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Spawn of Inferno

By HUGH B. CAVE

*Blackness, thick and impenetrable, rolled up like a thick fog,
as a Thing from outer darkness sated its ghastly appetite*

IT IS a well-remembered fact, at least in certain circles, that in the year 184— the quiet little city of Darbury, in western Massachusetts, was for a brief interlude of blackness completely in the grip of mortal terror. From time eternal, darkness has brought fear; and the darkness that swept down on the streets and homes of Darbury, during those hours of madness, was a thousand times more intense than night. Under cover of it, as under the cover of an impenetrable fog, murders were done and houses looted. For a sudden brief interval of horror, the entire city stopped breathing and became wrapped in a living layer of pitch.

Learned men, of course, made haste to offer explanations. The sun, they said, had done something unusual. Or an unknown planet had come between earth and sun, in some dizzy flight through the ether. Or a mighty magnetic force had suddenly seized that particular portion of the earth's crust in its grip.

The people, ignorant of even the rudiments of science, accepted those idiotic explanations and believed them. Years later, when I read of that "dark interlude," I too believed the current explanations. Being a man of medicine, I knew no more of advanced science than the ordinary layman.

But today, with those hours of terror long since past and forgotten, I found something else. I had chanced, as was often my habit, to visit the library of old Doctor Bruce Moller, who died several

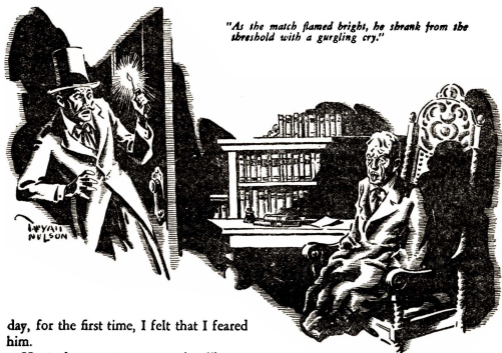
years ago at the age of ninety-four. In his musty rooms today I prowled from one shelf to another until, by some queer twist of fortune, I picked up an old, withered thing in red leather covers. The title of it was *Creatures of the Beyond*—strangely significant in view of the yellow manuscript that lay between its pages!

The first sheet of that manuscript was missing. I give the rest of it here precisely as it was set down in the fine, condensed handwriting of Doctor Moller, in the thick sheaf of papers that I found in his library. When I say that I had known Doctor Moller for several years, and known him to be an utterly sane and honest man, I think I have said enough.

Here is Doctor Moller's account:

. . . have just come from the home of Antone Sergio. He is a peculiar man, Sergio, growing older and visibly weaker with each successive time that I see him. Never have I seen a man so cynical and bitter toward mankind. He has, of course, no living kin. Lives alone in that house of gloom on Lantor Street, with no companion other than the rat-faced Lober, his assistant.

When I went there today, Sergio himself let me in the front door; and as I followed him down the hall I felt that I was following a man already dead, or following some strange jungle creature, shaggy and deformed. He is not actually deformed, in the medical sense of the word, but his crouching shuffle is like the walking of an anthropoid ape. To-



"As the match flamed bright, he shrank from the threshold with a gurgling cry."

day, for the first time, I felt that I feared him.

He took me at once to the library, where he sat down abruptly and faced me, leaving me to stand ill at ease and considerably confused by his hostile attitude.

"Moller," he said—he pronounces my name with that peculiar accent of his, until it sounds like Merler—"you have come here today to examine me?"

His tone was practically a challenge. I felt that he hated me, and it was a most uncomfortable feeling.

"You've put yourself in my care," I scowled. "If you wish to consult another physician, Sergio, that's your privilege. But as long as I'm looking after you, it's my duty to come here."

He studied me for some time, as if he would read my mind and find there some other reason for my coming. I believe he suspected me of prying into his scientific secrets.

"Yes," he muttered, "it is your duty to come. I am not well, of course. My head——" And then suddenly he got

to his feet, glaring at me with those deep, close-set eyes of his. "But you would like to know what I do in this house, Moller, would you not? You're curious! You want to snoop around and find out things!"

He was completely transformed. I did not dare to resist him when he seized my arm and dragged me to the door. His grip was heavy; his fingers dug savagely into my coat; his eyes were afire with some unholy glow of triumph.

He led me then down the long corridor that extends through the entire lower floor of the house; and, at the end of it, pushed me into a narrow, ill-lighted room that lay beyond. Before I had taken two steps over the threshold, I knew that the room was his laboratory, the place where he spent hours and days at a time, pottering about with his instruments.

"I will not have you coming here at

all hours," he snapped irritably. "You come to spy on me!"

I protested. He smothered my protest with a burst of vehemence which startled me.

"I would rather tell you what I do here! Tell you, do you understand? I won't have you prowling about like a thief in the night. Because I am not well, you use me as an excuse to come here. I will show you what is in this room, and then I will defy you! Do you hear?"

He was standing with his arms half lifted, facing me. His tangled head of white hair came only to my shoulders; and beyond him I could see his assistant, Lober, standing at the far end of the room, staring mutely toward us.

Then Sergio seized my arm again and pulled me to a wooden bench that extended from one end of the chamber to the other, along the wall. As he bent over it, ignoring me for an instant, I saw a pile of loose papers, charts. With one of these in his hand, he turned on me again.

"You're not a scientist," he declared. He knew I was not; yet I could tell from the triumph in his voice that it gave him pleasure to mock my ignorance. "Then look here! Look!"

He lifted the chart to my eyes. I studied it intently, and scowled at it. It seemed to me to be nothing more than a huge circular outline, crossed with intricate perpendicular and horizontal markings which signified nothing.

"You think you know all the secrets of this paltry universe of ours," he gloated. "You've read the Bible and studied your medical books, and you're quite certain of everything under the sun. You blind fool! I'm going to tell you some truths!"

And he told me. It was madness. He spoke of a world of darkness; he de-

scribed horrible shapeless denizens of what he called the Dimension of Death. He was not concerned with ordinary beliefs of a spirit world, or of communication between the dead and the living. Good heavens, no! His talk was of mighty elementals—vicious monsters which were hovering within reach, black and hungry, separated only by what he termed the "walls of dimension." I can see no good in repeating such madness here.

"Do you know what would happen, Moller," he demanded, "if the gate were opened? If these demons of the Death Dimension should discover a doorway to our puny earth?"

I DID not trouble to answer him. I wanted very much to go away; yet there was a quality of eagerness in his voice that fascinated me. Lober, too, was listening from his place at the other end of the chamber. He had not moved, but he had stopped his work, so that the room was utterly silent except for the shrill voice of my patient.

As for Sergio, he stared at me in silence for some time. Then, slowly, the glare in his eyes died. He laughed softly.

"Come," he said. "I'll show you."

He took me into the shadows, where the light was so dim that I could scarcely see the things about me. As we went, he began once again to talk. This time his voice was soft, no longer shrill with excitement.

"There is a gateway, Moller," he said. "It is the door to hell. Some day I will open it, and then you will know that I speak truths. Look there."

I followed him a dozen more paces, and there, almost invisible, I saw a solid block of some unnamed metal—something that looked for all the world like a huge square of carborundum. It was colorless and opaque, crystalline in ap-

pearance, and yet the many tiny facets gave off no light. About four feet square it seemed, with a score of thin wires attached to its surface. My companion was pointing, with a hand that was very careful not to reach too close, to the medley of wires.

"What is it?" he said. "Perhaps some day I'll tell you, Moller. It is the result of most of my life. A combination of four substances, fused together under terrific heat. Lifeless. Dead. Not a spark of power in it.

"But here"—his hand jerked aside to fall on a huge, polished machine—"here is the thing that gives it life! And in the core of that block, Moller, are mirrors. Hundreds of them. Have you ever tried to place three right angles at right angles to one another? No? Try it, Moller. Then you will realize what I mean when I tell you that there, inside that mass, are *seven* of them!"

His voice had, strangely enough, become shrill again. He was intensely excited. His fingers closed over a black-handled switch at the edge of the table beside him. He looked first at me, then at the switch. Then he said sharply:

"A moment after I have thrown this, the world will know horror. Do you hear, Moller? Do you understand? In the space of one moment I can release into this dimension a horde of demons from the Land of Death! And I can control them! I can make them do as I will!"

He stood rigid. There was no color in his face; it was ghastly white with emotion.

"Do you know why I have told you this?" he rasped. "Because I wish to! Because I want some living person to know what is happening when the world becomes black and cold with the vileness of the Death Dimension! Because you are an ignorant, stupid fool without imag-

ination—and will not believe me! Now go!"

He pointed to the door. I think he would have struck me if I had not obeyed him. Yet as I left the room I was conscious of a pair of staring eyes—Lober's eyes—following me. Then, a few moments later, I had traversed the corridors and stood on the stone steps of that madhouse.

I am writing this down because, though I believe the whole affair to be a fantastic hoax, I have been possessed with a most unnatural sense of foreboding ever since leaving Antone Sergio's house. The sight of him, white-haired, bitter, defiant, standing in that dimly lighted room filled with strange instruments of science, has left an impression upon me that I can not easily erase.

Perhaps some day I shall laugh at myself for recording such nonsense; but the thought comes to me that after all I am merely a man of medicine, ignorant of the secrets of science and metaphysics. This man knows more than I, certainly; and if he has the power he claims to have, he will not hesitate to use it! He is alone in the world and, as I have said, bitter in his relations with it. He would send it to destruction, if he could, with a grim laugh.

However, there is nothing more to say now. Perhaps at some later day I may have something to add to this account.

IT IS now two days since my uncanny visit to Antone Sergio's home. For twenty-four hours after writing the first part of this account of my relations with him, I considered myself an utter fool for doing so. Now, after what has happened—though it may have no direct connection with Sergio's "machine"—I think myself a fool no longer!

Last evening, about seven o'clock, a

street urchin came to my office in the square. I was in at the time (I still reside in the little suite of rooms at the rear of the office) and he placed in my hands a sealed envelope.

The envelope—I have it before me now—is gray in color and bears in black ink my name: Bruce Moller. The only significant clue to the handwriting is the fact that the words are written in a strained, back-handed manner, as if the writer were unused to such an angle.

But the contents needed no detailed study. They were inscribed in the same strained characters, and the words were these:

"You are perhaps prepared for death, Doctor Moller? If not, prepare yourself, for you have less than twenty-four hours to live. You are to be destroyed."

That was all. There was no signature, no fantastic details such as usually accompany uncouth threats of violence. No reason for my impending death; merely a straightforward statement that I should die!

For an hour, perhaps, I studied the note. During that interval I went over my past history with the utmost care, seeking to remember the name of a man who might desire to murder me. My practise has been a successful one; I have caused no deaths on the operating-table, nor have I been indirectly associated with any deaths. I could find no reason why any sane man should wish to destroy me.

I had put the note down with a shrug, and was about to retire, when the door of my room echoed to a slight knock. Before I could cross the room, the door opened. My old colleague, Pedersen, stood there on the sill.

He came forward quietly. Pedersen is a stolid chap who seldom shows excitement; he is large and strong as an ox; it was he who founded the Darbury Athletic Club. And the first thing I noticed, as he

advanced toward me, was the gray envelope in his fist. An envelope precisely the same as the one that lay at that moment on my table!

"I've received the most infernal threat, Moller," he said. "Twenty-four hours they give me to live. And the damned thing is not signed!"

That was like Pedersen; he is the sort of fellow who would pay more attention to the irregularity of form than to the warning of destruction. When I turned and indicated the note that lay on my own table, he merely went to it, picked it up, and read it. Then he replaced it.

"What do you think, Moller?" he demanded, swinging on me. "Same writing, same paper. Sent, of course, by the same man. What man in Darbury or the surrounding district might wish to have us both murdered?"

I had no answer. He was merely repeating a question to which I had already failed to find an answer—except that he now included himself in it.

"I was on my way to After Street, Moller, when this thing was thrust into my hand," he frowned. "It was dark, and I missed seeing the chap's face. Small fellow, he was—rather shrivelled. Of course, I didn't see him closely. He didn't intend me to. When I finally stopped under a street lamp and read the note—took me some time, too, in the gaslight—he was gone."

I nodded. "Mine," I said, "came by messenger, an hour ago. I'd better keep in touch with you. There may be something behind these notes that we don't understand." And as I spoke, I could not get away from his description of the man who had waylaid him: "Small fellow, rather shrivelled." Could it have been Sergio? Did my half-mad patient really believe in the power of his "Gateway to the Death Dimension," and in-

tend to throw that queer black-handled switch?

I said good-night to Pedersen rather lamely, and stood at the door, listening to the beat of his footsteps on the stairs. Then, shutting the door quietly, I went back to the table and once again took up that gray envelope.

That was last night. I am wondering, as I write this, what the next move in our little comedy will be!

I HAVE just learned, by messenger, that Vernon, too, has received a threat of death. Vernon, in his note, describes the letter he received (it came by runner, as mine did) as being "written on gray paper in a queerly reversed script, as if the fellow had made a definite effort to disguise his hand." He says further: "I can't see any reason for the thing, Moller. Good Lord, I've been in medical work for a good many years, but I don't believe I've made any enemies as severe as this. He can murder me if he likes, though I'm inclined to believe the whole thing is a hoax; but what will it get him? I've no money—never knew a medical man yet who did have!—and the most he can get is the satisfaction of seeing my dead carcass. Have you any explanation?"

An explanation? No, I had none. When I had finished reading the note, I was no nearer a solution than before. But now, thank God, I am!

It came to me a moment ago. Vernon, Pedersen, and I—what had we three done together at any time? And then, with a start, I realized the truth. It was we three who condemned Carmen Veda to the asylum for the insane, less than a month ago. The case had been brought to us for examination, had been separately analyzed by each of us. We had found the girl to be completely insane, and had recommended that she be confined.

But these notes of murder—who could have sent them? I had myself carefully looked up the girl's history and discovered that she had no relatives. Perhaps, if she had had some one to care for her, we should have been less severe in our decision; but she had been friendless, destitute, completely alone. A pretty girl, too, and hardly more than twenty; but youth and beauty are no guarantee against an unbalanced mind. Pedersen, especially, had maintained that she would be better cared for in the institution than if she were allowed to prowl the streets in her weakened mind. And so, at the recommendation of the three of us (the law requires more than a single testimony in such a case) the girl was put away.

And so, too, I have stumbled on the solution—if that *is* the solution—of our mysterious threats. What will follow now, I do not know; but I shall make haste to acquaint both Pedersen and Vernon with my discovery. It is better that they be warned at once of their danger. The allotted twenty-four hours will be up soon. Whatever is to be done must be done at once. It is morning now, and daylight, and I assume that we are safe enough until nightfall. When darkness comes, I intend to remain in my rooms and be ready for—

IT is three weeks now since I wrote that last interrupted line of this narrative. As I worked over the manuscript, I was sitting at my table by the window so that the light would reach me.

And then, in the midst of my efforts, the room in which I sat became completely black. Black, I say—not merely dark!

It did not come suddenly. To be truthful, I do not know just how it did come. I was engrossed in my account and became conscious, all at once, that the chamber was no longer warm with sun-

light. It was as if a great black cloud had slowly obscured the sun. That was my first impression.

I got up, groping and bewildered, and went to the window. Outside, the square was a blur of pitch; and even as I watched, motionless and completely astonished, it became a complete void. I could see nothing; not even the outline of the First Unitarian Church and the tower. I remember how deeply that fact impressed me; for on the blackest of black nights the tower inevitably loomed against the sky line a spear-point sentinel, one shadow against another. Now there was no shadow. There was nothing!

Dazed, and vaguely afraid, I went stumbling back across the room to my table, and lit the lamp there. By its feeble glow I could see the face of the clock on the mantel. The hour was eleven o'clock *in the morning*.

As I turned away, a single thought possessed me, to the exclusion of everything else. This uncanny darkness was a dreadful thing, to be sure—it was utterly without explanation—but the danger that lay *in the darkness* was what spurred me on. I must go to Pedersen, go to Vernon, and warn them. In this vicious blackness, brought on by some unearthly phenomenon, they were doubly in peril. Whoever had written those notes, threatening us with destruction, would no doubt take advantage of the sheltering gloom and creep upon us like a shadow.

A shadow! The thought held mocking humor. Even as I tugged on my coat and threw open the door of my room, the lamplight from my table was throwing shadowy, shapeless forms over the walls behind me. The light itself was being smothered, as effectively as if armless hands were lowering a shroud over its wick. As I groped down the stairs, the darkness triumphed. With macabre sig-

nificance it welled out and around me, burying me.

How I found Pedersen's home—how I succeeded in getting across the square—I do not quite know. At every step I was conscious of muffled excited voices: voices filled with fear and terror. Shapes brushed past me. At intervals, as I stumbled blindly along, things struck against me, thrusting me aside. I heard screams—women's screams—from nowhere. Once I heard a screech almost at my feet, and then the snarling, animal-like sounds of two bodies fighting in the gutter.

For perhaps half an hour I hurried on, finding my way by instinct and because I had traversed the same route so many times before. As I went, I heard the tower clock strike the half-hour almost directly above me; yet I could see nothing—not even the outlines of the buildings I stumbled against. Voices—things—hurrying past, stumbling over one another, lurching into me, snatching at me, cursing, screaming—there was nothing more.

I knew, too, that under cover of the blackness murders were being committed, and the blackness itself was murder. It was no ordinary gloom; it was alive with a thin, tenuous, almost inaudible whining sound that seemed to come from the very bowels of it. It was a living, viscous thing, or a million living things—a wave of slithering, down-pressing exhalation, utterly vile and evil. Within it, the alley rats were abroad, gloating over their opportunity for plunder. More than once I heard cries of abject horror, so close that I might have reached out and touched the women who uttered them; and they were cut short as unseen filthy paws closed over the lips of the unfortunate victims.

And so I reached Pedersen's home. I fell while climbing the steps; and to my surprize the door hung wide. Mechanically I stepped into the hall. Not a sound

came from the big structure above me. There was no light, no lamp burning.

I called aloud, shouting my friend's name. The empty rooms only echoed my own outcry. And then—I say this with no attempt to be dramatic—an unutterable fear came over me.

For a moment I stood there in the hall, undecided whether to turn and run or to advance further. The living darkness was in my eyes, in my throat, vibrant with its high-pitched *whirring* sound and hideous with a stench of fetid decay. It clung here, in the corridor of Pedersen's home, a thousand times more ugly than in the street outside. It was stalking me.

Then I found false courage. Resolved to find my friend or at least discover where he had gone, I crept forward. I say "crept"—it was creeping, nothing more. With both hands outflung before me as a barrier of defense, I went slowly down the hall. Somehow in the dark I found the door of Pedersen's library, the room where he spent most of his time. And this door, too, was open. Never in all the years I had known Pedersen, had he gone off and left the door of his most private sanctum open.

Here I struck a match. The sulfur sputtered and suddenly flared bright; and I shrank from the threshold with a gurgling cry. I saw that scene only for an instant; yet as I write this account three weeks later, it is still vivid and frightful. Before me lay the narrow, book-lined room with its single table. A huge carved chair stood by the table; and in that chair, staring straight toward me, sat Pedersen.

When I say that the man's face was a mask of unspeakable horror, I mean just that. I have seen torment before, where torment is a routine thing. I have handled crushed, broken bodies on the operating-table; I have watched men and

women die slow deaths when the more merciful thing would have been a bullet. But Pedersen's face, when I looked into it at that moment, was the essence of all agony. The eyes protruded like sticks of charcoal; the tongue was a black, bloated, lolling horror. And the body below that was no body at all, but a shapeless, bloody mass of sodden pulp, propped there in mockery.

I did not strike another match. Why I did not whirl about and rush away, I do not know. Perhaps it was loyalty that dragged me to my friend's side; perhaps it was something else which is better left unexplained. I know that I paced forward and stood over him, and I was aware of a stench that did not come from his mutilated body. The entire chamber was filled with it—a reek of obscene rot that was strangely like the smell of sour milk. It hung about the body like a malignant *presence*, of the exhalations of some malignant presence which *had been* here.

It was that vileness, more than anything else, which thrust me back and caused me to realize my position. Good God, I was standing here like a blind man, stiff with horror, while another of my friends was in danger of the same death! If the murderer had found one victim, he would seek a second. He would go to Vernon's rooms, or possibly to mine. Wherever he went, I must reach there first!

I stumbled out of the room, along the passage to the door. As I went out into the utter blackness of the street, I realized for the first time that I was cold, horribly cold. It was as though every spark of heat and radiation had been removed. The pavement was like ice. The very air, as I breathed it, seemed to penetrate my lungs with needle-like sharpness.

I SHOULD have known, then, what had happened. That combination of darkness and cold, coming so soon after Antonio Sergio's threats of annihilation, should have brought the solution to me in a flash. But it did not. At that moment I could think of but one thing—that I must get to Vernon at once, without an instant's delay. The horror of my own situation was, during that interim of madness, a secondary thing. I scarcely heard the screams and cries that echoed about me as I hurried through the veil. I hardly felt the lunging shapes that struck out at me. I must get to Vernon! To Vernon!

His rooms were half a mile distant, across the square again. I walked quickly, as quickly as I dared. There were no lights to guide me. Had there been—had the lamp-lighters come out of their holes and created their usual friendly patches of yellow glow in the dark—I might have been less terrified. The street lamps would not have been much, to be sure. Merely flickering haloes of uncertain light at rare intervals. But they would have enabled me to see the shadowed outlines of my surroundings. They would have been beacons, and by groping from one to another I might have found my way across the square, and reached that obscure by-street which harbored my friend's rooms, with more haste.

Yet I knew, even as I cursed the veil, that those same street lamps would have availed nothing. Good heavens, if this infernal dark had smothered sunlight, how could artificial flames of gaslight prevail against it? Even the insignificant match which I had struck in Pedersen's library—even that had been extinguished. *Extinguished*, I say! It had not burned itself out; it had been snuffed out, choked out, annihilated by this foul and mon-

strous darkness which was a living, breathing, whining entity!

God, how I wanted light! Had there been even a faint glow from the upper window of Vernon's rooms, as I approached, I might have shouted for joy. But there was none; there was nothing. I stumbled up the steps; and the lower door, like the door of Pedersen's house, swung wide before me. I rushed into the hall, shouting my friend's name. There was no response. I heard no sound at all as I ascended the winding staircase. The door on the upper landing, too, was ajar. I remember clawing my way along the wall and colliding with it, and being almost grateful for its very presence. Here at last was something sane and solid; here were familiar surroundings, albeit lightless and silent. Vernon would be inside, and I could end my horrible pursuit of shadows. Vernon was a level-headed, cool fellow, rugged and indifferent to danger. He would laugh at my fears and find an explanation for the awful darkness and cold which had descended upon us.

I pushed the door wide, eagerly. With one hand on the knob and one foot poised over the sill, I became rigid. A cry of stark terror jangled from my lips, and I remember hearing it echo and re-echo through the upper reaches of the structure above me.

It is hard to convey the full awfulness of that scene. In the first place, the room was not dark; it was alight with an unearthly greenish glow which emanated from the uncouth shape before me. No hue of heaven or hell was ever like that oily, viscous mass of writhing vapor, dangling half-way between floor and ceiling, above Vernon's chair. No living thing born of woman was ever even remotely like that hideous abhorrence. No stench from the foulest slaughter-house

ever approached that vile reek of living death and embryonic putrescence.

The thing had no certain outlines, no definite form. It possessed no single human characteristic—arms, legs, or face. It was a thousand times more horrible than any twisted mockery of human life. It was like a monstrous malformed devil-fish with bloated, swollen tentacles; and from the very center of its loathsome mass came the sound of its breathing.

Breathing, I call it! God, that sound! Like a gigantic slug the thing enveloped Vernon's chair—and it was *eating!* I could hear the sucking of its unseen maw. I could hear its shapeless lips—if it *had* lips—drooling blood and tearing flesh. I could hear bones snapping, splintering, grinding. . . .

And then I saw!

People have asked me, since that night of inferno, why I refuse to work over the operating-table; why I shudder at the sight of torn flesh. They say I am getting old and fearful of using the knife. But no fear of old age can ever be like the awful torment of that instant!

Before my eyes the vile thing moved. Would to God I had stepped back out of range of vision; but I stood there, transfixed, and watched. The monster slithered sidewise, to fasten itself more securely on its victim. For perhaps five seconds I gazed upon the mangled, pulpy shape beneath it—the pitiful form which had once been Vernon.

Then I ran.

The thing did not follow me. I doubt if it even realized my presence, or cared. I stumbled blindly, madly, down the corridor. I descended the staircase at crazy speed. In another instant I was outside, running, with a dead, cold fear in my heart, toward Lantor Street and the gloomy house which held Antone Sergio's terrible machine.

I REMEMBER little of that wild flight. The black streets were practically abandoned, and so cold that I could scarcely breathe. I raced through Ames Street, on the south side of the square, and gasped recklessly on. Once or twice I heard those all too familiar sounds which told their grim story of the horrors that were going on in cover of the dark. A woman screamed; men fought; a child ran from me in terror, sobbing pitifully. Then the gravel path and stone steps of Sergio's house lay before me. The heavy door opened to my thrust. I was in the unlighted corridor, reeling toward the room which had given birth to all the horrors of hell.

I groped to the bottom of the winding staircase. All about me, as I felt my way to the upper level, hung that shrill, thin, whining noise which was the voice of the living dark. Here, near its source, it was like a wail triumphant; it was the drone of a million invisible insects, giving out sound and sense and odor.

And then I heard something else—something human and sinister. A sharp intake of breath; a rustle of loose clothing. I had reached the top of the stairs, and I stopped abruptly. In that opaque veil I could see nothing, yet I sensed the presence of a hostile creature close to me. When I heard that sudden rush of feet, and the snarling human voice, I was stiff and poised for contact.

A lunging, clawing form fell upon me. I did not step back. Had I retreated, the weight of the fiend who battled with me would have hurled me against the banister, and down over it to certain death. Instead, I struck out as best I could. I am young enough and strong enough to be a match for anything my size, and this clawing thing was hardly as strong as I. He was like a small, savage monkey, hurling his body against mine with in-

sane fury. I did the only thing possible—swung about so that his body was wedged between me and the wall, and struck upward with all my strength. The clawing thing became suddenly silent. His fingers loosened their grip on my throat. When I stepped back, he slumped to the floor.

He was not dead, of course. His rat-like face glared up at me; and that face, even in the darkness and in defeat, was savagely triumphant. So triumphant that it told me, in a single glance, the secret of the horror that gripped the community about me. I did not wait for a second glance!

THE door of Antone Sergio's laboratory was a dozen strides distant. I reached it and seized the knob frantically. The barrier was locked. I flung myself against it, time after time. Something splintered, broke. The door clattered inward. I rushed forward; and even as I crossed the threshold I heard a muffled cry from the darkness before me.

A sputtering match burned in my fingers then; burned just long enough for me to discover the gaunt, massive shape of Antone Sergio's mad dynamo. In gloom again I groped toward it, crashing against the heavy table that stood in my path. Wires caught at my feet. I kicked them aside furiously. I could hear the moan of the machine itself—an undercurrent to the vibrant whining that was all about me.

And then I stopped. It was one thing to rush blindly forward with heroic thoughts of destroying the monster which Sergio had created. It was another thing to come in contact with that throbbing metallic giant of evil. The thing was no longer cold and dead; it was fearfully alive!

I am no hero, no man of undaunted

courage who will stalk into death for the thrill of it. I had no desire to hurl myself insanely upon this thing and be drawn into its vortex. I hesitated; I fell back. And as I stood there, my stiff fingers mechanically struck another match.

In the glow of that quickly smothered flame I saw something else. It was the shrivelled, distorted figure of Antone Sergio, bound to a table in the far corner of the room. Blood marred his face, and a livid crimson welt extended across his forehead. He was straining toward me, trying feebly to warn me.

"The switch—Moller! Turn it! Hurry——"

The match was dead in my fingers. I scratched another. My hand closed over the black-handled switch that controlled the strength of the infernal beast before me. With a sudden convulsive jerk I wrenched it loose.

What happened then I am not sure. A great sheet of blue flame shot toward me, enveloping me with uncanny quickness. Every separate sound in the room was drowned in a roaring blast of noise. I reeled backward, with both hands pressed against my eyes, and the bitter odor of burning metal in my nostrils. I saw a faint crimson glow well up from the twisted mass of metal before me. I was hot, terribly hot, as though I had suddenly been thrust from absolute cold into a pit of writhing fire.

Somehow, through that burning glare, I reached the man who was in that chamber of fury with me. I wrenched at his ropes until they crumbled in my hands—it was as though they had been eaten through by that first cloud of liquid flame.

I remember dragging him to the door, and hearing his muttered words as his tortured face came close to mine.

"He—tied me here—Moller—and turned it on! God knows—why—he did—it—"

Then I was in the corridor outside, on hands and knees, crawling. The voice of the darkness, on every side of me, was a screaming, howling wolf-cry. Sergio was beside me, whimpering. And from far away—from the direction of Vernon's rooms on the other side of the square—came a sound that screeched its way into my very brain. An endless, unfluctuating wail of the most utter agony, born in the deepest depths of hell and loosed from lips that were dying. Shrill and clear it came, murdering everything before it. Murdering my last feeble resistance.

Yet even as I succumbed to it, Sergio's words burned into me. "He turned it on!" And I remembered the face of the man who had attacked me at the top of the staircase. The face of Lober—Antone Sergio's assistant.

And as I write this account now, in the security of my own rooms, I still shudder at the bestial expression of that man's features as he fell upon me.

MUST there be another chapter to this narrative? After reading it over (it is now three months and four days since my last visit to Antone Sergio's home) I am afraid that I must add a word more.

It was nearly four hours before I regained consciousness on that night of terror. I lay in the corridor of Sergio's house, precisely where I had fallen.

My first thought was of that room of madness. I went to the door. The floor inside was covered with a fine metallic dust; and from the single narrow window in the wall came a ray of warm sunlight. In the corner of the room stood that infernal machine, now merely a twisted, broken pile of metal. And beside it, lying

half on the floor and half against the coils of wire, I found Sergio.

I do not know how he returned to that room. I do know this: his love for the instrument he had worked fifty years to perfect was strong enough to overcome physical weakness. He had been dying when I dragged him through that strange glare of light to the safety of the corridor. He was dead when I found him.

I did not remain long. When I reached the street outside, the sun was once again a crimson ball in the evening sky, and that vicious darkness, with its accompanying cold, was a thing of the past.

I hurried to Vernon's rooms, praying fervently that my previous visit there might have been but a nightmare. But I found there, on the floor, a huddled, shapeless thing with shreds of clothing clinging to it. And all around it, over it, *in* it, lay a film of ill-smelling green slime. . . .

An hour later, when I arrived at Pedersen's home, the police were already at the scene. I saw Pedersen's body, and shuddered. And the police were saying, in whispers, that some fiend with terribly powerful hands—

I have since discovered one thing more, though. By investigation I have found that the notes sent to Pedersen, Vernon, and me were in the handwriting of Sergio's assistant. True, that handwriting was disguised; but it contained certain characteristics which were proof enough in themselves to hang the man.

He was not hanged. He was found later, roaming the streets of a near-by town, and has since been confined to the asylum, on my own recommendation. You ask me why? Because I have discovered that this poor unfortunate fellow was, on his own confession, a devoted dog to young Carmen Veda, who was sent to that same institution some time past. He has told me, with the most honest sorrow, that his

reason for threatening us was because we had taken from him the only thing in the world that he loved.

It was he who bound Sergio to the table. It was he who turned on that terrible machine which opened the gateway of the Death Dimension. It was he who released that malignant elemental from a macabre world and dispatched it on its errand of murder.

He was mad, to be sure; yet he might have been a fiend incarnate. I shudder to think of the nameless horrors which are even now clamoring at that closed Door, seeking admittance—and which

he *might* have released, had he so desired.

And so, while I write this, those hours of inferno are a thing of the past. Scientists have already invented their explanations; and some of those inventions are mad enough to bring a smile even to my ignorant lips. The Gateway is closed. That abhorrent darkness with its living spawn is barred—for ever. And unless some meddling fellow chances to find this statement, the truth of that interlude of fear will for ever remain unknown. I have no desire to bring those hours of terror to the fore again. Better, far better, that they remain dead through time eternal.
