SWITCH ON THE LIGHT!

15 STORIES WEIRD AND GRIM · EDITED BY

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON

BEING THE SIXTH VOLUME OF THE FAMOUS

"NOT AT NIGHT" SERIES

SWITCH ON THE LIGHT

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Selected and arranged by

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON

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SWITCH ON THE LIGHT

THE CURSE OF YIG

ZEALIA BROWN REED

IN 1925 I went into Oklahoma looking for snake lore, and I came out with a fear of snakes that will last me the rest of my life. I admit it is foolish, since there are natural explanations for everything I saw and heard, but it masters me none the less. If the old story had been all there was to it, I would not have been so badly shaken. My work as an American Indian ethnologist has hardened me to all kinds of extravagant legendry, and I know that simple white people can beat the redskins at their own game when it comes to fanciful inventions. But I can't forget what I saw with my own eyes at the insane asylum in Guthrie.

I called at that asylum because a few of the oldest settlers told me I would find something important there. Neither Indians nor white men would discuss the snake-god legends I had come to trace. The oil-boom new-comers, of course, knew nothing of such matters, and the red men and old pioneers were plainly frightened when I spoke of them. Not more than six or seven people mentioned the asylum, and those who did were careful to talk in whispers. But the whisperers said that Dr. McNeill could show me a very terrible relic and tell me all I wanted to know. He could

explain why Yig, the half-human father of serpents, is a shunned and feared subject in central Oklahoma, and why old settlers shiver at the secret Indian orgies which make the autumn days and nights hideous with the ceaseless beating of tom-toms in lonely places.

It was with the scent of a hound on the trail that I went to Guthrie, for I had spent many years collecting data on the evolution of serpent-worship among the Indians. I had always felt, from well-defined undertones of legend and archeology, that great Quetzalcoatl —benign snake-god of the Mexicans—had had an older and darker prototype; and during recent months I had well-nigh proved it in a series of researches stretching from Guatemala to the Oklahoma plains. But everything was tantalizing and incomplete, for above the border the cult of the snake was hedged about by fear and furtiveness.

Now it appeared that a new and copious source of data was about to dawn, and I sought the head of the asylum with an eagerness I did not try to cloak. Dr. McNeill was a small, clean-shaven man of somewhat advanced years, and I saw at once from his speech and manner that he was a scholar of no mean attainments in many branches outside his profession. Grave and doubtful when I first made known my errand, his face grew thoughtful as he carefully scanned my credentials and the letter of introduction which a kindly old ex-Indian agent had given me.

"So you've been studying the Yig-legend, eh?" he reflected sententiously. "I know that many of our Oklahoma ethnologists have tried to connect it with Quetzalcoatl, but I don't think any of them have traced the intermediate steps so well. You've done remarkable work for a man as young as you seem to be, and you certainly deserve all the data we can give.

"I don't suppose old Major Moore or any of the others told you what it is I have here. They don't

like to talk about it, and neither do I. It is very tragic and very horrible, but that is all. I refuse to consider it anything supernatural. There's a story about it that I'll tell you after you see it—a devilish sad story, but one that I won't call magic. It merely shows the potency that belief has over some people. I'll admit there are times when I feel a shiver that's more than physical, but in daylight I set all that down to nerves. I'm not a young fellow any more, alas !

" To come to the point, the thing I have is what you might call a victim of Yig's curse—a physically living victim. We don't let the bulk of the nurses see it, although most of them know it's here. There are just two steady old chaps whom I let feed it and clean out its quarters—used to be three, but good old Stevens passed on a few years ago. I suppose I'll have to break in a new group pretty soon ; for the thing doesn't seem to age or change much, and we old boys can't last for ever. Maybe the ethics of the near future will let us give it a merciless release, but it's hard to tell.

" Did you see that single ground-glass basement window over in the east wing when you came up the drive ? That's where it is. I'll take you there myself now. You needn't make any comment. Just look through the movable panel in the door and thank God the light isn't any stronger. Then I'll tell you the story—or as much as I've been able to piece together."

We walked downstairs very quietly, and did not talk as we threaded the corridors of the seemingly deserted basement. Dr. McNeill unlocked a grey-painted steel door, but it was only a bulkhead leading to a further stretch of hallway. At length he paused before a door marked B 116, opened a small observation panel which he could use only by standing on tiptoe, and pounded several times upon the painted

metal, as if to arouse the occupant, whatever it might be.

A faint stench came from the aperture as the doctor unclosed it, and I fancied his pounding elicited a kind of low, hissing response. Finally he motioned me to replace him at the peep-hole, and I did so with a causeless and increasing tremor. The barred, ground-glass window, close to the earth outside, admitted only a feeble and uncertain pallor ; and I had to look into the malodorous den for several seconds before I could see what was crawling and wriggling about on the straw-covered floor, emitting every now and then a weak and vacuous hiss. Then the shadowed outlines began to take shape, and I perceived that the squirming entity bore some remote resemblance to a human form laid flat on its belly. I clutched at the door-handle for support as I tried to keep from fainting.

The moving object was almost of human size, and entirely devoid of clothing. It was absolutely hairless, and its tawny-looking back seemed subtly squamous in the dim, ghoulish light. Around the shoulders it was rather speckled and brownish, and the head was very curiously flat. As it looked up to hiss at me I saw that the beady little black eyes were damnably anthropoid, but I could not bear to study them long. They fastened themselves on me with a horrible persistence, so that I closed the panel gaspingly and left the creature to wriggle about unseen in its matted straw and spectral twilight. I must have reeled a bit, for I saw that the doctor was gently holding my arm as he guided me away. I was stuttering over and over again : " B-but for God's sake, *what is it ?* "

Dr. McNeill told me the story in his private office as I sprawled opposite him in an easy chair. The gold and crimson of late afternoon changed to the violet of early dusk, but still I sat awed and motionless. I resented every ring of the telephone and every whir

of the buzzer, and I could have cursed the nurses and interns whose knocks now and then summoned the doctor briefly to the outer office. Night came, and I was glad my host switched on all the lights. Scientist though I was, my zeal for research was half forgotten amid such breathless ecstasies of fright as a small boy might feel when whispered witch-tales go the rounds of the chimney-corner.

It seems that Yig, the snake-god of the central plains tribes—presumably the primal source of the more southerly Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan—was an odd, half-anthropomorphic devil of highly arbitrary and capricious nature. He was not wholly evil, and was usually quite well disposed toward those who gave proper respect to him and his children, the serpents ; but in the autumn he became abnormally ravenous, and had to be driven away by means of suitable rites. That was why the tom-toms in the Pawnee, Wichita, and Caddo country pounded ceaselessly week in and week out in August, September, and October ; and why the medicine-men made strange noises with rattles and whistles curiously like those of the Aztecs and Mayas.

Yig's chief trait was a relentless devotion to his children—a devotion so great that the redskins almost feared to protect themselves from the venomous rattlesnakes which thronged the region. Frightful clandestine tales hinted of his vengeance upon mortals who flouted him or wreaked harm upon his wriggling progeny ; his chosen method being to turn his victim, after suitable tortures, to a spotted snake.

In the old days of the Indian Territory, the doctor went on, there was not quite so much secrecy about Yig. The plains tribes, less cautious than the desert nomads and Pueblos, talked quite freely of their legends and autumn ceremonies with the first Indian

agents, and let considerable of the lore spread out through the neighbouring regions of white settlement. The great fear came in the land-rush days of 'eighty-nine, when some extraordinary incidents had been rumoured, and the rumours sustained, by what seemed to be hideously tangible proofs. Indians said that the new white men did not know how to get on with Yig, and afterward the settlers came to take that theory at face value. Now no old-timer in middle Oklahoma, white or red, could be induced to breathe a word about the snake-god except in vague hints. Yet after all, the doctor added with almost needless emphasis, the only truly authenticated horror had been a thing of pitiful tragedy rather than of bewitchment. It was all very material and cruel—even that last phase which had caused so much dispute.

Dr. McNeill paused and cleared his throat before getting down to his special story, and I felt a tingling sensation as when a theatre curtain rises. The thing had begun when Walker Davis and his wife Audrey left Arkansas to settle in the newly opened public lands in the spring of 1889, and the end had come in the country of the Wichitas—north of the Wachita River, in what is at present Caddo County. There is a small village called Binger there now, and the railway goes through ; but otherwise the place is less changed than other parts of Oklahoma. It is still a section of farms and ranches—quite productive in these days—since the great oil-fields do not come very close.

Walker and Audrey had come from Franklin County in the Ozarks with a canvas-topped wagon, two mules, an ancient and useless dog called Wolf, and all their household goods. They were typical hill-folk, youngish and perhaps a little more ambitious than most, and looked forward to a life of better returns for their hard work than they had had in Arkansas. Both were lean, raw-boned specimens ; the man tall,

sandy and grey-eyed, and the woman short and rather dark, with a black straightness of hair suggesting a slight Indian admixture.

In general, there was very little of distinction about them, and but for one thing their annals might not have differed from those of thousands of other pioneers who flocked into the new country at that time. That thing was Walker's almost epileptic fear of snakes, which some laid to prenatal causes, and some said came from a dark prophecy about his end with which an old Indian squaw had tried to scare him when he was small. Whatever the cause, the effect was marked indeed; for despite his strong general courage the very mention of a snake would cause him to grow faint and pale, while the sight of even a tiny specimen would produce a shock sometimes bordering on a convulsion seizure.

The Davises started out early in the year, in the hope of being on their new land for the spring ploughing. Travel was slow; for the roads were bad in Arkansas, while in the Territory there were great stretches of rolling hills and red, sandy barrens without any roads whatever. As the terrain grew flatter, the change from their native mountains depressed them more, perhaps, than they realized; but they found the people at the Indian agencies very affable, while most of the settled Indians seemed friendly and civil. Now and then they encountered a fellow-pioneer, with whom crude pleasantries and expressions of amiable rivalry were generally exchanged.

Owing to the season, there were not many snakes in evidence, so Walker did not suffer from his special temperamental weakness. In the earlier stages of the journey, too, there were no Indian snake-legends to trouble him; for the transplanted tribes from the south-east do not share the wilder beliefs of their

western neighbours. As fate would have it, it was a white man at Okmulgee in the Creek country who gave the Davises the first hint of the Yig beliefs ; a hint which had a curiously fascinating effect on Walker, and caused him to ask questions very freely after that.

Before long Walker's fascination had developed into a bad case of fright. He took the most extraordinary precautions at each of the nightly camps, always clearing away whatever vegetation he found, and avoiding stony places whenever he could. Every clump of stunted bushes and every cleft in the great, slab-like rocks seemed to him now to hide malevolent serpents, while every human figure not obviously part of a settlement or emigrant train seemed to him a potential snake-god till nearness had proved the contrary. Fortunately no troublesome encounters came at this stage to shake his nerves still further.

As they approached the Kickapoo country they found it harder and harder to avoid camping near rocks. Finally it was no longer possible, and poor Walker was reduced to the puerile expedient of droning some of the rustic anti-snake charms he had learned in his boyhood. Two or three times a snake was really glimpsed, and these sights did not help the sufferer in his efforts to preserve composure.

On the twenty-second evening of the journey a savage wind made it imperative, for the sake of the mules, to camp in as sheltered a spot as possible ; and Audrey persuaded her husband to take advantage of a cliff which rose uncommonly high above the dried bed of a former tributary of the Canadian River. He did not like the rocky cast of the place, but allowed himself to be overruled this once ; leading the animals sullenly toward the protecting slope, which the nature of the ground would not allow the wagon to approach.

Audrey, examining the rocks near the wagon,

meanwhile noticed a singular sniffing on the part of the feeble old dog. Seizing a rifle, she followed his lead, and presently thanked her stars that she had forestalled Walker in her discovery. For there, snugly nested in the gap between two boulders, was a sight it would have done him no good to see. Visible only as one convoluted expanse, but perhaps comprising as many as three or four separate units, was a mass of lazy wriggling which could not be other than a brood of new-born rattlesnakes.

Anxious to save Walker from a trying shock, Audrey did not hesitate to act, but took the gun firmly by the barrel and brought the butt down again and again upon the writhing objects. Her own sense of loathing was great, but it did not amount to a real fear. Finally she saw that her task was done, and turned to cleanse the improvised bludgeon in the red sand and dry, dead grass near by. She must, she reflected, cover the nest up before Walker got back from tethering the mules. Old Wolf, tottering relic of mixed shepherd and coyote ancestry that he was, had vanished, and she feared he had gone to fetch his master.

Footsteps at that instant proved her fear well founded. A second more, and Walker had seen everything. Audrey made a move to catch him if he should faint, but he did no more than sway. Then the look of pure fright on his bloodless face turned slowly to something like mingled awe and anger, and he began to upbraid his wife in trembling tones.

" Gawd's sake, Aud, but why'd ye go for to do that ? Hain't ye heerd all the things they've ben tellin' about this snake-devil Yig ? Ye'd ought to a told me, and we'd a moved on. Don't ye know they's a devil-god what gets even if ye hurts his children ? What for d'ye think the Injuns all dances and beats their drums in the fall about ? This land's under a curse, I tell

ye—nigh every soul we've a-talked to sence we come in's said the same. Yig rules here, an' he comes out every fall for to git his victims and turn 'em into snakes. Why, Aud, they won't none of them Injuns acrost the Canayjin kill a snake for love nor money!

"Gawd knows what ye done to yourself, gal, a-stompin' out a hull brood o' Yig's chillen. He'll git ye, sure, sooner or later, unlessen I kin buy a charm offen some o' the Injun medicine-men. He'll git ye, Aud, as sure's they's a Gawd in heaven—he'll come outa the night and turn ye into a crawlin' spotted snake!"

All the rest of the journey Walker kept up the frightened reproofs and prophecies. They crossed the Canadian near Newcastle, and soon afterward met with the first of the real plains Indians they had seen—a party of blanketed Wichitas, whose leader talked freely under the spell of the whisky offered him, and taught poor Walker a long-winded protective charm against Yig in exchange for a quart bottle of the same inspiring fluid. By the end of the week the chosen site in the Wichita country was reached, and the Davises made haste to trace their boundaries and perform the spring ploughing before even beginning the construction of a cabin.

The region was flat, drearily windy, and sparse of natural vegetation, but promised great fertility under cultivation. Occasional outcroppings of granite diversified a soil of decomposed red sandstone, and here and there a great flat rock would stretch along the surface of the ground like a man-made floor. There seemed to be very few snakes, or possible dens for them, so Audrey at last persuaded Walker to build the one-room cabin over a vast, smooth slab of exposed stone. With such a flooring and with a good-sized fireplace the wettest weather might be defied—though it soon became evident that dampness was no salient

quality of the district. Logs were hauled in the wagon from the nearest belt of woods, many miles toward the Wichita Mountains.

Walker built his wide-chimneyed cabin and crude barn with the aid of some of the other settlers, though the nearest one was over a mile away. In turn, he helped his helpers at similar house-raisings, so that many ties of friendship sprang up between the new neighbours. There was no town worthy the name nearer than El Reno, on the railway thirty miles or more to the north-east; and before many weeks had passed, the people of the section had become very cohesive despite the wideness of their scattering. The Indians, a few of whom had begun to settle down on ranches, were for the most part harmless, though somewhat quarrelsome when fired by the liquid stimulation which found its way to them despite all Government bans.

Of all the neighbours the Davises found Joe and Sally Compton, who likewise hailed from Arkansas, the most helpful and congenial. Sally is still alive, known now as Grandma Compton; and her son Clyde, then an infant in arms, has become one of the leading men of the State. Sally and Audrey used to visit each other often, for their cabins were only two miles apart; and in the long spring and summer afternoons they exchanged many a tale of old Arkansas and many a rumour about the new country.

Sally was very sympathetic about Walker's weakness regarding snakes, but perhaps did more to aggravate than cure the parallel nervousness which Audrey was acquiring through his incessant praying and prophesying about the curse of Yig. She was uncommonly full of gruesome snake stories, and produced a direfully strong impression with her acknowledged masterpiece—the tale of a man in Scott County who had been bitten by a whole horde of rattlers at

once, and had swelled so monstrously from poison that his body had finally burst with a pop. Needless to say, Audrey did not repeat this anecdote to her husband, and she implored the Comptons to beware of starting it on the rounds of the countryside. It is to Joe's and Sally's credit that they heeded this plea with the utmost fidelity.

Walker did his corn-planting early, and in midsummer improved his time by harvesting a fair crop of the native grass of the region. With the help of Joe Compton he dug a well which gave a moderate supply of very good water, though he planned to sink an artesian later on. He did not run into many serious snake scares, and made his land as inhospitable as possible for wriggling visitors. Every now and then he rode over to the cluster of thatched, conical huts which formed the main village of the Wichitas, and talked long with the old men and shamans about the snake-god and how to nullify his wrath. Charms were always ready in exchange for whisky, but much of the information he got was far from reassuring.

Yig was a great god. He was bad medicine. He did not forget things. In the autumn his children were hungry and wild, and Yig was hungry and wild, too. All the tribes made medicine against Yig when the corn harvest came. They gave him some corn, and danced in proper regalia to the sound of whistle, rattle, and drum. They kept the drums pounding to drive Yig away, and called down the aid of Tiráwa, whose children men are, even as the snakes are Yig's children. It was bad that the squaw of Davis killed the children of Yig. Let Davis say the charms many times when the corn harvest comes. Yig is Yig. Yig is a great god.

By the time the corn harvest did come, Walker had succeeded in getting his wife into a deplorably jumpy state. His prayers and borrowed incantations came

to be a nuisance ; and when the autumn rites of the Indians began, there was always a distant wind-borne pounding of tom-toms to lend an added background of the sinister. It was maddening to have the muffled clatter always stealing over the wide red plains. Why would it never stop ? Day and night, week on week, it was always going in exhaustless relays, as persistently as the red dusty winds that carried it. Audrey loathed it more than her husband did, for he saw in it a compensating element of protection. It was with this sense of a mighty, intangible bulwark against evil that he got in his corn crop and prepared cabin and stable for the coming winter.

The autumn was abnormally warm, and except for their primitive cookery the Davises found scant use for the stone fireplace Walker had built with such care. Something in the unnaturalness of the hot dust-clouds preyed on the nerves of all the settlers, but most of all on Audrey's and Walker's. The notions of a hovering snake-curse and the weird, endless rhythm of the distant Indian drums formed a bad combination which any added element of the bizarre went far to render utterly unendurable.

Notwithstanding this strain, several festive gatherings were held at one or another of the cabins after the crops were reaped : keeping naively alive in modernity those curious rites of the harvest-home which are as old as human agriculture itself. Lafayette Smith, who came from southern Missouri and had a cabin about three miles east of Walker's, was a very passable fiddler ; and his tunes did much to make the celebrants forget the monotonous beating of the distant tom-toms. Then Hallowe'en drew near, and the settlers planned another frolic—this time, had they but known it, of a lineage older than even agriculture : the dread Witch-Sabbath of the primal pre-Aryans, kept alive through ages in the midnight

blackness of secret woods, and still hinting at vague terrors under its latter-day mask of comedy and lightness. Hallowe'en was to fall on a Thursday, and the neighbours agreed to gather for their first revel at the Davis cabin.

It was on that thirty-first of October that the warm spell broke. The morning was grey and leaden, and by noon the incessant winds had changed from searingness to rawness. People shivered all the more because they were not prepared for the chill, and Walker Davis's old dog Wolf dragged himself wearily indoors to a place beside the hearth. But the distant drums still thumped on, nor were the white citizenry less inclined to pursue their chosen rites. As early as four in the afternoon the wagons began to arrive at Walker's cabin ; and in the evening, after a memorable barbecue, Lafayette Smith's fiddle inspired a very fair-sized company to great feats of saltatory grotesqueness in the one good-sized but crowded room. The younger folk indulged in the amiable inanities proper to the season, and now and then old Wolf would howl with doleful and spine-tickling ominousness at some especially spectral strain from Lafayette's squeaky violin—a device he had never heard before. Mostly, though, this battered veteran slept through the merriment ; for he was past the age of active interests and lived largely in his dreams. Tom and Jennie Rigby had brought their collie Zeke along, but the canines did not fraternize. Zeke seemed strangely uneasy over something, and nosed around curiously all the evening.

Audrey and Walker made a fine couple on the floor, and Grandma Compton still likes to recall her impression of their dancing that night. Their worries seemed forgotten for the nonce, and Walker was shaved and trimmed into a surprising degree of spruceness. By ten o'clock all hands were healthily

tired, and the guests began to depart family by family with many handshakings and bluff assurances of what a fine time everybody had had. Tom and Jennie thought Zeke's eerie howls as he followed them to their wagon were marks of regret at having to go home; though Audrey said it must be the far-away tom-toms which annoyed him, for the distant thumping was surely ghastly enough after the merriment within.

The night was bitterly cold, and for the first time Walker put a great log in the fireplace and banked it with ashes to keep it smouldering till morning. Old Wolf dragged himself within the ruddy glow and lapsed into his customary coma. Audrey and Walker, too tired to think of charms or curses, tumbled into the rough pine bed and were asleep before the cheap alarm-clock on the mantel had ticked out three minutes. And from far away, the rhythmic pounding of those hellish tom-toms still pulsed on the chill night-wind.

Dr. McNeill paused here and removed his glasses, as if a blurring of the objective world might make the reminiscent vision clearer.

"You'll soon appreciate," he said, "that I had a great deal of difficulty in piecing out all that happened after the guests left. There were times, though—at first—when I was able to make a try at it." After a moment of silence he went on with the tale.

Audrey had terrible dreams of Yig, who appeared to her in the guise of Satan as depicted in cheap engravings she had seen. It was, indeed, from an absolute ecstasy of nightmare that she started suddenly awake to find Walker already conscious and sitting up in bed. He seemed to be listening intently to something, and silenced her with a whisper when she began to ask what had aroused him.

"Hark, Aud!" he breathed. "Don't ye hear

somethin' a-singin' and buzzin' and rustlin' ? D'ye reckon it's the fall crickets ? "

Certainly, there was distinctly audible within the cabin such a sound as he had described. Audrey tried to analyse it, and was impressed with some element at once horrible and familiar, which hovered just outside the rim of her memory. And beyond it all, waking a hideous thought, the monotonous beating of the distant tom-toms came incessantly across the black plains on which a cloudy half-moon had set.

" Walker—s'pose it's—the—the—curse o' Yig ? "

She could feel him tremble.

" No, gal, I don't reckon he comes that way. He's shapen like a man, except ye look at him clost. That's what Chief Gray Eagle says. This here's some varmints come in outen the cold—not crickets, I calc'late, but summat like 'em. I'd orter git up and stomp 'em out afore they make much headway or git at the cupboard."

He rose, felt for the lantern that hung within easy reach, and rattled the tin match-box nailed to the wall beside it. Audrey sat up in bed and watched the flare of the match grow into the steady glow of the lantern. Then, as their eyes began to take in the whole of the room, the crude rafters shook with the frenzy of their simultaneous shriek. For the flat, rocky floor, revealed in the new-born illumination, was one seething brown-speckled mass of wriggling rattlesnakes, slithering toward the fire, and even now turning their loathsome heads to menace the fright-blasted lantern-bearer.

It was only for an instant that Audrey saw the things. The reptiles were of every size, of uncountable numbers, and apparently of several varieties ; and even as she looked, two or three of them reared their heads as if to strike at Walker. She did not faint—it was Walker's crash to the floor that extinguished the

lantern and plunged her into blackness. He had not screamed a second time—fright had paralysed him, and he fell as if shot by a silent arrow from no mortal's bow. To Audrey the entire world seemed to whirl about fantastically, mingling with the nightmare from which she had started.

Voluntary motion of any sort was impossible, for will and the sense of reality had left her. She fell back inertly on her pillow, hoping that she would wake soon. No actual sense of what had happened penetrated her mind for some time. Then, little by little, the suspicion that she was really awake began to dawn on her; and she was convulsed with a mounting blend of panic and grief which made her long to shriek out despite the inhibiting spell which kept her mute.

Walker was gone, and she had not been able to help him. He had died of snakes, just as the old witch-woman had predicted when he was a little boy. Poor Wolf had not been able to help, either—probably he had not even awakened from his senile stupor. And now the crawling things must be coming for her, writhing closer and closer every moment in the dark, perhaps even now twining slipperily about the bed-posts and oozing up over the coarse woollen blankets. Unconsciously she crept under the clothes and trembled.

It must be the curse of Yig. He had sent his monstrous children on All-Hallows' Night, and they had taken Walker first. Why was that—wasn't he innocent enough? Why not come straight for her—hadn't she killed those little rattlers alone? Then she thought of the curse's form as told by the Indians. She wouldn't be killed—just turned to a spotted snake. Ugh! So she would be like those things she had glimpsed on the floor—those things which Yig had sent to get her and enrol her among their number!

She tried to mumble a charm that Walker had taught her, but found she could not utter a single sound.

The noisy ticking of the alarm-clock sounded above the maddening beat of the distant tom-toms. The snakes were taking a long time—did they mean to delay on purpose to play on her nerves? Every now and then she thought she felt a stealthy, insidious pressure on the bedclothes, but each time it turned out to be only the automatic twitchings of her overwrought nerves. The clock ticked on in the dark, and a change came slowly over her thoughts.

Those snakes *couldn't* have taken so long! They couldn't be Yig's messengers after all, but just natural rattlers that were nested below the rock and had been drawn there by the fire. They weren't coming for her, perhaps—perhaps they had sated themselves on poor Walker. Where were they now? Gone? Coiled by the fire? Still crawling over the prone corpse of their victim? The clock ticked, and the distant drums throbbed on.

At the thought of her husband's body lying there in the pitch blackness a thrill of purely physical horror passed over Audrey. That story of Sally Compton's about the man back in Scott County! He, too, had been bitten by a whole bunch of rattlesnakes, and what had happened to him? The poison had rotted the flesh and swelled the whole corpse, and in the end the bloated thing had *burst* horribly—burst horribly with a detestable *popping* noise. Was that what was happening to Walker down there on the rock floor? Instinctively she felt that she had begun to *listen* for something too terrible even to name to herself.

The clock ticked on, keeping a kind of mocking, sardonic time with the far-off drumming that the night-wind brought. She wished it were a striking clock, so that she could know how long this eldritch vigil

must last. She cursed the toughness of fibre that kept her from fainting, and wondered what sort of relief the dawn could bring, after all. Probably neighbours would pass—no doubt somebody would call—would they find her still sane? Was she still sane now?

Morbidly listening, Audrey all at once became aware of something which she had to verify with every effort of her will before she could believe it; and which, once verified, she did not know whether to welcome or dread. *The distant beating of the Indian tom-toms had ceased.* They had always maddened her—but had not Walker regarded them as a bulwark against nameless evil from outside the universe? What were some of those things he had repeated to her in whispers after talking with Gray Eagle and the Wichita medicine-men?

She did not relish this new and sudden silence, after all! There was something sinister about it. The loud-ticking clock seemed abnormal in its new loneliness. Capable at last of conscious motion, she shook the covers from her face and looked into the darkness toward the window. It must have cleared after the moon set, for she saw the square aperture distinctly against the background of stars.

Then without warning came that shocking, unutterable sound—ugh!—that dull, putrid *pop* of cleft skin and escaping poison in the dark. God!—Sally's story—that obscene stench, and this gnawing, clawing silence! It was too much. The bonds of muteness snapped, and the black night waxed reverberant with Audrey's screams of stark unbridled frenzy.

Consciousness did not pass away with the shock. How merciful if only it had! Amidst the echoes of her shrieking Audrey still saw the star-sprinkled square of window ahead, and heard the doom-boding

ticking of that frightful clock. Did she hear another sound? Was that square window still a perfect square? She was in no condition to weigh the evidence of her senses or distinguish between fact and hallucination.

No—that window was *not* a perfect square. *Something had encroached on the lower edge.* Nor was the ticking of the clock the only sound in the room. There was, beyond dispute, a heavy breathing neither her own nor poor Wolf's. Wolf slept very silently, and his wakeful wheezing was unmistakable. Then Audrey saw against the stars the black, demoniac silhouette of something anthropoid—the undulant bulk of a gigantic head and shoulders fumbling slowly toward her.

" Y'aaaah! Y'aaaah! Go away! Go away! Go away, snake devil! Go 'way, Yig! I didn't want to kill 'em—I was feared he'd be scairt of 'em. Don't, Yig, don't! I didn't go for to hurt yore chillen—don't come nigh me—don't change me into no spotted snake! "

But the half-formless head and shoulders only lurched onward toward the bed, very silently.

Everything snapped at once inside Audrey's head, and in a second she had turned from a cowering child to a raging madwoman. She knew where the axe was—hung against the wall on those pegs near the lantern. It was within easy reach, and she could find it in the dark. Before she was conscious of anything further it was in her hands, and she was creeping toward the foot of the bed—toward the monstrous head and shoulders that every moment groped their way nearer. Had there been any light, the look on her face would not have been pleasant to see.

" Take *that*, you! And *that*, and *that*, and *that!* "

She was laughing shrilly now, and her cackles mounted higher as she saw that the starlight beyond

the window was yielding to the dim prophetic pallor of coming dawn.

Dr. McNeill wiped the perspiration from his forehead and put on his glasses again. I waited for him to resume, and as he kept silent I spoke softly.

"She lived? She was found? Was it ever explained?"

The doctor cleared his throat.

"Yes—she lived, in a way. And it was explained. I told you there was no bewitchment—only cruel, pitiful, material horror."

It was Sally Compton who had made the discovery. She had ridden over to the Davis cabin the next afternoon to talk over the party with Audrey, and had seen no smoke from the chimney. That was queer. It had turned very warm again, yet Audrey was usually cooking something at that hour. The mules were making hungry-sounding noises in the barn, and there was no sign of old Wolf sunning himself in the accustomed spot by the door.

Altogether, Sally did not like the look of the place, so was very timid and hesitant as she dismounted and knocked. She got no answer, but waited some time before trying the crude door of split logs. The lock, it appeared, was unfastened; and she slowly pushed her way in. Then, perceiving what was there, she reeled back, gasped, and clung to the jamb to preserve her balance.

A terrible odour had welled out as she opened the door, but that was not what had stunned her. It was what she had seen. For within that shadowy cabin monstrous things had happened and three shocking objects remained on the floor to awe and baffle the beholder.

Near the burned-out fireplace was the great dog—purple decay on the skin left bare by mange and old age, and the whole carcass burst by the puffing effect

of rattlesnake poison. It must have been bitten by a veritable legion of the reptiles.

To the right of the door was the axe-hacked remnant of what had been a man—clad in a night-shirt, and with the shattered bulk of a lantern clenched in one hand. *He was totally free from any sign of snake-bite.* Near him lay the ensanguined axe, carelessly discarded.

And wriggling flat on the floor was a loathsome, vacant-eyed thing that had been a woman, but was now only a mute, mad caricature. All that this thing could do was to hiss, and hiss, and hiss.

Both the doctor and I were brushing cold drops from our foreheads by this time. He poured something from a flask on his desk, took a nip, and handed another glass to me. I could only suggest tremulously and stupidly :

" So Walker had only fainted that first time—the screams roused him, and the axe did the rest ? "

" Yes." Dr. McNeill's voice was low. " But he met his death from snakes just the same. It was his fear working in two ways—it made him faint, and it made him fill his wife with the wild stories that caused her to strike out when she thought she saw the snake devil."

I thought for a moment.

" And Audrey—wasn't it queer how the curse of Yig seemed to work itself out on her ? I suppose the impression of hissing snakes had been fairly ground into her."

" Yes. There were lucid spells at first, but they got to be fewer and fewer. Her hair came white at the roots as it grew, and later began to fall out. The skin grew blotchy, and when she died——"

I interrupted with a start.

" *Died ?* Then what was that—that thing downstairs ? "

McNeill spoke gravely.

" *That* is what was born to her three-quarters of a year afterward. There were three more of them—two were even worse—but this is the only one that lived."

MURDER BY PROXY

Richard Stone

"And this," said Vernon Lovell, with a slow smile at his visitor, "this is the haunted room."

Arnold Carew stepped across the threshold and looked round. A charming bedroom, nothing sinister about it, with a delightful view over the sunk water-garden, bordered by an old yew hedge. He looked round a second time, then laughed.

"It doesn't look in the least like one."

Lovell moved one hand deprecatingly.

"No. But it is. A curious old story. One of my ancestors. Can't keep away from the room. Don't know that he has ever hurt anyone, but he comes in on certain nights and sits in that arm-chair over there. I saw him myself once. Apparently he carries on some conversation with an unknown ghost that no one has seen. Anyhow, after a while he gets up and goes off down the secret passage to the hall." He pointed to a dim corner where the faint outline of a door could be seen through the wall-paper.

"The panelling was pulled down by my grandfather for some unknown reason and the door unmasked. We keep it locked, and the exit into the hall is locked too. Don't want people prowling about and perhaps catching their feet and falling down the steps. Awkward place to lift a man through."

Arnold nodded. He crossed to the wall and examined the door. Lovell, behind him, dropped the mask of good fellowship that had been on his

face. For a second his features were distorted, malignant, hideous with hate. Then, as Arnold turned back again, the same friendly smile spread over his lips.

"Not much to see, really," he said. "Let's go down to tea. Marian will be waiting."

"Right." Arnold followed him from the room.

Below, on the terrace, Marian Lovell waited behind the tea-tray. Her eyes lit up with pleasure as the two men came out of the house. Her husband saw the gleam and scowled.

"Well, Arnold, what do you think of our ancestral hall?"

"Absolutely topping!" Arnold answered.

Marian handed him a cup of tea as she continued:

"Isn't it jolly to have got it back again after all these years? Such a piece of luck that it fell into the market just when Vernon had made enough to buy it. It's splendid being here."

"You're lucky, but you deserve to be," returned Arnold. "I think it's a delightful place, thoroughly complete, family ghost and all. I hear there's one that walks quite regularly."

Marian laughed.

"I wonder. I know they say so, but would any old place be really complete without a ghost? I wonder they don't advertise them in the papers—you know, after the description of the magnificent sitting and bed rooms, perhaps even after 'bath, h. and c.,' and 'company's sanitation.'"

"You may laugh," said Vernon, helping himself to cake, "but I've seen the ghost. No, I didn't tell you, Marian," he added at her look of surprise. "I didn't want to alarm you. But I saw it almost the first night I was here. You remember, when I came down alone to see over the place I slept in that room. After one experience I knew that, harmless as it appeared to be,

you would rather sleep somewhere else. So I arranged to have it turned into a spare room."

"Anyone sleep there?" asked Carew carelessly.

"Not so far. As a matter of fact, I'm putting Teddy Winter there to-night. The other rooms aren't quite ready—we're having a few small alterations, a new window cut, a new connecting door blocked up, and so on—and that's the only habitable room in that wing."

"Don't tell him about the ghost," begged Marian. "You know how nervous he is."

"Rats!" laughed her husband. "It wouldn't harm him."

He pulled out his watch.

"I must be going if I'm to meet the five-fifteen. She's generally on time."

Marian waved to him as he went round the corner of the house to start the car. For a moment or two after he had gone there was silence. Marian crumbled cake. Arnold sat still.

"Marian," he said presently. "May I ask you a question?"

She nodded.

"But I won't promise to answer."

"I shall know the answer," he returned with confidence. "Are you happy, married to—him?" He nodded in the direction Lovell had gone.

She lifted her eyes to his. There was a strained look of appeal in them, a piteous begging for mercy. Arnold bit his lip: his shoulders sagged a little.

"You needn't answer, dear," he said gently.

Again there was silence. Marian tried to speak, but the words choked in her throat. She put her hand to her mouth.

"He—he loves me," she whispered at last.

"And you?"

For a second, torture shone in her face.

"I—I wish I could," she wailed. "Oh, Arnold, it's not fair—it's not fair. He loves me utterly—utterly, and I—I can't love him in return. He's so good to me—thinks of nothing but me—he bought this house to please me as much as himself—oh, if only I could love him as he deserves! And now——"

"And now I've come back?" Arnold put the question gently.

She did not reply, but her silence was the more expressive.

Arnold tried to control himself, but his feelings were too much for him.

"Oh, Marian, Marian, why was I such a fool—such a cursed fool? If only I'd spoken before I went abroad—then you might have waited; you wouldn't have believed the reports of my death. Your heart would have told you I was still alive."

"What are we going to do?" She put the question simply, as if sure of his complete ability to answer.

"I'm going away. To-morrow. It's no good, my dear. Later on, perhaps, we can meet again, just as friends. But not yet. I—I didn't realize how hard it was going to be, and when I met your husband in town and he asked me down for a few days, well, I couldn't resist the temptation. I thought—I hoped—to find you well and happy, and that I should go away, if not cured, at least consoled. But now I find it is as hard for you, Marian, I daren't stay—I daren't see you again just yet."

Marian nodded.

"You're right. I—I couldn't endure it; and then Vernon is so terribly jealous—oh, I don't mean of you especially, but of anyone. He—he guesses, I think, in spite of all I can do or say, that I don't really love him—not as he wants to be loved. And so he—he doesn't trust me. Oh, I don't mean it in the vulgar way; I don't mean that he spies on me or suspects

me, but in his own mind he is always watching and questioning—afraid of the security of his possession. He's a very possessive man, you know. And I'm afraid. I've an ever-present fear. His heart, you know. It's weak. Any sudden emotion, any agitation or excitement might—might—— Don't you see, Arnold, how careful I must be? He magnifies things so because he is so jealous."

Arnold nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"All of which points still more strongly to the necessity of my going away at once," he said as Marian got up.

"I must write some notes for the evening post," she murmured. "Will you forgive me if I leave you alone for a little while?"

He made no attempt to detain her or to speak, but stood watching her go through the conservatory, the sun bright on her blue dress, burnishing her golden hair to copper. Then he took out his cigarette case, struck a match, and, after lighting a cigarette, walked along to the far end of the terrace, where a wooden seat placed in an angle commanded a splendid view. There he sat, forgetting to look at the landscape, smoking continually, his eyes staring blankly in front of him.

. . . . . .

Vernon Lovell drove wildly along the station road. He had none too much time to reach the town before the train came in. Deliberately he had allowed himself to be almost late in order to have an excuse to exceed the speed limit and work off some of his frenzy. In the end he arrived ten minutes before the scheduled time, and, a little breathless, pulled up in the yard.

He dragged his cap down over his eyes and sat in the driving-seat, his chest on the wheel, thinking.

"So that's the way the land lies," he muttered. "So that's it. That's the man I've asked to stay in my house. The man Marian loves—the man who loves Marian. In my house!"

He took his pipe from a pocket and bit the end viciously.

"Never again! I'll see there's no repetition of this! The fool! Carrying his heart on his sleeve like a schoolboy! Thought I shouldn't notice, I suppose. And Marian? She doesn't look like that for me. She doesn't smile that way when I come in to tea. She's mine! She's mine! She's my wife—not his. He's had his chance, and the poor fool missed it, but he shan't come poaching on my preserves. I'll see to that."

An idea struck him suddenly, and he drew a deep breath. His eyes brightened and his hand instinctively clenched. For a long minute he sat enthralled, staggered, almost afraid. Then with a huge sigh the tension lessened.

"By gad! What an idea! As safe as houses! We'll be rid of him for ever. 'A most regrettable accident.' That's what they'll call it at the inquest. And Teddy coming to-day! It couldn't be better. They won't have time to compare notes."

The shriek of the engine as the train drew up at the platform roused him. He climbed out of the car and went over to the barrier, just in time to meet a tall, fair man carrying a suitcase in one hand and a bag in the other.

"Hullo! You're a bit behind time. Give me that bag."

"Hullo, Vernon! Good to see you again! That your car?"

"Yes. Jump in. We can store the luggage at the back. It's only a few miles. Pretty country, too, once we're out of the town. All right? Golf clubs in?"

" All aboard," Teddy Winter grinned and settled himself beside his host.

They drove away, and got to the house soon after six. Marian was not visible, and Arnold was still on the terrace. Having satisfied himself that they were not together, Vernon paid no more attention to either, but took Teddy upstairs.

" Here's your room," he said, flinging the door open. " Next to mine. You and I have the best of the views."

" It's awfully jolly." Teddy went over to the window and leant out.

" You've done yourself well at last, old man."

Vernon nodded.

" I waited for it," he said, a little sombrely. " I'm forty-two now. I'd hate to lose it after all this time. I'd hate to lose anything I've won."

There was such concentrated hate in the last few words that Teddy Winter turned in surprise. Vernon forced a smile.

" How've you been keeping ? " he inquired, lounging against the dressing-table. " No more nightmares ? "

This time Teddy flushed uncomfortably.

" 'Fraid so. Much as usual. This blasted shell-shock. Doesn't give me a chance. Whenever I hear a noise in the night—enough to wake me, I mean—I jump and find myself slashing away with that old Sudanese knife I always carry around. One day there'll be an accident, I expect. I've already ruined two wall-papers."

" Why do you still carry the knife ? " inquired Vernon.

Teddy shrugged his shoulders.

" Don't know. Force of habit. Part of the illness. Mascot ! Really don't know. But I can't do without it. Can't sleep at all unless I know it's

under my pillow, ready to my hand in case I'm attacked."

"You're a queer cuss, aren't you ?" Vernon spoke lightly, but there was a touch of exultation in his face. "Well, I'll leave you now. Your hot water will come in a minute. The bathroom's across the passage if you want a shave before dinner and can't wait. Central heating and all that: one good modern thing among a heap of bad ones."

He closed the door behind him when he left and went back to the dining-room. The cocktail mixer and bottles were on the sideboard, and he poured himself out a fairly stiff drink.

"Couldn't be better," he whispered. "One day there'll be an accident. Splendid. Must remember that when the time comes. Poor fellow—hardly sane at times. That blasted war!"

Dinner passed off lightly. Once or twice Marian looked at her husband in surprise. She had seldom seen him in such good spirits, and never when there were other people in the house. As a rule he did not shine in company; his possessive soul preferred to be alone with its gods. But to-night it almost seemed as if he were a boy again, laughing, ragging, amusing. It was the same after dinner in the drawing-room. Marian went to the piano, but the music she had meant to play was taken from her, and for an hour or more she played the accompaniments to student songs and folk songs, while the three men enjoyed themselves mightily.

Once or twice Vernon caught a look of surprise in his wife's eyes. He must not overdo it. But how splendidly everything was working! It was essential to his plan that Arnold should be hilarious. Later on, when Marian had gone to bed, they would adjourn to the smoking-room and have drinks. That would help the good work even further. He knew a mixture that

was bound to excite Arnold. Then Teddy would go to bed ; he was always an earlier bird than most, he slept badly, and wanted the long night's rest. And then—— Behind the others' backs Vernon smiled evilly, gloatingly.

In the mirror Marian caught a glimpse of his face, and her heart sank. What was he planning ? What was at the back of his pretended mirth ? Abruptly, she brought the song to an end, and almost slammed down the lid of the piano.

" Sorry," she said, swinging round on the stool. " But I'm tired. I can't play any more. I must go up to bed."

" I say, I'm awfully sorry," Teddy said quickly. " I'm afraid we've been awfully selfish, keeping you at it like this, but we've been enjoying ourselves so much the time has flown."

" You're not too tired, Marian ? " asked her husband.

" Oh, dear, no. But you know sometimes one suddenly collapses, and one's fingers won't find the notes any more. I've got to the stage now, so I'd better pack up and go off."

" It was awfully good of you to play so long," put in Arnold. " We've had a ripping evening."

" Good night, my dear," Vernon called after her. " We may be a bit late."

He closed the door and stood with his back against it, surveying his guests.

" What about a drink ? " he suggested quietly. " Let's go along to the smoking-room and be cosy."

The other two, nothing loath, followed him. Vernon mixed the drinks judiciously, making his own very weak. He must run no risk of losing his nerve or foiling his own plans.

After half an hour of conviviality Teddy rose to his feet. His eyes were heavy, but he was perfectly sober.

" I'll say good night," he said. " I'm all in. Never any good at staying up late these days. See you in the morning."

" Right you are. You'll find your way all right. Dare say we shan't be long," Vernon replied cheerfully.

When the boy had gone he handed Arnold yet another drink, carefully planned. That should be sufficient to make him reckless, to blunt his senses and tone down his finer shades. Vernon watched him closely as he drank it off, almost at a gulp. Arnold was undeniably cheerful by now, ready for any sort of a rag. Vernon's eyes sought the clock on the wall.

He must not move too soon or Teddy would not be asleep, and then the whole plan would be likely to spoil. Yet if he waited too long Arnold might himself drop off, tired out.

Suddenly, for no obvious reason, Arnold himself gave him an opening.

" Winter's in the haunted room, isn't he ? " he said.

" Yes ; we hadn't anywhere else to put him just now. I say, Arnold "—he leaned forward in his chair and tapped Arnold's arm—" are you game for a rag ? "

Arnold's eyes brightened.

" Sure thing ! Always ! "

" Then why not make the ghost walk for Teddy ? You do it ; give him a shock. He'll think I've doped his drink—made him see double—and we'll rag the life out of him in the morning."

Vernon was talking quickly—almost desperately. He knew his chance depended on his carrying Arnold away with quick words. The matter must not be discussed, and yet it must not look too staged. But there was no time for over-planning.

" It'll be a splendid rag," he urged, filling Arnold's glass again. " You can go in your dressing-gown. I'll give you the key of the door in the wall, and I'll

wait for you at the foot of the hidden stairs. We'll give him a splendid shock. The ghost doesn't hurt anyone—never has. Only goes and sits in the chair for a few minutes and then disappears."

Arnold, rather stupefied, was staring at him.

"What a rag!" he said. "Won't hurt him—of course not. What a rag!"

"Come on!" urged Vernon, still more anxiously. "We'll start now. The best ghosts always walk at midnight, and it's ten to twelve." He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a small key. "Here's the key of the door in the wall. The lock's oiled all right. I tested it the other day as a matter of interest. And I'll meet you below."

Arnold rose to his feet and took the key. He was in no state to consider anything clearly, and lurched a little—a very little—as he walked. Vernon smiled.

They went together to Arnold's bedroom, and then Vernon left him. He could hardly contain his excitement as he ran down in his slippered feet to the hall. For appearance's sake he must wait there for a quarter of an hour or so. Besides, he wanted time to control himself, to hug his horrible jest to himself, to gloat over the downfall of his enemy.

A quarter of an hour should do. He watched the tall grandfather clock on the dais by the window. How slowly the hands moved. Thirteen minutes more. Thirteen! Unlucky number. Unlucky for Arnold, for before they had ticked away he would be dead—with a Sudanese knife through his heart.

Vernon chuckled to himself, and the sound in the still house was startling. The walls were so thick, and the bedrooms in a wing so shut off, that he could hear no sound. He unlocked the secret door and put his head inside the opening. No sound from above. If the plan failed and Teddy did not rise to the

unrehearsed part allotted to him, Arnold would come down the stairs. Then he would have to find another way—but it would be hard to think of anything so simple and so safe.

The clock chimed the quarter-past ; there was no movement at the head of the hidden steps. Vernon waited, hardly daring to believe in his good fortune. When the clock struck the half-hour he smiled and shut the door. Arnold would not come now. And in the morning ! " An accident." How terrible !

Softly, he climbed the stairs and slipped into his own room. Not a murmur disturbed the quiet of the old house.

For the rest of the night Vernon lay in bed, forcing himself to keep still, hardly able to restrain his excitement. Only one thing puzzled him, and that was the complete absence of sound from the haunted room. He concluded that Teddy had collapsed after his attack of shell-shock and was asleep. This, he knew, was the usual procedure, and it was highly probable that he would know nothing of what had passed till the morning. Once he got up and tried to go to the door ; the strain was almost too great, and the temptation to listen at the keyhole of the haunted room troubled him sorely. But saner counsels prevailed. Whatever happened he must not jeopardize his future safety. Arnold was dead, and only he and Arnold knew that there had been any plot regarding the ghost. When the matter came to light he must deny that ; since he knew that Teddy was given to shell-shock nightmares no one would credit him with the callousness of planning such a ghastly practical joke. But Arnold—Arnold who had never met Teddy before—who had been drinking fairly heavily—and was in the mood for a rag ! Surely it was credible that without a word to anyone he had dressed up and gone into Teddy's room in the night ! No one would be blamed

for not warning him of the probable consequences : who could have believed he would do such a thing ?

Vernon chuckled as he lay in bed, watching the first streaks of dawn through the open window.

No need to dispose of the body in this murder ; no one would suggest it had been a murder !

Vernon forced himself to remain controlled and normal. He greeted the servant who brought him his early morning tea, shaved without the smallest slip, dressed, and went downstairs. At the dining-room door he paused for a second. Then he turned the handle and went boldly in.

A sudden rush of blood to the back of his neck, a sudden mist before his eyes, made him catch at the nearest chair. Then with a supreme effort he steadied himself, drew a deep breath, and contrived to murmur a casual greeting.

Sitting at breakfast, already well into his plate of eggs and bacon, was Arnold Carew.

Vernon half walked, half stumbled to a chair, and dropped into it a little heavily.

" Hullo ? Hurt yourself ? " asked Arnold.

" No—no—nothing. I—slipped on the stairs, turned my ankle, and went lame. I'll be all right in a minute."

Never before had he been so glad that Marian had lately taken to breakfasting in her own room.

" Well," Vernon inquired, with an attempt at jocularity, " what about last night ? How did it go off ? "

Arnold looked rather shamefaced.

" To tell you the truth it didn't," he said. " I did come down to tell you, but you weren't in the hall, so I guessed you'd given up waiting and gone off to bed. I—well, I couldn't do it."

Vernon's eyebrows went up a trifle.

" No ? "

" I went up and got into my dressing-gown, as we agreed. You know, you left me up there taking off my coat. Then I went along to Winter's room. The door was locked. I had a hazy idea there was a spare key in my room—I suppose I was really thinking of the key to the door in the wall. Then I thought of coming down and going up through the wall stairs. I was back in my room by that time and feeling pretty awful, so I plunged my face into a basin of cold water. That cleared me up a good deal. You know, you pushed the drinks round rather often last night," he added, with a shamefaced laugh.

" Well, I got sobered up, and then I thought it seemed a rotten trick to play on a boy who's got shell-shock, or was frightfully nervous. So—I—I went to bed, after coming down to see if you were still in the hall."

" I see." Vernon's voice was dull and stale.

All his fine plan had come to nothing. He would never be able to repeat the experiment. Such a splendid chance, and foiled because a young fool locked his door on the inside and the other man hadn't the courage to carry a rag through to the end ! He would be put to the trouble of finding another way

Suddenly Arnold looked up from his plate.

" Winter's rather late, isn't he ? " he suggested.

The question jarred on Vernon's strained nerves.

" Yes. I—I think I'll just run up and see if he's awake."

He fled from the room. Somehow he must escape from that complacent guest who should have been a corpse by now.

Arnold helped himself to marmalade and was just pouring out a second cup of coffee when he heard Vernon calling him.

He went out into the hall and half-way up the stairs.

" Come up, will you ? " Vernon was leaning over the balustrade and beckoning. " I—I think there's something wrong," he cried in an exciting whisper. " I don't want to disturb Marian if I can help it."

His voice held a note of fear. Arnold ran up the remaining stairs two at a time and came to the landing.

" Let me look," he said, and bent down by the door.

" The key's not in the inside and the door's locked," said Vernon, his voice quavering a little. The continuous strain of the morning had begun to get on his nerves.

Arnold hammered, at first gently, then more firmly, on the door, but no answer was forthcoming.

" Can we open it, or must we break it down ? " he asked, turning a strained face to his host.

Vernon was biting his lips in an effort to keep control of himself.

" I've got a master key in my room," he stammered. " I had it made when the house was done up : all the keys kept getting lost. I—I'll get it."

While awaiting Vernon's return, Arnold again knocked on the door, a little louder than before. The noise seemed magnified a hundredfold in the echoing landing. He wondered how it was that Marian remained undisturbed.

A door opened at the far end of the hall. Arnold turned sharply, nervously. Marian was coming swiftly along the landing.

" Arnold, Arnold, what is it ? " she called as she came towards him. " Why all this noise ? Is Teddy——? "

As she spoke Vernon returned and roughly pushed her to one side. With shaking hand he fitted the key into the lock. It turned a little stiffly and then the door swung wide.

He went in first, then reeled back with a smothered cry. Arnold pushed past him and then clutched at

the bed. In that awful moment both forgot Marian's presence.

Stretched on his back on the floor lay Teddy Winter. He was quite dead. A look of indescribable horror was on his face and his brown hair was flecked in places with grey.

Near him was a faded tapestry chair and through the back of it a Sudanese knife had been thrust.

" Vernon ! "

The whispered cry was Marian's as she clung to her husband's arm.

He was still oblivious of her presence.

" The Ghost Chair." He mouthed the words.

" You think . . ." Arnold's voice was thin, dry.

" I don't know. We shall never know," Vernon began, and a shaking like an ague racked his frame. Then he slipped to the floor and lay there, laughing, laughing, in a high, piercing, unbelievably horrible note. He crawled towards the corpse and began to fondle it, laughing all the time.

Arnold caught Marian round the waist, and pushed her out of the room.

" Go—go at once and send for a doctor ! "

Then he turned back to wait by the side of the man whose diabolical scheme had recoiled on his own head.

HAUNTED HANDS

JACK BRADLEY

CITY streets are lonely in the small hours of the morning, and Officer Cardigan, just going off duty, was glad to see the big police car draw up beside him. For one thing it would mean a lift down town which would save a long wait for a surface car. Besides the patrolman at the wheel, the car contained a captain of detectives, a police stenographer, and Dr. Hughes, the stubby, explosive little police surgeon attached to his precinct. Cardigan knew they had been up at the city hospital trying to obtain a confession from " Sniffy " Callers before he died.

" Any luck ? " he called out as the car stopped.

" No," the captain of detectives replied, " he wouldn't say a word. Just laughed at us. But, anyway, we—holy Mike ! What's this coming ? "

Cardigan turned about to follow his gaze. Down the street a man came running. He was barefoot and clad only in pyjamas and he ran as if all the devils of Asia pursued him. Seeing the officers, he gave a hoarse cry and raced toward them. As he drew nearer they could see that he was a tall young man, slight of build, with dead white hair and a face that was a mask of horror and suffering. He stumbled to a halt before Cardigan and thrust out his hands, close together, his throat working convulsively in an effort to speak. The officers were already climbing out of the car.

" Your handcuffs ! " the man gasped when he could speak. " Your handcuffs ! In the name of pity, put

the good, clean steel on these damned things from the Pit! They have killed her! Killed her! Killed the woman I loved! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

He was babbling incoherently, shaking his hands before Cardigan. And Officer Cardigan, who had seen every horror that the metropolis has to show to a policeman, looked down at this man's hands and gasped. They were the hands of a strangler, those hands. Long and lean and dark they were and they looked inhumanly powerful. As Cardigan stared at them the lean cruel fingers were twisting and writhing like a nest of dark snakes.

But the thing that had caused Cardigan to exclaim was the startling impression those hands gave him. In some indefinable way he *knew* those hands were separate entities, knew that they possessed a life of their own apart from the man who wore them! Dazedly he fumbled with his handcuffs.

"Put them on him, Cardigan." It was the cold, unemotional voice of the doctor, and as the handcuffs clicked he shook the man sharply. "Come now! The good, clean steel is on your wrists. You are safe now. Tell us what the trouble is."

The doctor had dealt with madmen before. At the touch of the cold steel, the man had quieted as if from an opiate. He looked down at his manacled hands and nodded dully.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I'll tell you. Come with me."

He climbed into the car and gave an address of an apartment house near by. When they reached the place he led them to an apartment on the ground floor. At the door of the bedroom, he stopped and pointed silently.

On the wildly disordered bed the body of a girl was lying. Her torn and mangled throat showed the manner of her death, but surely no human hands could have mangled a throat as this poor girl's throat

had been mangled. The vertebræ had been snapped like a matchstick and the muscles squeezed apart like a crushed orange. The doctor stared in utter disbelief at the girl's throat and then turned to look at those weird hands, now writhing and straining at the handcuffs. He stared for a moment longer at the torn throat of the girl, then drew a sheet over the poor form and turned from the room.

"Come away," he said to the man. "And now tell us how it happened."

With a strong effort, the man drew his eyes away from the grisly thing on the bed and led the way into the living-room. Each man felt a peculiar sensation of being watched, the sensation that men sometimes feel in the midst of the jungle, an instinct that is handed down from the Elder World. They glanced about and located the source of the feeling at once.

It was a grand piano. A magnificent thing of carved walnut and great powerful lines, its dark grandeur dominated the room, seemed to overshadow it. The man glanced at the thing, then drew his eyes away with a shudder. Drearily waving the others into chairs around a table, he seated himself and began.

"My name is William Tchianski," he said. "I am the adopted son of Wladimir Tchianski, the pianist, and she"—he nodded toward the murdered girl in the next room—"she is my wife, Helen. We were married a week ago."

"Why did you kill her?" interrupted the captain of detectives.

"I did not kill her. I loved her, more than anything else in the world. *They* killed her!"

He laid the dark, shackled hands on the table and stared dully at the writhing, twisting fingers.

"All right," the captain answered patiently, "why did *they* kill her?"

The man smiled gently. "You think I am mad,

don't you ? But I am not. Emotionally torn to pieces, yes, but not mad. And now, gentlemen, if you please, I should like to begin at the beginning and tell the story in my own way. Otherwise, you would not understand me."

He moved the writhing hands beneath the table and in a dull, lifeless monotone began his story.

" I was ten years old when Tchianski took me from the orphanage where I had been left a foundling. Why he selected me instead of one of the other boys at the orphanage, I do not know, but, on the train going home, he told me his reason for adopting a son.

" He was a pianist, he said, the greatest in the world, and he wanted someone to carry on his name and fame when he died. He would give me a home and the very best musical education obtainable, and in return I was to study hard and fit myself to carry on his fame as a pianist when he died. It was a cold matter of business ; from the very first he made it clear that there was no sentiment involved, but to me, freed at last from the rigid discipline of the orphanage, it seemed a godsend of kindness. Eagerly I agreed to work with all my might to carry out my part of the bargain.

" We left the train at Turgot, a small town upstate, and late that afternoon I saw the place that was to be my home until I reached manhood. The house was more like a grim, mediæval castle than a modern home. Built entirely of stone, its age-grimed turrets and walls were almost hidden by the thick, clinging tendrils of the ivy that blanketed them. The building was located in the centre of the estate and the whole was surrounded by a high stone wall.

" Tchianski began at once with my musical education. I learned rapidly enough, but after a time it began to be apparent that my patron had made a bad selection. It was simply not in me to become a

master and seemingly never would be. I could play the music that was put before me, yes. I could strike the notes that were indicated, strike them as accurately as a machine, but the flaming genius that enabled Tchianski to weave a glowing thing of flame and beauty from the cold keys of a piano was in me simply non-existent.

" When Tchianski was finally forced to the conclusion that I could never become the master player that he was, he was wild with rage. Pacing up and down the room, he would listen to my mechanical rendition of a selection and curse savagely. Then he would spring to the piano, shove me aside, and under his fingers the score that I had been playing like an automaton would become a shimmering thing of flame and glory. Often I begged him to give up the hopeless task and take someone who possessed the talent I lacked. But, no, he would not admit failure.

" ' There are ways,' he would mutter. ' Even with a machine like you, there are ways. Ways which those fools out there do not know ! '

" His contemptuous gesture was toward the village, but I knew that it included the whole wide world of sane normal men and women. For, down in the village, I had heard strange tales of this man. Tales of ghostly lights that had flickered through the gloomy old castle in the small hours of the night. Tales of dreadful orgies, of wild, evil chants, faintly heard, whispers of the Black Mass. Dreadful furtive tales that I had been too young to understand and had refused to believe when I grew old enough to understand.

" But as the years rolled by, I was forced to believe them. There were rooms in the house which I was sternly forbidden to enter. At times I was summarily ordered to pack a bag and leave the place for a specified length of time. And on a few very rare occasions I

had caught glimpses of terrible books in Tchianski's study. As I grew into the understanding that comes with manhood, there could no longer be any doubt: this man who had taken me for his own was a worshipper of Satan, a priest of the Prince of Darkness. Oddly enough, I attached little importance to this when I was certain of the truth. It was to me very disgusting and suggestive of insanity, but nothing more.

" So the years rolled by until I reached manhood; then Tchianski died. I was in New York City at the time. There was no warning, merely a telegram commanding me to return at once. When I reached home he was seated in an arm-chair, fully dressed, apparently in the best of health. He gave me no word of greeting, only motioned me to a chair and broke the news without preamble.

" ' William,' he said, ' I am about to die. I have just six hours more to live and I have something to say before I go. No, no, do not interrupt. I know what you are going to say—a doctor and all the rest of the customary rigmarole. But a doctor could not help me. He could not even find anything the matter with me. No, it is to discuss your future, not mine, that I have called you. I want to know what you plan to do with your life when I am gone. I have made my will in your favour and there is plenty for you to finish your musical education under the best masters of Europe, if you will go on. That is what I want to know, if you intend to go on. There never was any pretence of affection between us and there will be none now. I want no sobbing vows. I only want a candid statement of your intentions. That is all.'

" The great, dark head was held coldly erect and those blazing eyes were boring into my brain, searching out every hidden corner.

" ' You know the answer, sir,' I told him. ' When

you took me from that orphanage, we made a certain bargain : that in exchange for your care of me, I was to study and fit myself to carry on your name as a pianist when you died. Every day of my life since that time, I have done my best to carry out my part of that bargain, and if you are really near to death, you can rest assured that I shall do my best in the future as I have in the past. But you know that I have no talent for music and I cannot promise success. I can only promise to do my best.'

" Tchianski leaned forward in his chair and stared tensely into my eyes for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was very low and tense.

" ' Listen to me, William. You have heard strange tales of me down there in the village. Tales of dread rituals. Tales of a power that ordinary men do not possess. Tales that you may or may not have believed. *But those tales are true, William !* I do possess those powers and I know too much to be balked of my plans by what those fools call death. Alone, you would never be anything but an automaton, but you will not be alone. Oh, no, you will not be alone. Far from it. Listen to me, boy !

" ' You know my wishes. Obey them and I will send these hands of mine back from the grave to play for you. *Refuse, and by the power of the Pit I will send these same hands back from the grave to strangle you !* '

" He lifted his hands—*these* hands, gentlemen—and shook them before my eyes. For months they haunted me. Those dark, cruel hands, with their lean, writhing fingers.

" When I entered his study the next morning, I found him dead. He was seated in his arm-chair, sternly erect, gazing straight ahead as one who waits the coming of an expected messenger. All of his books and other objects dealing with Satanism had been destroyed, and in a neat pile at his side lay all

of his business papers, including his will, ready for me. On the top of the pile lay a paper containing the directions for his burial. To my surprise, there was nothing particularly objectionable in these directions. He merely stated that 'as certain events made it impossible for him to be buried by members of his own faith, he was to be buried without aid of clergy and with as little publicity as possible.'

"When his attorney called the next day to help me straighten out his affairs, I learned with a shock that it would be utterly impossible for me to carry out his plans as I had meant to do; for the fortune he left me consisted of mining stock as worthless as so much waste paper. Like many men of genius, he had no more business acumen than a child. I had to sell the house and furniture to meet his debts and pay the funeral expenses. When it was over, I had little more than the clothes upon my back with which to face the world. And his piano. I kept that, of course.

"There was only one thing to do. Go to work at once and, when I had sufficient money saved, to take up my musical studies again, as he had wished. Almost immediately I obtained a position with the company of which I am now an officer. I loved the work and plunged into it wholeheartedly. Twelve and sixteen hours a day I was working, and I was making wonderful progress. But there was no time for anything but work, and for two years his piano sat there untouched.

"And then I met Helen."

The man paused wearily, and Cardigan held a glass of water to his lips. The man drank and then went on with his story, speaking in the same dull, lifeless monotone.

"I had been sent by my firm to show her some property about which she had inquired, and it was, with me, a case of love at first sight. I was completely

captivated by this lovely, gentle girl, and I was soon calling upon her regularly. She was a concert pianist, and already she was beginning to make a name for herself. Gradually I told her something of my early life. I did not tell her of my patron's Satan-worship nor of his gruesome dying threat, but I did tell her of how he had taken me from an orphanage and how I expected to take up the study of music as soon as I had money enough. When I told her of Tchianski's piano and how it had sat there untouched for two years, she expressed a wish to see the instrument, and one day, at the termination of a shopping tour, I took her to my apartment to see the piano of the great Tchianski.

" That was less than a month ago, but it seems a thousand years. We were so happy, then, like two laughing children, as I took her hand and led her up to that diabolical piano. She seated herself and played a selection she had brought with her. As her dainty fingers rippled up and down the keyboard, that damnable thing seemed to stir itself like some slimy dragon slowly coming to life. I could *feel* the thing, just as you gentlemen can, no doubt, feel it now.

" But Helen seemed to notice nothing unusual. Or perhaps she was too much absorbed in the music she was playing—a new opera, a prison song—and under her trained fingers the music swelled up into a sobbing song of heartbreak and passion. When she had finished she arose and laughingly insisted that it was my turn now.

" Just why I seated myself at the piano, I do not know. Certainly I should never, in my normal state, have made myself ridiculous by attempting that complicated score after two years without practice. But something seemed to draw me toward that unholy piano. Like a man in a daze I seated myself and aimlessly dropped my hands on the keyboard.

" Then something in me snapped and I was playing ; or rather my hands were playing, for I was conscious of not one note of that music ! I was staring dully at the score and it registered in my brain as nothing more than a white blur. Like a man in a trance, I sat there and my fingers were flying back and forth across the keyboard like demons of hell, suddenly released.

" Beneath those flying fingers the music rose up and up, into a wailing thing of glory. Helen had played the score with all the consummate skill of an artist, but her rendition had been pale and colourless beside this mad thing that was being woven beneath my fingers.

" When I had finished, there were tears in Helen's eyes, and she poured out a flood of eager questions—questions to which I had no answer, for I was as puzzled as she. Not for a moment would I believe that my patron had really been able to keep his promise to send his hands back from the grave for me ; that savoured too much of mediæval superstition. Yet I could think of no other reasonable explanation. I made some fumbling answer to Helen's questions and took her home as soon as possible.

" I had no sleep that night—had I but known it, that night was the forerunner of so many other nights when I was not to sleep—but I did decide upon the only sensible course to be taken. I would tell Helen the things I had not told her before, and together we would find a solution to the mystery if there was one to be found.

" When I called upon Helen the next evening, I told her the things I had not cared to mention before. I told her of my patron's Satan-worship and of the gruesome threat he had made before dying. Then I told her of how I had played that music, the evening before, without being conscious of a note of it.

" When I had finished my story she was as puzzled as I. Like myself, she would not believe that Tchianski actually possessed the power to do the thing he had threatened, but, like myself, she could think of no other explanation of what had happened. The best that she could do was to suggest that I experiment by playing the piano as much as possible and trust to time to solve the mystery.

" And so began what was surely the strangest test ever undertaken by two people. Night after night I sat before that damnable piano and played while Helen sat enraptured, listening to the wild glories that my fingers evoked without direction from my mind. I tried to play upon other pianos and found that upon them my hands would not play with the same ease.

" So it was that each night I came back to that Satanic piano and Helen sat, tense, listening to those glorious, hell-born symphonies. Night after night I played, and day after day my contacts with the sane, normal people of the business world seemed more and more like a dream. Only the night-time seemed real, when I could sit before that piano and listen to my hands weave those crashing symphonies from the Pit. Then, so suddenly that it was like a crashing blow to a man stumbling through a dark room, I discovered the truth !

" From the first night at the piano, it had seemed to me that my hands were growing longer and darker. I had thought it merely a hallucination born of the emotional stress under which I was labouring, and it was more to quiet my own fears than in any real question that I made a careful measurement of them. When I measured them again, my brain sickened in horror. There could be no doubting the cold figures before me. My hands were rapidly growing longer and already they were much darker.

" That night when I seated myself at the piano I

received the final confirmation, if any had been needed. No sooner was I seated than my hands fairly leaped upon the keys. But it was no mere riot of song that was being played by those hands now. It was a message that was being told to me by the singing keys, a message that I could understand as plainly as the spoken word—the voice of the Satanist, Tchianski, exulting that at last I knew, demanding that I yield my will to his and become his creature.

" If I would obey—the singing keys whispered to me a tale of stately glory—of fame—the adulation of beautiful women—gold—a power that was greater than that of man—all these things would be mine if I would obey.

" If I refused—the music changed its joyous tempo. It breathed terrible threats—lewd hints of forgotten arts—of things that sane men should never know. There were secrets, the singing keys whispered, dread secrets of the Pit, and if a man were willing to pay the price for those secrets, he could reach back—even through the Veil, he could reach back—to strike at those who refused to obey his will.

" I remember screaming and straining to jerk my hands away from the keyboard—straining with all my might as they clung to the keys like quicksand. Then everything went black before me. For the first time in my life, I had fainted.

" When I had regained consciousness, Helen was bending over me frantic with fear, terrified as much by that unholy music as by my fainting. For while she had not understood as clearly as I the message those keys had whispered, she had understood their evil import.

" When I told Helen that there could no longer be any doubt that Tchianski had been able to keep his promise—that the hands upon my wrists were his, not mine—she nodded in agreement.

" ' Yes, I have really been sure of it for days now, and so have you, I am sure. And there is only one thing to do. You must never touch a piano again, Billy. You could be the greatest pianist in the world, but it would be at the price of your soul and that is a price too great to pay. No matter what promise you made to him, you can break it with honour when your soul is the price of its fulfilment. Once you have been away from the piano for a while, he will lose whatever hold he has upon you. Of that I am sure.'

" ' Yes,' I replied, ' I feel that I can honourably break my promise after this. And I am sure that he knows our decision. But if he is here, listening to us, it is only just that I should go to the piano one more time to hear his final word. And after to-night, I shall never touch a piano again. Somehow, I hope that he will understand and forgive me.'

" With Helen's anxious eyes upon me, I walked to the piano and seated myself. The instant that I touched the keys there was a wild jangle of sound from the piano. Then the dark hands were racing up and down the keys like mad beasts, pouring out a wild, incoherent scream of hate ! hate ! hate !

" Helen shrieked and leaped to my side, trying to tear my hands from the keyboard. I added my strength to hers, but we were as helpless as two children in the grip of a giant. On and on that mad song of hate played, gradually changing its tone. It was lower now, low and tense like the snarl of a cornered beast. Over and over the keys whispered that snarling tale of a hate that would never die, never relent, until its victim had been drawn through the Veil to it. Lower and lower the music sank until it dared to whisper that even after death there would be a ghastly vengeance out there in the dark. Suddenly I realized with a cry of horror that this devil's tale of hate and vengeance was not for me alone—that it

was directed at the woman I loved as much as at myself. For the second time that evening, I fainted.

" This time, when I regained consciousness, there was no Helen bending over me. She, too, had understood that low, snarling threat and had fainted. When I saw her pale, lovely face before me and realized the danger she had faced with me, I gave silent thanks that I had not yet declared my love. At least I could spare her. I would at once drop out of her life, and with me would go, I thought, the menace of this thing from the Pit.

" When I had brought her back to consciousness, I told her of my decision. And then I learned the full depths of a gentle woman's love.

" She looked at me tenderly for a moment then. ' You've loved me for a long time, now, haven't you, Billy ? ' she asked.

" There was no blush on her face as she spoke, no false modesty of drooping head, only a great, tender love. I could only nod, dumbly.

" ' I know,' she continued. ' I have known for a long time, now. And I've loved you even longer. Don't you see, beloved, that no matter what he can do to us it will not be so hard to bear as separation would be ? No, Billy, we will fight this thing together, and if he wins here, we will go out there in the dark to face him—still together. *And in the end we will win, beloved, for love is the greatest power in the universe. No matter what weapons he has, they will not overcome such love as ours.*'

" We sat there for a long time, huddled in each other's arms, like two frightened children, comforting each other, and then I took her home.

" When I returned home I was almost calm, and happier than I had been for days. No matter what horror was in store for me, I should not have to face it alone. There was a great flood of love in my heart

for this gentle, loving girl who was facing death and worse than death for love of me, and the memory of her warm lips on mine was like a benediction. For the first time in many weary nights, I fell asleep as soon as I retired.

" I do not know how long I slept, but suddenly I was aware that my bedroom was filled with a clammy cold, a chill draught that seemed to bear the stench of the charnel-house. Above my head hovered a shadow that was dimly visible as being darker than the rest of the room. And from the shadow glared the burning eyes of Tchianski, the Satanist ! Closer and closer to me came the dreadful eyes, and now I could see the cruel strangler hands below them. Then a voice sounded, a voice that was low and tense—like that music I had played a few hours ago.

" ' Since you have broken your vow, William, I have returned to keep mine.'

" Steadily the cruel hands moved closer to my throat, closer and yet closer as I desperately struggled to rise and throw myself out of their path. It was like that phenomenon known as a dream within a dream, where a sleeper in the throes of a horrible nightmare struggles to awaken himself.

" Mad with horror, I watched—I felt—those damnable hands creep up my chest—up—up, until I felt them fasten about my throat, felt my breath cut off and dimly felt my own desperate struggle to throw off those strangling hands. It seemed that I went through long æons of torture before I awoke—to find my hands clutched about my throat in a strangling hold that left great blue marks upon my throat for days. My hands ! *His* hands !

" Of what followed, I have no clear recollection. I have fragmentary memories of running through the streets, babbling incoherent things as I ran. Somehow, I found myself battering at the door of Helen's

apartment, and I can remember her terrified scream when she opened the door and saw me, but the rest of the night was only a nightmare memory of crouching in her arms trying to ward off the memory of those dreadful hands. When morning came she brought a mirror to me. Overnight, my hair had turned white and my face was lined with the horror I had experienced.

" ' And now,' she said quietly, ' we are going to be married at once. Never again, beloved, will you face those horror-filled nights alone. Always, hereafter, you will have me by your side to help you in this dreadful fight.'

" And I yielded. There is no excuse I can offer for what I did. At first, of course, I begged her to leave me to face the thing alone. I even told her that I would leave the city at once in order to move the danger away from her. But in the end, I yielded. For one thing, I was sure that she was marked for vengeance as well as I, by that thing from the Pit ; that, even if I fled, she would eventually face it, and it were better that we face it together. But it was more than a mere matter of reasoning. It was her calm and oft-reiterated statement that ' no matter what he can do to us, it will not be so hard to bear as separation.' Love like ours does not often come to men. That day we slipped over into Connecticut and were quietly married. She packed a few things in a bag and we came to my apartment to live."

The man shifted warily in his chair. Cardigan brought him another glass of water. Then he went on, speaking more rapidly as if anxious to be done with his story.

" That was a week ago, gentlemen. A week, but it seems like a lifetime in hell. A week without sleep, gentlemen. Do you know what it means to live for a week without the blessed release of sleep ? To fight

with all your might against sleep, knowing that it would bring death? Time and again I would drift into slumber and awake to find Helen tugging desperately at a pair of dark hands that were at my throat —hands that were hands from the Pit though they were attached to my wrists. Outside, on the street, people were passing—sane, normal people going about the prosy, everyday round of life, and inside we crouched in each other's arms like two children afraid of the dark.

"It will, no doubt, seem strange to you that we did nothing but cower there and wait—that we availed ourselves of none of the aids of modern civilization. But, somehow, we knew that it would be useless, that nothing could be done unless we could prove our will stronger than his. Oh, yes, we talked of various things. Travel. A doctor. But we knew that it would only mean death in some madhouse, and death was not the worst thing we feared now. Already we were beginning to plan our real fight—our fight against him out there in the dark, when we had passed through the Veil.

"And so the week dragged slowly through, with its nights of horror and its days of dreadful waiting. Yesterday I received a letter from the management of the Turgot Cemetery where Tchianski was buried. The cemetery is being moved to make way for a dam, and the letter was to notify me that his grave would be opened to-day. It started a new train of thought in my mind. Perhaps if I went there and obtained his remains and burned them to ashes, it would help in our fight against him. As I thought the matter over, I grew almost hopeful. Perhaps I could even snatch an hour or so of sleep while she watched over me.

"And when I awoke again I was seated at the piano and playing!

" Merciful God ! If I could only forget that Song of the Pit that those damned hands were playing ! It was a wild pæan of—triumph ! A devil's jubilee, a dirge played in utter, joyous syncopation. A chant of all the demons of hell as they chanted their devilish tales in my ears. And over it all *his* voice shouting a hellish song of victory in my suddenly comprehending ears ! God ! how his wild laughter rang out under those flying fingers ! How gleefully the singing keys chuckled and whispered their grisly tale to me—of how those evil hands had waited—waited patiently until she had fallen asleep and then had crept up to her soft throat.

" On and on that wild song of triumph played, whispering its ghastly tale to me, hour after hour until, numb with exhaustion, I managed to tear myself away from the piano. I did not look at her. I knew only too well what had happened. I rushed out into the street, brought you gentlemen here, and the rest you know.

" I suppose you will want to place me under arrest, now, charge me with murder and go through with all the formality of the law. Do so, if you wish. It matters very little what you do with me. The end is only a matter of a few hours at best. Very soon, now, I must sleep. And when I sleep again, he will conquer. That is one of the things he told me through that hellish music last night.

" And I am anxious to have it over with, to go to her out there in the dark and stand beside her when she faces him and his followers from the Pit. And, somehow, I *know* that, out there, we shall win. She said that love is the greatest power in the universe—that no power of hell could overcome a love like ours. And I believe ! Yes, yes, I am quite anxious to have it over with and go to her out there where she is facing him."

The man broke off and stared almost placidly into the grey dawn that was breaking through the windows. The captain of detectives blew his nose quite ostentatiously when he produced his handkerchief, but Cardigan and the other patrolman were frankly wiping their eyes.

"You poor devil!" It was the doctor who spoke. "And all the time you never thought of the one simple thing that would have saved you. Ropes, man! And that's what we'll do with you now. Down at the station house we'll tie your hands to a bunk—even chain them if it will make you feel any better—and you can sleep for a week if you like. After that, you'll have to go through a trial, of course, but it will be very brief. A mere formality. In next to no time you'll be out of it and in a comfortable sanatorium where you can receive treatment. And there's always hope, young man, always hope. Can't make any promises, of course—unusually severe case of hallucinations, induced by severe mental shock—but there's always hope. Yes, certainly there's always hope."

He cleared his throat briskly and fingered the leaves of his notebook. The man shook his head gently.

"You simply don't know him. You could set these hands into a concrete wall and still they would do his bidding. If—if you had heard them playing a few hours ago, you would understand. . . ."

It was quite early the next afternoon when Dr. Hughes entered the station house—much earlier than his round of duties called for. Cardigan was bending over a newspaper as he entered.

"Well, Cardigan," the doctor asked, "how is our young man to-day?"

Cardigan looked up from the newspaper with bewilderment written large upon his face.

"Well—'tis a strange thing that has happened,

Doctor. The lad is dead. You remember how we handcuffed his hands to the sides of his bunk, and, besides that, set that young rookie to watch beside him? Well, the rookie reports that about ten o'clock he got up and went to the end of the cell corridor for a drink of water. He swears that he was not gone more than three and a half or four minutes at the most, but when he got back, the lad was strangled to death. And, Holy Mother, but you ought to see the lad's throat, sir! It's mangled worse than *hers*, sir. And "—Cardigan cleared his throat nervously—" and —well, the rookie *says*, sir, that the lad's hands were still moving although the lad himself was lying perfectly still. 'Tis a strange business, indeed, Doctor, and would you be having a look at this, sir?"

He handed the doctor the newspaper he had been reading and pointed to a small item at the bottom of the page. It was a single paragraph and was dated the day before:

> TURGOT, N.Y., August 11, 19—. A curious matter occurred here, to-day, where the old Turgot cemetery is being moved to make way for the new dam. One of the graves opened was that of Wladimir Tchianski, one of the greatest pianists of his day. His skeleton was found to be in perfect condition except for the bones of the hands. From the wrists down, the bones of both hands were missing and in their place was a peculiar green slime which emitted a powerful stench when the grave was opened. Local authorities think it the result of some little-known disease and are attempting to analyse the green slime. So far their efforts have met with no success.

THE FLAME FIEND

N. J. O'NEAIL

THANKS, Archer, I'll be glad to join you, but with just one stipulation—and it must seem an insane one ; that you don't light a fire in that huge fire-place of yours.

No, I'm not joking. Call it an absurd whim, if you choose ; though God knows it's not that, either ; I was never more serious in my life. I know it's a cool evening, with a wind blowing, that bites like sin itself ; but I'd rather face a lifetime in the eternal ice at the Pole, than—well, no matter about that.

It isn't that I've any Eskimo complex ; I crave warmth, and shrink from cold, more than the average man. But—well, as I said, there's no use trying to explain it. I could, of course, but you wouldn't believe me ; you'd be a fool if you did.

Set it down to pyrophobia, if you like. An obsession ? Well, yes, perhaps. But you needn't look at me like that ; there's nothing psychopathic about it. My mind's as sound as it ever was, and as normal ; and that's a wonder, perhaps, after—oh, damn it, Archer, on second thought I'd better not go ; I'd only have you studying me all evening as if I were an object lesson in idiosyncrasies. Just forget that I ever mentioned any such thing.

No, it's no use trying to explain ; I never have, yet. I'd sooner be classed as just plain eccentric than as a combination of liar, lunatic, and hophead. No, you might not, old man, but I couldn't ask even you to believe—well, damn it, why not, after all ? Now that

you've got my thoughts running through that channel of hell again, it might ease my mind—as I said, you won't believe me ; but at least you won't laugh at me.

Besides, it should be of particular interest to you, since it has a bearing on poor old Sharples and his fate. You remember him, of course, with his deep-sunken, brooding eyes, gleaming above his big beak of a nose, and his greying, reddish hair, straggling awry from under that rum old skull-cap ? Why, of course ; we were in his class in applied psychology together. Can't you still see him there on the platform, dinning into our adolescent ears the supremacy of mind over matter ?

He dabbled, of course, in all kinds of occult research ; " dabbled " isn't the word, either, for it was the absorbing passion of his life. I don't suppose there have been a dozen men in the last century who had delved so deeply into black letter lore. It was rumours about some of his experiments, you remember, that finally led to his being cropped from the faculty.

He confided to me, once, that one of his favourite theories was that of materialization. I don't mean any spiritualist séance hokum, with ectoplasm and table-tapping and spirit messages ; but the power of the human mind, by thought-concentration, to summon up in tangible, physical form objects from other worlds, wherever and whatever those other worlds may be.

None of us, of course, took much stock in his hobbies at that time ; I wish to God I had, for that might have saved me—but I'm rather running ahead of myself.

After the old chap left the university, you remember, he buried himself in an old hunting-lodge up in the Rockies, and there kept on with his researches. He wrote me, once, about two years ago ; a letter as curt and enigmatic as most of his lectures, but hinting that

he was on the verge of triumph in some weird experiment, and inviting me to visit him whenever I could find the time.

It was just a couple of weeks later that we read of the poor old beggar's uncanny death; you, of course, were abroad at the time, and may not have heard many of the details. A couple of hunters found his body stretched on the floor of his cabin, his head and throat incredibly mangled. It might have been the work of a puma or some other giant cat, so far as appearances went; but it couldn't have been, for the door and every window of the lodge were locked.

In fact, there was no end of mystery and to-do about it, for weeks. The thing was so inexplicable that the hunters who had found him were under suspicion, for a time; but their records were clean, and there was no possible motive for murder, so they were released, and the case lapsed into the long list of unsolved enigmas.

Three months or so later, a business trip took me to the coast, and set me thinking once more of Sharples. I had always had a deep admiration for the old chap, and I believe that in his gruff way he was fond of me, too. It hurt me to think that I hadn't had a chance of accepting his invitation to visit him; and then the fancy seized me to pay a sort of posthumous call; at any rate, to visit the spot where he had met his end.

It lay on a God-forsaken slope in the Rockies, twenty miles from the nearest settlement; and I spent the better part of a day scrambling up the rocky incline and cutting my way through festering undergrowth that twined, snake-like, round my legs.

It was just growing dusk when I finally reached the lodge, a solitary log structure, bathed in a blood-red glow from the setting sun, as I approached it. A single, dying pine tree stood like a mournful sentinel beside the building; for the rest, the landscape was

a boulder-strewn waste, with an occasional clump of bushes in the distance.

The place would have been gloomy enough, even at midday; and I give you my word that in the gathering shadows I felt a distinct physical chill as I opened the door of the lodge.

The building consisted of three rooms; a large rectangular living-room, with a tiny bedroom and a kitchen opening off it, on the left. A huge stone fireplace, fully twelve feet wide, and towering to the ceiling, was built into the right-hand wall.

The furniture, of the simplest, had been left apparently just as it was during Sharples' lifetime. There was a large, plain wooden table, piled high with dog-eared volumes, almost any one of which would have been evidence enough to send the old man to the stake, a few centuries ago; an arm-chair, a few other chairs, and a battered trunk; and every item in the collection seemed to be enveloped in an almost tangible aura of sinister isolation.

The other rooms were furnished in just as Spartan style. A tousled cot, a single chair and a shelf piled high with more books were all that were to be seen in the bedroom; in the kitchen, a few granite dishes, cooking-utensils, and a small shelf, piled with canned foods.

By now, night had fallen in earnest, and I found the cabin growing momentarily chillier, both physically and mentally. And it didn't make matters any the more cheerfu lwhen, playing my electric torch over the floor, I perceived several dark blotches in front of the fireplace; reminders of the unexplained tragedy those walls had witnessed.

I had brought food with me, prepared for an overnight stay in the cabin, but at that moment the prospect was far from appealing to me. However, I wasn't anxious to tackle that twenty-mile trek back to

the village, by dark ; and then, a sudden savage patter of rain on the roof helped me make up my mind. The cabin would be my shelter, until dawn, at least.

I found a pile of pine knots beside the cabin, and with an armful of these soon had a fire blazing, which helped to dispel the gloom. As I munched my solitary meal, the rain kept up its tattoo on the roof, and several vicious lightning flashes tore a passage through the air, just outside the window ; but I preferred even the storm's accompaniment to the tomb-like stillness that had preceded it.

After supper, with the aid of a kerosene lamp that I discovered in the kitchen, I started on a more thorough inspection of the place, and my heart was touched at the evidences of the hermit-like life poor old Sharples must have led, to say nothing of the unexplained gruesomeness of his death.

I could hardly hope to find anything that would shed any light on that, of course, since the cabin had been thoroughly searched at the time ; so I turned to an examination of the old man's books.

I doubt if anywhere else on this continent you could have found such a library of occult lore, of sorcery and necromancy from the days of earliest Egypt down to twentieth-century psychic research. As the tempest's fury swelled, outside, I turned the pages of one cabalistic volume after another. They weren't the sort of thing to be fathomed at a glance ; but the little that I gathered from them opened up vistas of things unseen and unthinkable, that appalled me.

I tell you, Archer, there are not only more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, but there are far more in hell, too ; for in those printed pages I saw things hinted at, that could only emanate from the deepest hell of hells. And as for what followed——

Finally, between the pages of one incredible tome,

a translation from the ancient Egyptian, I fell upon something of a far deeper personal interest—a pad of scribbling-paper, covered with a familiar scrawl—the handwriting of old Sharples himself, as cryptic a hieroglyph as any ever inscribed on the oldest pyramids.

It appeared to be a diary, in which he had recorded his progress with experiments of some sort, but so laconically that I could gather little from them. The last entry was dated—as nearly as I could recall—four or five days before the finding of his body.

" Threshold of triumph at last," it read. " To-night —final proof . . . danger if control falters . . . formula of Sothmi should suffice."

Then I glanced at the book in which I had found the notes. From the page at which it was open, I read :

> Notable among such elementals is the salamander, the spirit of fire. This being, Sothmi describes as having the aspect of a giant lizard, with protruding fangs and claws . . .

At that moment the light of the kerosene lamp flickered and vanished, leaving the room illuminated only by the dancing rays of the fire. I saw that the lamp was empty ; so I heaped another armful of pine knots on the blaze, and drew the arm-chair up closer to it.

I had brought the book with me, but as a particularly vivid flash of lightning stabbed the darkness outside, and a clap of thunder snarled in its wake, I hesitated to read on. My mind and feet seemed to be treading a dangerous labyrinth, whose tortuous windings might lead at least to madness, if not to some abyss of hell.

As the fire crackled, and the flames leaped hungrily ever higher toward the ceiling, I gazed into their

glowing depths. Strange, I thought, that my mind should so focus on the fire when a moment before I had been reading of the mythical spirit of fire. But, after all, was it so strange ?

That uncanny snatch of description was running through my mind—" the aspect of a giant lizard, with protruding fangs and claws "—and I tried, blind fool that I was, to conjure up a mental image of such a being.

Of course, I told myself, it was preposterous to sit in the twentieth century of Christian civilization and dream of a creature of five-thousand-year-old fable. And yet, those words obtruded still on every cell of my brain—" the aspect of a giant lizard, with protruding fangs and claws."

By now, I was staring into the fire with the fixed fascination of a crystal-gazer. There's a hypnotic force about a blazing flame, Archer ; small wonder, I reflected, that primitive races had either deified it, or at least imbued it with a personal spirit—the salamander.

As I gazed into the fire, an illusion gradually grew upon me that my brain was whirling round and round in a circle, at the centre of which crouched the figure the book had described—" a giant lizard, with protruding fangs and claws. . . ."

I grant you, Archer, that that was pure illusion ; auto-hypnosis, if you will. But what followed wasn't.

For suddenly, above the roar of the storm outside, and the crackling of the fire—which had now grown so hot that I had moved my chair back from it—I heard a sound which turned me cold with dread, as no sound has ever done before or since.

It was a peculiar, sibilant hiss, which came to my ears as clearly as though all else had been dead silence. It wasn't unlike the hiss of an angry cobra, if you've ever heard that none-too-pleasant sound ; but it

possessed, too, some incredible, unearthly quality which set my head reeling with involuntary nausea.

And, above all, it appeared to come from the very centre of the fire.

For a moment I looked backward toward the door, and pondered the possibility of breaking away and spending the night even in the open, in that downpour of rain, if necessary. But then I got a tighter grip on my nerves; and, trying to convince myself against my own knowledge, that it was all imagination, I turned to face the fire once more.

As I did so, that diabolical hiss came once more, followed by a peculiar, stertorous grunting; and then, in the very heart of the flame, I beheld something gradually assuming visible form.

First it appeared to be a mist, or vapour; and then, out of the mist, two dreadful green spots glowed, like searchlights playing from the very bowels of hell. And then the mist seemed to settle into a solid outline —such an outline that I screamed aloud in horror of soul, and sprang from my chair, and would have burst out into the night, but in a twinkling the ungodly thing had leaped straight from the heart of the flame and gripped me by the throat.

Archer, this is the living truth, I swear it, as I am a living man this moment. I haven't words—human tongue hasn't power—to describe adequately that foul spawn of Satan that had materialized from thin air before my very eyes.

The description I had just read—" a giant lizard, with protruding fangs and claws "—fitted it, as far as it went, but it didn't begin to picture the soul-sickening repulsiveness of the object.

It wasn't unlike a Gila monster in general appearance, if you can conceive of a Gila monster five feet in length, with a slimy black body and ghastly horned head, eyes that glowed alternately red and green,

fang-like teeth projecting from a satanically slavering mouth, and forelegs with claws like those of an eagle.

And this unutterable horror was the Thing that had torn the life from poor old Sharples' body. I realized that, in the same twinkling of an eye that it had catapulted itself upon me.

I was so unnerved in soul and body that a breath of wind could almost have floored me, and I collapsed like a rag beneath the spring of the monster. Then, as I found myself flat on the floor, with its ruthless talons sinking into my throat, and its foul face pressed close to mine, its breath searing me like a blast from hell, despair gave me new strength.

I don't know whether old Sharples was there in spirit, aiding me in my battle against that atrocity from the shades, or not, but I dug both hands into the creature's throat, and twined its legs about its flopping body, with the grip of a boa-constrictor.

Even in that hectic accumulation of horror upon horror, I experienced a fresh twinge of nausea to find that although the Thing had emerged from the heart of the flame, its body was as icy cold as though fresh from a tomb.

Old Dante himself, Archer, could scarcely have painted in one-tenth of its ghastliness a word-picture of the struggle there in that lonely cabin, with thunder, lightning and rain outside lending a fitting accompaniment.

It seemed like hours—in reality it can't have been five minutes, for no human being could have lived so long in such unequal combat—that I tossed and grappled with that awful Thing. I felt, in my heart of hearts, that the struggle was vain ; that I couldn't hope to kill, or even to overcome, this Thing which wasn't of earth. But still, with the frenzy of despair, I tore at its neck and kicked at its pulpy body, as those savage talons bit into my shoulders and that unspeak-

able mouth, with its protruding fangs, hovered close above mine.

And then the bestial jaws opened wider, and I knew the end was at hand, and I prayed to God as I've never prayed before, that it might come with merciful quickness.

And it did. There was a sudden, blinding flash, and then a crumbling, rattling, roaring sound as though the universe itself were falling in ruins; something crashed on my head, and then—oblivion.

You probably don't believe in miracles, Archer, but I do, ever since that night. I'm firmly convinced that it is due to Divine intervention that I'm alive to-day.

When the mists lifted from my brain, I lay in a pile of stone wreckage on the floor of the cabin, racked with agony in every limb. My first conscious thought was of that fiend from the shades; then, as I raised my head slowly, to look for it, I realized that it had vanished, and that the blessed light of day was streaming in the windows.

No, no, Archer, it wasn't a dream. Here—just a minute until I loosen my collar; you'll notice that I wear it particularly high. Do you see those scars on my throat? No dream could have put them there. If those unholy claws had gone a quarter of an inch farther, they'd have torn my jugular vein open.

Well, explanations are always an anti-climax, so I'll cut mine as short as possible, combining what I observed there and what I learned later, from a closer study of Sharples' books.

The thing that had killed Sharples, and come within an ace of doing the same to me, Archer—you won't believe it, I know—was, literally, a salamander, one of those elemental beings which form a connecting link between this world and some world beyond.

An elemental, of course, is a disembodied thing, only capable of action if it can get control of a physical

body as an instrument. And old Sharples had created such an instrument for this creature.

Those diabolical old volumes of his contained, among many secrets, the ritual to be followed in the summoning of an elemental in material form. The theory was that by sheer concentration of will-power, an adept, or sorcerer—call him what you will—could create a material body or shell for such a spirit.

In the case of the salamander, there were two essentials: first, the concentration of the mind, and secondly, a strong, hot fire—the native element of the creature. And old Sharples had succeeded, as he had dreamed of doing, in actually incarnating the monster which had cost him his life.

The materialization was a limited one, as all such materializations are, thank God; limited as to place and time. The salamander was fettered, you might say, to that spot; it could move only a few feet from the flames in which it had sprung into being, and it dematerialized once more, the moment the flames died.

But once summoned into actual existence, probably for the first time in a score of centuries, the Thing was still chained, unseen, at that spot; and hence, far less concentration of thought was necessary to summon it a second time. The fire, and the involuntary focusing of my mind on what I had read, were sufficient.

Then came the miracle that saved me, at the moment when it seemed that scarcely even a miracle could intervene.

In that instant when that hell-born creature's fangs were at the point of meeting in my throat, a lightning bolt had struck the stone chimney of the cabin, and had sent it crashing inward, shattering the fireplace and instantly extinguishing the flames—with the consequence that the salamander's material

body had evaporated into the air from which it had emanated.

That's my story, Archer, and—well, just a point or two more, perhaps.

As I say, I realized later that that damnable Thing was still lurking invisible within the cabin, thirsting with all its unholy force for another opportunity of taking physical form.

There wasn't much likelihood of that, perhaps, since the fireplace was irretrievably shattered, and even if any wayfarer in that desolate region had chanced to build a fire there, there'd be practically no chance of his turning his thoughts in a dangerous direction.

But, I was resolved to take no chances on its ever being loosed on human eyes again ; so I did probably a high-handed and unlawful thing. A week later I climbed that tortuous mountain slope again, and laid a charge of dynamite beneath the cabin, which levelled it in a tangle of wreckage to the ground.

Sharples' books I removed first, poured kerosene over them, and set them alight—with a long fuse, incidentally, for I preferred to be a couple of miles from the spot when those sinister pages flared into flame.

There's nothing more to add, except that from that day to this I've never dared to face flame, for fear my mind, in sheer defiance of my sanity, may focus there once more, and summon up some other lurking messenger from hell.

BOOMERANG

Oscar Cook

Warwick threw himself into a chair beside me, hitched up his trousers, and, leaning across, tapped me on the knee.

"You remember the story about Mendingham which you told me?" he asked.

I nodded. I was not likely to forget that affair.

"Well," he went on, "I've got as good a one to tell you. Had it straight from the filly's mouth, so to speak—and it's red-hot."

I edged away in my chair, for there was something positively ghoulish in his delight, in the coarse way in which he referred to a woman, and one who, if my inference were correct, must have known tragedy. But there is no stopping Warwick: he knows or admits no finer feelings or shame when his thirst for "copy" is aroused. Like the little boy in the well-known picture, "he won't be happy till he's 'quenched' it."

I ordered drinks and when they had been served and we were alone, bade him get on with his sordid story.

"It's a wild tale," he began, "of two planter fellows in the interior of Borneo—and, as usual, there's a woman."

"*The* woman?" I could not refrain from asking, thinking of his earlier remark.

"The same," he replied. "A veritable golden-haired filly, only her mane is streaked with grey and there's a great livid scar or weal right round her neck.

She's the wife of Leopold Thring. The other end of the triangle is Clifford Macy."

" And where do you come in ? " I inquired.

Warwick closed one eye and pursed his lips.

" As a spinner of yarns," he answered sententiously. Then with a return to his usual cynicism, " The filly is down and out, but for some silly religious scruples feels she must live. I bought the story, therefore, after verifying the facts. Shall I go on ? "

I nodded, for I must admit I was genuinely interested. The eternal triangle always intrigues : set in the wilds of Borneo it promised a variation of incident unusually refreshing in these sophisticated days. Besides, that scar was eloquent.

Warwick chuckled.

" The two men were partners," he went on, " on a small experimental estate far up in the interior. They had been at it for six years and were just about to reap the fruits of their labours very handsomely. Incidentally, Macy had been out in the Colony the full six years—and the strain was beginning to tell. Thring had been home eighteen months before and on coming back had brought his bride, Rhona.

" That was the beginning of the trouble. It split up the partnership : brought in a new element : meant the building of a new bungalow."

" For Macy ? " I asked.

" Yes. And he didn't take kindly to it. He had got set. And then there was the loneliness of night after night alone, while the others—you understand ? "

I nodded.

" Well," Warwick continued, " the expected happened. Macy flirted, philandered, and then fell violently in love. He was one of those fellows who never do things by halves. If he drank, he'd get fighting drunk : if he loved, he went all out on it : if he hated, well, hell was let loose."

"And—Mrs. Thring?" I queried, for it seemed to me that she might have a point of view.

"Fell between two stools—as so many women of a certain type do. She began by being just friendly and kind—you know the sort of thing—cheering the lonely man up, drifted into woman's eternal game of flirting and then began to grow a little afraid of the fire she'd kindled. Too late she realized that she couldn't put the fire out—either hers or Macy's—and all the while she clung to some hereditary religious scruples.

"Thring was in many ways easygoing, but at the same time possessed of a curiously intense strain of jealous possessiveness. He was generous, too. If asked, he would share or give away his last shirt or crust. But let him think or feel that his rights or dues were being curtailed or taken and—well, he was a tough customer of rather primitive ideas.

"Rhona—that's the easiest way to think of the filly—soon found she was playing a game beyond her powers. Hers was no poker face, and Thring began to sense that something was wrong. She couldn't dissemble, and Macy made no attempt to hide his feelings. He didn't make it easy for her, and I guess from what the girl told me, life about this time was for her a sort of glorified hell—a suspicious husband on one hand, and an impetuous, devil-may-care lover on the other. She was living on a volcano."

"Which might explode any minute," I quietly nodded.

Warwick nodded.

"Exactly, or whenever Thring chose to spring the mine. He held the key to the situation, or should I say, the time-fuse? The old story, but set in a primitive land full of possibilities. You've got me?"

For answer, I offered Warwick a cigarette, and, taking one myself, lighted both.

" So far," I said, " with all your journalistic skill you've not got off the beaten track. Can't you improve ? "

He chuckled, blew a cloud of smoke, and once again tapped my knee in his irritating manner.

" Your cynicism," he countered, " is but a poor cloak for your curiosity. In reality you're jumping mad to know the end, eh ? "

I made no reply and he went on.

" Well, matters went on from day to day till Rhona became worn to the proverbial shadow. Thring wanted to send her home, but she wouldn't go. She owed a duty to her husband : she couldn't bear to be parted from her lover, and she didn't dare leave the two men alone. She was terribly, horribly afraid.

" Macy grew more and more openly amorous and less restrained. Thring watched whenever possible with the cunning of an iguana. Then came a rainy, damp spell that tried nerves to the uttermost and the inevitable stupid little disagreements between Rhona and Thring—mere trifles, but enough to let the lid off. He challenged her. . . ."

" And she ? " I could not help asking, for Warwick has, I must admit, the knack of keeping one on edge.

" Like a blithering but sublime little idiot admitted that it was all true."

For nearly a minute I was speechless. Somehow, although underneath I had expected Rhona to behave so, it seemed such a senseless, unbelievable thing to do. Then at last I found my voice.

" And Thring ? " I said simply.

Warwick emptied his glass at a gulp.

" That's the most curious thing in the whole yarn," he answered slowly. " Thring took it as quietly as a lamb."

" Stunned ? " I suggested.

" That's what Rhona thought : what Macy believed

when Rhona told him what had happened. In reality he must have been burning mad, a mass of white-hot revenge controlled by a devilish, cunning brain : he waited. A scene or a fight—and Macy was a big man —would have done no good. He would get his own back in his own time and in his own way. Meanwhile, there was the lull before the storm.

" Then, as so often happens, Fate played a hand. Macy went sick with malaria—really ill—and even Thring had to admit the necessity for Rhona to nurse him practically night and day. Macy owed his eventual recovery to her care, but even so his convalescence was a long job. In the end Rhona, too, crocked up through over-work, and Thring had them both on his hands. This was an opportunity better than he could have planned—it separated the lovers and gave him complete control.

" Obviously the time was ripe, ripe for Thring to score his revenge.

" The rains were over, the jungle had ceased wintering and spring was in the air. The young grass and vegetation were shooting into new life : concurrently all the creepy crawly insect life of the jungle and estate was young and vigorous and hungry too. These facts gave Thring the germ of an idea which he was not slow to perfect—an idea as devilish as man could devise."

Warwick paused to press out the stub of his cigarette, and noticing that even he seemed affected by his recital, I prepared myself as best I could for a really gruesome horror. All I said, however, was " Go on."

" It seems," he continued, " that in Borneo there is a kind of mammoth earwig—a thing almost as fine and gossamer as a spider's web, as long as a good-sized caterpillar, that lives on waxy secretions. These are integral parts of some flowers and trees and lie buried

deep in their recesses. It is one of the terrors of these particular tropics, for it moves and rests so lightly on a human being that one is practically unconscious of it, while, like its English relation, it has a decided liking for the human ear: on account of man's carnivorous diet the wax in this has a strong and very succulent taste."

As Warwick gave me those details, he sat upright on the edge of his easy chair. He spoke slowly, emphasizing each point by hitting the palm of his left hand with the clenched fist of his right. It was impossible not to see the drift and inference of his remarks.

"You mean . . .?" I began.

"Exactly," he broke in quickly, blowing a cloud of smoke from a fresh cigarette which he had nervously lighted. "Exactly. It was a devilish idea. To put the giant earwig on Macy's hair just above the ear."

"And then . . .?" I knew the fatuousness of the question, but speech relieved the growing sense of ticklish horror that was creeping over me.

"And then . . .?" I knew the fatuousness of the question, but speech relieved the growing sense of ticklish horror that was creeping over me.

"Do nothing. But rely on the filthy insect running true to type. Once in Macy's ear, it was a thousand-to-one chance against it ever coming out the same way: it would not be able to turn: to back out would be almost an impossibility, and so, feeding as it went, it would crawl right across inside his head, with the result that . . ."

The picture Warwick was drawing was more than I could bear: even my imagination, dulled by years of legal dryasdust affairs saw and sickened at the possibilities. I put out a hand and gripped Warwick's arm.

" Stop, man ! " I cried hoarsely. " For God's sake, don't say any more. I understand. My God, but the man Thring must be a fiend ! "

Warwick looked at me and I saw that even his face had paled.

" *Was*," he said meaningly. " Perhaps you're right, perhaps he *was* a fiend. Yet, remember, Macy stole his wife."

" But a torture like that ! The deliberate creation of a living torment that would grow into madness. Warwick, you can't condone that ! "

He looked at me for a moment and then slowly spread out his hands.

" Perhaps you're right," he admitted. " It was a bit thick, I know. But there's more to come."

I closed my eyes and wondered if I could think of an excuse for leaving Warwick, but in spite of my real horror, my curiosity won the day.

" Get on with it," I muttered, and leant back, eyes still shut, hands clenched. With teeth gritted together as if I myself were actually suffering the pain of that earwig slowly, daily creeping farther into and eating my brain, I waited.

Warwick was not slow to obey.

" I have told you," he said, " that Rhona had to nurse Macy, and even when he was better, though still weak, Thring insisted on her looking after him, though now he himself came more often.

" One afternoon Rhona was in Macy's bungalow alone with him : the house ' boy ' was out. Rhona was on the verandah : Macy was asleep in the bedroom. Dusk was just falling : bats were flying about : the flying foxes, heavy with fruit, were returning home : the inevitable house rats were scurrying about the floors : the lamps had not been lit. An eerie devastating hour. Rhona dropped some needlework and fought back tears. Then from the bedroom

came a shriek. 'My head! My ear! Oh, God! My ear! Oh, God! The pain!'

"That was the beginning. The earwig had got well inside. Rhona rushed in and did all she could. Of course, there was nothing to see. Then for a little while Macy would be quiet because the earwig was quiet, sleeping or gorged. Then the vile thing would move or feed again and Macy once more would shriek with the pain.

"And so it went on, day by day. Alternate quiet and alternate pain, each day for Macy, for Rhona a hell of nerve-rending expectancy. Waiting, always waiting for the pain that crept and crawled and twisted and writhed and moved slowly, ever slowly, through and across Macy's brain."

Warwick paused so long that I was compelled to open my eyes. His face was ghastly. Fortunately I could not see my own.

"And Thring?" I asked.

"Came often each day. Pretended sorrow and served out spurious dope—Rhona found the coloured water afterwards. He cleverly urged that Macy should be carried down to the coast for medical treatment, knowing full well that he was too ill and worn to bear the smallest strain. Then when Macy was an utter wreck, broken completely in mind and body, with hollow, hunted eyes, with ever-twitching fingers, with a body no part of which he could properly control or keep still, the earwig came out—at the other ear.

"As it happened, both Thring and Rhona were present. Macy must have suffered an excruciating pain followed as usual by a period of quiescence: then, feeling a slight ticklish sensation on his cheek put up his hand to rub or scratch. His fingers came in contact with the earwig and its fine gossamer hairs. Instinct did the rest. You follow?"

My tongue was still too dry to enable me to speak. Instead I nodded, and Warwick went on.

" He naturally was curious and looked to see what he was holding. In an instant he realized. Even Rhona could not be in doubt. The hairs were faintly but unmistakably covered here and there with blood, with wax and with grey matter.

" For a moment there was absolute silence between the three. At last Macy spoke.

" ' My God ! ' he just whispered. ' Oh, my God ! What an escape.'

" Rhona burst into tears. Only Thring kept silent, and that was his mistake. The silence worried Macy, weak though he was. He looked from Rhona to Thring and at the critical moment Thring could not meet his gaze. The truth was out. With an oath Macy threw the insect, now dead from the pressure of his fingers, straight into Thring's face. Then he crumpled up in his chair and sobbed and sobbed till even the chair shook."

Again Warwick paused till I thought he would never go on. I had heard enough, I'll admit, and yet it seemed to me that at least there should be an epilogue.

" Is that all ? " I tentatively asked.

Warwick shook his head.

" Nearly, but not quite," he said. " Rhona had ceased weeping and kept her eyes fixed on Thring—she dared not go and comfort Macy now. She saw him examine the dead earwig, having picked it up from the floor to which it had fallen, turn it this way and that, then produce from a pocket a magnifying glass which he used daily for the inspection and detection of leaf disease on certain of the plants. As she watched, she saw the fear and disappointment leave his face, to be replaced by a look of cunning and evil satisfaction. Then for the first time, he spoke.

" ' Macy ! ' he called, in a sharp, loud voice.

" Macy looked up.

" Thring held up the earwig. ' This is dead, now,' he said, ' dead. As dead as my friendship for you, you swine of a thief, as dead as my love for that whore who was my wife. It's dead, I tell you, dead, but it's a female. D'you get me ? A female, and a female lays eggs, and before it died, it . . .'

" He never finished. His baiting at last roused Macy, endowing him with the strength of madness and despair. With one spring he was at Thring's throat, bearing him down to the ground. Over and over they rolled on the floor, struggling for possession of the great hunting knife stuck in Thring's belt. One moment Macy was on top, the next, Thring. Their breath and oaths came in great trembling gasps. They kicked and bit and scratched. And all the while Rhona watched, fascinated and terrified. Then Thring got definitely on top. He had one hand on Macy's throat, both knees on his chest, and with his free hand he was feeling for the knife. In that instant Rhona's religious scruples went by the board. She realized she only loved Macy, that her husband didn't count. She rushed to Macy's help. Thring saw her coming and let drive a blow at her head which almost stunned her. She fell on top of him just as he was whipping out the knife. Its edge caught her neck. The sudden spurt of blood shot into Thring's eyes, and blinded him. It was Macy's last chance. He knew it, and he took it. When Rhona came back to consciousness, Thring was dead. Macy was standing beside the body, which was gradually swelling to huge proportions as he worked, weakly but steadily, at the white ant exterminator pump, the nozzle of which was pushed down the dead man's throat."

Warwick ceased. This last had been a long, unbroken recital and mechanically he picked up his empty glass as if to drain it. The action brought me

back to nearly normal. I rang for the waiter—the knob of the electric bell luckily being just over my head. While waiting, I had time to speak.

"I've heard enough," I said hurriedly, "to last me a lifetime. You've made me feel positively sick. But there's just one point. What happened to Macy? Did he live?"

Warwick nodded.

"That's another strange fact. He still lives. He was tried for the murder of Thring, but there was no real evidence. On the other hand, his story was too tall to be believed, with the result—well, you can guess."

"A lunatic asylum—for life?" I asked.

Warwick nodded again. Then I followed his glance. A waiter was standing by my chair.

"Two double whiskies and soda," I ordered tersely, and then, with shaking fingers, lighted a cigarette.

THE TAPPING

J. Dyott Matthews

Julian Matterson, manager of the Pristford branch of Riley's Bank, looked at his watch. Twenty minutes past five. Would they never leave ? There were only two clerks in the bank now, besides the chief cashier. The other had gone, and the workmen had left at midday. The latter had been putting the finishing touches to the strong-room which was to take the place of the antiquated safe, unworthy of so important a provincial branch as Priestford. Already all the boxes, securities and valuables which had filled the safe to overflowing had been placed in it, leaving room for much more.

Matterson was nervous and overwrought. At the best of times he was highly strung—now his nerves were at such a tension that he thought with a grim little laugh, that at any moment he might become insane. But at all costs he must not lose his head. That would be fatal to his scheme. For this was the day for which he had been waiting. He had had the valuables moved into the strong-room as they would be the easier to select in the added space afforded by it, and also through some queer kink in his brain, it flattered his vanity to take them from a strong-room.

He looked at his watch again. Half-past five. The two clerks were preparing to go. He mopped his brow. God ! wasn't it hot. He knew that at his branch of Riley's, at least, the junior clerk would wait until the manager left, out of courtesy and a

necessity for locking up the premises. He had therefore informed his chief cashier, whose name was Roach, of his intention of working late, and had given instructions that all the clerks could leave. He had left his attempt late enough. By six-thirty they would all be gone.

He felt almost like rushing out of his sanctum and yelling :

" Get out, damn you, every one of you, get out."

He smiled a little nervously when he thought of the consternation such an act on his part would cause. Would those clerks never go. They were standing in front of the counter talking about cricket. He distinctly heard the names of Hobbs and Hendren mentioned. He inwardly cursed them. Who cared about Hobbs or Hendren on a night like this ?

They left the bank together. There was only one member of the staff remaining—Roach.

How he loathed the man. The very sight of the brushed-back hair, which had to be brushed well back in order to hide the small but slowly increasing patch of baldness, which could just be seen between the strands, made him bad-tempered. The sight of this bald spot with its fringe of hair irritated him. The gold-legged, horn-rimmed spectacles, which were worn so low on the nose as to appear at any moment to be about to fall off, annoyed him. The sparse, scanty eyebrows got on his nerves. He hated the cold, fish-like grip of his flabby fingers when he shook hands. But what he detested most of all was the cool, suave manner of the man—his perpetual urbanity. He reminded Matterson, whenever he saw him talking to the customers of the bank, of a churchwarden or sidesman showing members of the congregation into their pews.

And now this man, Roach, seemed to be watching him. Could he guess ? Of course not. It was only

nerves that made him think so, he told himself, with a shrug of the shoulders and a well-assumed air of nonchalance. But if he did know, who could have told him? He had only one confederate—Hislop, his chauffeur—but Hislop wouldn't breathe a word, he was trustworthy. Besides, it was to his own advantage to keep his mouth shut. Wasn't he going to receive a quarter share of the booty?

But, again, supposing Hislop was a detective put on his trail by Scotland Yard. Fool that he was, letting his thoughts run riot like that. To get back to where he had started. If Hislop were a traitor what possible object could he have in telling Roach? Perhaps they were working together? No, that was impossible, Roach had been in the bank for thirty years.

Anyway, he had with him his trusty Colt, which had stood him in good stead during the war, and now was fitted with a silencer. He tried not to remember how it had neatly placed a bullet in the heart of one of his superior officers, who had been reported "killed in action," thus leaving the command and the rank in the hands of Captain Matterson, as he was then. Nothing was going to stand in his way. He had everything tacked down in his plans for his grand coup. Hislop was to be at the back entrance with the car at six-thirty. By that time he was to have opened the strong-room, taken out the jewels which Lady Bisnell had deposited there, and put them into a couple of suitcases.

If a police-constable were to accost him, he would say he was going away for a short holiday, and had brought the bags up to the bank in the morning, in order to be able to get straight off. But no police officer would interfere with him—he was too well known in the district—as the prosperous manager of an exceedingly prosperous bank.

He left his seat at his roll-topped desk in his glass enclosed sanctum, and went up to Roach, a forced smile on his lips.

"Not gone yet, Roach?"

"No such luck, sir," he said, laughing in his heavily jocular style.

"Well, I should cut along, old man." It almost hurt him to use this term of endearment to one whom he loathed, but he checked his repugnance.

"Thanks, I have just one little matter to finish before I go."

"Do it to-morrow morning."

"I can't, that is why I want to get it done to-night."

"I insist on your leaving soon."

A suspicious glow came into the somewhat pig-like eyes of the other.

"Why are you so keen for me to go? You ought to be pleased with me for getting the work up to date."

"Oh, I am pleased"—he had an answer ready for that question—"but with Lady Bisnell's heirlooms and family jewels, which I believe are almost priceless, in the bank, I naturally want to lock up myself, and I don't want to be up too late."

"Oh, I see, well, I'll be going in that case," he said, putting the ledger, in which he had been writing, in his drawer.

"Good night."

"Good night, Roach," replied the manager.

He waited in his office for about half an hour after this, in case, as he said to himself, Roach might come back for something.

Then taking up his two bags and the necessary keys, and having locked both doors to the bank on the inside, he made his way to the strong-room. There was no light in the place, although there was a plug near the floor by the door, to which a wire attached to a bulb could be fixed. This did not worry Matter-

son, however ; he had his pocket torch, and soon had the door of the strong-room open.

This room was on the ground floor, the premises having no basement. He unlocked and pushed open the massive steel door and, entering, placed the two grips on the floor. Then he went to Lady Bisnell's chest and dragged it to the doorway. He opened the box with a file and a stout screw-driver, and began to transpose the jewels—the most dazzlingly beautiful stones he had ever seen—from it to his own bags.

" So this is why you wanted me away ! "

Matterson spun round, his face grey and ashen.

" What the——! " Then regaining his composure, " Stick 'em up."

Roach did so, eyeing the barrel of the revolver nervously.

" Now," said Matterson, " I'm going to shoot you like a dog. I've hated you for years. I can't stand your flabby handshake or your greasy hair. You get on my nerves. I detest you. But first tell me how you came to suspect me."

" Well," in a shaking voice Roach replied, " I happened to be present at Victoria Station when you were booking your ticket for the boat train. I didn't think until to-night that you would make your attempt so soon though. I, also, was booking my passage to the Continent. I am on the same game as yourself. Can't we work together on a fifty-fifty basis ? "

" How the deuce did you get in, then ? " he said paying no attention to the offer of the other. " I locked both doors of the bank."

" I never went out. I was in the wash-place all the time, with the light turned out, waiting for your next move."

" You cur, I'll have no more of your sneaking ways."

" Plop." The heavy Colt with its silencer made a

dull noise, but Roach fell to the floor sprawling over the suitcases.

Matterson left the room and went off with his bag to remove blood-stains from them in the wash-place next door.

Roach, who was not hit in a vital part, came to himself after a couple of minutes. His face was terribly hot, he was almost overpowered by the heat. What could he do to stop his face burning ?

He glanced up at the shelves, then he saw something which cheered him ; if he could only reach it.

That same afternoon he had knocked down the electric fan in the office and had broken three of its wings. He had told the second cashier to put ie somewhere in a safe place, pending its repair, at th-same time giving him some ledgers to put in the strongt room. He had obviously put the fan in this steel-lined room also.

Slowly he raised himself to his feet, reached down the plug, and inserted it in its socket.

He turned on the switch and was reaching for the fan when a feeling of nausea overcame him. He got his fingers on to it, but as he grasped it, unconsciousness came upon him and he fell, half into the chest. The fan, now revolving fast, fell into the box underneath him, making a tapping noise every now and then as the remaining wing struck something in the box.

Five minutes later Matterson was passing the door of the strong-room on his way to the exit, and heard the noise of rapid knocking coming from the interior of the room.

He stood aghast for a moment. What could be the meaning of that mysterious sound ? Surely that Roach was not dead. Perhaps he had been mistaken ? Perhaps the tapping was not from the strong-room after all ? He put his head against the door. Yes, it was certainly coming from within.

"Tap! Tap! Tap!"

It came at regular intervals at first, then there were pauses in between the noises. It reminded him of the Morse that he had learnt in the army. Surely Roach was not signalling?

Could it be a bird which had become imprisoned? No! no bird could possibly get in there—besides, he would have noticed it when he went in there before.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

No! It could be no one but Roach—Roach was winning the last trick after all. He would only have to keep himself conscious until the following day, make that tapping noise, and the police would immediately detain him—Matterson—at Dover before he could embark in the morning cross-channel steamer. Anyway, he must kill him. By midday he would be well away. He knew a little place on the west coast of France. Then a weird, uncanny thought came to him—could it be Roach's soul trying to get out? But nothing could bar a soul's exit. Nothing. Anyway, he would go in and see. Roach would not cheat him.

He entered the room, leaving the key on the outside of the lock. As he went in, he tripped over the wire of the electric fan, disconnecting it immediately. The tapping ceased at once.

"You thought you could cheat me, did you, Pretending to be dead now, are you? Well, I'll finish you off," he said, lowering his face near to the other's and snarling at him.

He pulled him off the box and leaned him against the heavy half-open door.

Then he raised his revolver and fired, emptying the remaining cylinders.

At the impact of the first shot, the solid steel door began to move almost imperceptibly, and with the last it closed with a click.

Then he realized what he had done.

The door was fitted with a snap-lock, and he was imprisoned with the man he had murdered !

With a shriek of delirious madman's laughter, he lifted Roach's body and dumped it into the open chest.

THE RED FETISH

FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

BILL CULLEN shaded his eyes with his hand and stared at the empty skyline. His arms, as he stood in the glittering light, showed scraggy and emaciated and his features were pinched and black. There had been strong winds blowing and enormous seas thundering on the beach, and the ferocity of the elements had accentuated his helplessness. He turned to his companion with a gesture of despair.

" Look here," he said, " you know as well as I do that it is physically impossible for us to hang on without water. What do you say to a swim ? "

Bill's companion groaned and shook his head. He was a frightened, nervous little man with pointed fox-like ears, and people who knew him were prone to brand him a coward. His name, Wellington Van Wyck, did not raise him in the estimation of his friends.

Bill studied regretfully the thing that Van Wyck had become. It was not the lack of water that gave him discomfort. His sorrow lay in the fact that Van Wyck did not possess a capacity for blind enthusiasm.

" It's only six miles," he urged.

" There are cannibals on that island," replied Van Wyck. " It's down on the chart."

Van Wyck was a little wild and he imagined that cannibals tore themselves to pieces over their ceremonies. Bill knew that cannibals were decent and clean and orderly ; but there was no explaining

that to Van Dyck. He dealt with him in another fashion.

" You're as weak and flabby and spineless as a jelly-fish with rheumatism," said Bill. " You're so unsavoury that the cannibals wouldn't eat you. Why don't you kill yourself now, and be done with it ? 'Twould be a good way to economize on food ! "

Van Wyck scowled and sat down upon the beach. His eyes narrowed. " We are safer here," he said. His lips were swollen and cracked and he spoke in a thin, small voice. He assured Bill that he could survive without luxuries. He said that two men could go three days on one pint of water, and that in three or four days anything might happen.

Nothing did happen. The three days went by like great white birds at sea, and the merciless glare of the sun made life a perfect misery. Bill looked grim. He squatted on the sands and watched the pale blue water foaming and bubbling in the lagoon, and his eyes glittered. Once he turned to Van Wyck and laughed. " It has green eyes," he said. " I saw it watching us on the beach. It plays with the moon and its tentacles are long and gelatinous ! "

Sea water affects some men like hashish. That morning Bill had crawled to the lagoon on his hands and knees and swallowed more salt than was good for him. Van Wyck had warned him that it wasn't done, but Bill was of the disbelieving sort.

Bill's clothes were in tatters, and he found no satisfaction in contemplating the leanness of his wrists and ankles. Whenever he held up his wrists for inspection they shook so violently that he let himself be guided by sentiment and wept. His ankles were no wider than broomsticks, and when he tried to walk he could hear them crack. He didn't want to turn them, so he sat down and talked to Van Wyck. He made an effort to be agreeable.

" I'll concede that the cannibals may eat us," he said. " There is always that risk. But I don't see why they should ; and it's only a six-mile swim. If we stay here I can't trust myself."

Van Wyck recoiled and his under-lip trembled. Bill laid a merciful hand upon his emaciated shoulder. " There isn't anything that I want to keep from you,'' he said. " I'll tell you the truth. For three days I've been planning to kill you. I lay awake last night and watched you. I thought : ' This thirst—this dreadful thirst—*he* would put an end to it ! ' "

Van Wyck shivered, and tears ran down his face and dampened his brittle red beard. His small blue eyes dilated with horror. Hot shame flushed red over his throat and ears. " But you wouldn't really eat me ? " he moaned.

" I don't know," replied Bill. " That's why I suggest the swim. It's six miles and we're atrociously weak ; but anything to keep from thinking of *that !* "

Bill knew that Van Wyck understood and sympathized. Van Wyck had a knife, which he kept hidden, but in his sleep he frequently took it out and felt the edge of it. Bill had been very much horrified, and he had not pretended to misunderstand the expression on Van Wyck's face. There was something brazen in Van Wyck's affrightment when he discovered that two could play the same sinister game.

The sun was setting and a few grey wisps of clouds were fleeing like flakes of snow across the blue sky. A single gull careened and dipped far out in the tumbling black immensity of ocean. A great silence had fallen upon the atoll, and the stubborn struggle between the two men drew to an issue before the first wild rush of stars. Van Wyck felt unsafe in the presence of Bill Cullen, and he made no effort to conceal his fear.

" Let's get away from here as quickly as possible,"

he pleaded. " You were right. Six or seven miles isn't a long swim. If we strip, we can make it."

Bill extended his hand. It was like a dead thing, but Van Wyck seized it and wrung it warmly. His voice quivered. " It isn't a long swim, old fellow," he repeated.

Bill made a grimace. " It might rain," he said.

" It won't rain," responded Van Wyck.

That settled it. They spent the evening getting ready. They hid their anguish in a bustle of preparation. Bill scurried about and secured three clams. The unfortunate bivalves were devoured with immoderate ferocity. Even their stiff, rubber-like necks afforded grist for the mill of Van Wyck's teeth. It grieved Bill to see the shells go to waste. They sat down and congratulated themselves for the first time in a week. The clams seemed to make their situation less hopeless, but they did not on that account decide to remain on the island. Their thirst was abnormal and monstrous. It was not a thing to be talked about.

They managed to get some sleep ; but they awoke with their throats on fire. The game that they had played was over. But they avoided the thought of their new plan as much as possible, since they did not want the possibility of fatal consequences to look them in the face.

A chill in the atmosphere generally preceded the customary heat of the day ; and the coldness now seemed unusually severe. They got together a few sticks and built a fire. The sun had not yet risen, but the island was immersed in the ghostly grey light of early dawning. They saw everything vividly. The boulders on the beach seemed alive. A light wind furred the steel-grey sea with tiny ripples.

" We mustn't waste time," said Van Wyck. It was obvious that his dread of Bill had grown in the night.

Bill's threat had taken complete possession of his shrivelled, selfish little brain. His teeth chattered over the fire and he planned a thousand assaults on the man beside him. His fingers clutched frantically at the knife which he kept hidden ; but he lacked the stomach for malicious manslaughter. He feared that his cowardice might betray him into a false or dangerous move, and he endeavoured to conquer his hysteria with loud boasts.

" It was all poppycock, our worrying about the cannibals," he announced. " The thing for us to do is to put on a bold front. They'll make gods of us ! "

In the present condition of his mind these words produced a curious effect on Bill. He waved his arms wildly, and swore at the sky. " Yes," he shouted, " they'll do that. But sometimes they're not satisfied with a living man. They're head-hunters, you know. They have a way of removing the skull from a man's head, and drying it up, and worshipping it. They have a predilection for red hair and beards. When they find both on one head they go wild."

Bill looked directly at Van Wyck. The latter could scarcely stand. He was swaying hysterically back and forth and running his fingers through his bristling red beard. " Perhaps I could shave it off before we start," he wailed.

" With what ? " demanded Bill.

" With the clam shells," cried Van Wyck, dejectedly, seeking to grasp some straw that would save his head.

" I refuse to permit it," said Bill. " It's time we started. It wouldn't be pleasant to swim in the full glare of the sun."

They stripped and rolled their clothes into neat, round balls. Somehow it did not seem right to abandon them helter-skelter on the beach. They had a vague idea that they might return for them. They deposited them gingerly beneath the one coco palm

and walking solemnly to the water's edge they scowled into the clouded mirror of sea before them.

The water was like ice, and Bill shivered and stood on one foot. " Walk right in," said Van Wyck. " The cannibals expect us ! " His smile was ghastly and indescribable. The blue veins stood out on his scrawny neck, and his forehead was covered with globules of perspiration.

Bill was the first to go into deep water. Van Wyck stood with the icy current swirling about his ankles, and watched him wade out until he stood waist-deep. Bill turned and looked back reproachfully. " You're coming, aren't you ? " Bill's disdain and distrust of Van Wyck were forgotten in a momentary need for companionship.

As Van Wyck stood with the cold water numbing his toes he had an irrational desire to turn back and run wildly up the beach, and to stay on the island until thirst finished him off. The risk of the swim seemed suddenly displeasing to him. A mist passed rapidly before his eyes ; he ran his fingers through his hair and gulped. But when he saw the pitiful, hurt expression on Bill's face he put aside unworthy thoughts. " I'm coming, Bill," he said.

He walked forward until the water eddied and swirled about his chin. His face was hideously drawn and his eyes bulged, but a forlorn ray of sunlight filtered through the clouds and played about his head, bringing out its latent manliness.

" It's deep, out there," said Bill.

They both lurched forward. The sudden loss of footing accentuated Bill's weakness, and he went under. He felt that his arms and legs were incapable of sustaining him, and he wondered if Van Wyck would try to save him.

He came up and struck out, his mouth full of water, the salt burned his throat and he swallowed. The

water went into his stomach. He shivered. The sun beat mercilessly down upon his naked body.

He swam boldly, with a brief sense of triumph. He had conquered his physical weakness. He knew that his strength might not last, but the thought that he had not depended upon Van Wyck gave him secret satisfaction.

He could see Van Wyck's red head on the water several yards ahead of him. The little wretch had evidently made good use of his legs and arms. "Slow up, Van Wyck!" he shouted.

"I don't dare to!" Van Wyck called back. "If I stop I might sink. And think how deep it is!"

Bill resented Van Wyck's reminder. "If you don't ease up," he shouted, "you'll surely go down. This isn't an athletic contest!"

"It is," cried Van Wyck. "It's the greatest ever—even if there are head-hunters at the goal. I advise you to talk to me. It keeps me from thinking. If I think I shall go down."

But Bill did not feel like talking. The water was cold and he had no stomach for repartee. He felt the chill of the depths beneath in his nude limbs. He swallowed great quantities of sea water. He knew that he might suffer eventually, but he did not care. He wanted to reach the island. He had never shared Van Wyck's dread of cannibals, and the thought of the island, with its crystal-clear springs and refreshing fruits was a precious balm to him.

He wondered if Van Wyck would survive him. The latter was swimming with frightful rapidity, leaving him definitely in the lurch. Bill envied and pitied his little companion. Van Wyck might survive to view the island, with its green, welcome frondage—but would he ever reach it?

Bill had an uncomfortable suspicion that he might sink. His initial courage threatened to give out. A

mounting hysteria surged through his brain. He closed his eyes and tried not to think. There was nothing before him but a limitless stretch of malachite sea. He was fascinated and horrified by his isolation. A cold, brilliant sun blinded his eyes and dried up the sap of life in him. The water seemed to thicken, and he had great difficulty in moving his arms and legs.

Bill never knew how he reached the island. For a starving, emaciated man to swim seven miles is tremendous, and deserves some reward. Like most valiant men, Bill was conscious of his own worth. When he sighted the island he said nothing, but he thought: "This is only just. I have paid the price, and I deserve this."

He had also caught up with Van Wyck. The awful glare in the despairing eyes that Van Wyck turned upon him told of a fatigue immeasurable and a desire for water that had passed the bounds of sanity. Van Wyck's eyes were living pools of liquid fire. His voice was hoarse and rasping, and he turned over and over in the water; and twice his head went under.

They were horribly near when they sighted the cannibals. Van Wyck saw them first. He was puffing and wailing, and he had been swimming on his back, and when he turned over and sighted them his face took on the aspect of an open wound. His mouth became an awful gash in a grotesque, streaked horror of countenance.

"Bill," he called hoarsely. "It's worse than we thought. There are hundreds of 'em!"

Fixing his frightened and horrified eyes on the shore, Bill trod water, and became suddenly very angry. The scene before him burned itself on his brain, and robbed him of his victory. He felt that the fates had taken an indecent advantage of him. His anger mounted, and flushed his neck and throat. "Damn their black hides!" he muttered.

A clamour and a stench arose from the rocks. The cannibals seemed to be recovering from a drinking-bout. They writhed in the sun like wounded snakes. Bill counted sixty or seventy. Their bodies were hideously tattooed, and they wore monstrous shell rings through their ears and noses. The women joined with the men in dancing and spitting venom. The hubbub was deafening. Ages of savagery and blood had shaped them into capering devils. They were all the more terrible because they had seen other white men. Bill did not expect much from them. He confessed a frank horror at the situation.

"If we only had something to give 'em," he groaned.

Van Wyck had somehow expected Bill to rally and come to his support. He needed a moral prop and he noted with horror that Bill had lost his solid, comforting manner. Van Wyck's lips were so dry that he could scarcely get his tongue to shape words of rebuff.

"I don't like it," he finally blurted out. "They certainly mean business. You might swim in and test 'em!"

"Don't be an ass!" roared Bill.

"All right, then. But if one of us doesn't swim in, both of us are goners. And since I've never talked with savages I'm hardly the man. You have a way with you. You could pacify a Java ape-man! Get 'em laughing—tell 'em a funny story!"

Bill protested venomously. "Those cannibals aren't children," he groaned. "You can't spoof 'em. This is serious business, Van Wyck."

Van Wyck refused to be convinced and he would have gone on urging Bill to commit suicide to save his own precious skin if something had not made conversation ridiculous. They both saw it at the same time. They looked at each other and said nothing.

Then Van Wyck began frantically swimming toward the rocks.

The fin divided the water into two glassy walls. As it passed along it turned the dark surface to shining quicksilver. Bill had barely grasped its meaning when something touched his ankles and he knew that the water was infested. He gave a sudden, defiant shriek.

But the sharks did not molest him. They made straight for Van Wyck. They approached in vicious circles, and Bill saw the whites of their stomachs through the dark green water. The mouth of the largest opened and closed; and then there followed a clashing of teeth that sounded like the clanging to of iron-clad portcullises.

Once the horrible grey back of the fish showed above the surface, and glittered lethally in the sun, and Bill knew that Van Wyck was done for. Van Wyck was almost near enough to the rocks to climb them, and he might reasonably have pushed the shark off with his foot, but Bill knew that he wouldn't. Bill knew that Van Wyck was as good as eaten, and he thought: "That shark will hardly be content with Van Wyck alone!"

A dozen fins intersected on the surface and occasionally one of the ravenous monsters would jump clear of the water in its eagerness to taste satisfying human flesh.

The sight got in under Bill's skin and hurt. He closed his eyes, and endeavoured to think of the grinning leering savages on the rocks. The sharks made frantic dashes at Van Wyck and came away with something in their mouths. They would rush forward, their great jaws would snap—and there would be less and less of Van Wyck.

Bill was unable to keep his eyes shut. He tried to cover them with his hands, but then he would go under

and get an extra mouthful of salt water. He came up gasping, and saw that the sea was streaked with crimson.

As the sharks darted away from Van Wyck they left dark red trails behind them. Bill heard Van Wyck's screams distinctly, although the latter had reached a point where screams seemed futile. They became less and less coherent. Perhaps Van Wyck realized the absurdity of protest. Perhaps he realized that all things eventually work together for the best. Certainly the cannibals would have treated him worse. It is not pleasant to be boiled in oil or hacked to pieces with little knives.

Bill saw the last of Van Wyck disappear in the maw of an enormous shark. The water turned a deeper red, and for a moment the sky and sea and even the naked, gesticulating savages seemed bathed in a crimson aura. It may have been an optical illusion, since Bill's eyes had ceased to function with clarity. Bill knew that the sharks would look about a bit after finishing Van Wyck, and the thought gave him no satisfaction. "You're next on the list," he told himself.

But somehow the sharks seemed satisfied with poor Van Wyck. Perhaps they found Van Wyck so unsavoury that they did not care to risk tackling another of the same breed. They circled about for a few minutes after the last of Van Wyck had disappeared, and then they passed solemnly eastward, their fins glistening in the brilliant sunlight.

Meanwhile, Bill trod water and shuddered when he thought of Van Wyck. But he didn't let himself think of Van Wyck much after that. Van Wyck, he argued, was no longer in need of sympathy. "It is the living who have to suffer," he thought. It was patent that he could enjoy no security in waters infested with man-eating sharks.

He shouted with delight when he discovered that

the cannibals had disappeared from the rocks. He was forcefully tempted to swim in and take advantage of his amazing good fortune. But he thought better of that when he calmly considered the nature of cannibals. They were probably waiting behind the rocks for him to swim in, and he didn't care to be boiled in oil when there were sharks to make a quicker, cleaner job of it.

He decided to attempt to round the island. His ability to keep afloat amazed and frightened him. He had evidently drawn upon some reserve strength that nature had hitherto wilfully concealed. Destiny had played him a new hand. He secretly congratulated himself, although he continued to curse fate for the cannibals.

He got around the island somehow. The current set to at the northern end and he had some difficulty in surmounting the backwash of black tidal water; but he finally reached a beach so clean and white and refreshing, that he shouted with boyish eagerness and gratification. He swam in without reckoning consequences, for in his exultation he had forgotten or overlooked the cannibals.

He would build a fire and warm himself, and he would eat nothing but fruit. It needed but a momentary inspection to convince him that the island contained an excess of fruit. And there was water! A tiny streamlet came out from the woods, between the boles of fabulously ancient trees, and ran down the smooth white beach.

Bill swam in and clambered up the beach. He sat down under a hotoo tree, an absurd horror of bones and wet, clinging sand. He was a living scarecrow come out of the sea with the wisdom and weariness of ancient ocean upon him. He could scarcely open and close his thick, black lips. His sun-baked skin was drawn painfully taut over his protruding ribs.

A steady surf was crashing on the beach, and he paused while he listened to the roar of the breakers. He reposed for a time ; then he got up, and a peal of wild laughter came from between his swollen lips. He had won out ! He had hoodwinked the cannibals and sharks ! In that blazing crystal world of sunlight and water he came to life again.

The sun dried him. He gulped up gallons of water from the tiny streamlet. It was fresh and clear. He was genuinely elated. The wind swept in from the sea in great, steady gusts, and the flaffing breeze whistled through his hair and under his armpits. He shouted and danced in sheer joy. The cannibals, he assured himself, were on the other side of the island. It was a large island, and he could hide. The chances against him, he thought, were negligible.

He decided to look about for a hiding-place. He knew that in the vast forest of tangled vegetation he would have no difficulty in achieving utter concealment. He could hoard up fruits and coco-nuts and live unmolested for days.

But when he turned he saw something peering from between the boles of the distorted, antique trees that made him change his mind. He stood still and stared, and presently he saw black, hideous figures come forward into the clearing. Others appeared, crawling toward him on their hands and knees. He realized then the absurdity of attempting any sort of concealment.

He stood stark still while the cannibals advanced toward him across the smooth, white sands. He began to envy Van Wyck. He knew too much about savages. He had that and his imagination to blame for the little hell that he endured. How could he guess that they did not want revenge ? A savage considers everything an insult. He knew that he should not have landed upon their infernal island. He wanted

to apologize to them, and to make them understand. He had no desire to lord it over them, and he admitted to himself that he had deliberately injured their sense of dignity.

At first he thought that they intended to make short work of him. They looked sinister. There were three dozen of them in the guard of honour that advanced toward him across the beach and he did not like their faces. Their faces were black and swollen and ugly and incredibly tattooed, and their cheeks were smeared with green and blue paint. One of them paraded a discarded panama hat. Bill could not imagine where he had obtained the hat. The wretch had probably repaid the owner by boiling him in oil. It was quite the thing twenty years ago to burn traders and missionaries in oil, although the custom has been outgrown among respectable savages. But the hat looked at least twenty years old. And one of the devils smoked a corncob pipe! They were tall, solemn-looking cusses, and Bill did not pretend to like them.

But when they got close to him they formed a circle, shutting him off from the sea, and he felt then that everything was worse than he had anticipated. When cannibals begin forming into rings it is customary to give up hope. They were grinning hideously and Bill could count the number of teeth in the rings which they wore about their necks.

Some of the leanest and tallest wore thirty or forty teeth. And Bill knew that a savage never wears more than one tooth from a single head. It is not considered decent. And each tooth means—but Bill never wept over spilt milk. He felt that his own head was in imminent danger, and the knowledge annoyed and frightened him. But he did not dare let on that he feared them, and he stood up very stiff and straight, and scowled into their narrow, bloodshot eyes.

They seemed to resent his hostility. It seemed to hurt them, and Bill was amazed at the hint of reproach in their glances. A cannibal is something of a gentleman, and he would not deliberately hurt a man's feelings for the world. And Bill's resentment somehow seemed an insult to their hospitality. Bill understood how they felt, and he realized that he had behaved like a boor. But his teeth were knocking together like billiard balls, and a stern front was necessary.

But he could not look his captors in the face. They came close to him, and then one of them stepped forward and patted him on the back. He spoke, and Bill understood him. Bill knew nearly all of the Bantu languages, and the savage spoke a corruption of several.

" We thank our brother for the very fine gift," he said. " We are indeed grateful ! "

Although Bill could understand what the black devil said, a reply was utterly beyond him. The grammatical construction of Bantu overwhelmed him. Bill kept his mouth shut and stared, pretending not to understand.

The spokesman turned and beckoned. A tall, lean youth with protruding yellow teeth came quickly forward. Save for a slight hint of pity in his small eyes his face bore no expression. He held in his right hand a large, round object which Bill did not immediately recognize. The spokesman nodded and took the object by its hair. He stroked it effusively calling upon it to protect and succour him in war and in peace. He begged that the object's pity and benevolence would extend to the whole tribe. He praised the object in terms that would have embarrassed any living man. Then he turned to Bill and made a very low bow. " It came ashore before you," he said. " And we are most grateful ! "

Bill opened his eyes wide with horror. He sought

to express his agony in words, but no sound came from between his black, swollen lips. A sudden shriek would perhaps have saved him, and Bill tried hard to make a sound in his throat. But his horror lay too heavily upon him. He made a wild, horrid gesture with his right arm and collapsed in a heap upon the sand.

Three months later, Bill was taken off by a trading-sloop. He blabbered idiotically about the right of a head to decent burial and made uncomplimentary allusions to the wearing of teeth. He evidently sought to stir up anger against the cannibals, but the traders ignored his insinuations, since he was obviously mad and since the cannibals had worshipped him and given him the run of the island. The memory of Van Wyck's encrimsoned head had addled his wits.

THE PACER

AUGUST W. DERLETH AND MARC R. SCHORER

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 rumours 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 business man 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. Collings, and " Of course," again, and would perhaps have gone on, but Mr. Larkins interrupted him.

" If I may ask, on what are these rumours based ? "

" Just noises—as if some one were walking around up there." The agent made a vague sort of gesture that included the entire second storey.

" 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 rapping 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 practice 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 possession.

Mr. William Larkins had quite forgotten all about the rumours 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 rumours 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 him-

self 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 surprised 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 cannot 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 Piccadilly 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 re-read 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 loath 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 re-read 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 house agent to suppress any such story, of course.

A clock on the mantel struck ten and Mr. Larkins shot an enlightened glance toward his bedchamber. 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 colour 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 now 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 favourably. 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 meagre. 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 to-day—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 cannot announce it to the world. . . . I buried him in the back . . . I wonder if . . . neighbours 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 cannot 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 ritualistic rites of old Chinese ancestor-worshippers. 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 top-coat 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 mid-ocean when the pacing began. Mr. Larkins stopped work at once ; he cast a sidelong glance at his flashlight 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 telephone on the table caught Mr. Larkins' eye—and close by, the letter from Roberts.

The letter from Roberts—in a flash the postcript:

If you should want me, call Piccadilly 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 cannot 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 telephone 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 cannot be true. He also asserts that there was some one else in the house, for he distinctly remembers a ghastly chill about his throat, a sudden draught—as if some one had opened a door somewhere—and a steady, low pacing sound creeping away into the distance.

FLOWER VALLEY

J. S. WHITTAKER

A COPPERY sun, brazen and fierce, roasted the occupants of the little boat. Both men gasped, for this sweltering, sultry heat was a good imitation of hell. For nearly twelve hours had they been rowing, after fleeing from the ship, and now, as the horrible day drew to a close, they were almost at the Island.

From the land that lay before them blew a hot wind. Rotten, pungent, fœtid. Like the breath of something vile : it tainted the air and made them feel sick, they shivered despite the heat.

With a last despairing effort they drove the bows of the boat up on to the black muddy beach and landed. Strange reptiles slithered and slid away among the tree roots, big ugly crabs scattered swiftly as they worked feverishly to get their boat high and dry. . . . Gathering their sparse equipment together, they struggled to the top of the beach, and threw themselves down, exhausted. Their faces were burnt and cracked, their lips were black, and their eyes, ringed with violet shadows, were hard and glazed as if they were being consumed by internal fires. They bore upon them the unmistakable signs of having been through some horrible ordeal.

The big man shook himself and sat up. " Hey, Joe, let's have a look at that drawing."

The other eyed him thoughtfully with dark speculative eyes, but made no move.

" Joe, let's have a look at that map. Come on," his voice was irritable.

" Aw. What do you want to look at it for ? " the little man asked.

" Well, how do I know. . . . I mean, how do we know if we're in the right place or not ? I mean . . . well . . . if . . ." His voice trailed away.

" I know just what you mean, and just what you're thinking," the other replied in a voice like ice. " There's only me an' you for all that gold now. . . . I'm not daft, Jim, nor blind. The map's stopping with me. . . . See ? . . . We're on Flower Island, an' you know that. . . . An' we're heading for Flower Valley, an' you know the way as well as I do. So cut out all this looking business——"

" But, Joe, I wasn't thinking of——"

" Well, don't think, Jim. It might get unhealthy for you. We'll look at the map when it's necessary, not before." The little man rose to his feet wearily. " Come on. Let's get going."

They tramped on till nearly midnight, cursing and swearing bitterly at their appalling journey.

The air grew steadily worse as they travelled further up the valley, till at last they were compelled to stop, choking and gasping with the terrible stench.

" My God, Joe, ain't it hell ? "

Joe spat forcibly and disgustedly, then gasped out an agreement. " We'd better look for a place to sleep, Jim. We can't go any further to-night."

" You're right. But we can't sleep down here. . . . We'd never waken up again," he added grimly. " Let's go up the hill a bit."

Presently they came across a small cave, running back off a rocky ledge. There they halted.

While Joe unpacked their meagre kit, Jim collected some dead wood, for the night was raw and they both were chattering with cold. Lying back in the cave

an hour later, feeling more content, now that they had some food under their belts, they examined the map and discussed the treasure for the thousandth time.

" Do you think it'll be there yet ? " Jim put the question rather timorously.

" Certainly," the reply held a wealth of scorn. " All the rest's dead. Nobody knows it's there but us. . . . Didn't Hook say that only him an' another fellow got away ? . . . An' that other fellow got drowned, Hook said so. . . . Of course it's there," he sneered, " unless Hook's ghost has shifted it. Eh ? " he chuckled.

" Don't talk like that, Joe. You scare me," his companion begged.

The little man glanced craftily at him, his eyes glinting cruelly beneath half-closed eye-lids. " Scare you," he repeated. " Why ? . . . Oh, because you killed Hook ? . . . That it ? "

" Shut up, Joe. Shut up, damn you." Jim glanced round fearfully in the gloom. " Sometimes I think he's beside me. . . . I can't forget him. . . . I can't . . ." his voice quavered. " You know, Joe, I can't forget what he said when he was . . . when he was . . ."

" Dying," said the other.

" Aye . . . dying . . . yes . . ." he hurried on, " He said, anyway, Jim, you'll have plenty of nice flowers when you die, if you're not careful. . . . An' he was laughing like hell when he snuffed it. What did he mean, Joey ? . . . What do you think he meant ? "

" I don't know," said his partner, " How should I ? . . . Anyway, why not ask him ? . . . He's over there, Jim. . . ." he flung his hand towards the darkest part of the cave.

" My God ! Where ? . . . Where ? " Jim scrambled

hastily to his feet, he was white and shaking visibly; apprehensively he glared around, while his partner roared in hysterical mirth, his cracking voice betraying the state of his nerves. Finally he ceased through exhaustion.

Jim glared down at him, the ruddy light from the fire glinting on his bronzed face and showing the twitching jaw-muscle. One side of his mouth was twisted up revealing a big white canine tooth as if he was snarling.

He bent over Joe and tapped his shoulder. " Say Joe, another funny remark like that from you an' I'll finish you. Get that," his voice was deadly, for a moment his eyes burnt into the others, then he turned away.

Joe lay very still after that, watching his movements; within his chest his heart raced queerly, he felt sick. Jim was dangerous ! It was funny, he'd always thought Jim was on the soft side, and had completely dominated him till now.

Jim busied himself piling the fire near the cave-mouth, then his work done, he came and sat down beside Joe. The little man watched him warily.

" Listen, Joe," he spoke softly and with a hint of reproach in his tones, " I've done all the dirty work up till now. . . . I drowned Hook's pal. . . . You didn't know that . . . Hook thought it was an accident, but it wasn't. . . . An' I killed Hook. . . . You know I tortured him for nearly an hour before he'd tell. . . . Now at night I see his face, and his feet where I roasted them. . . . An' I dream about him. . . . I dream about him all night. . . . He chases me in my sleep, an' he runs on his hands with his burnt feet in the air, an' he keeps laughing an' shouting, ' You'll get plenty of flowers when you die, Jim. . . . Plenty o' flowers. . . .' My nerves are going to bits. . . . I've two deaths on my mind. . . .

Then there's all that we went through getting here. . . . Hook. . . . Hook. . . . He's everywhere. . . . Then you start scaring me, Joe. . . . Lay off it. I'm telling you, lay off if——"

The little man grinned inwardly, although his face wore a very sympathetic expression as he leaned forward and clapped his partner on the shoulder. " I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't know it was so bad. Don't worry, son, we'll be O.K. I'll pull you through."

The fire died down, and the heavy silent hours of morning lay across the hills. The two men crouched close for warmth, they drowsed uneasily. Once Joe shivered and sighed, causing Jim to start uneasily and glance fearfully round the cave. The morning air was coating the walls and floor with a layer of icy dew. . . .

What caused Joey to waken he never knew, but certainly he found himself awake with every nerve tensed and alert. For a long moment he lay motionless, his eyes searching the cave. Nothing was wrong. Nothing as far as he could see. He came to his feet with a bound, suddenly afraid. Jim was gone ! His equipment too. . . . The big sap, desert him would he? Joe smiled grimly, he might go far, but he'd never find the treasure. He fingered his neck thoughtfully where hung the pouch that contained the map. His idly groping fingers met . . . nothing ! With a curse, he tore open his shirt to verify his fears, it was gone ! Within his shirt lay the thin leather thong, neatly cut, that the pouch had swung on. He cursed bitterly, fear and rage hammering in his breast.

What was that ? Hurriedly he crossed to the fire and picked up the object that had caught his eye. The pouch ! And the map too ! He puzzled on this for a time, but the stub of a pencil cleared all wonder from his mind. Jim, for some obscure reason, had made a copy of the map and then had replaced the original. " P'raps he was going to put it back round my neck,"

Joe spoke aloud, " then he could have sloped off any time with the copy to fall back on. P'raps he was going to have my company till we were nearly there, then make a dash for it. . . . Anyway he's made a break for it now. . . . Damn him. . . . The lousy pup." He grated his teeth, then spat viciously into the fire as if to express his thoughts the better.

After piling the fire up again he sat down to carefully examine the map, for the uneasy conviction lay at the back of his mind that Jim might have altered the original. . . .

Dawn was breaking as he straightened his aching back; the map was unaltered, as far as he could see. Just as he folded the plan a gust of wind blew it open, and for the hundredth time, he gazed down on the faintly pencilled words: " The . . . ar. delicat. creatures . . . handl . . . as women." He frowned as he doubled the map over. What did the words mean? What were the missing words? Hook, he knew was a great joker. Was this one of his jokes? Feeling curiously troubled and uneasy, he finally gave it up, he could make no sense of the words. Fifteen minutes later he was travelling swiftly and vengefully on his partner's trail.

Two days of hard and hellish going, and he stood looking down into a minor valley that lay to his left. Even to his uneducated mind the great beauty of the place was evident. Stretching far between cool, grey hills, the bright emerald of grass and foliage flowed like a river. The air was full of sweet and new-grown scents, flowers in thousands and in innumerable colours splashed the green. Tall shrubs, trees, flowers, and grass, all had the new clean look of heaven. He drank the scents in eagerly and for a time feasted his eyes on the beauty of the valley. . . . Then material thoughts and desires surged uppermost. . . . With his automatic clutched grimly in his hand he crouched swiftly

and dived quickly downwards into the valley of treasure. . . . Flower Valley. The sun was beginning his downward track before he saw Jim. Hastily he slipped his pack off, there was going to be trouble, and the quickest would last the longest !

He glanced at his gun, made sure it was loaded, then slowly worked his way down to the little depression where he had seen his partner moving. . . .

Ten minutes passed before he saw Jim again, this time he was in a curious attitude. To Joe he appeared to be examining something on the ground, for he lay outstretched, face down. Once Joey thought that his arm moved and that his body heaved, but for the next hour he was still. Ominously so. A queer feeling crept over Joey, a feeling of fear. Jim looked as if he was dead !

He worked his way nearer to Jim until not ten yards separated them, and for a time watched him closely, but he could detect no sign of life. The thought crossed his mind that Jim might have spotted him first, and that he was only shamming to lead him into a trap. . . . But he banished the thought when a little bird alighted on Jim's shoulder. . . . Yet he was not wholly satisfied. Finally he tried an old trick. With his face close to the ground he shouted as hard as he could : " Jim. Jim. Help ! Help ! " . . . but there came no sign. Desperately he threw his gun forward and a single vicious crack split the stillness. He aimed to miss, but near enough to let Jim know that he was firing at him. . . . His partner never moved !

With something akin to terror, Joe stood up, and stepped forward. What had happened ? Jim had been alive and well apparently, not long ago. . . . Cautiously he moved till he stood over his late comrade.

As he stood there wondering, he became aware of a strong heady perfume, so sweet that he felt sick. His

head seemed curiously light, and he felt his heart throb painfully in his breast. With a shudder he looked away from the body and tentatively sniffed at the air. . . . To his great surprise he felt himself reel! Alarmed, he glanced hastily around and saw a huge clump of ugly flowers not a yard from his left hand. A deathly looking shade of purple, that reminded him of some one being strangled. Their mottled stems of grey and green sent a feeling of revulsion through him. The harsh scream of a bird, wheeling high in the air above him, jarred upon his nerves and made him tremble. In terror he changed his position so that the wind carried the scents of the blossoms away from him.

Jim was dead. Yes, dead as a door-nail. Joey had pressed his ear close to his back, but could detect no sign of life. Wondering, he gazed at the body, then moved by some sudden impulse, he stooped quickly and rolled the still form over. . . .

With bulging eyes and a curious sickness in his throat, he staggered back, horrified! It was no man that he gazed down upon. It was a THING! A sickening, half-skinned THING! . . . Crushing down the wave of nausea that surged within him, he bent closer and examined what had been Jim. No face! Just a red raw mass. All the clothes were missing too, where the body had touched the ground. From forehead to shin-bones, a long red blistering strip. . . . He looked as if he had been splashed with molten metal. . . . His nausea swept over him and took the upper hand, he felt his nerve go, and fled madly for about fifty yards before an unseen root brought him crashing and half-stunned to the ground. He lay there, blubbering pitifully and mouthing incoherent things. . . . The mood passed, and weakly he sat up and tried to collect his scattered nerves. This would never do, acting like a kid. . . . Gosh, a dead man

shouldn't scare him, he'd seen plenty. . . . He looked towards the body and shuddered nevertheless. A faint scent of the heady perfume came borne to him on the breeze that ruffled the grass, and that breeze brought inspiration. . . . Of course, that was it! Jim, probably weak, with his forced march to the valley, had been knocked out with the scent of the purple flowers, and the ants had got him. That was it! He stood up, pleased at his own cleverness. Jim had always been a fool, he wouldn't be caught like that. No fear. He knew what he had to watch for, ants and the purple flowers. With tight lips and grim face, he strode determinedly back to the dead man

The treasure could not be far away, because Jim had been poking among the tangle of roots and flowers when he had last seen him. Carefully he examined the map. . . . "Fourteen paces from the tree into the Garden." . . . Garden? . . . He could see no signs of cultivation. What did Hook——He had it! . . . Hook meant the patch of flowers that faced him. Strangely enough they bore an ordered look as if they had been planted with deliberation.

". . . Eleven, twelve, thirteen," he spoke aloud, then stopped abruptly, his eyes staring. Exactly in front of him lay a small black case, iron-bound! A stab of joy and exultation shot through him. All for him now! Eagerly he stepped forward, brushing the tall red lilies to one side, smashing and breaking the pale green macaroni-like stems, in his haste. Bending, he seized one corner and tugged at it. It was heavy, he could not move it. Cursing, he strained again, then he saw the cause of its solidity, a root had grown over and along one side, pinning it fast to the ground. Savagely he wrenched at the root, but it was tough and would not break. He swore aloud. With a curse, he lifted his heavy shod boot and kicked wildly among the long, thin, watery stems; with sickening snapping

sounds they broke, and fiercely he trod the stems and roots down, down, down—— Hell ! What was that ? A red-hot needle-like stab ran through his hand and arm. Sweat broke out upon his forehead. He had forgotten the ants ! In terror he looked at his hand, but there were no ants to be seen, although his hand was red and swelling visibly. A hot and numbing pain was creeping up to his shoulder, very difficult to describe. It was agony.

With reeling head he stooped once more, and again he was struck, this time in the neck. His neck felt to be on fire, terrific pain stabbed and stabbed again round his shoulders and round his throat. Slowly his legs buckled under him, and cursing feebly he sank to the ground, where he squatted on his haunches, cursing and laughing feebly and rubbing his hands together in childish bewilderment. What was wrong ? . . . Now and again a fresh spasm would wrack through him, filling his veins with molten fire before it merged into the one huge pain that was he ; he was all pain and nothing else. . . .

A great wave of terror swept through him, there were no insects in sight, no birds, no form of living life, no vapours, nothing at all that could do him any harm. With sweat drenching his face and body, he struggled desperately to rise, the effort made him groan, but at last he succeeded, and weaving weakly to and fro, he stood at last erect. Every pulsation seemed to send volcanic fires sweeping through him. . . . It was hell ! . . .

With fast-going sight he looked round. . . . No living thing to be seen. . . . He reeled and automatically clutched at the nearest thing, a great bunch of lilies. The sickly stems broke as his weight hung upon them for an instant, he staggered, then crashed full length into the clump, smashing and crushing the clump completely. . . .

He rolled over on his back and with a great sigh, opened his eyes; Jim was in full view. Some of his bones were showing already. . . . He wondered how long it would be before he was like that. . . . An explosion seemed to take place in his head, a wave of violet light engulfed his eyes . . . then darkness engulfed him. He was blind! Strangely enough, he felt no fear, and as that final oblivion claimed him, a childish wonderment awoke within him. He died not thinking of his Maker, but wondering what it was all about.

Overhead, the broken stems of the great lilies waved and shivered in the faint breeze that stirred the valley. . . . From each broken stem little jets of watery fluid spurted spasmodically, and great blisters appeared on the still forms that lay in their shadows. . . . A blister would appear . . . it would break and leave raw flesh, then blister again, break . . . blister . . . break . . . blister . . . break. . . .

A voice came croaking out of the darkness. . . . "You'll get plenty of flowers when you die. . . . Ha, ha, ha! The lilies are delicate creatures, and you should have handled them the same as women. . . . Tenderly. . . . So very tenderly. . . . Ha, ha!" . . .

The shade of Hook fled . . . and the great lilies were swallowed up in the tropic night.

THE RATS IN THE WALLS

H. P. LOVECRAFT

ON July 16, 1923, I moved into Exham Priory after the last workman had finished his labours. The restoration had been a stupendous task, for little had remained of the deserted pile but a shell-like ruin; yet because it had been the seat of my ancestors I let no expense deter me. The place had not been inhabited since the reign of James the First, when a tragedy of intensely hideous, though largely unexplained, nature had struck down the master, five of his children, and several servants; and driven forth under a cloud of suspicion and terror the third son, my lineal progenitor and the only survivor of the abhorred line.

With this sole heir denounced as a murderer, the estate had reverted to the Crown, nor had the accused man made any attempt to exculpate himself or regain his property. Shaken by some horror greater than that of conscience or the law, and expressing only a frantic wish to exclude the ancient edifice from his sight and memory, Walter de la Poer, eleventh Baron Exham, fled to Virginia and there founded the family which by the next century had become known as Delapore.

Exham Priory had remained untenanted, though later allotted to the estates of the Norrys family and much studied because of its peculiarly composite architecture; an architecture involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders—Roman, and even Drudic or native

Cymric, if legends speak truly. This foundation was a very singular thing, being merged on one side with the solid limestone of the precipice from whose brink the priory overlooked a desolate valley three miles west of the village of Anchester.

Architects and antiquarians loved to examine this strange relic of forgotten centuries, but the country folk hated it. They had hated it hundreds of years before, when my ancestors lived there, and they hated it now, with the moss and mould of abandonment on it. I had not been a day in Anchester before I knew I came of an accursed house. And this week workmen have blown up Exham Priory, and are busy obliterating the traces of its foundations.

The bare statistics of my ancestry I had always known, together with the fact that my first American forbear had come to the colonies under a strange cloud. Of details, however, I had been kept wholly ignorant through the policy of reticence always maintained by the Delapores. Unlike our planter neighbours, we seldom boasted of crusading ancestors or other mediæval and Renaissance heroes; nor was any kind of tradition handed down except what may have been recorded in the sealed envelope left before the Civil War by every squire to his eldest son for posthumous opening. The glories we cherished were those achieved since the migration; the glories of a proud and honourable, if somewhat reserved and unsocial, Virginian line.

During the war our fortunes were extinguished and our whole existence changed by the burning of Carfax, our home on the banks of the James. My grandfather, advanced in years, had perished in that incendiary outrage, and with him the envelope that bound us all to the past. I can recall that fire to-day as I saw it then at the age of seven, with the Federal soldiers shouting, the women screaming, and the negroes howling and

praying. My father was in the army, defending Richmond, and after many formalities my mother and I were passed through the lines to join him.

When the war ended we all moved north, whence my mother had come ; and I grew to manhood, middle age, and ultimate wealth as a stolid Yankee. Neither my father nor I ever knew what our hereditary envelope had contained, and as I merged into the greyness of Massachusetts business life I lost all interest in the mysteries which evidently lurked far back in my family tree. Had I suspected their nature, how gladly would I have left Exham Priory to its moss, bats, and cobwebs !

My father died in 1904, but without any message to leave to me, or to my only child, Alfred, a motherless boy of ten. It was this boy who reversed the order of family information, for although I could give him only jesting conjectures about the past, he wrote me of some very interesting ancestral legends when the late war took him to England in 1917 as an aviation officer. Apparently the Delapores had a colourful and perhaps sinister history, for a friend of my son's, Captain Edward Norrys of the Royal Flying Corps, dwelt near the family seat at Anchester and related some peasant superstitions which few novelists could equal for wildness and incredibility. Norrys himself, of course, did not take them seriously ; but they amused my son and made good material for his letters to me. It was this legendry which definitely turned my attention to my transatlantic heritage, and made me resolve to purchase and restore the family seat which Norrys showed to Alfred in its picturesque desertion, and offered to get for him at a surprisingly reasonable figure, since his own uncle was the present owner.

I bought Exham Priory in 1918, but was almost immediately distracted from my plans of restoration by the return of my son as a maimed invalid. During

the two years that he lived I thought of nothing but his care, having even placed my business under the direction of partners.

In 1921, as I found myself bereaved and aimless, a retired manufacturer no longer young, I resolved to divert my remaining years with my new possession. Visiting Anchester in December, I was entertained by Captain Norrys, a plump, amiable young man who had thought much of my son, and secured his assistance in gathering plans and anecdotes to guide in the coming restoration. Exham Priory itself I saw without emotion, a jumble of tottering mediæval ruins covered with lichens and honeycombed with rooks' nests, perched perilously upon a precipice, and denuded of floors or other interior features save the stone walls of the separate towers.

As I gradually recovered the image of the edifice as it had been when my ancestors left it over three centuries before, I began to hire workmen for the reconstruction. In every case I was forced to go outside the immediate locality, for the Anchester villagers had an almost unbelievable fear and hatred of the place. This sentiment was so great that it was sometimes communicated to the outside labourers, causing numerous desertions; whilst its scope appeared to include both the priory and its ancient family.

My son had told me that he was somewhat avoided during his visits because he was a de la Poer, and I now found myself subtly ostracized for a like reason until I convinced the peasants how little I knew of my heritage. Even then they sullenly disliked me, so that I had to collect most of the village traditions through the meditations of Norrys. What the people could not forgive, perhaps, was that I had come to restore a symbol so abhorrent to them; for, rationally or not, they viewed Exham Priory as nothing less than a haunt of fiends and werewolves.

Piecing together the tales which Norrys collected for me, and supplementing them with the accounts of several savants who had studied the ruins, I deduced that Exham Priory stood on the site of a prehistoric temple; a Druidical or ante-Druidical thing which must have been contemporary with Stonehenge. That indescribable rites had been celebrated there few doubted, and there were unpleasant tales of the transference of these rites into the Cybele worship which the Romans had introduced.

Inscriptions still visible in the sub-cellar bore such unmistakable letters as "DIV . . . OPS . . . MAGNA. MAT . . ." sign of the Magna Mater whose dark worship was once vainly forbidden to Roman citizens. Anchester had been the camp of the third Augustan legion, as many remains attest, and it was said that the temple of Cybele was splendid and thronged with worshippers who performed nameless ceremonies at the bidding of a Phrygian priest. Tales added that the fall of the old religion did not end the orgies at the temple, but that the priests lived on in the new faith without real change. Likewise was it said that the rites did not vanish with the Roman power, and that certain among the Saxons added to what remained of the temple, and gave it the essential outline it subsequently preserved, making it the centre of a cult feared throughout the heptarchy. About A.D. 1000 the place is mentioned in a chronicle as being a substantial stone priory housing a strange and powerful monastic order, and surrounded by extensive gardens which needed no walls to exclude a frightened populace. It was never destroyed by the Danes, though after the Norman Conquest it must have declined tremendously; since there was no impediment when Henry the Third granted the site to my ancestor, Gilbert de la Poer, First Baron Exham, in 1261.

Of my family before this date there is no evil report,

but something strange must have happened then. In one chronicle there is a reference to a de la Poer as " cursed of God " in 1307, whilst village legendry had nothing but evil and frantic fear to tell of the castle that went up on the foundations of the old temple and priory. The fireside tales were of the most grisly description, all the ghastlier because of their frightened reticence and cloudy evasiveness. They represented my ancestors as a race of hereditary dæmons beside whom Gilles de Rais and the Marquis de Sade would seem the veriest tyros, and hinted whisperingly at their responsibility for the occasional disappearances of villagers through several generations.

The worst characters, apparently, were the barons and their direct heirs ; at least, most was whispered about these. If of healthier inclinations, it was said, an heir would early and mysteriously die to make way for another more typical scion. There seemed to be an inner cult in the family, presided over by the head of the house, and sometimes closed except to a few members. Temperament rather than ancestry was evidently the basis of this cult, for it was entered by several who married into the family. Lady Margaret Trevor from Cornwall, wife of Godfrey, the second son of the fifth baron, became a favourite bane of children all over the countryside, and the dæmon heroine of a particularly horrible old ballad not yet extinct near the Welsh border. Preserved in balladry, too, though not illustrating the same point, is the hideous tale of Lady Mary de la Poer, who shortly after her marriage to the Earl of Shrewsfield was killed by him and his mother, both of the slayers being absolved and blessed by the priest to whom they confessed what they dared not repeat to the world.

These myths and ballads, typical as they were of crude superstition, repelled me greatly. Their persistence, and their application to so long a line of my

ancestors, were especially annoying ; whilst the imputations of monstrous habits proved unpleasantly reminiscent of the one known scandal of my immediate forbears—the case of my cousin, young Randolph Delapore of Carfax, who went among the negroes and became a Voodoo priest after he returned from the Mexican War.

I was much less disturbed by the vaguer tales of wails and howlings in the barren windswept valley beneath the limestone cliff ; of the graveyard stenches after the spring rains ; of the floundering, squealing white thing on which Sir John Clave's horse had trod one night in a lonely field ; and of the servant who had gone mad at what he saw in the priory in the full light of day. These things were hackneyed spectral lore, and I was at that time a pronounced sceptic. The accounts of vanished peasants were less to be dismissed, though not especially significant in view of mediæval custom. Prying curiosity meant death, and more than one severed head had been publicly shown on the bastions—now effaced—around Exham Priory.

A few of the tales were exceedingly picturesque, and made me wish I had learnt more of comparative mythology in my youth. There was, for instance, the belief that a legion of bat-winged devils kept witches' sabbath each night at the priory—a legion whose sustenance might explain the disproportionate abundance of coarse vegetables harvested in the vast gardens. And, most vivid of all, there was the dramatic epic of the rats—the scampering army of obscene vermin which had burst forth from the castle three months after the tragedy that doomed it to desertion—the lean, filthy, ravenous army which had swept all before it and devoured fowl, cats, dogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent. Around that unforgetable rodent army a whole separate cycle of myths revolves, for it scattered among the

village homes and brought curses and horrors in its train.

Such was the lore that assailed me as I pushed to completion, with an elderly obstinacy, the work of restoring my ancestral home. It must not be imagined for a moment that these tales formed my principal psychological environment. On the other hand, I was constantly praised and encouraged by Captain Norrys and the antiquarians who surrounded and aided me. When the task was done, over two years after its commencement, I viewed the great rooms, wainscotted walls, vaulted ceilings, mullioned windows, and broad staircases with a pride which fully compensated for the prodigious expense of the restoration.

Every attribute of the Middle Ages was cunningly reproduced, and the new parts blended perfectly with the original walls and foundations. The seat of my fathers was complete, and I looked forward to redeeming at last the local fame of the line which ended in me. I would reside here permanently, and prove that a de la Poer (for I had adopted again the original spelling of the name) need not be a fiend. My comfort was perhaps augmented by the fact that, although Exham Priory was mediævally fitted, its interior was in truth wholly new and free from old vermin and old ghosts alike.

As I have said, I moved in on July 16, 1923. My household consisted of seven servants and nine cats, of which latter species I am particularly fond. My eldest cat, " Nigger-Man," was seven years old and had come with me from my home in Bolton, Massachusetts ; the others I had accumulated whilst living with Captain Norrys' family during the restoration of the priory.

For five days our routine proceeded with the utmost placidity, my time being spent mostly in the codification of old family data. I had now obtained some very

circumstantial accounts of the final tragedy and flight of Walter de la Poer, which I conceived to be the probable contents of the hereditary paper lost in the fire at Carfax. It appeared that my ancestor was accused with much reason of having killed all the other members of his household, except four servant confederates, in their sleep, about two weeks after a shocking discovery which changed his whole demeanour, but which, except by implication, he disclosed to no one save perhaps the servants who assisted him and afterward fled beyond reach.

This deliberate slaughter, which included a father, three brothers, and two sisters, was largely condoned by the villagers, and so slackly treated by the law that its perpetrator escaped honoured, unharmed, and undisguised to Virginia; the general whispered sentiment being that he had purged the land of an immemorial curse. What discovery had prompted an act so terrible I could scarcely even conjecture. Walter de la Poer must have known for years the sinister tales about his family, so that this material could have given him no fresh impulse. Had he, then, witnessed some appalling ancient rite, or stumbled upon some frightful and revealing symbol in the priory or its vicinity? He was reputed to have been a shy, gentle youth in England. In Virginia he seemed not so much hard or bitter as harassed and apprehensive. He was spoken of in the diary of another gentleman adventurer, Francis Harley of Bellview, as a man of unexampled justice, honour, and delicacy.

On July 22 occurred the first incident which, though lightly dismissed at the time, takes on a preternatural significance in relation to later events. It was so simple as to be almost negligible, and could not possibly have been noticed under the circumstances; for it must be recalled that since I was in a building practically fresh and new except for the walls,

and surrounded by a well-balanced staff of servitors, apprehension would have been absurd despite the locality.

What I afterward remembered is merely this—that my old black cat, whose moods I know so well, was undoubtedly alert and anxious to an extent wholly out of keeping with his natural character. He roved from room to room, restless and disturbed, and sniffed constantly about the walls which formed part of the old Gothic structure. I realize how trite this sounds—like the inevitable dog in the ghost story, which always growls before his master sees the sheeted figure—yet I cannot consistently suppress it.

The following day a servant complained of restlessness among all the cats in the house. He came to me in my study, a lofty west room on the second story, with groined arches, black oak panelling, and a triple Gothic window overlooking the limestone cliff and desolate valley; and even as he spoke I saw the jetty form of Nigger-Man creeping along the west wall and scratching at the new panels which overlaid the ancient stone.

I told the man that there must be some singular odour or emanation from the old stonework, imperceptible to human senses, but affecting the delicate organs of cats even through the new woodwork. This I truly believed, and when the fellow suggested the presence of mice or rats, I mentioned that there had been no rats there for three hundred years, and that even the field-mice of the surrounding country could hardly be found in these high walls, where they had never been known to stray. That afternoon I called on Captain Norrys, and he assured me that it would be quite incredible for field-mice to infest the priory in such a sudden and unprecedented fashion.

That night, dispensing as usual with a valet, I retired in the west tower chamber which I had chosen

as my own, reached from the study by a stone staircase and short gallery—the former partly ancient, the latter entirely restored. This room was circular, very high, and without wainscotting, being hung with arras which I had myself chosen in London.

Seeing that Nigger-Man was with me, I shut the heavy Gothic door and retired by the light of the electric bulbs which so cleverly counterfeited candles, finally switching off the light and sinking on the carved, and canopied four-poster, with the venerable cat in his accustomed place across my feet. I did not draw the curtains, but gazed out at the narrow north window which I faced. There was a suspicion of aurora in the sky, and the delicate traceries of the window were pleasantly silhouetted.

At some time I must have fallen quietly asleep, for I recall a distinct sense of having strange dreams when the cat started violently from his placid position. I saw him in the faint auroral glow, head strained forward, forefeet on my ankles, and hind feet stretched behind. He was looking intensely at a point on the wall somewhat west of the window, a point which to my eye had nothing to mark it, but toward which all my attention was now directed.

And as I watched, I knew that Nigger-Man was not vainly excited. Whether the arras actually moved I cannot say. I think it did, very slightly. But what I can swear to is that behind it I heard a low, distinct scurrying as of rats or mice. In a moment the cat had jumped bodily on the screening tapestry, bringing the affected section to the floor with his weight, and exposing a damp ancient wall of stone ; patched here and there by the restorers, and devoid of any trace of rodent prowlers.

Nigger-Man raced up and down the floor by this part of the wall, clawing the fallen arras and seemingly trying at times to insert a paw between the wall and

the oaken floor. He found nothing, and after a time returned warily to his place across my feet. I had not moved, but I did not sleep again that night.

In the morning I questioned all the servants, and found that none of them had noticed anything unusual save that the cook remembered the actions of a cat which had rested on her window-sill. This cat had howled at some unknown hour of the night, awaking the cook in time for her to see him dart purposefully out of the open door and down the stairs. I drowsed away the noontime, and in the afternoon called again on Captain Norrys, who became exceedingly interested in what I told him. The odd incidents—so slight yet so curious—appealed to his sense of the picturesque, and elicited from him a number of reminiscences of local ghostly lore. We were genuinely perplexed at the presence of rats, and Norrys lent me some traps and paris-green, which I had the servants place in strategic localities when I returned.

I retired early, being very sleepy, but was harassed by dreams of the most horrible sort. I seemed to be looking down from an immense height upon a twilit grotto, knee-deep with filth, where a white-bearded dæmon swineherd drove about with his staff a flock of fungous, flabby beasts whose appearance filled me with unutterable loathing. Then, as the swineherd paused and nodded over his task, a mighty swarm of rats rained down on the stinking abyss and fell to devouring beasts and man alike.

From this terrific vision I was abruptly awaked by the motions of the Nigger-Man, who had been sleeping as usual across my feet. This time I did not have to question the source of his snarls and hisses, and of the fear which made him sink his claws into my ankle, unconscious of their effect; for on every side of the chamber the walls were alive with nauseous sound—the verminous slithering of ravenous, gigantic rats,

There was now no aurora to show the state of the arras —the fallen section of which had been replaced—but I was not too frightened to switch on the light.

As the bulbs leapt into radiance I saw a hideous shaking all over the tapestry, causing the somewhat peculiar designs to execute a singular dance of death. This motions disappeared almost at once, and the sound with it. Springing out of bed, I poked at the arras with the long handle of a warming-pan that rested near, and lifted one section to see what lay beneath. There was nothing but the patched stone wall, and even the cat had lost his tense realization of abnormal presences. When I examined the circular trap that had been placed in the room, I found all of the openings sprung, though no trace remained of what had been caught and had escaped.

Further sleep was out of the question, so, lighting a candle, I opened the door and went out in the gallery toward the stairs to my study, Nigger-Man following at my heels. Before we had reached the stone steps, however, the cat darted ahead of me and vanished down the ancient flight. As I descended the stairs myself I became suddenly aware of sounds in the great room below; sounds of a nature which could not be mistaken.

The oak-panelled walls were alive with rats, scampering and milling, whilst Nigger-Man was racing about with the fury of a baffled hunter. Reaching the bottom, I switched on the light, which did not this time cause the noise to subside. The rats continued their riot, stampeding with such force and distinctness that I could finally assign to their motions a definite direction. These creatures, in numbers apparently inexhaustible, were engaged in one stupendous migration from inconceivable heights to some depth conceivably, or inconceivably, below.

I now heard steps in the corridor, and in another

moment two servants pushed open the massive door. They were searching the house for some unknown source of disturbance which had thrown all the cats into a snarling panic and caused them to plunge precipitately down several flights of stairs and squat, yowling, before the closed door to the sub-cellar. I asked them if they had heard the rats, but they replied in the negative. And when I turned to call their attention to the sounds in the panels, I realized that the noise had ceased.

With the two men I went down to the door of the sub-cellar, but found the cats already dispersed. Later, I resolved I would explore the crypt below; but for the present I merely made a round of the traps. All were sprung, yet all were tenantless. Satisfying myself that no one had heard the rats save the felines and me, I sat in my study till morning, thinking profoundly, and recalling every scrap of legend I had unearthed concerning the building I inhabited.

I slept some in the forenoon, leaning back in the one comfortable library chair which my mediæval plan of furnishing could not banish. Later I telephoned to Captain Norrys, who came over and helped me explore the sub-cellar.

Absolutely nothing untoward was found, although we could not repress a thrill at the knowledge that this vault was built by Roman hands. Every low arch and massive pillar was Roman—not the debased Romanesque of the bungling Saxons, but the severe and harmonious classicism of the age of the Cæsars; indeed, the walls abounded with inscriptions familiar to the antiquarians who had repeatedly explored the place—things like "P. GETAE. PROP . . . TEMP . . . DONA . . ." and "L. PRAEC . . . VS . . . PONTIFI . . . ATYS . . ."

The reference to Atys made me shiver, for I had read Catullus and knew something of the hideous rites

of the Eastern god, whose worship was so mixed with that of Cybele. Norrys and I, by the light of lanterns, tried to interpret the odd and nearly effaced designs on certain irregularly rectangular blocks of stone generally held to be altars, but could make nothing of them. We remembered that one pattern, a sort of rayed sun, was held by students to imply a non-Roman origin, suggesting that these altars had merely been adopted by the Roman priests from some older and perhaps original temple on the same site. On one of these blocks were some brown stains which made me wonder. The largest, in the centre of the room, had certain features on the upper surface which indicated its connection with fire—probably burnt-offerings.

Such were the sights in that crypt before whose door the cats had howled, and where Norrys and I now determined to pass the night. Couches were brought down by the servants, who were told not to mind any nocturnal actions of the cats, and Nigger-Man was admitted as much for help as for companionship. We decided to keep the great oak door—a modern reproduction with slits for ventilation—tightly closed ; and, with this attended to, we retired with lanterns still burning to await whatever might occur.

The vault was very deep in the foundations of the priory, and undoubtedly far down on the face of the beetling limestone cliff overlooking the waste valley. That it had been the goal of the scuffling and unexplainable rats I could not doubt, though why I could not tell. As we lay there expectantly, I found my vigil occasionally mixed with half-formed dreams from which the uneasy motions of the cat across my feet would rouse me.

These dreams were not wholesome, but horribly like the one I had had the night before. I saw again

the twilit grotto, and the swineherd with his unmentionable fungous beasts wallowing in filth, and as I looked at these things they seemed nearer and more distinct—so distinct that I could almost observe their features. Then I did observe the flabby features of one of them—and awoke with such a scream that Nigger-Man started up, whilst Captain Norrys, who had not slept, laughed considerably. Norrys might have laughed more—or perhaps less—had he known what it was that made me scream. But I did not remember myself till later. Ultimate horror often paralyses memory in a merciful way.

Norrys waked me when the phenomena began. Out of the same frightful dream I was called by his gentle shaking and his urging to listen to the cats. Indeed, there was much to listen to, for beyond the closed door at the head of the stone steps was a veritable nightmare of feline yelling and clawing, whilst Nigger-Man, unmindful of his kindred outside, was running excitedly around the bare stone walls, in which I heard the same babel of scurrying rats that had troubled me the night before.

An acute terror now rose within me, for here were anomalies which nothing normal could well explain. These rats, if not the creatures of a madness which I shared with the cats alone, must be burrowing and sliding in Roman walls I had thought to be of solid limestone blocks . . . unless perhaps the action of water through more than seventeen centuries had eaten winding tunnels which rodent bodies had worn clear and ample. . . . But even so, the spectral horror was no less ; for if these were living vermin why did not Norrys hear their disgusting commotion ? Why did he urge me to watch Nigger-Man and listen to the cats outside, and why did he guess wildly and vaguely at what could have aroused them ?

By the time I had managed to tell him, as rationally

as I could, what I thought I was hearing, my ears gave me the last fading impression of the scurrying; which had retreated *still downward*, far underneath this deepest of sub-cellars, till it seemed as if the whole cliff below were riddled with questing rats. Norrys was not as sceptical as I had anticipated, but instead seemed profoundly moved. He motioned to me to notice that the cats at the door had ceased their clamour, as if giving up the rats for lost; whilst Nigger-Man had a burst of renewed restlessness, and was clawing frantically around the bottom of the large stone altar in the centre of the room, which was nearer Norrys' couch than mine.

My fear of the unknown was at this point very great. Something astounding had occurred, and I saw that Captain Norrys, a younger, stouter, and presumably more naturally materialistic man, was affected fully as much as myself—perhaps because of his lifelong and intimate familiarity with local legend. We could for the moment do nothing but watch the old black cat as he pawed with decreasing fervour at the base of the altar, occasionally looking up and mewing to me in that persuasive manner which he used when he wished me to perform some favour for him.

Norrys now took a lantern close to the altar and examined the place where Nigger-Man was pawing; silently kneeling and scraping away the lichens of centuries which joined the massive pre-Roman block to the tesselated floor. He did not find anything, and was about to abandon his efforts when I noticed a trivial circumstance which made me shudder, even though it implied nothing more than I had already imagined.

I told him of it, and we both looked at its almost imperceptible manifestation with the fixedness of fascinated discovery and acknowledgment. It was only this—that the flame of the lantern set down near the

altar was slightly but certainly flickering from a draught of air which it had not before received, and which came indubitably from the crevices between floor and altar where Norrys was scraping away the lichens.

We spent the rest of the night in the brilliantly lighted study, nervously discussing what we should do next. The discovery that some vault deeper than the deepest known masonry of the Romans underlay this accursed pile, some vault unsuspected by the curious antiquarians of three centuries, would have been sufficient to excite us without any background of the sinister. As it was, the fascination became two-fold; and we paused in doubt whether to abandon our search and quit the priory for ever in superstitious caution, or to gratify our sense of adventure and brave whatever horrors might await us in the unknown depths.

By morning we had compromised, and decided to go to London to gather a group of archæologists and scientific men fit to cope with the mystery. It should be mentioned that before leaving the sub-cellar we had vainly tried to move the central altar which we now recognized as the gate to a new pit of nameless fear. What secret would open the gate, wiser men than we would have to find.

During many days in London Captain Norrys and I presented our facts, conjectures, and legendry anecdotes to five eminent authorities, all men who could be trusted to respect any family disclosures which future explorations might develop. We found most of them little disposed to scoff, but, instead, intensely interested and sincerely sympathetic. It is hardly necessary to name them all, but I may say that they included Sir William Brinton, whose excavations in the Troad excited most of the world in their day. As we all took the train for Anchester I felt myself poised on the brink of frightful revelations, a sensation

symbolized by the air of mourning among the many Americans at the unexpected death of the President on the other side of the world.

On the evening of August 7 we reached Exham Priory, where the servants assured me that nothing unusual had occurred. The cats, even old Nigger-Man, had been perfectly placid ; and not a trap in the house had been sprung. We were to begin exploring on the following day, awaiting which I assigned well-appointed rooms to all my guests.

I myself retired in my own tower chamber, with Nigger-Man across my feet. Sleep came quickly, but hideous dreams assailed me. There was a vision of a Roman feast like that of Trimalchio, with a horror in a covered platter. Then came that damnable, recurrent thing about the swineherd and his filthy drove in the twilit grotto. Yet when I awoke it was full daylight, with normal sounds in the house below. The rats, living or spectral, had not troubled me ; and Nigger-Man was still quietly asleep. On going down I found that the same tranquillity had prevailed elsewhere, a condition which one of the assembled savants—a fellow named Thornton, devoted to the psychic—rather absurdly laid to the fact that I had now been shown the thing which certain forces had wished to show me.

All was now ready, and at eleven a.m. our entire group of seven men, bearing powerful electric search-lights, and implements of excavation went down to the sub-cellar and bolted the door behind us. Nigger-Man was with us, for the investigators found no occasion to despise his excitability, and were indeed anxious that he be present in case of obscure rodent manifestations. We noted the Roman inscriptions and unknown altar designs only briefly, for three of the savants had already seen them, and all knew their characteristics. Prime attention was paid to the momentous central altar, and within an hour Sir William Brinton had caused it to

tilt backward, balanced by some unknown species of counterweight.

There now lay revealed such a horror as would have overwhelmed us had we not been prepared. Through a nearly square opening in the tiled floor, sprawling on a flight of stone steps so prodigiously worn that it was little more than an incline plane at the centre, was a ghastly array of human or semi-human bones. Those which retained their collocation as skeletons showed attitudes of panic fear, and over all were the marks of rodent gnawing. The skulls denoted nothing short of utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom.

Above the hellishly littered steps arched a descending passage seemingly chiselled from the solid rock, and conducting a current of air. This current was not a sudden and noxious rush as from a closed vault, but a cool breeze with something of freshness in it. We did not pause long, but shiveringly began to clear a passage down the steps. It was then that Sir William, examining the hewn walls, made the odd observation that the passage, according to the direction of the strokes, must have been chiselled *from beneath.*

I must be very deliberate now, and choose my words.

After ploughing down a few steps amidst the gnawed bones we saw that there was light ahead ; not any mystic phosphorescence, but a filtered daylight which could not come except from unknown fissures in the cliff that overlooked the waste valley. That such fissures had escaped notice from outside was hardly remarkable, for not only is the valley wholly uninhabited, but the cliff is so high and beetling that only an aeronaut could study its face in detail. A few steps more, and our breaths were literally snatch d from us by what we saw ; so literally that Thornton, the psychic investigator, actually fainted in the arms of the dazed man who stood behind him. Norrys, his plump face

utterly white and flabby, simply cried out inarticulately; whilst I think that what I did was to gasp or hiss, and cover my eyes.

The man behind me—the only one of the party older than I—croaked the hackneyed "My God!" in the most cracked voice I ever heard. Of seven cultivated men, only Sir William Brinton retained his composure, a thing the more to his credit because he led the party and must have seen the sight first.

It was a twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see; a subterraneous world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion. There were buildings and other architectural remains—in one terrified glance I saw a weird pattern of tumuli, a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood—but all these were dwarfed by the ghoulish spectacle presented by the general surface of the ground. For yards about the steps extended an insane tangle of human bones, or bones at least as human as those on the steps. Like a foamy sea they stretched, some fallen apart, but others wholly or partly articulated as skeletons; these latter invariably in postures of demoniac frenzy, either fighting off some menace or clutching other forms with cannibal intent.

When Dr. Trask, the anthropologist, stooped to classify the skulls he found a degraded mixture which utterly baffled him. They were mostly lower than the Piltdown man in the scale of evolution, but in every case definitely human. Many were of higher grade, and a very few were the skulls of supremely and sensitively developed types. All the bones were gnawed, mostly by rats, but somewhat by others of the half-human drove. Mixed with them were many tiny bones of rats—fallen members of the lethal army which closed the ancient epic.

I wonder that any man among us lived and kept his sanity through that hideous day of discovery. Not Hoffmann or Huysmans could conceive a scene more wildly incredible, more frenetically repellent, or more Gothically grotesque than the twilit grotto through which we seven staggered ; each stumbling on revelation after revelation, and trying to keep for the nonce from thinking of the events which must have taken place there three hundred, or a thousand, or two thousand, or ten thousand years ago. It was the antechamber of hell, and poor Thornton fainted again when Trask told him that some of the skeleton things must have descended as quadrupeds through the last twenty or more generations.

Horror piled on horror as we began to interpret the architectural remains. The quadruped things—with their occasional recruits from the biped class—had been kept in stone pens, out of which they must have broken in their last delirium of hunger or rat-fever. There had been great herds of them, evidently fattened on the coarse vegetables whose remains could be found as a sort of poisonous ensilage at the bottom of huge stone bins older than Rome. I knew now why my ancestors had had such excessive gardens—would to heaven I could forget ! The purpose of the herds I did not have to ask.

Sir William, standing with his searchlight in the Roman ruin, translated aloud the most shocking ritual I have ever known ; and told of the diet of the antediluvian cult which the priests of Cybele found and mingled with their own. Norrys, used as he was to the trenches, could not walk straight when he came out of the English building. It was a butcher shop and kitchen—he had expected that—but it was too much to see familiar English implements in such a place, and to read familiar English *graffiti* there, some as recent as 1610. I could not go in that building whose

demon activities were stopped only by the dagger of my ancestor Walter de la Poer.

What I did venture to enter was the low Saxon building, whose oaken door had fallen, and there I found a terrible row of ten stone cells with rusty bars. Three had tenants, all skeletons of high grade, and on the bony forefinger of one I found a seal ring with my own coat of arms. Sir William found a vault with far older cells below the Roman chapel, but these cells were empty. Below them was a low crypt with cases of formally arranged bones, some of them bearing terrible parallel inscriptions carved in Latin, Greek, and the tongue of Phrygia.

Meanwhile, Dr. Trask had opened one of the prehistoric tumuli, and brought to light skulls which were slightly more human than a gorilla's and which bore indescribable ideographic carvings. Through all this horror my cat stalked unperturbed. Once I saw him monstrously perched atop a mountain of bones, and wondered at the secret that might lie behind his yellow eyes.

Having grasped to some slight degree the frightful revelations of this twilit area—an area so hideously foreshadowed by my recurrent dream—we turned to that apparently boundless depth of midnight cavern where no ray of light from the cliff could penetrate. We shall never know what sightless Stygian worlds yawn beyond the little distance we went, for it was decided that such secrets are not good for mankind. But there was plenty to engross us close at hand, for we had not gone far before the searchlights showed that accursed infinity of pits in which the rats had feasted, and whose sudden lack of replenishment had driven the ravenous rodent army first to turn on the living herds of starving things, and then to burst forth from the priory in that historic orgy of devastation which the peasants will never forget.

God! those carrion black pits of sawed, picked bones and opened skulls! Those nightmare chasms choked with the pithecanthropoid, Celtic, Roman, and English bones of countless unhallowed centuries! Some of them were full, and none can say how deep they had once been. Others were still bottomless to our searchlights, and peopled by unnameable fancies. What, I thought, of the hapless rats that stumbled into such traps amidst the blackness of their quests in this grisly Tartarus?

Once my foot slipped near a horribly yawning brink, and I had a moment of ecstatic fear. I must have been musing a long time, for I could not see any of the party but the plump Captain Norrys. Then there came a sound from that inky, boundless, farther distance that I thought I knew; and I saw my old black cat dart past me like a winged Egyptian god, straight into the illimitable gulf of the unknown. But I was not far behind, for there was no doubt after another second. It was the eldritch scurrying of those fiend-born rats, always questing for new horrors, and determined to lead me on even unto those grinning caverns of earth's centre where Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god, howls blindly in the darkness to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute-players.

My searchlight expired, but still I ran. I heard voices, and yowls, and echoes, but above all there gently rose that impious, insidious scurrying; gently rising, rising, as a stiff bloated corpse gently rises above an oily river that flows under endless onyx bridges to a black putrid sea.

Something bumped into me—something soft and plump. It must have been the rats; the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that feast on the dead and the living. . . . Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? . . . The war ate my boy, damn them all . . . and the Yanks ate

Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret. . . . No, no, I tell you, I am *not* that demon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was *not* Edward Norrys' fat face on that flabby, fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! . . . Shall a Norrys hold the lands of a de la Poer? . . . It's Voodoo, I tell you . . . that spotted snake. . . . Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do! . . . 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust . . . wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? . . . *Magna Mater! Magna Mater!* . . . *Atys* . . . *Dia ad aghaidh 's ad aodaun* . . . *agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa!* . . . *Ungl* . . . *nngl* . . . *rrrlh* . . . *chchch.* . . .

That is what they say I said when they found me in the blackness after three hours; found me crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Captain Norrys, with my own cat leaping and tearing at my throat. Now they have blown up Exham Priory, taken my Nigger-Man away from me, and shut me into this barred room at Hanwell with fearful whispers about my heredity and experiences. Thornton is in the next room, but they prevent me from talking to him. They are trying, too, to suppress most of the facts concerning the priory. When I speak of poor Norrys they accuse me of a hideous thing, but they must know I did not do it. They must know it was the rats; the slithering, scurrying rats whose scampering will never let me sleep; the dæmon rats that race behind the padding in this room and beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls!

SUZANNE

J. Joseph Renaud

In a spacious hall, lit by tall lamps, sat a young man in evening dress, bound in an arm-chair. Around him stood a woman and three men. The young man's downy moustache seemed extremely dark in his spectral face ; his gaze was fixed and mournful. The ends of his white tie hung loosely down ; mud was drying on his disordered hair, on his torn white waistcoat, on his black trousers.

" Mr. Wilson, once more we tender you our humble apologies ! But we are acting in the service of our country, and we must have the text of this new secret military entente between England and France. A general drew it up, a minister signed it, and an attaché of the Embassy—you—copied it ! The general and the minister are both beyond our reach, so we are obliged to have recourse to the attaché ! . . . Don't look so angrily at poor Milly—she too is serving her country ! Yesterday evening in her little house you had hoped to find her—and you found us, and we were daring enough to ask you to divulge a State secret. You said : ' No ! ' So we were obliged to bring you here in a motor-car, bound down to one of the seats, enveloped in a great fur cloak, and gagged under a chauffeur's mask. It was impossible for the passers-by to guess that this strangely motionless chauffeur was longing to call out ' Help ! ' " said one of the men in military tones, although his long grey hair and gold-rimmed spectacles gave him more the

appearance of a German university professor than of a soldier.

" These cords are torturing me," panted the prisoner.

His eyes wandered back to the beautiful red-haired woman, who, closely wrapped up in a mantle, was passionately listening.

" Loose him," said the man with the gold-rimmed spectacles.

The other two, who were of herculean build, and evidently only subalterns, obeyed the order. But the prisoner was very weak ; the floor seemed to be rocking under his feet. He fell over in a faint. . . .

When he regained consciousness he was again sitting in the arm-chair.

" Well ? No need of cords now ! A low diet, the open air, hunger, fatigue—no one can withstand these. And, if necessary, we have something better than that. . . . But you have only to speak, it is so simple ! Give us the outlines of this clause and you are free. Your involuntary complicity will be a guarantee to us for your silence, and when you return home you will receive a liberal compensation."

The young man answered : " You shall know nothing ! "

Stars were still dancing before his eyes, and the humming in his ears had not ceased, while blood was dropping from his wounded wrists.

" Since you are obstinate, my dear fellow, we shall be obliged to make you acquainted with Suzanne—a very charming person ! But first permit me to introduce myself. . . . Dr. Salzmann ! . . . These gentlemen are my friends and collaborators. Now come ! "

His tone had suddenly become honeyed—ironical—terrifying.

The two big assistants supported the dragging steps

of the prisoner, but the red-haired woman remained behind.

She turned away her eyes as the captive passed her.

In a corner was the head of a winding iron staircase, which they descended in the dark. A heavy iron door opened before them, and a puff of warm air, smelling of eucalyptus, blew upon them. Fine gravel crunched under their feet with a hollow sound, as though they were in some enormous empty building. Far away, somewhere in the silence, a fountain was splashing.

The strange doctor turned on the electric light, and suddenly an enormous conservatory was revealed around them, so vast that its real size could not be gauged ; for the small electric lamps, cleverly hidden among the green branches, shed but a feeble glimmering light, and nothing could be seen but foliage stretching far into the distance on all sides. Above, colossal leaves clustered gracefully on unseen branches, in dome-like groups, while, above these, others were dimly seen, and yet others. All around, above, everywhere, there was but a fantastic tangle, which it was difficult to believe belonged to the vegetable kingdom. Was there not life in these orchids, which looked full of an impotent rage ? And in these green spiders, three feet high, crouching as though to spring ? A confusion of terrifying creatures seemed to inhabit this warm forest, among the shadows and the glimmering lights.

No sound from outside—neither the sea flowing over the pebbles nor yet the moaning of the wind—penetrated here, but one could almost *hear* the intense life of all these exotic plants, so crudely green in the pale electric light.

The doctor evidently had lavished both wealth and care on this marvellous garden. Several times he stopped the group to mention, with ironical courtesy,

the name of some rare plant to the captive who was panting in the heavy, suffocating air.

The end of the conservatory was in darkness, but it was just possible to see that it had recently been altered to form a rotunda, similar to the monkey houses in zoological gardens, but with stronger trellis-work and with some enormous iron bars to further strengthen it.

A terrible apprehension aroused the young diplomat from the torpor into which he had fallen. And he suddenly noticed a sweet, sickly odour, somewhat resembling that of over-ripe bananas, lilies, or decaying dahlias, mixed with the smell of wild beasts ! . . . One would have supposed a menagerie was near.

The doctor, turning to him, said, in the peculiar, pedantic tones he had adopted : " Now, my charming young friend, allow me to introduce you to Suzanne ! "

He turned on an enormous electric light hung from the roof of the rotunda. In the dazzling white glare there arose a sort of gigantic tree ; *its leafless boughs were waving slowly, like mighty serpents, or like the tentacles of an octopus.*

The trunk, which could be seen between the movements of the horrible limbs, resembled green marble ; at the base it was as thick as a man's body, and increased in girth till, at a height of twelve or thirteen feet from the ground, it branched out into a hundred long, hairy boughs, all slowly moving as though alive. At the end of each bough, thick as an athlete's arm, was a sort of flexible funnel which evidently possessed the power of laying hold of objects and clinging to them so that there was no escape. The shortest of these boughs were seven or eight yards long.

These monstrous tentacles were not waving at random, but *with conscious design* they were reaching out toward the grating ! Some stretched far enough to seize and twist wires as thick as a cigarette.

"Ah, if the grating were not there! We must enlarge this cage; Suzanne is growing too fast," said the doctor, with a mirthless grin.

No one laughed. Although they must have seen it many times before, this horrible plant clearly terrified the doctor's assistants.

Wilson felt as though needles were pricking him all over. Although he was suffocating in this foul atmosphere, his teeth were chattering.

The doctor continued: "My charming young friend, I see you are a little surprised! But as you are filled with a thirst for knowledge, I will tell you about Suzanne.

"You must have heard of the South American plant called *Nepenthes* which feeds on insects? When a mosquito rests on one of its twigs, the tip seizes it and all the other twigs coil around it, and it is absorbed by the plant, which, while its digestion is going on, appears to be dead. I brought one back here from Brazil. Japanese gardeners succeed in dwarfing oaks and pine-trees till they are only a yard high; well, I experimented in a contrary direction with my *Nepenthes*. I tried to cultivate this little shrub, hardly as big as a rose-bush, till it should be as tall as a forest tree. I noticed in Brazil that a *Nepenthes* near an ant-hill, being thus better fed, acquired entraordinary dimensions.

"I began by stuffing it with flies, and it soon became more vigorous. Then I offered it bigger and bigger insects, such as wasps, spiders, bees, and on this diet it grew ten inches in a few months. Then, gradually, tiny pieces of meat took the place of the insects; Suzanne's growth now became extraordinary and her height and strength were soon trebled.

"I continued increasing the size of her meals; soon she needed a steak every day; then two. One day a sparrow perched on her and in a few seconds it had disappeared among the greedy, ferocious branches;

thenceforth Suzanne showed a strong predilection for living prey.

" For a year I fed her on mice, then guinea-pigs, then rabbits ; besides this, her roots were watered with several pails of blood a day which I ordered from the slaughter-house ; under this treatment Suzanne soon reached a height of seven feet.

" Well, to cut the story short : she grew higher and higher, and in the end had to be fed on lambs, then sheep and pigs, not to mention the red water, which was doubled.

" This protecting grating has surrounded Suzanne for a long time now, for when she was scarcely five feet high she seized me one evening, and I had great difficulty in escaping from her embrace. If I had met with this adventure a few months later I should not have the pleasure of being here at this moment !

" You guess to what use Suzanne is put ? If anyone refuses to give us information which our duty forces us to seek—this is the present case—we bring him to this house, tied to the seat of a motor ; we then question him again, and if he remains obdurate we thrust him behind this grating ; then we leave him. Of course, no traces remain, and the most minute search would reveal nothing. Am I not at liberty to cultivate a *Nepenthes* if I choose ? . . . Well, for the last time I ask : ' Will you tell us what we want to know ? ' If your answer is ' yes,' we are all attention ; if ' no,' Suzanne will take you in hand—and she is hungry ! See how greedily her boughs are waving ! How she stretches them out toward you—yes, toward you, for *she understands perfectly well that you are the prey !* . . . Why, she already smells stronger, and she is beginning to sing ! "

In very truth, the fearful stench of a menagerie was growing more powerful, and the hairy tentacles, as

they twisted and turned, produced a gentle, whining sound, like that of a flight of swallows.

Wilson was filled with that unspeakable terror which whitens the hair of the bravest. But the very imminence of the danger kept his mind clear. What could he do ? First, he must gain time ; otherwise, this very minute would be last of his life.

In the tone of some one who at last comes to a painful decision, he said : " I have no choice left : my answer is ' yes.' You will know the treaty. . . . But first give me food. . . . I am fainting. . . ."

" Bravo ! I am delighted ! I should have been sorry to—we will give you a meal which will loosen your tongue. And Suzanne shall not be the loser, the sweet creature ! "

One of the two giants disappeared and soon returned staggering under the dead body of a whole ox, whose horned head was swinging to and fro.

He opened a very low side door and pushed his burden in.

Ten tentacles immediately snatched up the enormous bloody mass and threw it into the top of the trunk ; all the boughs clasped it frantically, and it soon disappeared amid the confusion of foliage. A dreadful noise was heard, and then all was silent ; the branches remained folded, giving the plant the appearance of an enormous mushroom.

" She would have liked you better ; she prefers living creatures," said the doctor. " Now she will remain two hours, folded up like that and quite harmless, while the process of digestion is going on. Then the branches will fall and begin to wave again, and it would be very imprudent then to come within their reach. Come ; you will excuse me if I take you to my laboratory instead of a dining-room—this is the abode of a horticulturist."

The laboratory was a large room, with walls painted

grey, full of implements for the study of chemistry, electricity, bacteriology, etc. Some were of ancient shape, and Wilson remembered having seen similar ones in scientific museums, labelled " Alchemy."

The doctor placed bread, ham, cheese and a bottle of wine before the young diplomat.

Wilson ate voraciously. The very smell of the bread intoxicated him ; the ham melted in his mouth like a delicious sweet ; he drank, and the taste of old Bordeaux tickled his palate.

Soon a pleasant feeling of warmth and comfort overcame him ; life began to flow through his veins. The food had made a new man of him. He began to feel optimistic, in spite of everything ; he no longer despaired of escape.

If only—but he searched in vain among the instruments for a knife, a pair of compasses, anything which could serve as a weapon. There was nothing—nothing but test-tubes, bottles, funnels.

The others were carrying on a whispered conversation in a corner, without paying much attention to him.

The only thing that attracted his attention was a phial with a label bearing the word : " Chloroform." He slipped it into his pocket. His death should be painless. . . .

As Wilson swallowed his last mouthful, Dr. Salzmann said : " We are listening."

There was a little wine left in the bottle. The prisoner poured it out, drank it, and smacked his lips.

" You have a good cellar, sir."

" Yes. Well ? "

" Well, you scoundrels, did you really suppose I ever intended to divulge anything ? I was hungry, nothing more."

The doctor's face puckered into a hundred wrinkles.

" That is all you have to say ? Think what that great cage contains ! "

" It contains my death, that is all; my answer remains the same ! "

A few moments later, bound again, Wilson was carried by the two giants to the rotunda. The horrible tree was still dozing, with its tentacles folded. But the awakening would come soon !

A large door was unbolted. They placed the captive against the trunk, which was warm like a living body.

The door was double-locked and bolted.

" I regret your obstinacy. You are a brave man," said the doctor, whose exultation seemed to have subsided like that of the tree.

He bowed and departed. The assistants gave a stiff, military salute, then made a right-about turn. . . .

Left alone, the prisoner first turned his attention to escaping from the horrible contact of the warm trunk ; he succeeded, gradually by rolling over on his side, and he did not stop till he had reached the corner of the cage farthest from the plant.

Either from forgetfulness or from cruelty, the doctor had omitted to turn off the light ; it flooded the immense conservatory, and the rotunda. In the distance, somewhere behind all the tropical plants the fountain continued its never-ceasing splash, splash. . . .

He was lost ! No hope was left ! The dreadful creature would soon awaken, and then——

He thought of the chloroform ; at the last moment he would inhale it and deaden all sensibility. With his free hand he took the phial out of his pocket and left it uncorked for a few moments ; a smell of fresh apple prevailed over the stench of the monster.

But he clung tenaciously to life, and his youth inspired him with confidence in the result of any fight maintained to the end. He did not give in. Horrible as was his position undoubtedly was, he wanted to show fight.

They had bound him not very tightly after all, and in a few minutes, at the cost of a few scratches, he was free.

Quick to act, and concentrating all his strength in a mighty effort, he tried first the little door, then the big one, but both resisted. He tried to smash the grating, but not a wire gave way. He tried to climb, and only wounded his hands to no effect; even had he succeeded, it would have been useless, for the tentacles would reach to the very top of the rotunda.

He could do nothing more—only wait. He sat down with his elbows on his knees, and his face buried in his hands.

All the happy moments of his life rose before him with extraordinary distinctness—his first years at school, his travels, his successes in diplomacy. . . . The sweet, sad face of his mother smiled at him as clearly as when she used to sing him to sleep in his cot! . . . And his father—what grief it would be to the poor old man who was so proud of him! . . .

What joys he might have tasted, what great things he might have accomplished! . . .

If he could only write to Milly, the traitress whom he still loved! If he could but throw through the grating a note which they would find afterwards! . . . He felt in his pockets; yes, a pencil and paper.

With difficulty he wrote, in great round letters:

"Milly, I die with no hatred in my heart. I love you, and my last thought shall be of you, my ever-beloved, my beautiful!"

A hissing sound caused him to look up. The plant was no longer asleep. It looked like an enormous Gorgon's head or a nest of furious serpents; the tentacles were waving with strength. One seized upon Wilson, who, mad with terror, uncorked the bottle of chloroform and held it to his nostrils.

In his haste he let fall a drop of the liquid on the

tentacle which had just clutched him by the shoulder, when, to his joy and surprise, the strange arm fell limply down beside the trunk. Instinctively he sprinkled another enormous coil which was about to wind itself around his neck ; this one, too, fell like the first, apparently dead.

But the others were whirling around him ; they seized him in their embrace, and, as they waved backward in their fury, they carried him to the top of the pulp, above the sort of mouth in which the ox had disappeared.

Half-fainting, bruised by the awful embrace, he dropped there the phial. At the same moment he fell heavily to the ground.

Here he remained motionless and dazed. What would happen next ? Why were the monster's tentacles not crushing him ? It took him a few seconds to make sure that he was on the ground, bruised but alive.

He struggled against a painful numbness, caused by the violence of his fall and the odour of the chloroform. He felt sick and faint, and a cold perspiration was pouring from him.

When, at last, he was able to see clearly, he discovered that the horrible tree was in a new posture ; all its branches were hanging down motionless as though dead ; the doctor's frightful plant had the appearance of a gigantic weeping willow.

He was only a few inches from the arms which but a moment before had been so ferocious, and although they appeared harmless now, he rose hastily and took refuge in the farthest corner of the rotunda. Here the stupefying influence of the chloroform and of the fall passed away altogether, and he tried to understand what had happened.

This was not difficult ! The providential bottle of benumbing fluid had saved him, at least for the moment, from a frightful death. . . . All plants are

sensitive to the effects of chloroform, and this carnivorous tree, which in some ways seemed to belong rather to the animal than the vegetable kingdom, must have peculiarly felt the benumbing influence. At this moment it was just as insensible as a patient under a surgical operation, but this was only a respite; it would awaken from this insensibility as it awoke after its meal, and the peril would be just as frightful as before.

But any respite from death is precious. The prisoner made another attempt to open the doors and climb up the grating, the upper parts of which perhaps were less strongly built; but again the wires only wounded his hands, and again the doors resisted all his efforts; although the monster was slumbering, escape was as impossible as ever.

Wilson at last sat down again, weary and despairing; he half-regretted that it was not all over, for the chloroform had only prolonged his agony. If die he must, he would rather die at once.

Time passed thus, till at last he became aware of a pale blue light which revealed first a glass dome, and then the tops of the highest of the tropical plants. At last, then, dawn had come, but this half-light was sickening, horrible. Far away—but perhaps he only imagined this—the angelus slowly rang forth. The mighty murmur of the waves, as they rose and fell, increased. Near at hand, birds were chirping.

Worn out, bruised, and bleeding, almost careless of his fate, Wilson gradually yielded to sleep.

The sounds of steps aroused him from his torpor and brought him to his feet; as he gazed through the grating, his distinguished, in the distance, the silhouette of Dr. Salzmann, coming toward the rotunda.

The terrible man would find out that his victim was still alive; he would call his acolytes. . . .

The captive hid behind the horrible tree, among

the tentacles. Like a child playing at hide-and-seek, he turned, in spite of his disgust, around the warm trunk, dodging the doctor as the winding paths led the latter's steps first to the right and then to the left.

When the doctor saw the extraordinary attitude of Suzanne, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. For a moment he stood motionless, then to Wilson's unspeakable joy he opened the great door of the cage, and cautiously entered. With the end of his stick he touched the tentacles, being careful all the time to slouch as far away as possible ; but the horrible arm still hung lifeless as before.

He ventured a little nearer—and thought he saw a phantom.

Wilson had sprung away from the plant. The doctor uttered a cry of terror, and at the same moment there fell on his jaw a crushing blow.

He fell limply to the ground. . . .

Wilson rushed out of the cage and ran along the first path he came to, but the conservatory was a perfect labyrinth, and he soon found himself back again at the rotunda. In vain he tried another path, and yet another ; at last, one led him to the side of the conservatory, overlooking the sea. He brushed away the steam with his hand, and, looking through the glass, he saw in the rosy dawn a pale stretch of sands, and farther on, the green, tumultuous waves of the sea.

There were several large doors leading out of the conservatory ; he opened and stepped out, but the icy air and the roar of the waves benumbed him. He found himself on a tiny balcony which ran along the side of the building, while below him was the smooth wall of the great house.

Below lay a fog, hiding the bottom of the abyss, while above, sea birds were whirling round uttering their harsh cries.

How was he to descend ? Was there some means of escape ?

He left the balcony, but had walked only a few moments in the soporific heat of the conservatory when the sound of steps, cries, shouts for help, following each other in quick succession, caused him to turn back. He still had a few moments in which to make good his escape, for the assistants would not immediately grasp what had happened and decide on their course of action ; but, when they saw the open door, the condition of their chief, and the torpor of the plant, they would understand all too soon that their prisoner was escaping.

Again he dashed on to the balcony in search of some means by which he could descend. At one end was an iron bar, which, strengthened every three feet by strong cramps, rose up from the sands, followed the contour of the cliff, and then rose straight up to the top of the conservatory, where it doubtless joined a lightning-conductor ; this bar passed up one end of the balcony, and Wilson believed himself saved. It was a perilous descent, but he had no choice.

He climbed over the handrail and grasped the bar, but horrible giddiness seized him ; the wall, the cliff, the bar, the balcony, all danced before his distracted eyes ; he had a terrible feeling of nausea, and was drenched in a cold sweat ; only a supreme effort saved him from falling. Hastily climbing back on to the balcony, panting with horror, he wiped his cold, clammy hands. Was his courage going to fail him at the last moment ? He tried to accustom his eyes to the sight of the abyss, but the horrible depths and the mist hiding the ground from view sent him back into the conservatory.

He lay down flat behind a clump of trees. The two giants, armed with guns, passed quite close to him without seeing him.

As soon as they had gone, he arose and ran along in the opposite direction toward the door at the foot of the iron staircase. Surely he was saved now, for he felt certain that no one else lived in the house. He could get out.

He started back. In the frame of the door he dimly saw a great green cloak, a head of glorious red hair, a pale face, a beautiful bar arm, and a hand grasping a revolver. Milly!

She stood between him and life. . . .

With the suddenness and precision which had one day astonished him at a rifle range, and the cruelty which he now remembered he had sometimes seen flash from the beautiful green eyes, she was going to——

Ah, no!

She stepped forth from the shadow, like a Rembrandt from its frame; tears were streaming down her cheeks, and despair was written on her features. In her other hand she held aloft the farewell letter which Wilson had written on the rotunda.

"I have read it. Forgive me—and come—quickly!" she said in low tones.

He followed her. The narrow stairs hindered their steps; when they reached the top, they passed through several large rooms, a hall, and a kitchen dimly lit up by the grey dawn. Then Milly stopped and turned round.

He noticed all these details as though in a dream. . . .

She softly opened the door. The morning was icy cold; birds were twittering all round. . . .

"Go through the kitchen garden. You will find a little door in the wall; the gardener always leaves the key in it. The path descends almost perpendicularly, then runs along beside the sea. When you come to a cross fixed into a block of granite, stop and wait."

He was in the state of utter fatigue in which the will,

incapable of making a choice, eagerly follows without reflection any advice. However, he stopped long enough to say: "Come with me!" Her swift gesture threw aside the mantle and revealed her exquisite ball gown, and her beautiful white neck, as she pointed to the door in the wall.

"Quick!" she urged.

He hurried along. Before closing the door of the garden he turned and saw Milly still on the same spot; her attitude urged him to hasten, but at the same time expressed such poignant grief that he was tempted to return.

Slipping on the pebbles, clinging to the bushes, he descended the difficult path. An iron band seemed to encircle his head; the sea air made his eyes smart. He began to cough. When he was close to the sea, he took up a handful of water and dashed it over his face and head.

He walked a long, long way along the edge of the roaring channel till at last, in the distance, his uncertain gaze fell on a rusty iron cross on a great rock.

The horrible house, far away in the distance, was tiny and white on the bluish cliff.

Suddenly it disappeared in a mass of black smoke while at the same time a loud report echoed and re-echoed among the rocks. All the birds around flew up into the sky. . . .

At noon some coastguards found Wilson raving in delirium.

When he at last arose from an attack of brain fever he told his story, but no one believed it.

The police made inquiries, without result. Yet he was able to guide the officers to the ruins of the conservatory, and show an immense greasy spot, which, he declared, was where the *Nepenthes* had stood.

THE THOUGHT MONSTER

AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

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 neighbourhood, 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 him 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 surprise, 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 cannot 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 coloured lights, I grow sceptical. 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 vice-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 cannot 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 grey 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! To-day 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.—To-day 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 to-day 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 fervour 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 neighbour 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 cannot 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! Cannot 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 to-day. 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. To-night 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 RED TURRET

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

AFTER a lapse of nearly half a century an Erringham came once more to the home of his fathers. Roy Erringham had spent the first thirty years of his life abroad: born and bred in Canada, he never saw his old home till he walked into it by right of succession one October evening.

Jerome Erringham, his father, was dead: going abroad, a poverty-stricken younger son, he had carved his way to fame and wealth, if not fortune, by his own efforts and those of his wife. Roy, the only child, had inherited the bulk of his wealth. Ten years before, his father had come into the Erringham property, but business necessities had kept him from coming to take possession, moreover he counted himself an outcast and a working man—one who had but little desire to live in the lordly home of his fathers.

Now there was only one Erringham left in the world—the last of a once proud and spreading family—and that one was Roy. True, there was hope for the future, for Helen, Roy's wife of a year, was a healthy woman and there was no reason why she should not bear sons.

Together, Roy and Helen walked into the old house on the day after they landed in England.

Roy loved it. Helen hated and feared it.

"But it's beautiful," he said, as he led her from one room to another. "Beautiful. Can't you see it?"

She shook her head. "I can't bear it. Roy, I don't

think I can live here. It's too—too gloomy. There is something uncanny about it. The house seems to be watching us. Don't you feel it ? "

He shook his head and patted her on the shoulder.

" Of course it's watching us, silly. Why not ? It's the old home of the Erringhams. We've been here for centuries. It's glad we've come back. It wants to make sure that we're the right sort."

" The right sort," Helen repeated, with a shiver. " Yes, Roy, but what sort does this house want ? " Her voice shrilled a little.

" You're tired." He spoke with masterful decision. " Come and rest for a bit. We'll go over the rest of the house to-morrow."

Away in the newer wing which the housekeeper, engaged by the lawyers, had rendered habitable, Helen felt less disturbed. She determined that, come what might, she would have her own rooms in this new and more comfortable quarter. Not for her the stone-walled grandeur of the great dining-room or the panels of the long saloon : she admitted that though she could appreciate grandeur in the abstract, she wanted modernity and comfort in real life. Tucked up on the luxurious Chesterfield, a shaded electric standard at her elbow, a new magazine on the occasional table, she felt at peace. This was home : she began to get a touch of warmth into her feeling for the old house. After all, it was only natural that so old a place should have an atmosphere.

" Perhaps it's me," she murmured half-asleep. " I'm the thing that's wrong. I don't belong here. I belong to Canada. I'm not really an Erringham—it thinks I'm an interloper."

In the morning various business claimed both her and Roy. In the afternoon, neighbours, forgetful of the bother of settling into a house that had been shut up for years, insisted on coming to call.

Not till dinner was over did Roy have time to finish his tour.

" You'll come with me, darling ? " he said, a little anxiously.

Helen assented. After all, it was her home, she must make it like her, must herself grow accustomed to the atmosphere.

They went through the long succession of rooms that they had seen the day before till at last they reached the picture gallery.

It ran the whole width of the house on the first floor. Above it was nothing but the roof. The high ceiling had been built to give an impression of space. The bedrooms on the floor above were all in the other wing.

Helen went to one of the long mullioned windows and looked out.

" We look down on the terrace here," she observed, over her shoulder. Then she added. " Roy, the door to the turret ought to be somewhere here. It's at this end of the house."

" Of course." He joined her at the window and took his bearings.

" That's funny," he said, looking back into the room. " There's no sign of a door here. Wonder where it is."

He strolled over to the end of the room, and Helen followed him, scanning the Erringham ancestors idly as she passed. Suddenly she gave a little cry and covered her face with her hands.

" What's the matter ? " Roy was beside her in an instant.

" That picture ! " she cried, pointing to the corner in deepest shadow. " It moved. I'm sure it did. . . ." Her voice rose a trifle.

" Steady on, darling ! " Roy spoke reprovingly. " You never used to have nerves like these. Of

course it didn't move. Let's go over and look at it. I can't see who it is from here, it's so dark."

He stepped to the wall to turn on the electric light, but the switch was dead and with an exclamation of annoyance, he turned back.

" I've got my flashlight with me," he said. " Come on, Helen. We'll kill this bogey of yours before we go downstairs."

He pressed the button of the torch and directed the glare on to the picture in the corner.

" Great-grandfather," he said, his eye catching the date on the frame. " He—he—not a very pleasant-looking old bird, eh ? "

Helen laughed nervously. She saw the distinctive Erringham features, saw, too, how they were reproduced in Roy. Standing there with the faint radiance on his face, he might almost have been his great-grandfather come back to life.

" I believe there was some sort of scandal about the old man," said Roy, as he looked at the portrait again. " I don't know what it was : Dad never mentioned it. But when I went through his papers after he was dead, I found some funny passages in some old letters that his mother sent him. She was daughter-in-law to this old man and lived here with my grandfather before he came into the property. I gather he was a bit of a queer fish, but I don't know why."

" I don't like him," Helen whispered. " He looks so evil."

" Not too prepossessing," agreed Roy. " Got the worst type of Erringham face, hasn't he." He lifted the torch and looked at the picture from another angle. " Hello," he said, " what's that ? Do you see, a handle or something on the side of the frame. I believe it's the entrance to the door of the turret. Let's go and see."

" Oh, don't, Roy," Helen pleaded, urged by some

instinct for which she could not account. "Please don't. Do wait for daylight."

"Not I," he returned. "The moon's coming up. The view from the turret over to the hills will be perfectly marvellous. Come along, Helen. Don't be a 'fraid cat," he taunted.

She set her lips and waited while he pulled at the handle.

As they had expected, the whole portrait swung round and a narrow flight of steps was disclosed to view.

"I wonder why they hid it," said Roy, as he swung the light up.

"Not much hidden, was it? We should have seen the lever at once in daylight." Helen was determined to make the whole matter as uninteresting and commonplace as she could. Somehow she sensed that in the turret lay danger—danger not so much to herself as to Roy, and she was determined to give it no aid by preparing to be afraid.

"Perhaps," Roy assented a little unwillingly.

He gave one glance at the portrait of his great-grandfather and then began to climb up the staircase. It wound round in a narrow spiral, evidently built in the thickness of the outer wall, while the turret itself rested on the roof of the picture gallery.

Helen followed, partly because she did not dare to trust Roy alone with what might happen, and partly because she herself did not dare to stop alone in the picture gallery with the Erringhams around. To her sensitive mind an air of repellent contempt came from the pictured faces. She knew they were not so much resentful of her as pitying, but pitying with a sneer.

Setting her teeth, she tossed her head at the lot of them and put her foot on the first stair.

The staircase was only the height of the gallery and three or four turns took them to the door at the top which barred the way.

Roy turned the great iron handle and pushed the door ajar. It was a heavy oaken affair, clamped with metal bands and screws. No one could have passed it without immense effort had it been barred.

" Here's the turret," said Roy, throwing the beam forward. Helen pressed to his side, and together they looked in amazement.

The turret was much larger than it looked from the ground, whence it gave the impression of being merely a pepper-box. It was deceptively built, its size running inwards along the width of the roof so that the chimney stacks broke the line and hid much of it.

On three sides were windows, deep-set, filled with thick glass, on which strange designs had been painted, evidently by amateur hands. Helen walked over to them and looked at them closely. The moon was shining full into the little room and its strange furnishings were clearly picked out. Roy snapped off the torch, for it was not needed, and he knew that the battery was wearing low. He would want what light he had to help them down the spiral stairs and through the picture gallery.

The moon passed behind a cloud, and for a moment the room was plunged into darkness. Before Helen could implore Roy to put on the torch, there came a strange unearthly radiance, filling the whole place and yet appearing from a source unknown.

Helen shrank back into the embrasure of the window, frightened.

Roy stood still in the middle of the room, taken unawares, yet amazed rather than scared. He knew all at once that he had dimly expected this. That as an Erringham he must be present at some strange, mysterious rite and make a choice. He waited.

Helen waited also. She grew less afraid. Her eyes roamed round the room. In the dim yet clear red of the light, it was easy to pick out the objects on the

floor. In the wall that had no window, was set a table. On it stood a golden plate and cup. Before it was a narrow mat, ivory white, worked in black. The light was so clear that she could distinguish the pattern of fir-cones that formed the chief feature of the scrolled design.

In the distance a clock struck ten times. The normal sound would ordinarily have reassured her, suggesting as it did a house inhabited by servants, a sane and pleasant life to which she could return at any moment if she so chose. But at the moment of the first stroke of the clock some new power seemed to fill the room.

It was so subtle, so strong, and so unexpected, that for the moment Helen was nearly overwhelmed by it. It gave her no time to prepare : it caught her, as it were, in a web of fine tissue and held her, unable to speak or move, yet conscious of all that went on.

She tried to cry out to Roy, but her voice was strangled in her throat. She tried to go to him, but her limbs seemed paralysed.

Her eyes fixed themselves on him and saw the change that came over his features. He had lost some of the wonder that had marked them when the phenomenal light began to appear. He was looking absorbed, interested, almost, Helen shuddered mentally, as if he were about to enjoy himself. He seemed to be expecting something, as if he knew what was about to happen and why.

Out of the radiance of the red light a figure seemed to materialize—the figure of an old man, wearing the robes of a priest. He turned, and Helen caught sight of his mocking, sardonic face. Her head reeled, she found she could not faint. Roy's great-grandfather stood in the middle of the room, beckoning to Roy—and Roy went to him, gladly, as if it were a natural thing !

" Erringham of the Erringhams, you have come ! "

The words could have issued from no living mouth, yet Helen would have sworn that she heard them clearly spoken.

Roy took another step towards that strange figure clad in gold and black, with touches of white that gleamed red in the light.

" I have come," he said, with assurance, as one who saw no cause for fear. " What do you want ? "

" To-night you have your choice," the strange, unearthly voice went on. " Your father refused to choose : he died a stranger in a strange land rather than face the choice of the Erringhams. Your grandfather died : your uncle died. You have come back."

" I am here," Roy reiterated. " What do I choose? "

" Whether you will eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, whether you will learn the control of the Life Force, whether you will be as God, even as I am, and conquer even the last great enemy, Death, that rides upon the Pale Horse and passes no one by."

" And the price ? "

" There is none. Knowledge is Power. What more do you desire ? Death shall pass you by, so shall you escape the final reckoning, since only the dead can be judged by God."

" I choose. I will follow you."

The old man's eyes seemed to gleam more brightly and the face he turned towards Helen was distorted with devilish glee. She tried again to scream, to warn Roy, but she could not make a sound.

" And the ritual ? " Roy asked. He had not moved, but it was plain that he was beginning to suffer from suppressed excitement. His face was very pale and the sweat began to show on his forehead.

" The Service of Sacrifice shall be held to-night."

The strange apparition went to the table built against the wall, which Helen, her heart sinking again, now recognized as an altar. He busied himself for a

moment with the golden vessels. Then he bent down and touched a spring in the front of the table. It swung open, and, controlling by the same spring, a stone slab slid quietly forward, resting some six inches above the ground. On it lay a strangely shaped knife, the handle glittering with jewels.

" All is prepared," said the man, as he drew himself up again.

In obedience to a sign, Roy came forward to the altar and flung himself on his knees.

Old Erringham stood before the stone slab and raised his arms. He began to chant, softly at first, then more loudly in that terrible room. At first Helen could not pick out the words, was only aware that they were in a strange tongue. Then, gradually, something familiar yet mysterious about them struck her and she realized with a further pang of horror that she was listening to that foulest of all rites, the Black Mass.

" But there should be a sacrifice. There must be blood," she heard herself saying, able to speak for the first time, but seemingly unable to control her words.

" There shall be blood. There shall be blood and a burnt-offering. There shall be a willing sacrifice," came back to her, chanted by the priest.

Moving in spite of herself, with no power over her limbs, walking as if hypnotized, Helen found herself crossing the floor to that terrible altar. Roy still knelt, his face buried in his hands. She tried to speak to him but could not. She could not even touch him as she went by. She must move as if in a dream.

Still without conscious volition, yet terribly aware of all that was going on, Helen found herself lying on the slab. Staring up into the face of the Erringham apostate, she was nearly rendered unconscious by the malevolence of his look. Suddenly an inner power came to her, she knew that she could only save herself

by a supreme effort—still more, that only so could she save Roy.

Summoning every ounce of will power, she broke the bonds that controlled her. She found her voice. Brokenly, only half-conscious of what she said, she began to recite the Pater Noster. . . . At the first words, a fury seized the demon bending above her. He seized the jewelled-handled knife and thrust it into Roy's hands.

" It is the moment of the Sacrifice," he chanted, his voice drowning Helen's feeble tones. " It is the moment for the spilling of the blood. See, my son, I place the golden cup beneath the Stone that it may catch the precious drops as they run, that you and I may drink from them and live."

As one in a dream, Roy rose from his knees and took the knife that was held out to him. He tested the blade against his nail, swung it in the air, and——

" Roy ! " Helen screamed.

The sound startled him. He dropped the knife. It fell across his leg, gashing the shin through his sock. A little blood trickled out and across the altar stone.

With a cry of baffled fury, mingled with desire, old Erringham bent down and tried to catch the flow in the golden Chalice.

Helen, on her feet by now, caught the cup, making the Sacred Sign as she did so. There was a blinding flash of light, that seemed to come from the altar. The room was lighted up and at the same moment a crashing peal of thunder broke over the house. As it died away, came another ominous crash and the roof of the turret started to crumble and fall in.

Helen seized Roy and dragged him to the head of the stairs. Behind them was the rumbling of falling stones and plaster with a crash at intervals, as one of the big roof beams came down.

Somehow, they staggered down the stairs and through the picture gallery, till they roused the frightened servants to action.

The storm had been sharp and sudden : only that one flash and one crack of thunder had been heard.

In the morning they went upstairs to see the damage done. The picture gallery seemed unharmed in spite of the masonry that had fallen on its roof. But when they went to the door of the staircase, Roy and Helen started back in amazement.

The picture of old Erringham, the wizard, the devotee of the Black One, had been torn from its frame and lay, a great cut in the canvas over the heart, face downwards on the floor.

They dragged it to one side and forced their way up to the turret. One wall still stood, the one against which had been built the altar stone. For the rest, Roy and Helen stood under the sweet blue sky and the clean sunlight.

Beneath the altar was a heap of rubbish. Roy went over to examine it. He came back, his face graver than before.

" Don't go to look," he said. " I—I must get someone to help. They are—bones. There must have been a body buried here."

Helen turned white. " Your great-grandfather," she said.

" I expect so. You remember, they always said his grave was empty in the churchyard. Last night, the Devil came for his own."

Helen shivered. " I am glad the turret has gone," she said, and led Roy to the head of the stairs.

PIGMY ISLAND

EDMOND HAMILTON

RUSSELL dived sharply from the yawl's deck as the last great wave struck and submerged it. He rose and sank in the foam-churned surf, then rose again and with great strokes fought toward the shoreline he could glimpse through the spray. The waters were thunderous in his ears and behind him the descending sun lit the world with coppery fire.

As he struggled on Russell was aware by brief glimpses that the beach ahead was nearer. The giant waves from behind bore him forward toward it in great leaps, but the deadly undertow gripped his feet with serpent grasp to pull him back. He kicked, struggled, and at last felt firm sand beneath his feet, and staggered up onto it beyond the clawing grasp of the waves.

He looked about him, dazed for a moment by his struggle with the furious ocean. He was standing on the beach of an island some three miles in length. Its surface, clothed green with sycamore and oak and brush, sloped gently up to higher ground at the island's centre.

A sound came to Russell's ears over the roar of the surf, and he half-turned. Down from the island's wooded centre by a narrow path a shirt-sleeved and hatless man was hastening toward him. As he approached, Russell saw that he was over middle age, with quick eyes and a keen, intellectual countenance beneath his greying hair. His face held anxiety as he came closer, hand outstretched.

" My dear sir ! I saw your boat foundering from my place—but it seems it was all over before I got here. You're not hurt ? "

" More chagrined than hurt," Russell managed to smile. " They told me over in Charleston that if I went too far out from the coast the squalls would get me, but I thought I could pull the yawl through them."

The other seemed relieved. " Well, it was as narrow an escape as I've ever seen. These squalls are treacherous, and if you hadn't been near this island——"

" It was just dumb luck that I was," Russell admitted. " And I never looked to find anyone here until you appeared. Most of the islands this far off the Carolina coast are uninhabited, aren't they ? "

" Most of them are," said the other, " but this one happens to be the site of the Northern University Biological Station. You've heard of it, perhaps ? "

" Of course ! " Russell was interested. " Over in Charleston I heard."

" I'm Dr. James Garland, the bio-chemist of the station and just now its only member," the other introduced himself. " There are ordinarily a half-dozen of us here—Dr. Wallace, the head, Professor Lowerman, and three others, but they've all gone off to Charleston for a vacation and I'm the unlucky one who stays here to tend their routine-work while they're gone."

" Russell's my name," the younger man replied. " Just one of New York's struggling young attorneys, on a trip south in a yawl that I always thought until now I could manage."

Dr. Garland smiled. " I'm afraid you'll have to put in a few days here with me until the others get back, for they went in our only boat. If you can put up with a somewhat irregular one-man household—— ? "

" Crusoes can't be choosers," Russell told him. " Besides—I've heard something about this station—I'm really glad of the opportunity to visit it."

" Well, you'd better begin your visit by changing to dry clothes," observed the other. " Lowerman's about your size—I'm sure he'd be glad to lend you anything of his if he were here."

He led the way across the beach and along the narrow path that twisted upward through the spring-green woods. The sun was sinking lower behind them and the keen sea-wind, striking Russell's dripping garments, soon had his teeth chattering. He was glad enough when they came out onto the more sparsely wooded plateau that was the island's highest part, and glimpsed the squat frame bungalow and the long and broad unpainted frame building some distance behind it.

" The laboratories," Garland gestured toward the latter structure. " I'll show you all over them, later, but just now the quicker you change the better."

Russell followed him into the bungalow and across a roomy living-room with comfortable, masculine furnishings to one of the bedrooms at the rear. There the bio-chemist dug from a mass of carelessly piled clothing and impedimenta a set of garments that were well-worn but dry and warm. When Garland left him with them darkness was falling, and Russell switched on the lights.

Arrayed in the dry clothes he ventured back into the living-room and found Dr. Garland busy with rolled-up sleeves in the surprisingly neat little kitchen. Russell, proficient in a boat's galley, helped him prepare the meal that they were soon falling upon, their only conversation the occasional monosyllables of hungry men at table.

Sitting before the blazing fire-place a little later and smoking one of the cigarettes his host had proffered, Russell reflected that there were, indisputably, worse places. Over the whine of winds outside there came to his ears the dim thunder of the distant surf. He hitched his chair closer to the comforting fire.

" I'm really immensely interested in your place here," he told the other. " I heard quite a bit about it over in Charleston."

" All of it good ? " asked his host quizzically, and Russell grinned.

" Well, as a matter of fact some of them did talk a good bit of rot about you and your friends. They had some melodramatic whispers about something pretty diabolical going on out here, and I gathered that you're all regarded as so many Twentieth Century Friar Bacons by a good many of them."

Garland laughed, blowing smoke from his cigarette. " Friar Bacon's a good example," he said. " The ignorance of modern people is often amazing, and the mere fact that we came to this lonely spot to set up our research station was enough to let those good people know that we were up to something that we wanted to keep hidden."

" It is a rather unusual spot for a research station, isn't it ? "

" Not at all," Garland promptly disclaimed. " The main purpose of this station is to make an exhaustive study of the evolutionary differences between some of the lower invertebrate sea-creatures. For that reason a sea-location with varied depths and conditions is necessary ; so when we started the station we persuaded the university to let us come here. Of course we all have our own side-lines here still—Wallace has his chromosomes, and Snelling his cell-theory, and I my size-changing work—but we've all got to spend most of our time on the station's main research or the university wouldn't support it long."

Russell caught at one of his phrases. " Your size-changing work ? "

The bio-chemist waved his cigarette. " My pet hobby. I've been able to stimulate the pituitary's functioning to an unheard-of degree, or to halt it

almost altogether. Of course, control is still rather a problem."

"I'm afraid you'll think me deplorably ignorant," Russell said, "but that means as much to me as algebra to a Hottentot."

Garland laughed. "These schools! What do they teach you nowadays? Well, the thing's simple enough in theory. You know, I suppose, that the size of a human or animal body is directly dependent on the functioning of its pituitary gland?"

"I seem to have heard something about a gland controlling the body's size," Russell admitted.

"No doubt," said Garland dryly. "Well, the pituitary gland, which is located near the centre of the head, does actually control the size of the body by its secretions. If it secretes normally your body is of normal size. If it secretes more than normally you are a giant. If less than normally, you are a dwarf. Now since that fact became known—I hope you will pardon my classroom manner, but for years I dinned these facts into sophomores—since that fact became known biologists over all the world have been attempting an artificial regulation of the body's size by means of it. That is, they have sought to stimulate or lessen the gland's secretions, and so increase or decrease the body's size.

"This experimentation has been on the whole rather fruitless so far. It's true that by tampering with the gland biologists have been able to make some animals a little larger or smaller than normal, but that's all they've been able to accomplish—a mere stunting or hastening of growth. The fact is that the ductless glands like the pituitary and thyroid are such delicate organisms that when we tamper with them surgically we damage them nine times out of ten. I became aware of that years ago, so left it off and started working from a different point of attack.

" I have——" Garland suddenly halted, rising to his feet. Grasping a heavy stick of firewood he stepped softly to the door, then flung it suddenly open.

Russell, amazed, heard the quick scurrying of something on the veranda outside as the door was flung open. For a moment Garland gazed intently out into the darkness, then closed the door.

" Damn them—they get bolder every day ! " he exclaimed angrily.

" Rats ? " asked Russell, and the other looked over at him and nodded.

" And cursed annoying ones, too," he said irritably. " Under the house and laboratory and all around them, yet you can't lay hands on them at all."

His brow cleared as he resumed his seat. " Where was I ? Oh, yes. Well, as I was saying, I've gone at this problem of influencing the pituitary gland in a different way. I said to myself, why cut open the head and take immense risks to reach the gland, when through the blood that nourishes it we can reach it easily ? I said, what if I devise a compound which when injected into the blood-stream will in time flow through the pituitary gland and excite it into unheard-of activity ? And what if I work out an opposite compound that will reach the gland in the same way through the blood, but that instead of stimulating will halt, or almost halt, its functioning ? You perceive what that would mean ? "

Russell's brow puckered. " Why, good Lord ! " he exclaimed. " That would enable you to increase or decrease the body's size at will ! "

Garland bowed. " You see it. So I set to work devising the two necessary compounds. The thing seemed clear in theory, but I don't mind saying that it's proved cursed difficult in actual fact. Nature's a mistress whose work is mighty hard to change. But I've plugged away, at the university and here, until I

have the formulas for my two compounds all worked out, and have been able to make enough of them to prove their efficacy beyond any doubt.

" I take a dog, for instance. I inject into one of his arteries leading into the head the stimulating compound. Soon that compound, carried by the blood-stream, reaches the pituitary gland, and at once, by reason of its irritant effect upon the gland, spurs it to tremendous activity. It throws its secretions into the dog's body at a terrific rate. I may say parenthetically that the injection produces coma almost at once in the subject. Within a day that dog, lying in coma, will have increased in bodily size to a giant dog six times its normal stature, if the stimulating compound has been injected in sufficient quantity. It will wake as a giant dog and will remain that size indefinitely, the compound in the gland stimulating it unceasingly until neutralized by the opposing compound.

" You will say, that dog increases six times in actual bulk and weight in its day of coma ; how can that be ? I ask in turn how did the dog increase from a small puppy to a full-grown dog in a year ? It did so because in the food it ate and the air it breathed it took in food elements that its body-organism turned into tissue. Had it breathed more or eaten more it would not have grown faster, for the body organism can only assimilate the food-elements at a certain rate, and that rate is directly dependent upon the secretions of the vital pituitary gland.

" But by immensely increasing their secretions, I have immensely accelerated the rate at which the body-organism can assimilate food-elements. The sleeping dog, in its coma, does not eat, but it breathes. The air it breathes contains in itself and in its carbon dioxide and water-vapour all the vital food-elements of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and hydrogen. These elements are assimilated thus from the breathed air by the body-

organism at a tremendous rate, cells forming into tissue and bone at incredible speed, building up a body several times the size of the normal body.

" If the opposite compound were injected, it would slow the secretion of the pituitary gland, and with that vital function almost halted the body would begin to throw off its own tissues with immense speed. By the familiar waste-processes of exhalation of air and perspiration it would throw off matter from itself at an unheard-of rate until it had reached a size consonant with the reduced functioning of its vital gland. If that compound were injected the dog would wake from its coma of a day to find itself but a fifth or sixth of its normal size. That the whole process would work in exactly the same way with a human being I have no doubt whatever."

Russell shook his head. " And you've really made those compounds ? You've actually tested them on animals ? "

" Of course—and with very great success. But that success will have to be complete before I can publish."

" It seems like something out of fairy-tales," the younger man commented. " Of course I don't doubt your word—but to make a living thing greater or smaller in size—it's one of those things you'd have to see to believe."

Garland laughed, relighting his cigarette. " Simple enough," he said. " I'll show you something over in the laboratory to-morrow that will make you believe. I could show you to-night, but I'm afraid your dreams would be rather nightmarish."

" Speaking of dreams makes me realize that I'm half into them now," said Russell, yawning. " I don't know why I feel so sleepy to-night——"

" The usual effect of scientific discourse," commented Garland. " Don't apologize—I'm used to it—

my classrooms were veritable halls of Morpheus when I got well into a lecture."

"Much more likely it's the effect of my tough time to-day," replied Russell, laughing. "That same room's mine for to-night? Well, I hope I'll be wakeful enough by morning to look at your experiment."

"Don't worry, you will be," retorted the other smilingly. "You're the first society I've had for a week, and as such you can't hope to escape without being bored mercilessly!"

Russell found himself stretching and yawning hugely as he prepared to retire, and it seemed to him that his head no sooner rested on the pillow than he was slipping into sleep. He half-heard a scratching and scurrying somewhere in the room's wall or floor, but was on the last rim of consciousness by then, and in another moment had drifted off it into dreamless slumber.

When he came back to wakefulness his first sensation was of a strange tingling in all his body, accompanied by a recurring nausea. He stirred, rubbed his eyes, sat up, his movements seeming oddly clumsy to him. He opened his eyes, blinking, looking around him with an irritated incomprehension that in a moment more had changed to stupefaction. His heart leapt uncontrollably.

He was not in bed in the room where he had retired, but was resting, quite unclothed, upon a thick mass of folded cloths that made a small pallet. It rested directly on the floor, but the floor itself was of smooth glass that was apparently immensely thick. And all around Russell there rose the gleaming walls of a great glass room, illuminated by clear sunlight.

He staggered to his feet, uttering an inarticulate cry. For almost a score of feet above him, apparently, rose the foot-thick glass walls. In them was no door or window or opening of any kind. They came to an end above with the glass room's ceiling or roof quite open

and roofless. Russell stumbled to the glass wall of his strange prison and gazed dazedly through it.

Another hoarse cry came from him, for he was gazing out upon a scene that seemed at the same time unutterably familiar yet unutterably strange and grotesque. The great glass room seemed to rest upon a long gleaming platform of burnished metal, scores of feet in width and hundreds in length. Upon it there rested here and there objects familiar in shape, metal and glass beakers and retorts, balance-scales and microscope, but all of size gigantic. The microscope's great tube loomed for twice Russell's height into the air! He could have hidden in the beakers!

He swayed to another of his glass prison's four walls. From it the view was different—a window a short distance from the glass wall. But the window was colossal in size, too, on a scale with the microscope and beakers! Through it he made out the fiery disk of the descending sun, and against it outside swung branches that seemed of trees huge beyond all experience!

Russell, strange sounds in his throat, reached another wall, and saw that from it the view was one of a room, a colossal room of cathedral proportions but rectangular in shape, with white walls and ceiling and with huge tables and chairs several times his own height ranged along it. And it was on the metal top of one such enormous table that his square glass prison rested!

There came to his giving brain a flash of vague remembrance and comprehension—Garland's talk of the night before—Garland's calm statement of his powers—and Russell, his mind submerged in horror, sank to the gleaming floor.

Into his stunned brain in the next instant penetrated a great clicking and clashing sound from the distance that brought him to his feet in a bound. One of the great doors at the vast room's end had swung suddenly open and there had stepped inside an appalling figure.

A man colossal! Between thirty and forty feet into the air he seemed to loom, a giant who came toward Russell's glass prison with thundering tread. And it was Garland! Garland—his eyes keen with interest as he bent over the glass enclosure. As his huge head loomed over the glass room's open top Russell could only stare upward, paralysed. Then he saw the great lips moving and there came down to him the rumbling thunder that was Garland's voice.

"I promised to show you something that would make you believe in my work, Russell," he was saying. "Well, behold that something—yourself!"

"Garland, damn you!" Russell was sobbing in his rage and terror. "What have you done to me? Made me like this—made a pigmy—out of a human being!"

The scientist's vast laugh thundered. "Don't take it so hard, Russell. You're not the first one to find yourself a foot in height—Wallace and Lowerman and the others of my esteemed co-workers are no larger than you, so you're not alone."

"Wallace——" Russell almost forgot his own terrible situation in that revelation. "Then Wallace and the others—you did the same——"

"The same as to you," the great voice rumbled. It became suddenly again thunderous. "Do you think that I would restrict my theory always to animals and never try working it out on men? Men—the mere raw material of experimentation, to me! So many guinea-pigs to aid test-tube and microscope in the search for truth!" His great eyes burned.

"I perfected the two compounds two weeks ago, Russell. I drugged the other five, Wallace and Snelling and Lowerman and Johnson and Hall. I injected the gland-depressant compound, the size-decreasing compound, into the neck-arteries while they lay in that drugged sleep. Of course it would have been just as easy to use the other compound, but I knew too well

what their reactions would be when they woke to try making the unsuspecting subjects of my experiment giants!

"Through the next score of hours the bodies of the five shrank almost visibly before me, their tissues disintegrating and being thrown off at a terrific rate. I brought them here to the laboratory when they had ceased shrinking, each a pigmy man hardly a foot in height, like you. I had prepared a crude prison for them and meant to use the size-increasing compound on them when they woke. That way, you see, I could test it also without danger of making them large enough to be formidable to myself. They were dazed and crazy with rage and all that when they woke, of course, just as you are, but I counted on making the second test even if against their will. So many guinea-pigs, to me!

"But they escaped, damn them! My prison for them had been too crude and they got away in the night, got down one of the rat-holes in the laboratory here and have been lurking around and under the place ever since. You heard them last night at the door? I hope the rats get them, and they surely will in time—a foot-high man is no match for a full-grown rat or snake, I assure you.

"But I had to have another subject to go on with the experiment, and fate sent me you, Russell. I would have swum out into that surf to rescue you if you hadn't got ashore, I wanted you so badly to work on. Well, you ought to know the rest. You were so sleepy because your food was drugged last night, and in the twenty-odd hours since then you've had the size-decreasing compound in your pituitary, have been shrinking in size every minute until you're the magnificent pigmy proof of my work that you now are. And now I can give the other compound, the size-increasing one, its final tests on you."

As Garland spoke he placed on the table and opened a narrow black case. It held two six-inch glass tubes, one filled with a bright red liquid and the other with a brilliant green one, and also a hypodermic needle of odd design.

Russell was raging futilely at the great head bent above him. "Garland—you fiend! You're mad—mad!"

Garland was calmly withdrawing the liquid-tubes from their case. "Quite possibly," he admitted. "Madness and genius are so closely akin that no one has ever been able to mark their exact dividing-line. Are all madmen merely geniuses of an order incomprehensible to us? An interesting thought."

"But you'll go no farther in your insane experiments with me!" cried Russell.

"You'll do well to remember, Russell, that on me depends your one chance of regaining your normal size. I make no promises, but——"

Russell shook his hand grotesquely toward the looming giant face. "No—I'll die this way first, Garland! You've made a pigmy, a monster, of me—but you'll get no chance to go farther with your devilish work on me!"

Garland slipped the liquid-tubes imperturbably back into the case. "Quite illogical," he remarked. "I'll give you until morning, Russell, and if you're still so obstinate I think I can bring you to terms. A few large spiders put in with you—they'd seem rather terrible in size and ferocity to you. Really, it would be amusing. You'd better think it over, and lest you have any hope of getting away as the others did——"

He drew over the top of the square glass box a sheet of heavy wire-screen that he fastened tightly over the box's top by means of projecting hasps, through which ran a chain held by a small strong padlock. Fastened thus it formed a strong lattice-work secured over the

box's top. With it in place Garland grasped the black case.

" Until the morning, Russell——"

Russell, leaning weakly against the glass wall of his prison, saw Garland's huge form passing down the laboratory, case in hand, and departing through the door he closed behind him.

Left alone, Russell crouched for some moments in silence, unmoving. The sun was sinking outside, he saw, for its level rays were fading and dusk was beginning to thicken in the laboratory's corners. There came to Russell dim memory of the sunset—how long before ?—that had seen him struggling through the surf toward this island of horror. He strove to think calmly, but his thoughts dissolved with each attempt into unreasoning horror.

He rose, paced along the wall of his glass cage, then with sudden crazy impulse flung himself against it. The impact left him bruised and breathless. He lay for some time panting, the shadows in the laboratory deepening as night came outside. Through an opposite window, though, an intensifying flood of silver moonlight was pouring into the long room, so vast to his diminished perceptions.

Russell looked up to where the heavy screen that Garland had fastened over his glass prison gleamed dully in the moonlight. It seemed more than twenty feet over his head, and it took but a few futile leaps to convince him that all hope of touching it even was futile. The smooth and perpendicular glass walls gave no slightest hold and there was nothing in his transparent cell to aid him in climbing. There was nothing, in fact, but the thick mass of dark cloth on which he had lain. Russell tore from it enough of the stuff to make a clumsy tunic which he tied around him. The garment comforted him oddly.

He sat down at last, his hope waning, vanishing.

Even were he to escape from his prison, Russell told himself, only Garland and his size-increasing compound could release him from the more terrible prison of his pigmy size. Only Garland—and he knew without shadow of doubt that whatever promises Garland might make, he would never permit him to leave the island alive, much less regain his normal stature.

Russell sat on with dull horror and hopelessness gnawing his mind, unheedful of the moonlight that was brilliant now in the laboratory. It picked out things here and there, the flange of the microscope, the handle of a tool, the pans of the balances—and made them shine dazzlingly. To his ears there came no sound from outside, and Russell was only aware of how deep was the silence in the laboratory, when it was broken finally by a sound.

It was an odd scratching sound from the laboratory's floor, beneath the shadow of one of the tables. Russell listened intently.

The sound came again, stopped, and then he heard light, hesitant footsteps. He rose and sprang silently to the wall of his glass cell, gazing into the laboratory. At first he saw nothing unusual ; then his eye caught a movement and he saw that out from the shadow of the great table opposite were cautiously advancing two figures. They were men, two pigmy men of the same foot-high stature as himself !

They were quite visible in the bright moonlight gazing cautiously around. Both were dressed in rough, tunic-like garments not unlike his own, and both carried what seemed long, metal-pointed spears. They halted, and Russell saw them gazing up toward his glass prison. He almost uttered a shout but changed it in time to a loud hiss. At the sibilant call the two waved quickly, as though glimpsing him, and then were running away beneath him, along the laboratory floor and out of sight.

Russell's heart was pounding. Had the two fled? For a moment in which his heart sank he thought so; then he saw them again.

Far along his great table a chair stood close to its edge, and the two were clambering up with some difficulty onto this. Grasping rungs and leg, they pulled themselves up until they were on the chair's seat. Then they were at the harder task of climbing up one of the rungs of the back toward the table's level. Russell saw them toiling upward, the corrugations of the rung helping them, until they were level with the table's top, a few inches from them. They clung to the rung an instant, then leaped.

They struck the table's metal top and collapsed in a heap, but almost at once were up and hastening along the table toward his prison. As they came closer he saw that one was young, his own age, and the other somewhat older, both dark-haired and unshaven men. The spears they carried were in fact slender wooden rods about eight to ten inches in length, to the end of each of which had been bound with fine wire, a small, sharp-pointed nail. These were, for the foot-high men, heavy and formidable weapons.

The two came to the glass wall, peered inside at him. He opened his mouth to call to them but one shook his head warningly. Russell was silent, watching them with pulse throbbing.

They conversed with each other in low whispers, pointing first to the thickness of the glass wall and then toward the heavy screen fastened over the box's top. At last one hurried off along the table, searching for something, while the other began to uncoil a roll of what seemed strong rope rolled around his body. It was in reality a length of ordinary twine. By the time he had it uncoiled and had knotted it here and there the other had returned, a short piece of steel wire in his grasp.

The two grasped it and with a great effort bent it into the form of a hook. In a moment they had tied the twine-rope to it ; then the older of the two whirled the shining hook around his head and sent it hurtling upward. It curved down and fell upon the lattice-screen over the glass box, was dragged along it for a moment, then suddenly caught in one of the screen's openings. At once the younger of the two was climbing upward by the knots, the other holding the rope steady beneath.

Russell saw the climber gain the top and inspect quickly the chain-fastening and lock that secured the screen over the glass cell. After a moment he whispered down to the man below. The latter tied one of his spears to the rope, and in another instant the one above had it in his hands. He inserted it in one of the screen's openings, pried and levered this way and that until he had made an opening a few inches across. Russell was watching tensely.

Then the man above drew up the rope from outside and let it fall down through this opening into the glass cell's interior. His whispered order was not needed, for in an instant Russell had grasped the rope and was climbing. He reached the top, balanced beside the other on the glass wall's edge, panting.

" You're Garland's new experiment ? " the other was whispering hoarsely. " You're the man who came yesterday—that Garland used the compound on ? "

Russell panted his name. " And you ? "

" I'm Snelling," the other whispered, " and that's Lowerman down there. Did you hear of us ? I thought Garland might have told you when you woke. We saw you come with him yesterday—we did our best to warn you, but couldn't. There are Wallace and Johnson and Hall, besides us two. Garland's experiments—pigmies, all of us. The others are waiting for you now."

Russell struggled for reason. " But where—— ? "

" Down beneath the laboratory," Snelling whispered. " We have a place there—we use the rat-holes and runways to get about—and Wallace sent us after you—has a plan——"

There was a warning hiss from the waiting figure beneath, and Snelling pulled Russell toward the wall's edge, drew up and let down the rope again upon the outer side of the wall. Russell slid down it, the other close after him.

Lowerman hastened to their side, his haggard and unshaven face clear in the moonlight. He grasped Russell's hands.

" We've got to get down to the others at once," he told him in a tense whisper. " There's not much time left, and we only have until morning."

" Until morning ? " repeated the dazed Russell, and Lowerman nodded swiftly.

" It's Wallace's plan—he'll tell you about it—but we've got to get out of here now. You have the rope, Snelling ? Good—there's no time to lose——"

Russell found himself hastening along the long metal surface of table gleaming in the moonlight, with Lowerman and Snelling on either side of him. It came to his dazed brain to appreciate for a moment the utter grotesqueness of it—that he, a pigmy of twelve inches height, should run with two others like him along the surface of a table ! A sensation of unreality held him until they came to the spot where the chair stood beside the table, its back-rungs a few inches away.

Lowerman, without hesitating, jumped for the nearest or corner rung and grasped it, clinging at the same time to his spear, sliding down to the chair's seat. Russell followed, grasping the rung with all his strength, lowering himself to the seat also. Snelling was but an instant behind him, and already Lower-

man was clambering down from the seat to the floor. In another minute they all stood there.

Without hesitating, the other two hurried Russell across the floor, a vast wooden plain to his eyes, and into the lightless shadow beneath the great opposite table. They reached the wall, fumbled along its juncture with the floor, until Lowerman's whisper indicated that he had found what he sought. As Russell's eyes became a little accustomed to the darkness beneath the table he saw that Lowerman and Snelling had brought him to a round, ragged hole that had apparently been gnawed through the wooden strip at the wall's base. It was in reality, he knew, but a few inches across, but seemed to him that many feet.

Lowerman had already stooped, was wriggling through the hole and disappearing into the still deeper darkness inside. His whisper came out to Russell, but the latter shrank back. Snelling, though, grasped his shoulder.

"It's the only way, Russell. Straight on—we've used these rat-holes for the last two weeks."

Russell mastered his instinctive terror, stooped and wriggled through also. He found himself in darkness absolute, and felt in a moment the touch of Lowerman's hands. A scraping sound told him that Snelling was beside them.

There was a loud scratch and splutter and a bright light flamed abruptly beside him. Lowerman held in his hand what seemed a short wooden cane burning brightly at one end. It was only when he suddenly remembered his own present pigmy size that Russell recognized the burning cane as an ordinary match.

The flame illuminated the place in which they stood, the interior of the wall. It seemed a narrow long hall whose walls towered up to colossal heights into the darkness above. Lowerman had fumbled for something on the floor, producing finally a crudely shaped

and thick little piece of candle. With the great match he lit it, and as its light replaced that of the expiring match he motioned Russell onward. With Lowerman leading, holding the lighted candle-piece, they started along the vast-walled narrow corridor that was the wall's interior. Russell fought against his sense of utter unreality as they went forward.

They moved on until Russell estimated that they must be approaching the corner of the wall. He wondered whither Lowerman was leading. He wondered——

"Snelling—back!"

As Lowerman's tense whisper hissed, the three sprang back as though plucked by a great hand. Russell heard from ahead a strange, rushing, loping sound, then a confused deep squeaking grunt that froze his blood. Lowerman had thrust the candle-piece into his hands, had sprung forward with Snelling, their spears level! Russell glimpsed one—or was it two?—great dark shapes ahead of them, just beyond the range of the candle's light, saw the gleam of quick eyes; then a swift rush of feet as the things sprang.

There were two of them, twin monstrous shapes that Russell could not recognize as rats despite his brain's assurance. Fully half his own height they towered, with bodies as long as he was high, great fur-clad monsters whose eyes were gleaming and whose open jaws were white-fanged and snarling as they sprang. He felt the impact of their rush, saw Snelling go down and Lowerman knocked to his knees as they thrust at the onrushing beasts with their spears.

One of the huge rats squealed as Lowerman's long nail spearhead sank to its depth into its body. Russell glimpsed Lowerman, braced against the floor, thrusting the spear deeper into the thing as its great furry body flexed and stiffened convulsively against the wall. But Snelling was down beneath the other, the great jaws

at his throat. Russell, a madness of combat on him, threw himself forward, thrust the lighted candle in his hand against the beast's side.

There was a sickening smell of burnt hair and flesh instantly and the beast whirled with a squealing snarl upon Russell. He dodged sidewise, felt the needle-pain of fangs closing on his thigh, then felt those fangs unclosing almost instantly. He staggered up, saw that Snelling and Lowerman were driving their already bloody spears again and again into the second rat's body. As Russell stumbled to his feet the great rat lay still, its paws slowly closing and unclosing. Russell felt Lowerman and Snelling at his side, found himself laughing weakly.

"Fighting with rats in a wall! Fighting death-combats with rats inside a wall!"

"Steady, Russell!" Lowerman clutched his shoulder. "We've got to go on—your leg's not hurt bad?"

Russell shook his head weakly. "It didn't have even a good hold on me. But let's go on, then—for God's sake let's go on!"

"Rats—more bold every day——" Snelling was panting as they hurried forward again. "Not afraid now of the candle-fire, even—almost took Johnson's arm off two days ago——"

"Down here, Russell," Lowerman directed.

They had come to a gnawed aperture in the wooden bottom of the wall. Lowerman dropped through it, Russell handed down the candle, and then followed with Snelling.

He found himself in another corridor, but one whose walls were of damp earth. It was narrow, and only by stooping could they go forward in it. With Lowerman ahead and Snelling behind again he moved along it. The corridor twisted and turned to right and left, and here and there was crossed by other earth-tunnels.

Before coming to each of these crossings they waited, listening, before venturing ahead.

The earthen tunnel twisted onward and at last Lowerman and Snelling turned with him into a branching corridor. This ended abruptly in a blank earth wall, in which was a single round opening that seemed a few feet across.

Lowerman extinguished their candle, and as he did so Russell saw that through the opening from beyond came a faint yellow light. They crawled through the opening, and he found himself in a fairly large den hollowed in the black earth. It was illuminated by an ordinary candle burning at its centre, one that seemed of enormous size to the pigmy Russell.

Around this candle, less than twice its height, three men awaited them. All were as unshaven and haggard of face as Lowerman and Snelling. One was big and white of hair, older than the others. Another had his shoulder tied in crude cloth bandages. Against the den's walls leaned several of the nail-head spears, some rude couches of cloth and grass, some scraps of food and candle. The smells of damp earth and smoke in the place were almost overpowering.

The white-haired man had grasped Russell's hand. "I hoped Lowerman and Snelling could bring you," he was saying quickly. "We dared not all venture up—Garland's laid so many traps for us——"

Russell dazedly returned the handclasp. "Then you're—you're——"

"Wallace—Dr. Fairfield Wallace. I am, or was, head of this research station. This is Hall here, and this Johnson—he had a pretty bad time of it with a rat in one of the runways, but he's getting better now."

They crouched down around the candle. Until he died Russell would not forget that scene—their six pigmy figures around the looming candle whose light flickered across the damp earth walls of the

subterranean den and on the drawn faces of his companions. Wallace was leaning tensely toward him.

" Russell, your name is ? Russell, we've got little time. Garland is mad. He is a mad genius of science, if there can be such a thing. He worked for years on his gland compounds, his size-changing compounds, until they have become a mania or obsession with him. His great aim was to try the compounds on human beings, and that's why he got us to establish our research station on this isolated island, though we never guessed it at the time. And once here he drugged us and injected the size-decreasing compound into us all just as he drugged you and injected it into you, making pigmies of us as he has of you.

" We found ourselves pigmies and we were in horror of what further fiendish experiments he might carry out on us, so we managed to escape and get down into this maze of rat-runways under the laboratory and bungalow. The things we've seen and done here in these last two weeks ! Russell, back home I have a house, a family, a position in the scientific world. And I'm here hiding from rats and snakes, fighting spiders, hunting bats to kill for food !

" But no more of that. Our one aim in these two weeks has been to get the red size-increasing compound of Garland's that alone can restore us to our normal size. He coloured the two compounds red and green to distinguish between them, and the red one alone can ever bring us back from pigmies to men. And Garland knows that !

" He knows that our one aim is to get the red compound and he has taken care that we should not do so. The only supply of it is in the tube which he carries with the other compound and his needle in that small black case. That case never leaves his person. And each night Garland has locked himself securely in his bedroom in the bungalow, with the

compound case. There's no hope of getting the case from him while he's awake, of course, for in our pigmy size he could kill all of us with a blow. Our one hope is to steal the case while he sleeps.

" In the last week we have been burrowing up through the wall toward his bedroom. We have a runway now leading up from one of the rat-tunnels beneath the bungalow to his bedroom wall, and we've only a thin surface of plaster left to break through now. So to-night—now—we're going to try it, going to break through into his room and try stealing the case. If Garland discovers us it means death for us all, of course. But on the other hand only that single tube of red liquid will ever bring us back to normal stature. Are you going to try it with us ? "

Russell drew a long breath. His brain seemed spinning. " I'm with you, of course," he said at last. " You're going to try it—now ? "

" Now," Wallace affirmed. " We've got to make the attempt before Garland wakes, and it will take us some time to get from here over into the bungalow and up inside his room's wall."

They all stood up. Wallace gave quick orders to the others and they began crawling out of the cavity into the corridor or rat-tunnel outside. Wallace handed to Russell one of the heavy spears with its nail head.

" These wouldn't do us any good against Garland, God knows," he said, " but they help us against the rats and others."

" We go through the rat-tunnels to the bungalow? " Russell asked, but the other shook his head.

" No, just through them to the surface and then over to the bungalow and into its own tunnels. There is a perfect warren of them beneath these two buildings."

They crawled out after the others and stood in the

rat-tunnel, with Lowerman and Hall carrying candles, whose flickering light feebly illuminated the earth-walled corridor. At once and without words, they set forth along it, but in an opposite direction from that by which Russell had come. To Russell it all was dream-like, by then—the flickering-lit low earth-tunnel they followed, their little band of rough-garbed, spear-armed men, the desperate venture that took them forward.

The tunnel wound this way and that. Lowerman led with one candle and Hall brought up the rear with the other. Once Snelling jabbed forth his spear to pin to the earth floor a great thing that had been scuttling sidewise, a dark many-legged shape that seemed of octopus size to Russell and that he only recognized after a moment as a big spider. Once, too, as they crossed another tunnel, there writhed in front of them a thick long snake-like thing that they passed unheedingly—a great earthworm.

The tunnel curved upward, and the going became harder, its roof still so low as to keep them stooping in it. In moments there came to Russell over the fumes of damp earth a breath of cleaner air. He glimpsed a round starlit opening ahead and above.

They were within a few yards of it, seemingly, when it was blocked by a dark shape rushing in from outside. Without a word, Snelling and Wallace and Lowerman had rushed forward with ready spears. There was a grunt and click of jaws, a threshing that dwindled suddenly, and before the dazed Russell could more than realize that another huge rat had rushed into the corridor from outside, the three were beckoning them on, panting and with their spears bloody. Russell followed them sickly over the big, still, furry body.

The candles were extinguished and they came out into open air. Russell found that they were standing in grass, whose great blades towered above their

heads all around them. He made out the dark looming expanse of a gigantic wall behind them, realized that it was the side of the laboratory building up from beneath which they had come. Ahead, just visible above the grass-tops, loomed another wall.

They had halted, and Wallace pointed toward it. "The bungalow!" he whispered to Russell. "Go quiet now, Russell——"

They started forward through the grass. It was like forcing through a thicket of huge vegetation, as they struggled onward through the towering blades. The wall of the bungalow loomed slowly closer as they went on.

They halted once as a giant winged thing that seemed of airplane size went by just above them with a whir of wings. A bat or bird of some kind, Russell knew. He caught himself glancing at the stars as they fought on through the grass, wondering if ever before they had looked down on such a scene as this of their pigmy band and its progress.

There came suddenly from Johnson, at the side of their little band, a low, tense whisper, and he pointed to the right with his unbandaged arm. They all froze motionless, silent.

Russell, heart pounding, saw that to the right and ahead, the towering grass blades were stirred by a nearing commotion, parting this way and that. There was a dry, slithering sound coming nearer. Then he saw what it was that approached. A snake. A huge snake that was to their eyes more than a score of feet in length, between one and two feet in thickness. It was gliding through the great grass slantwise across their path.

The starlight showed clear to Russell as it neared the enormous flexing and unflexing length of the snaky body, the triangular head and great jewel-like eyes. He strove to tell himself that the thing was but an

ordinary snake made monstrous to them by their own pigmy size. He could only watch it with the others as it glided nearer. It did not see them, but glided past and vanished in the tall grass behind them. Russell was not aware of what horror was shaking him until he felt Wallace's steadying hand on his shoulder. He stumbled on with the others.

The great dark wall of the bungalow was closer, and as they went on through the great grass they changed their course, heading toward one of the building's corners. Beneath a thicket of shrubs near that corner they halted. A burrow-like opening in the earth yawned blackly beneath them.

Already Snelling and Lowerman were dropping into it. Russell followed with Wallace, heard the other two coming after them. They were in darkness until a match flared and spluttered to reveal another rat-runway like those beneath the laboratory. The candles were lit and they started along it. To Russell, his brain already dazed, the earth walls around them made it seem that their minutes of progress through the towering grasses in the open air was but a dream-like interlude.

The tunnel twisted upward. They came to a great solid wood barrier over their heads, a round hole gnawed through it. When they had pulled themselves up through it, they stood in the interior of a wall, a narrow and towering-walled corridor like that other laboratory wall whose interior Russell had come through. The little band went along this and then after a few moments turned into another narrow wall-corridor opening at right angles from the one they followed. They clambered over obstructions until they came to a place where wood and plaster alike had been hacked out and a tiny hole pierced through the thin surface of plaster remaining on the wall's other side. At once the candles were extinguished.

Wallace drew their heads close. " This is Garland's room," he whispered. " We've worked for days to dig through this wall, Russell. Don't make a sound now until we have a look."

He turned back to the tiny opening in the plaster and peered through it. He motioned then to Russell.

" He's asleep, all right," he whispered. " And the case—look ! "

Russell peered through the opening. He saw a room like that which he had occupied in the bungalow on the preceding night—centuries before, it seemed—dimly lit by the thin starlight from the window, with a few chests, and articles of furniture and a simple cot. On the cot stretched an unmoving figure, breathing regularly in sleep—the figure of Garland, gigantic to his eyes. And on a low table beside the cot —his heart bounded—the black case that held the two compounds !

" We'll try it now ! " Wallace whispered. " If we can steal that case and get away before he wakes——"

" Enlarge the opening now ? " Snelling asked, his spear poised.

Wallace nodded. " But quietly, for God's sake."

Snelling and Hall began to dig silently at the plaster around the opening, chipping it away with their heavy spears. It seemed iron-hard, but bit by bit they broke loose little fragments of it, enlarging the opening. Once a fragment fell outside and rattled on the room's floor, a foot or two beheath the opening. They all were silent and unmoving, but the regular, loud breathing of Garland continued.

At last they had chipped away an opening large enough to permit their passage through it. Snelling went first, sliding down to the floor with spear in hand and catching and steadying the others as they too descended. Johnson was last, half-falling. They stood upon the floor, a group of six pigmy figures,

but a third the height of the great wooden chest that loomed beside them.

They started silently across the room toward the low bedside table. Russell, his breathing strangely tight, found himself carrying his spear poised, his eyes on the sleeping, huge figure on the cot. The absurdity of it came home to him—the thought that with the tiny ten-inch spear he could kill that enormous figure. But they were almost beneath the low table now—his heart drumming with excitement—the eyes of the others brilliant with hope—the table—the case—the case——

A cry from Snelling, and they leapt back, but too late! The huge motionless form of Garland on the cot had sprung into sudden activity, had leapt to the wall and with a single shove of his giant arm had pushed the great chest against the wall, covering the hole by which they had entered, blocking their retreat! Garland's hand found the switch and far overhead in the ceiling flared the sunlike lamps, flooding the room with light. And Garland, a forty-foot giant to their eyes, confronted the six pigmy figures, fully dressed, a gleaming pistol in his hand!

His laugh rumbled down to them like thunder. "So you came at last!" he jeered. "Wallace—Lowerman —all of you—and even you too, Russell, escaped, I see. I knew you would come—sooner or later!

"You thought your burrowing through the wall quite unobserved, eh? You dolts! You might have known that I was quite aware of it, and only let you go on because I knew that you would be coming in here to steal the compounds, and that I need only wait to trap you here!

"And trapped you are—trapped like rats to die the death of rats! Do you remember how we used to shoot at the rats with our pistols when we first came here? Well, the next few minutes ought to be just as

amusing, with you six taking the place of the rats. I can get other and more tractable subjects for my experiments, I think. And as for you six, you can now——" His arm came up with the pistol.

Wallace cried to the others as their tiny pigmy figures sprang back beneath the table's shadow. "Snelling—Hall—get to his ankles—try to trip him—our only chance——!"

Snelling and Hall sprang beneath the shadow of the immense cot just as there came a terrific detonation across the great room, and a smashing and splintering of the floor beside them as the great bullet crashed into it. The gigantic Garland, laughing in crazy amusement and not noticing the running two figures beneath the cot, sent another bullet into the floor in front of them as they leapt to escape the first. Russell saw Johnson trip as they recoiled again beneath the table, and dragged him with him an instant before another great bullet dug the floor at that spot.

The scene was fantastic, out of nightmare! The vast room, the colossal shape of Garland with pistol in hand, the massive leaden missiles that crashed at them. They made for the shelter of the cot, but threw themselves back only in time to escape another bullet which sent clouds of great splinters over them. Lowerman, struck by a flying splinter, was knocked flat, and Russell saw Garland's giant arm train the pistol on him. But he saw too, the foot-high figures of Snelling and Hall racing out from the shadow beside Garland to stab furiously at his ankles with their spears! Garland stumbled, his fifth shot going wild. He started to whirl around to stamp upon the two pigmy figures beneath him, but they had gripped his ankles and he tripped, fell, his body across the room with head near the other four pigmy men, pistol flying from his grasp as he struck the floor.

Instantly the four foot-high men were upon him,

clambering toward his throat with spears fiercely out-thrust. The battle of Gulliver and the Lilliputians re-enacted, it flashed through Russell's brain as he drove forward with his spear. But Garland, a vast bellow of rage coming from him, was scrambling up, his flailing enormous arms knocking them this way and that. Russell felt himself whirling across the floor as a flailing arm struck him, saw Garland rising to his feet, his face crimson with rage. And Garland, his crazy amusement dissolved into mad fury now, was grasping a chair, whirling it over his head to send it crashing down on the scattered pigmy figures.

Russell, staggering to his feet even as Garland's chair swung up, felt rather than saw beside him a big metal shape, the pistol that had slid from Garland's hand as the giant fell. To the foot-high Russell the pistol was huge, but almost without conscious exertion he had grasped and lifted it, one arm encircling its great butt and his other hand on its trigger as he pointed it up like some clumsy big rifle toward the giant Garland's breast. He was not aware that he had pulled the trigger until the roar of the weapon knocked him backward. There was silence. . . .

Garland swayed as though in stupid surprise, the huge chair slipping from his upraised hands and crashing to the floor—swayed, a spreading red stain upon his breast, until he too slumped and crashed in thunderous fall to the floor.

Russell was dazedly aware of voices and running feet, of the others crowding about him, weeping, sobbing, helping him up. Wallace and Lowerman were climbing to the low table, bearing down from it the black case between them, the six pigmy figures crowding round it as it was opened with frantic haste. The tubes of red and green compound—Wallace was filling the big hypodermic needle, the others supporting tube and needle as the red compound

filled the latter. They crouched down near the room's centre but away from the prostrate giant figure of Garland—and then Wallace and the great needle—a stab of pain in Russell's neck as it penetrated—and then swift darkness—darkness—darkness. . . .

When Russell awoke, sunlight was warm upon his face. He opened his eyes, stirred, sat weakly up, nausea and weariness infinite upon him. Around him others were stirring. He looked about him dazedly, then with swift remembrance and comprehension. Wallace and Lowerman and Snelling, Johnson and Hall, they all were stirring, waking like himself, in the crowded room that seemed now not gigantic, but small. And beside them another figure that did not stir—Garland! Garland—his dead figure no larger in size than their own!

They staggered to their feet, all dazed by the transition from pigmy to human stature once more. They were all without clothing, and on the floor lay the little rough tunics that had been theirs as pigmies, and the absurdly little spears. They groped out of the room after unlocking the door, and groped into clothing in the other rooms, like men restored suddenly from insanity to sanity. They poured stumbling out of the bungalow into the light of still another sunset, their speech still incoherent.

"The boat!" said Wallace thickly. "Let's get away—for God's sake let's get away!" He halted suddenly. "But first——"

He ran back into the bungalow, and when he emerged, disappeared into the laboratory, then joined them. As they stumbled away from the buildings and down toward the island's shore, thin curls of smoke lifted from the two structures. They reached the shore of the island, opposite that where Russell had first landed, and there was the long boat-house with still upon its door the lock that Garland had placed there.

They smashed into it, and in a few moments had the cabin-boat out and heading with noisy motor away from the island.

Clouds of dark smoke were lifting skyward from the island's higher centre as the flames ate the two buildings there. The sunset's level rays struck in vain against their black and billowing masses. Snelling held the boat westward away from the island, Lowerman and Hall and Johnson sprawled in its cockpit. Wallace pointed back with unsteady hand to the lifting smoke-clouds as he and Russell gazed.

" There never were any of Garland's compounds—never any pigmies that he made with them from men," he said. " Never anything but an accidental fire that caught Garland. You understand ? "

Russell nodded weakly. " Better so," he whispered. " Better that the world hear it so——"

He crouched with Wallace, looking back still. The island was dropping behind, vanishing in the waters, but the smoke from it rose visible still into the heavens like a great black column, an enormous sign. Their eyes could mark it still, though the island itself had passed from sight. Snelling, though, had not turned, had not looked, heading the boat straight onward into the setting sun.

BHUILLANEADH

R. F. Broad

I

Mist, drifting in irregular, muffled waves from Ben Tromach's sullen slope, lapped across the far side of the Moor. A thin wind flogged at the crushed and stunted heather, swept a charge of sandy drizzle into the faces of two lonely figures that had paused, irresolute. Their very insignificance gave to the whole scene an unreality and a false perspective; they seemed out of place, unwanted, and it was as if the elements themselves resented the strangers' presence. The elder man, whose nerves were obviously on edge, felt it keenly.

"Hostility—in the very air!" he whispered. "You notice it?"

His companion nodded. "We can't expect friendship from the forces at work here. We bring opposition, and the power to thwart: but the enemy hides. Better get back to the village, Krondahl—until the mist lifts, we can do nothing. I want to measure the foe in daylight, and in another hour it will be dark, with his strength at its greatest. We're going to play a dangerous game—a single false move, or a moment of unpreparedness, and there is little chance left for either of us in this world—or *the next.*"

They had begun to return as he spoke, and his listener shivered.

"Then you can form a theory as to what has happened—and I was none too soon in seeking you out?"

" If you had not had your terrible experience in that house : if you had not lost yourself in the mist—had not come to me when you did, then there might have been consequences too ghastly to contemplate. Let me, as one who knows the occult, give you an idea of the truth. From what you have told me, I have no doubt whatever that this ruin of a house has proved an unholy sanctuary for an earth-bound spirit inspired by extreme malignancy. It will try, I know, to gain enough strength to break down the barriers of this world, and create a weak spot in the defences ; since its type desires nothing so much as the destruction of virtue—goodness, sanity. I must seek it out and rob it of its power before it can do harm—— Professor Krondahl, you have been touched by the finger of hell, and to discuss that contact is the last thing I desire. I want you to try to forget, to base your faith in the realization that good must conquer. I shall beat it—be sure of that."

Lance Cranford had to choose his words carefully. Too keen a recollection of the ordeal he had undergone might be quite enough to wreck Krondahl's already weakened reason, as might too free a statement of the cause. When the elderly Swede had come to Cranford's London flat in a frenzy of terror, to implore the occultist's aid, his incoherent narrative had aroused an appalling theory. He made Cranford understand at last that during a walking tour in the Grampians of Scotland, a storm had driven him to shelter in the deserted ruin of a great mansion—where darkness caught him. He might have been warned by a sense of evil ; but he ignored it, until, in the dim light of a stormy moon filtering through broken casements, he saw a horrible sight. A great, shapeless black mass materialized itself from the gloom of the echoing, stone-floored hall—vile, and without reason . . . it reached out what he calls a " tentacle " to seize him,

and then suddenly his paralysed legs came to life, and he fled in blind terror. He was only just in time, since as it was, the finger of hell touched him—searing through coat and shirtsleeve to the agonized flesh beneath, with the corrosive effect of hot acid, and leaving a great, scarred burn on his forearm. His recollections were, of course, very confused; but he declared himself conscious of an impression of cunning Satanic intelligence—and also of a most disgusting stench of putrid flesh. Himself no occultist, he turned for an explanation to the greatest ghost-hunter of the century.

"And my dreams!" he had stammered pitifully—"Gott, if you could imagine them! Night after night to dream of foul darkness, and something that laughs at my fright, wants always to lure me back to that place. Up there, they call it Bhuillaneadh, and they swear it is cursed—inhabited by the devil . . . and night by night, he drags me back . . . God! be merciful, for I am going mad—*mad*——"

He ended on a thin note of hysteria.

"Steady—steady!" Cranford cut in sharply—"you must force yourself not to let it prey on your mind! Scotland is full of legends—it may well be nothing serious——"

But he knew he lied—lied because he dared not speak the truth. To tell Krondahl that an earth spirit of fiendish powers had found a way of materializing itself through the medium of rotting, blackened corpses stolen from desecrated graveyards, clotting the festered remains of that poor outraged flesh into an unclean mass of jelly which it might inhabit . . . now searching for the souls of men to aid it a stage further, even as their discarded bodies went to sate its appetite—to tell that much would be to turn the frightened creature before him into a raving madman. A doctor can diagnose from a rambling account of symptoms, and

so can an occultist. Secretly Cranford had a chill fear of being too late—of tackling the case at a time when the entity had gained too firm a hold on its earth sanctuary.

Actinomyces—bacteria with a soul. Finding a chance wayfarer, and branding him with its touch . . . gaining a little hold on him, inhabiting his dreams. Working to corrupt him, to lure him down, because it needed a human agency's perverted help in tearing aside the veil, whereby it might admit the host of the damned to the earth sphere. And he, fighting in his subconscious mind, seeking in a wild heart-cry for help, the means to aid himself, and to destroy right at its beginning a manifestation too deadly and vile for normal contemplation.

Akin to Voodooism—Vampirism—the Black Art . . . things laughed at, because a material age refuses to admit their possibility.

And how far, Cranford wondered, had the hold on Krondahl possessed itself? What effect would it have to subject the Professor once more to the influence of Bhuillaneadh? For it had to be done—the victim must serve as a decoy, whatever the price. . . .

They had gone north together, losing no time: Cranford, unable to make his survey of the Moor of Tromach or the house for the thick mist, returned with his companion to the small village that formed their headquarters. Followed a night of uneasiness, through which the occultist dared not sleep for fear of another attempt on the Professor; whom he planned to take over as soon as the weather cleared, without revealing that a night under Bhuillaneadh's ruined roof might be essential.

Tired, but resolute, Cranford sat at the window, and watched the breaking of a perfect, clear dawn. He rose stiffly, and went to Krondahl's door—stood listening. There was no sound. Silently he lifted

the rough latch ; and, a second later, realized that in failing to keep a rigid watch, he had made a bad mistake. For the room was empty—the bedclothes thrown aside.

He had underrated the adversary, and, with supreme cunning, it had stolen a march on him. Across the intervening miles, Bhuillaneadh had called in the night, and its half-won victim obeyed—probably sleep-walking, since the Professor's clothes lay as he had left them.

Against the white of his face, Cranford's eyes showed wide and dark. Swiftly he returned to his own room, washed and dressed silently ; forced himself to eat. Into a knapsack he packed food, revolver, and other weapons more potent against the forces of darkness. Every minute of daylight was priceless, since it is only when the sun sets that such things have power to work their will—and before it had risen high enough to melt the clammy mists of dawn, he was away.

He walked quickly, in spite of his lack of sleep, and the cold breeze refreshed him. The Moor, treacherous with its bogs and quagmires, carried not a single beast —shunned by man and cattle alike. It was slow, rough going, and the wiry heather hid endless pitfalls for ankle and leg.

When he had crossed it, the young morning glowed and swelled—but seemed to start back from the tree-girt fastness of Bhuillaneadh. His first sight of the place was ominous : nothing was to be seen of the house for dense, naked branches, and the rusty gates were cluttered feet deep in a jam of mouldered leaves. One gate, its hinges long crumbled away, leaned drunkenly against its pillar, leaving a space large enough to squeeze through—and inside, past the opening, were footprints in the leaves. He caught his breath. . . .

What had once been the drive was now a dank and

gloomy cavern. He braced himself, and commenced to worm his large frame through the gap.

He freed himself just in time, and saved his life with a mighty leap. One half of the huge, twenty-foot wrought iron structure ripped loose from the spongy stonework ; and though it was leaning inwards, slewed at him on his *outward jump*. It was a near thing—another three inches, and the ornamental capital would have smashed his skull. As it was, the metal grazed the back of his hand, pitching into formless, noisy ruin at his feet. A moment he rocked there, nursing his bruised hand, and feeling a little sick . . . then seized his courage, and advanced.

Half-way up the drive, a rotten branch fell, to brush his shoulder and thud into the thick carpet beneath him : but he reached the broken steps. Keeping a sharp watch for falling coping, he mounted them, and tentatively eased a little weight against the door. Its massive hinges protesting, it yielded stiffly. Raising his right foot, he gave it a powerful kick, using the reaction to curl himself back into the angle of the entrance porch. The door swung wide, and a tenth of a second later, Bhuillaneadh made its third, and most terrifying attempt on him—a failure only because he did not rush inside as the door gave way. A massive beam, as he found, dropped from the hall roof, thundering to the floor with sufficient force to crack one of the big stone flags, and sending a cloud of ancient, musty powder rolling through the entrance like smoke from a wind-driven fire. Cranford, whose unerring sixth sense told him he was temporarily safe, waited till the echoing boom had died down. Then, snapping on his torch, he stepped inside.

The vast hall had the damp, indescribably beastly smell of a long closed vault ; and, as he stood listening, he knew that the house was trying to shake his nerve. Silence is sometimes tangible, especially when it is

broken only by small, distant sounds, and is the silence of a morgue-ridden emptiness. He could hear great sullen trees flogging their aged arms at the walls ; and inside, there was nothing except a distant dripping of water, which he could not locate. Even if he had not known that the materialization centred itself in the hall, he could have guessed by the overpowering sense of evil that swept over him.

Once it must have been a splendid place : perhaps when Prince Charlie was fighting for a throne, and a Scottish clan bowed to Bhuillaneadh as its rallying point. The door opened to the middle of the long side, and at the far end, Cranford's torch picked out a double stairway. This arched up over another entrance, giving to some farther part of the house ; but now its former magnificence had yielded—its stone steps dangerous with the slippery damp and crumbling rot of age.

He played the beam down, and it caught a dark patch in the centre of the floor—a square of blackness. Cautiously he edged over, testing his steps. The patch was a trap in the floor, and it gaped open ; alongside it lay a square flag, ringed in the middle, and a stairway dived into the murk.

When Cranford set his feet carefully on the slimy steps, he calmly took the biggest risk of his life. The odds were considerably against his ever coming out alive—and there was a ghastly penalty in death. He was virtually placing himself in the enemy's hands, but his trust lay in his haversack ; and he knew he had to fathom the secret under the house before nightfall.

It seemed as if the flight would never end, but at last it deposited him in a narrow, low-roofed passage, wet and dripping with fetid slime. It wound away round a corner, and he followed its narrowing to an opening so small that he could hardly work his way through it. Some odd acoustic trick had previously

cut off the sound of the water, but as he approached and passed the tiny doorway, it burst upon him loud and distinctly. He wrinkled his nose at the clammy air, and for a moment his surroundings puzzled him. The tiny dungeon-like cell had in the centre of its floor a large round opening—and then he suddenly realized that he was in the well-room. He dropped to his knees, and lying flat on his face, got his head over the opening—his right hand lighting the depths.

What he saw confirmed his worst fears. He shut his eyes as, in spite of himself, a spasm of nausea passed over him, and cold sweat broke on his face.

Thirty feet below him, half-submerged in stinking water, it lay. It was twisted and bloody, half-naked, horribly distorted—the corpse of Professor Krondahl.

There were rungs in the side of the well, extending down . . . the occultist set his teeth. He slipped the haversack from his shoulder, and, taking a length of string from it, leant over and lashed his torch to the topmost rung so that it shone downwards. When he was sure it was secure, he tested his footing, and began to descend.

Keeping his head was the hardest part of the work. Vertigo and revulsion hammered him as he hung perilously down, and with his free hand, began to lift the stiff, icy thing. It smelt of well water, and of things unmentionable and some of the blood on its pulpy, battered head seemed as if it were not yet dry. Worst of all, he had to carry it over his shoulder.

Breathing hard, Cranford had climbed half-way back, when the torch, without a preliminary flicker, went out.

II

For thirty seconds he stayed perfectly still. The rungs were spaced both widely and irregularly, and to find them in pitch darkness with his gruesome burden

to hamper him, was difficult and awkward. *Why had the torch failed?* Difficult and awkward—it might be more than that. . . .

He threw off a temptation to slough his burden. It was unthinkable, to re-enact the affair. It could only be gone through once.

The deadweight on his back grew heavier with the pause. He could feel the water silting through his coat to his creeping flesh . . . with an effort of resolution he loosed his right hand and groped, clinging with his left. Before he could locate the next rung, something dropped with a little thud on his head, and started to *crawl* down past his ear. A tremor shook him—he reached up and grasped it, swallowing . . . it was soft and sticky, writhed in his fingers horribly . . . biting his lip, he flung it from him, and heard it fall away, to strike the water with a little splash.

He had thrown with unnecessary violence, and the reaction increased still more the mass of the wet corpse across his shoulders—it slipped. Somehow its dead, dripping arm linked choking round his neck, and he nearly lost control, fighting it back into place. Its mass, its bulk, were ponderous, unbearable, and still there loomed in the darkness a fifteen-foot climb ; with more than a broken neck if he lost his balance. He made a rung—two rungs : in spite of himself a thin moan slipped between his teeth. He chewed on his lip, and battled again. He might have been drawing it from a quicksand—invisible bands were clawing it down against his corded, aching muscles.

After a thousand years, his fingers, torn and bleeding from the rough, rusty iron, met the sleek curve of the torch. He made no attempt to test it—somehow, until he was out of the well cylinder, he was more afraid of light than of darkness. With a final effort, his arms seeming to be wrenched from their sockets, he drew himself over the rim, and slid along the stone floor

until it was safe to allow the dead to drop gently. He cursed his nerves, for the slap of its chill flesh on the flags shook him.

He tore the torch free and stepped back, pushing at the button. Instantly, as he had expected, its brilliant beam cut the darkness, and with an effort he steadied himself. Then there was a shocking discovery—it was eleven o'clock, nearly high noon. Bhuillaneadh had cheated him out of the morning, and he wanted every available second for his preparations before night. Turning from the empty well, he gazed down at the poor huddle on the floor ; and gazing, found himself again in a great gust of rage that such things could be. He swelled with it, drawing up his big frame to its full height—felt he wanted to destroy, defy . . . a bitter oath left him.

Picking up the body, he half-dragged it to the passage ; through it, and up the steps to the great hall. Not far from the trap, he set it in a pentacle of chalk, since there were powers around him that had strength even when the sun was high. Then he set about barricading the house on the inside, for he wanted so to arrange matters that whatever he had to deal with would find no way of escape, and no stage for its work save in the hall.

His barriers were not visible and solid, but they were as near impregnable as ancient Egypt could contrive. The formulæ, the rites, came from the Pyramids, where old-time priests, dabblers in anthropomancy and the Black Arts, learned to safeguard themselves against the shades they evoked. Chiefly, Cranford's weapons were the pentacle chalk, and a little flask of some colourless liquid which he scattered round the lintels of door after door. He had meant to finish with two hours of daylight in hand, but though he went straight through, it was late afternoon when he at last allowed himself time to snatch a hasty meal. In

the intervening hours, he had combed the entire house from the lofty attics to the well-room—where he laid " guides " to bring the enemy where he wished—and sealed every avenue of escape. It was a dangerous business—many of the floors were rotten, and at least twice only his own agility saved him from being shot through. The house followed him, seeking his destruction, and in its malignancy trying to urge him to a false move.

When he had eaten a quick meal, he arranged his own defences, and was glad he had brought the apparatus of the electric pentacle. He built it twenty feet across, and well inside set Krondahl's body—beset by a queer sense that the distraught, frightened spirit of the dead hovered near him, beseeching him to save it. The body must be destroyed before the soul can be claimed. Perhaps it was Cranford's imagination that the strong confidence of his thoughts quietened those tiny, agonized whisperings as he worked. When he was ready, he tested the battery ; and then, for the last time before he began his long vigil, walked to the door and looked at the dying daylight.

Already the enemy was massing. He felt it in the silent chime of little evil voices in the air, in quick plucking touches at his coat which grew stronger every second. Soon there would be no safety outside the glass tubes ; and leaving the door open in case of extreme emergency, he took up his post within the pentacle. He was prepared to wait all night, if necessary ; and his battery could keep the glowing red tubes alive for ten hours.

With the end of the sunset his ordeal began, and to it he submitted unflinchingly until nearly nine o'clock The dim red light of the tubes threw a feeble glow over the vast hall, and from the shadows crept the advance guard. The silence was never complete, yet never broken ; muffled, crying voices unearthly in their

cadence, that cajoled, cursed, lamented, jeered, rejoiced. Across the darkness flitted vague, unholy shapes—beastly, leprous . . . now taking the outline of satyrs, obscene animals—circling stealthily, warily —eager to watch for any sign of weakening by the man who sat, unmoving, out of their reach. Yet Cranford knew only one fear ; and that, that he might fall a victim to the occasional intolerable desire for sleep that fell upon him. If he did, his sleeping brain might become sufficiently objective for a transmitted impulse sent from outside to control it. A convulsive movement dictated, and one of those delicate glass tubes touched, shattered—the pentacle plunged into darkness, and himself, body and soul, into the deeps of hell. . . .

No disease-ridden imagination has ever conceived such shapes, or such sounds, as beset him—beating ineffectually at the repulsion of the pentacle. They fell back in baffled, snarling rage each time as they attempted to cross the steel-strong barrier ; and at last their repetition snapped even Cranford's tough control. Rather than sit inactive, he rose to his feet, determined to bring forth the spirit of the house and cross lances with it, rather than submit longer to the indignities of its creatures.

His voice rang and re-echoed through the lofty hall, strong and challenging. In it there was an intensity of scorn, of loathing and contempt—clearly and incisively he enunciated the opening phrases of the Ritual of Xost, which is as old as time itself.

The last words of the *Condemnation* beat themselves away from wall to wall. Every fibre of Cranford's being thrilled and tensed in the succeeding silence as, amid a low, soundless humming, the far air thickened into a cloud of mist—and Bhuillaneadh itself came out to meet him.

There was a soft, formless impact, like the dropping

of a mass of snow from the eaves of a house. Cranford pressed the button of the torch, and pointed the beam at the trap-door mouth. It picked out a sight so inexpressibly vile that even his hardened faculties recoiled, and the light-ray wavered in his hand.

Amid a stench almost visibly revolting, it poured through the maw of the trap—a tide of hell. As he had expected, it took the form of a dull, black jelly of putrid, reeking flesh, shapeless, quick and furtive of movement. A waving octopoid arm projected rapidly from the mass, its foul ooze clouded with acid vapours ; fell with a soft flopping on the stones, and into this arm the main body spewed itself. It advanced thus rapidly, amid a curious hissing, till the far end of the hall was obliterated under a glabrous swamp, deep and bubbling in the swiftness of its advance towards the pentacle.

For one anguished moment Cranford thought his defence inadequate, but it stopped abruptly as the red tubes drew near. Instantly, with incredible cunning, it swept round the five points ; and, in a matter of seconds, the occultist was isolated in his sanctuary. Like the lapping waves of an unholy sea, it reared itself, tried to smash past the barrier, fell back, beaten. Its attack was two-fold—danger came from the sheer physical filthiness of it with its attendant risk of nauseated unconsciousness, and from the deadly, receptive state of a mind submerged by bodily loathing. He could feel its bidding ; unable to break the pentacle from outside, it tried to force him to shatter it from within. Every second he had to fight an insane desire to step forward beyond safety, and several times caught himself moving imperceptibly towards the tubes. He snatched his handkerchief from his pocket, crushing it over his mouth to try to avoid breathing the tainted air. His stomach seemed to shrivel within him, and sweat ran over him in streams as he sustained the exhausting effort of will he needed to save himself. At

last he exposed his mouth, and put his soul into a recital of the *Abhorrence* of Xost, pinning his faith to the ability of those dread words against the power before him. But it shook off the Abhorrence and the Conjuration as a mad dog shakes off a blow on the head . . . fear, deadliest of all foes, gripped him. Gasping amind the stifling reek, he staggered backwards, groping for a certain flask of liquid. He found it—tore the cork from the bottle, and with a wide swing of his arm, splashed the contents right and left. The liquid, falling on piled ramparts of living slime, seared and dissolved them like hot vitriol ; they drew back, writhing and crying out in pain—a ghastly, blubbered sliver of inhuman sound. With a fierce shout, Cranford emptied the flask around him, and there rose a cloud of luminous, stinking steam, and a hellish yowl of anguish. He collapsed, sobbing, relaxing involuntarily—and Bhuillaneadh, which had drawn back hurt, but watching, had him off his guard —flung all its concentrated venom into a last mighty effort.

By Cranford's side, *the dead moved*—made a little jerky, convulsive movement, like a coiled spring that is suddenly released ; and the man's dilated gaze saw a dead, stiff leg lash out. He leapt with a shriek of fear too late as the rigid body twisted hideously over, bunched up, and with a staccato lunge crushed one of the glass tubes of the pentacle. The red glow vanished.

He staggered back, hands before his face—felt himself seized by dead, cold hands, held tight . . . heard a low, terrible laughter bubble round him. His torch dropped to the ground in a tinkle of breaking glass, just as he had a horrific vision of the slavering jaws of a huge wolf in the middle of its noiseless spring—sable head limned in faint, unearthly radiance, red eyes blazing. . . .

And while yet it shot through the air, Bhuillaneadh paid. A clean, live flame set it reeling under concussion, cleaving roof, floor, ceiling in the fiery vigour of a lightning bolt. The fist of hell was burned and broken as it struck—and Cranford, freed, tore in the blind instinct of self-preservation for the open night. He was singed and scorched; all round him walls and floor heaved, shattered—transformed in an instant to a white-hot furnace.

Crying, tottering like a drunkard, he reached the open moor, and there fell with his face buried in the rough heather. At last an inarticulate choked sound of gladness burst from him as he looked back, to see a torrent of angry flame at its task of cleansing. Saved, his part played, he let his head fall back amid a worn sigh, and slept, stretched on the cool ground under the present hint of a new, fresh dawn.

Epilogue

The world mourns Lance Cranford's death by drowning, in the *Corona Castle* tragedy, since it loses thereby a great deal. Probably Bhuillaneadh sapped his nerve, else he might have joined the boats instead of jumping overboard—apparently in the hope of picking up a piece of wreckage. Certainly there was no question of anyone's being left to drown—the boats were by no means full, and the ship was left calmly and efficiently.

There is mystery, too, in the final notes he made about the Bhuillaneadh case—the end of those jottings from which this story has been put together. One can read tragedy between the lines, but not enlightenment:

"Complete conquest is necessary, but sometimes I doubt myself. It should have been thorough, and

yet I have that lingering devil of uncertainty. Do they need help—the other side? Perhaps there is still more for me to do——"

Did he gain a little clearer insight, and know that even at Bhuillaneadh he had not faced, and beaten the ultimate? Did a great, fine courage come to him, to set out on a long, lonely journey for the eternal safety of mankind?

No one here will ever know; his body was never recovered from the grey Atlantic. And there is no answer in a pile of blackened, weed-grown stones. Perhaps, one day, when many things are made clear....

FINIS