

# Weird Tales

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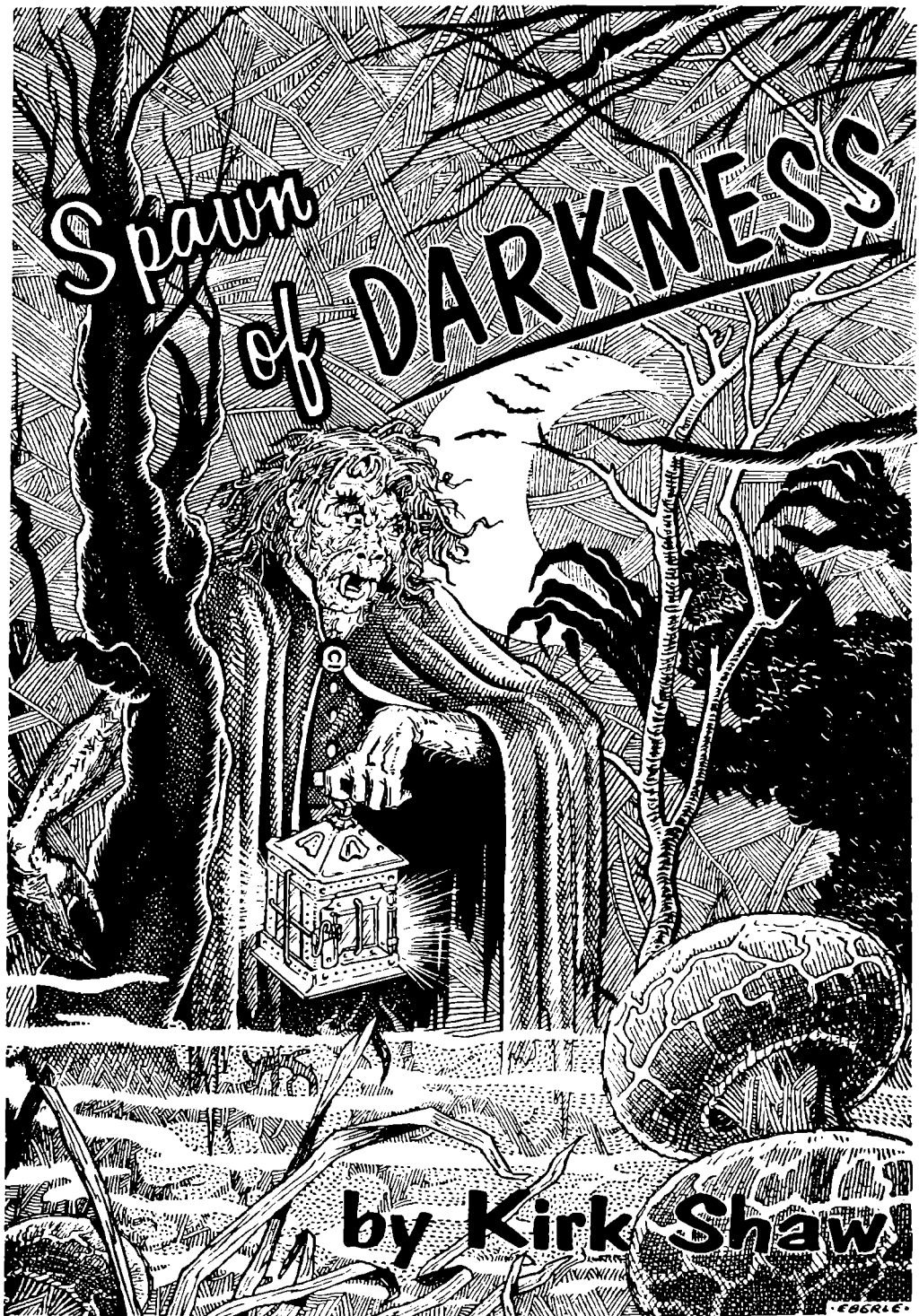
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Heading by Joseph Eberle



... the Old World sometimes seems to live very much  
in the shadow of the past.

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THE sun of the earlier part of the day had completely gone as the car climbed higher among the Cumberland hills, and by late afternoon the sky was dark and forbidding. The first tentative drops of rain appeared on the windscreen and distant thunder, like the angry blundering of some blind beast, rolled round the hills and muttered itself to silence over the dark waters of the lake far down on my left. Like the vanguard of a phantom army long wraiths of cautious mist slithered from every gully and shivered in fitful anticipation as the star shells of lightning ripped the evening asunder and showed up stark and bare the

futile resistance of dripping trees and lowering mountains.

A feeling of insane exhilaration like the frenzy I have known in a storm at sea swept over me. I felt I wanted to shout and sing, and as the rain began to fall heavily I let myself go and sang 'Polly—Wolly—Doodle' at the top of my voice.

'A grasshopper sittin on a  
railroad track,'

'Singing Polly—Wolly—  
Doodle o' a day.'

Crack, went the thunder!  
Down lashed the rain! Water  
slew itself across the wind-  
screen, grabbed at the glass to

peer in at the singing fool and was swept aside by the impartial arm of the wiper.

'A pickin of his teeth wid a carpet tack'  
'Singing Polly—Wolly—Doodle o' a day.'

The car breasted another rise and vaguely through the rain and mist I saw the gray ribbon of the road winding down the hillside to a dark forbidding tunnel of weaving trees. The sight sobered me. I ceased my idiotic singing, stopped the car, and while the full fury of the storm broke and surged around me, I lit a cigarette and watched with awe the majestic pyrotechnic display of the enraged elements.

When the wild loneliness of the countryside began to have its effect on me, I had my first real doubts on the advisability of driving on blindly. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have stayed at the inn where I had dinner? But what the hell! I wanted this holiday to be different, didn't I? It couldn't be so much further to a village or another inn, and if the worst did come to the worst I could always sleep in the car. Another month and I'd be heading back to the States, my own private sentimental journey far behind me. Back to the old grind and an editor who thought me a chuckle-

headed fool for blowing my savings in trying to recapture something that had gone for ever.

But I was ever a sucker for sentiment and the years I had spent in Britain as a war correspondent were just about the happiest of my life. There had been a girl, come to that, there had been two or three girls; nothing very serious but a lasting memory that made me want to have this one last fling while I still had the chance.

I stubbed out the cigarette. I'd be weeping soon if I didn't watch out. I let off the brakes, and started to coast towards the trees. With the engine silent I wound down the window a little and reveled in the sound of the rushing wind squeezing in over the glass as we gathered pace. Down through the streamers of mist that swirled across the highway until the overlapping trees bowed their storm tossed heads and sucked me in.

The car had gained quite a bit of speed by now and in the woods it was pitch dark, so I switched the headlights on full before starting the engine. As the twin lances swept out ahead I stepped hard on the brake, bringing the car up shudderingly.

**O**UTLINED for an instant against the gray background of the mist was a man. With a

peculiar stooping gait he had been crossing the road unaware of my silent approach until I had switched on the lights. When they hit him he threw up a protecting hand to his face, hesitated for a second, then vanished among the trees with one tremendous bound. I saw, or thought I saw his face for only a fraction of a minute, but brother, that fraction was much too long.

I had the impression of a startling whiteness. Not a clean pure white, but the unhealthy paleness of uprooted toadstools. The eyes slanted at a narrow angle and they reflected the headlights with a yellowish gleam. The cheeks were cadaverous and drawn, but the lips that curled back from yellowed teeth were red and sickeningly moist.

Only for a second did he remain pinned in the beams before disappearing among the sodden vegetation, but the encounter unnerved me strangely. My common sense told me that what I had seen was some old hobo frightened out of his wits by the juggernaut rush of the silent car, but I felt shaky and slightly hysterical.

Come flood, storm, or high water, I wouldn't have stepped out of that car just then for all the tea in China.

Instead I started up again, anxious to put as much distance

between me and that spot in the shortest possible time. Too anxious as it proved, for as the road swung abruptly to the right the wood ended—and so did my headlong rush.

**R**IGHT across the road and completely blocking it lay a tall elm uprooted by the storm. I had no time to stop and I did the only possible thing, swinging the wheel desperately in a hopeless attempt to avoid a head on crash. The tires screamed protestingly and branches snapped off loudly as I grazed past them, then a stone gatepost loomed right ahead and jumped at me.

I flung up both arms as the hood collapsed and the windshield starred, before the night exploded in a million brilliant flashes.

**A** COOL gentle touch on my brow brought me sleepily back to this world, and for a minute or two I relaxed and enjoyed the pleasant sensation while I gathered my scattered senses. Carefully I opened my eyes. Oh, let me always awake from my sleep like that! A vision of loveliness was bending over me and gently soothing my brow with a cool sponge. Through veiled lids I watched her. Raven black hair framing a perfectly oval face with a rich ivory skin. Two great brown eyes filled with

tender concern that made me curl in knots inside, and a cupid bow that would be a crime not to kiss. Only the wings were missing, and who the heck worries about wings?

"I always did believe in angels," I murmured dreamily, and as the girl jerked back with a startled exclamation I added, "More! More!"

A deep chuckle of masculine laughter made me open my eyes fully. I was lying on a long tapestry covered sofa in front of a roaring log fire, and from somewhere behind me a dimmed light cast soft warm shadows over a room that was built for comfort. By my side the ministering angel was sitting back on her heels brushing a stray lock of hair from a face that was prettily flushed from my badinage.

Then the owner of the chuckle came into view, a tall well built man in serviceable brown tweeds. In one hand he held a glass towards me while a pleasant grin lit his tanned face.

"I'm sure our friend feels more in need of this now, Vi," he said to the girl in a deep rich voice, and then to me, "I trust sir, that you are feeling none the worse of your accident? We could find no bones broken, but I'm afraid we can't say the same for your car. It's in a bit of a mess."

I accepted the glass gratefully

and let the neat whiskey glow its way down my throat.

"This must be Valhalla." I gasped when I had got my breath back. "First I wake to find an angel looking after me, then I'm given a glass of nectar."

The man chuckled again. It had an infectious quality that made me smile along with him.

"Then let me disillusion you. I can give you my solemn word that you are still in Cumberland, and that Vi's no angel when her temper's roused. Are you, my dear?"

"Beast!" retorted the girl, rising and placing the basin and sponge she had been using on an occasional table. Her voice was just as I had imagined it would be.

"But let me introduce myself." The man was speaking again, "My name is Stafford, and this is my niece, Miss Vivian Hartland."

I acknowledged the introductions, noting the 'Miss' with pleasure.

"And this—" he turned and held out his hand to someone behind me "—is my wife, Sylvia."

"Oh please don't get up." said Mrs. Stafford, appearing from behind the sofa. "You've had a nasty knock, and although I'm glad it hasn't been more serious you really must rest and take things quietly for a little."

I liked Mrs. Stafford right away. She was tall for a woman, gracefully built, and she spoke with a cultured accent, but there was no denying her evident solicitude for my well-being.

"Well I guess I'm still a bit hazy as to how I got here," I apologized, "but for what it's worth my name is Tracy, and I'm certainly grateful for all you've done for me."

"The real person to thank is Archer, our lodge keeper," replied Stafford. "It was his house you almost wrecked when your car hit the gatepost. When he realized what had happened he phoned here, and Silas, that's my brother, went down to help carry you up." The door of the room opened and shut just then, and Stafford looked up. "Oh, and here's Silas now. Mr. Tracy, my brother, Silas Stafford."

The man who appeared and crushed my hand in a vise-like grip, came as a bit of a shock. Massive is the only word that would describe him. He was close on six foot four with great broad shoulders and long arms that terminated in strong muscular hands. I could quite imagine how he must have carried me up like a baby. When he spoke his voice boomed and seemed to vibrate through the room, but what really stunned me was that he was dressed as

a sky pilot. He was the Reverend Silas Stafford.

"Glad you're feeling better, Mr. Tracy," he roared at me, "Sir Hugh thought at first that you were badly hurt."—So he was a 'Sir'? I was moving in high society. But Silas had turned his leonine head now and was addressing his brother. "Brought up his suitcase. Gave it to Meekins to put in his room."

Lady Stafford rescued me from this well meaning but rather overpowering human bear. "I hope you don't mind Mr. Tracy? Silas brought your case up from the car. As it will be quite impossible for you to continue your journey I took the liberty of having a room prepared for you. Were you in a particular hurry to keep an appointment?"

I assured her that time was all my own, but protested that they mustn't inconvenience themselves over me.

"Nonsense, old boy!" Sir Hugh cut in. "I feel a certain amount of responsibility for your accident. After all it was one of my trees and my gatepost that brought you to grief. If you have no definite plans for the immediate future, then you must let me salve my conscience a little by staying at Fardene with us. At least until your car can be repaired."

I protested feebly, but the temptation to see more of Miss

Vivian Hartland, even if she was staying very much in the background at present, was too strong for me to put up much resistance.

So it was settled that I should remain at Fardene Hall for a few days, and in the meantime, Sir Hugh would arrange to have my car towed to the nearest village and repaired.

**A**FTER that things became more informal and we were soon chatting like old friends. Before I realized it, it had gone eleven and the ladies broke up the party by going to bed. Then as I had a nightcap, I watched Sir Hugh, help Meekins, the butler, fit heavy wooden shutters across the windows and secure them with an iron bar.

"Afraid of burglars?" I asked jocularly. "I shouldn't have thought they troubled you so far in the country."

"Much worse," replied Sir Hugh gravely, fitting a bar into its socket. "Three weeks ago, a travelling circus had an accident about fifteen miles from here when one of their wagons ran off the road and burst open. Unfortunately it contained three leopards and they all escaped. Two were rounded up later, but the third is still at large and it has been causing a lot of havoc among the hill flocks."

"But surely you've tried to hunt it down?" I protested in

amazement. "A leopard's a mighty touchy animal and just as likely to attack a human as a sheep."

Sir Hugh struck a match and applied it to an old briar pipe before answering.

"That's not so easy as it sounds. This part of the countryside is still quite wild with houses few and far between. We've tried using dogs to trace the brute and even now there are armed groups scouring the hills and woods. But so far it's been too cunning for us." His voice grew tired and a deep frown lined his forehead. "As you say, the danger is there and I'd feel a lot happier in my mind if I knew that the animal were dead."

Shortly afterwards we went to bed, and what with the long drive and the accident, my head no sooner touched the pillow than I was off in a deep, deep, sleep where strange white faces with glowing yellow eyes mixed in a nightmare fantasy with the lovely features of Vivian Hartland.

**T**HE noise of old fashioned curtain rings gliding on a wooden rail awoke me next morning to see Meekins, his arms outstretched, pulling back the heavy brocade curtains on another dismal wet day. I felt none the worse of my adventures the



previous evening, and as I stretched myself luxuriously on the soft bed I let my thoughts wander. Maybe today I'd get a chance to speak to Vivian alone. Last night there had been little opportunity, and I felt sure she had deliberately kept herself in the background of the conversation.

"A cup of tea, sir." Meekins' carefully modulated voice recalled me from daydreams that were growing a trifle lurid, and I struggled up in bed to accept the proffered cup.

"Thank you, Meekins. Looks like the weather hasn't improved any?"

"No, sir. I'm afraid it's going to be another wet day."

He busied himself around the room, arranging neatly the clothes I had dropped in an untidy heap. Somehow I got the impression that he wanted to say something more. I decided to encourage him. Maybe I could get him to talk about Vivian.

"I feel flattered Meekins," I said, "but isn't it rather unusual for you to call guests in the morning? I thought it would be a maid or someone like that who did that job?"

Meekins straightened, and laid my tie carefully over the back of a chair. He looked tense and—yes, frightened.

"Under normal circumstances, Millie would have called you,

Sir. She is the daughter of the lodge-keeper and was employed as maid in the house. But—" he faltered—"Millie was killed last night."

I sat bolt upright, spilling some of the tea on the quilt.

"Killed? What was—I mean, was it an accident?"

"No, Sir." he gulped and his face whitened while his voice dropped to a whisper. "She was killed by the beast that's roaming the countryside—the leopard. Her father found her this morning with her throat torn out."

"WHAT!" I yelled the word at him.

But Meekins had regained his composure and obviously felt he had overstepped the mark between servant and guest.

"You will find the bathroom second door on the left, Sir. Breakfast will be served in half an hour."

And with that he left me to my thoughts.

**M**ILLIE? The name didn't mean much to me, but I had a vague recollection of a pleasant faced, plumpish girl in a black dress and housemaids' cap, coming in to speak to Lady Stafford the previous evening. Probably about the preparation of this very room. And found by her father? What horror piled on horror. To find your own daughter with her throat torn

out. Poor devil. First the shock of my crashing into his house, and now this—

And the animal? Good God, it was probably still around. Driven from the hills by the rigors of the Cumberland winter it must be seeking shelter in the woods.

I bathed and dressed hurriedly, then made my way downstairs. An open door indicated where breakfast would be served, but I had lost all appetite for food. By the long French windows, Sir Hugh turned from a gloomy contemplation of the weather. I was staggered at the way the night had aged him. All buoyancy had gone from his rugged features leaving them drawn and stern, and from his breeches and leather gaiters I could see he had just been or was about to go out.

"Good morning, Mr. Tracy. I trust you slept well?" A very faint smile flickered at his lips. "I'm afraid you will have a solitary breakfast. The ladies won't be down, and I—I'm not feeling hungry."

"Have they found any trace of it, Sir Hugh?" I asked bluntly.

His eyebrows rose. "Then you know?" and at my nod, "So far—no. But the earlier search was only perfunctory. I was just going out again, would you—?"

"Of course I want to come." I cut in. "I suppose you have

some guns here, and I've done a bit of hunting in my time."

"Good man," he replied briskly. "Come along to the gun-room where I can offer you quite a decent selection. The police have already taken the girl's body away, and Silas has run her father into the village. So I suggest we take my two dogs—they're both gun trained—and see if they can pick up any scent around the lodge."

FROM the cupboard racks in the gun-room I chose a light but powerful sporting rifle, and after putting on raincoats we went round the back of the house to where the kennels were and collected two beautiful red setters. The dismal day seemed to have not the slightest effect on their spirits for they frisked boisterously at the end of their leads as we walked down the long drive to the lodge, Sir Hugh telling me what little he knew of the night's happenings.

Millie had last been seen alive shortly after supper the previous evening when her father had gone off to bed leaving her to wash up the supper dishes. His bedroom was to the front of the house, but although he was a light sleeper he heard nothing unusual all night. In the morning when he came through to the kitchen he had been surprised to find the electric light still

burning, but on going to the back door that was standing open he had immediately found his daughter. She was lying on her back not ten feet from the house, her eyes staring sightlessly up at the leaden sky, her hair wet and bedraggled from the incessant rain that ran down her pallid cheeks. Her high necked dress was torn at the collar, and in her throat the horrible gaping wound.

"Did the police say when they thought she died?" I asked.

"According to Doctor Pearson she had been dead for at least seven hours," replied Sir Hugh.

"Then she was definitely attacked last night and not some time this morning?"

"Yes. The police theory is that after washing up the supper dishes she went out to bring in some clothes she had left on a line. The kitchen door would be open to give her some light and this must have attracted the leopard that crept out of the woods and stalked her."

I shivered at the thought of the animal slinking through the shadows towards the unsuspecting girl. One lightning rush, a spring, and the scream for help would be silenced as its fangs sunk into her throat.

Sir Hugh sensed my thoughts. "It's a horrible picture and the sole redeeming feature is that her death must have been almost

instantaneous. Poor Millie, I doubt if she even had time to realize what had happened."

WE WALKED on in silence, each engrossed in his own thoughts, until we came to the lodge. It was a solid square built little house, and as we rounded the path to the back a hefty young policeman in glistening oilcape, stepped out from the partial shelter of the kitchen doorway. When he recognized Sir Hugh he saluted awkwardly.

"'morning Hawkins," acknowledged the squire, "I've brought down the Baron and Countess to see if they can help us."

I was puzzled at his words until I realized he was referring to the two dogs.

"Aye, Sir, an' they've sent for them there bluidhounds that's out wi' the hill searchers," the policeman informed us. "But I'm thinking the rain'll no give them much chance."

Meanwhile my attention had been taken by the patch of grass immediately opposite the door. It was marked off by four small wooden pegs with twine stretched round them. Millie's body had been lying there. Beyond it a line of sodden washing flapped forlornly in the slight breeze. Common everyday articles—a shirt or two, some handkerchiefs, some underwear—com-

mon everyday articles, but the unwitting cause of Millie's death.

"Her throat was torn you said, Sir Hugh?" I asked with a frown. "I meant it's not just a figure of speech, her throat really was torn?"

"The front of her neck was gone," he replied, "like—like a bite out of an apple. I saw the wound, and God knows when I'll ever forget it."

"But there seems very little blood for such a wound?" I persisted.

The young policeman had been looking slightly green during this exchange, but the ignorance of such an amateur evidently required immediate remedy for he looked pityingly at me and replied laconically.

"Rain!"

Sir Hugh smiled, but he saw what I was getting at.

"I noticed that too, Tracy, and—" he emphasized the word, "—the doctor said she had bled heavily. The body was almost drained of blood."

We walked carefully round the marked area but could see no sign of pad marks on the muddy ground. Then Sir Hugh let the dogs nose around. They wove back and forward for a bit at the end of their leads before starting to pull towards the dripping trees with excited yelps. With a hurried farewell

flung back to the policeman who seemed relieved to see the last of such ghouls we gave the dogs their head.

That they were definitely on to something became obvious from the eager way they surged ahead, and we found it difficult to keep up with them. Underfoot the ground became soggy and slippery and though the actual rain wasn't penetrating the thick branches, water dripped continuously on our bent heads. Every sound was magnified by the close confine, and each snapping twig jerked our guns to the ready. Even the panted snuffling of the dogs sounded unbearably loud, and every now and then I could hear my companion curse softly as he tripped over broken branches. Despite the cold and damp I felt clammy with sweat as I pushed after him.

When we came to the clearing I thought we had passed clean through the woods until I saw the shadowy outline of more trees sweeping silently round the solitary building that stood in the center. The dogs were acting nervously now, whining uncertainly as their heads jerked from side to side and Sir Hugh hung back on the leads to bring them up.

"They're acting damned peculiar, Tracy," he said in a puzzled voice. "Think we can be anywhere near our quarry?"

I nodded towards the lonely gray building. "What's that?"

"That? Oh that's the family vault. All my family for generations have been buried there."

"Could the leopard have taken shelter inside?"

Sir Hugh shrugged. "Quite possible. There's a grilled window on either side and it could have squeezed its way in—look, you can see one of the windows from here."

"Then let's tie the dogs to a tree." I suggested, "and we'll have a closer look. If the brute is in there it will probably be asleep and we don't want the dogs to warn it of our presence."

He did as I suggested, and when the two dogs had lain down at his command we advanced cautiously with our rifles at the ready.

CAREFULLY we approached one of the windows and rising on tiptoe peered in. An artificial twilight cast deep shadows over the whole interior but as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw that it wasn't so dark as I had at first thought. From glass windows in the high domed roof weak light filtered in and I could see the blurry outline of the last resting places of the Staffords.

Sir Hugh's fingers bit deep into my arm, and a pointing finger indicated one of the coffins near

the opposite window. Light played near its foot and from behind it what looked like a long furry snake lay stretched on the floor.

"A tail," he mouthed in my ear and I nodded silently as carefully we began to retrace our steps. When we reckoned we had gone beyond the distance our voices were likely to carry, we held a hasty confab.

Its outcome was that as the leopard lay hidden, one of us must flush it, the other to be ready by the window to shoot as it appeared. Sir Hugh being more used to the guns, it was decided he should take the stance by the window while I created some kind of diversion by the door. Quickly we took up our positions.

As soon as Sir Hugh signed that he was ready I reached for the heavy iron ring of a handle, and with my heart in my mouth began to turn it. The creak of the door sounded monstrous but I was careful not to open it wide enough for any big cat to spring at me. When nothing happened and there was no shot from Sir Hugh, I slid the barrel of my gun into the opening and squinted along the sights. Then as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom I saw the leopard.

It was lying on its side with its head arched back at an unnatural angle. I felt certain that it was already dead.

Still taking every precaution I pulled the door wider and moved in. A quick glance up at the window showed me Sir Hugh's startled face, then I kept my eye on the animal—just in case.

But this particular leopard would kill no more, and when Sir Hugh joined me I saw his eyes open in astonishment. Not only was it dead, but from the signs and smell of decay it had been dead for quite some time. An almost overpowering sense of evil flooded over me as we looked at one another. Then Sir Hugh voiced our unspoken thoughts.

"But who—or what killed Millie?"

**A**FTER a very silent lunch the question still remained unanswered. We had told the ladies that the leopard was dead but had not mentioned for how long, as it would only have scared them unduly. Silas still hadn't returned, so when the meal was finished Sir Hugh decided to drive in and inform the police himself of our discovery, and as Lady Stafford had some arrangements she wanted to attend to regarding Millie's funeral she went with him, leaving me alone with Vivian.

Under any other circumstances I would have welcomed the opportunity of being alone with her, but my mind was so full

with the problem of the dead beast that I was absent-minded and distant. When Vivian excused herself therefore on the plea of having a headache, I felt relief that I could be alone to work out an answer.

I went into the gun-room and taking down the gun I had with me in the morning, I began to clean it although it had not been fired. The whole picture was screwy. The dead sheep—Millie with her throat torn out—and the escaped leopard dead for days.

Still engrossed in the problem I carried the rifle over to the long curtained windows, and I was looking out at the thickening mist when the scream shrilled through the air. It came from above and slightly to the left of me and as I hesitated for a second a dark shape thumped lightly to the ground and began scuttling to the safety of the mist.

My reaction was automatic. Up flew the rifle, and the window shattered as I hurled a bullet through it. With a screech the thing stumbled and fell, but it was on its feet again instantly. As its head turned in my direction I felt shaken and sick—it was the man I had almost run down in the woods. Then he fled and disappeared in the mist.

I threw the rifle aside and took the stairs three at a time to the first landing. But quick as I had

been, Meekins had beaten me to it and already he was hammering on one of the doors.

"Miss Hartland! Miss Hartland! Are you all right? Please unlock the door!"

I barged him aside and threw myself at the heavy door, but it would probably have withstood my onslaught had help not arrived from an unexpected quarter. Silas appeared, and without waiting to ask any questions he flung his great weight against the panelling. At his third charge the hinges collapsed and we surged in.

Vivian lay stretched on the floor, and a cold fear gripped at my heart. But Silas again proved himself a man of action, and bending swiftly he picked her up as if she were a child and carried her to the rumpled bed.

"It's all right," he assured us. "She's only fainted."

**W**HEN Vivian regained consciousness the experience she had gone through flooded back in a terrifying wave, and it took our combined reassurances to quiet her enough to tell us what had happened. Her story sounded macabre in the extreme, and if I hadn't seen that dark form drop to the ground and scuttle off, I would have felt inclined to think she had been suffering from a nightmare.

After going up to her room,

in the hope of getting rid of her headache she had taken a couple of aspirin tablets, removed her dress, and lain down on the bed with the quilt over her. With the quietness of the house she had fallen into a light sleep when a persistent low scratching sound brought her awake. A strange feeling of intense fear had crept over her, and realizing that the scratching came from the direction of the window, she turned her head slowly on the pillow.

On the window ledge, silhouetted against the gray background of the mist, crouched a man. Misshapen and bent, she could make little of what he was like or what he was doing until she saw one hand, a bony parchment like hand with long cruel fingers, rasp down the side of a pane. He was slowly and painstakingly picking out the lead that held in the glass. At that instant he grew suddenly aware of the girl's scrutiny, and lifting his head peered in at her. Separated by a few feet and a thin sheet of glass she saw clearly the drawn pallid features, the glittering yellow eyes, the slobbering red lips, and the sharp discolored fangs.

Terrified as the creature writhed back its lips in a snarl, she screamed and flung herself from the bed—the rest we knew.

Sir Hugh and Lady Stafford returned shortly after we had persuaded the frightened girl

that her unholy visitor would not return, and while Lady Stafford ran upstairs to comfort her, we three men sat down to a council of war.

"But it's impossible, Tracy," said Sir Hugh in bewilderment, "The wall outside Vivian's bedroom is sheer and there's neither ivy nor a suitable pipe that anyone could have climbed. She must have imagined it—mixed a bad dream with reality."

"Then I just shot Vivian's dream," I replied scathingly "—or perhaps I imagined that too?"

"And don't forget Millie," cut in his brother, "nor the dead leopard. Hughie, there's no use continuing burying our heads like ostriches. You know as well as I do that neither of us felt too happy about blaming any circus leopard for what's been happening recently. Oh it was convenient I grant you, but both of us had the Fardene curse at the back of our minds all the time."

"The Fardene curse?" I queried. "What has Millie's death or the scaring of Vivian got to do with a curse?"

Silas looked quizzically at his brother whose downcast head nodded silently. The baronet's shoulders had bowed as he sat hunched in his chair, and I felt pity for this obviously very worried man. But I had little time

for conjecture as Silas started speaking again.

"A curse, Mr. Tracy, is probably something you rarely encounter in your enlightened land, and even then it is only in the form of profanity. But over here we still live in the shadow of the past, and a curse in its old sense had a very vital and totally different meaning to our forefathers.

"The curse on Fardene for instance goes back to the days of the Stuart kings, when twin brothers of that name shared the title to these lands. Twins they were physically but by nature they were extreme opposites. Rupert was what the Scots would term 'unca guid,' but his life was dedicated to the ungodly aim of amassing a personal fortune. Hector, his brother, was a renegade as far as the church was concerned. A man with a nasty name regarding women, and the center of dark rumors of an even viler nature.

"Nothing definite was ever known to Hector's discredit until the death of a young girl, one of the tenants, under rather horrible circumstances. Public opinion rose against the brothers, and to protect himself Rupert gave damning evidence that resulted in Hector being tried and found guilty of practicing Black Magic. He was condemned to death at the local assizes, and when sen-



tence was passed on him he cursed and swore at the brother who had betrayed him. He swore that he would be revenged and that whenever the House of Fardene flourished he would bring its name down in dishonor."

Silas paused to light a cigarette and I took the opportunity of asking a question that had me puzzled.

"But surely, although this is still Fardene Hall the curse won't apply to the Staffords?"

Silas smiled. "'Fraid so, Old Man. The name Fardene died out in the nineteenth century, but the Staffords are legal descendants on the female side of the family. But as I was saying, Hector was hung, and a pretty ghastly business it was by all accounts requiring two men to hang on his legs before the rope did its grisly work.

"After his death, Rupert flourished and made quite a bit of money. Then came the Civil War and the start of the Fardene curse. Cromwell's men captured this house that had remained loyal to the king, and failing to force Rupert to tell where his money was hidden, they squeezed him into a small iron cage and suspended him above his own doorway until he starved to death.

"Twice more since then the curse has brought ruin on the

family just when it seemed to be most prosperous. Now old Hugh here has raised the family fortune once more and we have been plagued by these weird happenings."

Silas leaned forward to stub out his cigarette. When he looked up his face was apologetic.

"Must sound childish and superstitious to you, Mr. Tracy, especially coming from a man of my cloth, but as I said before, we live very much in the shadow of the past over here."

"But surely there is something we can do?" I burst out in exasperation. "Curse or no curse, what I shot at was solid enough, and if I can wound it, why can't we exterminate it?"

Sir Hugh sat up with a jerk. "Wounded it!" he exclaimed. "Then there may be a trail we can follow. Anything would be better than sitting here waiting for something else to happen."

"Of course!" I cried excitedly, jumping to my feet. "Why the devil didn't I think of that before?"

TEN minutes later saw the three of us scouting around the area where I had seen the creature fall, safe in the knowledge that Meekins was sitting stolidly outside the bedroom of the two women.

Sir Hugh was the first to find any trace, a brownish gray patch

that discolored the fallen leaves. From it at intervals we found other spots that led us over the path the fugitive had followed in his escape through the woods. All around us lay the unnatural silence of the mist, as careful not to make too much noise we followed the uneven drops.

It was with no great surprise that I found we had left the wood and were once more in the little glade of the mausoleum. Straight to its door the blood-stains led us—and entered.

The hairs on the back of my neck grew rigid and once again I knew the overpowering sense of evil I had felt when we found the leopard's body. But we were three against whatever lurked in there, and cautiously we entered.

On the dusty floor the spots of blood were easier to see, and across the vault they led us to an old wooden coffin, green with age. On its side were marks where the dust had been scuffed, and I heard Sir Hugh draw in his breath sharply as with a shaking finger he pointed to the almost illegible plate on the lid:

**HECTOR FARDENE**

**DIED 1626**

**A MAN OF SIN.**

Silas broke the uneasy silence with a strong steady whisper.

"It looks as if we have traced

the killer home. It only remains for us to remove the lid and make certain."

My hand trembled as I reached for one of the heavy screws to open the coffin, but I had no need to turn it. Their grooving didn't hold the wood. Together we lifted the lid.

Within lay the man I had last seen as he fled from Fardene Hall. His eyes were closed, and the thin cruel hands lay folded on his breast. From one corner of his tightly closed lips drooled a saliva stain of blood, and there were ugly blotches of it staining the wooden sides of the coffin. One leg of the trousers was torn and through the rent showed the taut parchment-like skin. A black bullet hole still oozed tiny drops—my snap shot had been a good one.

Silas had hooked one finger in the man's collar, and now he pulled down the cloth exposing the scrawny neck. There was a band of deep brown skin right round the throat. I remembered my hands when a sail I had been handling jerked through them—it was a rope burn.

**W**E LEFT the lid leaning against the coffin and made our way out into the open. Despite the clammy atmosphere of the mist it felt clean and wholesome compared to that of the tomb.

"What do we do now?" Sir Hugh's face was white and I knew that I must appear the same, but Silas proved the tower of strength.

"I don't think there is anything you can do," he said quietly. "By virtue of my office the task automatically falls on me. I only pray I have faith and strength enough to see it through."

I remembered stories I had heard of stakes being driven through bodies and heads being cut off, and I felt sick in the pit of my stomach. But Silas's only weapon was his hand as he stepped forward to the door of the tomb, and making the sign of the Cross began to intone in Latin.

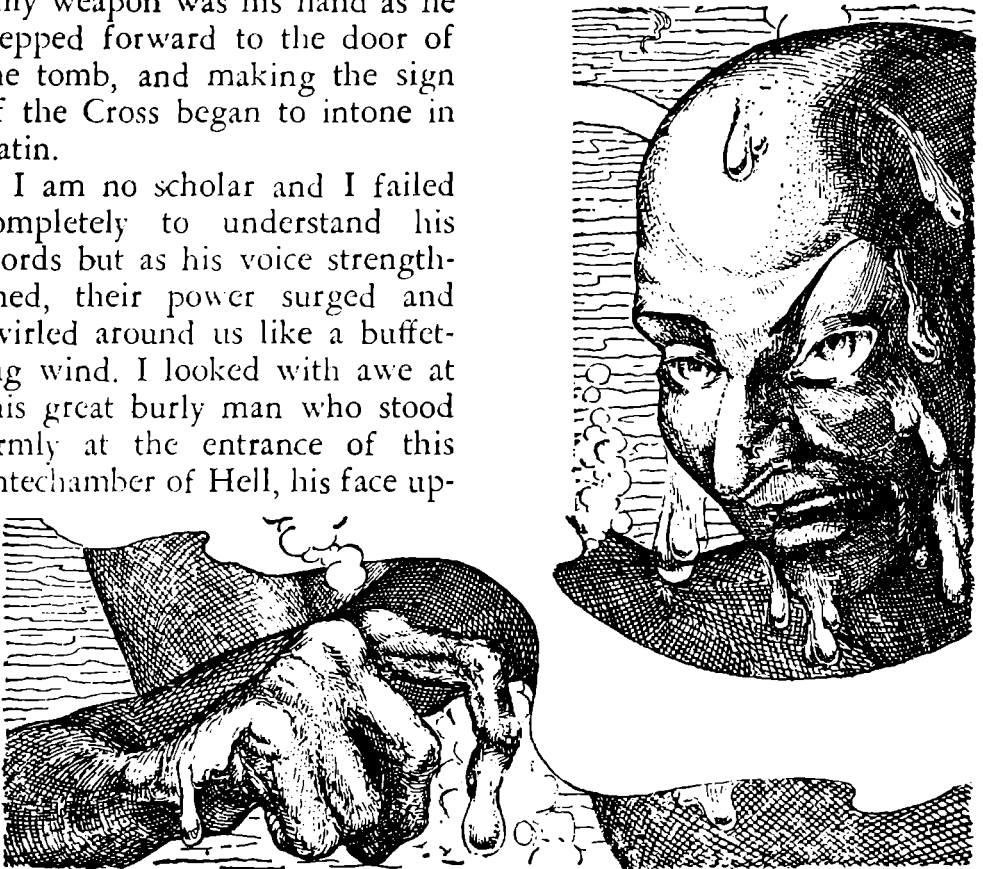
I am no scholar and I failed completely to understand his words but as his voice strengthened, their power surged and swirled around us like a buffeting wind. I looked with awe at this great burly man who stood firmly at the entrance of this antechamber of Hell, his face up-

lifted and lit by an inner glow as he repeated the ancient protection against the powers of Evil.

From the tomb rose a smell of carnage, so vile that my knees grew weak and feeble, and I knew that the evil thing within was answering his challenge to battle.

Sir Hugh swayed beside me and I could hear his hoarse voice whispering the Lord's Prayer over and over again, but my eyes were fixed on Silas.

His face was serene and majestic, but great beads of sweat glistening on his forehead told



of the inner conflict. Again his hand rose in the sign of the Cross, and from the tomb came a clatter as the lid of the coffin fell to the floor. Through the open doorway I could just see past Silas's body, and I saw the thing in the coffin sit up.

The great burning eyes fixed themselves in hate and fear on the face of its adversary, the slobbering lips writhed back displaying the yellowed fangs, and the creature squirmed as if in pain. Slowly I saw it rise from its unclean bed, and swaying upright begin a drunken lurch towards us.

**T**REMBLING with fear I dropped to my knees babbling half forgotten prayers from my childhood. Then the skies ripped asunder. Crash after crash of thunder pealed and roared around us. Vivid streaks of forked lightning tore the skies apart—and ever the voice of Silas grew louder and louder above the awful roar of the storm. In the doorway appeared the vampire, its fingers hooked to tear at the throat of the man who swayed it before the powers he invoked.

"It's no use." I moaned, "it's no use." And the fireball struck! A blinding thunderbolt that smashed on the ornate iron cross

surmounting the mausoleum and shattered the high domed roof.

For a second the cross teetered and I saw the vampire look up. Its mouth opened in a snarl that it never uttered as the cross crashed down. High on its chest the iron spike drove in, then the building collapsed in ruins, obscuring everything in a cloud of dust.

As quickly as it had risen, the storm swept over and I rose on wavering legs. Silas was on his knees and I feared the falling masonry had struck him down. But as I drew near I saw that his lips were moving silently and that tears trickled from his closed eyelids—he was praying in gratitude.

Sir Hugh was beside me and he whispered a hoarse, "Look!"

I followed the direction of his finger to where the body of the vampire lay half buried in the broken stone, the iron cross rising triumphant from its chest. It was no longer the terrifying creature that had killed Millie or threatened Vivian. Cheated for so long, the grave had reached out its long delayed hand to claim its own.

All that remained was a skeleton form with some few patches of flesh, clothed in garments over which the mould spread before our eyes.

