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## Contents for January, 1925

Cover Design.....	Andrew Brosnatch	
Invaders From Outside.....	J. Schlossel	5
<i>A Planet From Outer Space Wages War on the Twelve Worlds</i>		
The Electric Chair.....	George Waight	17
<i>Death Faced Him—or Else the Grisly Horror of an Unknown Fate</i>		
As Obligated.....	Armstrong Livingston	26
<i>The Baronet's Bathroom Bell Was Bewitched</i>		
The Rajah's Gift.....	E. Hoffmann Price	35
<i>Oriental Tale—One Crowded Hour of Glorious Life</i>		
The Fireplace.....	Henry S. Whitehead	40
<i>A Weird Murder—and a Ghostly Revenge</i>		
White Man's Madness.....	Lenore E. Chaney	49
<i>Last of the Incas—the Lure of Gold</i>		
Red and Black.....	Irvin Mattick	67
<i>Yong Lo Was a Reptile with an Artist's Soul</i>		

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

<b>When We Killed Thompson</b> .....	<b>Strickland Gillilan</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>For Thirty Years He Believed Himself a Murderer</i>		
<b>Wings of Power (First Part)</b> .....	<b>Lady Anne Bonny</b>	<b>77</b>
<i>Three-part Pseudo-Scientific Novel</i>		
<b>Out of the Long Ago</b> .....	<b>Seabury Quinn</b>	<b>95</b>
<i>Werewolves—a Tale of Heredity</i>		
<b>On the Highway</b> .....	<b>Cargray Cook</b>	<b>106</b>
<i>Wild Automobile Ride, with Death at the Wheel</i>		
<b>The Ocean Leech</b> .....	<b>Frank Belknap Long, Jr.</b>	<b>109</b>
<i>Uncanny Monster Oozes Over the Side of a Ship</i>		
<b>Two Crows</b> .....	<b>Francis Hard</b>	<b>115</b>
<i>Verse</i>		
<b>Fog</b> .....	<b>C. Franklin Miller</b>	<b>116</b>
<i>Prehistoric Patagonian Monsters—a Tale of Stark Terror</i>		
<b>Luisma's Return</b> .....	<b>Arthur J. Burks</b>	<b>123</b>
<i>Haiti—Death of Henri I, Emperor of the North</i>		
<b>A Changeling Soul</b> .....	<b>Victor Lauriston</b>	<b>129</b>
<i>Tale of Tangled Personalities</i>		
<b>The Specter Priestess of Wrightstone</b> .....	<b>Herman F. Wright</b>	<b>134</b>
<i>Ghostly Legend of an English Castle</i>		
<b>The Valley of Teeheemen (Conclusion)</b> .....	<b>Arthur Thatcher</b>	<b>138</b>
<i>Two-part Novel—Strange Valley in South America</i>		
<b>The Remorse of Professor Panebianco</b> .....	<b>Greya La Spina</b>	<b>157</b>
<i>Scientist Tries to Find the Physical Qualities of the Human Soul</i>		
<b>Arhl-a of the Caves</b> .....	<b>C. M. Eddy, Jr.</b>	<b>163</b>
<i>Zurd the Coward—and the Love of Arhl-a for Wagh the Mighty</i>		
<b>The Festival</b> .....	<b>H. P. Lovecraft</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>Eldritch Tale of New England Witchcraft</i>		
<b>Phantoms</b> .....	<b>Laurence R. D'Orsay</b>	<b>175</b>
<i>Crime—Dope—and a Haunted Conscience</i>		
<b>The Eyrie</b> .....		<b>179</b>
<i>A Chat With the Readers</i>		

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# PHANTOMS



Laurence R.  
D'Orsay

**T**HE only man who knew the story was Carson, and he never told it. He was as hard-headed a man as you could find in the country and his pride was that he wasn't superstitious.

When Sellars called on him that evening he left the monstrous tale in Carson's breast. True, he repudiated, ten minutes later, the confession made, evidently, in a moment of weakness.

"You can't go back on your statements like that, Sellars," the physician said quietly. "Even if the hop has so undermined your system that it's but a matter of weeks, you're not insane. You are as sane as I am, and you're lying to me when you try to get out of it like that."

"Swear to me that you'll never tell—never tell. All made up of whole cloth—spun you a yarn—don't know why. All rot, Carson, old man. Promise—to forget it!"

"I would promise, and welcome," said the other slowly, "if it weren't for the victims. The child, man! You know, Sellars, your case is serious. If you die with that on your soul! I guess I'm old-fashioned and all that; but the child, apart from the—the other thing—abandoned, as you say, in the woods! See a priest—let me call in Father Quinn. My God, Sellars!"

Sellars laughed, a trifle uneasily. The doctor's blue eyes widened with horror.

"You won't see a priest, Sellars?" he pleaded.

"No, damn the priest—damn you, if you believe the rot I gave you a while back. I made it up—always was a bit theatrical—I lied—"

"You lie now, Sellars, you know that"; and the keen eyes bored to the shrunken soul rattling in the frail body before him. "Stop lying, man. You are about to die; it's no use blinking the fact. Common decency, even if you have no respect for religion—"

With an oath, the other turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him.

**Y**ES, Martha was dead and gone. There was no doubt about that. Yet, as Sellars glanced uneasily about the one little room comprising the old ramshackle cabin in the midst of the marsh, he had an eery sensation that she was present. He had a feeling that she was trying to impress her presence on him, that she was vainly trying to communicate with him.

This was the third day that he had passed alone in the old cabin since Martha died. But three days—they seemed like years. Like years it seemed since he had returned in his

skiff from Vallejo to his home above the inlet and Martha, noting his drunken state, had started the argument.

It had degenerated into the usual squabble, for both were of uncertain temper. Martha, womanlike, seeing that she was being worsted in the argument, had pushed him through the door of the cabin, causing him to land full-length in the sticky mud outside.

Then he had risen in a towering rage and, grabbing a heavy iron bar, had dealt a terrific blow at his wife's head, expecting to see her dodge as on many similar occasions. But she had slipped and lost her balance, and with a crunching, sickening sound the bar had descended on her unprotected head. He could see her now, lying where she had dropped without a cry or groan.

Horrified and frightened, he had poured cold water on her upturned face, had slapped and chafed her wrists. Finally, in a frenzy of terror, he had placed his hand over her heart. There was no movement, not even a flutter. Martha was dead, her head crushed in by the frightful blow.

He had sought the hypodermic needle again, and his fears had fallen from him. He had picked up the baby and taken it to the outskirts of Suisun. Someone would find it and give it a home.

But as the drug gradually wore off, he had fallen a prey to remorse and fear, and at last had fled to Carson for comfort and counsel. And, God pity him, he had not had the courage to go through with it!

Sellars straightened up and glanced around. To his fervid imagination, a thousand pairs of eyes seemed watching him. The leaves on the trees and bushes near by, rustling in the wind, sounded like accusing voices. A crane rose from the swamp with a mighty flapping of wings and a shrill, harsh cry, causing Sellars' flesh to creep and his hair to stand on end. What if the

crane had seen, and was now trying to attract man's attention to the murderous deed?

Martha's body had been disposed of in a shallow grave quickly dug in the soft, muddy ground. It was covered over with damp earth. Sellars breathed a sigh of relief. All the same, if only the crane hadn't seen!

How gloomy and depressing the old cabin seemed! The very air seemed weighted with an unearthly, deathly chill. And those unseen eyes — watching — watching his every movement. . .

He had been aware of their presence for two years and more, long before Martha died. The doctor had said "hallucinations," but Sellars knew better. At night, out at his lines or setting his nets, he had been conscious of ghostly whispers and strange murmurs, which quivered in the air about him. He could not shake off that strange sensation that invisible eyes were watching him out of the misty, damp air that hovered over the swamp.

The mysterious sounds were more noticeable in foggy or rainy weather; in fact, several times, when out late at night, he had seen mistlike shapes dogging his footsteps. He had at last come to the firm conviction that the air around the swamp was inhabited by a peculiar group of phantoms, whose forms were almost visible in damp or foggy weather.

Foggy, stormy, gloomy! And the wind this evening whistled across the swamp with a mournful intensity, like a legion of demons turned adrift, seeking for some human being to destroy. Every moment Sellars, sitting there, expected to see the cabin torn apart and its debris scattered broadcast over the swamp. The rain came down in torrents, dripping down the chimney and threatening to extinguish the small fire in the open hearth.

If only Martha were not buried so close to the house! Again and again

he felt certain that some one was trying to force open the door. Tiptoeing over, he listened intently. He imagined he could see misty shapes peering in through the solitary window. A damp chill was in the room, despite the fire.

He rolled a barrel of water against the door, then fastened a large sheet of cardboard across the window. The misty shapes, furious that their view was obstructed, pointed ghostly, accusing fingers in his direction.

**T**HE night wore on, and Sellars was unafraid. He pulled a writing tablet towards him and began to write, laughing at the foiled phantom shapes outside.

He dozed off to sleep, only to awake with a shriek of terror and that strange, intangible feeling that the house was surrounded by invisible beings, ready to pounce upon him the moment he stepped outside. And then a cold perspiration stood on his forehead. What if the piece of cardboard which he had fastened across the window should fail to resist their attempts to force it?

With terrified eyes he glanced across the room. The cardboard still protected the window. But Martha seemed to be in the room; and so strong was this feeling that, although he could not see her, he caught himself speaking to her and waiting for her to answer. She seemed, somehow, to be in the room sewing or knitting in the old, familiar way; and yet she was buried in the shallow grave outside the cabin. . . .

What a gloomy place the cabin was! He saw something on the threshold, but as he looked again it was not there. He searched every nook and corner of the room, even going down on his knees and looking under the bed. He could discover nothing. Finally he decided that it must have been the cat; it was now purring lazily before the hearth, and he gave

it a vicious kick and began to prepare hot coffee.

But the wind began to rise, and the rain beat against the window pane in a steady downpour. A chill crept over Sellars; the cat was mewling eerily. At times the cabin rocked and swayed with the fury of the gale. Again he was sure that Martha was in the room—quite close to him now—seeking to communicate with him.

There was a loud rapping at the door, a loud, insistent knocking, as if some one demanded admittance.

In a voice trembling with fear, Sellars asked who was there. No response came, but the latch clicked as if some one were trying to open the door.

Panic-stricken, Sellars sat at the table, muttering incoherently to himself. He noticed that the cat, with arched back and hair standing straight in the air, dived under the bed and continued to spit and mew.

Again that knocking on the door, making it quiver on its frail hinges. Then the bar that secured it on the inside began to move slowly out of its socket!

Sellars half attempted to rise from his chair, with the intention of holding the bar in its place, but he was powerless to move. The cat gave a wild screech and dashed through the flame and smoke of the hearth up the wide chimney.

A loud click of the latch, and the door swung open. With eyes starting from their sockets, Sellars, nearly crazed with terror, watched several misty shapes circling round the threshold. They changed and drifted in the wind like phantom forms of fog or smoke.

The desperate man's hand flew for the revolver in his hip-pocket. As he grasped the weapon, the foremost of the phantoms glided up to where he sat. His brain reeled as he felt a pair of ice-cold hands encircle his wrists. His hands were held as in a vise.

Sellars tried to struggle to his feet, but other hands forced him with irresistible pressure back into the chair. His elbow knocked the lamp from the table. It overturned on the floor; and at that moment the fire on the hearth went out, leaving the room in utter darkness.

The rain and wind had suddenly ceased. The cat, on the roof, was mewling in an agony of terror. Far across the swamp, the bell of one of the channel buoys sent out a mournful sound, like the bell in the belfry of a church as a funeral approaches.

The chill, clammy hands that encircled Sellars' wrists with a slow, steady pressure forced the muzzle of his revolver against his forehead. He tried desperately to resist, but he was as putty in the grip of those unseen hands.

And then, in a far corner of the room, he saw Martha. And her face was red with blood from the wound he had inflicted.

Sellars made a desperate effort to rise from his chair. The thought flashed through his mind that if he could reach her he would be saved.

But in the grip of those uncanny, unearthly forces he was powerless.

The muzzle of the revolver was forced back slowly, irresistibly. Now, like the finger of fate, it pointed directly at his forehead.

A pressure on his finger, a flash of fire before his eyes! Martha swayed forward as if to embrace—drifting through space, drifting, drift—. . .

“**SUICIDE,**” said Carson, at the inquest. “A constitution undermined by long and excessive use of alcohol and drugs. Brain snapped. Undoubtedly he was already insane when he killed his wife.”

“But what about the statement in deceased's handwriting, containing what purported to be a record of the happenings of the hours immediately preceding his death?” asked the coroner. “That seems rational enough.”

“Alcohol and drugs,” said the doctor shortly. “Hallucinations.”

And he turned abruptly, as if he were glad to have done with the case. For Carson was as hard-headed a man as you could find in the country, and his pride was that he wasn't superstitious.