

CREATURES *of the* NIGHT

By A. P. McMAHON

HARRISON himself would not tell you this story. Right after it occurred he could think and talk of nothing else. His friends found it so incredible that he was suspected of mental unbalance, and only after he resolved to avoid discussing it was he set at liberty. But the friends of his youth have all passed beyond now, and to me, as his trusted confidant, he one night told the story in detail.

Harrison has for years held a famous chair in one of the foremost Eastern universities, and I shall repeat his story as accurately as I can remember it, trying to let him tell it in his own way and leaving out the quotation marks. Needless to say, he will probably deny that this story has anything to do with him, even if you ask him.

Imagine us, then, comfortably seated in the professor's dimly-lighted study, before us an open box of cigars, with a bottle from the scholar's carefully hoarded stock of pre-Volstead nectar. The varicolored bindings of the thousands of books which line the study walls are reflected softly in the dark recesses of the room. Professor Harrison is telling me in his even, cultured voice the story of the Terrors by Night:

Hair-raising adventures right here in New Harbor? You might not think it possible, perhaps. But I know. There are times when the dark and malicious forces that hide behind the veil of Nature come forth, free to assault and lay waste the minds of those whom they chance to meet. There are many persons who could tell you stories as strange as that which I am telling you, but they are afraid to.

And those who have not had any such adventures are even more afraid—afraid that they may some night themselves meet such weird beings. Just as we put murderers and dangerous criminals in jail, or even execute them, so we thrust those who have seen the terrors by night into asylums and other institutions. By keeping out of sight those who have actually seen the Terrors, we hope to deny their existence and forget them.

I love the night. When you cherish the darkness and prefer it to the coarser glare of day, you are able to penetrate deeper into what really is. Landscapes and buildings, which by day are ugly and

stupid, at night become beautiful and interesting.

Have you never noticed that the same thing happens with people? Faces and forms that would never win a second glance on the street at noon, become mystical and immensely important as they vaguely move through the nocturnal shadows. The poetic and imaginative creations that spring from the brains of writers turn into realities and take visible form before our eyes.

It was a calm night early in June, many years ago, when I suddenly awoke after a few hours sleep. From my childhood days I have been able to sleep soundly only after dawn, not before it. During the hours when the sun deserts this hemisphere my thoughts race along eagerly as they never do in broad daylight.

I was as fully alive and awake as it is possible for a poor human being of ordinary flesh and bones to be. The air was miraculously still, and the trees outside the dormitory windows were as motionless and rigid as if they were enclosed in a dome of glass or had been frozen stiff.

That very day I had successfully passed my examinations for honors. To be sure, I was never a student to whom learning comes easily. It was always a hard struggle for me to master a deep book, but I was resolved to be a scholar, and I had by dint of intense and prolonged study come out at the head of my college class. I need not tell you, who have studied under my direction, what degrees and honors have come to me since I concentrated in a field of science in which I am called by many of my colleagues the most learned of living men.

That night, I repeat, I had come home from a little party of friends who had assembled to congratulate me on attaining the head of the class. It had been a very quiet party, after all. We had had a few bottles of wine and a very substantial dinner. We were limited in funds and not able to carry dissipation very far. I had reached my dormitory at about eleven o'clock, and soon after I had dropped off to sleep.

Then I suddenly awoke, as I just stated, and at once noted an extraordinary sensation of clearness and calm in the atmosphere. There was a feeling of

suspense, of expectation, something like holding your breath and wondering how long your lungs and heart can stand it. I glanced at the clock, whose face stood out visible in the moonlight, and noted that it was five after one.

I felt an insuperable desire to go out, to run and race my shadow in the moonlight. Somebody seemed to be calling me, and I felt that my presence was urgently required somewhere. The compulsion to arrive at the class-room that I feel whenever the hours for my lecture arrives was never more irrealizable. I knew that I was tired and ought to get a good rest in preparation for the trials of Commencement Day. But I could not withstand that summons. Follow it I must. Out there in the silent, silvery moonlight I was wanted. I could not linger nor hesitate longer.

Not a leaf was stirring when I finally dressed and went out. There was nobody visible anywhere about the college campus. As soon as I began to walk I felt imperceptibly guided. I knew where I must go. It was not in this vicinity, but a mile or more beyond the town, to a half-developed park where young folks sometimes wandered to spoon on warm summer evenings, but which would be quite deserted at this hour.

The wide-sweeping elms that adorn this part of the country seemed to open an avenue straight to the place where I should go. I hardly noticed the streets and the country roads along which I passed in haste. But these giant plants that have weathered the years and seen thousands of human beings scurry by only to disappear, while they still survive, were aware of me. They watched me in awe and amazement as they drew back their mighty arms and made way for me.

Even so I was bathed and drenched in a shower of peace and happiness. The obscurity of the cloudless night was soft and delicate. The moon looked down upon me with interest and marked each step of mine. My shadow swung its arms wildly, dangled its legs, doubling and twisting its head as it fell on a smooth stone wall or fluttered along in the wagon ruts.

At last I reached the park.

For a moment I stood undecided. In the distance I heard a sound. It was like the muffled, pleading groan of somebody

moaning in his sleep, filled with a strange unknown distress whose nature we can only surmise. It must be there, I thought.

All this time I was not afraid. I was protected and enveloped in an armor of confidence. No doubt something illuminating and potent would be revealed to me that night, though how or by whom, I knew not. I hurried on. The spot whither I turned my steps was in a gully where the sand and clay had been washed out by a flood some years before, and the rough underbrush and bushes had never been able to hide the yellow and red under-soil that gleamed through the thick surrounding sod like a bleeding wound.

Tales had been told of curious events noted by late passers-by in this remote and solitary spot. The headless body of an unclothed infant had been found here one morning. It was said that unsuspecting lovers loitering here had several times seen a headless, childlike form feebly stretching out its arms to them in the moonlight, a sight from which they had fled away in terror. But after the flood, which had torn out the scarred hillside, a tiny skull had been discovered and decently buried, after which nothing unusual had been observed, probably because the spot was avoided.

While I had been somewhat interested in the supernatural, the subject was of only slight importance in my studies, and I had reserved it for leisurely reading at some vacation period. I neither believed, nor disbelieved, at that time. And I was not afraid.

It was rather darker than elsewhere at the entrance to the glen. My foot slipped several times as I cautiously descended its sloping sides. When I reached the bottom, I was disconcerted to note that even the grassy plains of the park had become gloomy. Although I had seen not a single cloud in the sky to threaten the moon's dominion of the heavens, something had happened—a great purple-black curtain had been drawn up across the skies and extinguished the moon and its light.

In the midst of this gully there was the battered trunk of an elm that stood almost overturned, with knotted and twisted roots, some interlaced and twined like the snakes in the head of Medusa, some pathetically projecting like the stumps of a maimed and crippled human form.

As I slipped and staggered among the roots and stumps, I was suddenly stopped. My foot was caught—jammed between the roots, I supposed, and I attempted to pull it away. But I could

not disentangle myself, so I stooped down to get a nearer view.

A huge hand, sickly white, with knotted blue-black veins standing out on it, was gripped about my ankle!

I looked closer and saw a long arm, angular and rigid like the arm of a tarantula, lying along the ground, leading to the shoulder of a thick-set form, whose features I could not clearly perceive. But it was a man that held me in this strange fashion, a man who was not himself near the ground, but was sitting, bent and crouched, on top of the weather-beaten stump of which I have already spoken. His arm must have been at least twice his own height, as it then stretched out and snatched me like a fly.

And then the arm began to draw me in toward him, and the arm gradually disappeared into his shoulder, as the tongue of an ant-eater is sucked back into its mouth. I attempted to break the hold of this long bony arm that held me prisoner. My efforts were in vain. Kicking, beating and struggling, I was dragged relentlessly over the uneven ground to the very base of the stump.

There I lay for a moment, exhausted, too surprised and shaken to know what I ought to do next. I was cut and torn by the stones and sharp branches over which I had been irresistibly pulled, and I felt the blood beginning to trickle down my cheeks, but I did not cry out or call for help. I knew that would be useless.

Nothing happened for a second or two. The huge, repulsive hand held me in its close grip and made no further move. I wondered if some fierce bird of prey would sweep down through the trees from the opaque sky and begin to rip out my vitals or pick my skull. Something unimaginable was, I felt, about to happen.

Nothing occurred for a second or two. But presently a shape appeared—a large undistinguishable shape at first, creeping, slipping and sliding painfully along the ground through the underbrush. There was a noise of crackling and breaking as it came along, demolishing the upstanding twigs and brush in its way.

It progressed like a sloth, its head close to the ground, parting as best it could, clumsily and awkwardly, the undergrowth in front of it. The thing was large and round, and when it drew near enough I saw that its nails were long and sharp, like those of a bear, and, although its hands were calloused and gnarled, they looked human.

Over its face hung a thick curtain of tangled, meshed hair, and its whole body

was a mass of hair matted with leaves and mud. As it came near, the repugnant being lifted its head, shaking back the hairy mane. It had a small, circular mouth and it puckered up its thick, bright red lips as it lifted its face toward me, sniffing suspiciously with a nose so flat against its face from pushing along the ground that there was scarcely a sign of nostrils. I gazed, fascinated, and looked for its eyes. It had a slight trace of a forehead, but eyes there were none.

I had been so terrified by this strange monster that I did not at first observe that still another being had approached me. It was coming from behind the tree stump. But I had seen enough to know that the unbelievable thing that crawled along the earth on its belly was, or had been, human.

The third being then came nearer. It was tall and slender, moving with a gentle grace, like a tall flower swaying in the wind. While the other two were of an odd hue, like the bark of a storm-stained tree, this was a pronounced green.

The point that interested me most about this creature was its face. It was calm and dignified. I could see it clearly and definitely, although everything else was veiled in mist and damp, penetrating gloom. Her eyes were downcast and a smile lingered on her lips, so faintly pink, although her cheeks were pale and transparent as if they were moulded of wax. This is a real human being, I thought.

She seemed to be unaware of me. She came nearer with a delicate step, the soft green draperies fluttering about her like mossy streamers hanging from the branches of some southern forest. But she did not seem to see us. Never once did she lift her eyes, nor did that sweet smile vary.

Nevertheless, she made her way directly to me, and then placed one long slender hand lightly on my arm, without once looking up. With the other hand she made a gesture as if to arrange her flowing hair or smooth her pale, waxy cheeks.

Then I saw her face begin to revolve, like a door on its hinges! Her delicate, beautiful hands opened her waxy face as one might the door of a clock. Within was a grinning skull, with dark, clotted fragments of ligaments and blood vessels stretched across it.

Consciousness left me then. For days I seemed to lie buried beneath the waves, miles and miles below the water, and from time to time I was gently

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cradled as the vast masses of the ocean bed imperceptibly rose and fell.

Once I "came to," and seeing nothing in the darkness, I pressed my fingers close to my eyes. They were warm and smelled salty. They were covered with sticky blood, whether my own or that of another, I could not tell.

One morning—months later, as I soon found out—I awoke to find that the sun was streaming in through the half-open window and the curtains were making fluttering patterns of light on the bedspread. . . Some people came in, and I tried to tell them exactly what I had witnessed and been through, but they only looked pained and disturbed. I was surprised to find the weather so very warm and at last discovered that the summer was well advanced into August.

One day a class-mate, of whom I was very fond, came to see me and I told him what had happened. He listened quietly and sympathetically to what I said.

"But, take it from me," he commented, "they will keep you locked up here just as long as you think and talk about that. You and I know how strange and how evil those vile beings are that come abroad at intervals in the night. But I advise you to do all you can to forget them and say nothing more about them to anybody."

I have kept his advice. Few besides yourself have ever heard me speak of it. But I am just as sure tonight, years afterward, as I am of these books and bottles, that what I saw and felt that night really exists.

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