

Ghost STORIES

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Contents

- My Phantom Pal** NICK SANFORD, *Movie Stunt-Flyer* 6
This Daredevil Aviator Faced Death—and a Ghost—6,000 Feet in the Air!
- The Woman at Seven Brothers** WILBUR DANIEL STEELE 12
Out of the Stormy Sea Her Phantom Came—to Claim the Lad She Loved
- Kidnapped by a Wraith** GILBERT DRAPER 16
Some Unseen Monster Lurked in the Old French-Canadian Inn—but How Could IT Abduct a Living Woman?
- The Specter in the New Hotel** A True Story by STUART PALMER 20
What Uncanny Thing Haunted the Sixteenth Floor of This Broadway Skyscraper?
- Vengeance of the Dead** HUGH WALLACE 24
Was Dan Murdered by a Crooked Political Ring? It Took a Ghost to Reveal the Truth
- My Strange Adventure with a Vampire** W. ADOLPHE ROBERTS 30
The Girl from Prague Cast an Unholy Spell Over Men. Here is the Weird Story of One of Her Victims
- The Inexperienced Ghost** H. G. WELLS, *Famous English Author* 36
Clayton "Caught" a Ghost—"a Poor, Weak Thing," He Said. Read of the Horror that Followed!
- A Cloud of Witnesses** FRANCIS GILBERT 42
Annie Crehan Was a Murderess—but the Other World Befriended Her. Why?
- Haunted Hollywood** WILBERT WADLEIGH 48
The "Scorpion" Strikes Again! Its Tentacles Reach Out to Seize a Beautiful Actress and a Great Director
- David Keeps His Word** THELMA JOHNSON 58
This Wise Little Girl "Faked" a Miracle—Only to Discover the Awful Power of the Unseen!
- Spirit Tales** COUNT CAGLIOSTRO 65
Can Mortal Eyes Look into the Future? Read the Facts
- The Mystery of the Dancing Coffins** ROBERT W. SNEDDON 66
What Mysterious Force Could Animate a Row of Coffins—in a Sealed Vault?
- Bewitched Love Letters** GUY DE MAUPASSANT 70
A French Marquis Performs a Ghastly Service for a Phantom Woman
- The Meeting Place** ROBERT NAPIER 73
How Science Tested Margery, the Famous Medium—and Other True Stories by Our Readers
- The Man with the Sabre Cut** ALAN SCHULTZ 76
A Boy Battles Against Occult Forces—to Save a Night-Club Dancer!
- Were You Born in August?** STELLA KING 83
What the Stars Foretell for Every Day This Month

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KIDNAPPED

Even if the old inn at St. Hypolite was haunted, how could an invisible creature steal a living woman?

By

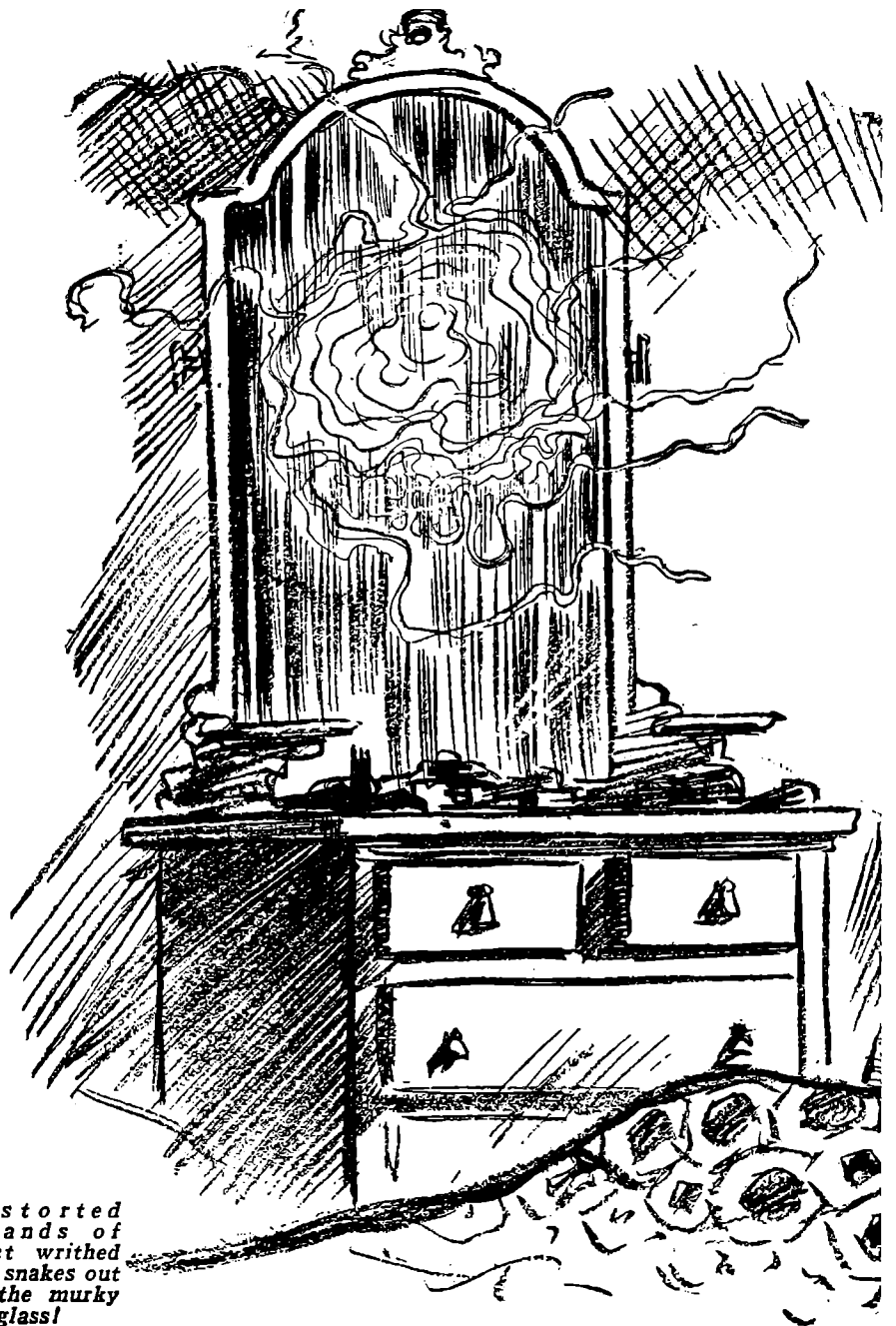
GILBERT DRAPER

IN the late summer of 1928 I travelled to an obscure French-Canadian village in the heart of the Laurentian Mountains, to spend my vacation at an ideally restful place I had discovered the year before. The village to which I went was called St. Hypolite. It was far from the beaten track of vacationists, so to speak, and most of the time I was the only guest at the one house where strangers were accommodated.

This hostelry, kept by a stolid Frenchwoman named Beauchamps, was one of the oldest, if not the oldest, residence in the place. It was shaped exactly like a large box, square and unadorned, save for a solitary stone chimney. The walls were white-washed inside and out, and were of amazing thickness due, I learned, to the hostility of the Indians at the time the house was constructed. Madame Beauchamps kept it scrupulously clean, but it could never be described as "cheerful." There was something positively sinister about its plain ugliness. Indeed, the year before, I had left it feeling strangely depressed, as though its atmosphere had been haunted.

During the winter, however, the remembrance of Madame's cooking and the peaceful time I had enjoyed made me decide to visit the old place again.

On the night of which I write, I reached the house just as the shadows of evening were enveloping the picturesque summits of the Laurentians. The wooded slopes of these great rounded hills rose on all sides, shutting St. Hypolite, as it were, away from the rest of the world. I was too fatigued after my long and bumpy drive from the station



Distorted strands of mist writhed like snakes out of the murky glass!

to converse with Madame, and ascended immediately to my room on the top floor. I did not even think to inquire whether I was, as usual, the inn's only guest.

Several hours later my deep sleep was rudely disturbed by a woman's scream. I sat up in bed quivering with excitement, mingled, I confess, with fear. As I waited breathlessly for a repetition of the cry, a clock in the depths of the house struck two.

THEN I heard a click, and the next instant saw the door of my room opening inward! I held my breath. The door, pushed by an unseen hand, moved with maddening slowness. A faint ray of light from the oil lamp in the hall fell across the bare floor. I stared at this spot, expecting the shadow of my nocturnal visitor to afford me some clue to his identity. Judge, then, my amazement, when the door, after opening wide enough to admit an ordinary human being and to let me see into the deserted hall, began

by a WRAITH



"Cover the mirror — if you value your sanity!" a mysterious voice whispered in my ear

leave the room when the sound of someone running up the stairs made me halt. The footsteps did not slacken until they reached my door, which was flung open unceremoniously.

A girl, clothed only in a diaphanous nightgown, stood on the threshold, her large, wide-open eyes and tumultuous breathing expressing the terror that was doubtless responsible for her sudden appearance.

We stared at each other until suddenly, without so much as a gasp, she collapsed and lay still. Her deathlike pallor frightened me and I picked her up as gently as I could and carried her to the bed. Then, after cov-

ering her with a quilt, I darted to the washstand to wet the end of a towel

with which to bathe her forehead. But before I could do so she had opened her eyes.

At first the strangeness of the room seemed to bewilder her. She looked about, unable to place the unfamiliar surroundings, while I stood watching her, the towel in my hand. My position in the shadows prevented her from becoming immediately aware of my presence, and I remained motionless, greatly impressed with her extraordinary beauty.

In a minute or two she had raised herself on one elbow and was pushing the hair back from her eyes in a dazed manner, evidently still oblivious of her flight up the stairs.

Then she saw me, and at the recollection of her terrifying experience, she uttered a despairing moan. I dropped the towel and stepped forward, but she stopped me with a gesture.

"The door, the door!" she gasped. "Lock it!"

I hastened to comply with her terrified request, and then

to close, though neither shadow nor form had appeared!

My first inclination was to shout, but terror prevented me from opening my lips. I waited with a sickening premonition of impending tragedy. Not a sound was to be heard.

I think that had I known there were people within earshot, my horror would have been less acute; but as it was, the uncanniness of the occurrence overwhelmed me with unreasoning terror.

How can I describe the thrill I felt when I heard another click? Once more I witnessed the strange phenomenon, but when the door had closed this time I knew beyond all doubt that my unseen visitor had departed.

It was not long before I had sufficiently recovered from the shock to light the candle on the table by my bed. The tiny flame sent weird shadows dancing over the walls and ceiling, but it served as a stimulant to my shaken nerves. Throwing back the covers, I slipped off the huge feather mattress and got into my dressing gown. I was about to

seated myself beside her on the bed. The extreme impropriety of the situation did not occur to me in my addled state, and forcing myself to speak calmly, I asked her to tell me what had happened.

"I know I shouldn't be here like this," she began, but I had no other place to go. You passed my door on your way upstairs tonight, so I knew your room must be on this floor. We are the only boarders, and Madame, as you know, sleeps downstairs."

"But what happened?" I inquired again.

She shuddered and gripped my arm.

"As usual I read in bed until nearly twelve," she continued. "The book was stupid, but I did not put it down because the noise of the crickets and frogs was so loud that nobody could possibly sleep. The very atmosphere seemed to be throbbing.

"Soon I was startled by a persistent bat that kept beating against the mosquito netting across my window. At first I didn't pay much attention to it, but when for the ninth or tenth time I heard its claws tearing at the cloth, I became horribly afraid it would get in. Knowing it was attracted by the light, I blew my candle out. Then I buried my head in the pillow and tried to go to sleep.

"Just as I was dozing off I heard Madame fixing the chain on the front door. I must have fallen asleep soon after that, for I don't remember anything else until I woke up with a start—for no apparent reason. The room was pitch black and I was sure there had been no sound. Certainly it was deathly still at the moment, and through the open window I could see myriads of stars.

"I SAT up, wondering what had aroused me. Hearing and seeing nothing, I was going to lie down again when the uncanny feeling of being watched petrified me. Almost simultaneously I knew that something was lurking near the bed. I was too frightened to scream. The blood seemed to have frozen in my veins. Can you believe me when I say that despite this awful sensation I had not heard the *slightest* sound, nor seen so much as a *shadow* move?"

She paused, while I, deeply interested, waited eagerly for the conclusion of her weird story. Her hand still clutched my arm, unconsciously, it seemed.

"When I felt I simply couldn't stand any more," she went on, speaking slowly and deliberately, "something moved just beyond the foot of the bed. It made the strangest sound I ever heard. I was sure it had not been caused by anything mortal. It was like some heavy mass of soft material rolling over—a peculiar hissing. . . .

"I sat frozen with horror until the door leading into the hall opened and closed. Heavens, how thankful I was! The 'Thing' had gone! For perhaps a full minute I didn't stir. Then I screamed—I couldn't help it. But afterward I was too terrified to stay in that room any longer. I remembered you were upstairs, and although the fear of being molested in the corridor nearly robbed me of the power to move, I knew I would go insane if I remained alone another minute. How I got to the foot of the stairs, I don't know; but when I did I flung caution aside and rushed up here."

Having told me of her almost unbelievable adventure, the girl sank back on the pillow with closed eyes. I hesitated to tell her of my own experience with the invisible terror because I feared to shatter the sense of security that was helping her to regain her composure. Were she to learn that the Thing responsible for her torment had been in this very room before she entered it, her mind might give way completely. I determined, therefore, to say nothing about the matter.

She was breathing regularly now. One bare arm was extended toward me above the quilt, the white skin gleaming in the light of the flickering candle; the other she had drawn beneath the coverlet.

I got up quietly to get my pipe. After filling and lighting it, I drew forward a chair, intending to remain on guard the rest of the night. I must have disturbed her, for she opened her eyes.

"You're not going?" she whispered timidly.

I promised to remain where I was. "You'd better try to sleep," I told her. "I don't think we will have more trouble, but I'll wake you if anything happens."

She smiled gratefully and closed her eyes.

Then began a vigil of nearly an hour's duration. From where I sat I could see through the window. Eastward the stars were pale, but northward one large silver orb shone low down on the horizon. The owls were haunting the woods with their banshee notes. The world was bathed in a silvery radiance. How, I wondered, could anything unholy be abroad at such a time?

I became drowsy in spite of myself. Everything seemed so peaceful and still. It became increasingly difficult to keep awake. All my former terror had vanished. Indeed, I began to wonder if my imagination had not played a trick on me. My companion's weird tale I felt inclined to dismiss as the result of hysteria. After all, neither of us had actually seen anything, and for myself I was ready to admit the impossibility of my own imagined encounter with the supernatural. Why, then, I reasoned, should I force myself to remain awake when my over-taxed nerves were demanding rest? The girl was slumbering as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Then, more to satisfy my curiosity and keep awake than because I hoped to discover a solution of the mystery, I decided to make a minute search of the room.

In one corner was a small closet, formed in a sort of pepperbox turret. On my previous visit I had noticed that inside, the floor boards looked loose and uneven. But now I took the candle and soon discovered that they were not nailed. Getting down on my hands and knees, I found that some of them lifted up quite easily, and was amazed to uncover a black, sinister hole. At first a host of ghostly explanations for it assailed me but on second thought I decided it was probably only an unused chimney. A musty, dank odor reached my nostrils as I replaced the boards, and I told myself that in the morning I would question Madame concerning this black shaft.

THERE being nothing else to investigate, I returned to my chair by the bed and was soon dozing comfortably.

I could not have slumbered very long, for when I awoke the stars were just beginning to pale. The candle, though reduced to a stub, was still burning.

Gradually I began to gather impressions—very unpleasant ones. I became certain that I was being watched intently. Some person or Thing present in the room, though unseen by me, was watching my every movement. I sensed that the ghost, if ghost it was, violently resented my occupation, was intensely hostile, and meant to make things unpleasant for me at the earliest opportunity.

I got up and compelled myself to look in all directions. The candle gave just sufficient light to distinguish objects: the corners of the room were obscure. Wherever I moved I felt that malignant eyes followed me. I kept glancing over my shoulder at every creak of the furniture and floor. It was in the intervals of dead silence that the presence became most imminent, most menacing.

Oh, where was that stealthy watcher whose baleful eyes were fixed upon me? I could see nothing suspicious. I could only feel acutely that we were not alone.

Suddenly my eyes encountered the mirror over the dresser, and as I gazed at this harmless object I became convinced that if I looked full into its surface I would see something horrible.

Then my attention was caught by a soft stealthy noise. Padded footsteps. Something had come near, and was creeping warily round in front of me. I was conscious of

close scrutiny. My scalp tingled as if the hair had risen on end.

Knowing the invisible specter was preparing to strike, I hastened toward the bed, my foremost thought being to guard my sleeping charge. As I have said, the room was in semi-darkness, and in my anxiety I failed to see the rockers of an easy chair which was in my path. I managed to save myself from falling, but could not help making considerable noise.

Fearing that my clumsiness had precipitated a disaster, I stood shaking with apprehension, my forehead damp with the cold sweat of terror. My companion, rudely awakened, was staring at me from the bed. My attempt to reassure her was futile, for she seized my arm and begged me to tell her the truth. Even then, I could not, so I sat down beside her and took her hand.

"Why, your hand is like ice!" she ejaculated, taking it in both of hers.

It was obvious she had not discovered we were not alone. I hated to tell her, but realizing that it would be better to warn her, I did so, clumsily.

"DON'T move, and try not to scream," I muttered hoarsely. "Something, God knows what, is going to happen. The Thing is back again. It is in this room with us now and may strike at any minute. We must face it together. Hold yourself against me. If I can protect you I will."

My teeth were chattering so I could hardly speak. My voice was pitifully unsteady. Lord, how I despised myself! I felt that if something didn't happen, my reason would snap and leave me an easy prey for whatever monster was lurking in the shadows.

The air had become unnaturally cold.

We sat on the bed, huddled together like children, expecting to witness the materialization of some hideous form.

Again my gaze was drawn to the mirror above the dresser. At first I saw nothing, but as I watched with fast-beating heart, the surface became clouded—and then, suddenly, distorted strands of mist writhed like snakes out of the murky glass!

"Cover the mirror—if you value your sanity!" A mysterious voice whispered in my ear. "The Thing can only become visible in the glass. Cover it and keep your back to the wall.

A half-stifled cry broke from my lips. The girl raised her head in alarm. She took one look in the direction of my fixed stare, and at sight of the ghastly, writhing spectacle, she uttered an unearthly scream and hid her face against my shoulder.

The voice persisted: "Go on, cover it, cover it! Why do you remain idle at a time like this? Unless you act quickly, you will see an indescribable horror."

"I must throw something over that glass," I gasped, attempting to get up.

But the girl's arms clung to me.

"No, no!" she cried hysterically. "You mustn't leave me! You promised you wouldn't!"

She began to tremble and to sob uncontrollably. I was too agitated myself to whisper a word of consolation, for I had become dominated by a determination to heed the inner voice. Roughly disentangling myself from her embrace, I got off the bed, swaying unsteadily. My eye caught sight of the towel I had dropped on the floor, and I stumbled toward it crazily. It was like forcing one's way through a mist of icy vapor, so cold and clouded was the atmosphere. Seizing the towel, I took a step in the direction of the looking glass—but I never reached it, for at that instant the room was plunged into darkness.

The candle had been extinguished by an invisible hand!

I did not have time to recover from this shock before a despairing shriek froze the blood in my veins. The girl—what ghastly fate had overtaken her the moment I left her side?

An intense rage at the merciless power arraigned against us took possession of me. I wanted to lay hands on this unspeakable assassin, to tear it limb from limb.

I groped my way forward with outstretched arms, feeling for the matches on the table. With unsteady hands I struck one and held it aloft, my eyes riveted in dread upon the spot where the girl had been. But she was gone! The tiny flame flickered for a moment over the empty bed and was snuffed out by a cold draft. I was once again the sole occupant of this hideous, haunted chamber.

It must have been a full minute before I moved, so overcome was I at this latest horror. I sank down upon the mattress, unable even to think coherently.

I lighted the stub of my candle and tried to get a grip on myself. Was it possible that the girl who had been safe on this very spot less than a moment before had been snatched away by some disembodied Thing while I stood almost within reach? Where had she

been taken? How had her body been transported from the room, when the only exit, the door, was securely bolted? I could have

sworn it had not opened in that brief interval of darkness. I rose to investigate, expecting to find it unlocked, if not ajar. But no! The door was still bolted on the inside!

I rushed to the window. Below it was a drop of easily thirty feet, with not the slightest foothold in view.

I returned to the bed in a dilemma. If her abductor had not taken her through the door or window, how—

Then I thought of the shaft beneath the closet floor and my heart contracted with horror. Had the unholy fiend flung her to her death down that fearful chute?

It was only by exerting all my will power that I opened the closet door. One glance was sufficient to confirm my worst fears: the floor boards had been flung aside. A sickening feeling of despair made me giddy. If she had been thrown down that reeking chasm, what chance was there of rescuing her alive?

The thought that Madame Beauchamps might know the secret goaded me into action. Clinging desperately to this slim hope, I ran from the room, descended the stairs like a madman, tore along the lower hall to the kitchen, and finally arrived panting at Madame's closed door, pounding on the panels and calling upon her to come out. In a few seconds she was shaking me back to sanity with a strength that would have done credit to a blacksmith.

It took me less than a minute to relate, rather incoherently, the startling fact that her other guest had just been carried or dropped through the floor of my closet. The stout Frenchwoman's stolid features underwent an eloquent change while I was speaking. Without a doubt she knew something about the matter.

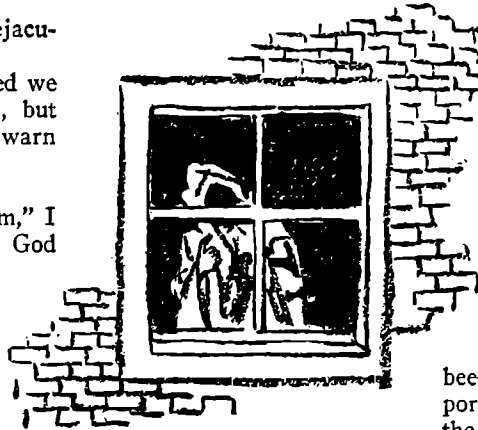
"*Mon Dieu!*" she ejaculated when I paused for breath. "I was sure dey would no return. I have hear no ting for long, long time. When I put you in dat room I no tink of ze hole. I haf clean all tings on dat floor. I do not see dem. And now dey haf come back to make for me more meescheef!"

"What do you mean by 'dey'?" I cried.

She shrugged her broad shoulders.

"Last winter I hear much

(Continued on page 90)



Kidnapped by a Wraith

(Continued from page 19)

strange sound, something like mans running up an' down in bare feet. Dey make beeg noise! But when I come I find nobodee dere."

"Where does that hole lead to?" I demanded. "Is there an underground room? Can it be reached from the cellar?"

"*Mais oui*," she replied. "We will look down dere now."

She got a lamp and led the way down a flight of worn steps into the cellar. On all sides I beheld a strange collection of oddities, while, fastened to the great beams above us, so that we had to duck our heads, were countless souvenirs of early battle fields—old-fashioned muskets, tomahawks, bows and arrows and a few powder horns.

Rats scurried frantically about us; the cellar seemed to be swarming with the vermin.

PRESENTLY we stopped before a heavy, impregnable looking door, set deeply in the wall. The hinges were rotten with rust and it was covered with cobwebs. Evidently it had not been opened for many years. A large iron ring served as a handle.

My guide put down the lamp on the floor and related, in her broken English, how many years ago, a number of murderous Indians, who had been convicted of pillage and rape, had been left to starve to death in this very dungeon.

I shuddered. I dared not contemplate the fate of the lovely innocent girl who had been carried down into the ghastly prison before us. Would we find her body mutilated beyond recognition? My heart nearly failed me at the thought. But although I dreaded the prospect of delving into the repulsive mysteries at the bottom of that black shaft, I could not bring myself to consent to a delay of even a few hours. Even if the girl were dead, we must rescue her body.

Resolutely I attacked the door with fierce energy, but it was not until the stalwart Madame Beauchamps had contributed her strength that we succeeded in getting it to budge. The protesting hinges squeaked loudly, as after a short struggle we forced it wide enough to pass through.

I was somewhat taken aback to behold, not the dungeon itself, but a flight of stone steps descending into impenetrable gloom. The subterranean chamber of death must be situated at the bottom.

Stark terror assailed me, but there was no going back now. I took the lamp and began a careful descent, followed by the strange woman who appeared to regard our nerve-racking expedition as inevitable. I marveled at her calmness. How could she, a woman, accompany me unhesitatingly into such a place? Could it be possible she did not realize that we were approaching the grave of barbarous warriors whose outraged spirits were waiting to wreak upon us unmentionable atrocities?

We must have gone down about twenty steps before our progress was

blocked by another door secured by two bolts, one at the top and the other at the bottom. I was able to pull both back without much trouble.

At last I was about to enter the abode of the dead!

To say that I was not afraid would be to lie. I was so frightened I could hardly stand. The terror that had gripped me in my room when I had first become aware of the ghostly visitant, returned twofold now that I was about to enter the actual death hole of his brethren, who might, for all I knew, prove even more ferocious and hostile than he.

Summoning my waning strength, I placed my shoulder against the door and pushed. It swung open with a groan.

The sight that met my eyes caused me to stand aghast: the floor of the dungeon was literally covered with human bones and skulls!

Had not Madame taken the lamp from my trembling hands, I surely would have dropped it, so overcome was I at the nauseating spectacle.

"*Mon Dieu!*" I heard her mutter, "eet ees her."

She clutched my hand and pointed to a heap of rotten straw against the opposite wall a little to the right of where we stood.

One look was enough to show me that the motionless white form lying there was indeed the body of the girl I sought. The light from the smoking lamp did not reveal her clearly, but I could see that her eyes were closed. Whether she was alive or dead I did not know.

My uncertain advance toward her was suddenly, without the slightest warning, blocked by an inexorable presence I knew was before me but which I could not see. That it was antagonistic I did not doubt, and a feeling of dismay sent cold shivers up my spine. A sense of overwhelming impotence assailed me. I could not pass this silent, sinister foe!

BY exerting some power, or rather influence, the Thing that stood in my path made it impossible for me to reach the unconscious girl.

It was Madame Beauchamps who saved the situation. She, too, must have sensed the unseen adversary.

"*Pour quoi*," she whispered, "you no see if *le bon Dieu* weel help? Maybe He can make dis ting go way."

The simple directness of the suggestion made me realize that I had not even thought of asking the Almighty for aid against this evil spirit. I was not a religious man, in the common acceptance of the word, but, strange as it may seem, my faith in the willingness and power of God to help me in this crisis amounted to conviction that deliverance was at hand through His intervention.

I stood leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, panting with emotion. Suddenly I recalled having seen a small cross about the woman's neck.

"Give me your crucifix, Madame," I said. "Perhaps this Thing will respect it."

"Ah, *oui*," she answered, "but eet ees not here. I leave eet upstairs."

"But we must have a cross!" I cried in desperation, now convinced that without one we were lost.

SHE did not reply. Instead, she placed the lamp on a step behind her. I watched her wonderingly. Without a word she turned completely round so that her back was toward me. Then, before I realized her intent, she had kneeled down on the stone floor and raised her arms level with her shoulders. Her shadow, cast upon the ghastly white bones by the light she was facing, made an almost perfect cross!

The sight of this symbol inspired me to again face the terror with renewed confidence.

Raising my hand above my head, I spoke aloud in a steady voice: "In the name of all that is holy, I bid you be-gone!"

There was absolute silence. Inwardly certain, however, that all would be well, I advanced slowly toward the pile of straw on which the girl lay, my hand still raised. As I moved forward I could feel that the presence was retreating before me. I almost imagined I could hear its labored breathing. In less than thirty seconds I had the girl's still form in my arms.

Behind me I knew that one of the diabolical denizens of this accursed dungeon was employing all its unearthly faculties in a final, terrific effort to prevent our escape. I was sublimely unafraid. My faith in the power of the Cross to defeat the evil influence of our weird enemy supplied me with the moral and physical strength to

carry the girl to safety in the face of all opposition.

Once outside the vault I called to Madame to bolt the door, which she did with a violence that seemed to shake the inn's foundations. The heroic woman, to whom I owed everything, then followed me to the kitchen.

For what seemed an eternity we labored over the seemingly lifeless girl. At last, with the aid of Madame's own cordials, she stirred with returning consciousness. But she remembered nothing; her mind was a complete blank. Only the skill of eminent specialists eventually restored the girl's reason and saved her from the awful vengeance of those savage ghouls.

A professor friend of mine, to whom I told my adventure before setting it down on paper, expressed the opinion that I was exceedingly fortunate to have had such intimate relations with "so fascinating a presence," notwithstanding its hostility. His acceptance of the occurrence as plausible and within the realms of possibility was what induced me to write my story.

He and his colleagues, for whose age and wisdom I have the greatest respect, were particularly attracted by the abduction incident, declaring that it proved conclusively that disembodied entities, despite reports to the contrary, do possess physical powers. I last saw them in the midst of a controversy concerning the exact means employed by the spectral abductor to transport the body of the senseless girl from my room to the dungeon underground.

For myself, I sincerely hope I shall never encounter another visitant from the spirit world: I am too human to be interested in the mystery enveloping the dead.