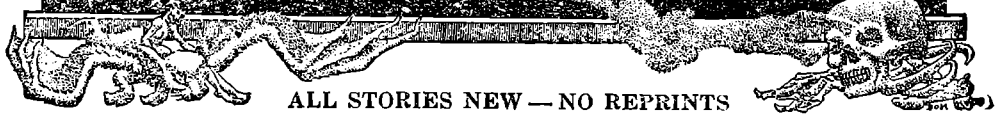


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1948

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

Clay

BY C. HALL THOMPSON

I HAVE not been there since. I am not alone in this. It has come to my knowledge that all the doctors who once held residences in the Institution on the northern lip of Dunnesmouth, have quit the place never to return. It is not strange. Men who shared such memories were bound to run from the doomed house that spawned them. Wickford could not have stayed on, anymore than I; even that enthusiastic youngster of medicine, Fothering, was badly shaken by the hideous outcome of the case of Jeremy Bone. These men stood in the soundless chapel, and remembered mouldering death discovered in its dim alcoves; they passed the room once occupied by Jeremy Bone, and saw again the foul liquescent thing that rose from lost hells to defy the reasoning of normal minds. Is it a wonder that they left and did not go back?

But, others, who have never heard of the Curse of the Mark of Clay, have ventured once or twice into that ill-reputed region near Dunnesmouth. I have heard them speak of crumbling porticos and eaves sagged in, and boys from the village who come witch-hunting by night, tossing stones at the ghost of the moon in shattered windowpanes. They say the road is strangled with brambles and the wrought iron fence leans drunkenly inward; the gate is unhinged and rust has eaten at the brass plaque on the gatepost. But, if one dares come close enough, one may still read the name, Wickford House, and below it, in barren letters, the solitary word: ASYLUM.

In an earlier, happy time, Wickford House was quite different. There was no

smell of musty documents hidden away in a teakwood case; there were no stains of clay on a swollen purple throat. The lawns were green and fresh with New England dew; the house was well-kept, with white porticos and green shutters and an air of gentle peace. Boys played at simple sports on the enclosed lawns; their faces were calm, unworried; white-coated attendants moved among them almost unnoticed. At times, even now, the memory of Doctor Gaunt's hearty laughter overshadows the horror of those later days. Peter Gaunt understood the "boys"; he could handle them as none else could. Even Wickford admitted that, under Gaunt's care, the boys never seemed what they were—inmates of an asylum for the insane.

Insane. Perhaps my use of that word is ill-advised. Of late, I cannot hear it spoken without experiencing a sickly mental shudder. It holds forbidding nuances that terrify me as they never could in the old days. It is a word I once thought I understood; today, I am not so sure. It was a word Peter Gaunt hated; a strange statement to make regarding a psychiatrist, is it not? Still, every aspect of this affair has been strange—horribly strange. Insane. Yes. That was the word Gaunt and Wickford were arguing over the night of the day Jeremy Bone came to Gaunt's ward.

We were finishing our brandy in the leathery seclusion of the library. It was a large room, high-ceilinged, with an antiquated, smoke-grimed fireplace. Booklined walls and velvet portieres drawn across the casements to shut out the whimper of the

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

*Each dark, downward pathway of the mind is an adventure,
dangerous deadly*



rain gave it an air of snugness and peace. The boys were settled for the night in their dormitories; occasionally, a man in white passed along the darkened corridors. That was all. Even the shrill laughter of the boy called Trask, who had spells of hilarity in the loneliness of rainy nights, seemed distant and undisturbing. I dawdled over a volume of Stekel, not really reading; over the booktop, I studied Wickford.

FIRE light made his round face rounder and more ruddy. White hair rose from the massive forehead like a leonine mane. Wickford wiped pince-nez on an immaculate handkerchief. He was the portrait of a satisfied successful man of medicine; he had made his mark; in the realm of psychiatric research, the name Harrison Wickford was one to conjure with; his was a voice to listen to. At sixty-odd, the head of his own sanitarium, author of countless theses, calm, smiling, self-confident. His voice had adopted a sure, pedantic tone.

"... All they require is care, patience, occasional restraint," he was telling Gaunt. "Keeping these in mind, it's easy enough to handle the insane. . . ."

Peter Gaunt winced, turning a weary smile on me. I smiled back.

One of Wickford's eyebrows arched petulantly; he didn't like the thought of being laughed at.

"I wasn't aware I'd said anything humorous. . . ."

"Insane." Gaunt stared at his brandy. "That word is so definite—hopeless. . . ."

Wickford shrugged. "Insanity is a very definite thing."

"Is it?" The bony head moved from side to side. "I'm not at all certain. Can we say definitely that a man is insane because he is unlike us—his mind functions a shade differently? The borderline between the sane and insane, between fact and fantasy, is too shadowy for any explicit delineation. Perhaps we have no right to brand these boys with the cold, irrevocable word, Insane; perhaps they are confused, frightened, pushed too close to that shadowline between to distinguish reality from fantasy. . . . But, then, at times, aren't we all. . . .?"

Wickford looked vague; his pink soft hand waved indefinitely. He laughed.

"Bosh, my dear Gaunt! Sheer bosh! Why if that's how you look at it, there is no way of telling just where sanity ends and insanity begins; no way of being certain of your shadowing of 'fact and fantasy.' . . . How could we know exactly who is sane or insane. . . .?"

Dark eyes fastened on Wickford. Peter Gaunt gave him a sharp quizzical grin.

"Precisely," he said. "How?"

Wickford's mouth was a surprised "O." His eyes went blank, then he must have decided it was all a joke, for he laughed and jogged my elbow.

"I say, sometimes I do believe this Gaunt of ours belongs among the boys rather than the doctors. . . ."

The laugh got loud. I smiled politely. Gaunt smiled wearily.

Wickford changed the subject; he turned to Gaunt.

"Speaking of boys, have you seen the new one I had transferred to your ward today. . . .?"

"You mean Bone?" Gaunt nodded thoughtfully. "I've seen him."

There was a hollow tone to the words; they echoed in the silent room. A log-corpse sagged on the grate.

"Bone," Wickford said. "Yes, that's it. Jeremy Bone. Odd name, eh? Decidedly odd case, too. Seemed to be doing very poorly; no progress toward normalcy. Those delusions of persecution persist; he keeps talking of a person he calls Oliver, who tortures him. . . . I thought you might do something with him. You've a way with stubborn cases. . . ."

My curiosity was peaked. That was the first I'd heard of Jeremy Bone. I wish now I'd never heard the damnable sound of his name. But that night I felt no presentiment of horror; I felt only curiosity.

"Bone?" I leaned forward. "Who is he? What's his history. . . .?"

"That's right," Gaunt said. "I'd forgotten. You haven't seen him. . . ."

He lit his pipe and blew out the match. "As Doctor Wickford said, it's a fascinating case. This Jeremy Bone is quite young—seventeen, I believe—and, to be quite truthful, we don't know a great deal about him. We do know he comes of very old New England stock; somewhere on the

heels of the *Mayflower*. . . His mother died when he was born. According to newspaper stories, his father died just a year later, of what seemed depression over some secret tragedy no one has ever been able to fathom. . . ."

"And Jeremy?" I prompted.

"Raised by a maiden great-aunt," Wickford said. "Queer old duck, she was, by all accounts. Reared the boy in the utmost seclusion; no schools; no friends; only the musty rooms of an ancient gargoyle of a mansion. . . ."

Peter Gaunt stared at the glow of his pipebowl.

"I believe loneliness is one of the things wrong with the boy. And some torturing fear. The sort of fear that may have destroyed his father; terror of some strange thing in the past of his family, perhaps. . . ." "Nonsense!" snapped Wickford. "Fear! Loneliness! Sounds like a melodrama. The boy is a plain and simple case of unbalance; melancholia bordering on depressive mania, due to this persecution complex. . . ."

"Words!" Gaunt rapped out his pipe with an impatient movement. "Words! Can they fathom the uneasy thoughts of a frightened mind like Jeremy Bone's? Can they allay his fears—fears that may be half-real. . . .?"

The laugh was mocking.

Wickford said: "Tell me, Gaunt; are you a doctor or a witch-hunter?"

IT was meant to be funny; somehow it fell flat. Rain cried against the windows. Trask's hollow laughter seemed to grow nearer and haunting; uneasiness crept into the room.

"To get back to the boy," Gaunt said quietly. "When his great-aunt died, the executors of the Bone estate, sent Jeremy to a school in Blackmoor. Reports say that the lad behaved oddly from the outset; was afraid and unwilling to go to Blackmoor; seemed to live in his own world with people of his own making. It was thought that the company of normal boys would improve him. It didn't. There are strange stories at Blackmoor of unsettled times after the coming of Jeremy Bone. Incidents, small, but decidedly unpleasant. The beheading of a school mascot, the neurotic talk of Jeremy's roommates about eerie

things happening to the boy during the night. . . ."

"The school board was worried," Wickford cut in. "Naturally. Their reputation suffered; enrollment fell off. At that point, I was called in. I committed the boy. He spoke of nothing but this strange entity, named Oliver; a 'Thing' that forced him to 'do evil'; to maim—even kill. He kept repeating: 'Oliver wants me to destroy others as I destroyed him.' . . ."

The ruddy head shook; the pink lips pursed.

"Typical schizophrenia, of course. Split personality; the one good, the other bad—called Oliver—compelling him to commit crimes his normal self finds repulsive. I thought we might snap him out of it, but . . ."

Wickford raised hands palm-up. Peter Gaunt frowned.

"It's not as hopeless as that, Doctor. Bone has behaved very well since he came to my ward; seems to get on famously with that young fellow, Swan, in his dormitory. You'd think they were blood-brothers. Perhaps friendship is what Jeremy needs. With that, I may get at the root of his fear, find out exactly who Oliver is and what terrible meaning he has for the boy. Maybe, with such knowledge, I could cast out this hellish entity. . . ."

"Cast out;" Wickford echoed pompously. "You talk like a preacher exorcising evil spirits. Really, my dear Gaunt! We're not alchemists handling a case of possession!"

Peter Gaunt lifted one black peaked eyebrow.

He said, softly: "Aren't we?"

The words died. Firelight did a *danse macabre* in the far corners of the library. Then, abruptly, a high-pitched unhuman cry shrilled through the silence. Gaunt stiffened. Wickford paused, brandy-glass halfway to his lips. My mouth felt strangely dry when I spoke to Gaunt.

"That was from your ward."

Even as he nodded, it came again, the wail of a soul in torment rising from a bottomless abyss. Gaunt was on his feet. He turned to the door just as it buzzed open. Lowery, an attendant from Gaunt's ward, stood on the threshold; his face had an unwanted pallor.

"It's the Bone kid, Doctor. He's acting up something fierce. . . ."

The agonized scream sliced out anew. Lowery licked dry lips.

"You better come. . . ."

Gaunt had already started. Wickford and I followed hastily. The gray corridors seemed unusually chill and lonely. Ward "A" lay around the first bend. An excitement I could not quite account for tightened my scalp as we entered Bone's dormitory. The cry had dwindled to the whine of a terrified animal. The room was dark. A noisome stench sifted under the smell of antiseptic; an odor of decay that seemed to rise from the black corner by Jeremy Bone's cot. I was conscious of Gaunt's face, pale and taut. I followed his gaze to that corner. Against the wall, a phosphorescent nimbus seemed to hover like a bird of prey. As we watched, its edges bled and faded; slowly the amorphous mass became one with the dark, and a last unholy wail tore from the throat of the pitiful creature that cringed in the shadow of the cot. I stared at Jeremy Bone.

BOBGING frantically on its taut spindle of neck, the ponderous head made a grotesque contrast with the boy's frail body. The massive cranium and frontal bones dwindled to a weak, sparsely-bearded chin. Bulging eyes held a nameless terror the like of which I had never seen before. Spittle slavered from the lax mouth, and his huge hands, strangely covered with gray suede gloves, tore wildly at the nightgown's throat. Slowly, the cries subsided to an abject whine. He continued to stare fixedly at the spot where that ectoplasmic cloud had been. His lips worked. Coherent words came.

"Thank God! He's gone. He won't make me do it . . . not now. . . ."

The glazed eyes blinked and roved and focussed on Peter Gaunt.

"Doctor Gaunt!" He stumbled to his feet; the big head wobbled; he caught Gaunt's sleeve. "Don't let Oliver come back! Please! He'll make me do bad things. When you came he was talking to me, real soft in my ear, kill, kill! He wanted me to destroy Swan. . . ."

Wickford exploded: "Good Lord! Swan!"

Someone switched on the light; I turned to Wickford. Then, I saw Swan's fat limp form sprawled across the bed in the other corner. Wickford looked pale and worried as I tested the boy's pulse. He sighed relief when I said Swan was only sleeping. At that moment, the little eyes opened; Swan gave us his slow cretin's smile. I patted his arm.

"It's all right, son. Go back to sleep. . . ."

Jeremy Bone giggled hysterically.

"You see? I didn't hurt Swan. Oliver wanted me to, but I fought him. I was strong. . . ." Fear darkened the wide eyes again. "But, if I weaken . . . someday he'll make me . . . he'll say 'kill', and I'll obey. . . ."

"Bone." Peter Gaunt's voice was flat, gentle. "Listen to me, Bone. Oliver can't make you do anything you don't want to do. . . ."

The head shook wildly. Bone shrielled: "You don't know him. . . ."

"Listen, Bone. Only you can decide your actions. . . ."

"No. He can force me. You never read those papers in the chest. . . ."

Abruptly, his voice snapped off. His eyes flicked from one of us to the other. He tore free of Gaunt's grip, hissing, "The chest!" He scrambled on all-fours under the cot, let out a cry of satisfaction, and then crouched there in the corner, clutching in his bony arms a small, exquisitely-wrought teakwood chest. He was like an animal at bay, at once cunning and shot through with mortal terror.

I whispered to Wickford: "What's the chest?"

"Had it with him when he came. Went hysterical when we tried to take it away. . . . We humored him. . . ."

"He said something about papers. . . ."

"Imagination. Thinks there are fancy papers in it; actually, it's empty. Examined it myself. All imagination. Like the fancy that he must always wear those silly gloves. Try as we may, we've never gotten him to take them off. . . ."

I stared at the abnormally large hands that clutched the teakwood casket. The frenzied eyes had shifted back to Gaunt.

"You don't know Oliver," Jeremy Bone intoned hoarsely. "He has a power; it's the secret of the chest. . . . You don't un-

derstand; you never heard of the Mark of Clay. Nobody knows about it, now. . . . Except me. Great-Aunt knew, and she kept me safe. She kept Oliver away from me. But now, he comes and whispers. . . . Kill, Jeremy, kill, *kill!*" The words splintered on a scream. "Keep him away! In the name of God, keep him away!"

PETER GAUNT caught the bony shoulders; tried to still the flailing arms. It was impossible. Saliva dribbled from Jeremy Bone's warped mouth; his eyes bulged horribly. In the end, it took three of us to hold him down. Gaunt shook his head, breathing heavily. "We'll have to use the needle. . . ." We did. The spasms died away gradually. Fleshless limbs relaxed.

Bone's eyes glazed with stupor. Once, he whimpered: "Keep him away. . . ." That was all. He slept. His gloved hands still held vise-like to the teakwood chest.

Under Gaunt's order, Lowery stood guard over Jeremy Bone throughout the remainder of that night. Silently, Wickford and Gaunt and I returned to the library. The room seemed cold and less friendly; perhaps the storm outside had grown more violent; the hiss of rain against the casements was a clear, lonely sound. I poured three fresh brandies. Gaunt took his glass without a word. I fancied that Wickford's plump hand trembled a little. He tried to keep his tone matter-of-fact.

"You see," he said to me. "Schizophrenia. Delusion of persecution by this—this 'Oliver'. . . . All part of a warped imagination. . . ."

He tossed off the drink hastily. He set down the glass and chafed his hands before the withering fire, as if they were unaccountably cold. For a time, Gaunt did not speak. Then:

"Imagination?" he echoed softly. "I'm not so sure. . . ."

His dark eyes searched a distant corner of the dim chamber; he was remembering that glowing, putrid mass that had died away in the darkness by Jeremy Bone's cot.

"I'm not so sure," he repeated in a slow puzzled way. "Maybe this fear, this sense of persecution has its roots in something all too real. . . ."

Wickford flushed; he covered uneasiness with bluster.

"I told you once, my dear fellow. We're doctors—not ghost-chasers!"

Gaunt nodded. "Perhaps. But, there are things even doctors have never nailed down with their scientific words. . . ." His voice was scarcely more than a murmur. "Evil things of lost aeons that linger at the edge of beyond, waiting an opportunity to return and haunt men. Unwilling—perhaps, afraid—to understand, to seek out these blasphemies and destroy them, we sidestep the issue by calling the men they haunt madmen. But, actually, are they mad. . . .?"

Wickford's cheeks puffed out; something like, "Bosh!" pushed through fat lips. Peter Gaunt went on as if he had not heard.

"If I could get Bone to trust me, I might get to the roots of his mind. If I knew what he means by 'the Mark of Clay' and Oliver. . . . If I could become his friend. . . ."

"Friend!" Wickford rumbled. "To a schizoid bordering on homicidal mania?" He laughed shortly. "Mark my word, Doctor. If you're wise, you'll keep this Jeremy Bone under constant restraint. Friend, indeed! No one will ever be *his* friend!"

The room was quiet. Peter Gaunt only stared silently into the glow of the hearth. But his eyes were steady, thoughtful. I think I knew, even then, that he would prove Wickford was wrong.

He did.

I SAW very little of Peter Gaunt in the weeks that followed. For reasons which have nothing to do with this narrative, I was called away from Wickford House. Nor did I see Gaunt immediately on my return. But, I did hear a great deal about him. The story of his marvelous progress in the case of Jeremy Bone was rapidly assuming the proportions of an inspired legend among the resident doctors. Men talked endlessly over their coffee and cigars of how Jeremy Bone had grown calm, docile even—to all appearances, quite sane. After the first fortnight, injections had been abandoned as unnecessary. No longer did one hear Bone crying into the night his terror of the nemesis, Oliver. It was remarkable.

When I did run into Peter Gaunt, I was eager to question him about his success. I

wanted to know by what means he had gotten Jeremy Bone to stroll the twilight grounds in his company, as calm as a pensioner out for his evening constitutional. I wondered about the long afternoons he spent with Bone in the ancient Chapel that lay in the hollow South of Wickford House; I asked myself what charm the tolling, dissonant litanies Peter Gaunt coaxed from the organ's throat had upon the boy. But, my questions remained unanswered.

I confess at this point I was aware of a certain uneasiness that stirred in the back of my mind whenever I saw Peter Gaunt. He seemed, to me, thinner and oddly taciturn concerning a success of which he should have been justly proud. The hollows of his eyes had deepened and grown darker, and while he talked of Jeremy Bone to no one, it was obvious that the boy was constantly on his mind. He grew absent and more than a little short-tempered. I was worried. It was not until the afternoon we were summoned to his private study that I realized Wickford shared my concern.

He offered us tea and scones; he was jovial, boisterous. He was, patently, a man about to broach a delicate subject. Gaunt watched him with detached eyes. At length, with strained casualness, Wickford said it.

"By the way, my dear Gaunt, you'll be pleased to know I've arranged for you to leave on your long-delayed sabbatical, sometime next week. . . ."

Gaunt sat bolt upright; he looked as if he wondered if he had heard correctly. "But, I don't want . . ."

"Nonsense, old fellow!" Wickford forged ahead. You deserve a vacation. Been working hard . . . ah . . . perhaps a bit too hard, eh? You're not looking like your old self lately. . . ."

"I don't want a vacation," Gaunt cut in flatly. "I . . . I've cases to think of. I'm just beginning to get at the bottom of Jeremy Bone's trouble. To stop now might mean disaster. . . ."

"Fiddlesticks. . . ."

"Fiddlesticks, hell!" The voice cracked with nerves. "I tell you, I daren't leave that boy, now . . . I . . ."

"Doctor Gaunt!" Wickford snapped. "Must I remind you I'm running this Institution?" He looked at me. "It is my con-

sidered opinion that Lambert, here, can take over the Jeremy Bone case quite capably in your absence. . . ."

For a moment, Peter Gaunt only stared. I waited for another outburst. It did not come. His dark eyes shadowed; the shoulders seemed suddenly stooped. Then, without another word, he turned and left.

Perhaps I should have been insulted. But, I sensed that something much stronger than professional jealousy made Gaunt unwilling to relinquish the Bone case to me. An aura of fear of some impending doom had hung over his desperate argument with Wickford. I felt sorry for him. I wanted to reassure him; I thought perhaps I might even continue his method of treating Jeremy Bone, if I could get him to confide in me. But, when I found him alone in the library that night, he gave me nothing but detached civility.

I tried to draw him out. "I want to do my best, Gaunt. It might be well if I carried on your treatment. . . ."

He stared at his book. "No. Just care for him until I get back."

"But . . ."

The sudden black stoniness of his glance stopped me. His voice was hushed, level. "Listen to me, Lambert. You wouldn't care to know my method of treating Jeremy Bone. It's . . . well, not orthodox. When you cross the threshold, as I have, you learn things no man wants to know. . . ."

"But, I do want to know. If you've had such success, perhaps I . . ."

He closed the book sharply.

"Very well!" he snapped. "I'll tell you. I'm *believin' g* his hellish story. I'm facing his fears and trying to root out this devil, Oliver, that haunts him, by believing in it and destroying it!"

It was fantastic. It was some remnant of witchcraft rearing its loathsome head from the ruins of black sorcery. I could only stare as Peter Gaunt rose, laid his book on the reading table, and walked out. When my hands were steady enough, I poured a stiff drink. I needed it.

I cannot be certain what uneasy thoughts crawled through my brain in that instant. Perhaps I wondered if Peter Gaunt had, himself, crossed the fearful shadowline between sanity and madness. I daresay I had

some notion of telling Wickford that Gaunt's condition was more dangerous than we had guessed. But, slicing across my fear and doubt, there was the shrill whisper of curiosity. What if Gaunt was right? Suppose there *were* things beyond human ken; evil things that only people like Jeremy Bone could see and fear, and because of which they were branded lunatics. . . .

Curiosity won. I decided to investigate. The following morning I paid the first visit to my new patient. The corridors were dark and cold; fog sighed against tall casement windows.

My palms felt damp; a remembered echo of Peter Gaunt's voice slid through hollow stillness. I told myself Wickford was right; it was all nonsense. It didn't help; my scalp still crawled; my lips were still too dry. I opened the door to Jeremy Bone's dormitory.

THERE was a sharp rustle and then the snap of a minute lock. Jeremy sat in the windowseat with the carved teakwood casket on his knees. He had closed the lid abruptly as I entered. His eyes were narrow with cunning. The big sheathed hands clamped possessively over the chest.

I said quietly, "Hello, Jeremy."

The huge head tilted grotesquely. "Who are you?"

"You remember me. I'm your friend. . . . Doctor Lambert. . . ."

"No. . . ." The gloved fingers were clawed. "No one is my friend. No one believes me. Only Doctor Gaunt. He knows I'm not crazy. He's seen Oliver. Doctor Gaunt's my friend. . . ."

I sat down beside him; he cowered in the seat-corner. I tried for Gaunt's reassuring tone.

"We're all your friends, my boy. Remember that. I want to help you. Now that Doctor Gaunt is going away. . . ."

"Going away!" It was a raw scream; wariness gave way to sheer terror. "But . . . he *can't* leave me! He was helping me; he was keeping Oliver away. He understood and could fight Oliver. He *mustn't* go away, now!"

"Listen, Jeremy. I'm here to help you now. You must trust me. Tell me . . . how I can keep Oliver from you. You must be

my friend. Like you were with Doctor Gaunt. . . . Like brothers. . . ."

Jeremy Bone sprang to his feet; a frantic screech clogged his throat. He clutched the teakwood chest to him; his head shook wildly.

"No! You shouldn't have said that! Not 'like brothers.' . . . Now Oliver will make me do it. . . . He doesn't want anyone to be my friend . . . my brother. Now he'll force me to kill Doctor Gaunt! Don't you see? It's the Mark of Clay! Brother against brother . . . always . . . first Oliver . . . now Gaunt. . . . No, please! Don't let him whisper to me. I don't want to hurt Doctor Gaunt. . . . No! Stop him!"

I tried to calm him; my words fell on fear-deafened ears; the wild eyes worked; the mouth twisted; gray-sheathed hands were like convulsed talons. The screams ripped from his throat again and again. In the end, an attendant brought the needle. Even with that, it took Jeremy Bone a long time to sink into shallow troubled sleep.

I was a doctor; I had been trained in the hard doubting ways of science. A man like that finds it difficult to believe in the erratic babbling of a boy who has been committed to an asylum. I told myself the whole thing was absurd; the idea of a frail child like Jeremy Bone overpowering and killing a man the size of Gaunt was ridiculous. Still, all the rest of that day, a deep sense of failure and anxiety nagged me. I promised myself I would question Peter Gaunt in greater detail that evening; I had the feeling he knew more about this bizarre affair than he had told me. I never got to ask those questions. I was too late.

By the time I had finished my rounds, picked up some books at the Dunnesmouth post-office and returned to dine at Wickford House, Peter Gaunt was gone. I ate a solitary meal, wondering at his absence, and wandered, afterward, into the library. A couple of other residents were there, arguing a point on Freud. I inquired for Gaunt. No one had seen him since mid-morning. I shrugged, poured a drink and tried to get interested in one of the new books. Perhaps it was a subconscious sense of uneasiness that distracted me. It had begun to rain again. Despite the fire, the library seemed gray and alien. I decided I needed rest and retired

to my quarters early. I had closed the door behind me and lit a lamp before I spied the manila envelope just inside the sill. The note was brief, and written in a square, sure hand.

Dear Lambert: I leave Jeremy in your care knowing you won't fail me. See that no harm comes to him, but I beg of you, ask no questions. Stay out of this affair. It is mine and must be left for my return.

It was signed simply: "Gaunt." I stared at it for a long moment, then sighed. After all, it was his case; it could wait until he came back. Came back. I frowned. For a man who had wanted no vacation, he had certainly gotten under way quickly. And without a word to anyone. Odd. . . . I put the note on my desk and began undressing. The knot of my tie seemed unusually stubborn. I looked at my hands in the mirror. They were trembling.

"Nonsense!" I said it aloud. The word sounded flat and brassy, like whistling in the dark. I repeated it more convincingly. I was getting upset over foolish trifles, taken in by the weird jabbering of an out-and-out schizoid. I had to get hold of myself. Everything was all right. . . . But even with the drapes drawn and electric heater going my sitting room seemed dark and filled with strange, restless thoughts. . . .

I MUST have dozed. My neck felt stiff with nodding in the easy-chair. I stirred. Somewhere, a door was open, because a damp draught swirled about my ankles. The sobbing of the storm had dwindled, but now, even before I opened my eyes, I was aware of a hoarse pulsing sound, murmuring from a spot very near to me. I sat quite still and stared. Inside the open door of my chamber, crouched and rain-soaked, stood Jeremy Bone.

My nerves tightened sharply. It cost an effort to keep my voice level.

"Well, Jeremy. Shouldn't you be in bed? It's past your time. . . ."

His thick breathing throbbed in the stillness. The pendulous lower lip quivered; his eyes had a look of blank, frozen horror. The same timbre of his words gave me a start.

"Doctor Lambert, I want you to lock me up. . . ."

"Now, Jeremy. You wouldn't like that."

"You've got to lock me up," he droned. Oliver has won. I warned you he would, and he has. I've listened to him . . . and killed." A raw sob caught in his chest. "I've killed Doctor Gaunt. . . ."

I had started toward him; I came up short.

"You're wrong, my boy. You wouldn't hurt Doctor Gaunt. He's your friend. . . ."

"Yes. . . ." The bulbous head nodded dully. ". . . Like a brother. That's why I had to do it, you see. I had to obey Oliver, like it says in the Mark of Clay. . . . The chapel was so quiet . . . the organ crying, low and sad. . . . I didn't want to kill him. But, Oliver kept urging me. . . . His neck was soft and easy to snap . . . and then, those gray marks on the flesh, and the organ going sour, like a dying man's scream. . . ."

"Jeremy," I said steadily. "Listen to me. Doctor Gaunt has left on his vacation. In a little while, he'll be back. You didn't kill him. You're only a boy; Gaunt is a powerful man. . . ."

"You don't know the strength of Oliver. . . . He speaks to me and my hands are like vises. . . ."

"Try to understand, boy. Doctor Gaunt left me a note. . . ."

"I wrote that note. . . . After I throttled him, I thought I wanted to escape. . . . Now, I know I can't. It'll always be somebody. . . . When he whispers, 'Kill,' I'll do his bidding. . . ."

I swallowed; my throat felt tight. It was growing more difficult to keep the words calm.

"Now, Jeremy, you're only upset because Doctor Gaunt has gone away." You need rest, and dry clothes. You shouldn't go out in the rain, Jeremy. . . ."

"You don't believe me!" Bone said sharply. The frantic terror was back in his eyes. "I tell you, I must be locked up. I killed Gaunt! There will be others. . . . It's the truth . . . in the secret drawer of the chest. . . . If you don't lock me up, I'll kill myself! I won't let Oliver torture me anymore! I swear it! I'll hang myself in the bell-tower! I'll . . ."

I had caught the fragile shoulders; Bone's arms flung out wildly. He screamed. That

was what brought Lowery. The attendant from Ward "A" sighed with relief at sight of the boy.

"Thank the Lord! We've been looking all over for him since noon. . . ."

He gripped Bone in powerful arms.

"All right, laddiebuck. Easy does it. No more of your running off and disappearing."

I said hoarsely: "You'd better use the sheets. . . ."

Lowery nodded; he and several others carried the floundering form from the room. Jeremy Bone's maniacal wail echoed back along the clammy corridors. "I'll kill myself! I warn you. . . . I didn't want to hurt Gaunt. There mustn't be anymore like him!" The words withered; I heard a heavy door clang shut. Then, only silence.

I turned back to my room. Tousled and bathrobed, Wickford filled the doorway.

"What the devil is this, Lambert. . . .?"

Between sips of brandy, I told him. His cheeks puffed out.

"Absurd! Why, I've a note from Gaunt, saying he was leaving. . . ."

"So have I. The boy claims he wrote it."

Wickford made a derisive sound.

"That's what comes of humoring their fantasies. Only makes them worse. . . ."

I gulped the last of the drink. "Then you think there's nothing to it? All this talk of the Mark of Clay and the teakwood chest? This story of murder. . . .?"

"Fantasy," Wickford said. "Pure and simple. We must break the boy of these imaginative flights. Orthodox treatment; that's the answer. Gaunt's method was getting rather out-of-line. That's why I wanted you to take over. . . ."

"But. . . ."

"No 'buts', my dear fellow. Take my word. It's all schizophrenic fantasy. . . ."

I wanted to believe him. It was the logical, safe answer. I watched Wickford pad off, yawning and self-satisfied, to his quarters, and wondered why I could not be as sure as he. I could still hear the shrill reverberations of Jeremy Bone's screams. I closed my door and locked it. Somewhere, outside, wind cried through naked branches. Even the quilted coverlet did not keep me from shivering. That night, I slept very poorly. A nameless apprehension lay like frozen fear at the pit of my stomach. But,

the expected blow did not fall that night. Nothing happened until the following Saturday. Then, Fothering discovered the thing in the Chapel.

LIKE Peter Gaunt, young Fothering was something of an artist at the keyboard; their mutual interest in organ music had made them fast friends, and, between them, they supplied the tonal background during Sunday services at the Chapel. With Gaunt gone on vacation, it was only natural that Fothering should take over; only natural that he should go to the Chapel on Saturday evening to run through the selections he planned to render the next day. But, what he found crushed in the gloom and cobwebs behind the gilded organ-pipes was far from natural. It was a hulk of bone and clothes and slowly decomposing flesh. The eyes pushed wildly from their bluish sockets; the skin of the face had gone black. It seemed impossible that this putrid mass was all that was left of Peter Gaunt.

Cold sweat pocked Wickford's red face. He mopped it with a handkerchief. His fat mouth worked soundlessly. Fothering swayed; his face had lost all color; he turned away and retched. The thing on the floor grinned up at me hideously. I fought back nausea and stooped. Even in dim light filtered through stained-glass windows, I could see the purple puffiness of the throat. There were the marks of two thumbs on either side of the windpipe. They were gray and flaked away drily when my fingers brushed them. I felt words thick on my tongue.

"The Mark of Clay. . . ."

Wickford's breath caught on a snag; he tried to sound gruff, assured.

"Nonsense. You're on the wrong track, Lambert. That boy couldn't have done it. It doesn't make sense. . . ."

I stood erect. "It does, if you believe in Oliver. . . ."

Wickford only stared.

"Gaunt believed. He warned us the boy wasn't mad. He said Bone's fear had a real cause. . . ." Remembered words chanted in my head. "The secret of the chest. . . yes, Jeremy said that. . . . Perhaps the answer is in that cask. . . ."

"I tell you, it's impossible. . . . Why

should this boy want to murder Gaunt? . . . And how could he manage to strangle a grown man. . . ?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. But one thing is certain . . . Jeremy Bone can’t be left loose. He tried to tell me there would be others . . . like Gaunt. We’ve got to restrain him . . . now, before it’s too late. . . .”

I did not wait for more of Wickford’s stubborn protests. I brushed past Fothering and out into the mist-clotted night. The journey across the grounds seemed endless. Behind, in its musty tower, the Chapel bell tolled with the shifting wind. Wickford puffed at my heels, cursing his foul luck. I hurried along the corridors toward Ward “A”. My hands felt like ice; a numb chill fingered along my spine. Somehow, even before I tried it, I knew the door to Jeremy Bone’s dormitory was locked.

Wickford blinked at me; the self-possession was gone; he waved plump hands. “Well, don’t just stand there! Break it down!”

I lunged against the thick panels; something gave and splintered. The fourth thrust did it. The door slammed open and I plunged into the room. Moonglow bled on the pallid walls. In its corner, Jeremy Bone’s cot was empty, its linen undisturbed. I started toward it. A low inane giggle brought me up short. I turned to find Swan sitting on the edge of his bed, smiling emptily at Wickford. The cretin’s head lolled to one side. His voice was a sing-song keeping time with the distant carolling of the Chapel bell.

“Listen to the chimes, the chimes are ringing, ding, dong, ding. . . .”

“Swan,” I said sharply. “Where’s Bone? When did he leave?”

The pale eyes focussed on me.

“Ding, dong, Jeremy said you would come . . . He locked me in . . . No more Oliver . . . Ding, dong . . . no more Gaunts . . . the secret of the chest. . . .”

“The chest,” Wickford echoed in a toneless voice.

I snapped on the light and made for Jeremy Bone’s cot; in the shadow beneath it, covered with a mildewed blanket, lay the teakwood casket. I drew it out; the lock was a simple affair. After a moment, the lid sprang open. I stared. The box was empty.

A foul stench issued from it like a cloud of grave-dust. I fumbled anxiously.

“He said there were papers . . . something about a secret drawer. . . .”

ON the lid of the chest, carved in dark wood, there was a gorgonmask; my fingers brushed it; the head turned with a muffled click and, simultaneously, at the base of the casket, a shallow compartment slid into view. The sickly odor had grown overpowering; it seemed to rise from the tiny, leather-bound book that lay on the bottom of the hidden drawer. The jaundiced pages crackled at the touch. The print was archaic and minute. I read the title page. “Night Terrors by Bartholomew Humphrey, Being An Accurate Account Of Evidence Garnered By The Author & Concerning Veritable Case Histories Which Support The Theory That Hydras, Ghosts, Gorgons, Chimaeras And Such Night-Things Do Truly Exist.”

The pages fluttered dustily; a clammy musk clung to my fingers. As if from habit, the book fell open at a place near its heart set off by a red velvet marker on which some Victorian hand had embroidered the name: “BONE.” Wickford pressed closer, reading over my shoulder. The words of the heading crawled slimly across the page:

THE CURSE OF THE MARK OF CLAY

“According to certain obscure documents in the archives of the New English hamlet of Dunnesmouth, there dwelt in that town, in the year 1603, a woman named Hester Titus. Sprung from a family of ill-repute, much mistrusted because of her secretive ways and physical ugliness, Hester Titus was known to consort with one William Bone, a taciturn, sardonic individual suspected by more than one of black magic and unholy witchcraft. Tried for the kidnapping and murder of a young girl in the community, William Bone was found guilty and burned at the stake. As his vile oaths died in cries of agony, Hester Titus broke through the watching crowd screaming that they could never kill ‘her husband,’ for she bore in her the seed of his kind, and would hereafter give birth to the child of William Bone.

“In the ensuing months, this woman led a secret solitary existence, avoided by the

God-fearing folk of the Village. Only at the final moments of her accouchement was a midwife induced to attend her. This midwife afterward related a strange and terrible story. Hester Bone, in supreme agony, had given birth to *twins*. The one child, named Solon, strong and lusty with the saturnine look of his father even at birth; the other boy was born dead; curled in a pitiful ball, his tiny form was covered with bruises. Tears of blood stained his swollen cheeks. In the midwife's own words: 'God help us, it was as if Solon strangled his weaker brother to death, before they even saw the light of day!' And thus, Solon Bone was branded a prenatal murderer.

"Hester Bone reared her child in something approaching complete solitude. Witnesses who, in passing the decadent Bone farm, glimpsed the boy during his formative years, told yarns of his singular grotesqueness. Tremendous head, the body of a weakling, and the huge muscular hands of a powerful man: so they described Solon Bone. Swiftly, he became half-legendary in the bleak countryside of Dunnesmouth.

"Perhaps fifteen years after the birth of William Bone's son, the first of a series of peculiar local murders took place. The victim, a boy who had once or twice attempted to befriend Solon Bone, was found at the bottom of a dried-up cistern, his face bloated by strangulation, and on his throat, a series of gray dusty fingerprints that seemed like nothing but the mouldering clay from some ancient grave. It was not until the third monstrous crime had been committed that the citizens of Dunnesmouth rose in arms and descended on the Bone farmhouse.

"They found the body of the woman, Hester, crammed in the blackened fireplace. She had been throttled. A party of irate men cornered the boy in the attic; he babbled strange stories of how his twin haunted him, forcing him to kill others as he had killed that brother. His hands were those of the murderer, stained with the clay of death, and leaving their hellish mark on the throats of his victims. As Solon Bone spoke, he seemed to reach a frenzied pitch, until finally, pointing at a dim corner of the attic, he screamed: 'It's him! He wants me to kill again!'

"There are extant statements signed by witnesses to the horrible scene, to the effect that as the boy cried, there appeared in that dark corner a liquescent shining thing that slowly formed the twisted crying form of Solon Bone's twin brother. An instant later, when the boy dove for one of his captors, and caught the charge of a shotgun in the chest, that unnatural being faded and was gone, never to be seen again.

"Yet, this was not the last of the Mark of Clay. It would appear that through succeeding generations the family of Bone—as if damned by the godless practices of their ancestor—were cursed by the recurrence of these unholy twins. More than one successor of William Bone has caused the prenatal death of his brother, and throughout his hellish life, borne upon his murdering hands the foul stains of graveyard clay."

SILENCE enveloped the room like a pulsing membrane. I could hear Wickford's hoarse breathing. Across the grounds rolled the melancholy rhythm of the bell in the Chapel tower. Swan's head lolled back and forth, keeping time. He chanted idiotically:

"Ding, dong, hear the bell, ding, **dong**, ding, dong. . . ."

Wickford shook his shaggy mane.

"Impossible. The boy was a weakling; Gaunt was a man in the prime of life . . . alert, powerful. . . ."

He stopped short. His gaze had fallen on the teakwood chest. He bent and drew from the drawer a folded sheet of yellowed paper. He opened it and stared with widened eyes. The words were a dry croaking in his throat.

"Birth Certificate. County of Dunnesmouth. Born this day, December 13th, 1930, twin sons, to James and Letitia Bone. One boy was called Jeremy; the other, dead at birth, bore the name Oliver. . . ."

He blinked at me dully.

"But, I tell you, Lambert, it's fantastic! Sheer lunacy!"

I was not listening. Somehow, suddenly, all I could hear was the monotonous, "Ding-dong" that tolled from Swan's thick tongue. Somewhere at the back of my brain, a dark memory slithered into glaring light. An hysterical voice screeched: "I warn you! I

won't let him torture me anymore! No more Oliver. No more Gaunts. . . . I swear, I'll hang myself in the tower!"

I said: "Good Lord!" I spun toward the door.

Wickford blurted: "What the devil . . ."

"The belfry," I told him. "That's where he'll be! Don't you remember? What he said . . .?"

The pink mouth fell open. By the time I reached the corridor, Wickford was pounding at my heels. I believe I have never since run as swiftly as I did that night. I stumbled. I heard Wickford cursing the brambles by the Chapel gate. Every throb of the bell was like a white-hot needle driven through my eardrums. I rushed through gloomy sanctuary, twisting behind the organ, into a tiny vestry. The door to the tower was ajar; the ladder was ancient and slimed with cobwebs. A cold draft slithered down the shaft. The trapdoor was open; now, the clangor of the bell was like slow thunder.

I halted abruptly; Wickford was right behind me. I didn't speak. I only pointed. In the darkest reach of the belfry tower, an eerie shifting brilliance slowly took on form. Curled at the heart of an amoebic oval, we saw a tiny naked child; its blind features, exquisitely wrought, were warped in ancient agony; blood-red teardrops stained the closed eyelids. The phosphorescence wavered and blurred; a wail, as of some defeated power of darkness, shrilled through the tower. The vision bled into surrounding night; at last, only a pinpoint of malevolent silver light gleamed. Then, nothing. The chapel bell tolled on.

WE found Jeremy Bone quite easily. Apparently, he had simply secured the hangrope to the crossbar of the bell, slipped the noose about his neck, and jumped into the black well of the tower. Without a word, Wickford and I drew him up to our level. I loosened the rope; the fragile body lay sprawled on the tower floor in a puddle of moonlight. The eyes bulged; the head was twisted at an ugly angle. The body was still warm, but Jeremy Bone was not breathing. His neck was broken.

Wickford sounded sick.

"I tell you, it's mad, Lambert. We're

rational men of science. Not ghost-hunting old women. There must be a more logical answer. . . ."

"And that vision in the dark . . .?"

"Mutual delusion . . . something we both *thought* we saw. Something we *expected* to see. . . ." The big head shook, staring down at the limp body. "No. I won't believe it. It's physically impossible! A mere boy strangle a man as strong as Gaunt? Nonsense! Why his hands wouldn't have been powerful enough. . . . Besides, he always wore those gloves; clean, gray gloves that would never leave the sort of stain we saw on Gaunt's throat. . . ."

"But, if he *took off* the gloves. . . ."

Wickford did not answer. The bell moaned a death-knell. We exchanged one more glance, then I knelt beside the corpse of Jeremy Bone. I unsnapped the wrist-button, and slowly peeled the glove from his clawed right hand. . . .

Now, in the quiet passage of days and nights that comprise my life as a general practitioner in a small town, there are moments when I might bring myself to believe it was all a hellish nightmare; that there is, indeed, a more "logical" explanation of the events which led to Peter Gaunt's death: or that Doctor Wickford retired because he wanted to, and not because he could never again be certain—not because he could never rid himself of Gaunt's quiet voice: "Can we ever draw definitely the boundary line between sanity and insanity . . . ?" Perhaps I could tell myself that madness is a definable state, after all, and creatures like Jeremy Bone are truly insane, not merely pitiable beings who have seen beyond a veil that should never be drawn aside. I could rationalize; and, in the end, I might convince myself. But for one detail.

It will never be possible to explain away the thing I saw that night in the Chapel tower. As long as I live, I shall hear the mournful booming of the bell and see frosty moonlight shifting across Jeremy Bone's hand; that tremendous, sinewy hand of a man of prodigious strength; that hand whose gnarled fingers were coated with clay from the crumbling walls of an ancient grave.