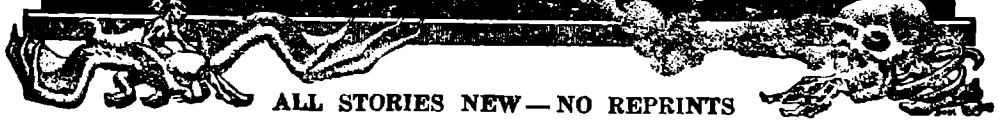


# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

July, 1945

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

## LONG NOVELETTE

- THE WATCHER FROM THE SKY** . . . . . August Derleth 6  
*The laws of space and time may be thrust aside by ancient evil known only to a few men whose voices cry in the wilderness of disbelief*

## NOVELETTE

- DEVIL DOG** . . . . . Manly Banister 46  
*The dogs, creeping through the jungle faster than a man could travel in the open, were a Godsend—most of them!*

## SHORT STORIES

- FOG COUNTRY** . . . . . Allison V. Harding 29  
*People are born here, and live here . . . but only if they can't possibly move away!*

- THE DAI SWORD** . . . . . Manly Wade Wellman 37  
*A man with occult knowledge and interests ought to have first bid on the sword of the Dais*

- ONE WAY TO MARS** . . . . . Robert Bloch 58  
*The only catch about a journey to Mars is—nobody's yet figured out how to make the return trip*

- THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD** . . . . . Edmond Hamilton 64  
*The aged statesman complained that intolerance, old grudges and ambitious men plague this world eternally*

- CARNABY'S FISH** . . . . . Carl Jacobi 74  
*There was something strange about the lake . . . but what was in the lake was far stranger!*

- QUAKING PROVIDENCE** . . . . . Reeder Goald 81  
*Everybody has a theory about the war but somewhere there is a little, oldish man who knows!*

- THE DEAD MAN** . . . . . Ray Bradbury 84  
*It's not fair to play jokes on a dead man. Well, anyway, it's not healthy!*

- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS** . . . . . Irwin J. Weill 73

- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB** . . . . . 93

*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.

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# Fog Country

By ALLISON V. HARDING

I AM the town recorder here at Elbow Creek. With all that this job is concerned with facts and figures of our community, the assessments and public debts, the levies and rates, the births and deaths, I

am not too busy but that I have time to myself. Time to think.

Elbow Creek—named after the shallow, sickly little stream that bends abruptly through our middle and thence to the Sound

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV



*You'll swear the fog is alive with a wet sticky gurgling life of its own!*

—is thinly populated. People are born here, to be sure. Some of them live their lives here if they aren't able to move away. And people die here . . . or disappear!

If you come our way, taking macadam 14 off the main highway, you'll notice Elbow Creek. It forces itself upon you as though you'd crossed an invisible line in some forsaken land. That little white clapboard town hall is where I work. I'm known as Smith. Just Smith. Driving through you might stop at the peak of the hill up where the big house is and look at the silver of the creek running away from you with the blueness of the Sound peeking over the topmost of the trees way out beyond us.

It's a pretty view all right, but people don't settle here, oh, a few times maybe, but they move away quick. There's a blight on this place. Fear's a blight, isn't it? It has to do with a lot of things, but I guess you can go back to the Hobells.

The family, as represented mainly by grandfather and his brothers, came ripping in here decades ago. It was a wild unpopulated country then, and I guess they liked that view down to the coast just the way the tourists do now. Only they didn't shudder when evening came and move on. The Hobells are tough and evil. They took most of the land hereabouts, especially the big hill. They built the huge house on top there. They even tried to call the town after themselves, but the state said it stayed Elbow Creek and the Hobells didn't care too much. They had just about all the land.

A strange crew, these big men and their wild-eyed woman-folk. Descendants, undoubtedly, of the buccaneers that plundered the coast and of the outlaws and guerrillas who pillaged this section of the country in its early history. Strong, cruel, ruthless men who, with no new lands to conquer, turned to debauches and fighting among themselves. The house on the hill in Elbow Creek became famous through the years as a place to avoid, and each new generation of Hobell men wrote new pages of violence in the evolution of the little town.

The other folks hereabouts, too weak to fight the Hobells, too poor to move away, simply tolerated the raids on their chicken coops, the thefts in the night, and the beatings perpetrated on any of their number un-

lucky enough to get in the way of a Hobell.

But there are forces here at Elbow Creek that are eviler than the Hobells and far more powerful. Forces beyond our understanding, and yet all who live here know of them with an inarticulate realization that brings fear deep to the very soul of a man. I remember not such a great many years ago, Jess Hobell, oldest brother and leader of the present generation of the family, lost his huge mastiff. Peculiar it was, too. Jess came to town the next day and marched through the streets accosting everybody he met, accusing them of taking the animal and knocking them down if they didn't make a satisfactory retort.

**T**HE night Jess's dog disappeared—and how could he, the eldest Hobell wanted to know, chained up tight to a post back of the house no dog could have pulled loose from—we had one of those fogs.

You don't know what that means unless you've been here. It's not like anything you've ever experienced or anything you ever will again, except here. The damp gray spongy clouds come rolling in from the Sound, following Elbow Creek like a marker and sitting down on the hill and around it. Damp, thick substance that you can almost feel in your hands and on your face. And the chill that goes through you isn't from the temperature because you'll swear the fog around you makes noises and is alive with a wet, sticky gurgling life that puts terror in the pit of your stomach.

Like I say, Jess's dog was outside when the fog came that night. He barked and growled and muttered a bit as always, and then later he was gone. Just like that. Maybe similar things had happened here, somebody's calf-baby or one of the poor folks youngsters—just disappeared! You don't pay much attention to those stories, though.

There was a very old man down in the village who told Jess when he came cursing and roaring the day after the fog, told him the place was evil, and especially the hill where the Hobells lived. The old man wouldn't shut up and turn aside the way the rest of us did when any of the family came amongst us. He told Jess to take his people and leave the hill. They whisper that Jess hit him, and we buried the aged fellow

two days later, but nobody saw the blow, nobody would say anything, and he *was* very old. The carrying-on up at the place on the hill went on, the fighting and drinking and cursing.

It seems that young Tom Hobell, the only one of the brothers who ever had much learning, the youngest and the least bad of the brood, wanted to get out, or so the villagers whispered. There was a girl in the valley he'd met once. He wanted to marry her and leave, but Jess was the strong man of the family and with the other brothers and sisters, persuaded Tom to bring his wife up to Hill House to live. I can see the girl so very well. She's just a figure here in my records under "Deaths" and even that was several years ago, but I can see her as she was, with her black hair and wide frightened eyes, but loving Tom so she went up to that hell-place.

The fights got worse, and one night Tom's wife was killed trying to beat off one of the other carousing brothers. They say Tom always suspected it was Jess, and maybe that's the truth. She was buried in the little cemetery on the slope just below town. Only Tom came to the ceremony, and I guess everybody noticed the way his face and hands were working and they knew there'd be trouble. The records here say "Accidental Death." That was before I, Smith, took over as clerk, but I know that's wrong and so does everyone else. Her death was no accident.

**T**WO nights later I think, some of the braver of villagers stole up the hill a ways. Most of the folks were sorry for Tom and they knew something was going to break up there. Tom was strong and tough but not more so than Jess, and there were the others against him. After a while Jess and Tom came out of the house, the elder of the two swearing and cursing. They came down the hill to an open space that cut a little dent out of the side of the slope, and they fought.

As they battled and the drinking and carrying on continued unabated up at the house, the moon went under and the fog started to come. Then the villagers, feeling the stealthy Sound dampness on the backs of their necks, crept away and hurried to their

homes, barring their doors and windows. Maybe one or two were brave enough to stay, I don't know, but the story tells of the blanket of slimy wetness that crept over Elbow Creek, crept over the land up the hill and settled down around the house.

And all the while Tom and Jess went on fighting, battering each other with their huge hard hands. When you're mad enough and fighting furiously enough, you don't notice anything. The men probably were aware of the fog but little, and certainly they weren't listening, so when the sounds from the house suddenly stopped as though muffled in a wet blanket, it was a time before anybody noticed—

The fog went away very quickly that night and the moon was out again. The village folk climbed back up the hill to find out what had happened. Jess and Tom were lying exhausted within a few yards of each other. The young one's face was battered and smashed beyond recognition and Jess himself wasn't a pretty sight.

But the crowning horror of the night came when the village people looked up toward Hill House. The mansion stood in the moonlight shockingly shriveled and deformed, its board sides wrinkled as though with age, its frame dislocated. No one went any nearer. The silence was too awful.

Finally Jess staggered to his feet and went up the hill. Everybody knows that what he found in the misshapen hulk of his house was nothing. Just nothing. Two brothers and two sisters gone. Glasses and bottles and furniture overturned and smashed and a wet, reeking slime coating the woodwork, floors, and ceiling. But nothing else. You could hear Jess yelling then, his deep hoarse voice reverberating through the empty house, and there was something indescribably terrible about it. He called them by name, each of his brothers and sisters, and the people watching downhill looked at each other and back at the house.

The first streaks of dawn were showing off to the east. Sometime before the villagers left, Tom had reeled off, holding his hands to his smashed face. The story goes that Tom went as far away from Elbow Creek as he could. The people in the village knew he'd never be seen around here again.

And Jess? Jess went to work repairing the

mansion. He got a couple of fierce dogs and he took to muttering to himself and the wild-eyed look grew more pronounced. But he didn't leave. He was bound to go on living there. He had extra lights put in the place, and you could see Hill House, a beacon blob of lights up there, shining all night, as though that would help!

All of the villagers knew that some time, some day, the same fate that oozed in from the Sound and lisped and slopped its way up the hill, gently, gently, would come back for Jess living there on the hill where nobody was supposed to live, and he was a Hobell. And even though the Hobells were evil, there were other things that were immeasurably more evil.

Time passed, and what fog came to Elbow Creek was small, wispy, harmless. But I always had a feeling that something was gathering out there in the blue night of the Sound, gathering its bigness and deadliness until the right time. I used to sit in my tiny ramshackle room near the Town Hall evening and look out the window at the darkening sky. I'd think of Jess up there on the hill with his two dogs and all his lights that he faithfully put on at dusk. I'd wonder about him and I'd wonder about the Fog.

**T**HEN one evening on the walk down the main street to my room I felt mist on my face, heavy and sticky. The proprietor of the small inn where I ate my meal remarked laconically, "Looks like one of the big fogs." I already had a hard knot of anticipation inside of me.

It grew dark very quickly, and when I left my room around nine o'clock, I noticed the streets were virtually empty and those persons still abroad hurried past me as though they wished to be through their business and home safely at the earliest possible moment.

I trudged out of town along the road that led past the foot of the hill where the Hobell house was. I had a waterproof flashlight in each pocket and a long hunting knife sheathed at my hip. I used one of my torches as I walked, throwing puddles of bright light on the road ahead of me. After some minutes I rounded a bend, and as I headed through the trees, I could see the cluster of lights from Hill House. I edged off the road

and pushed through the tall grass at the bottom of the incline. Then I started up, cautious to make as little noise as possible. I didn't want the dogs to hear me. I stopped midway in my climb and settled beneath some bushes. I could see the house clearly. Once I saw the giant shadow of Hobell cross in front of a window. Yes, there he was again, obviously pacing up and down. Nervous.

The dogs were nowhere to be seen but I dared not risk approaching closer just yet. An oath came from the house and I heard a thud and a yelp. Jess was even taking it out on his mastiffs. I settled myself in a more comfortable position and then turned on my side to look back down the hill.

Somewhere off in the darkness, I could not see, there was a whispering and rustling like the first breath of air on a very hot still summer night. The atmosphere around me was heavy. I was conscious that the moisture in it was plentiful. My face and the backs of my hands felt damp. I looked at the house and again Jess crossed the window in front of me. I heard him rattling at the locks on the huge front door, testing them. I saw his face at one of the windows then, the gigantic shoulders of the man taking up the whole space, but his expression etched in light was one of terror.

He looked out and upward. Then as an afterthought he opened the window and hung out for a moment sniffing at the air and craning his neck. From behind him in the room I heard the uneasy whine of one of the dogs. Jess pulled his head and shoulders in and shut the window, fumbling carefully with the lock. Then he turned away out of my sight.

The vague rustling as though of wind seemed to be moving toward the hill, toward me, toward the house from behind. Uneasiness tugged at my brain and my scalp tingled. Folks who have been in Elbow Creek know those fogs and they fear them deeply and unreasonably, but they have lived through them. Lived through them, though, behind their barred and bolted doors, huddled in their houses, and I was out here in the open!

I had the unmistakable feeling that some force was stalking the hill from the blackness behind me. The air began to move

in eccentric little cross-currents, and then as though withdrawn from a vacuum, I found the atmosphere flat, energyless, moist and wholly ominous. In my growing fear I lay as close as I could to the ground with my fingers dug into the soil that was a part of something I still knew and understood. Back of me and above me I knew this other was coming.

I opened my mouth to relieve the pressure on my ears and a drop of perspiration or fog-moisture, I wasn't sure which, plopped from my face.

ONE of the mastiffs inside the house whined and the other took up the howl. The mournful sound rose and fell and rose again. Then I heard Jess's screamed order to shut up. The sound of rustling that I had noticed behind me seemed to grow into a sound I could only describe as a low moistureful hiss. I felt clammy fingers of dampness move over me much as though someone had drawn a wet sheet across my back and head.

Instinctively, I unsheathed the knife at my hip. The heavy atmosphere pressed and weighed down on me until breathing was no longer unconscious and automatic but a labored effort. The pressure on me increased until it was almost as though some soft gelatinous presence rested on my body. In unreasoning animal fear I struck with my knife at the air around me. The absurdity of what I was doing took hold of me for a moment and helped me regain control, but a new horror fingered its way into my brain. I could swear that as I completed my instinctive, frenzied blows, there was a resistance to the knife and hand; not, mind you, as though one had struck a solid body, a tree trunk, but as if one had driven knife into something softer, much softer—like jelly!

I wiped the back of my right hand and felt the oily slime that coated it, but the sudden imperative barking of the dogs pulled my attention back to Hill House. I looked at the rambling mansion and it seemed much further away. The visual sensation was as though I were looking through the wrong end of an unclean telescope. The lights seemed dimmer. Was the electric power beginning to fail? I realized that this impres-

sion came about because of the thick oily layers of fog that were settling down, one after another around the house.

As I watched, my own fright at the feelings of chill alien dampness transferred into a sort of objective fascination at what I saw unfolding in front of my eyes. The house was being literally smothered. First its lights and then the very dark bulk of its whole frame became more and more indistinct. The barking alarm of the dogs grew into a crescendo, and then more awful than anything, the fog over me and around the house seemed to lisp and hiss. It almost sounded as though it were pronouncing in some inanimate and inarticulate way the name of Hobell, but of course my reason dismissed that as a trick of a overwrought imagination.

Then Jess, inside the house, began to scream. There is nothing more terrible in the world than the sound of a strong man screaming in unholy mortal terror. The cries went on and on and the house and its lights became merely a dimness and the dimness finally a darkness and then the cries sounded only in my head, in throbbing time to my heartbeats. For there was silence. Complete.

I somehow got to my feet and started down the hill although each step was like pushing through clammers' mud. I staggered and stumbled several times and nearly fell but fear gave me both strength and balance for I knew with a dreadful conviction that if I ever fell here and now, I would never rise again.

I gained the road somehow still running, my breath coming in short agonized wheezes. All the way along the highway I never dared once break my gait. I never dared turn my head for fear something would be there following me, something monstrous and deadly for all its soft oozing and lack of solidity. I ran and stumbled and staggered until I fell against the door to my room in town. Not once had I seen anybody on the road to or in town.

The fog was dispersing slowly but the villagers preferred to stay indoors. I fell on my bed and for a long time lay there, the springs creaking with my breathing. When my heart quieted down, I began to shake, first my legs then my arms, then my entire body, with a chill that seemed to

emanate from within, though my room and the night now were warming.

I HAD few doubts about what had happened up on the hill, what had happened to Jess in the house. I knew the stories of the other times when the fog had come, but I realized I had never fully accepted the terrible significance of something that defied explanation and yet demanded one because it was so very real.

It wasn't until the small hours of the morning that I dropped off into fitful sleep. The next morning after breakfast I headed as usual for the clerk's office in the Town Hall. The marshal greeted me.

"Morning, Smith," he said.

"Morning" I answered.

"Some fog last night, eh?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Wonder if . . . wonder if anything happened? Anything bad?"

I shrugged and turned to my desk. The marshal was troubled and wanted to go on speaking.

"Some of the folks that live nearest to Hobell's swear there was some terrible yelling and screaming from up that way." He paused ominously. "And then all the lights went out. Mighty funny, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

I turned away so that the marshal wouldn't notice the tremor in my hands. With the sunlight baking Elbow Creek's main street and streaming in the window of the Town Hall, the memory of my experiences last night were more bearable, and yet when I thought hard enough about them, the fear came back into my joints and soul.

"He was an old devil anyway," muttered the marshal. "That Jess Hobell!"

I nodded in agreement.

"If anything happened to him, it would be all right. All those Hobells. They're bad. That place has got a curse on it. Nobody was meant to live up there."

As I listened to him talk, I thought of the old man who had warned Jess long, long ago. That there was something evil that had a prior claim to the place. Something evil that came in from the Sound and followed Elbow Creek up the hill, up, up, settling down mushroom fashion over the land around and taking, killing what it wanted;

carrying off in damp sticky pores of fog.

The marshal went on thinking out aloud as I sat at my desk. If anything had happened to Jess, the property would become the state's. The big old house and all the land. No one knew where Tom was or if he ever existed any more. And nobody hereabouts would take the place over even if they could buy it, and its value was far beyond any local person's reach.

After a while the marshal went out and I sat at my desk thinking. After all, there must be some reasonable explanation. The old wives' tales of the neighborhood about calves disappearing and children playing in the woods caught unaware by the fog and carried off, those were open to question. The two Hobell men and two women who'd disappeared some time ago were, I suddenly became convinced, frightened away just as Jess, if he'd gone from the hill, had been frightened away last night. Jess and all of them may have sneered at those tales of the fog, but underneath it all, cruel, brutal, superstitious men are the most susceptible to a suggestion of that sort.

THE fogs that rolled in periodically from the Sound blanketing Elbow Creek were unusually heavy. A stupid man's imagination and primitive fearfulness would do the rest. Those stories about the house shriveling, aging, were the human desire to attach human conditions to inanimate objects. A tree shriveling in fear from lightning, a house shrinking and aging overnight in a heavy fog. It was absurd.

Several days later, what I had suspected came true. It was evident that Jess was no longer at the Hill House. He and his dogs had cleared out, apparently that night. Of course the villagers called it "disappearing." "Taken" by the fog.

A week later Hill House had a new tenant. I was there with my belongings, and it seemed strange at first, very strange, but I grew accustomed to it soon. There'd been some trouble and a great deal of explaining at the Town Hall, and as I stood in the large downstairs room of the mansion and looked in the full-length mirror at my scarred misshapen face, I realized that my impatience at the marshal and his surprise was not justified. He'd looked at me when

I told him and his face had gotten white and then pink.

"But you *can't* be Tom Hobell! Why, you don't look like him, man! Your face. It's, it's—."

I reminded him of the fight I'd had with Jess years ago, of the beating I'd taken, and then I'd shown him these papers I'd had, my birth certificate issued by that very state, a certificate from the county school. He'd wagged his head in wonder, and then the same reticence had come over him that characterized all of the villagers in their dealings with the Hobells. I roared at him until he brought the town commissioner, and the three of us signed papers legally binding the house to me as last of the Hobells.

I didn't care then what had happened to Jess and the others. I had property now and the house itself made me a man of potential wealth. I'd waited for years for this to get rid of Jess somehow, and the legend had done it for me. That night I had gone to kill him. In the fog I thought I could get him and dispose of the body and the villagers would think, the fools would think he'd gone the way Hobells do, the way all people who dare to live on the hill do.

I could laugh now at the memory of the way the fog had scared even me. For I had believed, a corner of my mind had, in the foolishness that had been talked about for so long here.

I carefully went through the house from top to bottom. Plenty of clothes, foodstuffs, liquor enough to last one man a year or more. I even found the strongbox back of the trunks in the cellar where we'd always kept it, but Jess had never let anybody go near it.

I thought of the time I'd spent in the miserable little job of town clerk and I looked at the money in the box greedily. This was one Hobell who was going to enjoy himself. I thought of my wife long dead, for a moment, but I could do much better now. I could bring the best woman in the countryside to this place, and I would.

One thing bothered that corner of my mind that I'd noticed was still susceptible to the fog legend. The stout old beams and uprights of the house *were* twisted strangely and the outside clapboards were warped and swollen in spots. This was what lent au-

thenticity to the villagers' tales of the house that aged in the fog. But I was sure it was some freak result of weather conditions. Perhaps the fog did play a part and then the blistering sun beating down on the hill's crest. But there was nothing wrong. Nothing wrong, I told myself.

I know little of construction, and the thick pastelike substance that I found under the shingles like glue and here and there in the cracks on the floor I dismissed as some kind of tar or wax. I think I looked forward to the next fog with an almost eager anticipation, because the very next day I'd enjoy strutting into town and the villagers who fondly had expected my "disappearance" would be so disappointed.

Several summer weeks passed and the weather remained clear. A couple of times I went to the village, and the townspeople avoided me assiduously. It made me angry to think I'd been accepted as "Smith" but now they knew me to be a Hobell they hated me and wanted none of me. Well, we'd see to that! I was potentially the most powerful man in the whole neighborhood. I didn't plan to remain a recluse the way Jess had. The carousing and occasional beatings-up of villagers perpetrated by my brothers didn't appeal to me. A more methodical system was indicated. I'd put them out of business. I'd squeeze their small narrow existence even more. And I'd foil their uneducated superstitious awe of the fog by walking in town where all could see me the day after!

**IT WAS** a couple of months later that the fall began to sweep across the country turning the Sound from blue to gray. I knew on the way home from the village that evening with supplies that there would be a big fog this night. I knew it from the way the villagers had looked at me slyly, almost eagerly; I knew it from the first breaths of clammy mist I felt on my face as I climbed the hill to Hobell House.

I ate an elaborate and lengthy supper and paid no attention to the weather as the hour grew late. There was a chill in the air and I'd fired some wood in the huge fireplace. I was sitting idly in a chair before the flames with a drink at my side when the flames hissed and dipped. I frowned. The embers



sizzled again and steam rose. Water was coming down the chimney flue. I thought of the fog then but resisted going to the window. The big room seemed somehow dimmer and I lit another light. Despite my efforts, the fire slowly died away. I must remind myself to fix the flue. It probably wasn't drawing right.

I thought of going upstairs to my bedroom but it was still warmer down here. I heard the rustling outside then, just as I had heard it months ago the night I'd lain on the hill and watched. An ember fell on the hearth and I jumped. The room was silent now except for the sound of my own breathing. Outside, the wind rustled the trees. Of course it was the wind. There was the sound of something plumping against one of the windows. Rain? It had not been raining earlier that evening.

I downed what was left in my glass in one gulp, stood up. A board above me creaked like the crossbeam in an old wooden ship. I imagined I felt a faint motion of the floor. The rustling outside grew, but I stayed away from the windows. I blinked my eyes. The electricity—it was failing! Was this some trick of the villagers to scare *me*? The lights were yellow, yellow with halos of mist around them. The mist was in here. Of course. It comes down the chimney, I thought. Nobody ever said there wouldn't be fog. I passed my hand before my eyes

and noticed in the failing light that the palm shone with dampness. There was a hiss as the last ember in the grate went out . . . and a hiss that was not from the fire but a part of the rustling outside. *Or was it in here as well?*

The lights were candle-flame size now, smaller, smaller, and then blackness. I had a torch on the table. I found it in the dark. The damn thing wouldn't work! In my pocket were some matches. I fumbled with the cover, struck one. It gave a tiny sighing gasp and died.

I opened my mouth to scream and felt a wet semi-substance fill the aperture. I kept thinking, I must think. . . . Tomorrow I will walk in the village street. Something was against my face, against all of me like jelly—tomorrow — I — will — walk — in — the village — street. The gelatin mass had filled the room now and was bursting upward. It was me and I . . . I became It, rising up with the incredibly high note of something twanging in my head. The last shred of life's consciousness, the last thought: Tomorrow — I — will — walk — in — the — village — street. . . .

And then to be drawn upward and around in a swirling vortex of incredible sound that is soundless and sucked out of life to billow and rustle and whisper with the Fog, to return again only as part of the grayness and dampness and secret night. . . .

