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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"At that instant he knew that the thing was not human."

# Flapping Wings of Death

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

*A tale of shivery horror, of mysterious murders, and the frightful thing that flapped its bat-wings on the plain after sunset*

"TELL you, Noel, the place is accursed!" Victor Langland leaned toward me across the polished old mahogany table. His silky hair was unkempt, and his eyes were wild. "If you

are wise, you will flee from it as from a pestilence."

I smiled at his dramatic manner. "My dear chap," I said, "if it is as bad as all that, why don't you leave yourself? Why

do you continue to breathe its contaminated atmosphere?"

"Leave?" he repeated, and there was longing in his voice. "I wish to God I could! But I am doomed. You are still safe, Noel; go before it is too late."

His strange words and nervous, jerky manner puzzled me. Could this be my old friend who, since earliest boyhood, had been to me like a brother?

"Of course," I said a little stiffly, "if you feel that way about it, I can put up at the inn. But I thought that because of our friendship and because we had not seen each other since your return from abroad, you would want me to stay here with you."

An expression of acute distress crossed his pale, esthetic features. "Don't take it that way, old fellow," he pleaded. "I do want you, more than you've any idea. But—I can't explain. . . ."

He seemed to be undergoing some inward struggle, that manifested itself in his twitching hands and trembling lips. At last:

"Very well," he said, almost in a tone of hopeless surrender; "since we both wish it, stay. But for the sake of our friendship, for the sake of all that you hold dear, promise me that you will be careful, and will do as I say."

His unusual behavior alarmed me. More, I did not like his exceeding paleness, nor his unnaturally bright eyes. He looked as if he was on the verge of both a mental and physical breakdown.

"Of course I'll promise, Victor," I said reassuringly, hoping to quiet him. "But what am I to be careful about, and what am I to promise?"

"You must be careful never to go out alone after nightfall," he answered promptly, "and never to eat anything in this house that has not been prepared by old Gregory. And you must promise to

sleep every night with your door locked and bolted, and to open it to no one, not even to me."

Bewildered, but anxious to humor him, I promised; and he summoned Gregory, his servant since boyhood, to carry my bags to my room.

Gregory, old and faithful, seemed overjoyed to see me.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Trevor!" he exclaimed as he laid out my clothes. "Master Victor needs a good friend to stand by him. He's not been himself at all lately."

"Perhaps the local mystery is getting on his nerves," I remarked, referring to a series of mysterious murders which had been terrorizing the countryside, and which I, as a journalist, had come to investigate.

Gregory shook his head. "I don't know, sir," he replied. "But it was before the murders that the master began to act queer. Before we came back here, even. It's been ever since he took up with that Doctor Gaspard."

I did not inquire who Doctor Gaspard was, although Gregory plainly wanted me to. If there was anything to be learned, I preferred to get it from Victor.

AT DINNER, I met Doctor Théophile Gaspard. Victor did not explain his presence; but I gathered that he was staying on indefinitely at the house. He was, in spite of his name, an Eurasian. His age might have been anything between thirty-five and fifty. He was slender and dark, with a scholarly forehead and eyes that were like black ice behind which a dull fire is ever smoldering. He was suave and courteous; and I felt strongly drawn to him, even while something in my inner consciousness cried out in protest against him.

All through dinner it was Gaspard

who did most of the talking. He was a clever and interesting conversationist; and he seemed, although by neither word nor gesture, to be making apology for our taciturn host. Victor, for his part, spoke not more than a half-dozen sentences during the meal. He ate almost nothing; but he drank a great deal of wine, which, however, had no more effect upon him than if it had been so much water.

"Victor tells me that you are a journalist," Gaspard remarked during the conversation. "I suppose you have come here to write up our recent murders?"

"Yes," I answered. "Unfortunately—or fortunately, as you may care to look at it—the public has a morbid thirst; and I have come here to do my part toward quenching it."

He smiled slightly. "Your metaphor has an appropriateness you probably did not intend, Mr. Trevor," he commented. "Did you know that in each case every drop of blood had been drained from the body of the unfortunate victim?"

"So it's true then!" I exclaimed with a journalist's interest. "I had heard something of the sort. There is also a rumor that in every instance the grave of the murdered man has been opened, and the body horribly mutilated. Is that also true?"

A dark flush overspread the doctor's face, and his eyes gleamed. "It is," he ground between clenched teeth. "Some meddling fool——" Then, seeing my look of surprize, he checked himself. "Always, during the night after the funeral," he continued in his normal tones, "the grave has been opened, and the body pinned to its coffin with an aspen stake driven through the heart. In one case, the head was cut off as well."

"That sounds like vampirism," I observed. "I've a notion to do a series of

feature articles along that line to supplement my main story."

"Do you believe in vampires?" Gaspard inquired. Although his tone was casual, his question was not put with any light intent; and I realized that I was expected to answer seriously.

"No, I do not," I replied. "Living dead men—the term is a contradiction in itself; an impossibility."

Again he smiled, and for an instant the fire seemed to flare up more brightly behind the dark coldness of his eyes.

"In my country, our attitude toward such things is different," he said. "But there is a reason for that. It is the difference between knowledge bred by theoretical study, and knowledge arising from experience."

"What!" I exclaimed, politely skeptical. "Surely you don't mean that you——"

And then I stopped short, for my glance had fallen upon Victor. He was sitting huddled in his chair, with his head drawn down almost between his shoulders. His hands were clutching at the arms of his chair, about which his long white fingers writhed and twisted, as if they possessed an existence separate from the rest of him. His face was deathly white except for one hectic spot on either cheek; and his staring eyes were fixed upon Gaspard's face as if held there by fascinated horror.

"Most of my countrymen believe in vampires," the Eurasian went on, apparently unconscious of Victor's spellbound gaze; "the dead who yet are not dead; who live by sucking the blood from the bodies of living persons; whose mouths are red with the blood of their victims; and whose hearts, in those cases where the bodies were discovered and opened, were found to contain fresh, living blood."

I shuddered at the description, and

again my eyes sought Victor. At each repetition of the word "blood," he had recoiled as though from a physical blow; yet he made no outcry, nor any sign to interrupt the horrible recital. He was like a man on the brink of a precipice: terrified, yet hypnotized by the very terror of what he contemplates.

At last Gaspard seemed to become aware of him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Victor!" he exclaimed in sudden and elaborate concern. "I had forgotten your distaste for such matters. Let us speak of things less gruesome." But in spite of his words of apology, I had a strong feeling that he had been consciously torturing his host.

Although we deliberately turned to the lightest of topics, the shadow of the bat, evoked by those few minutes' conversation, was still upon us. It was like the breath of foulness that lingers even after the cause of it has been removed.

**T**HE last of a gorgeous sunset was flaming in the sky as we rose from the table. Victor looked at its ruddy reflection upon the ancient, discolored wainscot, and a violent shudder convulsed him.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me, Noel," he began, avoiding my eyes. "I—I've been ill lately, and I generally go to my room immediately after dinner."

"Why, of course, old man," I replied readily. "Run right along. Doctor Gaspard and I will entertain each other."

"Until tomorrow, then," he said, holding out his hand to me.

I took it, and was surprised to find how cold it was, like the hand of a dead man.

As he turned to leave the room, he caught sight of his own reflection in a long mirror, bathed, like everything else, in the lurid light of the sunset. He started, and passed his fingers across his cheek,

as if he expected the color to come away upon them.

"Blood again," I heard him mutter hoarsely. "It's everywhere, and I can't escape it. Oh, my God!"

Gaspard and I went into the library, where we chatted inconsequentially for about an hour. But I saw that the doctor, although he was courteous enough, was not giving me his full attention. Presently he rose somewhat abruptly.

"Please excuse me a minute, Mr. Trevor," he requested. "Victor is my patient as well as my friend, and I would like to have a look at him."

Without waiting for my reply, he left the room.

While I was waiting for him to return, old Gregory looked in.

"I'm going to my room now, Mr. Trevor," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

I assured him that there was not, but he continued to linger.

"You'll be careful tonight; won't you, Mr. Trevor?" he asked diffidently.

"Careful?" I repeated, surprised. "What about, Gregory?"

"About locking your room, sir," he replied, sinking his voice almost to a whisper. "Queer things have been happening hereabouts, you know, and whatever happens, you mustn't open your door. Promise that you won't, Mr. Trevor."

Here was more mystery. I gave old Gregory the promise he desired, but refrained from questioning him; for, while it was plain that he definitely knew something, I feared that his account would be too garbled by an old servant's imaginings to be of any use to me. However, I resolved to make inquiries in some other quarters at the earliest opportunity.

In a minute or so, Gaspard returned.

"Victor is sleeping," he reported. "The rest will be good for him."

"What exactly is wrong with him, Doctor?" I asked bluntly.

"That is difficult to state precisely, Mr. Trevor," he replied silkily. "For one thing, his nerves are in a dreadful state—his occult studies, you know."

"No, I *don't* know," I said. "I was not aware that he was interested in the occult."

The Eurasian shrugged. "I fear that he is regretting his interest," he observed. "If I were you, I would not speak to him on the subject."

Was this a maneuver to forestall any attempt on my part to question Victor, I wondered? Suddenly I knew, with that intuitive sixth sense that is beyond ordinary, logical knowledge, that my friend's safety—more, his very life—was in danger. But I dared ask no more questions just then for fear of arousing this strange man's suspicions.

We talked on through the evening; or rather, the doctor talked and I listened. His soft, cultured voice seemed to slither through the atmosphere, like something at once beautiful and dangerous. The lamplight fell across his face without illuminating it. It was like those beams of light which, thrown against the night sky, are seen as light themselves, but which are turned back, impotent; repelled and blunted by the unfathomable darkness and mystery which they have attempted to penetrate.

**A**T LAST, by mutual consent, we rose and went to our rooms. My room was a spacious, high-ceilinged chamber toward the back of the house; one which I had often occupied during my visits to Victor when we were boys. Then it had seemed pleasant and interesting with its curious old furniture and mementoes of the past. But now . . .

Curious that I had never before noticed

that atmosphere of moldering decay that pervaded it! As I set my lamp upon the table, its light brought out great, discolored patches upon the walls, like black, evil fungi that fed upon the more healthful portions of the room. I had the hideous impression that these splotches were growing; that some day they would cover everything; and then . . .

I went back to the door, and locked and bolted it, as Victor had instructed me. But I was not so sure that I had locked the evil out. It seemed to be all around me. It was as if something had brought to life all the ancient powers of malignity that had lain dormant in the very earth upon which the house was built, just as a malevolent influence calls forth the propensities for evil in a human character.

Slowly I undressed and got into bed. I would have to pull myself together, I decided as I turned out the lamp; I was becoming frightened by shadows. Something of Victor's hysteria must have communicated itself to me. If I was either to help him or do my own work decently, this sort of thing must stop. Repeating these thoughts again and again, I finally went to sleep.

When I awoke, the room was pitch-dark. The moon had set, and the feeble light of the stars was unable to penetrate through the dense foliage of the trees outside. The utter blackness was like something that could be touched and felt.

I sat up in bed and listened. Although all was silent now, I knew that some sound had awakened me. Then I heard it again; a stealthy, crawling sound, like a body that half drags, half gropes its way in the dark!

The thing was coming down the hall. It moved slowly, but with a deadly deliberation that was more alarming than any sudden rush could have been. There

was something awful about that creeping, monotonous approach. The thing, whatever it was, did not seek stealth; it simply moved quietly. Then a disconcerting realization flashed upon me: My room was at the end of the hall; the creature must be making for my door.

I reached for the little revolver which, before retiring, I had slipped under my pillow. But even as my fingers closed upon it, I knew that it would be useless against that thing out there in the darkness.

I thought of making a light; then hesitated. If I let it know that I had heard it, it would be on its guard. Better to let it think that I was unaware of its presence.

Now it was just outside my room. I could hear it brushing against the panels of the door. Then the knob began slowly to turn.

"Who's there?" I shouted without warning.

There was a pause; then:

"Noel, it's—it's Victor." It was a barely audible whisper.

Surprized and a little bewildered, I got out of bed. "Wait a minute," I called, "till I make a light."

"No, don't make a light!" The voice was a little louder this time, and nervously imperative. "Let me in."

Wondering, I groped my way to the door. My fumbling hand found the key and turned it, then felt for the bolt. As I touched the door, I could feel something pressing eagerly against it from the other side. And then, like letters of fire against that thick, smothering blackness that shrouded about me on all sides, Victor's words, spoken upon my arrival, flashed before me:

"You must promise to sleep with your door locked and bolted, and to open it to no one; *not even to me!*"

With my hand on the bolt, I hesitated. Could I be sure that it was Victor out there in the hall? I had heard only a whispering voice. Could this be what he had meant when he had uttered his strange warning?

"Hurry, Noel," the voice whispered. Its owner was now pressing with all his weight against the door.

Suddenly I knew that I must not obey that whispering voice; that the thing to which it belonged was inexpressibly evil. So long as the door remained firmly closed between us, I was safe; but as soon as I withdrew that bolt . . .

"Hurry," the voice repeated. "Let me in."

"No!" I cried, relocking the door instead. "You are not Victor Langland!"

There was a quavering, long-drawn sound, like a deep sigh; then silence. Trembling I returned to the bed and sat down upon its edge, keeping my revolver trained on the door. Again I heard the knob turning, but the locked door did not yield.

For over an hour, intermittent whinnings and half-sobs sounded from the hall. More than once I suffered from grave misgivings: Suppose it *was* Victor out there, dangerously ill, and I was refusing to help him! But could my friend be making those weird, inhuman sounds? Racked by a host of emotions, I sat listening until at last the whimpering ceased. Then, convinced that the creature, whatever it was, had gone, I threw myself across the bed, to lie sleepless till day-break.

**T**HE next morning I had breakfast with Doctor Gaspard. Victor did not appear.

"He rarely comes down for breakfast," the Eurasian told me. "He does not sleep well during the night." And after an in-

appreciable pause, "You slept well, I hope, Mr. Trevor?"

I decided that subterfuge with this man would be useless. Accordingly, "No," I replied frankly; "on the contrary, I slept rather badly. In fact, I had the impression that some one or some *thing* was trying to get into my room."

I watched him narrowly as I said this in order to get his reaction. He merely raised his eyebrows in polite surprize.

"Really?" he said. "How strange! What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," I replied; then I asked, "What would you have done?"

"I think I should have gone to see what it was," he answered. "Weren't you curious?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but I was also cautious. Remember, the thing that brought me here was a series of mysterious murders."

I thought his eyes flickered at that, but he said nothing.

Just then old Gregory came in with our breakfasts. He was quivering with excitement, not untinged with fright.

"Gentlemen, have you heard the news?" he gasped without waiting to be addressed. "There's been another one!"

Gaspard and I looked up sharply. "Another murder?" we exclaimed in a breath.

"Well, not exactly," he admitted, "but another attempt at one. It happened out near the grove again. Mr. Linton's car had broken down about five miles beyond, and he was walking home. This morning some men found him lying unconscious by the side of the road, with the same kind of wound in his throat as the others had. One of the men ran for a doctor; and Mr. Linton's been taken to the hospital."

"Do they think he'll live?" Gaspard demanded.

"They think so," Gregory answered, "although he's pretty weak from loss of blood."

Gaspard made no comment until Gregory had left us; then:

"I am a doctor," he said. "I think I shall call at the hospital, which, in this small place, is a very poorly equipped one, and see if there is anything that I can do for this poor man."

I saw my opportunity, and seized it. "Take me with you," I pleaded. "I promise that I will not be in the way. It is on account of these mysterious killings that I have come here."

He hesitated, and for a moment I thought he was going to refuse; but apparently he could think of no sufficient reason for doing so.

"Very well," he conceded. "But you must not take anything that Linton may say too seriously. The shock of what he has been through will probably have caused illusions."

**W**E ARRIVED at the hospital, and were admitted without difficulty to the wounded man's room. He was extremely weak, but seemed wholly rational when he answered our questions.

"I don't know what it was that attacked me," he said. "It sprang upon me from behind, and I was not able to see its face."

"'It?'" Gaspard repeated quickly. "Then the police are right in thinking that it is some kind of animal?"

"I'm not sure," Linton answered thoughtfully. "It seemed inhuman enough, and yet it wore clothes, like a man. I had the impression of a long, black cloak, that flapped in the wind. Its hands, or claws, or whatever they were, were like steel: I couldn't even struggle, once they had caught hold of me. All I can remember is their clammy grip upon my throat, pull-



ing me over backward. Then I must have fainted."

"At approximately what time did this happen, Mr. Linton?" I inquired.

He considered. "It was nearly one by my dashboard clock when my car broke down," he replied thoughtfully. "I must have worked over the engine about half an hour before I decided to walk home. And since the car broke down about five miles from the grove—I guess it must have been between half past two and three o'clock."

"Thank you," I said, endeavoring to keep the tingle of excitement that had swept over me from showing itself in my voice. For by the radium dial of my watch, it had been five minutes past two when the Thing had quitted my door the night before. And I had already ascertained that the grove, where the near-tragedy had occurred, was within twenty minutes' walk of the house!

The hospital's resident physician, who was attending Linton, came into the room. "I'll have to ask you to go now," he said. "My patient is too weak to be allowed to talk longer."

He followed us out into the hall, and closed the door. "I have had a picture taken of the wound in Mr. Linton's neck," he told us. "Perhaps you would like to see it."

We both replied that we would, and he led the way to his office. Taking some photographic prints from an envelope, he spread them on the desk in front of us. They showed the angle of Linton's jaw, and a portion of his neck, with two lancet-like punctures just above the jugular vein. "Why!" I exclaimed, bending over them, "they look like teeth marks!"

"Exactly," the doctor nodded. "But the most horrible part is, the condition of the flesh around the wounds indicates

that they have been sucked. It's revolting!"

"Were the others like that?" I inquired, referring to the four deaths that had occurred before my arrival.

"Yes," he nodded. "There is evidently some strange creature haunting the grove and the scattered cottages in its vicinity. The inexplicable thing is that searchers have been unable to find it."

Gaspard, who had remained silent up to this time, uttered a short, derisive laugh. "Of course they haven't found it," he said. "The thing is a night prowler, and remains well hidden during the daytime. If they expect to find it, they must search at night, when it is abroad."

I SPOKE little on the way back to the house, for I was formulating in my mind a plan that had been suggested to me by Gaspard's words.

On arriving at the house, we found that Victor had not yet come downstairs. This made me uneasy, for it was nearly noon; so, getting rid of the doctor under some pretext, I slipped upstairs to my friend's room.

My knock brought no response; but the door, which was unlatched, swung partly open under my hand. Through the aperture, I could see Victor lying upon the bed. He was not in his night-clothes, but was still wearing the clothing he had worn the evening before. Something in his appearance frightened me, and I went into the room.

I crossed to the bed, and looked down at him. His features were pale as death; and I could detect no movement of breathing. A horrible fear swept over me: Had I turned him away from my door last night, and had he come back here, sick and alone—to die? Almost in panic, I caught him by the shoulder.

"Victor!" I cried. "Victor, wake up! You must!"

A kind of shudder passed over him, and he opened his eyes.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed in relief. "I thought for a minute that you were dead."

He looked at me, and a strange expression crossed his face. "Dead?" he muttered. "I wish to heaven that I were, Noel!"

The utter hopelessness in his tone aroused the fighting instinct in me. "Stop talking such nonsense," I commanded sternly. "You've got to buck up, and get well."

He shook his head at this. "Noel," he said in that same despairing voice, "as much as I want you here, I want your safety even more. Won't you go away?"

"What for?" I demanded bluntly.

"There's danger."

"If there's danger for me, there's danger for you," I pointed out. "Will you go with me?"

"I—I can't," he groaned.

"Then neither can I," I retorted, determined. "I had one reason for coming here—my work; but now I have two for staying—my work and you. I don't know in what way you've got entangled in this mystery, Victor; but I'm convinced that you have, and I'm going to see you through."

He made a pitiful effort to smile. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked; and while his tone was light, I saw that the question was really troubling him.

As the day wore on, I completed and perfected the plan that had occurred to me in the morning. It was this: All four of the inexplicable deaths, as well as the attack upon Linton, had taken place in or around a place called the grove, a small, tree-covered tract about the size of

a city block; a pleasant enough locality by day, but by night a dark, silent, and sinister-seeming spot. This grove was surrounded on three sides by a loop of the river, and on the fourth by a stretch of lonely road. A few scattered cottages were the nearest habitations to it; and after them, the old Langland house. It was my intention to go there after night-fall, and conceal myself among the underbrush on the side of the road opposite the grove, to await the coming of the Thing. I felt that I would be in little danger so long as my presence was unknown. Also, I would be armed with a powerful flashlight and my revolver. I had no wish to try to capture the thing, only to get a glimpse of it.

I WAITED until I felt fairly certain that Victor and Gaspard were in bed and asleep that night; then I let myself out at a side window, and sprinted at top speed toward the grove. The moon was up, and I had no difficulty in finding my way, although its presence permitted me to be seen as well as to see. Still, this caused me little alarm, since apparently the Thing did not begin its prowlings until after the moon had set. Only one thing disturbed me: As I had left the house, I had an unaccountable sensation that unseen eyes were watching me, although I had heard no sound and detected no movement in the surrounding shadows.

Arrived at the grove, I found a suitable hiding-place, and concealed myself. About forty feet to my left was a one-story, wooden cottage, deserted since the day when one of its two inmates had been found dead in his bed, the second victim of the mysterious killer. On my right was a sweep of rough, uncultivated land, covered with a heavy growth of weeds and scrub-locust. And in front of me was the grove.

I fitted my body into a depression in the earth, and with the scrub-locust concealing me, settled down to wait. The road wound shimmering by in the moonlight, while on its farther side the black pines whispered furtively to one another. The night was still and warm, with only the voices of little, summer night creatures and the hushed rustling of the trees to break the silence. I felt the peace of the place stealing over me, bringing with it a pleasant drowsiness. In order to drive this off, I took out my notebook and pencil, and began to scribble down impressions. The moonlight was so bright that I could see easily to do this.

The page grew gradually dimmer before my eyes, so that I had difficulty in writing. This meant that the moon was setting. I put away my notebook, and glanced up and down the road. There was no one in sight, nor could I detect any sign of movement in the grove. A glance at my watch told me that it was one-thirty. It would soon be time for something to happen.

But nothing did. Minutes dragged on, and the peace of the night was undisturbed. I began to wonder whether perhaps the Thing did not walk every night. In that case I would have to repeat my vigil until it met with success. Well, I would wait until three o'clock; and if nothing had happened by that time——

With an abruptness that had in it a sense of shock, the noises of the crickets and locusts around me ceased. Utter silence was added to the utter blackness that now enveloped the scene. I could neither see nor hear.

I strained my senses toward the grove opposite. Apparently there was nothing there. Cautiously raising myself to a sitting posture, I crouched with revolver drawn, while my left hand gripped my flashlight. At the first dim sight or sound,

I was prepared to send a beam of powerful white light in its direction. But the silence was painful, and the only visible thing was the faintly glowing dial of my wrist-watch, like a circle of pale, phosphorescent fire in the surrounding darkness. My ears and eyes ached with the intensity of the black and silent void.

And then, behind me, a twig snapped.

In an instant I had whirled around and pressed the button of my flashlight. Behind me was the Thing!

It was crouching not ten feet from me, a black, shapeless mass in which I could recognize neither man nor beast. As I looked, a kind of quiver passed over it, and I knew that in another minute it would spring.

With a yell of fear, I leaped to the road and started down it in mad flight. A crash in the underbrush behind me told me that I had been not a moment too soon; and then came the blood-chilling sound of pursuing footsteps.

I fled with the speed of terror, but always behind me sounded those inexorable footfalls. Once I dared to look round and flash my light behind me. The creature was running upright, like a man, but with its head bent forward so that its face was hidden by the broad brim of its hat. A long, black cloak billowed out behind it, like the leathery wings of a bat. At that instant, I knew that the Thing was not human, but was a monstrosity, something that should have perished with the Dark Ages. I extinguished my light, and fled on.

After what seemed an eternity of nightmare horror, the feel of flag-stones beneath my feet told me that I was nearing the Langland house. Again turning on my light, I saw the twin hedgerows leading to its entrance directly in front of me. With a sob of thankfulness, I turned in between them.

But I was not yet safe. Just when I had almost reached the house, something that lay across the path seemed to twine itself about my foot, and I stumbled. As I pitched forward, I heard once more those ominous footsteps, this time almost upon me. Then my head struck the ground, and I lost consciousness. . . .

**W**HEN I opened my eyes, I was lying upon a couch in a room that I had never seen before. Except for the couch, a long, porcelain-topped table, and two chairs, the room was unfurnished; but its walls were lined with shelves and glass-fronted cupboards, both filled with various-sized bottles. The sunlight, entering almost vertically at the eastern windows, apprised me that it was nearly noon.

I tried to turn my head to look around, but an instant, sharp stab of pain caused me to groan aloud. At that, there was a movement behind me, and Doctor Gaspard came into view.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, taking my hand and feeling for my pulse.

"Rotten," I answered thickly. "How did I get here?"

"I brought you," he replied. "I found you lying on the walk in front of the house. You must have gone out for an early morning walk, and had a fainting-spell. I carried you here to my workroom, where I could attend to your injuries."

I sat up, regardless of the agony in my head.

"What injuries have I?" I demanded. "When did you find me? Was there any one else around?"

He smiled at my excitement.

"The only injury that I could find," he told me, carefully answering my questions in turn, "is a case of slight concussion resulting from a severe blow on the right side of the frontal bone, attended by a small scalp abrasion. It was just at day-

light that I chanced to look out of my window and see you. There was no other person around."

"Were there no other marks on me?" I persisted. "No mark on my throat, for instance, such as there was on Linton's?"

"Aha!" he exclaimed with a playfulness that seemed to have a touch of ghoulish relish to it. "So you were out looking for the vampire last night!"

His frank use of that horrible word revolted me, and I remained silent. He turned his back upon me, and went over to a cabinet, from which he took a bottle containing a white powder.

"I suppose you were keeping vigil at the grove," he commented as he mixed some of this powder with water in a glass. "Did you see anything?"

"I saw a man-like creature in a black cloak, which pursued me back to the house," I answered with a frankness intended to match his own. "It was nearly upon me when I stumbled and fell."

"What time was this?" he asked, as casually as if we had been discussing some commonplace.

"It must have been nearly four o'clock," I replied. "The eastern sky was beginning to turn gray."

"It was that which saved you," he informed me. "With the coming of dawn, the vampire must return to its grave."

He finished stirring the mixture in the glass, and brought it over to me. "Drink this," he directed.

Mechanically I took the glass from him, but paused with it half-way to my lips. "What is it?" I demanded suspiciously.

He smiled openly at my caution. "Only something that will relieve your headache," he replied. "It will not hurt you."

I looked at the white liquid in the glass, and felt a little foolish. It was unlikely that the man would deliberately try to

murder me. Besides, I suddenly realized, I had no legitimate reason for believing him to be a villain; only a groundless dislike. I raised the glass to drink.

At that moment, the door was flung violently open, and Victor staggered into the room. He was white to the lips, and trembling so he could hardly stand.

"Noel!" he cried, catching sight of me. "Thank heaven you are not seriously hurt! Gregory told me——"

He rushed over to the couch and in his nervousness and excitement, knocked the glass from my hand, spilling its contents over both of us.

Gaspard flushed with anger, and muttered something in a language I could not understand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Victor apologized, but there was no contrition in his tone. "Let me help you to your room, Noel, so that you can get into some dry things."

Gaspard made no effort to interfere; so we went together to my room.

"Now," I demanded, as I exchanged my medicine-stained shirt for a clean one, "why did you knock that glass out of my hand?"

He glanced involuntarily toward the closed door before replying; then: "Remember," he said hurriedly in lowered tones, "what I told you: You must not eat or drink anything here unless Gregory prepares it."

"But why?" I persisted. "And why all this mystery, Victor?"

He seemed to be struggling for speech, but at last gave it up hopelessly. "I can't explain, Noel," he said, "but you must do as I say."

"Look here," I exclaimed recklessly, determined to get to the bottom of the matter if it were at all possible, "has Gaspard got some hold upon you, and is he experimenting upon you with some of his

refined Eastern tortures? And what has he got to do with——"

I was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door. At the sound, Victor's eyes dilated with terror, and he collapsed into a chair.

"Who is there?" I called.

"Gaspard," answered the soft, cultured voice of the doctor. "May I come in?"

I gave my consent, and he entered the room.

"I have been wondering," he began without preliminary, "whether it would not be advisable for you to spend the day lying down. You have suffered a severe blow upon the head; you will need rest."

There was, I realized, a great deal of truth in what he said. I still felt sick and dizzy, and had needed the support of Victor's arm to reach my room.

"All right," I assented, not unwillingly. "I will lie down, for a while, at least."

**A**BOUT an hour later, Gregory brought me a light lunch, which he said he had prepared for me at the doctor's direction. After I had eaten and he had taken away the tray, Victor came in.

"I've come to sit with you," he announced.

"Thanks awfully, old man," I replied gratefully. "But you needn't unless you want to, you know. I'll be all right."

"I *do* want to," he replied briefly, and sat down by the window.

He spoke little during his self-imposed vigil; and for this I was, in a way, grateful. The reaction from my accident had begun to set in. I suddenly realized that I was very weak and very much in need of the rest which the doctor had prescribed.

At dinnertime I refused the tray which old Gregory brought up to me. Victor, too, declared that he was not hungry, and

instead of going down to join Gaspard, chose to stay with me.

"I say, this won't do, old fellow," I remonstrated with him. "Why, you have eaten hardly anything since I have been here."

He turned my solicitude aside with some evasive remark, and in order to pacify me, let Gregory bring him a biscuit and a glass of wine. But I noticed that he did not touch the biscuit, and only sipped at the wine.

As dusk came on, he began to grow restive. His fingers strummed nervously upon the arms of his chair, and he seemed barely able to sit still. At last he rose abruptly.

"I'll have to go, Noel," he said without looking at me. "Be careful tonight—and remember what I told you about locking the door."

"I will," I assured him. "Good-night, Victor."

I held out my hand to him. He did not take it, although I knew that he was fully aware of it.

"Good-night," he muttered, still without looking at me, and was gone from the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind him when it was opened again by Gaspard. "How do you feel, Mr. Trevor?" he inquired in the softly modulated tones of the physician.

"Better," I replied, then added, to see the effect upon him, "Victor has stayed with me all day."

He showed no surprize. "Victor is a fine young man," he said. "I wish I could do more for him."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"His is a peculiar case," he went on. "He is suffering from a nervous disorder that has resulted in a strange phobia; he is afraid of every one who comes near him

after nightfall. I suppose he left you just now as it began to grow dark?"

"Yes, he did," I admitted.

"That is an instance of the phobia," he said. "Probably when you first came, he asked you to go away. Poor fellow! he is even afraid of me, simply because I am with him all the time. He is so afraid that he will not take my medicines; yet he will not consult any other doctor, as I have suggested many times that he should do."

He was busy taking my pulse and temperature as he told me these things, and seemed not to expect an answer; so I gave him none. I was both astounded and bewildered by what he had said. Could this be the simple explanation of the mystery surrounding Victor's behavior, whereas I had been looking for something more sinister? Had I been unfairly prejudiced against Doctor Gaspard, simply because of his nationality?

"I suppose the series of mysterious murders are partly responsible for this night-phobia," I ventured finally.

"Undoubtedly," he replied, "but they were not the beginning of it. As I hinted to you before, his recent occult studies proved too much for him."

At another time I would have seized eagerly at the opportunity to inquire into the nature of these occult studies, but this was not the time. I was still feeling the effects of my adventure of the night before; my nerves as well as my legs were unsteady. I was decidedly not in a state to make inquiries into mediæval magic and superstitions.

Gaspard chatted a few minutes longer, adroitly steering the conversation to subjects less likely to harass the imagination of a sick man. At last he rose to leave.

"You are coming along nicely," he said. "Try to sleep tonight, and you will be all right in the morning."

He moved toward the door. I sat up

on the side of the bed, preparatory to turning the key in the lock behind him. Seeing me, he stopped.

"Don't get up," he advised quickly. "If you do, you'll find yourself less steady on your feet than you think." Then a sudden light of understanding seemed to dawn upon him. "Ah, yes, of course!" he exclaimed. "Victor must have made you promise to lock yourself in. Well, I will lock the door for you from the outside, and toss the key over the transom. Will that serve?"

I replied that it would; and, wishing me good-night, he removed the key from the inner side of the door, and took it with him. A moment later I heard the metallic sound of it being turned in the lock; then it shot in a bright arc through the open transom, and landed with a tiny thud in the middle of the floor. I turned out my lamp, and prepared to go to sleep, feeling more secure than I had felt at any time since my arrival. . . .

**F**OR the second time, I awoke amid pitch-blackness, dragged back to consciousness by that curious, groping sound in the hall. But this time, instead of being instantly broad awake, with all my senses on the alert, I seemed to be struggling up through heavy waves of oblivion, that were pressing down upon me, trying to smother me back again into unconsciousness.

The groping sounds were much nearer this time than they had been when I had first heard them two nights before. I lay listening to them, fighting down a feeling of unreality, and thanking heaven that the door between me and the Thing was locked. Then a sudden realization smote me: Gaspard's explanations, while they accounted for Victor's strange behavior, had *not* accounted for the presence of the Thing!

With the thought, new horrors and speculations smote me. If the doctor knew, why had he not told me; and if he did not know—— Victor knew, I felt sure; and it was against the Thing that he had tried to warn me. I could hear it just outside the door. Now it was fumbling with the knob. And with that, I knew for a certainty what I had only suspected before: The Thing out there in the hall was the vampire killer of the grove!

At the realization, I became wet with cold perspiration. I could feel the short hairs rise at the back of my neck. I strained my ears for some sound to tell me what the creature was doing, but could hear none. Perhaps, I thought, clutching eagerly at the idea, it had gone away. But I had not heard it go. And then I became conscious of a cold draft blowing over me, a draft that was coming from the direction of the door!

With a horrible sickening of all my senses, I realized that the door was open, that Gaspard never had locked it! He betrayed me to the Thing!

I tried to move, to cry out; but I was like a man in a nightmare, weighed down and stifled by an intangible heaviness that permeated my entire physical being. My heart was beating with great, pounding blows that threatened to burst it; it was as if every ounce of strength in my body had gone into its intolerable thumping.

I strained my eyeballs into the darkness. If I could only see the Thing! All I knew was that it was somewhere in the room with me; we two hemmed in together, yet separated by the thick blackness. If I could only know from what quarter——

There was a rustle at the side of my bed. Two icy, talon-like hands gripped my throat; and I fainted. . . .

There was a sound of rushing waters in my ears, through which I was fighting desperately for consciousness. Somewhere, far away above the dark waters, were light and sounds; and toward these I strove.

Gradually, as the waters subsided or as I gained mastery over them, the light resolved itself into the glow of a lamp upon the table of Gaspard's workroom, and the sounds, first into voices, then into words.

I lay with half-closed eyes, listening to these words, which, unintelligible at first, presently began to take on meaning.

". . . and if you do, by God, I'll kill you!" declared one of the voices, which with a start I recognized as Victor's. "I mean it."

The other voice, Gaspard's, laughed softly. "You excite yourself over nothing," it replied in the tone of one who reasons with a rebellious child. "The state is not painful; you must admit that. And think of its advantages. All I ask in return is allegiance to me; forced, I'll grant, but I am not a hard master. If you would forget your apprehensiveness and appreciate your situation——"

"Stop!" Victor broke in. "I have sworn that you shall not do this thing to Noel, and you shall not! I——"

"Enough!" Gaspard turned upon him the fatal, fixed stare of the hooded cobra. His voice was deadly quiet. "I am your master. You will do as I say, and will not rebel against me. Now go."

Beneath that hard, cold eye, Victor wilted. Like a whipped dog, he turned and slunk from the room.

**G**ASPARD looked after him and shrugged; then he crossed to the couch where I lay.

"Ah, you are conscious!" he exclaimed. "That is good! I had begun to fear—but I will give you some medicine, and all

will be well. You must lie still now, perfectly still, and do not try to think. I will get the medicine; just a little white powder in a glass of water. . . ."

His voice was soothing and monotonous, and while he talked, he gazed steadily into my eyes. I stared back, unable to look away. In those few seconds, Victor and all else was forgotten. There was only the doctor's will, swaying me and molding me as it chose.

Satisfied that the partial hypnotism would hold me helpless, he left me, and, crossing to one of the cabinets, took down the bottle which he had taken from it the day before. I watched him with a casual kind of interest. The whole thing seemed unreal, a kind of melodrama, in which one part of me played a minor role, while another part looked on as spectator.

Gaspard began to return to me, stirring some of the white powder in a glass of water as he came. Something deep down in my consciousness tried to sound a warning against him and his medicine; but already it was too late. I knew that, powerless against him, I would swallow the contents of the glass, even if it meant my death.

Then I became aware of something else: The door at the doctor's back was slowly opening! In a few seconds it had swung wide enough to admit Victor, who stood pale and resolute on the threshold. He was holding some dull, metallic object in his hand, and his eyes were fixed unwaveringly upon Gaspard. Carefully deliberate, he began to raise the hand that held the metallic object. . . .

Gaspard had reached my side. "You will drink this," he was saying in that soft, persistent voice that seemed to smother my will. "Drink it, and be one of my company. It means power, Noel; power beyond anything you have ever imagined. That is right; take it. . . ."



My fingers reached for and closed around the glass. In a kind of daze, I raised it to my lips. . . .

From the other side of the room sounded a sharp report, accompanied by a spurt of red flame. Doctor Gaspard pitched forward, shot through the heart!

I let the glass crash to the floor, and sprang to my feet. The spell was broken; save for a slight dizziness and a feeling of weakness, I was my own man again. Victor stood facing me, still holding the revolver.

I looked from him to the dead man upon the floor. "You've murdered him!" I cried in horror.

"Yes," Victor said. "It had to be his life or yours."

"You mean—he would have killed me?" I demanded incredulously.

"Worse than that," he replied. "Feel your throat."

I obeyed. Just over the jugular vein was a small surgical dressing, held in place by a strip of plaster. I knew what type of wound lay beneath it.

"Merciful heaven!" I exclaimed. "Then he was the vampire killer!"

Victor smiled, but it was a horrible, ironic kind of smile. "Do you suppose that any vampire could be slain so easily with an ordinary bullet?" he asked bitterly. "No, he was not the killer. I am."

"What?" I cried aghast. "Victor, you don't know what you're saying!"

"I know only too well," he replied. "I realize what you are thinking: You believe that I have lost my reason; but, unhappily, it is not so.

"Two years ago, while I was in the Caucasus studying the survival of mediæval magic, I met Théophile Gaspard. He, too, was a student of my subject, but advanced so far beyond me that he seemed like a master by comparison. We

became friends, and he offered to teach me what he knew. That was the first step along the road to my destruction.

"I had known him about three months, when one evening he confided to me that he had discovered the secret of immortality. At first I thought he was joking, but his manner soon convinced me that he was in earnest. He told me that it was not contained in an elixir, as was generally supposed, but in a white powder which, taken between two slight surgical operations, would render a man immortal. He then asked me whether I wanted to undergo the treatment.

"Naturally, I inquired whether he had made himself immortal, and when he replied that he had not, I laughed at him. He hastened to explain that, because of the surgical end of it, it was impossible for him to treat himself, but I was still skeptical. We argued upon the subject for half the night, and at last he flected me upon the raw by accusing me of cowardice. Nettled, I told him that I would undergo his treatment, to prove both that I was not a coward and that his great discovery was a piece of absurdity.

"I know I was a fool to permit myself to be taunted into submission to his will, but it is too late to grieve over that now. That very night he etherized me for the first 'operation.' When I returned to consciousness, I suffered from no ill effects except a languid weakness. Also, I discovered on my neck a small surgical dressing.

"When he saw that I was conscious, he mixed some of his white powder in water, and made me drink it. The following night he put me to sleep by hypnosis.

"When I awoke from the hypnotic trance, the feeling of weakness had departed. I had no pain, but I experienced an indescribable feeling of change. I also

discovered before long that I no longer possessed a will of my own, but was wholly subservient to Gaspard.

"Then there developed the strange situation concerning food. I found I could not eat; yet every day I awoke with the feeling that I had eaten a full meal only a short time before. There was also the peculiarity of my sleeping. As darkness came on, I felt growing upon me a sense of unreality, not through any feeling of drowsiness, but rather through an abnormal wakefulness; a consciousness grown so acute that ordinary perceptions took on the phantom aspect of dreams. When I went to sleep, I do not know; but I never awoke before noon of the following day.

"Finally I determined to ask Gaspard about these things. He only smiled at my questions at first, and gave me evasive replies; but when I persisted, he told me all, and took a fiendish delight in telling: With the 'operations' and his white powder, he had made me into a vampire, a living dead man!"

VICTOR paused, overcome with the horror of his own story. I ventured a question.

"But how?" I asked. "How did he do this unspeakable thing?"

"I can only surmise from what he drove me to do afterward," Victor replied. "I have no memory of my attacks upon the poor creatures from whom I drew my sustenance. It was Gaspard's horrible plan that these, becoming vampires in their turn, should be chained to him as I was; but this, at least, I was able to prevent. Always, after they had been committed to the grave, old Gregory, acting on instructions whose import he only half understood, would open the coffin and drive an aspen stake through the heart of the corpse, or cut off its head; and so each living dead man of my mak-

ing was set free from his revolting bondage.

"What Gaspard used for the 'operations' in my case, I don't know. Whether he used a giant blood-sucking bat, or whether—but it does not matter. His powder was the most devilish touch of all; for it not only sapped my will, binding me to him like a slave, but it made me, between the hours of noon and sundown, like any normal, living man, fully conscious of the horror of my situation. Nature has given to the soul of the ordinary vampire merciful unconsciousness of its hideous deeds: I was denied even that.

"Gaspard told me that we would not be able to remain in the Caucasus; that we would be suspected, and hunted down like dogs. So we fled across Europe, leaving behind us a trail of mysterious deaths, and at last came here, where he hoped to establish a whole colony of undead, by whose labors he would gain power and wealth. He planned to lure men here to destroy them; but I struggled against this with what little will remained to me. Then you came, Noel, and he very nearly succeeded."

He stopped speaking, and stared down at the dead man who lay between us. I, in turn, stared at him. The story he had just told me was, of course, the wild imaginings of an unbalanced mind. Perhaps Gaspard was in some way responsible for his condition; but a few months in a good sanitarium—

He looked up quickly, and apparently read my thoughts in my eyes.

"So you still think I am mad?" he asked wearily. "Perhaps that is not to be wondered at, although the wound in your throat should convince you. . . . You must try to forgive me for that, Noel; I could not help myself."

He glanced toward one of the win-

dows, where the darkness of night crowded against the pane.

"You must go now," he said. "Night is already here; and soon——"

I rose, and placed my hand upon his shoulder. "You must brace up," I commanded sternly. "Gaspard is dead now, and his influence over you is gone."

"Yes," he admitted grimly; "his influence over me is gone. But I am still the thing of horror which he has made me. You don't believe? Feel."

He drew my hand from his shoulder, and placed it over his breast. The next instant I recoiled in horror. *There was no heart-beat beneath my fingers!*

In a flash, all the indicative horrors of the past few days shot like an express train before my mental vision: the death-like coldness of Victor's hands, his disinclination to eat normal food, his withdrawal at nightfall, and above all, the terrible, deathly trance in which I had found him that first morning after my arrival.

I staggered back, aghast, and with the movement my body collided with the table and overturned the lamp. There was a sharp explosion as the lamp burst, and the streaming oil became ignited. As if by magic, flames shot up on all sides, fed by the dry, rotting wood of the old house and by the inflammable chemicals on the doctor's shelves.

**H**ALF suffocated by the heavy smoke that curled like a great black serpent through the red fire, I stumbled to-

ward the door. As I reached it, my arm was seized in a firm, supporting grip, and I was dragged, blinded and choking, out of the house and to a safe distance beyond, where I collapsed weakly upon the ground.

"Are you all right, sir?" a voice inquired solicitously.

I looked up with smoke-stung eyes, and for the first time realized that my rescuer had been old Gregory. Then my gaze traveled beyond him to where a raging inferno, that had lately been the Langland house, stained the black night sky a deep blood-red.

Forgetting my pain and weakness, I scrambled to my feet.

"Victor!" I cried wildly, and would have rushed toward that holocaust. "He is in there!"

But Gregory laid a restraining hand upon my arm.

"It is no use, Mr. Trevor," he said quietly. "He is beyond our reach now. And he wished it so, I know. Think a minute, sir: There are worse things than good, clean fire."

"What do you mean?" I asked, pausing.

"He was still what that wicked doctor had made him," the old man explained. "I couldn't do for him as I did for the others, although he often begged me to. And the only other way was cremation—destruction of the body by fire. His poor soul is at rest now, Mr. Trevor; it is the only way he could be freed."

