she knew. He took the agony column, with coffee and rolls, every morning for breakfast. A man may change his wives, easily, but his habits remain fixed. Still, to make certain he would recognize the "Personal" as directed to him, she had been tempted to key it with his complete telephone number—Gerard 7932—but that would have drawn the attention of others, and she could not leave a last good-bye that might humiliate him.

It was strange to think she would never see the sun again. Nor the warm brown earth, the friendly grass, and trees beckoning in the wind. Only the ugly little room with the evil fog crouching at the window. Soon she would leave her body there and set out alone. Was there another life beyond—or merciful annihilation? Today she would find out. Even now it was time to go. Where? Involuntarily she looked toward the window and, shivering, drew the torn shade close. The gas flame flickered more brightly. The shabby hole of a room seemed a bit less dismal.

What must one do to get ready for death? Was there nothing more than mere mechanical preparation? No good-bye?

In happier days, farewells and homecomings had never been complete without loving, foolish little presents. Now that she was going away for the last time, she longed to celebrate with a final gift. But there was not one friend to whom she could offer it. Poor, indeed! Only a wedding ring, too loose for the bony, small finger it encircled. She could not part with

her ring, though her husband had taken away everything it symbolized —love, protection, happiness, even his name.

He had been able to withdraw his gifts. But it was out of his power to make her take back what she had given him, the drudgery which had helped support him during those lean years of struggle to establish himself in his profession. She was no longer his wife—she did not even share his name—but her love would inevitably continue a fundamental part of his career. He could never wrench that much of her apart from his life.

What a wonderful thought to carry with her! It might keep her warm even in the grave. A fluttering radiance for an instant brightened her wan face—the afterglow, the fare-thee-well of love. She picked up the *Times*. Her message was too sad. It should have been a joyous good-bye—that gay word of parting in the old days: "Cheerio!"

Why not telephone him now? It would be so easy. Just a coin in the slot—"Gerard 7932"—then his voice. Quickly: "Cheerio, old dear!" Click the receiver back into place, and turn a smiling face to death.

But no, she was forgetting. His secretary would answer the telephone. Strange that she could forget! There had been another secretary. . . . Savagely she jerked up her thoughts. She wanted to carry beauty with her out of the world, not bitterness.

As she began methodically to tear the newspaper into strips, her glance was arrested by the "Personal" at the top of the agony column:

> Would anyone possessing skeleton and having no use for same, kindly lend it to two medical students who are unable to buy.—Elfort, 142, Cambridge St., S. W. 1.

Here was her opportunity! Ironically enough, her body. The one gift men had persistently sought from her. Withheld from all but one; lavished on that one, who had turned it into a weapon against herself. As the old, bitter panorama flashed through her memory, it seemed the crowning mockery. For the thousandth time she wondered dully what excuse her husband would have used to divorce her if the very work she had done to help him had not given him such a cruel lever.

They had married so young and so poor. A few months after the pinched gayety of their honeymoon, jokes about poverty had not seemed humorous—to Richard. He grew increasingly morose, spent less and less time at home, harried so by creditors. To bring in needed extra sovereigns she worked at whatever she could find to do. One day an artist asked her to pose for him. Work in the nude paid best, and she was desperate. She was afraid to tell Richard. But he never seemed to think it strange when the unpaid bills diminished. He was always ready to ignore unpleasant things.

He began to get on in his profession. Social engagements in which she was never included became an important part of his life. Too proud to question him, she pretended to accept his casual explanations that these engagements were only to further his career. Beating back doubt and dismay, she made every excuse for him in her own mind. But she began to sicken under the suspicion that he longed to be rid of her.

Late one afternoon, wearily returning home after hours of posing, she found a stranger waiting on her doorstep. He asked her name, handed her a folded document and was gone before she could question him.

In the nightmare weeks which followed, she managed to see her husband once. Bewildered by the legal technicalities of the divorce plea, with little money and no able friends to lend their support, she begged Richard to be kind to her, to accept the innocence of those "secret meetings with individuals hereinafter named,"

and withdraw his charges. At last, in a frenzy of despair, she implored him to be merciful because of the gratitude he owed her. That had turned him from stone to violent rage. He literally pushed her out of his office, ripping from his arm the terror-stricken clutch of her beseeching fingers. Hope gone, she had let the divorce proceed uncontested, unwilling to drag down in the wreck of her life the reputations of those artists her husband had named as corespondents. Their money, earned blamelessly by her beautiful body, had helped pay Richard's bills.

And now that same body, lovely no longer, was still in demand. There was grim humor in the thought. She smiled in bitter self-derision. Even in the flesh she was a first-class skeleton —and that was what was wanted! "Two medical students . . . unable to buy . . ." Macabre though it was, she felt grateful that she was not quite a pauper. She had something left to give. Now she could close her eyes on the travesty of life with a twisted smile. There was a sardonic sense of fitness in offering her last gift to medical students. Poor, eager, funny lads, with their audacious "Personal." How well she understood their hopes and hardships, their soul-shriveling disappointments and their incredulous joy when the tide of success finally turned in their direction. Here was a chance to speed them on their way, to give them a mute "Cheerio!"

Her note was brief:

Call at 1525 Cardle Road any time after nine a. m. Thursday and ask to be shown to Muriel Barr's room. You may have the skeleton for taking it away.

When she came back from the pillar box at the corner she was shuddering. Gasping for breath, she slammed the door. Safe! The world shut out. Shut in with death. Out there in the fog were vague shapes drifting and dissolving—ghosts! Cold, clammy, like dead hands slipping over you. Quick! Quick now, she must close it all out—fog, life, love, everything she knew of reality, the dear familiar things of earth and sky, the close feel of humankind. With no compass but her lonely soul, she must venture out into the dark. Perhaps, though, there might be friendly lights and even, at the end of night, sunshine and a new day.

With weakly trembling fingers she stuffed the strips of paper into the cracks around the door, plugged the keyhole, then slid limply to the floor. She was tired, so very tired. But in that moment, drained to the dregs of life, repose came, strength for her purpose. Struggling to her feet, she looked keenly about the room. She had sealed it well.

It was time to do the last thing.

She stretched out her hand toward the flickering gas jet. No, she would blow out the flame. It sputtered, dancing frantically an inch above the gas tip as her breath cut between. Such a feeble flame, a mere wisp of light, to cling so tenaciously to existence. One more puff—closer—stronger . . .

The room became a black horror closing in on her. Her clawing fingers rasped the wall, then gratefully clutched the cold rigid pipe and raced along it to turn off that hissing poison.

But with her fingers at the stopcock, her momentary wild panic subsided. Like an automaton she turned and groped her way to the bed. Stiffly she laid herself down on it. Arms tense at her sides, she waited—waited . . .

And then she felt fear leave her, lifting like a fog from the city. Anguish slipped away. Turning on her side, she tucked one hand under her cheek. A lethal drowsiness relaxed her whole body. Her mind seemed to float above it, drifting higher and higher, another self. Any moment the invisible thread that held it might gently snap and she would rush up-

ward, buoyant and free, leaving below an inert, dead weight.

Old scenes began to take form and grow vivid. She could think of the past without sorrow. When she and Richard were young and together. Too long had she closed her mind to those bright yesterdays. Now she could give memory one last holiday—let it gather a garland of the sweetest flowers of the past.

A garland . . . a funeral wreath . . .

THERE was something sinister about the closed door. The two young men looked with growing suspicion at the mask-like face of the lodging-house keeper. But her narrow, pale eyes showed only a subterranean curiosity. She stooped to the keyhole. Quickly straightening up, she ordered the callers to break open the door.

A rush of gas met them. One dashed to the window and jerked it open, tearing down the tattered curtain. The other turned off the gas, then bent over the huddled figure on the bed. He touched it furtively—stiff and cold.

"I'll go for the coroner," he murmured thickly as he stumbled toward the door.

"No, you don't!" The landlady pushed him down on the step beside his companion. "You'll both wait here till the copper comes. He'll find out what you two know about this!" She marched heavily past them down the stairs, opened the front door, and blew a police whistle.

When the officer arrived a faint odor of gas still lingered in the narrow room. A brilliant shaft of sunlight lay across the bed, turning to gold the long bronze hair that half covered the small person lying there so still, so unconcerned.

With the arrival of the coroner, the brief examination of room and body was completed. The medical students showed him their note.

"Pretty good joke—on herself!" he commented. "I suppose the body's yours, as long as she gave it to you, but it'll have to lie in the morgue the usual time. Where're you going to keep it—in your bathtub?"

AS THE students hurried out from the gray misery of the damp lodging-house, the sunshine of early spring seemed the unreal radiance of another world. In silence they walked block after block down the mean street. Suddenly the younger blurted out:

"God! If I had the money I'd give that little creature a decent burial!"

"You blooming idiot! She was damn near dead with consumption and starvation anyway, but if she hadn't seen our 'Personal' in yesterday's *Times* we'd have lost our chance."

"D'you mean you're going to—Christ! We advertised, but not for a skeleton with the flesh still warm on it!"

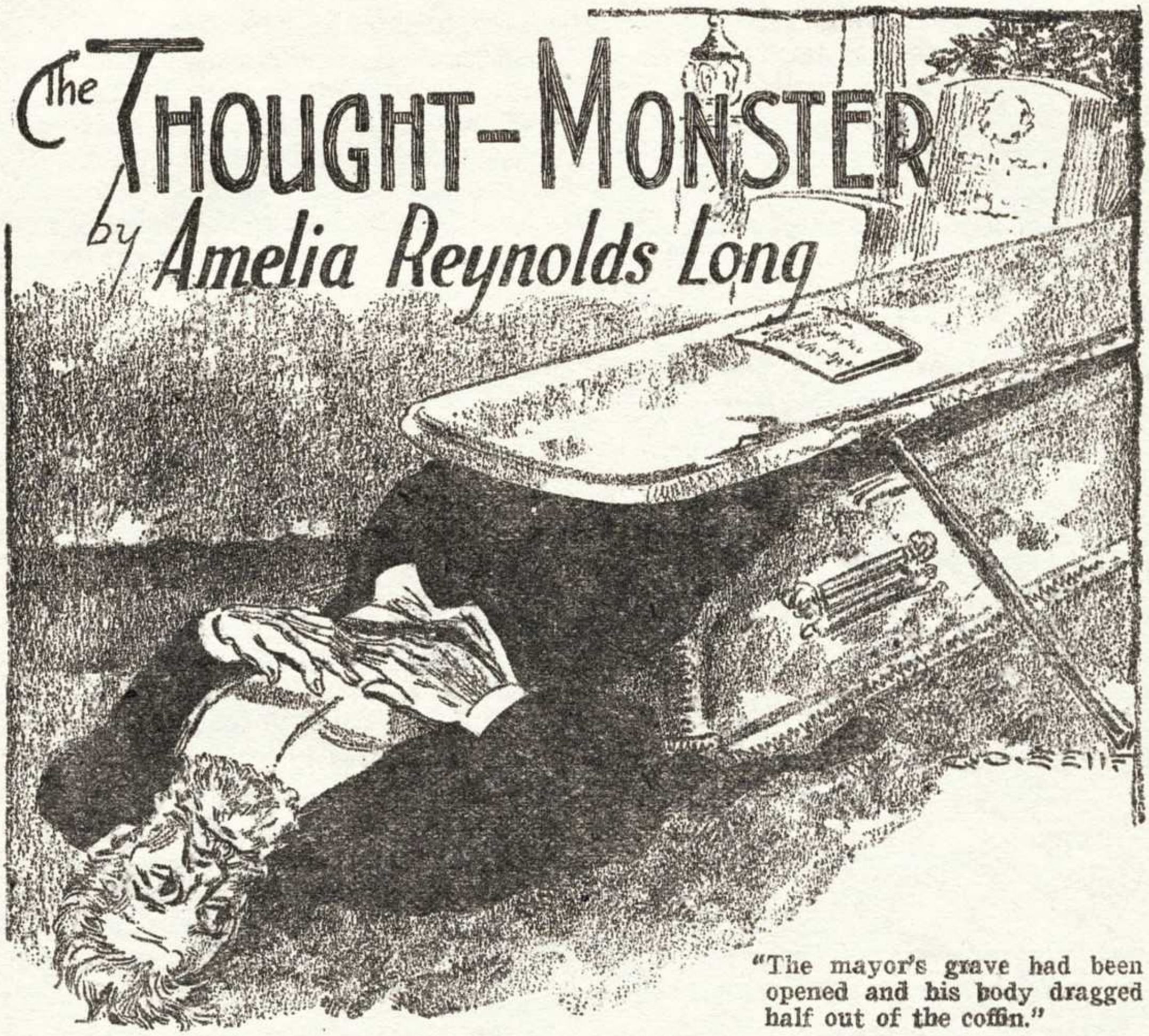
In his own way, though, the other was for carrying out the last wish of the dead.

"Now, look here, old chap!" he argued. "The science of medicine has got to advance, suicide or no suicide. That body back there is no more and no less than the body of a dead dog in a gutter. Pure luck, I call it! Not only gives us a skeleton, but Dr. Evans wants a tubercular body for dissection at the clinic. I'll just stop in here and telephone him. What's his number, d'you remember? Trafalgar—Trafalgar—no, it's Gerard—something. . . . Wake up, wake up, man! What's Evans' number?"

"What? Dr. Evans? Oh—Gerard 7932."

The Thought-Monster

by Amelia Reynolds Long



"The mayor's grave had been opened and his body dragged half out of the coffin."

THE first of the series of outrages was the case of Welton Grimm. Grimm was a retired farmer with a little place about three miles from town, who apparently had not an enemy in the world; yet one morning he was discovered dead in a patch of woods near his home with a look of horror on his face that made the flesh creep on those who found him. There were no marks of violence upon the body; only that expression of horrified revulsion at unspeakable things. Two doctors, a coroner, and a jury puzzled over it, and at last gave out the statement that he had been the victim of a heart attack—which nobody believed.

For a while the case was discussed, as all such things are in small towns. Then, just as it was about to drop into oblivion, the second blow fell: another man, a stranger this time, was found dead under identical circumstances in the same spot. Before the town could digest this, two half-grown boys were added to the list of victims, and the very next night a woman was found dead under similar conditions about a mile distant.

The police scoured the countryside for the culprit—for it was now admitted that the deaths were the result of foul play—but to no avail. They could find nothing: there seemed to be nothing to find. But when again the Terror struck, this time claiming for its victim the

mayor himself, the townspeople decided that something drastic must be done at once; and they sent to New York for a detective.

He came—a keen-witted, intelligent man named Gibson, with a long list of brilliant exploits behind him. After going over the case with the chief of police, he pointed out a fact that was so obvious it was a wonder we had not seen it ourselves.

"Those people have died of fright," he said. "There is someone, probably an escaped lunatic, hiding in the woods who is so hideous that the very sight of him frightens the beholder to death. Since all the deaths occurred within a mile of each other, you will find him hiding somewhere within that comparatively small area."

"But we searched the woods," objected the chief. "We searched them thoroughly. There wasn't the sign of a thing."

"Did you ever search at night?" asked Gibson.

"Well, no," the chief admitted.

"Whatever your Terror is," went on the detective, "he is too clever to come out in daylight. But at night he is sure of himself; so that is when we must lie in wait for him."

Everyone saw the sense of this plan, but few were willing to try it. At last, however, Gibson collected some half-dozen men, and they stationed themselves, armed to the teeth, throughout the patch of woods to wait for the thing. They had a series of prearranged whistle signals by which they could communicate with one another should occasion arise.

The night passed quietly; but in the morning it was found that the outrages had taken a new turn: Gibson had completely disappeared! The woods were searched for him and a pond was drained for his body, but without result. Then, about a week later, he wandered into town—a mouthing, gibbering idiot!

The morale of the people began to break under this new horror. And to add to their consternation, the grave of the mayor was opened the night before Gibson's return, and his body dragged half out of the coffin. A great mass meeting, for the purpose of taking counsel against the Terror, was now called. The hall was jammed to capacity, for all came who could come.

One of the town councilmen was addressing the assembly. He was in the most earnest part of his address when suddenly he stopped. No one had been conscious of any of the doors opening, yet we all knew that another presence had entered the room! There was an apprehensive shuffling of feet and craning of necks as uneasiness among the crowd grew. The speaker took a sip of water, and tried to go on, but without success. And then it was as if a thin veil began to form between us and the electric chandelier overhead.

With that, hysteria broke loose. There was a stampede for the exits, in which three people were trampled to death. Later, the body of the speaker was found upon the platform. The face was twisted into a mask of overwhelming horror.

The people were stunned. They crept into their churches to pray. And, as if in answer to their prayers, came Michael Cummings, psychic investigator.

CUMMINGS first presented himself before the town council. "I have been reading about your trouble down here," he said, "and I would like to try my hand at solving the mystery."

He was welcomed with open arms.

He did not consider the possibility of an escaped lunatic in the neighborhood, as Gibson had done. "No madman could be responsible for all this," he said when someone mentioned the subject. "It takes more than the sight of a poor, deranged mind to kill a strong man. I believe

that there is a supernatural force at work; possibly one of the little-understood elementals that are sometimes aroused or liberated by a disturbance of the laws of nature. I shall go out to the woods around dusk this evening and look the ground over."

"But, man," gasped the town treasurer, "that's suicide! No man comes out of there alive who enters after nightfall."

"There is little danger until after night has actually fallen," smiled Cummings. "Besides, even should I meet the Terror, I am armed against it in a way that none of the others were."

He went, but learned nothing. The next morning a farmer, who lived about half a mile away, was found dead in his barn.

That afternoon Cummings called upon Dr. Bradley, who was the coroner. "I am going to make a strange request, Doctor," he began. "I am going to ask that you permit me to photograph the eyes of this poor man."

The doctor, greatly mystified, gave his consent.

"In a case of violent death," Cummings explained as he set up his apparatus, "an image of the last thing seen is usually photographed upon the retina of the eye. I want to see whether a carefully developed enlargement won't show us that image."

At Bradley's interested request, he promised to let him know the results of the experiment. Two or three hours later, therefore, he returned to the doctor's office.

"I have drawn a blank," he confessed. "The eye shows absolutely nothing."

"Your theory didn't work, then?" asked Bradley sympathetically.

"No," Cummings answered. "And yet I don't see how it could have failed in a case of this kind. There is one alternative: perhaps there was nothing for the dying man to see."

"But," objected the doctor, "I thought it was what he saw that killed him."

"Fear," said Cummings, "can enter a man's soul through other senses than sight. Anyway, I shall work on that hypothesis for a while, and see where it leads me." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Who lives in that rambling old place half a mile out from town?" he asked.

"A scientist named Walgate," answered the doctor. "I'll admit," he went on quickly, "that the location of his house and his being something of a recluse make it look as if he might be concerned with the mystery, but we have proof that he isn't. For one thing, he was here in town in the company of the most reputable people the nights that the first three outrages took place."

"Could he have any sort of creature concealed about the place on which he might be experimenting?" asked Cummings.

"No," answered Bradley. "He isn't that kind of a scientist. Psychology in its most abstract form is his line. In fact, I was around to see him myself, thinking he might possibly have something like that."

"I wonder," said Cummings, "if you would mind going again."

The next day they called upon Dr. Walgate. They found a courteous, scholarly man plainly as much concerned over the mysterious deaths as they were.

"Doctor," asked Cummings presently, "have you ever considered the possibility of the Terror's being nothing physical at all, but a kind of psychical entity?"

The doctor shot him a keen, swift glance. "Yes," he said. "I have considered that."

"And you have come to the conclusion——?"

"It is difficult to come to a conclusion in matters like this unless one

has some definite point to start from."

To Bradley's surprize, Cummings did not follow up this very evident lead, but soon brought the visit to a close. "Why didn't you press the psychical entity opening?" he asked a little reproachfully as they walked back to town. "It was plain that Walgate either suspects or knows something in that direction."

"Suspects, may even know, but can not prove," corrected Cummings. "But he is the type of man who will not speak until he *can* prove. Meanwhile to attempt to force his confidence would defeat our own purpose."

At Cummings' suggestion, the people in the outlying districts kept violet-shaded lights burning outside their houses after nightfall.

"The thing which we are fighting," he said, "is supernatural, and our best weapon against it is the violet ray, which is highly inimical, and sometimes even fatal, to it."

"Look here," said Bradley, "aren't you introducing a little too much legerdemain into this? I can accept a primitive natural force run amuck, but when you begin to fight it with colored lights, I grow skeptical. Is this an attempt to give the people a mental sedative?"

Cummings only smiled, and the people went on burning their lights. The outrages ceased.

"It looks as if you had razed the ghost after all," admitted Bradley when a month had passed unmarred by any fresh tragedy.

But Cummings shook his head. "No," he said, "I have only staved him off temporarily. As soon as we should cease to use the lights, he would return. More, he may even grow strong enough to resist them. I think that in a day or two I shall visit Walgate. Perhaps I can induce him to talk."

But that time never came. That night a car drove into town with a dead man in the driver's seat, his hands gripped to the wheel in convulsions. In the tonneau sat two more corpses whose faces, like that of the driver, were contorted with stark terror. Only the ruler-like straightness of the road and the vise-like grip of those dead hands upon the wheel had kept the car from overturning. It was like a challenge from the Terror to the town.

For the first time, Cummings was discouraged. "We can protect ourselves," he said, "but we can not protect those who come here from the outside. Something must be done at once, and yet there is nothing that can be done. The situation is even more appalling than the tragedies themselves."

And then, in the gray of early morning something *was* done.

CUMMINGS and Bradley were sitting in the doctor's office when the telephone rang. Bradley answered it.

"Is that Dr. Bradley?" The voice at the other end was hoarse and strained. "This is Dr. Walgate. I want you and Mr. Cummings to come up to my house in half an hour. Walk straight in without ringing, and go into the living-room. There you will find a manuscript lying on the table. I want you to read it. But do not come until half an hour from now."

"But why—what——?" stuttered Bradley in his excitement.

"Do as I tell you," interrupted Walgate's voice. "That is all." A metallic click told that he had hung up.

"What do you make of it?" asked Bradley when he had repeated the message to Cummings. "Is it a trap?"

"No, it is not," answered Cummings promptly, "it is not a trap. Walgate is no fool, and he accordingly will not take us for any. We had better do as he tells us."

"Including waiting the specified half-hour before going out?"

"Yes. We don't know what he intends to do. An attempt to improve upon his directions might ruin his plans."

Watches in hand, they sat counting off the minutes. At last Cummings rose. "We can start now," he said. "Come."

They drove out to Walgate's house, and entered as he had directed. Bradley noticed that in the near-by woods no birds sang, and that in the house itself an unearthly stillness brooded. He experienced an unnerving intuition of new horrors about to be laid bare.

They proceeded into the living-room, and Cummings pressed the electric light button, for the daylight was still dim and uncertain. Placed conspicuously on the table was a small bundle of manuscript.

"We may as well read these now," said Bradley. "There's no use stopping to look for Walgate; he undoubtedly used that half-hour to make his getaway."

CUMMINGS picked up the manuscript and began to glance through it. "It seems to be part of a diary," he said. "It is made up of entries beginning about a year ago. It looks——" He broke off to read several sentences under his breath. "I think I had better read this aloud from the beginning," he said.

He began to read:

"*Aug. 4.* Have been studying the material existence of thought. A fascinating subject. If thoughts have material existence, why could not the thought essence be concentrated to—— Off on that wild theory again! I am too old for this nonsense.

"*Aug. 7.* I wonder if many of the so-called psychic phenomena, such as table-tipping and the like, are not in some way connected with the materiality of thought. I am tempted to try a few simple experiments.

"*Aug. 11.* I have been wasting time on these silly experiments. I must return to my respectable psychological studies.

"*Aug. 13.* Success! Today I moved a small object by the power of thought alone! Since this can be done, what will not be possible once the power is properly developed?

"*Aug. 25.* I have complete mental control! And now my old theory returns. Shall I consider it seriously? It seems too silly even to write down here; and yet——

"*Aug. 27.* I shall do it! I shall create a mental being by the concentrated power of pure thought! I am making arrangements with an architect to build in my house a room lined with lead, since lead is least conductive to thought waves, and so will not permit the precious thought essence to escape.

"*Sept. 16.* The room is finished. I have been spending five hours a day in it, concentrating upon my thought-creature.

"*Oct. 18.* Today I thought I detected a kind of gathering tension in the atmosphere, but probably it was my imagination. It is too early to look for results.

"*Nov. 24.* The strain of my experiment is beginning to take my strength.

"*Dec. 12.* I fainted today in the lead room.

"*Dec. 29.* Have been forced to give up my experiment temporarily because of my health. Have locked the lead room in order that the thought essence may be preserved until I can return to complete my work.

"*Jan. 5.* Am recovering rapidly.

"*Jan. 18.* All my work has gone for nothing, and through the carelessness of a servant! Mrs. Jensen, in a fervor of house-cleaning, unlocked and left open the door of the lead room! If I am to go on with my experiment, I must begin again at the beginning, for all the precious thought-essence has escaped. And just when success was so near! I have discharged Mrs. Jensen. I shall keep no more servants.

"*May 1.* We have had a sad accident here. Welton Grimm, a neighbor of mine, was found dead this morning on the road which runs by the patch of woods between his farm and my house. A pity. Grimm was barely past the prime of life. Dr. Bradley says it was heart failure.

"*May 15.* A strange coincidence; a stranger who was stopping in town was found dead in almost the same place that they found poor Grimm. Oddly enough, the cause of death was the same, too. Some of our more superstitious citizens are alarmed.

"*May 17.* Something is wrong here. Two boys, who, fired by the talk of their elders, had gone exploring after dark in the region where the deaths occurred, were found dead there early this morning. Someone is responsible for these tragedies; coincidence does not go so far.

"*May 18.* Another! A woman this time. On the face of each of the victims is a look of acutest terror. What can it mean?

"*May 20.* Had a most peculiar experience today. I was sitting in my study at dusk. Suddenly I felt that I was not alone; that there was another intelligence in the room with me. I looked up. There was no one there. I switched on the lights, and the illusion vanished. Am I becoming the victim of nerves?

"*May 25.* Another victim; this time our mayor. What is this Terror that is stalking among us? The people have sent to New York for a detective.

"*June 1.* I am being haunted. Three times this week I have felt distinctly that someone was following me, but when I turned to look, there was no one. Dr. Bradley called. Discussed series of tragedies.

"*June 2.* I am not alone in the house. Something is living here with me. I enter a room, and know that it has just been occupied by another; I go down a dark hall, and feel something lurking in the shadows. Yet I search, and find nothing. Only brilliant lights can hold the thing at bay.

"*June 3.* Gibson, the New York detective, has disappeared. Is he, too, a victim of the Terror?

"A thought has come to me: Is there any connection between the Terror and the Thing that occupies my house with me?

"*June 5.* I have solved the mystery of the Terror, and the solution is more awful than was the mystery itself. I had gone into the lead room for some books that were stored there. Presently I became aware that something was in the room with me. This time I did not look up, but stood perfectly still, waiting and listening. And then the air was filled with something that had being, yet was not made of matter. Great, waving tentacles were groping for my mind, trying to suck it into themselves! With a scream, I rushed from the room. The experiment which I began last fall had succeeded without my knowing it, and I have let a thought-monster loose upon the community!

"*June 7.* Even a thought-monster can not live without food. On what does this demon subsist? Can it be that——

"*June 9.* Last night I committed an atrocious crime against society, but it had to be. I entered the cemetery, and opened the grave of the mayor. One glance at his blackening face showed me that he had died an imbecile. My suspicions were right; the thought-monster is a mental vampire, feeding upon the minds of its victims!

"*June 10.* Gibson has returned, but his mind is gone. The intelligence that was James Gibson has been swallowed up in the maw of my detestable invention! I am responsible for his state, and for the deaths of those other poor wretches; but what can I do? If I tell the people the nature of this force that is terrorizing the community, they will not believe me. What ordinary man could accept a creature created entirely of thought?

"*June 12.* The Thing is growing bolder. Last night it entered the town hall, where nearly a thousand people were assembled, and caused a panic. Three people were killed, not including one of our councilmen, who fell a victim to the Thing. I am four more times a murderer! Can not heaven show me a way to put an end to this?

"*June 14.* Michael Cummings, a psychical investigator, is here to run down the Terror. Will he succeed? I doubt it.

"*June 16.* Another man has died.

"*June 18.* Cummings and Dr. Bradley were here today. Do they suspect me of being concerned with this series of deaths? They are right; and yet how far from the truth! No human mind could ever conceive the awfulness of that. I was tempted to tell Cummings my whole story, but held back. What proof could I offer him? How convince him that I was not mad? Even the relief of confession is denied me, for I would not be believed.

"*June 30.* Cummings is checkmating the Terror by means of the violet ray. Cummings' work is only temporary, but it has given me an idea. The violet ray, sufficiently intensified, can destroy a psychic force. I shall have the lead room fitted with violet lights; then lure the Thing there and destroy it.

"*July 3.* Have begun work wiring the lead room. I must do the work myself, since I dare not bring an electrician here for fear of the Terror. So far it has not tried to attack me.

"*July 10.* I have completed my task. But the Thing suspects something, and will not go near the room. I can feel its tentacles groping for my mind, trying to read my thoughts. I think it would attack me if it dared, but for some reason it fears me; perhaps because I am its creator.

"*July 22.* The Thing is becoming desperate through lack of food. I can feel that it is planning some bold move. Is it marking me for its next victim?

"*July 24.* This is the last entry I shall ever make in this diary, and it is addressed to you, Dr. Bradley and Mr. Cummings. Tonight I was in town when the death-car arrived. I knew then that the thought-monster must be destroyed at once.

"Nature always meets a vital emergency, and so she met this one. As I looked upon those four poor beings whose minds had gone to feed the thing I had created and whose lives had flickered out in the horror of what was happening to them, I saw clearly the one way to stop the havoc for which I was responsible.

"When I telephoned you, I bade you wait half an hour before coming here in order that I might arrive ahead of you and put the first part of my plan into execution; for I feared that should I take you into my confidence beforehand, one of you, through distorted humanitarian motives, might attempt to stop my going through with my design.

"This, then, is my plan. I shall go into the lead room with all mental guards down. The Thing has been particularly inimical to me lately, and, finding me in that state, will follow me in. Then I will close the door on both of us. I do not think that the Thing will suspect; a hungry beast is seldom wary of traps. When the door is safely closed, I will turn on the violet lamps. By the time you arrive and reach the end of these papers, those lamps will have done the work for which they were designed.

"You will find the lead room at the end of the hall on the first floor. Open the door carefully (it is not locked), and, if you receive the faintest intimation of an Intelligence beyond, slam it shut again and wait for the lights to complete their task. Mr. Cummings had better attend to this. If you receive no such intimation, you

will know that the monster is dead and that the curse so unintentionally laid upon you all is lifted forever. In your charity, do what to you seems best with the other thing you will find there; the thing that will have been

"JULIAN WALGATE."

AS CUMMINGS read the last sentence, Bradley made a dash for the door.

"Not so fast," Cummings called after him. "Where are you going?"

"Going!" Bradley paused momentarily in the hall. "To that lead room, of course. The man is killing himself! Don't you see it?"

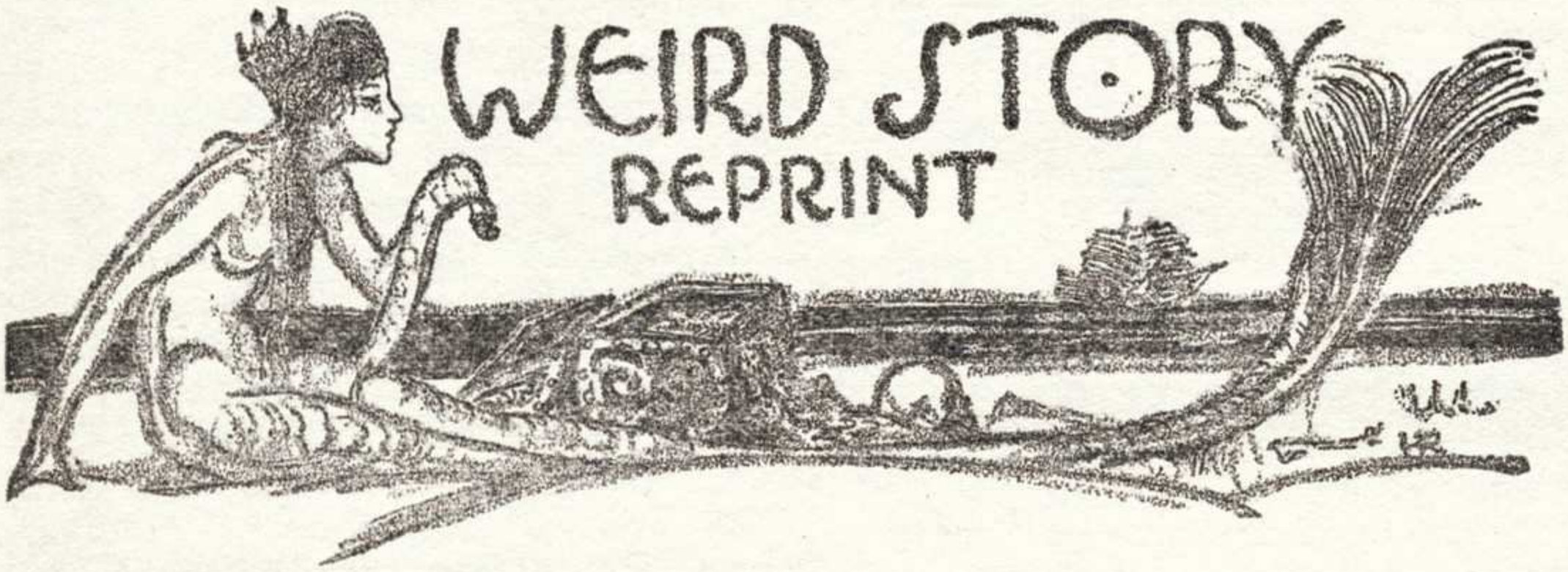
Deliberately Cummings placed the diary on the table. "If any harm was to come to Walgate," he said, "the damage is already done. If not, a few minutes more in there can do him no harm, while our too hurried and careless entry may undo the work for which he was ready to pay the highest price in man's power."

He passed the doctor and led the way down the hall, stopping before the last door. Slowly he turned the knob, and pushed the door open a few inches. A bar of vivid purple light fell across his face.

"Is it all right?" Bradley whispered, close behind him.

"I think so." Cummings opened the door a bit further. In the room beyond was an atmosphere of snapped tension; of climax that had passed.

They stepped across the threshold. And then they became aware that the room still held a living occupant. From the far corner, his clothing wrinkled and torn, his hair and trim Vandyke beard in disarray, there shambled toward them a helpless, mindless idiot!



*The Sunken Land**

By GEORGE W. BAYLY

IT WAS eleven o'clock in the morning when Tom O'Grady and I rode into a remote little Cree village some hundreds of miles northwest of Edmonton, Alberta.

We were both members of the Royal Canadian Northwest Mounted Police (commonly called Mounties) and wore the scarlet jacket of that famous force. We had been detailed for special duty to find and bring back the slayers of a certain half-breed at Athabasca Landing. When last noticed the murderers had been headed in this direction, but since

*From WEIRD TALES, May, 1924.

then two months had elapsed, and we had not obtained the faintest trace of their whereabouts.

It was, therefore, without much hope that we rode through the scattered lodges in search of the chief of the roving band. As we approached the center of the village our attention was attracted by a small crowd of Indians standing and squatting in a large semicircle around a solitary white man seated on a soap box at the entrance to the chief's lodge. The man was sturdy and thick-set, and gave one the impression of possessing great physical strength. His present attitude was one of calm and complete detachment, but as we approached he turned his head in our direction and called out:

"Hullo, Gerald! hullo, Tom! You're the very men I want to see."

It was the Dominion Government doctor on one of his periodical visits to the wandering tribes in that section of the Northwest Territories.

"What's up? I asked, dismounting.

"I've found a dead white man in here," he answered, "and at the same time I've unearthed a mystery. Sit down and I'll show you."

As soon as we were seated he took a small match-box from his pocket and handed it to me. Inside it there were ten small stones. I examined them carefully.

"They're diamonds," I said.

"Now look at this," and he took a rough, torn piece of brown paper out of his pocketbook. On the paper, evidently part of a rough diary, were the following disjointed notes:

entered the sunken land
S. lost. No tra
ip
Blue Clay Island
Lat. 60° 30′ Long. 127° 10
150 miles
B. very sick. Must ge
ack

One glance at this scrap of paper

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was enough to show me that we were on the trail of the murderers. S. could mean but one thing: Sam Elliot, one of the men we were after; and B. must be Bad Bill Blake.

"Now let's see the dead man. If it's the one I think it is we'll know where to find the others. Eh, Tom?"

We followed the doctor into the teepee. One look was enough. Pat Corbeau, the ringleader of the gang, had committed his last crime. It was now up to us to gather in his accomplices, dead or alive.

"When do we start?" asked the doctor as we came out into the sunlight once more.

"We?" I said. "Are you coming with us, then?"

"Why not?" he answered, shortly.

"Don't get sore, Doc. We'll be tickled to death to have you but it's going to be one hell of a boring trip."

"That's where you're wrong," said the doctor. "I've heard rumors of this sunken land, though I've never met a soul that's been there; but that there's something uncanny and altogether horrible about the place I fully believe. Take that scrap of diary, for instance. Read it by what's left unsaid, and you'll see what I mean."

"Nice cheery document," I remarked as I glanced at it again. "We'll bury Pat this afternoon and start off on the trail tomorrow forenoon. How does that hit you, Doc?"

"Fine," said that laconic individual without turning, as he strode off toward his own tent on the outskirts of the encampment. "Now we eat." We followed him a few paces behind.

IT WAS two weeks later. The day was far advanced, and the sun, low on the distant horizon, was sinking into a bed of heavy black clouds. Away to the south a range of mountains stood sharply silhouetted against the sky.

We were preparing camp, quietly, steadily, methodically; for the spirit of the trail had taken hold of us and conversation was reduced to a minimum. The horses had been taken back by the Indians some four days previously, and we were now entirely upon our own resources. We stood on the threshold of the unknown. Up to that point our journey had been a commonplace of northern travel. Work, danger, monotony, they had all come in the day's run. We had crossed many rivers, we had traversed a mountain range, until one day we had descended to a vast plain which stretched northwest as far as the eye could reach. This plain was typical northern country, grass land alternating with stretches of stunted black spruce and white birch, and stretches there were, too, where sand and glacial boulders predominated, but this was all past. In front of us, straight into the sunset, lay a low range of undulating hills.

After supper we smoked in silence for a time; finally the doctor pointed to the hills.

"If I'm not mistaken, the Sunken Land begins beyond that low range. What latitude and longitude did you make it at noon today, Gerald?"

I took out my notebook.

"My observation gave us an approximate latitude of 61 degrees 50′ and a longitude of 126 degrees 40′. The sun was rather obscured so I can't be quite certain of my figures."

"That's near enough," said the doctor. "We enter the Sunken Land tomorrow, and don't forget our agreement. Not one of us must ever, even for an instant, be separated from the other two. There's something queer about that country, and it's through getting separated that that other party came to grief; at least that's the way I have it figured. So let's keep together."

The next morning we began the climb of the low range, following a little valley we slowly ascended until we came to where it flattened out; we had reached the top. In front and

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below stretched a panorama of broken country, low hills alternating everywhere with plains, but the astonishing thing was that the whole country sloped downward. As far as the eye could reach the hills continued.

"The whole land seems to have sunk," said Tom. "That hill on the horizon line must be thousands of feet below us."

I took out my field glasses and focused them on the horizon line.

"I can't see any sign of the lake," I said as I handed them to the doctor.

"I don't suppose you can," he remarked. "If that diary is correct it's one hundred and fifty miles from here."

All day we traveled carefully, warily, expecting every moment to have to defend our lives against some hidden peril, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred. During the past weeks we had often discussed the fate of the men who had preceded us into this land, but the subject was baffling, as we had no clue as to the manner of their death.

Now that we had actually seen the country spread out before us, a feeling of vague alarm had taken hold of us—none of us could explain why. The country looked so very peaceful, but I could not help thinking of a story I had read, where ants the size of rats and of unparalleled ferocity inhabited a tract of barren rolling country somewhere on the borders of Afghanistan, and devoured all that came in their path. No animals could escape, as they could run with incredible swiftness; consequently the country was entirely denuded of game. I told this tale to my companions, and though they appeared to treat it as a joke, I noticed that their watchfulness increased.

Sometimes we climbed the rounded hills, at others we descended their farther slopes, but always the descent was longer than the ascent. Toward the end of the second day we noticed a distinct change in the temperature. The country was getting warmer, vegetation, too, began to increase, scattered pine, tamarack and birch trees became more numerous and game became abundant (thus exploding the ant theory). Rabbits in particular seemed to overrun the whole country, while deer were quite plentiful. But the face of the country was undergoing a steady change, woods were appearing, taking the place of scattered trees, alder and ash also became abundant and finally I noticed a stunted elm.

"I say, by Jove, this is interesting," said Tom. "See the squirrels and small birds. Why, the country is simply crawling with game."

Being interested in forestry I found this change in forest conditions fascinating in the extreme. The country was, in fact, a paradise; nothing untoward had yet happened, and all sense of approaching disaster seemed to have vanished. The very air seemed clearer. In fact, we acted as if the danger were behind, rather than in front of us; unless the diary lied.

THAT night we camped by a small stream, and rising early the next morning, had been on the march for a couple of hours when Tom suddenly stopped.

"Do you fellows notice anything?"

"I can't say I hear anything," said I.

"Nor I," said the doctor.

"That's it," Tom replied. "There's nothing to hear; the game's gone. I haven't seen a rabbit or heard a bird for the last hour." We looked at each other.

"That's true," I said. "I wonder what's the trouble."

We looked carefully on every side; the country seemed the same.

"Nothing's changed from yesterday," said Tom finally.

"The trees are larger," I remarked.

"And there seem to be more creepers," added the doctor.

"There's something queer about

this," sputtered Tom. "Keep your rifles ready."

At noon we stopped in a little grassy clearing.

"Look, there's a rabbit!" I cried. "See the way it's running; something's chasing it."

We sprang to our feet, seizing our rifles. The creature tore past us without even noticing our presence, squealing as if in the most mortal terror, and disappeared in the opposite direction. Then all was still again. Not a sound broke the stillness.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "I feel as if something were watching us."

"Yes, I feel that same way," said Tom, "but it's only natural. Fear is catching, even a rabbit's. It was probably only a weasel."

We agreed heartily, too heartily perhaps.

"Let's be moving," I suggested.

Before us the forest appeared much thicker, and the trees much larger, and I pointed out some oak and beech, as well as a few very large elms. The temperature was almost oppressively hot.

That night when we camped we chose an open space and lit a large fire, taking turns to keep watch, but nothing tangible occurred. The night was oppressively still, yet all through the night there were vague sounds of rustling and faint whisperings, now louder, now fainter; that was all. There was an uncanny strangeness about it which made us distinctly uneasy.

The next morning we talked it over, and the doctor's opinion was that if at any time we were out at night, it would be a good plan to carry torches. This suggestion met with approval, so we spent an hour before starting out in making a few for each of us, and fastening them to our pack sacks.

All next day the temperature kept rising, and as we progressed, the vegetation became more and more tropical. We were now progressing in

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single file along a trail, made in all probability by the ill-fated party which had preceded us, as the forest growth had not yet had time to obliterate the recent traces of man's handiwork.

As night approached we began to look around for an open clearing, for the prospect of spending the night in the thick undergrowth among these giant trees in the presence of an unknown peril was far from reassuring. To make matters worse, the ground was becoming swampy; little stagnant pools and rotting vegetation appeared on every side, making the going more and more difficult.

Suddenly Tom, who was leading, stopped and remarked:

"It's no use going on. This may get worse and worse instead of better, and we can't camp here, so I think we'd better go back to the last clearing we passed. How far do you think it is, Doc?"

"Two miles, I should think."

"All right then, about turn and we'll have to hurry. The sun's just setting."

THE darkness came on quickly, the great trees shutting out the afterglow, and we were soon straggling along in a very uneven manner, the doctor now leading, and Tom bringing up the rear. The uneasy feeling of the previous night began to take hold of us and at the same time our resolution about torches flashed into my mind. Without a moment's pause I stopped and calling to the others, pulled out a torch and lit it. The others did the same.

"That's better," said Tom. "Now we can at least see where we're going."

But the flare and flicker of the smoky torches only seemed to accentuate the darkness of the forest about us, and as I glanced from side to side I felt sure that again an evil presence, a gruesome, nameless terror, was keeping pace with us on either hand. I spoke about it to the others. They, too, felt the same fear. The night was dreadfully still, but again we noticed a faint whispering sound; but now it seemed all around us.

Suddenly the whispering seemed to grow louder and more menacing. I saw the doctor start to run; already he appeared a long way ahead. All at once his torch disappeared from view, for the trail had taken a bend. At that moment, I, too, started to run—wildly. I had felt something soft and clammy grasp my throat, while I thought I felt innumerable little feelers gripping my face and body. With a scream I fought them off with my torch, and realized a moment later that my nerve was going and that the little feelers had only been a creeper and the branches of some trees. A moment later I was running close behind the doctor. Suddenly I turned round.

"My God!" I cried. "Where's Tom?"

We started down the trail, the hair literally rising on our heads. There was nothing but black darkness behind us and from the darkness came a hum as of angry bees. Suddenly—there was a distant shout.

"Ger-ald—Ger-ald! Come back—my torch has gone out," and then—then came a prolonged scream of agony and terror—"help—Gerald—hel——" followed by a choking cry of mortal terror—then silence.

Throwing off our packs we raced along the trail at top speed. When we reached the spot where he had been we found his rifle and his pack, evidently thrown off in the desperation of a fight for life. And—that was all. Tom had completely vanished. We searched the ground with our torches and called and called and fired our rifles—but all to no purpose. No sound broke the stillness of the night. Even the whispering had ceased.

We returned to the trail, and fetching our packs we brought them back

to the place where Tom had disappeared. Then we gave way to utter despair.

How long we sat I don't know, but it must have been some considerable time, for the first thing that roused us was the dying splutter of my torch, which had been stuck into the ground at our feet. This effectually brought us back to a sense of our position and to the danger of thus sitting still. I lit another torch and turned to the doctor.

"What are we to do now?" I asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," he answered. "Camp here, I suppose, and light a large fire. We'll have to wait for daylight before we can do anything."

As soon as we had a good fire going we put out our torches, and making ourselves as comfortable as the swampy condition of the ground would allow, we lit our pipes and settled down to wait for morning.

An hour passed; then softly, ever so softly, a faint, almost imperceptible murmur began to come from the tree tops.

"Sounds like a breeze," I said, tilting my head a trifle to listen.

"Yes, it does," assented the doctor, "but unfortunately we know it's no such thing. Throw some more wood on the fire."

"What do you think it is?" I asked as in strained attention we listened to the increasing murmur.

"God knows," answered the doctor, with a shrug.

"Do you think a rifle is any good against it?" I went on.

"No, I do not," he replied shortly.

"Why?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," he said.

"I've been thinking over the events of the last few hours," I went on, "and there are one or two things that strike me as especially curious."

"For instance," suggested the doctor.

"Well—for one thing," I said,

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"We're in a far northern latitude, yet because this country is many thousands of feet below the upper plain, the temperature has increased to such an extent that all the conditions of life down here are tropical."

"Yes, yes," interrupted the doctor, impatiently, "I know all that. We've discussed it many times."

"But this is my point," I said. "These are *not* the tropics. This is an entirely abnormal condition; therefore, life, as we know it, may have undergone a complete change, or at least a modification."

The doctor nodded. "Go on."

"In that case the animal and vegetable life may have characteristics entirely unknown to us, and quite foreign to those with which we are accustomed to deal."

The doctor was lost in thought.

"I see what you mean, but don't generalize. Come down to something definite."

"That I can't do," I answered, "but I have a suspicion that this thing which is menacing us is more or less impalpable, but is armed with innumerable feelers, which I actually felt round my throat and on my face and all over my body a while ago."

The doctor abruptly sat up.

"By God, that's true!" he cried. "I remember feeling them, too, but I thought I was imagining things, and decided they were only creepers and branches of trees, after all."

"That's not all," I went on. "The thing can only see at night; light apparently blinds it."

"In that case," said the doctor, "our best hope lies in our knives and hatchets and in having plenty of light. Throw on some more wood, Gerald."

The next morning we were up at the first hint of daylight, and after a hurried breakfast, determined to prosecute a thorough search for our missing companion, in the faint hope that we might at least gain some clue as to the manner of his death. Plunging into the undergrowth we soon struck a small stream, and advancing in single file along the bank, found that it narrowed down to a mere brook, and finally lost itself in a great green morass of sponge-like mosses, into which we sank up to our knees. The place was horribly haunted by clouds of enormous and most venomous mosquitoes. This swamp seemed to extend without end in front and on both sides of us.

"It's no use," said the doctor. "We'll have to give it up and go back and make our way to the lake as quickly as possible."

All day we traveled along the narrow trail, making a slow but steady speed. For a forest land it was the most wonderful that the imagination of man could conceive. The thick vegetation met overhead, interlacing into a natural pergola, and at last through this tunnel of verdure, in a golden twilight, we caught sight of the lake, beautiful in itself, but marvelous from the strange tints thrown by the light from above filtering through the foliage.

CLEAR as crystal, motionless as a sheet of glass, green as the edge of an iceberg, it stretched before us. In the center was a small conical island, entirely denuded of trees, while at our feet, where the trail ended, lay a small raft imbedded in the mud.

"There's our boat," I said.

"Well, we still have about an hour of daylight," said the doctor. "That treeless island looks the most beautiful place in the world to me at this moment."

Whether it was the sound of our voices or something else, I don't know, but at that instant the whispering began in the tree tops and from moment to moment the sound increased. Looking up we saw leaves and twigs in violent motion high in the crowns of the trees. Too astounding to move, we watched the strange phenomenon. Suddenly without any warning the

whole tree seemed to spring into life. The giant branches curved down and swept the ground, and every twig and leaf seemed to be stretching out toward us. And at that moment, as if aroused by the clamor of the tree, every plant and shrub began to stir with life, violently agitating their long tentacle-like stems, the edges of which, rasping upon each other, produced a whispering or hissing noise.

"Good God!" screamed the doctor. "The trees! the trees! I'm caught!"

"Use your hatchet," I cried as I sprang to his rescue and severed a long sinuous tendril that had twined itself round his waist. At the same instant I felt a steel-like vise closing round my ankle and fell heavily. Turning, I saw an enormous plant which had been near the path, waving its tentacles like a huge octopus. It had a short thick trunk, from the top of which radiated giant tentacles, narrow and flexible, but of extraordinary tenaciousness. The edges were armed with barbs or dagger-like teeth. It was one of these sinewy feelers which, inclined at an angle from the trunk, had laid itself flat upon the ground, and at the touch of my boot had risen and like a gigantic serpent had entwined itself about me, and was drawing me toward the center of the stump, where my body would soon have been crushed until every drop of blood had been squeezed out of it and absorbed by the ferocious plant.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead as I noticed other feelers flailing the air in search of me, and in the frenzy of despair, I slashed at the tendril round my leg and with two quick blows severed it. Immediately it rolled itself up into the parent stem.

"Run! Run!" I yelled to the doctor. "Into the lake!"

Tripping and falling and rising again, and slashing to right and left as I ran, cut and bleeding from the giant barbs, I rushed into the lake. Turning, I saw the doctor madly cut-

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ting at a creeper that had him by one arm. In another instant he was free from it, and with a frenzied bound was in the lake beside me, his clothes all torn and his face streaming with blood.

We were up to our waists in water, but safe for the moment from that frightful nightmare. We watched with gruesome fascination the madly tossing forest, the long feelers still groping and searching for us.

"Isn't it ghastly?" I said.

We were nearly sick with the horror of what we had escaped, but when I had sufficiently recovered my mind and some wind, and some of my nerve had come back, I began to look around for some means of escape from the predicament in which we found ourselves. My first thought was of the raft; it looked small and seemed firmly imbedded in the mud. However, with only a small amount of effort we were able to launch it and climb aboard. It was nearly flush with water but with care we were able to cross safely, propelling ourselves by means of a crude sort of sweep which was fastened to one end.

THAT night, after a good meal from our fast-diminishing stores, we slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, untroubled as yet by any fears for the future. Next morning we found our cuts and scratches very sore, but with plenty of iodine and a roll of bandage we were soon fixed up and ready for the exploration of Blue Clay Island. Climbing the conical hill we found, as I expected, that the center of the island consisted of the crater of a small, extinct volcano, the floor of which was covered with blue clay mixed with small boulders.

"There's your diamond clay," I said.

The doctor nodded.

We descended into the cup-shaped valley and soon found the spot where the murderers had started to excavate. We spent the rest of the day then looking for gems and turning over the solid clay, but we were only rewarded with one minute stone. Whether our want of success was due to lack of experience or to the fact that we did not dig deep enough, I can't say, but the fact remains that that stone was the only one we ever got from the mine.

From this time on our every effort was bent toward trying to find a way of escape, but we were stopped at every turn. We circled the lake in an endeavor to find a landing-place, but everywhere the trees seemed to sense our approach, and we dared not land. Two or three days passed in this way, while we grew more and more desperate. Finally, on the evening of the fourth day, as we were sitting by our fire smoking, our energy almost exhausted, the doctor spoke, deep dejection in his tone.

"It's no use, Gerald. I give up. We'll either have to try to make our way through the forest where we came in or die of starvation. We have only a few more days' grub left."

"Before we do anything as rash as that," I remarked, "let's tell each other all we know about this place, put all our cards on the table, and we may be able to work something out when we have our data all together. I'll begin. To start with, look at the forest now. Not a leaf stirring, is there?"

The doctor looked intently at the shore line with my field glasses.

"No, everything is as calm and peaceful as possible."

"Now watch the trees."

I took a fair-sized stone and threw it into the lake about a quarter of the way across. There was a big splash.

"Any sign?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, look at the water line where it meets the shore by the big pine and keep looking and tell me when the ripples get there."

"All right," he said a moment later. "They're lapping the bank."

"Now look at the tops," I directed.

The doctor uttered an ejaculation. "That's a remarkable thing. They're all in motion. Whatever made you think of that, Gerald?"

"You see," I went on, "how hopeless it is to try to reach the shore without letting the trees know of our approach."

"That's true," said the doctor, "but we can land on that little sand beach just to the right of the path."

"Yes, that's point number two. And number three is, the nearer the lake the fiercer the trees."

"I don't see any more points," said the doctor slowly.

For a long time we sat moodily staring into the fire. Then, slowly at first, but finally with a flash of inspiration, the idea came, and I smiled. The doctor, who had been watching me dejectedly, suddenly exclaimed:

"You've got a plan, Gerald. Spit it out."

I pointed to the fire. "We'll burn the forest," I said.

Ever since our first entry into the Sunken Land, the weather had been dry; consequently the timber on the island, which, as the diary showed, had all been cut down by our predecessors, was in first-class condition to start a fire. The only question was, would that forest burn?

"We'll have to build a bonfire on the beach and have everything all set for the first big wind from the northwest," I said.

"A regular funeral pyre," remarked the doctor.

For the next two days we toiled from daylight to dark, ferrying logs and brushwood across the lake and scientifically building a large square pile which covered the center beach, and at the apex, for the top was conical, was nearly fifteen feet high. The forest at this point consisted of a pure stand of pine, mostly longleaf, with some loblolly admixture, which was a great piece of luck for us, as this pine is highly resinous.

Our preparations were now all

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made; the wind only was wanting. We made a number of torches and got everything in readiness, then, while waiting for the weather to change, tried our luck with the blue clay once more, but with no success.

Four days passed. Then one night I was awakened by feeling a strong breeze from the northwest blowing over me. I quickly roused the doctor, and we sat up and listened.

"It's rising," I said.

"Yes, it's rising, but we're going to have rain. We haven't a minute to lose."

Hurrying down to the raft, we paddled across.

When we got back to the island our landing was as bright as day in the light of that enormous fire, which, fanned by the rising wind, was roaring above the tops of the nearest trees.

"Let's go up to the highest point of the island," I suggested, "so that we can follow the course the fire takes with our field glasses."

The conflagration was now well within the pine stand, and was already beginning to spread fanwise; momentarily the wind increased, driving clouds of sparks and dense clouds of smoke high into the air. We watched it, fascinated; our lives hung upon the result.

I handed the glasses to the doctor. "The fire has reached the mixed forest. Will the deciduous trees burn?"

The doctor pointed to the east. "Look, Gerald, the dawn."

"I feel a drop of rain," I said.

Overhead heavy gray rain clouds were tearing across the sky.

"Let's cross," suggested the doctor.

"No use," I replied. "We'll have to wait until tomorrow morning."

Late in the afternoon we crossed to have a look at things. The rain was coming down in torrents, and the wind had dropped to a gusty breeze. We made our way into the charred forest for a couple of hundred yards. Nothing molested us; apparently our way lay open.

The next morning we made an early start, for the weather had cleared and a bright sun was shining. We followed the path of the fire all morning until we reached the edge of the green morass where Tom had disappeared. Here the fire had burned itself out, but its purpose had been accomplished. We were safe.

The object of the expedition from an official point of view had been achieved, but at a terrible cost. Poor Tom had paid with his life, and to us the price seemed far too high. It is true that no trace of the last of the murderers, Blake, had been found, but we had had sufficient proof of the impossibility of escaping from the island in any other way than that which we had taken.

He had tried to pass the forest and had failed.

The Drums of Damballah

(Continued from page 325)

but three motiveless crimes; viewed as connected links in a chain of misdemeanors, they begin to show some central underlying motivation. 'Let us suppose,' I say to me, 'the same man have done all these things—he have slain Monsieur Sherwood who is influential for good among the blacks; he have stolen away a baby girl; he have desecrated the sanctuary of a church. What sort of people do so?'

"All quickly I think; all quickly I

remember. In voodoo-ridden Haiti, during the reign of the tyrant Antoine-Simone, he and his daughter Célestine, who were reputed to be *grande mamaloi* of the island—a sort of female pope of the voodooists—those two did actually succeed in hoodwinking Monseigneur the Archbishop of Haiti to bless and almost bury in consecrated ground the carcass of a slaughtered he-goat which they had substituted for the corpse of one of the palace suite. What they desired of the cadaver of a stinking goat which had been blessed with bell, book and candle only God, the Devil and they knew, but the fact remains they wanted it, and but for a fortunate accident would have succeeded in obtaining it.

"This I recalled when the good Costello told of the ravishment of the church, and so I thought, perhaps, I saw one tiny, small gleam of light amid the darkness of these many so strange crimes.

"Then like a confirmation of my theory comes the discovery of the patchwork corset—pure voodoo, that—upon the body of a white girl. 'Ha,' I say to me, 'here are a new angle of this devil's business.'

"Her murder follows quickly; a murder obviously committed to stop her mouth with blood. We search for the killer; but nowhere can we find him. Only the apes of Tarzan could have gained a vantage-point to hurl the fatal knife, then effect escape from immediately beneath our noses.

"Comes then the killing of Monsieur Lucas, the watchman. When I see his dead corpse all mutilated I tell me, 'This is no ordinary killing; this is the ritual murder of some most vile secret society.' And even as I come to that conclusion what do I find but the two burnt matches which mean that voodoo vengeance has been wreaked upon a backslider. *Voilà!* The mystery is a mystery no more. And the so long footprint marked in blood at the murder-scene—*there* is

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the track of my ape-man, the one who could have murdered Mademoiselle Adelaide because of his peculiar ability to climb that ice-encrusted tree beside the room where we interviewed her. Yes, the same one have undoubtlessly done both murders.

"All quickly I investigate her unhappy past, and likewise that of the murdered watchman. I have told you what I found. Undoubtlessly this old nurse of the murdered girl, this old Toinette, is a voodoo *mamaloi*, or high priestess; she have settled here, she have made many unfortunate negroes her dupes; aided by the ape-man, she have planned the supreme revenge upon the white oppressor—she has raised up a white girl to serve the snake-goddess of Obeah, to perform the sacrifice not of a goat, as is done at ordinary ceremonies, but of *'the goat without horns'*—a human infant, and a white one, at that. Thus is explained the kidnaping of little Baby Boswell.

"'Jules de Grandin,' I tell me, 'we must work fast if we are to circumvent this abominable abomination.'

"Then comes the riot when the police are defied with guns, an occurrence without parallel, the good Costello declared. It are most significant. I recall that the bloody massacre which drove the French from Haiti was plotted round a voodoo watch-fire on August 14, 1791, by rebellious slaves led by one Boukman, a voodoo *papaloi*, or priest. Impossible as it seems, a disordered brain had conceived the possibility of waging war against the law here in New Jersey, America. Only alcohol, drugs or religious frenzy, perhaps a mixture of them all, could nurture such an insane plan.

"Quickly on the riot's heels comes the abduction of Mademoiselle Marrien. I see her remarkable resemblance to the dead Mademoiselle Adelaide; I observe the headache-producing powder on the mysteriously delivered orchids; once more the trail of voodoo cunning lies across my path. Her room was inaccessible to any but an ape; yet she is gone. Ha, but there is an ape-man dodging back and forth between all the happenings in this so mysterious chain of circumstances; once more I think I see his handiwork. Yes, it is unquestionably so.

"'These wicked ones, they will not be denied their triumph,' I tell me. 'Having deprived themselves of the priestess they so carefully trained from childhood, they steal another, as like her in appearance as possible, and by means of drugs and drums, and *le bon Dieu* only knows what sort of foul magic, they break her will in pieces and force her to serve in place of her they slew.

"I seek a likely place for them to congregate; by great good luck and more than ordinary intelligence, I find it. Forthwith I come to Friend Costello for reinforcements. The rest we know."

"But see here, de Grandin," I asked, "in the voodoo temple tonight you said something about Marrien Thorndyke being in peril of her life. Would the same thing have applied to Adelaide Truman? D'ye think old Toinette would have risked her life in the Martinique earthquake to save the child, only to have her slaughtered in the end?"

"*Mais certainement,*" he assented. "Does not the shepherd repeatedly risk his life for his flock, only that they may at last be driven to the shambles?"

"But she was a priestess, a being regarded almost as divine," I insisted. "Surely they would not have harmed her after electing her to celebrate their rites. Why——"

"Why, of a certitude, they would," he interrupted. "The sacrifice of the priest or priestess, even of the god's own proxy, is no strange thing in many religions. The priest of Dionysos at Potmice was sacrificed following the performance of his priestly office; the Phrygian priests of

Attis were of old destroyed when they had done serving their god; a man impersonating Osiris, Sun God of Egypt, was first worshipt with all fervor, then ruthlessly slain in commemoration of the murder of Osiris by Set; and among the ancient Aztecs, Chicomecohuatl, the Corn Goddess, was likewise impersonated by a beauteous maiden who afterward was butchered and flayed in public. Yes, there is nothing strange in the slaughter of a venerated priestess by her worshipers, my friend."

"Well, annyway, Dr. de Grandin, sor, ye sure ran th' murtherin' divils down an' settled that ape-felly's hash in tidy order," Costello interrupted. "Good thing ye did, too. He sure deserved killin', but we'd never 'a' convinced a jury he kilt pore little Miss Truman or even the Eagle Laundry's watchman, Lucas."

"*Eh bien,* my friend," de Grandin cast one of his quick, elfin smiles at the big Irishman, "all that which ends well ends satisfactorily, as Monsieur Shakespeare remarks. The motiveless, meaningless crimes which threatened your tranquillity will trouble you no more; neither will the criminals.

"Trowbridge, Costello, good friends"—he filled three glasses with amber cognac and passed us each a bumper—"let us leave off this business as we began it; I bid you Happy New Year."

In Letters of Fire

(Continued from page 336)

"Hark, hark! Does it not seem to you tonight that the wind sounds like the voice of a dog?"

We listened, and Makoko answered, "It is true! The wind really seems to be barking—there, behind the door!"

The door was shaking strangely,

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and we heard a voice calling, "Open!"

I drew the bolts and opened the door. A human form rushed into the room.

"It is the steward," I said.

"Sir, sir!" he began.

"What is it?" we all exclaimed, breathlessly, and wondering what was about to follow.

"Sir, I thought I had handed you your twelve thousand francs. Indeed, I am positive I did so. Those gentlemen doubtless saw me."

"Yes, indeed," from all of us.

"Well, I have just discovered them in my bag. I can not understand how it has happened. I have returned to bring them back to you—*once more.* Here they are."

The steward again pulled out the identical envelope, and a second time counted the twelve one-thousand-franc notes, adding:

"I know not what ails the mountainside tonight, but it terrifies me. I shall sleep here."

The twelve thousand francs were now lying on the table. Our host cried:

"This time we see them there, there before us! Where are the cards? Deal them. The twelve thousand in five straight points, to see, to know for certain. I tell you that I wish to know—*to know.*"

I dealt. My opponent called for cards; I refused them. He had five trumps. He scored two points. He dealt the cards. He turned up the king. I led. He again had five trumps. Three and two are five! He had won!

Then he howled; yes, howled like the wind which had the voice of a dog. He snatched the cards from the table and cast them into the flames. "Into the fire with the cards! Let the fire consume them!" he shrieked.

Suddenly he strode toward the door. Outside a dog barked—a dog raising a death-howl.

The man reached the door, and speaking through it asked:

"Is that you, Mystère?"

To what phenomenon was it due that both wind and dog were silent simultaneously?

The man softly drew the bolts and half opened the door. No sooner was the door ajar than the infernal yelping broke out so prolonged and so lugubrious that it made us shiver to our very marrow. Our host had now flung himself upon the door with such force that we could almost think he had smashed it. Not content with having pushed back the bolts, he pressed with his knees and arms against the door, without uttering a sound. All we heard was his panting respiration.

Then, when the death-like wailing had ceased, and silence reigned both within and without, turning toward us and tottering forward he said:

"He has returned! Beware!"

MIDNIGHT. We have gone our respective ways. Makoko and Mathis have remained below beside the dying embers. Allan has sought his bedroom, while, driven by some unknown inner force controlling me absolutely, I find myself in the haunted room. I am repeating the doings of the man whose story we had heard that night; I select the same book, open it at the same page; I go to the same window; I pull the curtain aside; I gaze upon the same moonlit landscape, for the wind has long since driven off the tempest-clouds and the fog. I only see bare rocks, shining like steel under the rays of the bright moon, and on the desolate plateau a weirdly dancing shadow—the shadow of Mystère, with her formidable jaws wide apart—jaws that I can see barking. Do I hear the barking? Yes, it seems to me that I hear it. I let the curtain drop. I take my candlestick from the chest of drawers. I step toward the wardrobe. I look at myself in its mirrored

panel. I dream of *him* who wrote the words which lie concealed within. Whose face is it that I see in the mirror? It is my own! But is it possible that the face of our host on the fatal night could have been more pallid than mine is now? In all truth, my face is that of a dead man. On one side — there — there — that little cloud—that misty cloudlet in the mirror—cheek by jowl with my face—those fearful eyes—those lips! Oh, if I could but scream! I can not. I am powerless to cry out, *when suddenly I hear three knocks.* And—and my hand strays of its own accord toward the door of the wardrobe—my inquisitive hand—my accursed hand.

Of a sudden my hand is gripped in the vice I know so well. I look round. I am face to face with our host, who says to me in a voice which seems to come from another world:

"Do not open it!"

NEXT morning we did not ask our host to give us the opportunity of winning back our money. We fled from his roof without even taking leave of him. Twelve thousand francs were sent that evening to our strange host through Makoko's father, to whom we had told our adventure. He returned them to us, with the following note:

"We are quits. When we played, both the first game, which you won, and the second one, which you lost, we *believed*, you and I, that we were staking twelve thousand francs. That must be sufficient for us. The devil has my soul, but he shall not possess my honor."

We were not at all anxious to keep the twelve thousand francs, so we presented them to a hospital in La Chaux-de-Fonds which was in sore need of money. Following upon urgent repairs, to which our donation was applied, the hospital, one winter's night, was so thoroughly burned to the ground that at noon the following day nothing but ashes remained of it.

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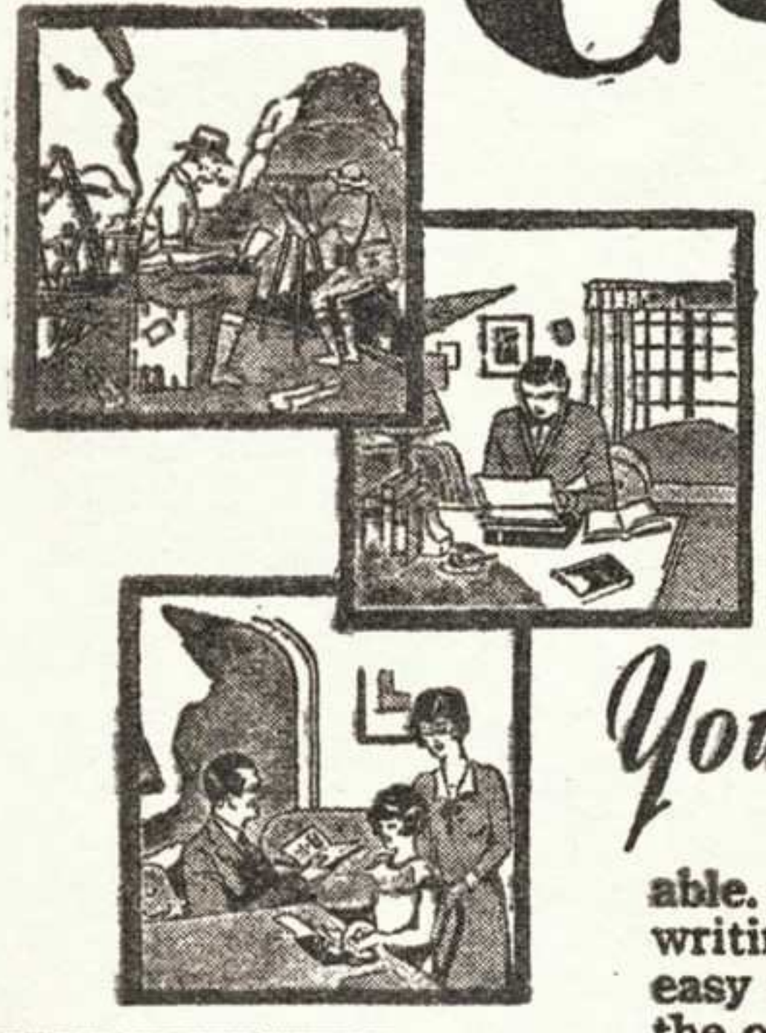

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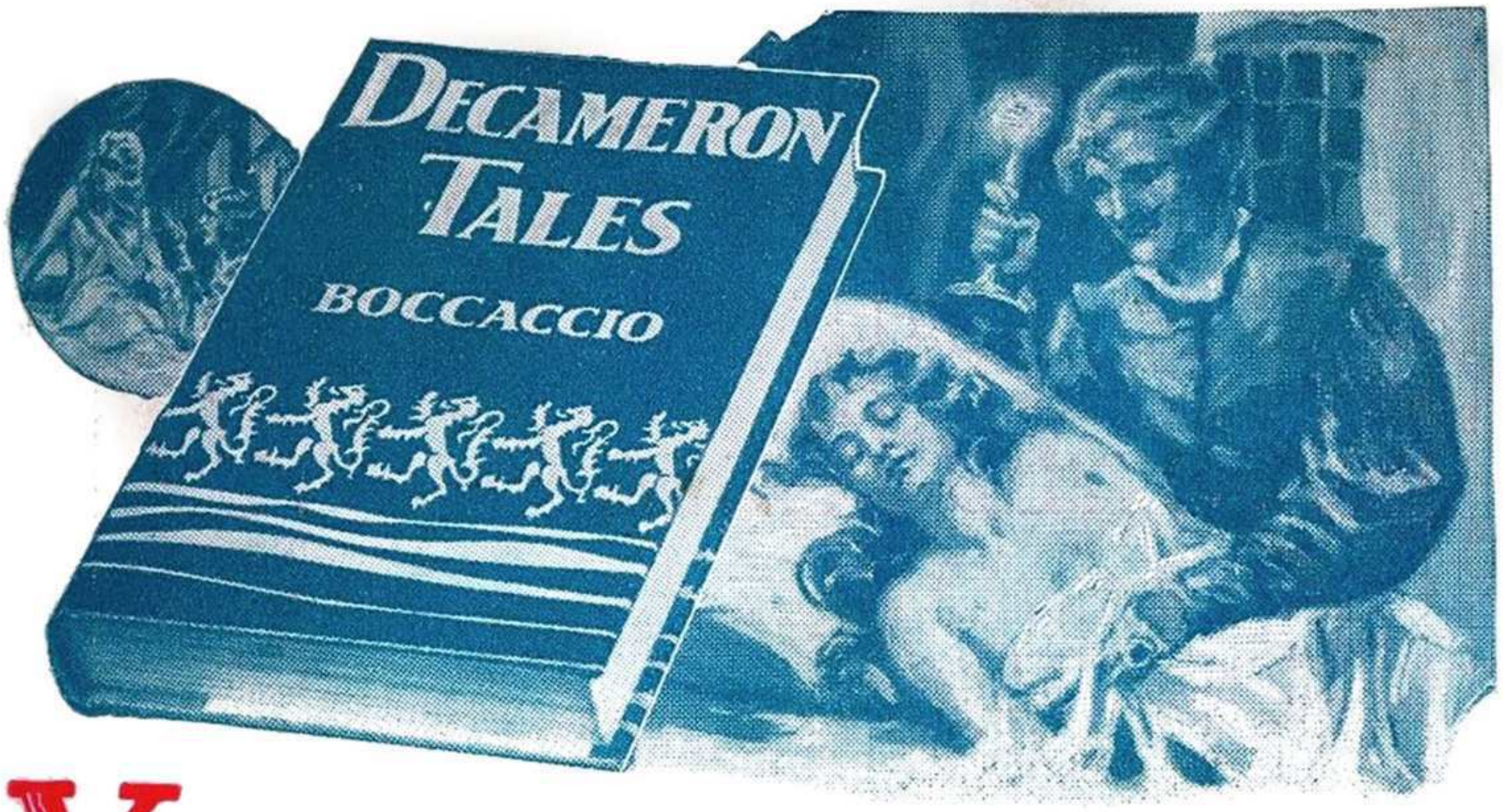

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