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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF THE MONTH**

# Slaves of the Gray Mold

By THORP McCLUSKY

*An inexpressibly weird tale, about the parasitic gray mold from outer space that menaced our world with horror unthinkable*

## 1. The Man with the Briefcase

**D**ETECTIVE - LIEUTENANT PETERS, like many other men, believed in the motorman's holiday. On the rare days and half-days he was privileged to call his own he invariably proceeded, dressed in his newest suit, by leisurely stages to that teeming district, bounded on the east by the miasmatic river and on the south by the financial district, where in years past he had walked the pavement and wielded a nightstick.

This was his happiest form of recreation. And on this particular Friday morning he was in a more than usually happy mood; it was a very clear day, and he had only recently breakfasted on griddle cakes and sausages, served in Maggie's own inimitable way with tremendous drenchings of maple syrup.

It was approximately ten-thirty in the morning. . . .

Not a day on which one might expect anything outré to occur; yet before Peters, after emerging from the subway, had gone half a block he witnessed an incident so unusual, and containing inherent peculiarities so interesting, that he determined to follow it to its ultimate conclusion.

A gray-haired, sprightly-walking man, who carried in his right hand a briefcase, had emerged from the dignified portal of a brokerage house and was walking down the street. He was passing, halfway down the block, a low granite wall that enclosed an ancient churchyard and the old gray-stone church that had successfully resisted

the encroachments of the surrounding Babylon. Half a dozen human derelicts, ragged, thin-faced wretches, lounged in various attitudes of dejection against the wall.

The man carrying the briefcase had passed all but the last man.

Although he could not see that man's eyes, Peters knew with intuitive certainty that he had looked up intently at the man with the briefcase.

The man with the briefcase had passed the wall, but now he stopped abruptly. Turning, he retraced his steps to the man lounging at the end of the wall, put the briefcase down on the broad low granite, and walked quickly away in the direction from which he had come. As he passed Peters, the Detective-Lieutenant glimpsed his face. He was frowning slightly, as though deep in thought.

The nondescript derelict at the end of the wall picked up the briefcase and calmly continued along the street in the direction its first bearer had originally taken!

Peters, perplexed, stopped midway along the fence. Apparently no other person had witnessed the incident. Of course, it might all have been entirely harmless, Peters knew. Perhaps the briefcase contained clean shirts and underwear—odds and ends donated by a worthy member of a family to one not so worthy, one whose very appearance was obviously embarrassing.

There might be countless explanations. Yet there was an unnaturalness in all this that struck Peters as strange. . . .



"There was a curious vague fixedness in her stare."

He made up his mind quickly. He could always locate bearer number one; he would follow bearer number two.

The man strode along rapidly, without so much as a backward glance. Obviously he was proceeding toward some definite destination, for he crossed two street intersections without pause, turned up abruptly to the right, and then commenced attentively studying the numbers on the buildings he passed. Midway in the block he turned, without hesitation, into an entrance lobby.

Peters, thoroughly intrigued, followed,

and unobtrusively watched the man scrutinize the building directory. Both men moved toward the elevator.

ON the twenty-fourth floor the briefcase-bearer got off, and proceeded to the offices of Paige, Dean & Wentworth, private bankers. Peters, after a discreet interval, followed the man into the office foyer.

Here, despite the number of obviously important callers who waited, the derelict was nowhere in evidence. Superficially everything seemed serene, and yet Peters

sensed agitation in the face of the receptionist.

He went directly to the girl.

"Where did that man go—the man who just preceded me?"

The girl would have evaded the question, but a flash of Peters' badge momentarily confused her.

"Mr. Paige—oh, it's so fortunate! Mr. Beach only just lost those securities somewhere on the street, and this man found them almost at once and brought them directly here."

"I want to see Mr. Paige—at once."

Her fingers trembling, the girl communicated with the partner.

"Lieutenant Peters of the Homicide Division of the Detective Bureau," Peters said grimly. "Tell him to try that on his zither."

Mr. Paige occupied a corner office, a very large room, walnut-paneled and furnished with that studied ignoring of every evidence of crass commerce many executives now affect. Except for a gigantic rosewood desk set in the angle between the windows, this room was in every other detail like an extremely luxurious living-room. Two large ship models were conspicuously displayed; several fine paintings hung on the walls. A small coal fire burned in a tremendous fireplace.

As Peters entered, Mr. Paige, small, sparse, with bushy eyebrows, looked up questioningly. Peters saw the briefcase, open on the rosewood desk, and, seated before the desk, the pitifully clothed creature who had returned it.

Mr. Paige spoke in a thin, irritable voice. "Sit down, Lieutenant Peters. Will you be good enough to explain your—imperious message?"

Peters looked frankly at Paige.

"This man here just brought you a briefcaseful of securities. I chanced to witness the manner by which he came in possession of them, and I followed him

here. Those securities were, in my opinion, intentionally placed within his reach by the messenger who originally set out to bring them here. Collusion, probably in the hope of a reward, is obviously indicated."

Paige looked startled, and frankly unbelieving. For a moment he sat in deep thought, then slowly shook his head.

"Lieutenant," he said gravely, all trace of his former irritation gone, "permit me to commend you upon your alertness. Except for one extremely pertinent fact I would certainly agree with you. The truth, which makes collusion impossible, is, that the securities in this briefcase were in the possession of the man, Mr. Beach of Webber & Beach, who lost them. He only telephoned me a moment ago, in great confusion, that he had suffered a brief attack of amnesia while on his way here, and that he must have put them down somewhere. He was about to call the police, but I was able to tell him that the securities had already been safely delivered by this man. I fear Mr. Beach has been working too hard."

"At any rate, he instructed me to send the man back to him, with the promise that work, if he desires work, within his capacities will be found there for him. And on my part I am going to reward this man's honesty with a small cash gift. Mr. Beach is very closely associated with us."

"So, Lieutenant Peters, you see that the matter quite simply explains itself. Many thanks, and if you will excuse us——"

## 2. *The Horror in the Eyes*

PETERS, leaving the offices of Paige, Dean & Wentworth, did not immediately enter the elevator. He waited, instead, for a word with the lucky derelict whom Mr. Paige was doubtless at this very moment filling to the brim with platitudes, climaxed by a sheaf of bills. Of course,

as Peters well knew, the sane thing to do would be to take the common-sense attitude and go along about his business. Quite candidly Peters admitted to himself that Mr. Beach could not well be mad enough to attempt to defraud himself. Yet Peters could not stifle his conviction that there had been some sort of silent communication between Beach and the derelict, beside that low granite wall.

Well, maybe it was all an over-active imagination. Peters turned toward the elevator. And in that instant the nondescript derelict himself came from the offices of Paige, Dean & Wentworth, and abruptly Peters decided he would have a word with the man. He took a step forward.

"Just a minute, you—" he rasped, his voice file-thin.

The man lifted his eyes to Peters' face. Peters gained the impression that they were blue eyes, faded and somewhat watery. And then Peters shrank against the steel-casemented window in paralyzed horror.

As though sprouting from *within* the eyeballs themselves, a downy fuzz of about the color of milkweed had abruptly spread over pupils, irises, and corneas. Having somewhat the appearance of cataract, it was not cataract.

It was a distinct growth, ciliated and finer than the finest eiderdown, so fine that it seemed to sprout through lens and integument without affecting even a single cell.

The man's eyes had suddenly become unhuman, fuzz-covered spheres! And the horror of it was that the fuzz on the surface of those spheres was alive, was studying Peters, was looking at him!

And then power, weird, alien power, radiating from those twin orbs in tangible, hurtling waves, crashed into Peters' brain with the devastating force of some titanic sledgehammer.

### 3. *What Horror Walks the Streets?*

AS THOUGH from an incredible distance Peters heard the confused honking of automobile horns. Then, like the swift lifting of a mighty curtain, complete awareness returned to him.

He gazed about in stupefied amazement. For he was far uptown, within a few blocks of his home. Apparently, if this strange mental oblivion had endured a few moments longer he would have returned home!

Home, to Peters, was the greatest, strongest influence in life; just as, perhaps, his brokers' office had been paramount in the soul of Cornelius Beach.

Peters, his forehead corrugated with deep thought, retarded his pace. His first conscious effort to unravel the mystery into which he had stumbled was to look at his watch.

It was twelve twenty-three. An hour had elapsed since that hideous experience on the twenty-fourth floor of a downtown office building.

Almost mechanically Peters turned into a drugstore and put in a telephone call to the offices of Webber & Beach. After identifying himself he talked for a few moments with Mr. Beach. The partner, replying to Peters' questions, seemed oddly evasive, oddly hesitating, peculiarly anxious to treat the matter as lightly as possible.

It was almost as though he was afraid for his own sanity! Yet he answered Peters' routine questions candidly enough.

The man who had returned the briefcase had given Mr. Paige the name of Jimmie Dunn. Yes, Mr. Paige had given him a sizable cash reward. He had not appeared at Webber & Beach to claim the position Mr. Beach had offered.

Slowly Peters hung up the phone and turned from the drugstore. And in that instant a problem occurred to him—a

problem so weird, so bizarre that it sent little crinkling shivers racing along his spine.

Dunn, Peters knew, had never once opened, or attempted to open, the leather briefcase. How, then, had Dunn *known* to whom the enclosed securities were addressed?

What horror that could read a message through a briefcase's leather, that could paralyze a man with a glance, was walking the streets?

#### 4. *The Long Shots Win*

**POLICE COMMISSIONER** Charles B. Ethredge was at the races. Each year, in a mild way, he succumbed to the lure of the running horses; six or seven afternoons a season found him at the track. And Ethredge, like many others, liked to place his bets—either at the pari-mutuel windows or with the independent bookmakers—and gain thereby a more personal interest in the outcome of each race. Yet Ethredge's primary interest in the races was not financial—it was esthetic. He loved most to look upon the lean-limbed beauty of patrician thoroughbreds and to thrill to the stout-hearted, neck-and-neck finish of a close race.

The second race was coming up. Ethredge had just placed a small bet on a ten to one shot—a horse owned by a personal friend—and had stepped aside to deposit his ticket in his breast pocket.

The next person in line was a smallish, wizened person of indeterminate age. His clothing was shabby and none too clean. Some poor devil trying to stretch a couple of dollars by betting on a long shot, Ethredge decided.

"Four C's on Lady-be-good," the little man was saying matter-of-factly. "On the nose."

Beneath his breath Ethredge whistled. The little man was, in his betting at least,

no piker. And the four one-hundred dollar notes lay in the pari-mutuel window to back up his effrontery.

For the odds on Lady-be-good were large! And he had played the horse, not to place, but to win!

Even the cashier was dumfounded. But he gave the little man his tickets. The little man walked away from the line and made his way through the crowd toward the rail. Ethredge followed.

The horses were already on the track when Ethredge and the little man found places on the rail, not too far from the finish line. Ethredge studied the horses carefully; Lady-be-good was acting nervously, prancing around stiff-leggedly with her ears laid tight back. She always behaved this way, Ethredge knew; she was too temperamental a mare to be a consistent winner. It was a shame, really.

There were two false starts. But then the horses got away and thundered, beautifully bunched, down the stretch toward the first quarter-turn. As they lengthened out for the turn Ethredge saw that Lady-be-good was in third place, running easily.

That race provided the first startling upset of the afternoon. For Lady-be-good won by three lengths, and in so doing she clipped three-quarters of a second from the track record for her age and class.

While pandemonium burst and surged about him, Ethredge glanced at the little man, standing a half-dozen feet down the rail. To his surprise, he saw that the little man still stood as he had stood throughout the race, his elbows propped on the rail, his hands vertical, like blinders, on each side of his face. Only by the slow turning of his head had he given any indication that he had watched the race.

Slowly, then, he stepped back from the rail, and pressed through the crowd. He was going to collect his winnings.

Police Commissioner Ethredge, his curiosity unslaked, turned and followed. As

he forced his way along he was estimating, rather dazedly, that the little man must have just won thousands of dollars.

A second numbing shock, awaited him. For the little man nonchalantly pyramided his winnings on a second long shot!

The third race was being announced. . . .

**A**S THE afternoon slowly wore along, Ethredge followed the small, wizened man from betting-windows to track and back again in growing stupefaction. For the little man, pyramiding his winnings on long shots, had won in three consecutive races!

It was unbelievable, yet there it was.

Other persons than Ethredge had noticed the little man's winnings. The second race had attracted attention to him; the third drew a gallery of curious persons; in the fourth scores of the superstitious bet on his choice. . . .

The fifth race was coming up. The little man, as though aware that any further effort of his to bet would send the odds tobogganing, had neither turned in his old tickets nor taken out new ones; the press about him had grown so great that two policemen were necessary to escort him about the track. Commissioner Ethredge still remained close to the man; his curiosity was still unsatisfied. This phenomenal winning was something one read about in books; it never happened in real life. And yet it was happening now. . . .

There was a twofold purpose, Ethredge knew, in those guarding supernumeraries. For, behind the scenes, down in the stables and the paddock, owners and jockeys and plant officials were looking for doped horses, for evidence of fixed races, for signs of bribery. And Ethredge knew, too, that they were learning exactly nothing. Everything was as it should be. No horse had been doped, no jockey bribed to throw a race. The two supernumeraries would not have to arrest the little man, for

no evidence had turned up against him—or against anyone.

And yet King Christophe, in winning the third race, had pulled a tendon so badly that it was thought he would never run again. . . .

Ethredge, during the last half-hour, had not been alone to watch the little man. He had been joined, greatly to his annoyance, by a broker acquaintance, Paul Caldwell, a person he passively disliked, partly because he suspected Caldwell of bucket-shop banditry, but mainly, as he had often admitted to himself in strictest candor, because the man had once been very much in love with Mary Roberts.

Caldwell, with indelicate persistence, was reiterating for the hundredth time an invitation for the Commissioner to spend a week-end at his lodge in the Adirondacks. Ethredge, under the circumstances, preferred to decline.

"No, Caldwell," he was saying, almost bruskly, "I can't get away."

"Well, then," Caldwell was persisting, "you must join my hunting-party in November. You know the lake, the isolation, the game."

Peculiarly, the little man was listening, as Caldwell went on to describe to Ethredge a lodge the Commissioner already knew very well.

Abruptly, then, and still escorted by the two policemen, he prepared to collect his winnings and leave the track.

His progress was slow. Newspaper-men, photographers, and a swarm of the avidly curious surrounded him. The press of surging bodies was terrific. The two supernumeraries, shouting and gesticulating hoarsely, tried to clear a path through the crowd.

A photographer seized the little man's arm, spun him around forcibly. And suddenly that photographer clutched at his throat. The camera slung over his left shoulder slid to the ground, he stumbled,

sprawled forward on his face in the crushed grass. The policeman waved the crowd back.

"Give him air! He's fainted!"

But when a physician who had hurriedly stepped from the crowd had concluded his brief examination the crowd, suddenly still, knew that the photographer would nevermore need air. The little photographer was dead.

In the sudden silence Ethridge heard the little man's voice, quite clearly, talking to the reporters wedged close about him.

"I knew that it was my lucky day," he was saying, in a sing-song, whiny voice. "I found a bundle of bonds this morning, and a rich man give me five hunnert dollars for turnin' it in. I knew then that if I bet I would win."

"Well, why did you bet on the races?" someone asked. The shrill words sounded hideously callous, hideously sacrilegious, there in the presence of death. "Why didn't you bet on something else?"

Simply the little man answered, "I didn't know nuthin' else but horses. I used to be a jockey. Jimmie Dunn's the name."

### 5. Strange Hypnotism

IT WAS not yet nine o'clock in the morning of the following day when Detective-Lieutenant Peters stormed into his little office in the homicide division of the detective bureau and threw himself into his swivel-chair.

For a man of his usually placid disposition, Peters was singularly perturbed. Less than half an hour ago, as he stopped at a corner newsstand for a paper and cigars before proceeding to Headquarters, he had seen headlines smeared across this morning's *Daily Tab* that literally sent shivers of inexplicable fear sweeping his stalwart body.

The newspaper lay before him on his

desk now. A wizened, well-remembered face stared ceilingward from page one; a face whose eyes had photographed indistinctly. Jimmie Dunn's face!

Jimmie Dunn's great human interest story screamed in the silent room:

### PAUPER WINS \$80,000 AT TRACK!

#### PRESS PHOTOGRAPHER DROPS DEAD FROM EXCITEMENT!

"This is my lucky day," Jimmie Dunn, ex-jockey, modestly explains.

The story followed, in two columns, on page three. But there was no need for Peters to open the paper in order to refresh his memory on any detail. He had memorized every word.

One paragraph in particular had sent strange little quavers chilling along his spine:

A more macabre angle obtrudes itself upon this saga of good luck in the death of Robert Searles, *Globe Syndicate* photographer, who collapsed while attempting to photograph Dunn and was pronounced dead immediately afterward by Dr. Lloyd Mattison, of 116 Capron St., who was among the crowd.

Dr. Mattison's opinion that death was due to heart failure was later confirmed by Dr. Phillips, track physician.

Searles was 41 years of age and unmarried. His body was removed to the *Traynor Funeral Home*.

"Damnation!" Detective-Lieutenant Peters cursed and bit the end off a cigar.

At that moment the door opened and Police Commissioner Ethridge walked into the room. Ethridge was smiling.

"Good-morning, Lieutenant."

Peters did not smile. "Morning, Commissioner," he mumbled.

Ethridge was grinning now. "What's the matter, Peters? You look as though you'd lost your best friend."

Peters' stubby forefinger stabbed sharply

down at the newspaper outspread on the scarred oaken desk.

"Commissioner, did you read that? There's something screwy in all this business!"

Ethredge glanced at the tabloid.

"Screwy?" he repeated. He shook his head. "I don't think so, Peters. I was at the track all afternoon, yesterday. I watched this fellow Dunn winning; I talked with track officials afterward. It was just an amazing run of luck."

Peters' jaw set hard.

"Listen, Commissioner." His voice was peculiarly hoarse. "I saw the beginning of this thing. I saw Beach lose that brief-case. Commissioner, Dunn *made* Beach put those securities down for him to pick up!"

Dunn hypnotized Beach, just as he hypnotized me!"

"Hypnotized *you*?" Ethredge asked, startled.

Peters nodded.

"Commissioner, I wanted to tail along after Dunn, yesterday morning. And Dunn just *looked* at me, and that's all I remember. The next thing I knew I was almost home—and it was an hour later. Commissioner, Dunn hypnotizes you. But it isn't like ordinary hypnosis. It's like an electric shock. His eyes get fuzzy when he looks at you. God, Commissioner, that man could kill you by looking at you, just as he killed that photographer Searles when Searles startled him."

Ethredge shook his head.

"Oh, nonsense—" he began.

Suddenly, then, he paused. He had remembered how Dunn had stood at the track, watching each race, with his hands held vertically beside his face, like blinders, while his head slowly turned to follow the running horses.

And he had remembered how King Christophe had run until he tore out a tendon—to win the third race.

Suddenly, just as he was about to speak, the telephone rang.

#### 6. *Something Happens to Caldwell*

ON THIS same morning Paul Caldwell, broker, having completed his matutinal exercises and shower, was brisking a comb through his sleek black hair preparatory to descending the stairs to breakfast, when he heard the sound, behind him, of an opening door. Startled, he whirled, an angry oath bursting to his lips.

That expletive was never uttered. For, to his surprise, Caldwell had recognized the man who, thus unceremoniously, had entered his dressing-room.

"You," he exclaimed then, in good humored astonishment. "Say, how did you get Morency to let you in without announcing you? He shouldn't have done that. But I suppose you've come to talk about investing that fortune you won yesterday. Boy, but you were a lucky devil."

Almost he licked his lips.

Jimmie Dunn did not speak. He merely stood there, his left hand still lingering on the door-knob. Slowly his eyes lifted to the stockbroker's face. And, as the eyes of the two men met, the millionaire's face suddenly went lax, his mouth dropped open loosely, his whole body sagged. In an instant he had become a mindless, drooling idiot!

Slowly, in that dressing-cubicle, the minutes passed. . . .

IN THE beautifully appointed kitchen at the rear of Caldwell's superb Colonial house Luigi Donizetti, Caldwell's chef, watched the glistening white electric clock high up on the wall and wondered why the master was late for breakfast.

The creeping minutes became a half-hour. Gradually the conviction grew in Luigi that something was wrong. The house was too still.

He deliberated on what he should do. But not for long. He was a Latin, and an artist, and he possessed an insatiable curiosity. Carefully he pushed open the little white door beneath the main staircase.

He saw Morency at once. The butler-valet was standing close beside the entrance-door, motionless, his head slightly lowered, as though deep in thought.

"Ha! Morency!" Luigi hissed the name. But Morency did not move.

"Morency!"

The butler stood like one in a torpor. Luigi cocked his head and listened. No sound came from upstairs. Perhaps Morency was making the fool of him, making him the buffoon. He would show the Frenchman.

He tiptoed exaggeratedly across the polished floor toward the motionless butler, grasped Morency's arm, swung the man around.

The butler's face stared into his own. And there was no more expression on that face than on the face of a cretin; it was the face of a man who, living, had no more conscious knowledge of the fact of his own existence than if he were actually dead!

Luigi Donizetti's face blanched, and his hands began a steady, nervous trembling. For he was an artist, and he knew instinctively that this imbecility on Morency's face was not faked. It was as real as one of his own omelettes.

And suddenly he felt horribly alone, in that silent house. He must find the master.

Despite himself—for he was a brave man—he was whimpering as he plunged up the staircase and down the long, thickly carpeted corridor to Caldwell's rooms. Nervously, with shaking hands, he knocked.

There was no answer.

Luigi licked his lips, and knocked again.

The silence from within was deafening. He tried the knob.

The door opened easily. Luigi stepped inside.

"Mr. Caldwell! Mr. Caldwell!" he was croaking.

Fearfully he looked about, at the great bed with its disheveled coverings, at the dumbbells lying on the floor where Caldwell had put them down. He moved toward the dressing-room door, opened that door, looked within.

A scream like the shriek of one damned ripped from his taut throat. For within that small dressing-room stood two men: Paul Caldwell and a stranger he had never seen before. Yet it was not the unexpected sight of the stranger that tore the scream from his lips. It was the horror that moved between the two men.

The men stood close together, their faces touching. And between their faces, filling the interstices like the mold that sometimes grows upon the top of a jelly, was a great mass of fluffy, grayish fuzz, finer than spun glass, more fragile than cobweb, softer than moss. And the hideous fuzz was exuding with a slow, inexorable tenacity of purpose from the face of the unknown stranger—oozing from his very pores and reaching out across the intervening inch or two to penetrate, almost as though Paul Caldwell's flesh were blotting-paper, Paul Caldwell's face!

Luigi Donizetti screamed twice, with the full intensity of his powerful Latin lungs.

The oozing fluff seemed to hesitate, to poised and lift, for a moment, toward him.

Luigi Donizetti screamed no more. And, presently, the oozing mold resumed its interrupted movement.

### 7. *The Death of Jimmie Dunn*

FOR an instant Peters and Ethredge, hearing the harsh jangle of the telephone, sat in inert, almost stupefied inac-

tion. Their thoughts, a moment before, had been boring in a direction so incredible that it took them an appreciable moment to recognize even the homely ring of the phone. But then Peters lifted the receiver from the hook. He listened a moment, and passed the instrument to the Commissioner.

"It's for you, Commissioner."

Ethredge took the call. With the first words his face showed an expression of extreme distaste, but rapidly that distaste faded into amazement. Then, with a sharp, "Call a doctor. Don't touch anything. We'll be right out," he slid the phone back across the desk and stared at Peters.

"Funny coincidence, Peters." A curious incisiveness had come into his voice. "We were just talking about Jimmie Dunn. Well, that was Paul Caldwell, the broker, who just called. Jimmie Dunn's in his house, deader than a doornail, right this minute!"

"What!" Peters exclaimed. "Jimmie Dunn?"

Ethredge nodded.

"He barged into Caldwell's dressing-room this morning, just as Caldwell was about to do down to breakfast. Opened his mouth to speak, and just toppled over, dead. Caldwell thinks he came rushing up for advice on how to invest that fortune he won yesterday—that the excitement finished him. We'll get Doc Hanlon and Cassidy and go along over. I'll notify the District Attorney just in case."

Peters, his mind awhirl, nodded.

#### 8. Sudden Recognition

MORENCY, Caldwell's butler, let the police party into the millionaire's home and, apparently acting under previous instructions, led the way quickly upstairs. Peters, as they climbed the stairs, asked the man a single question.

"Did you let this fellow in, Morency?"

Morency shook his head.

On the second floor landing Paul Caldwell met the party and, after a brief "Good-morning, gentlemen," led the way to his bedroom.

Within the bedroom a youthful physician, whom Ethredge recognized at once as one of the more sophisticated country club set, but a good diagnostician withal, stood, hands clasped behind his back, gazing through the window. Diagonally behind him Ethredge saw the body, half in and half out of the dressing-room.

The young doctor turned away from the window.

"Heart, Commissioner," he said, with a slight smile. "Perfectly obvious what happened. Sudden accretion of wealth—couldn't stand it."

Doctor Hanlon had hustled over, and was surveying the body.

"You never can be too sure, young man," he said stiffly. "I'll take a look."

While Hanlon was busying himself about his examination, Ethredge talked with Caldwell. Almost idly he asked, "Who let this Dunn into the house, Morency?"

"Yes."

Abruptly Peters pounced upon the statement.

"Morency?" he snapped. "Morency says 'no.' Somebody's lying."

For an instant Caldwell did not speak. Then he laughed slightly.

"You don't believe me?" he asked. His voice was silk-smooth. "Call Morency."

Cassidy, standing in the doorway, called down to the butler. There was a pause, and then Morency appeared in the doorway.

Caldwell looked at him. The millionaire's left profile was turned toward the detectives, and, as if ponderingly, he lifted his left hand and touched his fingers to his temple. The gesture screened his gaze.

"Morency," Caldwell said crisply,

"these gentlemen say that you told them you did not let Dunn into the house this morning. Of course, you know that you did."

"Yes," Morency said promptly. "I must have forgotten. I remember, now."

Caldwell nodded. "Very well, Morency. That is all. Unless—" he paused significantly.

Peters shook his head. "No more questions, Morency. You may go."

"After all," Peters told himself, "in the eyes of the law there has been no homicide here."

As Morency left the room, Caldwell let his left hand fall negligently to his side. For an instant he looked at Peters.

Peters, gazing into those cold, oddly opaque eyes, could feel, almost with the force of a tangible blow, the suspicion and the antagonism of them, and sudden recognition. Caldwell *knew* Peters, although to the best of his knowledge the detective had never seen the man before!

#### 9. Caldwell Secludes Himself

**J**IMMIE DUNN'S spectacular skyrocketing, within twenty-four hours, from oblivion to riches and coruscating, dramatic death, provided a newspaper sensation that lasted a week. His life story was syndicated; his photograph was widely reproduced.

Almost a thousand persons attended his funeral, and a score of second and third cousins appeared from nowhere to squabble over the disposal of the fortune he had so unexpectedly left. Quickly, then, the furor waned.

Only Peters, as the weeks passed, remembered the strange succession of events that had been the brief career of Jimmie Dunn, and vaguely suspected that the story had not yet reached an ending. Once, he had tried to argue with Ethridge.

"Why did that butler of Caldwell's tell

us one thing, and then, when his master was present, tell us another? Commissioner, the thing that was in Dunn transferred itself to Caldwell, made the butler forget whatever he had seen. When I questioned Morency the thing realized that it had made a mistake. Perhaps it had never been up against detectives before. And so it let the butler remember, just enough more to make the stories dovetail. Commissioner, Caldwell isn't a man any more. There's a devil in him!"

"Lieutenant, you're a precious fool!" Ethridge had returned, with considerable annoyance. "If Caldwell had the powers you claim Dunn possessed he'd have made himself, by this time, the richest man in the world. But Caldwell has shown no inclination to corner the stock market, or to make puppets of his associates. Indeed, he's almost retired from active business. He's been spending the last few weeks at his lodge on Bear Mountain Lake, in almost complete seclusion."

For a moment Peters was silent. Hesitatingly, he tugged at his lower lip with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Then, doggedly, he spoke.

"Commissioner, as sure as I'm sitting here, he's gone up there for some damnable reason. There'll be hell to pay yet; you mark my words."

Ethridge laughed.

"I don't think so. And I'm in a pretty good position to keep tabs on Caldwell myself. I know most of his associates, and I frequently get word of him. For instance, I know that right now he's doing a bit of experimenting. I suppose it has something to do with marine engines—Caldwell was once quite a putterer that way. Maybe he's accumulated so much money that he doesn't need any more. In any event, if your curiosity ever becomes unendurable we can take a run up there for a weekend. Caldwell's invited me, innumerable times."

10. *Mary Writes a Letter*

MARY ROBERTS, in the cool of a late September afternoon, received the unexpected telephone call from her former admirer with a mingling of pleasure and discomfort. Paul Caldwell's lovemaking had, at one time, been both impetuous and wholly sincere; except for an innate cruelty and ruthlessness which she suspected the man possessed, he had been, at all times, a charming companion. Certainly he had been a gentleman. And he had stepped aside, when she told him of her choice, quietly and without dramatics.

But all that had been many months ago. Undoubtedly he would greet her now merely as an old friend; there would be little in the meeting to embarrass either man or woman.

Waiting now, in the commodious, softly toned living-room of the Roberts' town apartment, she caught herself thinking of Charles. Perhaps, she mused, long engagements were, after all, a mistake, although she herself had insisted. A winter-time wedding would be nice, with the pure white snow frosting the ground. . . .

The foyer bell rang.

"I'll answer it, Eileen," she called to her maid. "It's only Paul." She moved to the door.

As she opened the door Paul Caldwell entered quickly, grasped both her hands hungrily.

"Mary!"

She drew back. However flattering his attentions might once have been, she definitely did not want him to resume them now. A half-jesting, half-serious rebuff was on her lips. And then she saw that he wore glasses, heavy-rimmed, huge-lensed, quite opaque. Swift pity overwhelmed her anger.

"Paul! You poor dear! What on earth's the matter with your eyes? Come in here and tell me——"

Impulsively she grasped his hand and led him into the living-room. And, even in that moment, she sensed the odd fact that, although his glasses were so opaque that she could not see his eyes behind their curved lenses, he nevertheless found his way unerringly across the floor to a chair, with the calm, confident assurance of one who sees perfectly.

For an instant the room was still. Then Paul Caldwell spoke.

"Look! Look at my eyes." The slow words were a command.

She was standing before his chair, looking down into his face. His right hand ripped away the glasses. The eyes of the man met the eyes of the girl.

She did not speak. For a moment, she did not move. Then, slowly, she turned, and went toward the small desk that stood in the angle beyond the fireplace. Seating herself, she drew forth notepaper, pen, and ink, and began to write.

11. *The Parasitic Mold*

WHEN Charles Ethredge received, by special messenger, Mary Roberts' cryptic note and read, in stunned incredulity, its message, he stood for long minutes in the center of his grimly utilitarian office and turned over and over, in the fingers of his right hand, the huge square-cut platinum-set diamond that had tumbled from the envelope. Mechanically, then, he placed the ring in his breast pocket. Slow minutes ticked away.

As the minutes passed, through the welter of heartbreak that swept the man one insistent conviction kept recurring again and again. It was not like Mary, even though she meant the words she had written in the note, to tell him in this way. Mary would, at least, have sought to explain.

Ethredge stared again at the silvery-blue tinted notepaper.

"Charles," the note read, tersely, "I have decided that I do not love you. I have fallen irrevocably in love with Paul Caldwell, and I am going to the mountains with him this afternoon. Katy is going with me.

"Please do not attempt to follow me, or to persuade me to reconsider. My mind is made up.

"I am returning your other gifts to your home. "Mary."

Hesitatingly, then, Ethredge lifted the receiver from his telephone and called the Roberts home. Dully, numbly, he heard the dread confirmation of his fear—Mary had already packed and left the house; she had gone to Bear Mountain Lake for an indefinite stay.

Her last gesture at home, then, had been the entrusting of ring and note to a telegraph messenger.

It was all so unlike her—so utterly unlike the girl he had known!

Paul Caldwell—damn the man! He had never really given her up at all. Some plan like this had always been in the back of his mind. Good God! he must have hypnotized the girl!

With a curious, intent expression on his face, Ethredge jabbed at a buzzer and asked for Detective-Lieutenant Peters. . . .

When Peters entered the Commissioner's office he found his superior seated very erect, with lips thin-drawn and face expressionless, behind his desk. Without a word Ethredge pointed to the note. Peters read the message twice through, slowly. \*

"Paul Caldwell!" he said, then. He sat down and stared earnestly at his chief.

"I told you—that Caldwell wasn't human," he said, his voice low. "No human being could take Mary away from you, Commissioner."

Ethredge laughed bitterly.

"I hope—now—that you are right," he muttered; then, as a sudden ghastly

thought struck him, he added hastily, "God, no—I don't! A man—at least! For the love of Heaven, Peters, tell me your suspicions. I'll listen."

Peters, with a far-away look in his eyes and a frown wrinkling his brows, began to speak.

"Jimmie Dunn looked at Beach, and Beach stopped dead in his tracks, put down a briefcase full of securities, and walked away. Jimmie Dunn looked at me, and an hour passed of which I remember nothing. He looked at long-shot horses, and those horses won. And then Jimmie Dunn died—in Paul Caldwell's presence. And, later, Paul Caldwell looked at Morency, and Morency conveniently remembered something he had forgotten. And now, as I suspect, Paul Caldwell looks at your fiancée and Mary Roberts breaks her engagement and runs away with him.

"Commissioner, this is not coincidence. And neither is it hypnotism, in the sense that we ordinarily understand the word. For, Commissioner, man may hypnotize man, but what human can impose his unspoken command upon a *beast*, and compel that beast to obey—to an extent beyond its normal endurance?"

Peters paused, and drew a deep breath. In the sudden silence, as the full impact of Peters' words hammered against Ethredge's consciousness, a chill of nameless fear shriveled the flesh at the nape of the Commissioner's neck. There was horror here—elusive, vague, alien.

Slowly Peters continued: "Commissioner, that thing that looked at me from Jimmie Dunn's eyes was something not human, maybe not even animal. Perhaps it doesn't even come from Earth; probably it doesn't, because it seems alone of its kind. But, on Earth at least, it lives as a parasite. It moves into a man's brain as a man moves into a house; it seems so incredibly thread-like in its physical texture that it can move between the cells of a man's flesh as a

swarm of gnats pass unimpeded through a coarse screen. It's like a mold, Commissioner, an unbelievably delicate mold. And, God, it was beautiful to look at, spreading over Dunn's eyes like a silky down."

Suddenly he stopped, sat staring at the scarred desk-top beneath his eyes. Then, after a moment, he resumed:

"The greatest horror is that the thing is parasitic. It seems able to assume the life and the interests of the man it inhabits. It gambled on horse races when it was in Jimmie Dunn's body; seemingly it was unaware of any method of disposing of the securities in its possession other than by returning them to their addressee. But in Paul Caldwell's body it—"

"Fell in love with Mary!" For an instant Ethredge's pain-lined face lifted to Peters', then was cradled in his hands.

Peters slowly shook his head.

"No," he corrected. "Caldwell was always in love with Mary. This thing in him has merely asserted that love."

Ethredge's fists were rhythmically knotting and unclasping.

Grimly Peters went on: "There is peril here, Commissioner, and we must fight it. There is far greater danger of tragedy here than in your personal loss, or in Mary's enslavement. The thing is but one, now, and despite its tremendous will and its unhuman intellect—for it is, perhaps, almost an embodiment of pure thought—its capacities for harm are strictly limited.

*"But what would happen if it could reproduce its kind, as it perhaps can? Why has it taken Mary?"*

His eyes were bleak, unfathomable, as he added, with terrible conviction:

"It has gone into comparative solitude. Paul Caldwell was essentially a companionable man. So we know that it has deliberately denied itself the satisfaction of at least one of Caldwell's instincts. Why?"

In the dead silence that fell over the

room the big clock high up on the smoke-grimed wall ticked on, maddeningly.

With hideous certainty, Peters added a final prophecy.

"It is planning—to live out its life cycle among mankind. It needed money, and it secured money. It needed a well-informed human brain, and it forthwith usurped Paul Caldwell's. It needed seclusion, and it has gone to his lodge. All this has been done purposely."

Ethredge lifted his face from his hands and looked haggardly at his subordinate.

"We're going—to Black Bear Lake, Peters," he said grimly. "Tonight."

## 12. *Caldwell's Lodge*

EITHREDGE'S long black sedan rushed through the lonely night, a sentient, stream-lined monster. Albany had been left behind long before; the sweeping curves, sharp grades and plunging declivities of this mountain country were becoming more frequent as the car bored deeper and deeper into the wild pattern of wilderness and lake.

In the east the sky was already tinted with the pearly, false dawn. There had been a delay in starting while Peters, as Ethredge waited in growing impatience, had made cryptic and curious preparations, for which he had offered no explanation. . . .

The black car, skirting the lake, was rolling through a sleeping village. Across a great bend at the foot of the lake Ethredge glimpsed the long rambling log lodge that was Paul Caldwell's camp.

"There, Peters. Across the lake."

Peters peered intently through the slowly lifting opalescence.

Ethredge's voice was bleak. "I want to go, first—alone."

Peters understood. "Stop the car. I'll wait here in the village."

Before the small general store the car

halted. Peters got out, stood in the macadam, a small leather bag tightly clenched in his left hand.

"How long will you be, Commissioner?"

Stony-lipped, Ethredge answered, "I'm going directly there. I shouldn't be over an hour or two."

Peters nodded.

"Very well. I'll wait. If you're not back within two hours I'll come for you."

**K**NOCK . . . knock . . . knock.

The tattoo of Ethredge's lean fist against the hewn pine door of Paul Caldwell's rustic lodge was a demanding challenge that carried far out across the silent lake. Alertly, then, Ethredge waited.

Curiously, there in the dawn, all this suddenly seemed slightly unreal, slightly impossible. Had it not been for Mary's note—yes Mary's note was the greatest impossibility in all this mad succession of events!

The door had opened. It was a second before Ethredge realized that, in the early stillness, his approaching car could easily have been heard for miles.

Paul Caldwell, fully dressed, except that he wore an informal smoking-jacket in lieu of a coat, stood in the cedar-paneled hall. His eyes were obscured behind dark glasses.

"I've come to speak with Mary." Ethredge spoke calmly; the queer conviction was in him that this was a dream and that presently he would awaken. He knew a moment's vague irritation because Caldwell's glasses hid the man's expression.

Caldwell stepped back. "Isn't it rather presumptuous, your coming here?"

Ethredge could feel the anger seething within him. His voice, when he spoke, was ominously quiet:

"No. Mary owes me a face-to-face explanation. You will be good enough to send for her, Caldwell."

The broker shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well." He lifted and rang a small bell. "I suppose that you would prefer to speak with her alone."

Ethredge nodded. "Yes."

There was the sound of footsteps from the rear of the lodge, and Morency, hastily attired in dressing-gown and trousers, appeared.

"Morency, please inform Miss Roberts that Commissioner Ethredge is here."

"Yes, Mr. Caldwell." Turning away, Morency ascended the staircase that bisected the rear of the hall.

Oddly, then, Ethredge made a peculiar observation. "You rise early, Caldwell."

The shadow of a smile flitted across Caldwell's lips.

"Yes. I have been working very hard." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Mary's cousin Katy is here, and her maid."

Stiffly, Ethredge bowed.

And then Mary's light, well-remembered footfalls sounded overhead. Caldwell gestured to a door.

"You may use the gun room. There is wood in the fireplace, if you care to light a fire."

Momentarily he chuckled, as he seemed to stare at Ethredge through the opaque glasses.

"I didn't wear glasses when I saw you last, did I, Commissioner? I forgot to tell you that my eyes have been—acting peculiarly of late."

### 13. *The Horror in the Door*

**P**AUL CALDWELL'S gun room was cozy and picturesque, with its bear-skin rugs on the floor, its hides and heads on the walls, the warm, wavering glow of the fire crackling merrily in the massive stone fireplace. These things were a picture of enchantment. But the stony indifference of the golden-haired girl sitting in a wicker chair before the fire destroyed

the harmony that should have pervaded the room.

Ethredge was standing. Behind his back his clasped fingers were twisting and untwisting.

"Mary, you've got to come to your senses! You're not the same girl who loved me! You've changed, somehow."

The golden-haired girl stirred irritably. Her eyes, until now deliberately fixed on the blue-yellow fire, lifted to Ethredge's face. And as she looked at him the eery conviction that had been growing in him—the conviction that in some manner beyond her own control she had elusively, horribly changed—deepened. For, although she looked at him she appeared not to see him; there was a curious vague fixness in her gaze, like the stare of a slightly wall-eyed doll. It was as though the attention she vouchsafed him was purely polite, purely mechanical; as though her real thoughts were submerged.

For an instant her gaze seemed to focus. Yet, even in that focussing, it seemed to Ethredge that she was not looking directly at him. She seemed looking around and beyond him.

She spoke in an inflexible monotone.

"I have told you, Charles, that my mind is made up. I am sorry that I have hurt you, but things like this have happened before and will happen again. Please go now."

The peculiar thought was in Ethredge's mind that something was behind him, watching him amusedly. And then torrential, bitter words burst from his lips:

"God Almighty, Mary, has that man cast a spell over you? By all that's holy, I believe he has! But—I'm coming back for you, Mary. By Heaven, if necessary I'll abduct you and have you examined by a psychiatrist!"

The expression in Mary's eyes, staring into Ethredge's own, did not change. Suddenly, then, Ethredge wheeled. That

vague awareness of something behind him, watching him in soundless amusement, had abruptly, sharply crescendoed to an overpowering, crawling certainty that that amusement had turned to anger, that a mighty malignancy was gathering behind him!

A door had been, as he stood talking to Mary, directly behind Ethredge. He now faced that door. It was an ordinary-enough appearing door; obviously it led to a serving-pantry, for it was fitted with a small sliding panel about fifteen inches in diameter, behind which was quite probably a collapsible shelf—all in all a very handy arrangement for the informal serving of drinks or *hors d'oeuvres*. This sliding panel stood open.

Framed in that fifteen-inch rectangle was a horror so monstrous that the mere sight of it froze Ethredge into instant immobility—immobility so terror-torn that it might dissolve within the span of a heartbeat into shrieking madness!

Something of about the size and shape of the head and neck of a man looked through that opening. But there all resemblance ceased. For the horror was about the color of asbestos; it was like a living bust which has, unbelievably, sprouted a luxuriant growth of mold!

#### 14. *A Lapse of Memory*

IN THE yellow-blue cool of the morning Lieutenant Peters stood beside the road and listened to Ethredge's big car drone toward him along the winding lakefront. A glance at his watch told him that Ethredge had been gone a little less than two hours. The Commissioner was driving fast.

The big sedan whirled around the last bend and rushed toward him. With a squealing of brakes it slid to an abrupt halt.

"Jump in." Ethredge's face was thun-

der-black. "We're going back to town."

Leisurely Peters climbed into the car. Matter-of-factly he reached over and shut off the switch. Then, his voice almost hypnotically quiet, he asked:

"What happened back there?"

Ethredge reached for the key, but Peters shook his head. Then, with a half-suppressed, choked sigh, the Commissioner began to speak.

"She's through with me, Peters—finished! She's madly in love with the man. We talked over an hour. But what could I do? Things like this do happen, Peters."

Peters was careful not to look up.

"Commissioner," he asked, with elaborate casualness, "just what were her words to you—her exact words—when she bade you good-bye, there on Caldwell's porch? Or, perhaps, did Caldwell show you to your car? Or did you just walk out alone?"

A half-silly expression of puzzlement slowly crept into Ethredge's face. After a moment he shook his head bewilderedly.

"Lord, Peters, I can't remember!" His voice had fallen almost to a whisper. "I can remember Caldwell's letting me in, and then my talking for a long time with Mary, but I don't remember leaving the lodge or getting in my car."

Peters nodded. His voice, when he spoke, was grimly calm.

"Caldwell did that. Caldwell numbed your brain, stuffed it with thoughts of renunciation you would never think, yourself, in a million years. We've got to go back and—destroy him—before he unlooses horror."

### 15. *The Violet Light*

MOONLIT night had settled over the forested hills before Peters and Ethredge, after a day spent in cautious reconnoitering, began to approach Paul Caldwell's lodge. Peters had insisted that they spend long hours in watching the

lodge. But Caldwell had remained within the rambling log structure throughout the day.

Peters wondered why. And in some strange way he sensed that the man was busying himself with feverish haste, working toward the early achievement of some obscure plan. . . .

A hundred yards from the rear of the lodge, Peters stopped sharply, drew Ethredge into the ebon obscurity beneath an aged, twisted maple. Here, in the thick dark, he put down the leather bag and dropped to his knees. In a moment he rose again to his feet, pressed something cold and smooth into Ethredge's hands.

"What on Earth—" Ethredge whispered.

Peters' soft laugh was grim.

"Rubber sheeting." The words were so low that their tangibility seemed lost; they were like thought-images born of the dark. "Put it over your head like a hood; I've cut eyeholes."

Bewildered, Ethredge obeyed. He had known Peters too long to retain any slightest disposition to ridicule even his most absurd-seeming theories. . . .

"There. I think I can see now."

Peters, who had also donned a shapeless rubber hood, was pressing a second object into Ethredge's hands.

"Lead-impregnated goggles. Put them on." Cryptically he added, "I think that now he—will be unaware of our coming."

Together the two weirdly hooded, goggles figures stepped from beneath the tree. Crouching low as they crossed a moon-bathed stretch of turf, they plunged into a protecting band of ebon darkness cast by a hedge that ran irregularly toward the lodge. Minutes of utter silence passed.

But then, at the rear of the lodge, the two invisible figures surveyed the moon-stippled structure. Only on one side did any lights gleam; from two adjacent windows on the ground floor thin slivers of

eerily fluorescent blue-violet light struck from behind closely drawn shades into the cold calm moonlight.

The two crouching figures, moving like amorphous ghosts, were crossing the open space behind the lodge. Above their heads was a small, tight-closed window. One figure climbed upon the shoulders of the other. A hooded, monstrous-eyed head pressed against the blindly staring glass.

There was a brief, silvery flash of moonlight against steel. The small window began to slide noiselessly open.

The upper figure disappeared within the opening. Presently two white hands reached downward, drew the figure below upward into the lodge. The window slowly closed.

Ethredge and Peters were within a small butler's pantry at the rear of Caldwell's camp.

Through long seconds they stood in immobile silence, listening. But, except for faint rustlings and the infrequent, quiet tread of footsteps from that room, so few feet away, from which had shone the violet light, the house was still. Whoever slept in Caldwell's lodge—slept soundly.

Slowly, inch by inch, Ethredge opened the door into the black corridor. The two men merged into the darkness. The door closed.

Twenty feet away, three feet above the floor, an almost invisible, blue-violet lightening of the gloom flickered and wavered. That unearthly glow marked, Ethredge and Peters were sure, the door to the chamber within which Caldwell toiled at his unfathomable labor.

Moment by moment, with mind-shattering caution, and invisible as the darkness itself, the two men approached that door. And then, before the door, Ethredge slowly stooped to his knees. Through an old-fashioned keyhole a small rectangle of weird light diffused in the blackness.

The light was blotted out. Still as a man

of stone, Ethredge watched, while Peters wondered.

Through that keyhole Ethredge looked upon—nightmare!

#### 16. *The Incredible Machine*

**A** VIOLET light overspread the room. There was no other light in the chamber, and Ethredge, kneeling at that rectangular, antique keyhole, felt his nerves crawl and his knees turn to water as the grisly realization swept him that perhaps the thing that was in Caldwell *needed no light!* For that violet glow was not in the room for any purpose of illumination. Enigmatically utilitarian, it wavered and flickered from all four sides of a monstrous frame set at the farther end of a fantastic and anomalous machine that dominated the center of the room, and a something that wore Paul Caldwell's clothes moved about before that machine and manipulated its strange controls!

The machine was a thing beyond human comprehension. As much an enigma to Ethredge as a radio tube would seem to a Tasmanian savage, it loomed there in that weird flickering light, an ambiguity the more sinister because of its utter quiescence. Except for that strange violet light radiating from its farther end it might have been some property from a cubist stage setting, so grotesquely, geometrically alien it was. Seemingly cast from some substance that lent to it the vague impression of extra-terrestrial strength—as though perhaps that stuff might be electron-stripped neutronium from the dead heart of some ebon star—it was a vast rectangular funnel, perhaps eight feet in aperture at the nearer and ten feet at the farther end, and open at both, like an unsymmetrical box which has been stripped of two of its sides. Its outer walls were covered with a complexity of crystal-like ducts and helixes of queerly distorted shape through

which a vari-colored liquid ebbed and pulsed; its inner walls were porcelain-smooth, like the inside of some strange, *unfinished* passageway. For the thing appeared oddly, curiously *incomplete*.

And then Ethredge put his left hand between the smooth rubber hood and his face, and bit into the lean strong flesh, hard, to keep from shrieking aloud. He had been watching, with a rapt, ecstatic horror, the being that had once been Paul Caldwell, as it moved about the unfathomable machine. He had seen Caldwell lift his hands to one of the transparent helixes.

Even Caldwell's hands and wrists were now completely covered with the gray mold!

The violet flame, streaming from the larger end of the monstrous funnel, was becoming more intense. And then, as Ethredge's eyes, for the first time, looked directly through that enigmatic tube, his blood congealed and his mind swirled.

It was as though he crouched at the focal point of some angular telescope, for he looked directly through the funnel, from the smaller to the larger aperture. But, through the frame of leaping violet light that rimmed the thing, he did not see the farther wall of the room. He gazed, instead, into nothingness—into nothingness so absolute that even the conception of it was staggering! Blackness in which light had, perhaps, never been, was not now, and might never be! Nothingness in which even the gravitational attraction between atoms did not exist—nothingness which was not even space! Nothingness, illimitable.

Even to look into that blind, unfeeling immensity sucked at Ethredge's nerves, sent his flesh crawling. And then he saw it, in the infinity ahead—the tiny pinpoint of violet light that appeared from nowhere and rushed toward him! It was growing; while time stood still it became a square framework a quarter of an inch across;

then it was the size of a facet of a large dice; then as big as the top of a card-table.

Framed in that rushing square of light he saw moving things, small visions of horror that were growing larger.

The speed of the frame was slowing. Beyond the narrowing gulf of utter nothingness it had become as visible and clear as a miniature picture upon a screen, and the sight of the mold-encrusted *things* that squirmed and pressed forward in silent eagerness toward its rim of violet flame sent waves of cold and heat rushing through Ethredge's body.

And then Ethredge screamed, tore at the door with suddenly frenzied fists!

For the mold-covered horror that was Paul Caldwell had abruptly appeared in the nearer of the joining funnels, was standing, its back to Ethredge, looking eagerly ahead across the narrowing gulf. And it held by its mold-shrouded left hand as in some unholy betrothal, the slender right hand of Mary Roberts!

LIKE a man amok Ethredge plunged into that room. His right hand was clawing at his hip as he leaped, a pantherine bundle of steely sinew, toward the gaping mouth of Caldwell's grisly funnel.

The thing that was Caldwell turned. With unhuman swiftness it thrust Mary against the wall of the funnel, crouched slightly, its gray-furred hands outstretched to meet Ethredge's rush.

The horrid face of it—that *shape* of a face, limned in living mold!

Ethredge's right hand gripped the butt of his blued-steel automatic; the gun swung up. But no stream of bullets seared from the stubby muzzle as Ethredge squeezed the trigger. The gun had jammed.

A raging, human catapult, Ethredge plunged at Caldwell. Then the men were locked together, were struggling like weird demons within the mouth of that fantastic

funnel. Weird demons—the hooded, goggled man, and the mold-impregnated thing that had once been Paul Caldwell.

The hideous, furred hands of the thing were clawing at the hood over Ethredge's head and shoulders. Ethredge's makeshift rubber helmet was slipping—even as he crashed the butt of his gun against Caldwell's skull it tore away.

For an instant Caldwell reeled. But then—he *looked* at Ethredge. Though his eyes were no longer distinguishable, though they had long since been overgrown, like the rest of his face, with that horrible fuzz, yet he looked at the man—the fuzz looked at the man. And in that moment Ethredge's brain stopped working, as completely and shatteringly as though he were sitting in the electric chair in that taut second when the rheostat spins and the current rives.

Ethredge's body slumped to the porcelain-smooth floor.

The horror that had been Caldwell turned back toward Mary Roberts, took her unresisting hand in its own. It waited. For the funnel that had come from beyond the infinite and the funnel that the thing had built in Paul Caldwell's lodge were merging into one—were becoming the two component parts of a single mechanism. The incredible passageway was gaping wide!

### 17. *The Crowding Shapes*

PETERS, in the second when Ethredge ripped open the door, had slid back into the shadows, in the same moment loosening his service automatic in its holster. And he had watched, through wise eyes that had already dimly anticipated the horror beyond that closed door, the brief violent struggle between Ethredge and the man entity. And he had waited.

Momentarily his attention had focussed on the intricate system of crystal-like helixes, throbbing with the flow of fan-

tastically colored liquids, and seemingly as fragilely blown as soap-bubbles. Then his gaze had reverted to the horror surging through the incredible funnel.

It was a thing elemental and primitive as the metazoa that swarmed Earth's steaming seas in pre-Cambrian ages. It was almost without organized structure; certainly it was without eyes or ears or any semblance of a rigid skeleton. And yet in some horrible way it was not an evolving type; it was a degeneration from some higher form, however simple; it was devolution. Monstrous, amorphous, thrusting itself forward and oozing ahead into itself. And it was gigantic.

Yet the greatest horror was not in the thing itself, or in its utter unconformability to any kind of life that has ever evolved on Earth. The horror was in that the thing—the great, blind, shapeless, hungry thing, mindless, perhaps, hardly more than ameboid—was cloaked and permeated with the same gray ciliated fuzz that had taken root in the body of the man Caldwell and had usurped that body like a malignant fungus. Even the crawling, ameboid monster was directed by a parasitic life not its own! Its living substance, like Caldwell's, housed the grayish mold!

Though no conscious thought crossed Peters' mind—for no man could have thought and remained sane in that moment of reeling horror—yet somehow he *knew* that that alien fuzz before him was a form of life that had perhaps endured for eons upon the whirling planets of long-dead suns, life that had evolved until it had cast off almost all body and had become almost wholly brain, life that had become so specialized that it was now completely parasitic, life that menaced all other life-forms in all the universes!

Like a fascinated spectator at some fantastic drama, Peters watched the gray-furred, ameboid thing roll down the funnel. And now it was close to where that

which had once been Paul Caldwell stood waiting, holding Mary Roberts' hand.

For an instant the ameboid mass, shapeless as viscid slime, paused, and Peters knew that it was conversing in wordless thought-speech with the gray man-thing before it. And then it moved abruptly toward Mary.

Behind it came others of its kind, oozing, ameboid shapes, all alive with the hideous, parasitic fungus, all eager to enter this new world where the life-forms were endlessly varied and complex, all impatient to shed the protoplasmically elementary bodies in which their race had been imprisoned through, perhaps, billions of years. And behind them their followers were as a vast gray sea crowding into the narrow throat of the funnel.

Then, with simian swiftness, Peters moved. The terrible, fascinated paralysis that had gripped him as he watched the ameboid thing approach was suddenly gone. His right arm swept up—his body plunged toward the funnel mouth.

For the crawling, ameboid thing seemed about to overwhelm Mary, and, with hideous certainty, Peters knew that it would discard its ameboid body after that fusion.

Even as he leaped, he realized, with a curious, detached hypersensitivity, that the fluorescent violet glow had faded from the room as the funnel from beyond the infinite and the funnel within the room had merged into one. And yet the weird light still pulsed in the crystal helixes.

The ameboid thing was flowing about Mary's knees!

And then Peters' gun was barking, and as the snub-nosed automatic roared, the violet glow of pulsing fluid in the nearest of the helical tubes faded and died and, like a fragile echo, there came to Peters' ears the faint, ephemeral sound of shattering. The crystal helix had burst like fine-spun glass! Again Peters fired, and again,

and the complex helical tubes shattered like creations of frozen mist.

And at the invisible juncture of the two halves of the funnel there abruptly appeared the faintest suggestion of a blowing, violet steam.

The mold-encrusted thing that had once been Paul Caldwell wheeled and stared toward where Peters stood, a fantastic, goggles and hooded figure, vaguely limned in the pallid light that streamed through the monstrous funnel. And, striking at the shapeless hood that covered his head, hammering against the thin sheet of insulating material that cloaked his skull, Peters sensed the powerful thought commands of the thing. And wild exultation swept him as he knew that those commands were diffused, knew that he was still master of himself. Slowly he raised the gun.

**T**HE automatic crashed—two shots—and the horror that was Paul Caldwell clutched, with a strange, grotesque, *clawing* gesture, its clothing-encased chest, and between the mold-ridden fingers Peters saw jetting, rich red blood. The thing's head drooped forward, and horribly its mask of mold twisted and writhed in human gaspings. Blood was pouring from its mouth.

The thing, the immaculately clothed thing, sprawled forward on its face; its hands drummed the funnel floor.

The ameboid monster oozing about Mary's knees had suddenly paused. For behind it, between the once juxtaposed halves of the alien funnel, had abruptly appeared a pencil-thin hiatus that limned the four smooth walls as though a simitar of violet flame had sliced that weird tube in half. And slowly, while the violet flame pulsing from the farther half of the funnel deepened and grew more intense, the violet hiatus widened.

With inexorable slowness the rift grew. And now, like incredibly thin tissue, the

wall of flame was beginning to tear, to show flickering patches of absolute black. Behind the ameboid thing, the multitude of gray-fured, shapeless things hesitated.

Suddenly, then, the lone, ameboid horror seemed to pause over the motionless body of Paul Caldwell, that still body from which the gray mold slowly poured. With a strange, caressing gentleness, it flowed toward the writhing, *growing* patch of defenseless gray mold. Ameboid thing and pool of mold merged into one.

Like a viscid slime, the ameboid thing rolled across the rim of thinning violet flame into that gray world where those of its kind milled and struggled.

Peters, all unconsciously, had crept closer and closer until now he stood within the funnel mouth. At his feet lay the bullet-riddled body of Paul Caldwell. Hardly knowing what he did, he lifted that body in his arms and thrust it across the widening violet rift. And in that instant the last wavering streamers of violet light, still reaching out from beyond the utter black toward the funnel in which he stood, tore away.

Peters stood in utter, blinding darkness! For, with the flickering out of the last ribbon of flame joining the two halves of the incredible funnel the ameboid, mold-infested things had disappeared; and, with them, the frame of violet light that had enclosed them, and the funnel-half into which they had surged!

Peters' fingers, fumbling, searched his clothes, found and lit a match.

God! Peters stared before him in utter disbelief! Three feet beyond where he stood, three feet beyond the mouth of Paul Caldwell's gargantuan funnel, standing sedately against a pine-paneled wall and flanked on the right and left by mounted deer heads, a superb old grandfather's clock serenely ticked away the minutes. Yet, sphinx-like, the funnel-half in which Peters stood remained, dominating the cen-

ter of this large room, its helical mechanisms shattered, propounding a question unanswerable.

And at Peters' feet Charles Ethredge lay where he had dropped when the thing in Caldwell had stared at him. And on Peters' left, close against the smooth funnel wall, stood Mary Roberts.

Peters, moving with jerky, disconnected steps, almost like a puppet actuated by strings beyond his control, stepped from the funnel mouth. On the paneled wall before him, near the grandfather's clock, was an electric light switch. His trembling fingers touched the smooth round button; subdued lights flashed up.

For an instant he turned and stared uncertainly at Ethredge and Mary. And he remembered the obliterating, paralyzing shock that had hurtled through his brain, that day Jimmie Dunn looked at him. . . .

"They'll be all right in a little while—please God!"

But the lead that had spat from his gun must be retrieved, and the clotting pool of blood that lay, a silent, threatening enigma, on the funnel floor, must be washed away.

Methodically, Peters began that which he must do.

Moments later he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Looking up from where he stooped within the funnel, he saw Morency, clad in dressing-gown and trousers, standing just within the open doorway. An odd bewilderment was etched on Morency's usually placid face.

"The—the master, sir," the man began hesitatingly. "Where—?"

Peters stepped swiftly toward the man.

"Morency," he said, his voice iron-calm, "your master has gone—away. He has gone back—among his own kind. Do you understand?"

For an instant Morency's right hand, clutching the door-frame, tautened. The bewilderment on his face slowly turned to

horror. He was looking at Mary Roberts and Charles Ethredge.

Almost imperceptibly, then, his lips moved.

"Sir—he will never—return."

The whispered words were stark with utter conviction. Morency, like Peters, knew.

#### 18. *Dawn at Last*

A ROARING fire leaped and twisted in the field-stone fireplace that dominated the north wall of the living-room at Paul Caldwell's lodge. It had leaped and danced so for hours, for the night had been long and there had been much to do and much to agree upon. But now it was close to dawn.

Mary Roberts, Ethredge, Peters, and Morency were gathered close about the singing flames. Musingly, Peters spoke.

"Pray God we shall never know from whence he came. From beyond our solar system—from beyond our galaxy—from beyond our space-time continuum, perhaps? Pray God that we shall never know—that he and his kind will never return."

Morency, kneeling, was tilting the glowing logs with brazen tongs. Peters went on speaking:

"How came he here? Did his voyage require moments, or hours, or billions of years? These are unanswerable questions. But we know that it was necessary for one of his kind to precede the others, and set up on a suitable world the mechanism by which they might follow. And we shattered that mechanism."

He smiled and nodded, almost dreamily, as Morency stepped back from the fireplace. "I think that he came from a higher dimensional plane. Certainly that alien machine warped both space and time."

He was silent, pondering. But Ethredge, his right arm about Mary's shoulders, leaned forward slightly.

"How did you know, Peters, that the hood and goggles you improvised would deflect his—mental commands?"

For a moment Peters, before he replied, looked thoughtfully at his chief.

"I didn't know. I only *knew* that all thought, all energy—everything that is—are fundamentally electrical. And my hood and goggles were made of non-conducting materials."

Except for the subdued snapping of the blazing logs, the room was still. Ethredge's lean, strong fingers soothingly stroked Mary's shoulder. Abruptly, then, Ethredge spoke.

"Do you think you will feel able to start back to the city this morning, Mary?"

She turned toward him. There was still a trembling hint of horror in her voice as she replied:

"Yes, Charles. I want—to get away—from this place. It has been like a nightmare—shot with patches of awful blackness."

Morency coughed, then, the perfect signal of a perfect butler who wishes to attract attention.

"I beg pardon, but it is nearly dawn. Perhaps you would all like coffee? And, since you desire an early start, might I suggest that Miss Mary rouse her cousin and her maid?"

Ethredge glanced through the long, deep windows that overlooked the lake. And he saw that, indeed, the night had given way to the lightening that precedes dawn.

"Thank God," Ethredge was thinking, "that they slept so soundly!" Aloud he said, and there was genuine admiration and friendliness in the words, "The coffee is an excellent suggestion, Morency. I think that we would all like coffee. And Mary can wait a few moments before she calls Katharine. Perhaps you, Morency, will take coffee with us?"