

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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LOCKED IN WITH DEATH

Terror held a great city in its paralyzing grip while girls, whose very youth and beauty condemned them to horrible death, cowered alone behind locked doors—where their danger was greatest!

By Dale Clark

(Author of "My Friend the Corpse," etc.)

HORROR hung like a black pall over Chicago that January of 1936. A horror that centered over Rogers Park, the northerly and fairly affluent district where the outrages centered.

The curtainless squad cars patrolling the pavements! The lines of people in the stores clamoring for locks—the newest, strongest, guaranteed to be pick-proof locks! The grim-faced husbands who

crouched behind those locks night after night clutching their ready, freshly greased, loaded revolvers!

And the uselessness of locks and guns. . . .

Sleepless and infuriated men rode the El in the mornings, each glaring at his neighbor with hot suspicion. The wan, terrified faces of girls who fled on tapping heels through the wintry dusk to barricade themselves in their kitchenette apartments—where they should have been safe, and where actually the danger was greatest!

The stark, screaming, inky headlines on the papers. The descent of swarms of newspaper hustlers upon some silent street in the dead of night, and the fierce brawling of their voices thundering up to the lighted windows:

"Fiend in de block! Hey, uxtry, read-allaboutit! Fiend in dis block!"

The cordons of police closing in—under the personal supervision of Detective Lieutenant Clubb, in charge of the Special Detail—but finding nothing. Absolutely nothing. Except, of course, the latest victim. . . .

THE night club singer, lying nude on the floor of her apartment—horribly bruised and mutilated, her blood besplattering the walls of the room, her throat torn as if by the claws or fangs of some enormously powerful animal. Her doors and windows were locked. . . . The actress, her *sac de nuit* ripped to shreds, and her body shredded by those fangs or claws. Her windows were fastened and the doors locked with new locks. . . . The dancer—she had her door locked and barred, and the windows nailed down!

It was the dancer who lived to gasp out a few words. "Circle of fire. . . . phantom. . . ." What could that mean?

There were others. False alarms, to be sure. In no part of the city could a purse

be snatched, or a woman frightened by a shadow, but the cry of "Fiend!" was raised. Discount also the stories told by hysterical or publicity seeking women who claimed to have beaten off the monster's attack. The real cases followed closely to a grim pattern.

The terror of it! A wild scream ringing out in some apartment building; a sound of furniture smashing, frightful cries and snarls as the brief struggle proceeded; the onrush of neighbors breaking down the door—then, no sign or trace of the fiend! How could that be? The man or animal, or whatever it was, must have been covered with the victim's blood. How did it pass through the police net?

And the circumstances—so similar, so baffling! Always the victims were young and beautiful women, and with the mysterious allure which is called "sex appeal." Generally, the attacker swooped upon them late at night. Yet there were the two brides whose husbands worked in the Loop—they were slain by broad daylight. Generally, too, the fiend found his prey alone—though once two girls, and again a man and his wife, were destroyed.

Always the firmly locked doors and windows! And, invariably, a radio turned on full blast flooded some wild, gay dance tune over the disordered, bloodied room and the horribly mangled, clawed body. . . .

But the doors and windows?

In the name of Heaven, what manner of thing was this that melted into thin air or passed through solid walls?

Fear swelled a frenzied exodus. By every train and bus, beautiful and delectable women fled the accursed city. Husbands sent away their brides, and fathers the daughters that no man could protect against the mysterious and invisible assailant. . . . The world had seen nothing like it since whole medieval populations panicked into flight from the Black Death.

Then, the night of the 29th! And, moving through the swirling, chaotic hell vapors, the figure of Charles Forture—in that building on the very shore of Lake Michigan, with the ice floes grating at its foundations and the freezing spray dimming the windows. . . .

But let *him* tell it.

(Here begins Charles Forture's story.)

BY PROFESSION I am a chemist ; by education a graduate of the University of Minnesota. I played football at school, and since have kept in pretty good condition through boxing and handball. I've been steadily employed, dating from 1930, by the firm of Beckley & Beckley.

Not that I expect anyone to be interested in *me*. The point is that I'm physically and mentally at least normal, a little on the scientific and skeptical side, and not a physical coward. My main fault is that I'm too easy going, good natured, and in a way unimaginative.

For instance, last January I wasn't much impressed by the great fiend scare. Mostly newspaper talk, as it seemed to me. That is, until. . . .

But here, I mustn't get ahead of myself. Not being a professional author, or anything like that, I'll just have to tell the thing the way it happened. Consequently I won't start out by chilling your blood in the first paragraph—the way those writing chaps do. As a matter of fact, my blood wasn't the least bit chilled about Enid Walsh.

I met her in rather an odd way that January evening—or rather she met me, for it was she who came and tapped on my door. I yelled, "Come in!" thinking one of the fellows had dropped by. And she came in.

She wore a trim little scarlet, swaggerish suit that hugged tight to her absolutely gorgeous body ; her eyes and lips were

vivid, without being awfully made up ; and she had a fluff of dark curly hair combed over to one side—but it isn't any good trying to describe Enid. Just imagine your particular brand of dream girl walking in at *your* door and you'll sense what I felt. This isn't mush. Any fellow that's never had a dream girl notion in his head—well, I know what kind of flower he is.

I felt all this before she opened her lips ; and when I heard her voice, that clinched it.

"I'm afraid you don't know me, Mr. Forture," she said. "I'm Miss Walsh. Next door."

I must have looked foolish, just staring at her. Probably I grinned like an idiot. Because, wouldn't it have been hell if she'd said, "Mrs.?"

"I don't quite know how to say this," she went on. "It's embarrassing to ask favors of strangers—"

"Oh, I'm a small town boy," I told her. "Always glad to oblige the folks next door. I'll lend you the sugar bowl, cup of flour, gin, anything. I'm handy at running errands, too."

She laughed.

"It's my radio," she said. "There seems to be a click in it. A loud click. One of my girl friends is staying with me tonight—she doesn't want to be alone, on account of the fiend," and I could tell the scare had got to her, too. "I just wondered, would you mind terribly about lending us your radio. Just for tonight. Mine's a rented set, and I'll have the man fix it tomorrow."

I felt like a Polar bear ; one of the Rogers Park gang that takes a dip in the lake once a week through the winter.

"Gosh," I had to say, "mine's on the blink, too. Been that way for a week. It's one of those special 18-tubers, and I haven't wanted anyone but an expert to go over it—"

"Then I'll have to ask somewhere else,"

she said. "My friend and I have to practice a dance routine for the Artists and Models Benefit." And closed the door.

I heard her heels clicking down the hall. So she was an artists' model. Then I knew where I'd gotten the dream girl idea—her face on magazine covers. Sure! I listened, and fairly soon another fellow brought her his radio. He carried it into her apartment and hooked it up. I heard him say, "Down the hatch!" and knew she'd offered him a drink.

Damn.

AFTER a while I went and tapped at her door. There was a pause, then she called, "Who's there?"

Well, girls weren't opening their doors—not that month. I told her, and she came. She had thrown on a negligée, and underneath I could just make out the dance routine costume. Panties and a brassiere.

"Please," I said, "would you mind asking your radio man to look in at my set?"

"Glad to," she said. And, naturally, didn't invite me in or offer me a drink.

About 5:45 the next evening, a man stopped at my apartment and offered me his card. It said, "HUGO THYLE, radios rented, repaired, satisfaction guaranteed," and so forth. He was an oldish man, and a big one, and with the most extraordinarily powerful hands I'd ever seen.

You won't believe this, but he didn't use a tool of any kind on my set. When it came to taking out a screw—and they were well-set screws—he simply put his black, thick, sharpened fingernail into the slotted head, and turned. I saw him snip a wire clean through between the thumb and forefinger nails.

"It's a pretty good radio," I said. "Don't you think?" Not that I wanted or needed his opinion.

"That?" His eyes, which were light

green and shifty, showered contempt on the set. "That's a mere child's device."

Which got in my hair.

"You don't see many better ones," I said.

"Oh, commercially." He grunted. "But commercial radio's in its infancy."

I thought I knew what he was getting at. "I expect we will have practical television one of these days. They'll be bringing prize-fights and football games right into our homes, I expect."

"Television?" It sounded like a snort. "That's another child's toy. Radio'll go a long ways beyond that."

I don't know why my spine tingled. It must have been his manner—his perfect cocksuredness.

"Well," I said, "what's your guess?"

He chuckled softly, and for the first time looked straight at me. "Well, what would you say to sitting down in front of your radio and—instead of having the prize-fight brought to you—you yourself be taken to the prize-fight?"

I was too stunned to say anything. "In other words," his words hammered at me "what would you say to ectoplasmic transmission?"

"Say that in English," I said.

"The ectoplasm is the material manifestation of the life-spirit principle," he came back.

"You mean, shoot souls out on radio waves!" I got a laugh out of that. "Oh, nuts!"

Thyle gave me a dirty look. The queer thing is, I don't believe he was sore because I laughed at him. He seemed to be sore at himself—as if he'd said too much, and wished now he hadn't said anything. . . .

THE rest I'll write carefully. My object is to put down exactly what happened. When I'm not sure about any part of it, I'll say so. For example, I can't give the

time to the minute, but it was close to midnight. . . .

Then hell broke loose. I heard a yell from Enid Walsh's apartment. Well, it wasn't a yell, either. More of a muffled sob. I should say that it started out to be a yell and was smothered or throttled into hardly any sound at all. I wouldn't have heard it, except for the thinness of the wall between our rooms. . . .

My chest thickened inside when I heard that. The breath made a dragging noise and feeling in my throat. I couldn't be sure that I *had* heard it; and at the same time, I *knew*. . . .

Then, a sound of feet running—or trying to run, churning up and down in the same spot almost, as if dragging some enormously heavy weight.

I came up out of the chair like a shot, and got to the door, and had to fumble with the knob before I stumbled out into the hall. At the same instant, Enid's door jerked open, and I saw her.

She had on a different negligée, a misty and billowy white silk thing with some kind of a fuzzy collar to it. One sleeve had been torn out from the shoulder, and showed the white curvedness of her arm down to the elbow. The negligée was torn across the front, too. Her hands clasped the tattered silk and covered her breasts.

"What happened?" I said. "What—?"

She couldn't possibly answer for a moment or two. Her face was talc-white, drained white. The eyes made two wide circles, and to me they were bottomless pools on which horror floated. Honest to God, her eyes looked *deathly*.

Enid swallowed, or tried to.

"It's in here," she managed to say. "The fiend—"

I went past her into the apartment. No credit to me, understand. At that time, I figured the fiend to be one of those dirty night prowlers. Maybe with some tricky wire device for unfastening windows, as

the police said. . . . I happened to be the lucky one in the million decent chaps in Chicago aching to sink their fists into the brute.

So I went in, with the left and the right cocked for action, and then had to pull up short . . . because there wasn't anybody or anything to hit.

Nothing.

And at the same time, I had a feeling there was *something*. I could hear it breathing . . . a horrible, wet, sucking sound. Or was that the pound and seethe of blood in my own skull? Because I couldn't locate the source of it. . . .

Understand, the windows were down and fastened down from the inside. I made sure of that. Two rooms opened off the apartment's hallway; a kitchenette-dinette, and a living room with in-a-dor, and the bathroom beyond that.

I waded into the closet where Enid's gowns hung, and explored through the misty, perfumed things. I poked behind the in-a-dor, and looked under the sofa; even into the gas range oven. . . . And there wasn't anything. And at the same time there was that feeling of a secret, lurking, damnable presence!

"It's no use," Enid said. She had closed the door and stood leaning against it. "You won't find it . . . it just *isn't*—"

I stared at her. "But you said it was in here!"

"I know." Her voice went dull, resigned. Hopeless. "Only, the thing isn't human. Not even real . . . if you can see what I mean."

I COULDN'T. So I fumbled in my pocket—I had on my smoking jacket, by the way—and found a cigarette. She didn't take one. Still that pale face and too-wide eyes! "You'd better tell me what happened, exactly," I said.

"I'm alone tonight," Enid explained. "The noise of the lake outside bothered

my friend—made her imagine things, she said. She's staying with another friend tonight."

She glanced at the sofa—didn't point, for her hands covered her breasts, as I've said. "I sat there. Listening to the radio. Perhaps I dozed off a little—"

"That's it!" I said. "You had a nightmare. Of course." I even thought to myself that maybe she had torn her own negligée, before she snapped out of the nightmare.

"It wasn't a dream," she shook her head. "It—oh, the horrid, slimy *thing!* It got hold of me and dragged me down—tore at me. . . . And then somehow I twisted away from it, off the sofa onto the floor. I staggered away, I don't know how—"

"What did it look like?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You mean, the light was off?" I said puzzled. "But the radio was on—?"

"That's on the power circuit," she said. "But the bridge lamp was burning. I just didn't see it clearly—something strange and white, or cloudy . . . if there was anything to see! Oh, I don't know!"

It sounded more and more like a nightmare to me. Still—"Shall I call the police?" I asked.

She bit her lip, shaking her head. "The police can't do anything. They never do. Only I'd get my name and picture in the papers and people would stare at me, strangers come up and ask questions—I'd hate that!"

I knew. Maybe they'd even call her one of those cheap publicity seekers. . . .

"Look here, Miss Welch!" I said. "You can have my apartment—there's a bedroom, and I'll sleep in the chair; or I'll bunk in your dinette."

"No-o."

Well, it wouldn't have been exactly proper. Besides, why should she trust me?

So I said, "Anyway, I sleep lightly. If

you have any more trouble, just call."

I lied. I didn't sleep at all. Back in my own apartment, I took off my shoes and lay back in the chair. This chair faced the door; and, furthermore, I opened the door a very little and propped it with a wad of paper. The idea being not to waste any time fumbling with the knob again.

Also I balanced a book on the back of my hand—just in case I should doze off. . . .

Pretty silly, considering that the girl had merely dreamed the thing? Yes, but I remembered that feeling of a *something* being in there. Remembered it? I felt it now, gibing at me: . . .

THEN . . . It was a full hour later.

I could hear Enid walking about. There wasn't going to be any sleep for either of us, apparently. And I heard the radio playing in her living-room. . . . By and by, it seemed to me that there was something queer about that radio music. As if something more than music lived in it. A menace. A queer, pulsing, evil menace!

Crazily, I wanted to pound on her wall and tell her to shut off that radio; that it wasn't right—somehow.

"I'm having a nightmare, too," I decided.

All the same, I got up and went to my own set. A little time passed while the tubes warmed, and then I hurried dialing down through the night-owl stations until I got in on her wave-length.

I listened. "Treasure Island", it was. But hadn't it a different, cleaner, sound as it came from my radio? I felt sure of it.

Then. . . . There wasn't any yell this time. Not even the whisper of a sob. Only the sound of something wet rustling, if wetness can rustle, a dreadful soft squishy sound as you'd imagine the feelers of an octopus slithering over a sea stone would make. . . .

And this sound seemed to be an intensification of what I'd been hearing in her radio!

I went through the door—down the hall like a shot. I knew that this time she wouldn't get to *her* door. I slammed down the corridor, close to the opposite wall, and whirled—smashed my shoulder against her door.

They don't put solid oak doors in these apartment buildings. There was hardly any sense of shock as I crashed through the flimsy panel.

"Enid!" I choked.

She lay in the middle of the living room floor, in a pool of light shed by the bridge lamp. Face down, with her hands out in front of her clutching the rug—as if she'd been trying to drag herself away from something. . . . All that remained of her negligée was the fluff of fur around the neck.

Three bloody channels raked down over her nude, satiny back. From just between the shoulder blades to the swelling roundness of her hips. As if she'd been torn by an enormous, metal claw!

Thank God, she lived! Great breaths lifted her shoulders.

I stared across the room. And there wasn't anything. . . .

Nothing. . . .

Except the radio purling out a louder, different dance melody. . . .

But this couldn't be a nightmare, I knew. Those scratches—wounds, really—couldn't have been self-inflicted! There *had* to be something.

And the dinette—dark! Didn't something move in there? Lord, I couldn't be sure. If I didn't see it, I sensed the *thing*—its secret, lurking, damnable presence!

Switch buttons ranged on a brass plate along the apartment hall's wall. I poked one. . . .

And killed the bridge lamp. Blackness blotted out everything—except the radio

music flooding out around the yellow blink of the illuminated dial.

Then I saw it!

A FOUL and vile *shape* was in that room—and it seemed to *flow out of the radio*.

The thing took form, almost human—and yet not human, either . . . a faint and dusky blot outlined by white, vivid, phosphorescent tentacles or filaments which waved and crawled in the air like innumerable glowing worms!

Hands! It had hands. . . Big, sinister, shining hands with nails which gleamed as fangs in the dark. . . .

There was blood on the hands. I saw that, too. Shining red drops that wept from the extended, groping fingers!

I stood still and gaped at it—instead of smashing out through the broken door. And that standing still was a hell of a lot braver thing than all the charging and fist shaking I'd done that night. . . .

Maybe I'd have run, after all. But suddenly I couldn't. Because the thing rushed me.

Since I'm telling the truth, I can't go into detail about the rest. I don't know what happened, exactly. It was all horror and madness—a blind hot seething maelstrom of rage and fear inside me—and that other cold, slimy maelstrom outside of me. . . .

The *deadness* of it. Like hammering your fists into corpse flesh, flaccid and rotten and gelid. It lived, though. It oozed and slithered all over me, sucked me into its noxious folds.

There was a face in it. Deep in the loathsome jelly substance, the features wavered like a countenance seen through muddy water. Green eyes blazed. A pale slit of mouth laughed, without making any sound. He didn't make a sound, even when my fists rammed deep into the flaccid flesh.

He? Yes—Hugo Thyle.

Or else, some unthinkably horrible replica of him made in some mucid stuff. . . . What had he said? Ectoplasm?

We flopped and threshed on the floor. His hands raked me. They were noxious, poisoned—I got weak and lightheaded. My fists felt like pillows. My arms went limp.

He—or his ectoplasmic self—had me pinned to the rug. His weight flowed over me, concentrated its weight on my chest and numbed biceps.

And the hands at my throat.

I should have died, then. There was no way I could go on living—not strangled, lungs bursting, head a ball of fire. But I didn't die, though it—for it wasn't human, I knew that now—may have thought I had.

I lurched up and went for the *shape* again.

It got away from me. There wasn't anything I could get my hands on because it seemed to be thinning and dissolving there in front of the radio—disappearing into it!

I smashed at it.

Fire fountained. And I heard a scream—or the ghost of a scream—that cried out in a more horrible torment than this earth knows the scream of a thing that dies frightfully the wail of life being pulled fiber from fiber!

Then the apartment lights flashed up. It seemed that half the occupants of the building were crowding into the room. I glared at them stupidly. I, with my hand thrust halfway through the ruined, smoking radio that had exploded when I hit it. . . .

And no sign of the thing anywhere!

SOME one had called the police. They came bursting into the place with a big plainclothesman leading—Detective Lieutenant Clubb, as I afterward learned.

They came damn near dragging me off to jail as the fiend. . . .

But Enid had gotten into the bathroom and put on another wrap; and she opened a window in there, and told them a story about a ragged tramp breaking into the apartment. You see, she couldn't have saved me any other way. Figure it out for yourself. Here were a bunch of cops that had caught a man—bloody faced, with torn clothing—in a room where a girl had been assaulted. They were being ragged to death by the newspapers, those cops. Do you suppose they'd have believed any story about a fiend that vanished into a portable radio?

I didn't say anything about Hugo Thyle. I'd been near enough to jail. I wasn't courting the lunatic asylum.

Clubb quizzed us, hard. What did the man look like? "We can't identify him," we agreed. Finally, he noted the time of the assault—12:51—and left.

I lay awake that night, figuring on ways to cope with Hugo Thyle. I never did settle with him. In the morning paper was a big front page story about the affair in Enid's apartment and back on page 7, this small item:

RADIO EXPERT ELECTROCUTED

Hugo Thyle, 54, proprietor of a radio repair shop at 8540 Cottage Grove, was found electrocuted in his place of business early today. Mr. Thyle had been working over an experimental broadcasting device, of a type so far unidentified, and was killed by a short circuit in the wiring. The time of the accident was indicated by his watch, which stopped at a few seconds after 12:50 A.M. this morning.

Thyle's body was badly injured by flying pieces of metal when the device exploded. The entire upper portion of the trunk was found to be covered with contusions. Physicians said, however, that the electric current caused the death.

Mr. Thyle was formerly employed by the Zonocast Radio Corporation.

The same day, I carefully examined the interior of Enid's radio. Every tube in the instrument was hopelessly wrecked. I have submitted the ruined tubes to experts, who tell me that they have never seen anything of the type before.

Mrs. Forture—yes, Enid—and I have quietly gone around “looking at apartments”—that is, the apartments where the fiend struck. The queer thing is, in the dozen cases we've been able to follow up,

the radios had been rented from Thyle; and he had removed the sets after the tragedy!

It is hard to believe in the transmission of soul plasm over the radio waves. . . .

Now Enid comes and begs me not to write any more about that old horror.

“We will forget it,” she says.

And that is the right and sensible thing to do.

Here ends Charles Forture's story.