

CECILIA'S GHOST

By DESMOND COKE

ILLUSTRATED BY G. WELCH RIDOUT

CECILIA suddenly decided that, in spite of her name, she must write something horrible.

Of course, like every respectable unmarried girl, she had published a novel, but there was nothing very awful about that, in spite of what the critics said. It was domestic; and deep in her, Cecilia felt sure, there was something unsuspected—almost unwomanly, dark, eerie—something that could find relief only on paper.

She would surprise the people who looked upon her as a rather average woman, and upon *Woman* as a very ordinary thing. She would raise the lid of her soul and display to them for one second things that would send them shuddering away. Never again should anybody call her "Sis."

It was not of moral iniquity that she hankered to write. No, it was dank horror which appealed to her. She would prove that she was a woman in no earthy mould, a woman all apart. Those who had been her friends should shiver as they passed, and murmur to inquisitive companions: "Why, *she* wrote 'The Crawling Thing'! . . . Let's hurry on, or she will talk to us, and I dread meeting her weird eyes."

There! "The Crawling Thing." That was the very title she had sought so long, and now it had come to her without any effort! The gods—but no, the demons—obviously spurred her on. She hurriedly seized up a pen and wrote these three words in excited capitals:

"THE CRAWLING THING."

Then she began to think; and possibly that hurt the demons' pride, for, try as she might, nothing more would come.

A dozen times did she write the first sentence, a dozen times she crossed it out. Nothing seemed quite ghastly enough to go beneath so grim a title. "It was midnight" appeared to her the best, but she felt certain that she had read it somewhere before. All the best things, she finally decided, had been used up centuries ago.

It was certainly very unfair that the early authors had started with such an advantage. Anybody could have been original in those days, when nobody had written anything. What a classic she would have become if only she had been born in the sixteenth century—or even before Edgar Allan Poe!

The sense of injustice was fatal to creation. She laid down her pen.

Then she thought of something else.

As it was something that she had done five hundred times at least before, it is surprising that she did not think of it a little earlier.

She would ask Max.

II.

"Max," she said, as soon as he arrived, "I've never written a ghost story."

"Why should you?" he answered jauntily, as he laid down his straw hat. It is not in healthy young men to anticipate a crisis.

Cecilia was annoyed at once.

She saw now that this, of course, was just the answer he *would* make. She had been a fool to ask him. It was this horrible superiority that always made her talk of something else whenever he proposed. Simply because he had sold twenty thousand copies of a book admittedly not half so good as hers was going to be, and had two serials almost accepted!

"I'm sure I don't know why I *shouldn't*," she replied with warmth.

Max pulled his trousers up two inches at the knee and sank into an easy-chair before he nonchalantly answered.

"Simply," he said, "because no woman ever has." He ran a finger down the mauve clock of his socks.

Cecilia could not trust herself to speak at first. This 1880 tone of patronage to *Woman*—and from the man who wished to marry her! She sat and stared at him and thought. Her first instinct was to overwhelm him with the names of all the women who had written about ghosts; but that seemed petty, and she could not recall

any at the moment, so she took a higher line.

"When you scoff at women like that," she said coldly, "do you recollect that Grace Darling, George Eliot, Mrs. Pankhurst and Christabel; that Joan of Arc, the late Mrs. Gladstone, and Elinor Glyn; that your own mother—"

"Leave her out," Max interrupted. "She's never written one. I never heard that any of the others had?"

"Oh!" cried Cecilia, with a pretty gesture of disdain. "And yet they say *women* can't argue! Of course you knew I wasn't talking about ghost stories just then."

Max gave no answer—probably guilt weighed him down—and presently, speaking in the tones that adults use to a forgiven child, Cecilia asked again calmly: "What do you think there is against my writing a ghost story?"

His penitence was certainly delusive. "Nothing but the fact already mentioned—women simply *can't*." And whilst she gaped at him, he crossed his legs comfortably, joined finger-tips, then started with the air of an Extension lecturer. "Women, you will find, are straitly limited to a quite narrow sort of writing. Essays, garden books, diaries, War experiences, domestic or sex novels—that is Woman's realm, and for an obvious reason. They have not been educated. Not," he added hastily, "in Greek or Latin, with this result: they lack the classic sense of *form*—that splendid simplicity which drives through from line one on to *Finis*, leaving out the inessentials. A woman's mind is different. What does she do if she sits down to write? She just starts anyhow, and sees what happens."

"When I sit down to write," Cecilia said with dignity, "I sit down and write."

"An excellent idea," Max answered suavely, "but it won't do with ghosts. You must sit down and *think*. Days must pass before you touch a pen. And why? Because, unless each step is logical, the whole thing goes to pot. And that is why no woman ever has written, or will, a really good ghost story."

Cecilia suddenly got up. He also rose, but she was at the door by then.

"Good-bye," she said, turning there. "I'm afraid I can't give you tea. Will you let yourself out? I'm in the mood to work, and everything must yield to that. I've quite decided to write a ghost story."

III.

MAX, for a man, was tactful.

He never said a word about the tale. He did not ask how it was getting on. He waited.

And presently came his reward.

"Max," asked Cecilia thoughtfully, some four days later, when he had paid his daily call, "how is the best way to begin ghost stories?" She spoke in quite an abstract manner.

"Well," he replied, no less impersonal, without a reference to any quarrel, "there are a dozen ways. Some begin at the last chapter. Many don't begin at all," he added hopefully.

"I could go on," she said, with a certain pathos. "I'm full of ghosts and things, all waiting to come out on paper, but it is just beginning. Max," she cried, and he had never seen her so appealing, so fragile, so delightful, "won't you write me just Chapter One, and tell nobody, and then I can go on?"

He got up and stood over her. "Wouldn't I do anything in all the world for you?" he asked. And then he ventured, ever so timidly: "Sis!" It sounded much more daring than "Cecilia."

She writhed. "I only want one chapter," she said lightly, to hide her emotion. "Just to get me going. When can you deliver it?"

"What is the rate of remuneration?" he inquired.

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Max!" was her peevish retort.

He could not have believed that what had seemed life's golden moment could turn so rapidly to dross.

IV.

MAX cleared his throat and said imposingly—

"THE CRAWLING THING."

FIRST CHAPTER.

"Oh, I think 'First Chapter' sounds horrid!" remarked Cecilia critically. "I like to hear it called 'Chap. One.'"

Max was firm at the start. "Of course," he said, "this is a mere shell. You can do what you like with it. This gets the creeps started. That and the title will be quite enough. The whole thing is a formula. By the way, I'm calling myself May."

"But why?" Cecilia asked.

Max snorted. "It's no use asking why. I am. I've got to be somebody, and stories like this are always in the first person. and I *must* be a girl."

"Oh, yes," said Cecilia. "Well, go on."
"First Chapter," doggedly repeated Max, and then—

"THE HOUSE ON THE HILL.

"Wanted, young couple to rent half of a large old country house (furnished).—Apply, Rua, Box 116A. . . ."

Cecilia gave a little sigh. "Oh!" she said. "And I wanted it to start with something creepy! I could have written an advertisement myself."

"It is creepy," sternly answered Max. "The readers all know something terrible is due to happen, directly they read this. That is the way every mystery story ever written has begun."

"Couldn't it be midnight, Max?" Cecilia murmured in the tones that had so often brought victory before.

But this time Max was adamant. "No, it could not," he said. "They wouldn't read advertisements at midnight. It's not ever done. And I shan't read the thing at all unless you promise not to say a word."

"I may at the end?" she asked.

"Yes, at the end," he answered with emphasis.

Thus crushed, Cecilia nestled in the sofa cushions and elaborately laid a finger on her laughing lips. Max ignored this little pantomime, and, having read the disputed advertisement again, went on—

"I repeated the words to myself for the five hundredth time, with ever-growing sense of dread.

"Yesterday they had seemed full of promise. I had pictured my brother, once dragged away from his beloved London, rapidly becoming the merry-hearted boy who had been my child-playmate, instead of the silent, gloomy man, obsessed by his writing, that he had recently become. To-day the same words came back to me with a note of doom, as something threatening to wreck my life.

"I could not say exactly what it was that had produced this change. Perhaps it was the long, slow drive to our new home; perhaps the bitter cold; perhaps my brother's silence.

"'Denzil,' I almost startled myself by asking suddenly, talking loud to overcome the rattling of our ancient carriage, 'you've never told me anything really about the house. I hope our half is separate!'

"'It's a quaint old rambling place,' he answered, 'built so that our wing only touches the main building at one point. I suppose there'd be a locked door there. In

our garden you won't know there is another house, and naturally we each have our front door.'

"'And the landlord? Is he—what is he like, Denzil?'

"'Haslam?' Oh, I don't know," he answered. "Forty or so, I suppose. Not a bad fellow, I dare say. Didn't altogether like his looks. But I expect he'll leave us decently alone. You'll see."

"He sank once more to silence, in a way that made it clear he did not want to talk."

"The jolting carriage rattled on, and I was left no whit more at ease.

"Vague terrors, shapeless premonitions, surged across my mind. In vain I tried to laugh at them, in vain I tried to reason. A hideous fear gripped hold of me. The horse's slow feet seemed to hammer out a song of doom.

"'Denzil,' I said almost faintly, 'Denzil, I'm so cold!'

"He did not answer.

"He was staring past me with his eyes wide open, eyes clearly unseeing, drawn as by a spell.

"'Denzil, Denzil!' I cried in horror.

"And still he stared coldly, blankly, through me with fixed eyes.

"The sun, so lately in its bed-time glory, peeping rosiely from curtains of a splendid yellow, now flung a last despairing beam on Denzil's clear-cut face, giving to it the deadly colour of a mummy.

"I laid a shaking hand upon his knee. 'Don't look like that!' I cried. 'You frighten me.'

"He seemed to come back to himself with a jar. His eyes shrank suddenly.

"'What is it now?' he asked impatiently. Then, as his eyes seemed to regain their faculty of vision: 'Why, here we are! That's Hagstomb.' He pointed to the spot where his gaze had been held. . . .

"I did not look at once. 'Hagstomb!' I repeated. 'Hagstomb? Our house isn't called Hagstomb?'

"'Yes,' he said, with angry cheeriness. 'But I meant not to tell you. You've such odd ideas. Someone was buried there. We easily can alter it. Now have a look at our new home.'

"Already sick with an unreasoning fear. I looked around.

"High on a bleak hill it stood, slate-grey in the sunset's monotone, illimitably drear. The dropping sun pierced for one moment its blackened hangings with a blood-red ray, which caught the windows of the gloomy,

shapeless pile. From pane to pane the flare ran fitfully.

"Looks just as though it was on fire already!" Denzil laughed.

"But to my eyes it spoke of infernal revelry and evil chance.

"I placed a hot, trembling hand on Denzil's wrist.

"He turned slow eyes upon me.

"I felt tears trickling down my face.

"Why, little girl—" he said with sudden tenderness.

"Oh, Denzil, I can't—I can't!" I sobbed, and fell shuddering across his knees."

V.

"WHY did she do that?" Cecilia asked.

"My dear girl—" he began, and she was too enthralled for protest. "If you ask that, you have spoilt the story. It was the horror of it—don't you see? Of course I don't know—this is all I'm writing"—he spoke firmly—but I imagine it will turn out to have something to do with the Crawling Thing."

"Oh!" cried Cecilia in surprise. "I thought you said that she was cold? I wondered why she didn't put a wrap on."

Max flung the manuscript upon the carpet. He had not troubled much about the chapter, but he thought it deserved better than this. "If she'd done that," he bellowed, "she would have wrecked the chapter and taken all the mystery away. But that's just like a woman. I told you so. You've too much common-sense for ghosts. 'She wouldn't have done that,' you say, and really we all know she wouldn't. But that's no use with a spook story. Well, it's all done," he went on, with relief, "so now we'll just pretend she *did* put on her wrap, and then we'll burn the rotten chapter."

"Oh, don't be cross and horrible," Cecilia said, with a reproachful gentleness. "You've done Chap. One so beautifully. It's only I don't see quite where the Crawling Thing comes in. Max"—and her tones were almost sugary—"if you did just a *little* more—"

"No," answered Max, with just that dubious quaver which would save his manly dignity when he had given in—the quaver invented by Adam when offered the apple, and used by his descendants ever since.

"Oh, yes, Max!" she replied, and took his arm. He quivered with delight. "You do it so well! I should only spoil your chapter. I'll take it up when you've got in your stride."

"No," came the answer. His arm that she pressed was all tense and hard.

"I don't believe you can," she whispered. It would have been a hiss if it had held an "a."

Man is so simple always—when he has a woman on his arm. That evening Max worked upon "The Crawling Thing" till midnight.

VI.

MAX, with ill-hidden pride, unrolled a solid bundle of MS. and settled down to read. She should see now whether he could!

"THE CRAWLING THING."

"SECOND CHAPTER."

"I GO ALONG THE CORRIDOR."

"My room that night was full of presences.

"Try as I might to go to sleep, always, as I shut my eyes, I felt—something behind me.

"I lit my candle. I tried to laugh my fears away. A grown woman—afraid of the dark!

"But it was all of no avail.

"Gradually, little by little, a sound from the actual world began to force itself upon me. At first I affected not to hear it; I tried to deceive myself. But it insisted, and slowly I began to analyse it, despite myself.

"What was the sound, and whence? At first it seemed to come from the next room, this regular sighing as of a distant engine, then from my very room, and then, for certain, from without the door. It was in the passage!

"But what? This question also found its answer slowly; but when the truth came to me, it came, like all awful truths, without debate. There was no doubt. The sound was of deep breathing, so deep as to seem like that of somebody in effort or agony.

"The terror of that discovery I think I shall never forget. For some moments I could scarcely think. Then into my mind, full with the terror of this room, yet faced with that greater dread outside, there came an instinct that is still a puzzle to me.

"I hurried on a dressing-gown, took my candle, and unlocked the door. With strange calmness I turned the light now this way, now that, along the corridor, peering here and there. There was nothing to be seen.

"Then, with no more time for thought, I hastened aimlessly along the dim corridor, shielding the uncertain flame with a protecting hand.

"It came upon me gradually that I was being drawn to a single spot. I walked aimlessly, unguided by my will, moved rather than moving, and yet I knew where I was going. At the end of this wing of the house—for which we had no use—there was a room empty but for half a dozen boxes. I halted suddenly beside the door.

sudden, to avoid them, I turned the handle. It was hideously dark within—so much I could tell as I stood, with the door open but a little, and listened for a sound or any sign of human presence.

"Everything was silent, and presently, still haunted by my thoughts, I cried, 'Is anyone here?' and then started



"'You mean to tell me,' she said angrily, 'you put it down there and don't know yourself? I call that really mean.' 'But I do know,' Max protested."

"It was now, when I ceased to move, and realised how far I had travelled from my room, that fear first came upon me. I began to fancy endless horrors that might front my eyes on entry; I pictured, above all, someone huddled in a corner, with a pistol trained upon the door. So terrifying were my thoughts—and so strong still my impulse to go inside the room—that of a

at the sound of my thin, frightened voice.

"Aghast at my own boldness, I thrust the door still further open and stood on the threshold, gazing in.

"And then I almost laughed at my mad fears.

"For the room was empty! Our travelling trunks had been set, as I had ordered,

on the floor, but so scattered that I could see that nothing lurked behind them; a spring bed, without a mattress, stood along one wall; but for the rest there was—nothing!

"Now at last, reassured despite myself. I turned to go. I would deceive myself into the belief that I had fancied everything, that this was just an empty box-room: above all, I would leave this room.

"Then a thing happened of which even now I cannot bear to think. When I turned round, the door had swung to, not so as to be absolutely closed, but so as to leave a gap of possibly an inch between it and the framework. I laid hold of the handle and, in my longing to escape, gave it a strong pull towards me.

"The door refused to move! It was not that it had jammed. There was no unyielding fixity about it, but rather a force which, though averagely steady, now gave, now gained a little—brute force resistlessly, unceasingly opposing me. Now the door was open close upon two inches, now it swung back until almost shut. The explanation left no place for doubt.

"The door was being held by somebody—Something—against me!

"At that awful thought a spasmodic shudder passed along my body, and I let go my hold upon the handle. Slowly and noiselessly, as if controlled by some uniform and impassive force, the door was closed, and, urged by an instinct of defence, I turned the key.

"Better a millionfold to be in the room, explored in every corner, than in the passage with all its unknown horrors!

"But as I stood in trembling near the centre of that empty room, I felt that, turn where I might, there was always—I will not say someone, but some presence behind me.

"In terror, I fell on my knees.

"And at that, from near behind me, came a low, full laugh of pity and derision.

"In an instant my hands fell from my face. I sprang up and stood erect, listening with every nerve.

"Again it came—less loud this time, more as of one who chuckles at the memory of a glorious jest.

"I forced myself to turn. I moved slowly round, dreading each moment to meet the face of the intruder. But there was no one there.

"Then panic seized me. I tottered, rather than ran, to the wall furthest from the awful

sound, and cowered helplessly against the corner. It was some comfort to feel the solid brick behind my back.

"Standing thus, I could be certain. The room was absolutely empty. There were still the scattered trunks, still the empty bed, still the depressing wall-paper of slate and blue. What more prosaic room could be imagined? And yet . . .

"Was I mad? Was Denzil right?

"And as I doubted, thoughts flashing at wild speed across my fevered brain, the laugh rang out again, the big laugh of strong Cruelty amused at cringing Terror, such as one would fancy the exultation of a fiend in hell."

* * *

Max's voice died down.

"Is that all?" asked Cecilia, uncurling herself rather timidly.

"All of that chapter," Max answered rather grandly. She had not believed he could go on!

Cecilia sat silent for a moment. "You never explain," she said presently. "Who held the door? Who laughed? And ~~was~~ it a cat breathing?"

"A cat!" Max answered scornfully. "Of course it wasn't. Nor, may I add, was it a mouse."

"Well, what was it, then?"

He cleared his throat and answered rather pompously: "My dear Cecilia, those things cannot be explained—just yet. That's all left for the last chapter. Nobody must know till then."

Cecilia put on her most pleading air and asked in studiously childish tones: "Not even me?"

"Why, you're writing it," Max answered coldly.

"So I am," she sighed.

VII.

"Yes," said Cecilia presently, with quite an air of finality. "But when do you start the love interest?"

He put down the manuscript a little heavily. "The love interest?" he asked in dazed tones, blink'ng.

"May and Mr. Haslam," she said quite simply.

"Oh, yes," he replied, with desolating irony, "that will be Chap. IV. Then in Chap. V. we'll please women readers by making Denzil fall in love with a house-keeper dressed all in black. And before the end we'll find a lover for the Crawling Thing."

"Oh, that'll be splendid!" cried this

innocent Cecilia, clapping her hands girlishly. "I was afraid that you were going to be stuffy. But *need* the housekeeper be all in black? She might be wearing——"

"I think," said Max, in iron tones of self-restraint, "I'd better leave all the love interest part for you! You'll do it ever so much better. I'm not a success ever as a lover." He looked up, but she had looked down. "Besides, I think it'll spoil the story. It's just what I said women always did. But of course you'll know what the housekeeper has got to wear."

VIII.

"WELL, look here," said Max, as though to end an argument that had been over-long. "I really *can't* go on. I've done three chapters now, and I meant only to do one. I've got it started now, and everybody knows how it goes on. But, if you like, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a list of chapter headings as a guide for you."

"Oh, yes!" cried Cecilia. "Bring it round after tea?"

Max began to look on the ghost story with more favour. Cecilia usually would not let him call more than once every day, which he considered a niggardly ration for these times of Peace. Punctually at quarter to five he came into her little drawing-room.

"Have you got it?" she asked keenly.

He at once unrolled it. These things are best over. Once he had read the list, they could resume their nice old talks, such as they had before she got this preposterous idea.

"Listen," he said.

"Chapter III. — What Lay Beneath the Sheet.

Chapter IV. — I Make a Discovery.

Chapter V. — The Tomb Beneath the Yews.

Chapter VI. — Denzil Beards the Landlord.

Chapter VII. — A Woman in Black.

Chapter VIII. — The Face at the Window.

Chapter IX. — In the Empty Room.

Chapter X. — A Night of Terror.

Chapter XI. — Old Toby Talks.

Chapter XII. — We Drive Out."

"Splendid!" she exclaimed, to his relief. "So now I can get on. Only"—and then she hesitated—"I don't think I quite see Chap. IV. What *did* lay—no, lie beneath the sheet?"

Max laughed. "Ask me another! I was never any good at riddles."

"You mean to tell me," she said angrily, "you put it down there and don't know yourself? I call that really mean."

"But I *do* know," Max protested. Without care, he could see his pleasant afternoon all spoiled.

"Then what *did*?" she asked like a child.

"I don't believe you know."

He had his head against a wall. "I'll write Chap. IV., then," he said hurriedly.

"Max, you dear!" she exclaimed. It was the first time ever.

Max certainly believed in ghosts.

IX.

"AND this really is the last," said Max firmly, whereon he began to read:

"CHAPTER THE THIRD

er—Chap. Three.

"WHAT LAY BENEATH THE SHEET.

"What was that?"

"I woke up with the distinct impression of someone fumbling at the door. A tap—the handle turned.

"I sat in terror, staring out.

"May?" whispered a voice, and I could almost have laughed in my relief.

"It was Denzil!"

"I leapt from my bed and in mad haste turned the key. It was wonderful to have company, to feel someone near during the long night hours in this awful house.

"But Denzil came in strangely grave and white. 'I say, old girl,' he whispered, 'I came to tell you that there is someone in the house. I heard footsteps, real footsteps'—he smiled at me—'in the corridor. I came to warn you not to be frightened if you heard me running about.' I noticed for the first time that he held a revolver in his hand. I had never known that he possessed it. He gently took my arms from around him, and made as if to go towards the door. The motion filled me with a fresh alarm.

"'You won't leave me?' I asked. 'You won't go?'

"'Don't be afraid!' was his answer. 'Nothing will happen to you, old girl. Lock the door till I come back.'

"'But, Denzil...' I put my arms around him, as if to keep him, but he shook himself free.

"'You don't suppose, May,' he said, more in his usual manner, 'that we can lock ourselves up while burglars ransack Hagstomb!'

" 'They're not burglars,' I said in a low voice.

" 'Then what are they?' asked Denzil fiercely, and to that I had no answer. As I stood for a moment wondering, I saw him, as in a dream, move from me, go out, and close the door. No notion of stopping him occurred to me. I stood pensive, motionless, for, I suppose, some thirty seconds. Then I realised suddenly that he had gone, to leave me in darkness once again. I flung open the door and gazed along the corridor. Everything was dark and silent. Here and there a thin streak of moonlight filtered obliquely through the narrow windows, and in the gloom I thought I could see cloaked figures lurking, creeping softly nearer. With a shudder, I hurried back into my room and quickly turned the key. I stood trembling with cold and fear, clad only in my nightdress, my hand upon the key, listening for sounds of Denzil.

" And as I stood there, I felt from behind me that same feeling—which I have tried to describe—of some presence in the room. I longed to turn, and yet I feared to turn. I feared everything.

" I must find Denzil. Forgetting all else, intent only on that, I passed swiftly out into the passage. There was no sound anywhere. I walked a few paces with caution—for it was darker here—and then I halted.

" 'Denzil!' I cried. The echoes died away, leaving me startled at the hollow sound that came from my dry throat.

" And now I hesitated which way I should turn. So far as common-sense decided, there could be but little doubt. Denzil, having found nobody in our corridor, would either go down to the day-rooms or up into the servants' attic; he would not expect to find burglars in the empty rooms. All that occurred to me. I knew that it was useless for me to go along the box-room passage, and yet I went—went to the scene of my horror on that hideous night when I had heard the laugh inside the empty room! . . . A few seconds more, and I stood grasping the door-handle of that room. Even then the dread of the place could not avail against its fascination. I listened, but there was no sound inside the room. The moon struck full on this side of the house, and through the half-open door I could see, from where I stood, the wall suffused with a dim glow of light. Everything seemed silent, everything peaceful. And yet I feared to enter. Presently, struck with a

thought, I tiptoed lightly to the threshold and peered timidly through the crack between the massive hinges of the door. There, too, was nothing, and again I saw only the pale light glinting on the walls. But even as I assured myself of this, I seemed to feel someone behind me, and swung quickly round, my heart thumping in my body. And again there was nobody, nothing! I resolved to stay thus, a prey to my imaginings, no longer—I would enter.

" At that I flung the door wide open, and then leapt back, finding it comfortable to have the wall behind me. But again no sound came from within, and through the wider opening I could see almost half the room. There were the empty boxes, now piled against a corner, and there was the empty—

" But, as I looked again, I realised that there was something on the bed—the bed that had been empty. Nothing of ours—and yet what could it be? Should I find here, in this bundle covered by a sheet, the secret of the midnight wanderings in Hagstomb? Oh, how I longed for Denzil! I feared to lift the sheet. I made a step towards it, but then drew back, overcome by a strange sickness. I *would* fetch Denzil!

" Yet, when I had my hand upon the door, I turned, as though my eyes were drawn, and looked long at the shapeless heap that rose upon the bed. It was so still, so simple—a mere sheet that covered—what? Why should I not look and know? I stepped forward slowly, hesitating, curiosity battling with fear, attraction with repugnance. Only when I was within a foot of the bedside did I start back, as if by instinct. Then, fearing that panic would once more drive me back, I laid hold of the covering and drew it sharply off. Of what met my eyes I can even now scarce bear to write.

" Terribly cramped in his position, pale in the moonlight, a strange man was staring up at me!

" Thoughts dashed across my mind. Why had I not known? A trap, this formless mass beneath the sheet, to draw me near my murderer, that he might leap upon me! Instinctively I started back.

" Then the absence of what I feared brought a worse terror to me. I stared, my blood chilling, at his mouth—his mouth fixed in a drawn smile, half jeer, half agony. Why did he not move? Why stare up at me with those cold eyes?

"My gaze fixed upon them, I seemed to feel myself led, as by an unseen cord, until, craning forward, moving step by step in dread, I found my face within an inch of his. Now I could have no doubt.

"The man was dead!

"Suddenly my strange state broke. I found myself staring into, all but touching, the fixed eyes of the dead man. It was the first time that I had looked on death, and the sight was terrible beyond description. All the blood in my veins rushed up to my head, a lump rose in my throat, a dizzy tingling passed along my limbs.

"I groped blindly for support, and my hand found rest on something strangely stiff and chill. For one moment it steadied me, then I felt my prop yielding, and as I realised that I had grasped the dead's man's hand, I saw his grey-white face lurch tremulously forward at me.

"There was a burst of sound, the whole wall, bed, face, everything shot up, and the last that I remember is my own shriek echoing in my ears."

X.

"So now," Max cried triumphantly, "you can go on!"

Cecilia snorted. "I don't see that at all. I think Chap. II. would have been easier to follow up. Real ghosts never die. What can I do now?"

"Do?" Max repeated. "Why, what's always done—go on piling horrors up, and then explain. You said that you were full of shiverdom and ghostery! Well, then, here's your chance. Could you have a better?"

Cecilia suddenly began to weep—the sort of discreet, decorative tears a woman weeps when she is comfortably in sight of the man who loves her.

Instantly Max was by her side, longing to put arms of consolation round her.

"Why, what's up?" he asked, instead. His hands hung limply by his side. He looked as big an ass as any man looks on a like occasion.

"I believe you've made it hard on purpose," sobbed Cecilia, wounded in her pride. And then, as always, the real complaint came out: "I don't see how you can 'explain' a corpse!"

"Is there any need?" he asked gravely. "Let's see if we can't find some other end for it."

Something in his manner—like that with which the mother tries to hearten a child

crying about nothing—shamed her. She dabbed her eyes with a small handkerchief.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't think me a fool, Max. I'm never like this. I'm not sure—perhaps writing this awful story has upset my nerves."

He was still serious. "Need you finish it?" he asked. And then, with just a flicker of his mouth: "Why not stop writing and be just a woman? It's a mistake for both husband and wife to write."

She gaped at him. "Husband and wife?" "Why not?" he asked. "You and me!"

Then she smiled, and it was like the sunshine after a spring shower. "Max," she said, "how silly you are! Haven't I said fifty times that I don't mean to marry you? I am an artist, not a woman. Besides, we're ever too much splendid pals. I'm far too fond of you, and I don't mean to spoil it."

"What do you mean to do, then?" asked Max casually, as though all this was mere nothing to him. "About this corpse, that is, and the laugh, and what held the door?"

She looked grave. She thought. He simply dared not interrupt, and presently her face lit up.

"Max," she said, like one inspired, "could we simply say no more about all that, and end with a marriage?"

"Exactly what I just proposed!" he cried. And then, in the excitement of the moment, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

He never knew how he had dared to do it, and she was always quite uncertain why she laughed so happily and felt, after long wandering, at home.

"I think," she murmured, as if in self-excuse, "perhaps I am a woman, after all, and I've been less fond of you since we began 'The Crawling Thing.'"

When Max got back to his flat, the first thing that he did was to unroll his own manuscript and kiss it sentimentally with something very near to passion.

Then a happy thought occurred to him. He would please her by finishing the yarn. He would explain everything—even the dead ghost. He felt omnipotent, enormous.

Poor little girl, she'd never write a word of it. She couldn't finish it, he knew.

But when he flattened out the page, he found that, unseen by him, she had, after all.

She had written in decisively large letters, beyond all hope of contradiction—

FINIS.