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Cave of Murdered Men

A Fantasy

By W. BENSON DOOLING

A CHILL, penetrating wind made the place insufferable for any but the dead. Wet, mossy substance clung to the rocky walls, floor and ceiling. Several corked bottles of ancient wines lay on the rock-hewn table. Fungus and spiderlike webbing almost concealed the jade green of the glass. Bats flew about, horribly shrieking and thudding as their insect-ridden wings struck against the mossy cavern walls. A speckled snake hissed a call of warning to a hunger-mad rat. The place was dedicated to, by, and for, the dead. What life existed there was low life, starved life, and pestilent life.

The dead were there. The murdered men were there in a body—men who had been poisoned, men who had been hung, men who had hung themselves, men who had been cut by a saber or pierced by a rapier, men who had dined with Borgia; they were all there, and there they must stay until their murders were avenged.

They sat about the cave in pensive melancholy. Their long, black cloaks hung in tatters about their bony frames. Several of them carried sabers. One had a monocle wedged in his eye-socket. Another held a leafless rose in his hand.

They sat about and talked in whispers that harmonized strangely with the eery whispering of that biting wind. Tales were told—tales of blighted faith, tales of money left in trust, tales of stock markets, tales of roulette wheels, tales of love, and tales of mad orgies. Now and then, as a drinking story was told, a parched

tongue touched thirsty lips. Weary eyes wandered to the fungus-covered wine bottles that they could not touch, and back again to the faces of thirsty comrades.

A door in the wall of the cavern—a door of solid onyx, with a knob of lapis lazuli—the door to the world outside, swung open. A figure entered and seated himself at the table. There was an expectant silence. After a moment he raised his head: there was sorrow in his eyes.

"I have been avenged," he said. "I will go now. Another will take my place."

He raised a bottle from the table, broke the neck against the rock with a long, sweeping motion of his bony arm, and drank deeply.

"I drink," he murmured, "to your new comrade."

He faded into nothingness.

A figure arose and gathered his tattered cloak about him. The onyx door swung open. He nodded to his comrades; and was gone.

THE light canoe bobbed up and down with the turbulent waters of the swiftly moving river. A pale, gray-haired man, seated in the stern, guided the frail craft as well as possible in the swiftly moving tide. He glanced over his shoulders, to see if "The Thing" still followed him. It was there, true enough, a few yards behind. He paddled more fiercely. Would he never shake "The Thing"?

It had been with him for the last month. It had trailed him through the streets of a big city. It had followed him, when he sought relief from

"It" and his thoughts, to his country villa. It had stared over his shoulder when he played at cards. It had spoiled his putts on the golf course. It had laughed with him at the musical comedy. It had cried with him at the tragic opera. He did not know what, or who, it was, but he knew that it worried him. It bore a strange, abstract resemblance to the man he had murdered so many years ago. It could not be Radnor! Radnor was dead.

A kingfisher swooped low, and away, with a bright flash of color. An owl gave a melancholy hoot from the thick-foliaged shore. "The Thing" behind him gave a hollow laugh—a laugh that blended strangely with an unseasonable wind.

He raised his hand nervously to his hair. It had been a glossy black three weeks ago. It was a dull gray now. A chill not of the night wind seemed to freeze the marrow in his bones. He laughed a discordant laugh in answer to "The Thing." He glanced back again, and again. His eyes were staring strangely. There

was a queer light in them, a light not so much fear as madness.

"The Thing" was gaining on him. There was no doubt of that. Perhaps it would like a drink from the silver flask in his pocket. He would fool it! There was only enough for one. He would make for the shore! That was the thing to do.

The bow of the light canoe turned gently to the right. In a moment it was caught in the churning current. The man in the stern stood bolt upright. The canoe swirled round and round, then sailed out into space, over the falls, in a fifty-foot drop to the angry rocks below. The man saw, just before he dropped, that "The Thing" behind had gone.

THE onyx door swung open, and closed again. A man, in a tattered cloak, walked to the table and seated himself. There was an expectant silence. He took a bottle from the table, broke the neck, and drank deeply.

"I drink," he said, "to your new comrade."