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# Weird Tales

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"SPAWN OF THE GREEN ABYSS" by C. HALL THOMPSON

# Weird Tales



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NOVEMBER, 1946

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# Spawn of the Green Abyss

BY C. HALL THOMPSON

I

I AM not writing this to save my life. When I have set down, in the sanity of plain English, the strange story of Heath House, this manuscript will be sealed in an envelope, to be opened only after my execution. Perhaps then the accounts that have filled the papers during my imprisonment and trial will be more easily understood. Today, in his effective baritone, the attorney-for-the-State told a mixed jury: "This man, Doctor James Arkwright, is the cold-blooded murderer of his wife, Cassandra, and her unborn child. You have seen the evidence, ladies and gentlemen; you have seen the murder gun. The State and the voice of the dead woman demand that this killer pay the extreme penalty." It was a very forceful plea; I could not have asked better. You see, I want to die. That is why this will not be read until the prison medico has pronounced me dead of a broken neck. If it were read while I lived, I might never be granted the release; the nothingness of immediate death; instead, I should spend endless, remembering years in the State Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

Do not misunderstand me. No feeling of remorse prompts me to seek forgetfulness. Should all this happen again—God forbid!—I know I should do the same. I destroyed Cassandra because it was the only thing left to do. Undoubtedly that sounds callous, but when I have told the entire, horrible story, it will seem the inevitable conclusion of a sane man. For, I am sane. There were times when I doubted my senses during those ghastly months on Kalesmouth

Strand, but, now, I can only say I am convinced. I know what I saw and heard, and I pray God no other mortal will ever be cursed with such a revelation. There are things beyond the veil of human understanding, strange, antedeluvian monstrosities that stalk the shadows, preying on dark, lost minds, waiting at the rim of the Green Abyss to claim their own. These are the things I must escape. And, for the mind that has come to realize their existence, the only avenue of retreat lies through the quiet labyrinths of death.

Haunting, half-facetious dribblings of truth have seeped into the feature stories which various local newspapers ran on the trial. The *Kenicott Examiner* mentions briefly the strange manner in which Lazarus Heath died; a precocious young reporter who visited ancient Heath House in Kalesmouth makes note of the nauseous effluvia that hung like a caul over the staircase, leading to the chamber where I shot my wife; he mentions, too, a trail of dried sea brine which streaked the floor of the entrance-hall, and the carpeting of that same stairway. Those were only thoughtless ripples on the loathsome, scummed surface of abominable truth. They did not touch upon the fluting, hypnotic music that echoed in those decadent halls; they did not dare to dream of the slobbering, gelatinous horror that seethed by night from sightless, watery depths to reclaim its own. These are the things of which only I may speak; the others who witnessed them are mercifully dead.

IN THE night, lying on the hard stickiness of my prison cot, staring into

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

*An accursed house, a soul that is no longer one's own—and a boundless doom that comes from the sea.*



soundless dark, I sometimes wonder whether I would have gone to Kalesmouth last fall, had I guessed at the horror that awaited me. All and all, I think I would. For, at that time, I should have scoffed at

such legends as haunted the antiquated village sprawled on a forlorn peninsula off New Jersey's Northeastern coast. As a medical man, and a mildly successful brain surgeon, I would have set them down to

antique folk-lore whispered by wintry fire-sides, told in the ghostly tongue of superstitious nonagenarians. Then, too, there were brief moments with Cassandra that were worth any price I had to pay; and, had I not gone to Kalesmouth, I should never have found her.

As things were, I suspected nothing. During that summer, I had been exceptionally active, and, my profession being as exacting as it is, toward the end of September I began to feel the effects. The only answer to the problem of a surgeon's trembling fingers is a complete rest. I do not know what prompted my selection of Kalesmouth; it was not a resort. But, then, I did not want amusement. When I saw that advertisement of a cottage to let in the seclusion of a rocky-coasted seaboard town, it seemed ideal. From childhood I had loved the salt-freshness of the Atlantic. Today, when I think of the greenish waves smashing at the beach, clutching it with watery fingers, I can never repress a shuddering chill.

Kalesmouth is little more than a sprinkling of cottages with a single general-store and a population in the low fifties. The small white houses are scattered along a narrow finger of sand-and-rock land that juts defiantly eastward into the sea. There is water on three sides and a single highway to the mainland. The people talk little to strangers, and one senses an aura of great antiquity in the solitary sun- and sea-swept life they lead. I will not say I noticed any sign of evil in the secluded settlement, but there was an air of tremendous, brooding age and loneliness about the homes and the people alike; the land itself seemed dry and barren, a forgotten relic of earlier, more fruitful days.

But quiet and rest were what I needed after the strenuous turmoil of antiseptic-choked corridors and operating amphitheatres. Certainly, no town could offer better chance for these than did Kalesmouth, redolent as it was of a Victorian era when life moved through leisurely, hidden channels. My cottage was small but comfortable, and Eb Linder, taciturn, wind-dried proprietor of the general-store, helped me lay in a good supply of staple foods. Long, salt-aired days were spent wandering

the bleached stretch of a rocky shoreline, and in the evenings I turned to my collection of books. I saw few people and talked with fewer. Once or twice, when we chanced to meet at Linder's store, I spoke to Doctor Henry Joyce Ambler, Kalesmouth's only general practitioner. He was a florid, white-haired individual, full of shop-talk of the sort I was trying to escape. I'm afraid I may have been rather rude to him, for in those first days, I was still over-wrought and in need of relaxation. Gradually, however, I drifted into a soft, thoughtful mood; I became more interested in my surroundings.

I CANNOT be certain when it was that I first noticed the house. Looking back, I should say that, somehow, I must have been vaguely aware of it from the start. The main window of my small sitting-room looked eastward to the aqua-marine expanse of the Atlantic. Situated as it was, at the approximate center of the narrow peninsula of Kalesmouth, my cottage commanded a view of the long earth-finger that pointed so boldly into the sea. Between me and the extreme point of land, a few stray cottages sprawled haphazardly, but there was no sign of habitation within a good half-mile of the land-edge on which the house stood.

The fact that it was a house, set it apart in Kalesmouth. All the others were clapboard bungalows of only one story. In the sea-misted evenings, I was wont to sit for hours by my eastward casement, staring at the vast, gray bulk of it. It was like something from another aeon, a tottering, decayed remnant of the nighted past. Massive and rambling, with countless gables and cupolas, its small-paned, murky windows winking balefully at the setting sun, set as it was on the extreme lip of the land, it seemed somehow more of the cloying sea than of solid soil. An ectoplasmic nimbus clung thickly to battered towers whose boarded embrasures argued desertion. I noticed that the sea-gulls circled the ancient monument warily; birds did not nest in the crumbling age-webbed eaves. Over the whole dream-like vision hung an atmosphere of remoteness that was vaguely tinged with fear and repulsion; it was a thing that whispered of forgotten evils, of lost and

buried blasphemies. The first time I caught myself thinking thus, I laughed away the sensation and decided that my solitary sojourn was beginning to work on my imagination. But, the feeling persisted, and in the end, my curiosity won. I began to ask questions during my infrequent visits to the store.

Silent as Eb Linder habitually was, I sensed an abrupt withdrawal in him when I mentioned the house at land's end. He continued weighing out my rough-cut tobacco, and spoke without looking at me.

"You don't wanta know about Heath House, Doc. Folks hercabouts ain't got nothin' to do with it. . . ."

Sullen warning charged his level tone. I smiled but a small shiver trickled along my neck. I looked across the store to where Doc Ambler stood, his white mane bent intently over one of the latest magazines. His head came up; the usual smile had gone out of opaque eyes.

"Lazarus Heath lives there, Doctor," he murmured. "Very much the recluse."

"Which is jest as well fer us," Linder put in cryptically. Ambler nodded and went back to his reading.

It was at that point that I became aware of the disheveled, weather-beaten creature in the doorway. I had seen Solly-Jo before, wandering the sand-and-stone wastelands of the beach. You will find one such outcast in every small town, I suppose. A slow-witted, distorted brute, with matted blond-gray hair, he combed the shores night and day, ambling aimlessly from spot to spot, sleeping in the lee of some jutting rock. He ate where and as he found food. Always before, the sad, baby-blue eyes turned on me had held a vacant stare, but, now, as Linder gave him his daily free bottle of milk, Solly-Jo was gazing at me with something like sharp understanding in his phlegmatic face. We did not speak further of Heath House, but when I left the store, Solly-Jo slowly followed. He caught up with me and shuffled at my side, smiling vaguely for a time before he spoke.

"You was talkin' about Heath House, wasn't you, Doc?"

I nodded; Solly-Jo chuckled softly.

"I know why you was askin' about it," he said with a knowing leer. "Only you

hadn't ought to. Ol' Laz Heath ain't no friend to nobody. Stay clear o' that house. They's things there that ain't right. They's bad things. . . ."

"Just who is Lazarus Heath?" I asked.

"Ol' man . . . real ol' . . . He got a funny smell about him . . . a dead smell, like dead fish washed up on the beach. . . . Used to be a sailor, but, now, he's too ol' . . . They's stories about ol' Laz. Him an' that daughter o' his'n. . . ." The lecherous grin returned. "You better fergit about Miss Cassandra, Doc. . . . I know you seen her; that's why you bin askin' about the house. . . . But fergit it. . . . She ain't fer the likes o' you an' me. . . ."

Solly-Jo shook his head slowly, and clucked, sadly.

"No, sir. . . . She's too much like 'er ol' man. Stays away from folks, like him. They live out there alone . . . an', like I say, they's things in Heath House. . . . They's a bad stink, like Ol' Laz has. . . . Nigh onto twenty year ago, Laz was in a shipwreck. Lost fer most two year, then a tramp-steamer found him on a island. . . . He had this little baby girl with him; said she was his daughter; said his wife died in the wreck. . . . Only nobody was ever able to find no passenger listin' fer a Missus Laz Heath. . . . Then, Laz come back here and bought that there ol' place. Even 'fore he come they was talk about bad things in that house. . . . People still talk, only now they whisper, 'case Laz might hear. . . . Take my word, Doc. . . . You steer clear o' pretty Cassandra. . . . She warn't meant fer men like us. . . ."

I can still remember Solly-Jo's simian shadow shuttling off along the craggy, moon-washed strand, voracious tongues of nighted tide lapping at his battered white sneakers. If I had not heard of Cassandra Heath before, now that I had my interest was made the more intense by the drone of the beach-comber's eerie warning still humming in my ears. I chuckled, telling myself it was probably utter nonsense, the mauling phantasms of Solly-Jo's lonely, warped mind. But, my laughter echoed back from a brooding watery wasteland. I recalled the solemn reticence of intelligent, educated Doctor Ambler, the wordless warning of Eb Linder.

Despite such memories I could not get Cassandra Heath off my mind; I promised myself that I would meet her and this legendary father of hers. It seemed easy enough on the face of it; I could pay them a visit, saying I was a new neighbor. Yet, more than once during the ensuing days, I tried to do just that and failed. Roving the dessicated peninsula on a sunny forenoon, I would set out resolutely toward the misty hulk of Heath House, but I could never bring myself to go all the way. The straggling, mossy embattlements seemed too much a part of another world; looking at the house, you got the notion that you could keep walking toward it, yet never reach the crumbling patio, never pass through the ancient, carven door. It is probable that I should never have met Cassandra Heath, hadn't she come to me.

## II

EARLY in October, an Indian-Summer storm washed in from the Atlantic. The day had been long and dreary, overhung with humid fog, and, in the late evening, vicious torrents swept inland under a fanfare of thunder. Through streaming casements I could barely discern the gigantic shell of Heath House, looming defiantly above the lashing fury of a hungry sea. I made a log fire and settled into an easy-chair; the subdued sougning of the storm combined with a rather dull analysis of Sigmund Freud must have lulled me into a doze. There was a sensation of spinning lostness; my mind ricocheted through the dark well of the rain-whipped night. There was a coldness brushing my face; a nauseous damp clung to my ankles, quelling the roseate warmth of the fireside. Something clicked sharply, and I opened my eyes. I thought I was still dreaming.

The girl stood leaning against the door she had just closed. Dying embers cast a phantasmagoria of lights and shadows on her face and hair. She was slim and well-made; ebony hair flowing to her shoulders gave one a feeling of rich warmth. It matched the steady blackness of extraordinary eyes that protruded ever so slightly. Her skin was deeply tanned. A faint flush in her cheeks and breath coming in quick

whispers through full lips seemed to indicate a rather hurried trip. I wondered vaguely at her being quite dry until I realized that the storm had died with the evening. A moment passed, silent, save for the faint dripping of water from the eaves, as the dark eyes met mine.

"Doctor Arkwright?"

The voice, cultured and controlled, like the throaty melody of a cello well played, heightened my illusion of a dream. I rose awkwardly and my book slid to the floor. The girl smiled.

"I'm afraid I must have dozed. . . ."

"My name is Cassandra Heath," the girl said gently. "My father is very ill, Doctor. Could you come with me at once?"

"Well . . . it might be better to get Doctor Ambler, Miss Heath. You see, I'm not a general practitioner. . . ."

"I know; I've read of your work. You're a brain surgeon. . . That's what my father needs. . ." The voice trembled slightly; shadowed lids covered the ebony eyes for an instant. Cassandra Heath had admirable control. When she spoke again it was in a tone tinged with defiant pride: "You needn't come if . . . if you don't care to. . . ."

"No. . . . It isn't that at all. Of course, I'll come, Miss Heath. . . ."

My mind sliding backward over the beach-comber's whispered tale, I arranged a small kit with strangely unsteady hands. Cassandra Heath stood silently by the door. I wondered if Solly-Jo's story had been something more than the weird fiction of an overworked imagination. The defiance in the girl's voice argued that the legend of Heath House was known and feared by more than this one insignificant wanderer; so much feared that it might frighten a stranger away.

Even without such a veil of mystery, swathing her life, Cassandra Heath would have been a striking person. As it was, I was fascinated.

We had walked some distance before the girl spoke again. The moon had risen and phantom rocks glistened in its watery glow. The ocean pounded choppily on a rain-sodden beach and our feet left moist rubbery prints that disappeared as quickly as they were made. Moving with long,

graceful strides, Cassandra Heath talked in a level monotone.

"I suppose you've heard tales about my father. You can't live in Kalesmouth any length of time without hearing about old Lazarus Heath. . . ." Grim humor touched the warm lips.

"Solly-Jo did a bit of talking," I admitted.

"You mustn't believe everything you hear, Doctor. My father is ill. He has been for some years. We prefer to keep to ourselves at Heath House. When people can't talk to you, they talk about you. They tell stories about father. . . ."

"Miss Heath," I ventured. "Do you think that your father . . ."

"Is insane?" the girl supplied. "Two years ago . . . last year, even, I should have said 'no'. . . . Now, I can't be certain. My father has led a strange life, Doctor . . . a strenuous one. . . . Here of late, he's been given to brooding. He was always moody and quiet, but this is something different. He . . . he's afraid of something, I think. . . . Then, too, there are the disappearances. . . ."

"Disappearances?"

"He's taken to wandering off at night. . . ."

Four times in the last couple of months I searched the whole length of the Strand and couldn't find him. . . ."

"Maybe, he'd gone to the mainland."

"I think not; someone would have seen him. No . . . he went somewhere . . . somewhere much farther away. . . ." For the first, a note of puzzled fear crept into Cassandra Heath's voice. ". . . Much farther. . . ." She seemed to come back with an effort. "He did that tonight, Doctor. Just before the storm broke. . . . I . . . I found him later hours later . . . wandering in a small cove beyond the house. He was talking strangely . . . and singing. . . . A funny little tune. He's in his room, now . . . still talking . . . still singing that song. . . ."

Onyx eyes flashed up to meet mine; in that brief moonlit instant, I saw all the doubtful terror, the puzzled anxiety that Cassandra Heath would not admit, even to herself. I had no time to question her further, to attempt to link together her last broken phrases so that I could guess at the real meaning that lay hidden in them. Kalesmouth Strand had suddenly narrowed, and now, on either side of us, midnight ocean

licked possessively at the land. A torturous path, tangled with sea brambles and rocks, snaked to the shadow-choked veranda of Heath House. Weather-wasted planks groaned in protest under unaccustomed footsteps.

AT a gentle pressure of Cassandra's hand the ponderous mahogany door swung back soundlessly. Even before I stepped into the candle-lit, gloom-encrusted hallway, I could smell it—that loathsome, clinging effluvium of rotting marine flesh of which Solly-Jo had muttered. It swirled sickeningly in the clammy atmosphere of a foyer that was like the dusty nave of some forgotten cathedral, rising along lushly paneled walls to the sightless dark far above. A wide, twisting staircase wound upward to some higher labyrinth, and as I followed Cassandra Heath up stairs whose ancient gray carpet was worn thin by the tread of forgotten feet, the fetor became ever more powerful, more noisome.

Through dream-like corridors, I followed the fitful glow of the candelabrum the girl carried. Another door opened, then closed behind me. I stood in a chamber that seemed drawn from the dark maw of lost aeons. Tremendous oaken furniture dwarfed the figure sprawled limply on a dias-raised bed, and, though the small-paned casements stood wide, chilling sea-fog swirling through them into the room, the stench was overpowering. Cassandra set the candelabrum on an antique cabinet-de-nuit; an eerie luster flickered across Lazarus Heath's wasted visage.

During his professional lifetime, a brain specialist is called upon to diagnose countless horrible cases, yet they are the horrors of the nighted mind, or of blindness caused by a tumor. They are medical things, and can be understood. You cannot diagnose a fetid malignancy that goes beyond medical knowledge, rooting itself in the black soil of ancient bells. There was nothing medical knowledge could do for Lazarus Heath.

Pushing back revulsion, I made a thorough examination. The massive body, little more than skin and bones, now, gave off a reeling aura of putrefaction, and yet there were no sores. Sopping clothes that hung in tatters, were tangled with dull-green seaweed, stained with ocean salt. But, it was the



face that caught and held my attention. The skin, taut and dry, was the color of aged jade, covered with minute, glistening scales. Staring into the candlelight, Lazarus Heath's pale eyes bulged horribly, and as the great, bony head lolled spasmodically from side to side, I made out two faint bluish streaks, about four inches in length, running along each side of the scaly neck, just below the jawline. The lines pulsed thickly with the air-sucking motions of his salt-parched lips. Watery incantations bubbled upward into the dank stillness.

"They call. . . They call for Lazarus Heath. . . Zoth Syra bewails her lost one; she bids me come home. You hear? The Great Ones of The Green Abyss hail me! I come, O, beauteous Zoth Syra! Your lost one returneth, O, Weeping Goddess of the Green Nothingness. . .!"

Sudden power energized the lax skeleton, so that I had no easy time in holding him to the bed. Pallid eyes stared beyond this world, and Lazarus Heath's cracked lips warped in a hideous smile. Then, as suddenly, he was calm; the ponderous cranium cocked pathetically to one side, in a grotesque listening attitude.

"You hear?" the hollow voice gurgled. "She sings to me! The Song of Zoth Syra!" Inane laughter tittered weakly. Heath's rasping voice dribbled into a strangely haunting threnody, a song that at once attracted and repelled with its subtly evil intonations.

"Zoth Syra calleth him who knows the Green Abyss;

Men of salt and weed are lovers all  
To the Goddess of the Green and Swirling  
Void—

Come away to Zoth Syra! Come away!"

"Father!"

Cassandra's voice was scarcely more than a distraught gasp, but at the sound of it, the odious, hypnotic smile froze on Heath's parchment-pale face, then, slowly, decomposed into a twisted mask of sick horror. For the first time something like terrified reason seeped into those oddly protuberant eyes.

"Cassie! Cassandra!" Heath stared about him frantically like a child lost in the dark; once again he tried to raise himself, but, be-

fore I could restrain him, crumpled backward into a voiceless coma.

HALF an hour later, standing in the shadows of the decaying patio, looking eastward to the moon-scorched desert of the Atlantic, I told Cassandra that there was nothing wrong with her father's mind. Perhaps I should have phrased it more coldly and added: "Nothing that medical science can cure." But, sensing the free, vibrant life that flowed in the girl's body and brain, I could not bring myself to tell her that I thought Lazarus Heath was going mad. Too, I was not at all sure of my own diagnosis.

I told Cassandra that I wanted time to observe her father more closely, and she seemed greatly relieved to know that I would consider the old man's case. For myself, I confess I could not have done otherwise. Despite the malignant shadow that shrouded Heath House in ageless mystery, I knew that I would come back again and again, not only because I was curious about the singular aspects that accomplished Heath's apparent twilight madness, but because, as I left her that night, Cassandra held out her hand, and I took it in mine. It was a simple, friendly gesture, and we both smiled. From that moment on, I was completely, irrevocably in love with Cassandra Heath.

Looking backward, it seems to me that our brief moment of happiness was like some minor miracle, rising as it did through a choking miasma of brooding evil, to touch, if only for an instant, a clean, sunlit world known only to lovers. Somehow, we managed to transcend the haunting omnipresent ghost of Lazarus Heath's illness. It is true that the old man returned to normalcy during that final fortnight of his troubled existence, and for a time Cassandra could forget the strange enigma of her father's insane babblings, and those sudden, inexplicable disappearances. Being a medical man, however, I never really forgot. Often, during those last two weeks, I talked with Lazarus Heath; he submitted to questioning and examination quite calmly. As to the peculiar condition of his skin, and the odd lines on his throat, he professed ignorance, and the once or twice I mentioned Zoth Syra, he went gloomily reticent on me. He

said the name meant nothing to him, yet, never before or since have I seen a man so patently weighted down by some blasphemous, heart-gnawing secret, as was Lazarus Heath. He ate little and spent his days and nights slumped in a crotchety chair, staring into the bluish mist of the small cove beyond Heath House.

Cassandra needed forgetfulness; as much as I could, I got her away from the sullen loneliness of the antedeluvian manse at land's end. With the passage of days, she relaxed and became her own charming self, a side of her nature to which, I think, even she might have been a stranger. For the foul legends that trailed after Lazarus Heath had cut his daughter off from companionship and the clear, untarnished joys of the extrovert.

**WE SPENT** the long sunny days together on the beach; Cassandra was like an imprisoned nymph suddenly set free. She swam with the grace of one born to the water, and ran the length of arid sand with the lightness of a child, her wonderful hair flowing wildly in the sea breeze. A man cannot see such youth and beauty and remain untouched. My Cassandra had not only these; too, there was an air of quiet wisdom about her, that was somehow wistful and sad. She was prodigiously well-read, and told me her father had educated her. Sometimes she spoke of long, lonely childhood years, when she lived only in the pages of the countless books in Lazarus Heath's library.

I had seen that small, book-cluttered room with its musty, rich bindings; the old man spent much time there. It is strange how so comfortable and common-place a nook could shelter such a vile, inhuman secret through the years. Had I learned that secret sooner, Cassandra would be alive today.

### III

**L**AZARUS HEATH died the night I proposed to his daughter. Up to that time he had improved fairly well, until, at moments, watching the new vivacity that had touched Cassandra, he seemed almost normally pleased. I believe the old man conceived a liking for me, because I had given

Cassie something; I had given her my friendship and my love, and his awful leg-end had not frightened them away.

The night I asked Cassandra to marry me, it was balmy and quiet, and we had been walking along Kalesmouth Strand, watching the silver ribbons of the moon on the Atlantic. I remember, I halted rather abruptly, mumbling that I had something "to ask her," and then Cassandra smiled and kissed me. Her lips were warm and full of promise.

"The answer is 'yes', darling," she murmured.

We laughed; then, a soft, rich laughter whose gentle, love-haunted echoes I shall never forget. Clinging together we ran along the moonlit sand. That day, a last leaf of Indian Summer had fluttered across the peninsula, and a wintry sea was already lapping hungrily at the land. Cassie chattered brightly about how happy her father would be for us, but somehow, as we neared the sepulchral tenebrosity of Heath House, a hollowness crept into her laughter. It was as though she already sensed the horrible discovery that lay before us.

There was no answer when Cassandra called out in the hollow well of the foyer. We began our search for Lazarus Heath calmly enough, but, now, the laughter had gone altogether. He was not in the dusty sanctuary of his library; the linen of his tremendous oaken bed flapped in the wind that brushed through casements thrown wide to the rapidly chilling night. The look of utter terror in Cassandra's eyes told me we were reasoning along the same lines.

It did not take long to reach the strange little cove in the shadow of Heath House. A cold, dream-like quality saturated every corner of that miniature beach, hid from sight on all sides save the East, where the predatory mutter of the sea seemed dangerously near. But you can awaken from the insanity of a dream; there was no such escape from the terrible reality of that night.

At the center of the cove, edging into the water, stood four weirdly hewn pillars, placed so that each made the corner of a crude square; in the moonglow they had the aspect of sinister mediaeval altars of sacrifice, reared to noxious, unnameable gods. Sprawled at the center of the evil square,

face-down in a foot of lapping sea-water, lay the lifeless body of Lazarus Heath.

I cannot rightly remember how I got the brine-tangled corpse into the house. There is a searing picture of Cassandra's face, frozen with sick grief; and another, of myself, alone in that fetid bed-chamber, performing an autopsy, listening to Cassie's distant, pitiful sobs the whole time. That night, I got down on my knees and prayed to God that the things I had discovered could not be so. Yet, I had seen with my own eyes the increased scaliness of Heath's face, the horrible enlargement of his eyes. I knew that my first guess had been wrong; Lazarus Heath had not drowned. For those hellish lines on his throat had become long, oozing slits; like nothing but the slobbering gills of a tremendous fish! I had a sick feeling that Heath's weird mumblings might not have been the gibberish of a madman, but the delirium of one who had learned things no mortal was ever meant to know.

We buried him in a sealed pine casket. If the morticians from the mainland noted the strange condition of the corpse, they gave no sign. With them it was a business; Death had myriad forms, each as cold and unquestionable as the last. With Cassandra, however, I had to be more careful. I knew the terrible effect that nauseous, bloated visage would have upon her. I told her the autopsy had been rather disfiguring, that it would be better if she did not see her father. She obeyed with the simple acquiescence of a child who is lost and lonely, and in need of guidance. Once, she roused from a cold, apathetic state of shock to tell me that Heath had always wanted to be buried in the cove. It rained on the day of interment; icy needles pelted forlornly on the unpainted wood, as two uneasy negroes lowered Lazarus Heath to his final rest. A timid mainland pastor intoned the Lord's Prayer in a sad, squeaky voice. That night, there was nothing but the rain, and the horrible stillness of forsaken Heath House. Sparse flowers wilted on the fresh clay mound in the cove; a clammy tide fingered slowly in, lapping at the edge of Lazarus Heath's grave.

I HAD to get Cassandra away; watching pent-up doubt and fear turn her lovely face into an expressionless mask, I knew

she must be freed of the cloak of black uncertainty that enveloped Heath House. We talked through most of that rain-washed lonely night, and for the first time in my medical career, I told a lie. Could I have seen the sick terror in her eyes, and spoken words that might turn that fear into madness?

When I performed that autopsy, I found no cause for Lazarus Heath's death. There was no water in his lungs; every organ was in excellent condition. But, I told Cassie that the old man died of a heart attack. I told her I was certain that her father had been perfectly sane. Even as I spoke, new color flushed her cheeks; an expression of indescribable relief lit ebony eyes. Cassandra could not know that the old man's sanity was more to be feared than his insanity. An unstable brain could answer for wild babblings, for ungodly melodies, but what could account for the terrible, concreteness of that scaly, fish-like corpse? Wrack my brain as I did, I could find no explanation in the accepted medical sense; and, I dared not go beyond that, into the malevolent lore of forgotten ages, to discover what blasphemous horror had destroyed Lazarus Heath. I preferred to try to forget—to go on with Cassandra, covering this nightmare with endless moments of normal, happy living.

Many times during the next few months, I thought I had succeeded. A week after the solitary funeral on Kalesmouth Strand, Cassie and I were married by a pleasant, apoplectic justice-of-the-peace. We had our wedding supper in the quiet luxury of one of the better hotels, and for the first time since her father's death, Cassandra smiled. The city proved to be good for her. Deliberately, I made those early days a scintillating round of gaiety. I introduced Cassie to the bright lights and the brassy, arrogant joys of city life. We were exquisitely happy. Her laughter was a wonderful, warm pool of summer sun, swirling briefly in that winter city, and then, suddenly, freezing over.

I cannot recall just when I first noticed the difference in Cassandra. Perhaps I had been too happy myself to realize what was happening to her. The breezy tinsel of the city had sparkled very brightly for Cassie, but, it had burned itself out in the effort.

After a time, it lost its fascination. In the beginning, I tried to tell myself that I was imagining things, but, gradually, I felt the happy freedom slipping away from us. Cassandra's smiles grew scarcer by the day; there was an infinitely sad far-away look that kept stealing into her eyes at the most unexpected moments. I began to imagine that she had grown pale. I watched her more closely than ever. An end of it came one evening late in August.

I found Cassandra alone on the night-cooled terrace of our apartment, staring Eastward across the summer-choked city. When I touched her shoulders she gave a little start, then smiled sadly.

"Can you smell it, darling?" she murmured wistfully, after a moment.

"What?"

"The sea. . . ."

In that moment, I think I had a sudden vision of the scabrous puffed face I had fought desperately to forget, and, floating evilly in the night air, I sensed a whisp of the decayed effluvia of Heath House. I struggled to keep my voice steady.

"What're you getting at, Cassie?"

Cassandra smiled again.

"Can't fool my doctor, can I?" Her voice was soft. "Darling. . . Would you mind terribly if we went back . . . to Kalesmouth . . . the Heath House?"

Strangely enough, all I felt for an instant was a sensation of relief. I had been waiting for that question all along; I was almost glad the waiting was over. I took Cassandra into my arms and kissed the tip of her nose. I wanted to sound careless and bright, I told her, if she really wanted to go back, there was nothing I would like better. Cassie smiled, nestling her head against my shoulder. As we stood there, looking into the darkness above the winking lights of the buildings, a cold shudder ran through me. I wanted to say it was wrong; we couldn't go back. I said nothing. Quietly, hypnotic and shrill, a familiar, odious threnody chortled inland from the distant Atlantic.

" . . . lovers all to the Goddess of the Green and Swirling Void. . . . Come away, to Zoth Syra! Come away!" I wondered if Cassandra could hear it. I prayed that she couldn't.

I am not certain of what I expected upon our return to Heath House. I could not

forget the puling, nauseous horrors we had left behind; the stench of a scaly corpse seemed never to leave my nostrils. I remember my hands sweating on the wheel as I tooled our car across the long bridge that connected Kalesmouth Strand with the mainland; early-morning fog seemed to close in behind us, shutting us off from reality. The baleful finger of the solitary macadam road that led to Heath House pointed with terrible certainty to the steely expanse of the sea.

However, the change in Cassandra heartened me, dispelling somewhat my uneasy premonitions. Already, her complexion had returned to its former warmth and beauty; her laughter rippled softly at some weak joke I had made, and the ebony cloak of her hair was rich and alive in the sea breeze. Our homecoming was much more pleasant and prosaic than I had dared hope it would be; it gave no trembling portent of the icy, sea-brined evil that was to stalk our future hours in the malevolent house. Only the sea chuckled expectantly in the lonely cove near Lazarus Heath's tomb.

It is impossible to trace the stages by which I became jealous of Heath House; there was something subtle and cruel about the change that overtook me after the first days and nights on the barren point of land that meant so much to Cassandra. At the start, I managed to convince myself that I was happy—happy because Cassie seemed to be so, for the first time in months. I even felt something like an uneasy affection for the old place, because it made Cassandra what I wanted her to be—full of a rich, wild life, touched with the mysterious charm that had first attracted me.

We began to refurnish and remodel the house; the mundane clang of workmen's saws and hammers, the earthly smell of turpentine and white lead, seemed to breathe a freshness into the foul, antiquated halls and chambers. I told myself it was just another charming old house where people could be happy if only they tried hard enough; but, all the time, a new whispering voice within me, clamored for attention. I knew I was losing Cassandra to a past of which I had not been a part; Heath House was reclaiming her.

Cassandra herself seemed to notice no

change in our relationship; she was gentle and full of a soft tenderness toward me, and still, I had the terrible feeling that a barrier was rising between us, day by day, second by second. Cassie took to a habit that roused uneasy memories in me; any hour of the day or night, she would be seized by an urge to walk quickly, unseeing, along the lashing edge of the sea. They were not the leisurely wanderings we had known in the past; it was as though Cassandra were trying to get, somewhere, trying, unconsciously, to reach something.

Once or twice I mentioned the habit, but she only smiled remotely and said there was no harm in a stroll by the seaside, was there? I had no answer. I could not tell her of the cold unprofessional, unreasoning fear that had begun to haunt me. We went on with our repairs of Heath House, and gradually, brightened by chintzes and restored tapestries, filled with usable period furniture, it became livable. We had finished all of it, save the library; it was our plan to make this into a study; in which I might work on the book I planned to do on brain surgery. We never remodeled the library. I saw the inside of that abhorred chamber only once after the night Cassandra locked the panelled door and made me promise not to ask for the key. I wish I had never seen it at all.

**T**HAT evening a bulwark of leaden clouds swung ponderously inland from the sea; a chilled late-October wind sifted beneath the imminent storm, swirling the sand in tiny puffs along Kalesmouth beach. By the tang of salt in the air, and the reticent anger of the surf, the Northeast was going to blow us a big one. I quickened my pace, walking home from the store; a dirth of incident had lulled me into uncertain forgetfulness, and, at that moment, I was almost pleased with the prospect of the evening ahead of me. Early in the afternoon, I had told Cassie tonight might be as good a time as any to go over the library, gleaning the useless chaff from the hit-and-miss collection that had been her father's. Now, with a storm brewing, the idea of going through the books and effects of my mysterious father-in-law fascinated me. The biting wind and glowering ceiling of sky seemed to me a final atmospheric touch. I wondered if the spell of

Heath House had begun to claim me as well.

The moment I saw her, I knew that something had gone wrong. There was a strange, jade-like pallor under Cassandra's skin, and her eyes wouldn't meet mine. Once or twice during our quiet dinner, she laughed, but the laughter echoed hollowly. Thunder had begun to shudder malignantly far out at sea. A finger of lightning shattered the darkness and our storage-battery lights pulsed anxiously. I saw Cassandra start and tip over her wine glass; the port spread like an oozing bloodstain on the Madeira linen. I looked at my plate, pretending not to notice her extraordinary nervousness.

"I've been looking forward to tonight," I said.

"Looking forward, darling?" That false-brittle smile was in Cassandra's voice.

"Yes . . . I've always wanted to go through those fabulous books. . . ."

The clatter of metal against china brought me about with a start. Cassie had dropped her fork from fingers that seemed suddenly paralyzed. She stared at me with unseeing eyes and one slim hand raised in a futile gesture of protest. Her colorless lips trembled.

"No! You mustn't. . . ." A gnawing fear sprang into the emptiness of her gaze; she made as if to rise, and, in an instant, all life seemed to flood from her body. She slid soundlessly to the floor.

What I did then was done with the unconscious habit of a medical man; training overshadowed the sick, watery weakness of my legs. Somehow, I got Cassandra to our bed chamber on the second floor. Her exquisite face had a whiteness that whispered of death, but breath came in uneasy, whimpering shudders. I chafed her wrists, an agony of doubt whirling in my brain. Thunder slithered across the sky, crashing insanely over Heath House; the storm broke. Dark eyes were suddenly wide in Cassie's pale face. Her hand clutched mine so violently that her nails bit into the flesh.

"You can't go in there. . . Nobody can go in there, ever again. You hear? Nobody . . . ever again. . . !"

"It's all right, darling. Try to relax. Tell me what's frightened you. . . ."

Her head shook dully.

"I can't. . . I can never tell you. You've

got to trust me. You can't ever go into that room; don't ever try...I've locked the door. You mustn't ask me for the key. Please! Promise me you won't! . . . Please!"

## IV

## I PROMISED.

I heard myself saying the words over and over in a thick monotone. They seemed not to reach her. Her lips hung loosely, fear twisting the beauty from her face, leaving nothing but unreasoning hysteria. She went on pleading, unable to hear my reassurances. The sedative I gave her was not a weak one. My hands shook as I prepared it. I had to work in the dark. Our storage batteries had given out. There was nothing but pitch-blackness and the babbling fury of the elements, chewing at Heath House mercilessly. Perhaps it was only my nerves; once I could have sworn that there, in the pulsing gloom, an overpowering stench, an effluvium that was almost tangible, brushed against me.

At length, Cassandra's whimpering died away; she sank into a deep fitful sleep. Lightning crashed maniacal brightness into the room; for an instant it washed Cassie's face and throat. There was a delicate, gold-dipped chain around her neck; on it she had strung the key to the library.

You cannot always give reason to your actions. That night I could have stolen the key. I could have gone down the hall through the darkness, and into the damnable chamber that held a secret ungodly enough to press my wife to the brink of madness. If I had, things might have worked out differently. Maybe I was a coward, afraid of the antedeluvian horror that awaited me beyond the massive carved door. Maybe I did not want to know the truth. I told myself I had made a promise to Cassandra. I left the key where it was, and stumbled downstairs in the stygian blackness. Screeching banshees of rain begged entrance at the streaming casements; a fire burned fitfully in the sitting room grate. I found a decanter of rum in the cabinet by the window. I do not remember how long I paced the floor, torturing myself with doubt and fear, trying to believe that Cassie was sane; "wondering what puling monstrosity lay hidden in Laz-

arus Heath's book-room. I sank into an arm-chair and swallowed another mouthful of rum; the storm seemed to have drawn far away from me. The rum bottle tinkled against the glass as I poured; I drank. I lay my head back. Lightning pulsed through my optic nerves, but sound was only a blurred pungent, rum-soaked whirlpool. Then, there was only darkness. I slept.

It was the dull angry thumping that woke me; consciousness seeped through the ragged slit it made in the forgetfulness of sleep. I got unsteadily to my feet and stood in the center of the room until the whirling darkness righted itself. Something new had sifted into the room; the fire still sputtered doggedly, and yet, there was a dampness it could not dispell. A chilled whisper of sea-air sighed along the floor. I went into the foyer; coldness washed over me in a tidal wave. The front door flapped back and forth on its heavy hinges; rain pelted in a drooling puddle in the hallway. I swore and slammed the door, throwing the dead-latch. Then, I stood very still. Cassie! The name blazed like a neon sign in my brain. I think I knew in that moment that she was gone.

THE search was something careening from a dream gone mad, a terrifying nightmare in which the geometry has gone all wrong. I wanted to scream or cry, but dry fear clamped my throat. Everything twisted crazily in my head; Cassie's empty bed, the heart-like drumming of the open front door; myself, stumbling through the brutal onslaught of a northeaster, calling her name again and again, finally reaching Eb Linder's place and getting half the people of the Strand out of sane beds to wander the hellish night in search of Cassandra. It must have gone on for hours; I cannot remember except in vague snatches. There was a stolid, gray-faced fisherman who muttered something about the sea claiming its own. At dream-like intervals Solly-Jo wandered in and out of the rain. Eb Linder's sister made coffee for me, and got me to change my drenched clothes. She kept telling me it would be all right. The men, with Doctor Ambler leading them, had been over every inch of the Strand and found nothing. Miss Linder kept right on saying it would work out all

right. At 3:30 a kid came in, dripping with rain. He said they'd found Cassandra in the cove behind Heath House.

She wasn't dead. When I reached the house, Ambler had her in bed, covered with numberless blankets. Her clothes lay in a sopping lump on the floor. Ambler poured me a drink, and I think I cried. He waited until I had got it out of my system. I kept watching to see if Cassie was breathing; she looked pale and dead.

"I can't figure it," Ambler said quietly, after a while. "We went over that cove so many times, I'd swear it was impossible for anything or anyone to be there. Then, Linder came across her, lying at the water's edge, on her father's grave. She was all . . . all matted with seaweed . . . I . . ." He stared at me. The numbing horror that froze my insides must have shown in my eyes. "What's the matter, man!"

"Seaweed!" I choked.

I didn't hear any more of what he said. I went to the bed and looked at Cassandra closely for the first time. Her skin shone faintly in the uncertain substitute of candle-light—as though it were covered with flaky, gossamer scales! On either side of her throat, I made out two pale, bluish streaks. My head spun; I felt as if I were going to be sick. Rising insidiously from the mucky pile of clothing on the floor, a vile, decadent stench flooded the chamber. From a tremendous distance, a voice whispered gently: "I come, O, Yoth Kala! Your bride has heard your call! Through night and storm, I come!" The voice was Cassandra's.

"It's nothing to worry about, man," Ambler was saying kindly. "Just a case of exposure. . . . She'll be all right. . . ."

"Yes," I nodded dully. "She'll be all right. . . ."

**T**HE last hope of happiness drained from me; I felt weak and lost in a plummeting void of unspeakable horror. There were times, in the days that followed, when I had the sensation of living in an alien, frightening world, a world in which lay hidden the blasphemous secrets of death and the grave, a world that sang with the strange, blood-craving incantations of lost and murderous cults. There was nothing human in the terror that held me prisoner. You can fight

evil if it is concrete. This was something that could not be touched or seen, yet, something always at my heels, its stinking, flesh-rotting breath burning against my neck.

I hid my doubts from Cassandra, trying to be cheerful. She convalesced slowly, under Ambler's care. For days at a time, she would seem to be herself; she would smile and talk of how it would be when she was well again. And, then, abruptly, her mood would swerve into one of black secrecy that made her eyes blank and hostile. She whimpered in her sleep, and took to humming the weird threnody that had been Lazarus Heath's swan song.

More and more the feeling that I had lost her possessed me.

Gradually, her body grew strong again. She was able to be up and about, to wander the Strand on sunny days, her face silent and secretive, her eyes shutting me out when I tried to reach her. A sick, uneasy spell pervaded Heath House. Cassandra began to be nervous whenever I was near her; she resented my intrusion on her solitary walks. It was as though she looked upon me as a jailer, and on Heath House as a prison from which she must somehow escape. She spoke coldly and shuttered when I touched her. But, at rare moments, some of her old gentleness would return; you could see puzzlement and fear in her face. She would touch my hand and kiss me. She would tell me I was wonderfully kind. For an instant we were together again, and then, without warning, the barrier chilled between us. Cassandra drew away; the fear and bewilderment froze to what could only be suspicion and loathing.

Winter crept inland on icy cat's paws; brittle tendrils of frosted air swung sharply along the peninsula. Even the afternoon sun had withdrawn behind a caul of December chill. The Atlantic whipped with predatory regularity at the deserted sands, scant yards from Heath House. I tried to work on my book, but it was no good. The severe cold had made it necessary for Cassandra to remain indoors; she paced the endless, labyrinthian halls with the cold patience of a caged jaguar. She talked little and spent most of her time seated before the ceiling-high casement that looked eastward to the undulating iron casket of the

ocean. At times, she made a feeble pretense of reading, but, always, her eyes sought that melancholy wasteland, as if she expected to see something, or someone. My head ached constantly, the tempestuous, evil problem of Cassie throbbing at my temples with hellish persistence.

Once I spoke to Ambler about her moods; he talked of complexes and Freud; it was reassuring to listen to his calm, reasoning approach to the subject, but even as he spoke, I knew there was something torturing Cassie that no psychoanalyst could hope to explain. She was possessed by an entity whose subtle, odious influence was stronger than any fantastic twist of the mind. Time and again, I paced before the forbidding oaken library door, trying to find the courage to break my promise to Cassandra. Once, she caught me there. She did not speak, but only stared at me with a hatred so intense that it was frightening. After that, it seemed to me, she was doubly watchful of the brass key that hung on the fragile web of her necklace.

Her silent hostility spread itself like an undulant pool through the brittle newness of Heath House; it wiped away everything we had tried to make of the place, and left it as it had been before, a clammy, sickening shell of the past, a past that wanted no part of the present, that would brook no intrusion of light or hope. Cassandra was a creature of that past.

DOCTOR Ambler continued to make routine monthly calls. To all outward appearances, Cassandra was no longer ill, yet, a certain, unhealthy pallor of skin persisted; at moments, when she was without make-up, the faintly luminous prominence of the delicate scales terrorized me. If she noticed them, Cassandra said nothing. The long, discolored streaks on her throat had become barely discernible, but I could not keep my eyes from them. Ambler made no comment on these noxious oddities; he went his earthy, country-doctor's way. I think he never had the slightest inkling of the true horror that engulfed the house he visited so regularly. Certainly, he had no notion of the evil that lay hidden in the news he told me that evening late in December.

The day hadn't been at all good; mid-

winter sleet lanced across a dense fog that came slithering and crying against the windows of Heath House. I had spent most of the time alone, making a sham at reading, wandering restlessly from room to room, staring blindly from one fog-curtained casement after another. During those last days, I had grown to anticipate a storm with a terrible, choking fear, for Cassandra's moods seemed more sullen and morbid as the easterly wind lashed angry rain or snow about the tiny cove behind the house. She would stand for hours gazing at the water-eaten mound that housed a thing that I could recall only with a tremor of disgust, a wave of nausea that balled itself like lead in the pit of my stomach. I had seen her doing that all that morning; she muttered something about how lonely he must be out there, and then walked slowly down the hall. I heard her door-lock click behind her. I had given up trying to understand her oblique remarks, brief whispers that seemed not meant for me, but rather, vague thoughts, personal and awesome, spoken aloud only by accident.

When Ambler had completed his examination in the privacy of Cassandra's chamber, he plodded heavily down the twisting staircase. I offered him a drink, muttering something about its being a raw night. It was only a pretense of civility with me, until, in the firelight of the sitting room, I saw the new expression that had crept into Ambler's eyes. I had seen many expressions there, after such sessions with Cassandra; expressions of doubt or bewilderment, or of professional satisfaction at her apparent recovery, but, now; there was something almost like pleasure in those soft gray eyes. I poured him a glass of sherry. He gulped it and winked.

"You've been wise people, you and your wife, Doctor," he said, after a pause. The eyes were actually twinkling.

"Wise?" His good humor had begun to irritate me.

"Of course! Nothing could have been more intelligent. . . I don't like to seem personal, but after all, it's been fairly obvious that you and Cassandra . . . well, something's come between you. . . . But, now, this. . . Certainly, a child is just the thing to bring you together again. . . . It'll make



all the difference in the world in this gloomy old place. . . ."

I suppose I hadn't really been listening to him. I remember packing my pipe, absently, and scratching a match on the box. It made a tiny, lost noise in the shadowy bleakness of the room. Then, he made that crack about a child, and I just stood there, staring at him, the match flickering in my hand. There was nothing but a hollow numbness in me; afterward, I found a scorched scar on the skin of my thumb and forefinger.

I realized dully that Ambler was chuckling; his hand was on my shoulder.

"Well, don't look so confused, old man, he said heartily. "I guess Cassandra wanted to surprise you herself, and now I've gone and spoiled it for her by blurting it out. . . ."

"She never said a word. . . ."

Ambler laughed and I think I managed a watery grin; he gave me that line about the husband always being the last to know. We had another glass of sherry. I tried to act natural. The wine spread hazily through my puzzlement; a warmth swirled in my head, as I saw Ambler to the door, a vague, unreasoning anger. I was hurt at the silent wall Cassandra had crected between us; it seemed impossible, almost inhuman, that she could have known such a thing, and deliberately kept it hidden from me.

When Ambler had disappeared into the maw of the storm, I bolted the door. Our lights had given out again, and I walked unsteadily. The anger throbbed in my temples now; it kept time with the flickering of the candelabra light as I slowly climbed the winding staircase to Cassandra's room.

## V

THE door was locked. My shadow cast a dark blot against its panels, a ghost that wavered drunkenly into the half-light. My hand was perspiring; the candelabrum kept slipping in my grasp. I knocked, listening to the leaden echo it made in the subterranean catacombs of the house. There was no answer. I called:

"Cassie!" My tongue felt thick and dry. I waited.

"I'm lying down, darling. I've a head-

ache. . . ." Cassie's voice was brittly light, controlled with an effort.

"I want to talk to you." Anger cut through my tone.

For a long moment, there was nothing but the spectral whisper of the waxed candlewicks as they sputtered anxiously, then, a murmur of footsteps beyond, and the key turned in its socket. I let myself in, closing the door behind me.

Cassandra was standing by the fireplace; the instant I saw her, anger ebbed from my mind. There was something terribly small and frightened about her lovely, small body in the gossamer softness of a negligee. I set the candelabrum on a table and went to her; my hands trembled at the warmth of her shoulders. She did not draw away; she did not move at all.

"Ambler told me about the baby," I said gently.

It was then that she turned; she was smiling, and in that moment, all the falseness had gone out of her face. A quiet warmth touched it. She traced my lips with her fingertips.

"I wanted to tell you myself. . . ."

I did not realize, then, that the faint sham was still in her voice. I kissed her. I told her it was wonderful. I said all the foolish things a man has a right to say at such a time. And, then, suddenly as I had begun, I stopped. Her mask had slipped; the warm tenderness was gone. A wall of nothingness blotted out the walls of her eyes. Cassandra twisted violently from me.

"It's no good," she whispered hoarsely. "It's no good!"

"Cassie. . . . I don't understand. . . . I . . ."

She spun to face me; blurred stains of tears streaked the sallowness of her cheeks. In the jaundiced candleglow, her eyes were abnormally bright.

"Can't you see? Do you have to be told?" Trembling lips twisted in a coarse sneer. Her small, even teeth seemed somehow vicious. "You're not wanted here! Just go away and let me be! I never want to see you again!" The hard grin widened and unstable laughter bubbled hysterically in her throat. "Your child! Do you think I'd bear your child! Can't you see I've changed? Don't you know you've lost me . . . that I belong to him now . . . ever since that night

I went to the cove . . . to the Abyss. . . . I'll always belong to him. . . . Always! Always! The bride of Yoth Kala. !"

The maniacal laughter cracked off as I gripped her shoulders; my fingers chewed into her flesh. I could feel her breath against my face, hot and sobbing.

"Cut it out!" I snapped. "Stop it, Cassie!"

She stood there for an eternity, staring at me; the mood whirled and twisted and childlike, bewildered fear was in her eyes again. She began to cry, her slight frame shuddering pitifully.

"It's true, I tell you," she gasped. "It's not your child. You don't believe me . . . you think I'm crazy. . . . You needn't believe me. . . . Just go away . . . before he comes for me. He said he would come. . . . I don't want him to hurt you. I don't want them to make you like me . . . like my father. . ." She was babbling senselessly, the words tumbling from her lips. ". . . Yoth Kala will come. . . . I hear his voice . . . he sings. . . . You hear? . . . Calling me . . . his bride . . . the mother of his child. I come, O, husband of the Green Void. . . . I come. . . ."

**I**T wasn't easy to hold her. I still have four parallel scars on my right cheek where her nails bit in frantically. She twisted with a strength that was nothing human, her lips muttering, her high, cracked voice shrilling that loathsome melody that meant death and horror and endless unrest to any who heard it. Finally, I won. Quite suddenly, she stopped struggling, she peered childishly into the darkness beyond us, her head cocked pathetically to one side, listening. She took an uncertain step toward the window before she fell. There was no sound save the rustle of her negligee as she crumpled at my feet. A thread of crawling spidery fog snaked in through the half-open casement, lingering like a shroud over her body. The stench was something from the bottomless watery depths of the sepulchre, a vile effluvium that was somehow the embodiment of every malevolent terror that stalked Heath House.

Cassandra and I were shadows playing a part against a papier-mache background in a scene from the opiate-deep nightmares of Poe. I did things without stopping to wonder

why. I can recall carrying her to the bed, and touching her pulse with fingers so numbed by horror that they could scarcely detect the fluttering heart-beat beneath them.

That was the night I came to an end of it. You can take just so much; you can go on hoping things will change, that you will awaken from this monstrous dream of falling through a void of unutterable terror. Then, you hit bottom. Staring at the chalky stillness of my wife's face, lost in the whiteness of the pillows, I knew I would have to break through. If I was to save her at all, I had to get to the bottom, I had to take this noisome fear in my hands and tear it out by the roots. I had to open the cancerous sore of the secret that ate at Cassandra's mind, the secret that lay buried in Lazarus Heath's book-room.

I was quite calm about it. When her breathing had become safe, I took the key gently from the necklace. With something that was more instinct than purpose, I got my revolver from the night-table drawer; it was fully loaded. I locked Cassandra in and went down the hall to the library. The gun made me feel better. It was something solid and sane to hold onto. A month later, the prosecution used the gun as exhibit "A"; they called it the murder weapon!

What I found beyond the massive, chiseled portal was a thing that laughed at the puny, human bravery of guns; a malignant, flowering evil that spawned itself in the pen-scrawled words of a man long-since food for the gnawing maggots of an unspeakable hell. As I pushed open the door, staring blindly into the pit of darkness beyond, I almost wished for a stinking, flesh-born terror with which I could clash; an evil that lived and breathed, and could bleed and die. I found nothing but a dusty, dry-rot smelling chamber, that had been too long without air and sunlight. A mouldering, half-burned candle stood at the edge of what Lazarus Heath had used as a writing-table; I held a match to it.

A butterfly of flame sputtered to life, throwing mammoth shadows along the crumbling plaster walls, casting an unwanted eye of light on the endless shelves of books long used to the privacy of night, untouched by curious hands. I wandered aimlessly about the high, barren room, gazing upon

titles so antiquated, so much a part of a past beyond remembrance, beyond life and death, that I should have sworn it was a library straight from the flaming abyss of Hell. They were books not meant for mortal eyes, tales told by cults that sank into oblivion before time was measured, cast out from earth, trailing the ruins of their hideous, blood-thirsting rites behind them. Here and there, more sane, understandable volumes came to view. There was a priceless collection of sea lore, and in one spider-webbed corner, I found a yellowed, thumbed copy of "The Odyssey"; one section had been underscored, its battered pages mute testimony of endless reading and rereading. It was the passage describing the escape of Odysseus from the sirens. God knows, Lazarus Heath had reason to be fascinated by it.

**T**HE shrill tumult of Cassandra's wild babbling still thundered softly in my brain. I stood very still, thinking, "This is the room." The root of it had to be tangled in the tomb-like dust of this shadowy chamber. But, where? my mind echoed. Where? My wanderings had brought me to the worm-eaten throne-chair behind Heath's writing-table. The light of the candle did a danse macabre as I sank heavy into the seat; it washed the black marble table-top with a flood of icy yellowness. Then, I saw the diary. I gave it a casual, irritated glance, and then, as the frenzied scrawl impressed itself upon my consciousness, I leaned closer. Faint gold-washed letters glittered brassily in the semi-darkness. "Lazarus Heath—His Book."

It may have been only the figment of a sick, overwrought imagination; I don't know. I know that I felt it there within me; the instant I touched the book, I felt the evil that sighed through Heath House, suddenly come to life, as I thumbed nervously through the water-stained pages of Lazarus Heath's diary. The demented tittering of the storm rose from a whisper to the howl of a rabid dog baying at the moon. Sleet lashed at high casement windows and the silken portieres rustled anxiously. Even before I began to read that incredible, unholy record, I knew I held the root in my hands.

There was nothing sinister in the first entry. It was made in the steady, squarish

script of a self-educated seaman, and dated February 21st, 192—. The words were sure and sane, with no hint of the hell-penned horror that lay in the final pages of the book.

Lazarus Heath had shipped out as First Mate aboard the freighter *Macedonia*, bound Southeast for Africa. It was as simple and prosaic as that. For pages there was nothing but the easy, satisfied chatting of a sea-faring man setting down, for his own amusement, the record of an interesting but mundane voyage. The first leg of the journey had gone well; even the weather had been with the *Macedonia*. The crew was competent and not too quarrelsome, and already looking forward to a "time" in the African coast-towns. Then, somewhere in the Southern Atlantic, they ran into the fog.

At first, Lazarus Heath made only passing mention of it; although it had come upon them unexpectedly and was intensely thick and disconcerting, it was judged that they would sail on through it on instruments without too much difficulty. There was a controlled, sensible attitude in Heath's script at this point; he was writing for himself the things he had told his men. At the close of the entry he wrote, as though loathe to admit it, even to himself: "There is a certain uneasiness among the men; it is not good for the nerves, this endless, blinding fog. . . ." The writing trailed off with the first whisper of the uncertainty that was laying siege to Lazarus Heath's mind.

The next entry was made four days later in a dashing, cold hand. It was short and bewildered. "Still this damnable fog, and that is not the worst of it. The instruments have begun to act queerly. We must go on as best we can and trust in the Almighty. Men very jumpy. . . ." And, on the night of the same day, the controlled hand had wavered perceptibly as it scribbled: "Instruments gone dead. What in God's name does it mean?" The story continued.

The coming of the voices was not sudden. It began with Dyke. Lazarus Heath knew little about the gangling, blond-bearded kid called Alan Dyke. He had signed on in New York as a fireman. A quiet, uneasy individual, he spent most of his leisure with books. He effected the bilge-water lingo of the sea, but underneath, he was only a

kid, and he was scared. It began, according to Heath, when the engines went dead. They had expected that for what seemed a century. The *Macedonia* couldn't go on plowing in blind circles forever; the fuel gave out. The hell-fire in the bowels of Heath's ship guttered and died; there was only an echoing ghost of the roar that had choked the engine room.

**I**T WAS too quiet. An unholy, nerve-rending silence enveloped the becalmed *Macedonia*. After a time, the men even gave up talking, as if the very echo of their voices, hollow and dead in the smothering fog, terrified them.

Dyke was on the foredeck when he heard the voices. Heath, standing beside him, had sensed an abrupt new tautness in the bony, coltish frame. Dyke's adolescent face strained to one side, marble-blue eyes gazing blindly into the mist; he listened. His words came to Lazarus Heath as though they had been separated by some yawning, fog-choked abyss.

"You hear them? The voices? I can hear them; they're calling us. . . . The syrens are chanting the melodies of watery death. . . . Zoth Syra calleth. . . ." The voice was no longer Dyke's. It was light and cloying, possessed of a malignant beauty. Men froze and stared; they seemed not to hear Heath's sharp commands. "I heard nothing," Heath wrote that night. "Still, the sounds must have been there. Dyke must have been listening to something; he and the others. . . . But, I mustn't believe these whispered legends of sea-syrens. Someone must hold this God-forsaken crew together. . . . if only I have the strength. . . . if only I can keep from hearing the voices. . . ." That was the prayer of Lazarus Heath, the night the *Macedonia* ran aground and sank off the ghostly shores of a lost, uncharted island.

Little space separated the next entry from those last frantic words, scribbled unevenly across a water-streaked, foul-smelling page of the diary, yet, reading on, I had the sensation of an endless spinning through some dark, watery nothingness. I lived the nightmare of which Lazarus Heath wrote with the calm sadness of a completely sane man.

The end of the *Macedonia* had been sudden and strange. By the hour, they had

known it must be noon in that outer world with which they had lost all hope of contact. Their own existence had become a perpetual fog-swarmling night; the monstrous ticking of the ship's clocks only taunted them. The bells of the *Macedonia* ricocheted mockingly into the boundless darkness of the mist. They had been chiming when the end came.

Lazarus Heath had spent most of his life on the water; he had survived more than one shipwreck. Panic and the smashing fury of the sea were nothing new to him. It was the quiet that terrified the *Macedonia's* First Mate. The crew seemed not to understand; his lashing, bitter orders fell on deafened ears. The swirling Atlantic sucked thirstily at their feet and they did not move. Officers and men alike, they stood or sat in a speechless, apathetic stupor, unmindful of the death that swirled and lapped on every side. Each face held the same wrapt, hypnotized expression. One would have said they were listening. . . .

Heath steeled himself. He mustn't listen. He mustn't let himself hear what they could hear. He wanted to live. He stalked the length of the bridge angrily, bawling harsh commands. Only the fog and the sea listened and echoed. The *Macedonia* groaned mournfully and listed to port; water, thick and brine-tangled, flooded her hold. No one moved. She was going fast. He had to do something, make them hear him, bring them back to life. . . .

Inky wetness washed against him, whirling him blindly in a stinking bottomless pit. His lungs would burst. . . . they must. Air! And, then, he was on the surface. In the near-distance of the fog, the gray mass of his ship loomed balefully. It foundered and up-ended; there were no cries of terror or pain. . . . only cold, death-spawned silence. The *Macedonia* went down. There was nothing but a dull phosphorescence on the surface, and the frozen, black expanse of sea and fog.

## VI

**H**EATH was never quite certain about the island. It seemed probable that the *Macedonia* had run aground on the pinpoint of land that rose like a monstrous

medusa from the mauve-green depths of the sea, yet Heath had never been aware of the existence of such an island; it was marked on none of the charts drawn by human hands. At a moment's notice, it had seemed to rear itself into the cotton-wool fog off the port bow of the ship. The water lapping at its fungus-clotted shores gurgled insanely as it swallowed the last of the *Macedonia*.

Oil-stained brine tangled Lazarus Heath's limbs; swimming was next to impossible. He never knew how long he was lost in the whirling eddies that licked about the island. It seemed an eternity. In the limitless, time-killing darkness of the fog, he struggled hopelessly, until finally, his feet touched bottom. He slithered ashore, lashed on by the incoming tide. Salt burned his lips and eyes; he was between choking and crying. In the lea of a gigantic finger of rock, he toppled to his knees, and sank forward, face-down, into a thoughtless stupor. . . .

The fog never lifted. When Heath's mind crawled upward from the soundless depths of unconsciousness, he had no way of knowing how long he had lain, senseless, with the mossy, damp soil of the island clinging to him as if it had some power of physical possessiveness. He rolled over on his back, his head throbbing and dazed. He was breathing more easily, now; some of the weary tautness had gone out of his limbs. Wincing at the effort, he dragged himself to a standing position. He leaned against that shadowy hardness of the rock. His hand came away coated with a malodorous, verdant slime. Heath wiped the hand clean, feeling suddenly ill at the cold dampness that crushed in on him. He couldn't be sick; do something . . . something to keep his mind busy. Dragging one foot heavily after the other, he began to explore the island.

When he tried to set down the incommunicable, barren loneliness of that lost outpost, Lazarus Heath failed. His pen stammered, searching for the right words, and finally admitted that the tone of the place was indescribable. He wandered endlessly through the cloying blueness of the mist, and found nothing that offered hope of any sort. The entire, clammy surface of the

island seemed to be covered with the same nauseous green slime his hand had encountered on the coastal rock. It sucked hungrily at his feet with each step he took. It oozed from the trunks and gnarled, lifeless limbs of the barren trees that were scattered sparsely inland. The smooth, mucous-like scum coated the jutting rock formations wherever they sprang into spectral being, making them gleam with a malevolent phosphorescence. Lazarus Heath wrote one fearful sentence, the ghastly import of which he was not to guess until an age of horror had passed. "One gets the singular, frightening impression that this island has been a part of the ocean depths for more years than man can count, and, somehow, has risen to cause the tragedy of the *Macedonia* and claim its only survivor . . . myself. " This was written just before he began to hear the voices.

PERHAPS, before, even up to the last nightmarish moment, when he saw the crew of the *Macedonia* drawn, hypnotized and unresisting, into the slaving maw of the sea, Lazarus Heath had not believed in the voices. A great many explanations of that frozen, listening attitude which held the men to their death, may have flashed like a wild phantasmagoria through his mind. Most of all, I think, he believed the officers and men alike seized by some loathsome mass madness. The sounds to which they "listened" so intently must be the figment of some malady of the mind. But, there, in the clammy mists of the lost, slime-coated island, he suddenly knew that the voices were very real.

They were not ordinary sounds. They were soft, cloying cadences that caught and held consciousness in a spider-web of evil beauty. They seemed uttered by countless alien tongues echoing across a vast and fearful chasm, and yet, as Heath stumbled on in search of them, he would have sworn that their source must be, there, just the other side of that next slimy knoll. He did not think of why he must find them; he only knew that this vile harmony had suddenly become very clear and understandable in his mind. "Come away!" the voices chanted, with the sound of myriad Gehennan lutes. "Come away to your bride, Zoth Syra! Come

away . . . away . . . to the Queen of the Green Abyss. . . ."

"I staggered blindly onward," Heath wrote in his diary. (The words themselves staggered crazily across the water-ruined pages, a mute reflection of the precipitous, hellish compulsion of his quest for the voices.) "I knew not where I was going, nor why. I fell time and again; my hands and knees bled with scrambling among the slippery, treacherous rocks. I came to the beach. Somehow the fog there seemed to lift, growing less dense, and I found myself on the brink of the ocean. I knew I must stop, or drown, but my legs continued to pump with piston-like persistence. The voices were nearer, now; they held a malevolent beauty more compelling than the sounds that echo through narcotic dreams. Panic-stricken, I felt the icy water rising about my body, and still I kept moving out to sea. Brine swelled about my chest. The voices chanted mad cacophonies in my ears; wild, discordant, irresistible. The water reached my neck, my mouth and then, my head was covered.

"And, now the maddest thing of all. Submerged, I continued to walk, to breathe, slowly, easily, not through nose or mouth, but through a pair of gills in my throat! I strode onward through the swirling, opalescent depths, ever toward the howling, evilly-joyful singing toward my bride, Zoth Syra!"

Between these frenzied, staggering words and the next and final entry, there is a gap of several blank, brine-yellowed pages. But for this, one might have guessed through desperate wishful thinking, that the final episodes of that hideous record were dreamed of whole cloth—the fanatical ravings of a mind lost beyond rescue. No such guess can be hazarded when you have seen that last entry. It is dated almost twenty years later, in Kalesmouth. The writing is spidery and precise; the words have the cold, terrifying ring of unquestionable, blasphemous truth. Lazarus Heath set down those final sentences with a calm, almost grim determination. The very bareness of the clipped emotionless style he used has a numbing quality. God knows I would rather have died than believe this unholy tale, but there was no choice.

**E**VEN after twenty years, Heath could only hint at the monstrous dream which followed his descent into what he called "The Empire of the Green Abyss." His tight, controlled words whisper of a world unknown to mortals, a submarine, slime-choked empire of strange geometrical dimensions, a city whose architecture was somehow "all wrong." Entering it, Lazarus Heath was seized with an unutterable nausea, a repulsion that made him want to return, to go back somehow, and die as normal men would in such circumstances. But, he went on. In some inexplicable manner, he had become a part of this world of loathsome watery putrescence. He became one with the creatures who were the subjects of Zoth Syra, Empress of the Abyss.

**O**BVIOUSLY, the pen faltered, the words would not come, but lay stagnant, and unspeakable, in Heath's mind when he tried to "describe" these creatures. He could no more draw a picture of them than he could explain the evil charm they held for him—a charm embodied in the chanting, ungodly thing they called Zoth Syra. Lazarus Heath was at once repelled and terribly, irresistibly drawn to this Queen who had chosen him for her lover. In trembling half-scrawls, he hints at the monstrous, primitive rites that were part of their betrothal ceremony. And of himself he writes with frightening simplicity: "I was helpless. I was part of those decadent blasphemies and knew it, yet had not the will to resist. I wanted only to go on listening to that hellish, sweet voice which belonged to my Queen. . . ."

There was no time; there was nothing but an endless, bitter-sweet madness, from which he had not the will to escape. He became to the creatures of the Abyss, Yoth Zara, the Chosen One. And reigning beside the indescribably evil beauty, Zoth Syra, he became conscious of a ceaseless murmuring of restless voices that echoed sibilantly in the song of his Queen. Perhaps it was then that Heath pieced together his explanation of that hideously magnificent underworld. I do not know. But it was the whispering of the voices that made him uneasy, that sent his mind struggling upward from the Abyss, groping blindly toward the light of normalcy. It was the

murmured legends that made possible his final escape. The horror of them gave him a strength he needed; they deafened his ears to the song of Zoth Syra. And, when the Empress of the Abyss bore Lazarus Heath a child in his image, he fled with the baby, wildly, insanely, rising through the undulant shadows of a mad dream.

More than a year and a half after the disappearance of the *Macedonia*, Lazarus Heath was found, more dead than alive, on an uncharted island in the Atlantic. Some aboard the rescue ship wondered about the strange blue marks on Heath's throat; they asked each other how a man could survive for nearly twenty months when there was no sign of shelter or vegetation on the island. They questioned him about the baby girl who was rescued along with him. Heath said her name was Cassandra.

## VII

"I Lazarus John Heath, being of sound and sane body and mind, and under the influence of no thing or man, natural or otherwise, do this day set my hand in protestation of the truth of what I have written above. My story is not a dream; it happened, and I pray to the Almighty it may never happen again. At first glance, it will have, for the reader, all the earmarks of drunken fantasy, but upon closer consideration of the facts, upon a study of the lore of the sea, I feel certain that another decision will be reached.

"In the ancient books, men have written of a race of Syrens, monstrous beauties of the seas, who lured men to death and worse with their strange, irresistible chanting. This race, say the recorders, was banished from the earth for its evil practice of black magic; the Syrens were turned into the rocky, treacherous shoals of the ocean; turned into stone. . . .

"The whispered legends of the Abyss have another tale to tell. Yes, they murmur. Their race was cast out as men recorded, but only condemned to the deep they once controlled; so that, sullen and alone, they begat the People of the Abyss, a race of creatures that lurks on the edge of time, safe in the maw of the green ocean, until the moment comes when they shall

again proclaim themselves and retake the world from which they were banished countless ages ago. I have been one of them; through me they hoped to strike, I think. I was to be their contact with this world we know. I have heard their unsatisfied whimperings; they chafe at the bit for release. And I say beware. They have claimed me. True, I escaped, but even yet, I am of them. In the end, they shall reclaim me . . . but, not alive, if I can help it. All these haunted years since my escape from the Abyss, I have heard their songs, their endless pagan chanting. So far, I have resisted, but I grow ever weaker. Some day, they will win. But, it is not this that terrifies me; I know I must die as a traitor to their cause. My only fear is that somehow, some day, they will realize that with me in my flight, I took the daughter of Zoth Syra. I pray God they will never reclaim her for Cassandra is one of them, just as I. . . ."

THE last words of Lazarus Heath's horrible testament wavered frailly across the page, as if the controlled hand of the writer had grown too weak to go on. The ink was blurred in spots by vague, circular stains that might have been made by raindrops, or the impotent tears of a lost, frightened old man.

With numbed fingers I closed that book of the damned. I sank back against the cold unfriendliness of the throne chair, and shut my eyes. I could feel beads of icy perspiration forming at the base of my skull and trickling down the back of my neck. Not only my hands were numb, my brain was working with the dreamy sluggishness of a somnambulist. Curiously evil visions danced across the shadowy, decaying bindings of books on the far wall. I do not know how long I sat there. The candle guttered and died. I sat on, hemmed in by the writhing ghosts that complete darkness set loose again in the chamber where Heath had written his hateful confession.

Outside, the storm raged maniacally, seething through the forgotten, rat-pirated tunnels under Heath House. Vaguely, I thought that somehow with each passing instant, the sea and the wind had become more ferocious, more predatory, as though

lashed on to devastating fury by some infernal, supernatural disturbance. Then, slowly, through the screaming lunacy of the storm, I became aware of another sound. It was a high, soft threnody that was of the wind and lightning, yet a song in itself, a chorus of myriad voices that echoed from beyond life and death, that whispered hauntingly, evilly, of the secrets of the unknown. The song of the Syrens, my mind muttered. Yes, their song. But, for whom? They had Lazarus Heath, now; they must be calling another. . . .

Even before I heard Cassandra's voice, I was out of the chair, stumbling toward the door. Then, the first anguished wail of her ghastly litany froze my senses. For an incalculable moment, I could only stand and listen. That unbearable throbbing was not my heart; it was Cassandra's frail hands pounding madly on her chamber door for release.

And always, steadily, her cry rose, shrilling through the shadow-crawling halls of Heath House, an obscene, awesome chant, at once wheedling, beguiling, and commanding. Slowly, painfully, I made out the words.

"I have heard you call, O, Yoth Kala, my betrothed! I have seen the spirits of the Abyss grown wild as presage of your coming; their rejoicing has set loose the sea that is their empire; it echoes in the thunder, the black wind and lightning! Come then, my husband and father of my child! Claim your bride! Come to me through the cove of Yoth Zara, my father! I wait! Come . . . Come!"

**T**HE silence in which that last unholy plea died away was an eternity of horror for me, yet it must have endured only an instant. It was a strange, pregnant silence, fraught with impending terror. I realized dully, that those countless voices that had risen a moment before above the howling wind, had just as suddenly been quieted. Now, in their stead, another voice; single and terrifying in the very loneliness of its sound, rose from a murmur to a sharp nasal chant that sliced through the violence of the storm as if it were a mere unruly zephyr. Someone, something, very near, yet outside, was calling Cassandra's name. The cove, my mind re-

peated mechanically. Come to me through the cove of Yoth Zara, my father. . . .

I staggered through the blinding darkness toward the single tall window of Heath's study. I felt the skin of my ankle torn as I stumbled over some vague, edged object. I swore and righted myself. My hand caught at the drape, and its dusty velvet strength supported me. I peered through the smeary, leaded panes, into the streaming maw of the storm.

"Cassandra!" that hell-spawned voice echoed. "I come, O, Cassandra my bride. . . ."

I do not know how I looked standing there, that night, in the evil-sodden gloom, but, I know what I saw. Perhaps, in the end, I shall be no more successful at putting the essential, blasphemous horror of that vision into words, than was Lazarus Heath. But, I must try. If I can transcribe only one grain of the actual loathsomeness of the Abyss-born creature called Yoth Kala, perhaps, then, men will know why I destroyed Cassandra. . . .

The flash of lightning that rent the maddened heavens in that moment, was nothing ordinary. It was like a sudden noon-day sun at midnight, throwing into relief the hideous, turbulent cove where Lazarus Heath died. The cold stone of the sacrificial pillars cast gargoylesque shadows on the slimy sand; a torrent of cackling sea crashed inland, and drowned them for an instant, then, suddenly, receded, and the Thing was there. I do not remember what wild conjectures twisted through my fear-tortured brain in the moment. Perhaps I thought I had gone mad; perhaps I told myself I was letting my imagination run away with me. But, I knew I wasn't.

I cannot say the Thing in the cove walked; it moved inland rapidly, but with a seemingly gradual, amoebic motion. It expanded and ebbed, gelatinous tendrils creeping over the sand of the cove, spreading like a stain of ink, or black, poisonous blood. I saw no distinct form. I was conscious only of a monstrous, jelly-like mound, black and glistening with a slime-coated, nauseous putrescence. The Thing slobbered onward to Heath House, covering ground with frightening speed. And from this hellish creature, through the whip-lash of the storm,



shrilled the high, hypnotic voice of Yoth Kala, calling his bride. . . .

The period of befogged waiting came to an abrupt end. I knew, quite suddenly, that the time for thinking and rational disbelief had run out. It was no longer a matter of guessing and wondering at the mad writings of Lazarus Heath. I, myself, had seen them come to foul, soulless life. I had witnessed the evil of the Abyss incarnate, creeping relentlessly toward its goal—coming to claim Cassandra!

**E**VEN as I watched, the foetid Thing disappeared around the dim corner of Heath House. I moved more surely, now, with a strange, icy calm. For, now, I had at least one thing for which to be grateful. The evil that I fought had taken on concrete form; I was no longer fighting shadows. Clutching the cool butt of the revolver in my pocket, I went out into the murky shadows of the hallway. I moved quietly, scarcely daring to breathe. I must reach Cassandra before It did. I must keep her from this creature of lost and carrion ages. And, always, as I walked, the discordant, shrill threnody of Yoth Kala sliced into my consciousness. The pounding on Cassandra's door became more frantic by the second. Her voice rose wildly, calling to the Thing risen from the briny tomb of the sea.

I had almost reached her door, when I stopped. A sudden, whirling vertigo seized my brain; I clutched at the balustrade for support. Rising from the well of the foyer, a reeking effluvia reached out to every corner of the shadow-ridden house. I will not say I actually heard movement; it was simply a soft, hissing sound, as of oily water eating at the rotten pilings of a river dock. I stared down the long staircase, trying to focus my eyes, and then, abruptly, the Thing was there, moving quickly up the stairs. I saw it clearly for the first time.

No one whose mind is cramped by cut-and-dried conceptions of form and the three-known dimensions, can possibly sense the vague, hideous shapelessness of that creature of the Abyss. The form it possessed cannot be drawn in units of height or thickness or density. It seemed to undulate, varying by the second, rising gelatinously to a height of perhaps ten feet, and then, subsiding, swell-

ing, spreading slimy tentacles forward. The whole of the rubbery outer skin was coated with a foul ichor, a tarry stickiness that seemed secreted from monstrous, leathery-pores. I think it was this bluish slime that set loose the rancid stench that grew more overpowering with each moment, with each slithering inch of its progress up the staircase.

At the approximate center of this putrid, blue-black mass, a raw, slobbering hole, which seemed to be a rudimentary mouth, sucked in and out with obscene rhythm. It was from this opening in the reticulated, reptilian hide that the cloying, mucous-choked chant of Yoth Kala emanated. Actually, there was no face, but, nearly a foot above the wound-like mouth, there was a single, serpentine tentacle that writhed from side to side, sensing, rather than seeing, looking like some flesh-made periscope shot up from hell. At the end of the tentacle, I made out what might have been an eye—the squamous, dusty, expressionless orb of a snake. And, now, as the Thing crawled upward, the eye-tentacle suddenly grew rigid, turning toward me. For a second, the huge gelatinous form hesitated, then moved forward again, this time directly for me.

Mechanically, sick with the putrid vileness of the odor the Thing cast off, I staggered backward, away from on-coming horror. The eye-tentacle wavered and followed me. The forerunning cilia of black, tarry stickiness flowed across the hall, only a few feet from me. The stench was unbearable. It seemed to me that the pagan song of Yoth Kala had taken on a high, evilly-humorous note. The slobbering mouth-hole spread in what could only be a hideous, anticipatory grin.

**N**OW, my back was against the wall; I could still hear Cassandra thumping on the panels of her door, crying her invitation to this loathsome lover of hers, but I was no longer thinking of her. I could think only of the long, jelly-like feeler, sent out from the black, viscid mass, curling slowly about my waist, crushing. Perhaps, I screamed or swore; I do not know. I remember plunging my hand into pocket and squeezing the trigger of that revolver. There was a smell of seared cloth as the bullet burnt through my coat, and then, sharply, a

**cry**, almost human, of furious pain. A slitted, ugly wound opened in the feeler, and bluish, stinking slime spewed over my hand and waist; this was the foul, putrid blood of the creature of the Abyss! A thick, nauseous ichor that spurted like oil from the bullet wound. The feeler uncoiled in a tremendous reflex of agony, and I stumbled away, down the hall, fumbling in my pocket for the key to Cassandra's door. I slammed the heavy portal behind me, and leaned against it, sobbing hysterically.

The first thing I became conscious of was the sudden silence; it fell like a spidery caul over Heath House. I realized dully that, for a moment, Yoth Kala's song had been stopped.

Beyond the door, there was a vague, liquid rustling, then a tense, waiting noiselessness—as though the Thing were being very still, listening.

And, here, in Cassandra's room, there was another silence. Before me in the shadows, the pallid oval of Cassandra's face wavered phantom-like, staring at me; the darkly brilliant eyes were tortured with a surprisingly sane fear. Abruptly, as though the silencing of that blasphemous incantation had momentarily released her to sanity, Cassie was in my arms, crying softly.

"Don't let him get me, darling! You mustn't let him get me! Promise you won't! Please! . . . I'm all right, now; it's only when I hear his voice that I can't refuse him. . . ."

"It's all right," I said thickly. "We'll get out of here somehow. . . . We'll go away where he can never touch you. . . ."

"No . . . no, I can't escape him that way. . . ."

"We can, Cassie! We must. . . ."

"No. . . . Believe me! I know! There's only one escape. . . . You've got to kill me. . . ."

"Cassie!"

"It's true! It's the only way out. If you don't care about me, think about the child . . . my child by him. . . ."

"Stop talking crazy. I tell you we'll get away. . . ."

"Think of the child," Cassandra insisted hoarsely. "I am the daughter of Zoth Syra. My father was a human; I was born in the image of that father. But, think of the child I must bear. . . . Suppose . . . suppose *he* is

born in the image of *his* father . . . of that . . . that Thing out there!"

## VIII

**I** WAS no longer seeing that frail, anguished visage, gray as death, with its ghastly, bluish throat-scars; I was no longer aware of the horror that shone through Cassandra's eyes—the terror of a mind caught in a web from which there was no escape: All I could see was that slaverling, heinous monstrosity beyond the chamber door. A child! Its child, born in its own hideous image! It couldn't be! It must never happen! This lost decadent race of evil encrouching upon the earth, getting its hellish fruit upon humans—and in the end, overwhelming, conquering, reclaiming, as Lazarus Heath had prophesied!

"Cassandra! O, my bride! Princess of the Abyss, I call. Yoth Kala calls!"

Beneath my hands, I felt Cassandra's fragile body turn rigid; her flesh suddenly burned against mine. Those dark eyes glazed and protruded horribly, and at her throat, the bluish lines pulsed obscenely, like the gills of a fish, like the nauseous mouth of the Thing in the hall. I tried to hold her, but as the chant of Yoth Kala rose wildly, her clawed hands beat insanely at my face; their nails bit into the flesh. With a species of supernatural strength, Cassandra tore herself loose. She thrust me to one side, and was at the door, tearing frantically at the latch, shrilling a nasal, hypnotic reply to her mate.

Now, staring at the door itself, I saw the massive panels sag and warp, as if from tremendous pressure from without. A foetid black feeler oozed through the crevice at the bottom of the door. It circled, obscenely possessive, about Cassandra's ankles, evil, caressing. The storm throbbed at the blackened casements. There was no lightning, now; only endless, abysmal blackness and rising through it, all the myriad hateful voices of the Green Abyss, howling in chorus to the incantations of Yoth Kala and his bride.

What I did then was done with the sure, unthinking calm of a man who has reached his final decision. I walked slowly to Cassandra's side; she was no longer conscious

of my existence. She tore so maniacally at the door to freedom that her frail fingers bled. The revolver felt cool in my sweat-soaked grip. I brought the neat, business-like muzzle within a few inches of Cassandra's temple. I knew, now, that she was right. There was only one escape. I pulled the trigger.

I waited for death.

You must understand that. I fully expected to die. I had no idea of running. I saw Cassandra slump forward against the door. As she slid to the floor, her fingers clutched convulsively at the dark wood; the nails dug four parallel streaks the length of the panels. She lay very still. In that instant, as the crashing echo of the shot withered to silence through the catacombs of Heath House, a great terrified wail soared insanely above the onslaught of the storm; a scream of pain and unanswerable anger. The huge door bent beneath superhuman pressure. Then, slowly, as I waited for loathsome, foul-smelling death in the grip of Yoth Kala, a death I did not intend to fight, the weird chanting from without died away. There was silence. A strange, utterly peaceful silence such as Heath House had not known for countless years. I saw the black, stinking tentacle withdrawn from the room. Outside, in the hallway, a sickly hissing sound echoed mournfully. It moved down the staircase that creaked beneath its retreating weight.

I walked unsteadily to the casement window and gazed out through a strangely abated storm. A sudden, peaceful moon had crept from behind dull clouds. And across the cold moonlit strand, into the cove, once again to be swallowed by the sightless depths of the Green Abyss, slithered the hideous, hell-spawned Thing no other living man has ever seen. Yoth Kala was gone.

I know, now, why it happened that way. I have thought about it a great deal in these last lonely hours, and I believe I have found the answer. I had waited for the vengeance of Yoth Kala; I had expected to die as the destroyer of his bride. But, Yoth Kala could not reach me. As Lazarus Heath had been before her, Cassandra was an instrument. She was the key in the grip of the people of the Abyss, their only contact with this world

that had cast them out ages since, the only one through whom they could regain a foothold in that world, on whom they could beget the race that would one day reclaim all that they had lost. When I killed Cassandra, I cut off that contact. Yoth Kala and his hideous breed were once more consigned to the bonded anonymity of the Abyss. This time, at least, the world had escaped their vengeance.

I walked back to where Cassandra lay, calm, and at peace. I sat down beside her, and smoothed her soft, warm hair gently. I think I cried. The storm whispered a lost protest and died. I sat there with Cassandra until late the next evening, when Dr. Ambler came to call, and found us.

Only another half-hour until dawn. The cell block has been very quiet most of the night. Outside, in the grayish half-light, there is a sound of distant business that seems ghostly coming in through the bars on the cold early morning air. There is a creaking of wood, and then a sudden thud. This is repeated several times. They are testing the spring-trap of my gallows.

They say that prayers help. If you have come this far, if you think you understand the story of Cassandra Heath, you might try it. Make it a very special sort of prayer. Not for Cassandra and me. All our prayers were said a long time since. We are at peace.

This prayer must be for you—for you and all the others who must be left behind, who cannot walk with me, up that final flight of wooden stairs, to peace and escape, who must go on living in the shadow of a monstrous evil of which they are not even aware, and so, can never destroy. You may need those prayers.

Somewhere beyond the edge of the last lone lip of land, beyond the rim of reality, sunken beneath the slime and weed of innumerable centuries, the creatures of the Abyss live on. Zoth Syra still reigns, and the syren songs are still sung. Entombed in their foul, watery empire, they writhe; restless, waiting. . . . This time they have lost their foothold. This time their link with the world of normalcy has been broken, their contact destroyed. This time they have failed.

But, they will try again . . . and again. . . .