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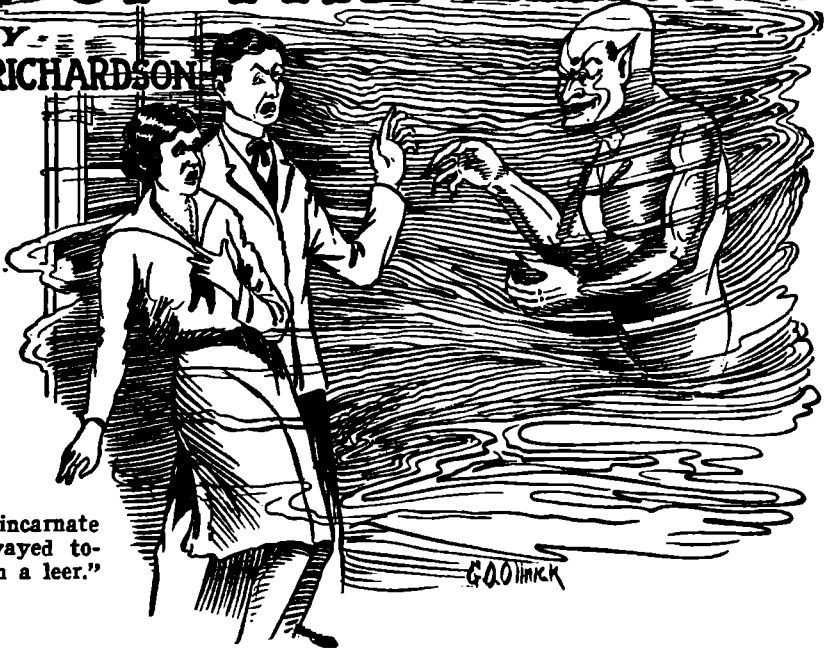
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# OUT OF THE EARTH

BY  
FLAVIA RICHARDSON



"It seemed incarnate evil, and it swayed toward them with a leer."

ANTONY WAYRE felt that he could never forget the horror of that night. Even when the actual experience had been forgotten and lived down, there would be intervals of madness when the whole scene was reconstructed in his memory. What Sylvia, his wife, thought, no one knew, for she held it closely to herself. All her energies were given to keeping Antony from brooding.

It all happened without any preliminary warning whatever. Antony and Sylvia had bought a small cottage, called "Roman's," in Gloucestershire. Since the end of the war, Antony had been indefinite in his plans, unable to get a decent job anywhere that would bring in sufficient for their wants and yet give him time to go on with his own writing. Then, at the end of 1924 his god-mother was killed in a motor smash, and he found himself the possessor of five hundred pounds a year, long

W. T.—2

before, in the ordinary course of events, it would have fallen to his lot.

He and Sylvia had at once started to look for a country cottage where they could settle down. With what he expected to make by writing, Antony judged they could manage well on his new income by living quietly. Sylvia was fond of gardening and of a country life, and she planned to breed chickens and ducks for their own use as well as to grow fruits and vegetables.

After much hunting, they found "Roman's," and knew it was the home of their choice. The cottage was small and compact, built at the top of a hill, two miles from the village, but only a quarter of an hour's walk across the fields from a small market town. The nearest neighbor lived at the bottom of the hill.

The first month they were there passed without noticeable event. They were both in love with the house, both busy all day, and tired and

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healthy enough to sleep perfectly at night. Had they not done so, it is just possible that they might have had some warning of the horror that was to come upon them.

**S**HORTLY after Christmas, Antony Wayre went to dine with the doctor who lived in the house at the foot of the hill. Sylvia was invited, but there was a thick white mist from the valley which had risen even to their altitudes, and as she had a bad cough and cold, she decided to stay at home by the fire.

Antony, being a good husband, and remembering that his wife was alone in the house—for their daily "help" went as soon as she had laid the supper—did not stay long with the doctor, and was walking up the hill again by half-past 10.

The mist was rolling up in strange white shapes, and by the time he had reached his own garden gate he could not see the lights from the doctor's house, nor any of those from the outlying villas of the town, usually to be seen through the trees. He pulled his scarf up more closely round his throat and shivered a little.

Suddenly he was aware of a strange feeling in the garden: it was hard to define; hard to pin down to anything in the least definite, yet it was strong enough for him to stand still and peer around. He was strangely conscious of the presence of a second person.

The feeling was so strong that Antony called out sharply: "Who's there?" wondering if some thief was hiding in the garden with intent to despoil the chicken run. But there was no answer; the white mist rolled up in deeper waves till it seemed to engulf him; it was becoming hard—with the mist and the darkness—to see even the garden path, in spite of his electric torch.

Shrugging his shoulders, Antony

went on to the hall door. Rather to his surprize, it was bolted. He knocked twice, and as he did so, the feeling that he was accompanied grew stronger.

A minute later, Sylvia opened the door and half dragged him into the hall, shutting and bolting it with feverish rapidity.

"Hullo, what's up?" asked Antony, naturally surprized. Then remembering his own sensations, he asked as casually as he could: "Have you been frightened? Did you think you heard someone about?"

Sylvia laughed, nervously, and backed into the drawing room.

"No, oh no," she said, "only—only it's the first time you have been out without me and I suppose I got a little nervous. There's a nasty mist up, isn't there? The house seems full of it."

Antony knew his wife too well to take her words at more than face value. He could see that she was on the verge of hysterics, and cursed himself soundly for having left her alone, even for a few hours. He ought to have remembered that she was not used to the country and that the silence was bound to affect her nerves.

Very deliberately, with the impression of infusing an air of everyday life into the situation, he divested himself of coat and scarf, put his stick into the stand, and lighted a cigarette. Then he went into the drawing room where Sylvia was waiting for him, the door wide open so that she could watch him in the hall. The room was, as she had said, decidedly full of mist, but it was not too badly lit for him to see that her eyes were wide with horror and her hands trembling as she sat down and picked up her knitting, making a feeble pretense at normality.

"Sylvia, what is it?" Antony spoke sharply; his own nerve was be-

ginning to falter. "What has happened? Are you frightened?"

She lifted her eyes from her work and nodded her head.

"Tony, Tony," she began, and her voice held a sob of fear in it. "Tony, I don't know what it is, but there's something dreadful about this place tonight. It—the feeling, I mean—came on about an hour ago; I've been sitting here, praying you wouldn't be very late. I began to think I should go mad."

Antony shook off the creeping horror that was beginning to possess him also. "Nonsense, darling," he said, as cheerfully as he could. "You aren't feeling very fit; your cold's pulled you down, and your nerves have given out. I was a fool to leave you tonight. Forgive me, dear. I'll make some cocoa, shall I? and we'll have it here by the fire before we go to bed."

His effort at normality seemed to pull her together, but she would not leave him alone. Almost clinging to his coat, she went with him to the tiny kitchen and helped to fetch the kettle and the tin of cocoa. Curiously enough there was hardly any mist in the kitchen; it seemed to have concentrated in the drawing room.

"Something to do with the aspect of the house," Antony thought to himself, but he did not comment on it to his wife.

Over the cocoa, Sylvia seemed to become happier, though she jumped badly when a log fell out of the fire on to the hearth.

"What did you talk about at the doctor's?" she asked.

Antony shrugged his shoulders. "Everything," he said, with a smile. "The birth- and death-rate of the village, poultry feeding—by the way, he's got some wonderful food mixture he thinks you would like to try—local history and so on. He told me, too, that there used to be a Roman settlement here; and that's why this

cottage is called 'Roman's.' Apparently at one time it was a pretty big place, and then it died out. But every now and then the farmers turn up old weapons and things when they're plowing."

Sylvia nodded. "I wonder if the hens will scratch up anything," she said. "They work hard enough. I believe they're going to do well. It's a bad time of year to start them, though."

"I suppose so," Antony spoke sleepily. "What about a move upstairs? That fire has almost burned itself out."

AS THE words left his mouth he became aware once more of that other presence. For the last few minutes it had left him; now it was back, and even more strongly than before. He glanced at Sylvia. She was looking over her shoulder at the door, and there was fear in her eyes.

"I—I don't think I want to go to bed just yet," she said in a strained voice. "Antony, I'm afraid. It's come back again."

"Don't be silly, dear," he said, encouragingly, and all the time knowing that it was he who would be silly if he set foot outside the door. Somehow he knew that It—the Horror—was in the hall—that he himself might have paved a way for its entrance when he came into the house.

The lamp gave a sudden flicker and then went out; the oil had been exhausted. Sylvia gave a little cry of dismay. The room was now lit only by the dying fire. Antony dashed to the window and dragged back the curtains. The mist had lifted and a pale moon shed a gleam on to the floor and the grand piano.

Antony went over to the grate and picked up the poker, all the while aware that it was a useless weapon. Then he went toward the door. Whatever it was out there, he meant

to face it; he could not endure the thought of being beaten in his own house. But as he laid a hand on the door-knob, he drew back. Something was on the other side, something so strong, so definitely evil, that every fiber of his soul recoiled by instinct from facing it. He could not co-ordinate his muscles; for a moment he stood still, dumb. Then he pulled his scattered senses together and turned round.

Sylvia was standing behind him, white as the moonlight; her eyes big and dark, her fingers moving tremulously. Antony went up to her and slipped an arm round her waist.

"Darling," he said, "we've got to see this thing through."

"What is it? What is it, Tony?" she asked, half sobbing.

"God only knows—or the devil," he returned grimly.

His arm round her waist still, they retreated to the far end of the room. Their eyes were seemingly compelled to remain on the door. Would it come in? What did it want? When would it go away?

**A**FTER what seemed hours of waiting, Sylvia gave a little cry and pointed to the floor. Antony followed the direction of her finger. Over the threshold, under the door, was coming a slow, thick, greenish vapor that rose slightly in the air as it was forced into the room by the pressure of a further discharge behind.

"My God!" gasped Anthony. "What's that?"

Clinging to one another, backs against the wall, they watched and waited, while the vapor increased in volume till it seemed to fill a quarter of the little sitting room. Then they realized that it was as if it were kept within confines of its own. That was in one way the most horrible thing about it. It did not spread and diffuse as gas would do, but

moved in a solid block with cumulus edges.

For a moment or two nothing more occurred; then Sylvia cried out again: "It's taking shape!" Staring, horror-stricken, they saw that this was indeed the case. Out of that solid wall of greenish gas—a foul, horrible green, that reminded them of rotten slime and duckweed—certain portions were growing together, were becoming a form. And as the Horror did this, so did the foul smell grow greater till they could hardly breathe the air round them. It was suffocating them.

Antony made a supreme effort, and without loosing his hold of Sylvia, jerked his elbow through the window. The raw night air came in with a rush, but it could not dispel the vapor inside. The edges of the block wavered a little for a moment, but that was all.

Sylvia was sobbing quietly, burying her head on Antony's shoulder, trying to shut out the sight. A sudden catch of his breath made her look up again, and she shuddered, sick with fear.

The form was growing clearer now; the central part of the green gas had become a being, an entity such as they had never seen before. Swaying backward and forward, raised slightly above the floor but without visible means of support, was a travesty of a man—grotesquely limbed and featured. But the chief horror lay in the expression. Never had Antony or Sylvia conceived that such bestiality, such foulness could live in any semblance to the human face. It seemed incarnate evil, and it swayed toward them with a leer, coming imperceptibly closer every moment.

Antony's back was against the wall; he could retreat no farther; Sylvia lay upon his arm, half-fainting with terror.

Somehow, by some strange instinct, Antony knew that he must make no effort to get out by the window; that outside was the creature's own ground: at a disadvantage here, he would be utterly lost if he made any attempt at a fight in the garden. The thing must be faced here and now. It was coming closer; the fetid smell was overpowering. Helpless, Antony lay splayed against the wall. It could be only a question of minutes, perhaps only a few seconds, before he and Sylvia would be engulfed in this ghastly sea of evil that emanated from the foul Horror in the room.

His hand, groping wildly round, touched the poker, but he made no effort to pick it up, knowing that such a weapon could do no good. His eyes roamed wildly round, seeking for help. Was there nothing that could save them? Were they to be possessed forever by the Thing, to fall hopelessly, irredeemably into its clutches?

Sylvia gave a little moan and fainted dead away on his arm, her head rolling to one side. The shaft of moonlight caught a ribbon round her neck. Antony saw it, unthinkingly, then with a glimmer of hope. With his free hand he jerked at the ribbon and dragged out the little silver crucifix she always wore.

The time for drastic measures had come; the Horror was only a yard away; Antony felt that he himself could not keep his senses much longer; he dropped his wife on the floor and stood in front of her, the crucifix held at arm's length, his eyes on the horrible black depths where the creature's eyes should be.

For a long minute he stood there, taut as a bow-string, concentrating all that was left of his strength. And the thing wavered, swayed backward, then forward, while a sudden wave of noisomeness engulfed Antony. Dimly he realized that this was the

crucial moment; that It was doing its utmost to crush him then. With one last supreme effort he flung the silver crucifix straight into the middle of the mocking, bestial face, crying: "In the name of Christ, be gone!"

There was a sound of rushing wind, a cry so terrible that it rang in his ears for weeks, and the Horror disseminated and disappeared, leaving the room filled with the raw night air from the broken window.

Then Antony fainted also.

THE doctor was already in bed and asleep when he was roused by the pealing of his night bell, and looking out, saw two figures at the door. He hurried down and, to his surprize, Antony and Sylvia tottered into the hall. He dragged the story from them by dint of close questioning.

"What is it, Doctor?" pleaded Sylvia. "Will it come again?"

"I don't know," he said. "Honestly, I don't know. But I should not stay at 'Roman's,' if I were you."

"What was it?" reiterated Antony.

The doctor moved his hands deprecatingly. "A Roman encampment and settlement," he said; "it has been considered by many experts that the hill is not a natural one but was originally a tumulus, perhaps also a barrow. And it is a well-known fact among those who study the occult, that such places are the favorite haunts of elementals.

"Mrs. Wayre—indeed, both of you—you have had a very fortunate escape. Something unknown to us, some natural cause, perhaps, some hidden attraction in one or other of you had let it loose and sent it like the devil its master 'seeking whom it might devour.' It is only by the grace of God that either of you can tell me the tale."