

# Weird Tales

January  
1954

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COVER BY W. H. SILVEY

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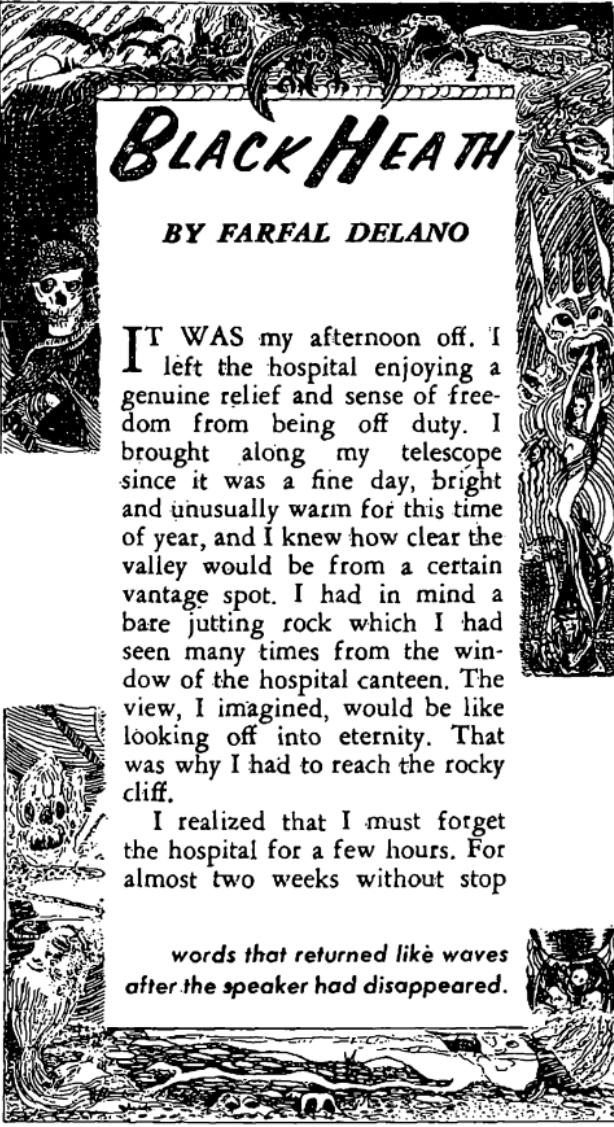
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# BLACK HEATH

BY FARFAL DELANO

IT WAS my afternoon off. I left the hospital enjoying a genuine relief and sense of freedom from being off duty. I brought along my telescope since it was a fine day, bright and unusually warm for this time of year, and I knew how clear the valley would be from a certain vantage spot. I had in mind a bare jutting rock which I had seen many times from the window of the hospital canteen. The view, I imagined, would be like looking off into eternity. That was why I had to reach the rocky cliff.

I realized that I must forget the hospital for a few hours. For almost two weeks without stop

*words that returned like waves  
after the speaker had disappeared.*

I had worked among that lot of human wreckage that had once been part of the 32nd Division. Hundreds of war-weary wraiths had been flown from Buna to the mainland and then by Australian hospital trains to us. A more emaciated, maimed, malarial, and jungle rotted and war-disillusioned bunch had never returned from a campaign before! And yet they had beaten the Jap wherever they met him, although they had not done so well with that other enemy—the jungle.

My descent was careful. The ground was very dry and loosely rocked throughout the slope of the hill. There were trees in spots, but mostly charred stumps remained in tomb-like memory of what once had been a woods. I expected to see reptiles crawling among the crevices and stones. It was a desolate terrain. I made my way into a miniature canyon, and for the moment my goal, the rock, was out of sight. I hesitated in the hollow, for several times I had heard the peculiar and almost bleating call of the Australian crow. Was it more like a cat mewing or like a baby crying? Climbing again I noticed that the timber on this side had escaped the fire. At the top I saw my goal once more, slightly below and not far away. The valley was much closer now, and as I looked behind and above, there were the hospital

buildings along the ledge of the mountain. Only shortly ago these buildings had been one of Australia's most famous hotels.

AT LAST I stepped on the rock and adjusted my glass to the magnificent world below. There was a precipitous drop from where I stood to the tree tops. A catcall suddenly sounded near. Then I saw a great black bird leaving a tree top from an adjacent crag. Its wings took on a silverish hue in the sunlight. Despite its bulk the bird flew with a wonderful grace and soon became a diminishing far spot in my glass. I kept looking, fascinated when a voice from behind split the natural silence.

"What a marvelous bird!"

I was startled. I had heard no one approaching my isolated perch. So quickly had I turned about that my balance became uncertain. At the sight of the unexpected company I felt my scalp crawl and chill. A tall bald figure with dark beady eyes faced me. He leaned on a heavy knotted walking stick as if for support. There was a sickly grayish hue about his facial skin. A long bloodless nose drooped loosely over what was not much more than a thin line for lips. Instantly I was reminded of a vulture.

"I see you are interested birds—" he began.

"Yes—a hobby of mine," I said cautiously.

"Good-*o*, we have something in-common, digger. You're a Yank, of course?"

I nodded feeling somewhat more at ease. I noticed that his voice was weak and trilling, as though his larynx was injured. When he spoke his Adam's apple throbbed and vibrated noticeably in a neck which was very long, frightfully thin, and parched like old wallpaper. His speech seemed to have less, too, of the typical Australian nasal quality, and I imagined that behind his gaunt form there was some culture of note. I couldn't help but wonder how he had in his apparent-dibilitated condition made the difficult descent.

"They are more than a hobby to me," he continued. "Birds have been a passionate study for me a long while . . . they are the most fascinating of all earth's creatures. . . ."

I was a bit alarmed by his enthusiasm. He had stared off into space as he talked, definitely lost in his own thought world. For a moment, following his eyes, I was diverted by the bed of the valley. I could plainly discern the white ribbon of a road winding through the green flats running on past toy houses, and finally disappearing among the enclosing hills which formed a western barrier.

Then I turned again to the awesome stranger. He remained still, buttressed by the crude stick, and peering obviously into nowhere. I judged him to be about fifty, although in physical preservation, he seemed ancient. I knew that I was looking at an abnormal human, but before I could ponder him further he pointed to the sky and gestured for my glass. How avidly he focused his eyes on two more crows soaring over the gum trees. And then suddenly his hands came to my attention. The fingers, the longest I've ever seen, were incredibly bony and claw-like! How grotesquely unhuman they were, curled and talonated about my telescope. I bit my lip to suppress a shudder.

"See how amazingly beautiful they glide!" he exclaimed with a note of reverence which I couldn't mistake. Then without removing his eye from the glass, he asked with strange graveness, "Did you ever think that man could fly also if he knew how?"

It wasn't the words so much, but rather the deliberate and calm way in which he asked the question that caught me unprepared. Somehow I understood that he didn't expect a contradictory reply. There was something preparatory about his whole approach to the subject.

"You mean of course like a

bird?" I said a bit cautiously.

"Yes, certainly," he replied returning my telescope abruptly. "Then you doubt the possibility?"

I decided to be careful, and at the same time tactful and logical if possible. I steadily made my way back from the edge of the rock, having felt uncomfortable since his arrival, first with my back to him and now with it to the dizzy drop and the valley.

"I have learned not to doubt anything too strongly. Since man can run, walk, jump, swim, crawl—then why not fly? And man does fly—faster than the birds or any other creature. Of course, he is mechanically aided, it is true. If it weren't for man's ingenuity, he would have to be satisfied with the good earth. Man isn't built to fly."

"You believe that."

"Yes. Birds have been given the bodies to fly, to contradict gravity. Their hollow bones, wing formation which is logically shaped and unusually light in structure all prove it. I'll admit that man has imitated the bird . . . if man . . ."

"If man," he interrupted again, "if man had something in common with the bird, he might fly; aye?"

"Yes," I said cautiously.

HE SEEMED to be waiting for the slightest concession.

Like a clever lawyer looking for an opening. There appeared a cunning glint in his beady eyes. It was that concealment-before-revelation look.

"Suppose I tell you that I know a man who can fly!"

It was evident that our conversation had now reached its specious limit. I was beginning to feel like a victim suddenly aware of a hoax. Furthermore I had my doubts about the man's sanity. He was too serious to be rational, I had wasted enough of my own time.

I said skeptically as possible: "I'm afraid I'd have to see that for myself to believe it." I wanted to end the matter right then. He faced me squarely and solemnly, as a minister might confront a heretic, and his facial muscles were taut with purpose.

"Then you shall see for yourself. You will be the first to see man fly!"

Who was this maniac? I wondered if he had just escaped from some cell. The situation had reached a point of incredulity for me. I heard him speaking in his unearthly voice, a voice that almost reminded me of a whistling from far off.

"Tonight you will come to my house: I live in the small stone cottage, the first one on the right side before you reach Black Heath. I shall expect you then?"

"Yes," I replied without pro-

mise or intention behind my words.

"If you get lost, ask for Amos Arlen's place. I shall be waiting for you, young man."

He started away, but turned shortly and pointed at me with his rough walking stick. "You will see something tonight that you will never forget—should you live a hundred years. Remember that!"

His words returned again and again like waves even after he had disappeared among the brush. I tried to shake off my discomfort, but there continually reappeared the image of that hapless being to haunt me in broad daylight. I pocketed my telescope and started back toward the hospital. It was difficult to rationalize what had just happened with the reality of the world about me. Amos Arlen be damned!

THAT evening after dinner I was resting by one the spacious windows overlooking the valley. This room with such a scenic vista had formerly been the hotel lounge and bar, but now by the fortuitous circumstances of war was our canteen. Except for a pair of chess enthusiasts, the PX attendant, and myself the place was unjustifiably neglected. I knew from experience that all those who were not on duty were likely to

be in Katoomba enjoying the local movies, bars, and women. I was ever bewitched by the magnificent view so generous and restful to my vision. My eyes sprawled and crawled lazily over the valley into the Blue Mountains. I noted the brilliant sunset beyond the hills making a serrated silhouette against the far away horizon. There were pastel streamers of red, orange, and purple interspersed by a blue-jade background. It was as though a broad rainbow had been stretched along the range, but pulled downward much too soon. I watched the hues change, until all that remained was an orange veil, and then this also receded behind the violet barrier.

Then inevitably the strange incident of the afternoon returned to mind. By some queer mental preoccupation I had succeeded in forgetting my bizarre experience for several hours. But now it returned with magnified strength and assumed weird proportions in my fancy. Amos Arlen! Such an obsession was surely psychopathic in any human being. And yet he was determined to prove his idiotic conceit. Why to me? Was it at all possible that he and I shook my head at my own weakening reason. Still at the same time I confess that I was overcome by an inexorable and utterly dominating curiosity. By

a convenient rationalization I convinced myself sufficiently that even if Arlen was crazy—was he not also dangerous and thereby unsafe while free to roam as he pleased? I waited for the last of daylight to disappear behind the Blue Mountains and then yielded to that irrational impulse that so often triumphs over its rational counterpart.

Black Heath was a few miles north, and since there wasn't any bus connection at this hour I had to walk along a dark road where hearing and feeling meant more than sight most of the way. A few stars were weakly visible, but the moon had not yet emerged from the dark pockets of the night sky. I walked rapidly and despite a chill in the air I soon sensed the warmth of my own blood flowing strongly. My eyes strained in the darkness as I tried to keep to the road which twisted along the lonely Australian bush. Just once was there any relief from the blackness. A freight train passed with a frightful cadence and illuminated the road like a huge torch in a flash, and while it went groaning by I was blind to everything and my blood frozen by the suddenness of the light and sound. At last I recognized familiar risings and descents in the road, and stones and openings among the trees—but how eerily different from daylight memory! I passed

several houses on the left, their lights faint yet comforting through the trees. I hastened, for just ahead of me now lay Black Heath. And then suddenly it seemed, there took shape within



a gap in the woods a low built house with a sickly light coming from a window. Approaching nearer I saw that it was a stone cottage. I recalled then that I had seen it some time ago, but until now its image had escaped me. This then was the dwelling of Amos Arlen.

A gravel path led to the gate which was part of an iron spikéd fence that evidently made a menacing border all around the house. I could see a dim kerosene lamp flickering through the right front window. The gate creaked rustily as I opened it and died out with a mournful shriekful cry before it stood still. A dog growled within the stone walls as I crunched gravel beneath my heavy shoes on the way to the door. I knocked against a heavy wooden door with an arched top.

And the dog growled again in a tone that aroused in me a terror I have seldom felt except when threatened with danger of a nightmare quality. I noticed a creepiness over my flesh which left me chilled. I fully regretted my impetuosity which led me to leave the warm comfort of the canteen. Then footsteps approached, stealthy, careful, afraid perhaps. A lock turned and gradually a crack in the door widened. I beheld in the semi-dark an eye, a weak watery eye. At last the full face and the bewildered stare directed at me. There was no recognition in his frightful features. A shadow finally passed like an eclipse over that forsaken visage and it seemed to partially light up as in recollection.

"Good evening—you have come! You'll forgive me for not recognizing you immediately. I was preparing an experiment, so you are just in time. Come in, young man. Be quiet, Ella where're your manners?"

**A**T THE moment I was more anxious about the dog than anything else. It had been snarling at my ankles with hot breath. It remained close to my legs as I entered Amos Arlen's house. He shut the door and turned the lock and I followed him through an open door into a room, the gloom of which affected me in-

stantly. A small lamp gave sparse illumination and cast ugly shadows over the bare wood floor. I was relieved to see the dog struggle across the floor to a worn oval mat near the empty fireplace. She was an old bitch; fleshy, and hoary. She watched me through cloudy brown eyes.

I sat down on a hard chair near the window and heard the wind rising outside. Arlen seated himself opposite with dog close by his feet. After a hurried look around, I realized that the room was the utmost in cold austerity. The two straight-back chairs and the round little table without covering comprised the furniture. Above the fireplace, in an irregular arrangement were a dozen or so misused and worn volumes. I noticed after adjusting my eyes to the distance that there was a medical encyclopedia, a chemistry text, a taxidermy handbook, and then what was strangest of all, or so it seemed for the moment, in faded gold letter on the spine the following: Tales E. A. Poe. On one of the stained and expressionless walls there was a single portrait in an oval frame. Through the half shadow and half light I was able to distinguish the features of a woman about thirty. Instantly I felt the haughty severity emanating from those steadfast eyes, and the pinched nostrils, and the tight lips which would defy a

chisel. I could not perceive the remotest ray of warmth in that face. And yet there was in those features something which might have been described as handsome if some terrible strain or anxiety were absent.

"That was my wife, digger. A fine woman—but cold as ice. She's been gone a good time now, poor woman."

The mixture of compassion and bitterness of Arlen's comment left me confused about his marital history. I could not imagine Arlen or his wife living happily together or individually. Observing him more carefully now, I noted his shabby black suit and the stained white shirt with its rounded collar from which hung a loose black tie of ribbon-like style. Here certainly was a fashion anachronism in this year 1942. I offered him a cigaret, but he shook his long bald head quite definitely. I placed my lighter flame to mine with more steadiness than I expected.

"I have a marvelous experiment to show you," he began in the most confidential tone. "But I shall insist on one thing before I allow you to witness. . . ."

"Yes. ?"

"You must give me your word that all you see tonight will remain a secret—our secret!"

"You have my promise." And for a long moment I squirmed inwardly under his piercing re-

morseless scrutiny. I became aware that I had unwittingly placed myself in his power. He arose from his hard chair, and I noticed as he did so that there was a wild sparkle in his eyes. I remained frozen for an instant unable to stand. Amos Arlen watched me with a distant expression. I sensed that some evil force was twisting this man's reason mercilessly. Why I thought this I don't know, perhaps it was the smirk about his mouth, or his eye gleam which now seemed to me so unholy, so baleful.

"Come, I shall show you my lab'rat'ry."

ONLY then did I arise and heard the old dog scrape and pull itself heavily upon all fours after me. I trailed behind the sober form of Arlen, out of the room and into the dark hall, and the sound of keys rattling struck my ears. Arlen stopped somewhere ahead of me and inserted a key with what seemed to me precision, considering the absence of light. A door grunted open, and although I could not distinguish the aperture against the black walls, I knew by both the sound and smell and that perceptive awareness of depth with which a person sometimes walks ahead in the utter darkness that a room was beyond. The room exuded a mixture of staleness,

dankness, and that sickening chemical formaldehyde. I was feeling some nausea while waiting for Arlen's reappearance and I imagined that people must know the same discomfort upon opening an old tomb.

A match flame burst through the darkness and then the brighter and more steady light of a lamp took its place. Arlen bade me enter with a slow gesture of his long arm. I came into a small narrow room with a low discolored ceiling. Once more I heard the closing of a door behind me and as in the first instance, I felt resentment at being locked in against my will. Presently he placed his lamp on a long work bench along the side of the room. I beheld now, what before appeared only to be shadows, as shelves along the opposite wall. Lined neatly and orderly, like so many black soldiers, were the stuffed bodies of numerous crows in all their coaly plumage. How lifelike they looked. I immediately recognized the work of a master taxidermist in this astonishing collection of morbidity.

"My workroom," he said modestly enough. On the lengthy bench were glass vials, bottles, notebooks, pen and ink, and a small black case of worn leather. The bench top was stained in motley colors and scarred with nicks and scratches.

I said nothing. I believe I was

inarticulate with such an ineffable terror by that horrible museum. Although I had turned from the preserved birds, I still suffered their haunting lifeless eyes in my back. I tried in vain to shake off a gloom which had gripped me from the moment I entered this old stone morgue, and had pervaded my senses with an icy awe.

From a drawer Arlen brought forth a vial of red fluid. It could only be . . . no, my dread must be affecting my reason! A current of fear seemed to intermingle and flow along with my bloodstream. With his thin clawlike fingers he held the tube up to the light and silently expressed a mocking approval.

"It is ready!" he exclaimed, satisfied as the devil himself. In a moment he had set down the vial carefully and pulled up from the floor a burlap sack. He reached inside deftly like a magician and drew out something stiff and black. I gasped as I saw another dead crow. The raven feathers had lost some of their iridescent quality.

I heard him say what sounded like genuine compassion: "Poor devil! He flew his last a week ago. You see his blood in that tube? It is chemically ready for use right now. I already have his niche waiting for him among the others on the shelf."

My harried imagination was being strained to the point

of danger in order for me to get whatever specious understanding there was to this macabre affair. What was the meaning of Arlen's mania and all this terrifying experimentation with one of nature's most melancholy and symbolic creatures? Poe had written what has perhaps become the most quoted poem in our language on that same black bird. But here was a man living with the morbidity he had destroyed and recreated.

A short chilly laugh interrupted my pondering. And turning to him I saw that the man of Black Heath had bared his jagged teeth in laughter. This inhuman outburst had all the echoes of a perverse sense of humor.

"You think I'm mad . . . I can see it in your eyes. You don't understand me. You wonder what this is all about?"

"It is true, I don't understand you."

"Then you shall! I'll tell you, but listen carefully. It is true every word I say."

With a quick gesture that swept the length of the shelves, Amos Arlen lowered his arm and faced me with the most rational look yet, and oddly enough it was that suspicion of sanity in his gaze that froze me more than anything previous, perhaps because it had appeared so unexpectedly. I remained cemented to the floor, stiff as the dead crow

on the work bench. From without I heard the wind whistle a shrill, screamlike bar along the eaves of the stone house.

"You see on the shelf twenty-three birds and before me the twenty-fourth. Each represents one month of hard labor. From each I have taken a quantity of blood. It is now two years since I began my incredible experiment. Mind you, two years of exhausting and patient labor. Of pain and agonizing suffering. And now at last I am about to complete my task. Tonight all is finished."

For a long moment he paused and then once more lifted the red filled vial to the lamp. He seemed very tired and on the verge of collapse.

"After I inject this I shall be ready to prove to all the skeptical world what it has been afraid to acknowledge!"

My clenched hands were sweating. An uncanny anticipation gnawed inside me as I felt a crisis nearing. He appeared to notice my rigid stance and smiled with what may have been sympathy or perhaps it was disdain for my weakness.

"Don't be unduly alarmed, young man. I've injected this formula at least twenty-three times before. You don't believe me . . ."

"Into your own veins!" I managed to exclaim.

"Yes, of course. At first it made me very ill—even the smallest amount. I've learned a lot in two years. I've counteracted the bad effects by adding a very simple compound taken from the eucalyptus leaf."

NO LONGER could I disguise my revulsion. The mere idea of the reaction between two different plasmas made me shudder. I tasted a trace of bile forming at the back of my tongue as a nausea began deep within me.

Amos Arlen was filling a syringe from the vial when next I was aware what was happening. My eyes had involuntarily closed a few moments ago. Now he set aside the empty tube and placed the syringe carefully nearby. I watched him remove his black coat and then roll up his sleeve past the elbow. The arm was miserably emaciated, and the veins stood out in ugly, discolored ridges. He raised the syringe, expertly and placed the needle into the hollow near his elbow. I closed my eyes again and for an instant wasn't sure of myself. My stomach made a quiver and seemed to jump, but I fought my faintness, and my eyelids pained from their strained closure. I opened them again when the sound of something touched the bench lightly. It was the empty syringe.

"Leave me quickly now," he said. "I must be alone to rest. You have seen only part of the experiment. Tomorrow I shall meet you on the rock where we met this afternoon. You'll come? You must!"

"Yes."

"Good-o. Go now. Tomorrow morning at six. Don't fail me!" He opened the laboratory door and held the lamp in the dark hall; I walked to the front door dazed and unlatched it. I felt completely enervated.

"Good night," he said, closing the door with an urgency.

"Good night," I murmured.

The air revived me. I hardly noticed the chill as the wind blew over my wet body. I hadn't the courage to think about what I had just witnessed. The black road seemed to undulate under my weak legs.

I REALIZE now that time had no meaning for me during that lonely walk back to the army hospital.

I was under a spell—a helpless kind of a mesmerism. I recall finding myself in my room again where I slept alone. The journey through the darkness is almost a blank. I vaguely remember shuddering images of stuffed crows glaring at me with terrible dead eyes. A trance hung over me like a pall. I didn't sleep except in hypnotic dozes. It was a

nightmare that remained even with the dawn.

With the light of day, I summoned all my will power and partly succeeded in shaking off enough of my obsession to rise and dress myself. I looked at my watch with sudden alarm. It was nearly six! I was very tired and at the same time in the clutches of a nervous weariness that offered no rest. I had to see this haunting experiment through to its tragic end. I had promised to meet him—why, I shall never know. It was too late to call for outside help. I rushed out into the semi-light disheveled and completely discomposed. The sun had not yet arisen enough to brighten the rough trail down to the crag and I stumbled over rocks and dead timber. Nearing the place of rendezvous, I made my way more cautiously. In my shaking heart I hoped desperately there would be no one there. And secretly I tried to convince myself that all this horror was only in my imagination.

But there before me, alone on the gray rock, waited the man of Black Heath. Then all this feverish mental anguish had a fatal reality after all!

"You've come just in time," he said. His skin appeared more ashen than ever. It was like seeing a ghost to behold Amos Arlen in the pale dawn.

"Yes, I've come and per-

haps just in time," I half shouted. "I'm ready for the final test."

"Wait a moment!" I moved toward him step by step.

There was a suspicious leer in his sunken eyes as I neared him. He too was moving, moving closer to the edge, step by step. I made my way very warily inch by inch. How grotesque his lank figure seemed against the ridged horizon! The sun's first beams appeared to pierce his spectral form.

"I came to tell you—" I began "—that I believe what you told me last night. You need not prove any further." I strove to make my words convincing, but they seemed to echo with a hollow insincerity. For a moment he hesitated like a child on the verge of changing its set mind. And then all trace of vacillation faded, and there returned in his face all the distorted determination of purpose of old. I knew any further plea would be futile.

"I don't trust you, Yank. You're like all the others. But you'll see in a moment. You'll be the first to see. . . ."

**W**ITHOUT any warning he raised his pinion-like arms horizontally and resolutely faced the profound depths of the valley. For a breathless moment I watched him pose like a prehistoric bird. And then I rushed

forth and tripped over his cane and sprawled to the edge of the cliff.

My hands caught in a crevice of the flat stone, while my eyes followed his gravity defying descent with wonder-stricken fascination. What can I say now, except this! For several endless moments I beheld a human figure in the truest semblance of flight. By the most miraculous operations the body of Amos Arlen banked and glided and soared and cleared tree tops with all the grace of a diving bird. And then I shut my eyes, unable to watch any longer, for I felt myself unknowingly sliding from rock, as if drawn by the force of Amos Arlen's aerial wake.

I lay there petrified for the devil-knows-how-long. Then I heard a caw-caw above me and so close that I imagined the crow was lighting on my back. As I turned and stared up in the blue sky, a black feather floated down to my side, and its owner flew beyond the trees. I picked up the raven plume and wondered at the strange souvenir.

By the time I had reached the upper road, my mind was formed on what action to take in the tragic case of Amos Arlen. I had

to unburden myself to someone immediately or risk going mad. In the little grocery store, I remembered there was a telephone. I found the little booth empty and dialed the operator. I asked for the Black Heath police.

"I want to report a suicide," I said more calmly than I thought possible.

"A suicide!"

"Yes. A man named Amos Arlen from Black Heath . . . never mind who I am now. He jumped from the cliff near the American hospital. Yes, of course, I'm sure. . . ."

I could hear some talking without being able to understand. Then a voice came over the phone. "This is Sergeant Jaimes speaking. Who are you? Pvt. Morris, you say. Will you come immediately? No, stay where you are, Pvt. Morris. We'll send a car. There's something very odd. . . ."

"Odd!"

"Aye, odd. Amos Arlen was arrested ten minutes ago here in Black Heath."

"He's all right?"

The voice laughed: "I wouldn't quite say that. He's crazy: He claims that he can fly. . . !"