

MAY

15¢



TERROR SALES

**DONALD DALE
CHARLES
BOSWELL**



*TWO STRONGLY CONTRASTED
NOVELETTES OF UNUSUAL TERROR!*

**MISTRESS OF THE
DARK POOL**

by RUSSELL GRAY

**TEST-TUBE
FRANKENSTEIN**
by WAYNE ROBBINS

TERROR TALES



VOLUME TWELVE MAY, 1940 NUMBER TWO

A LONG NOVEL OF WEIRD TERROR

The Book of Torment.....Harrison Storm 6

How could anyone have believed me when I said I had not committed those horrible torture-murders? For they had read the gloating admission of the ghastly crimes—and the handwriting was my own!

FOUR MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

Where Dwell the Living Dead.....Wayne Rogers 28

Old Jubel Tandy swore that until the end of time I would remain faithful to the spirit of his dead daughter—and now in that cavern of damnation, her corpse was rising up to claim me in the cold, white embrace of death!

Mistress of the Dark Pool.....Russell Gray 56

I could not help but laugh when that ancient hag told me I would take the place of her dead lover. For had I not my own lovely Cara? Yet there came a night when I promised to kill—that I might have the love of a wrinkled, leathery crone!

Prey for the Daughter of Hell.....Conrad Kimball 78

Death lay in my lips! I knew this, but some power stronger than myself forced me on to lure men to their destruction. Was I so accused that even the one man I truly loved could not escape my frenzied madness?

Test-Tube Frankenstein.....Wayne Robbins 86

I wanted to destroy that slimy, protoplasmic horror that fed on the flesh of the humans it sought to imitate, but even as I locked with it in a struggle of death, it changed into the lovely form of—my wife!

A SHORT STORY OF FEARFUL MENACE

The Night Eternity Ended.....Donald Dale 46

The Blue Lady of the Sierras was the infinitely desirable embodiment of all man's longing and passion. Yet on one forbidden night of the year none could look upon her—and live!

TRUE TERROR FEATURE

Monsters of Monarchy.....Charles Boswell 73

Egomaniac of Antiquity . . . the man whom all Rome feared. . .

—AND—

The Inside Story.....The Editors 4

Are writers men or geni? . . .

Black Chapel!.....A Department 104

A reader's complaint. . .

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2236 Cross Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. Harry H. Hargreaves, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter May 27, 1936, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 7, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1940, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 13c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A., \$5.00. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. For advertising rates address Russ J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send them to 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

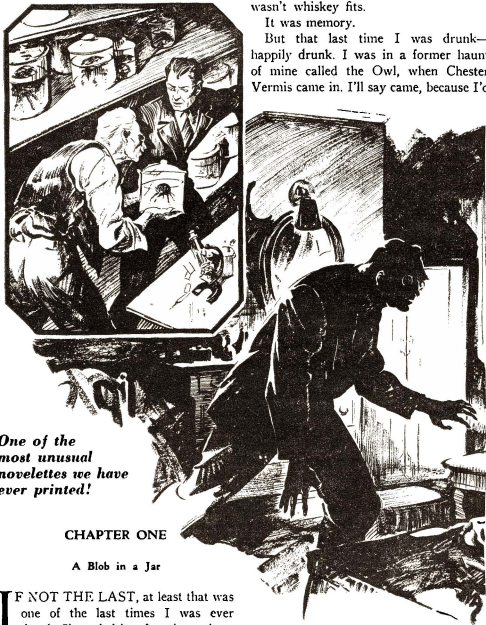
TEST-TUBE FRANKENSTIEN

by WAYNE ROBBINS

up for a week at a time, and give me the cure, and mumble whiskey fits. But it wasn't whiskey fits.

It was memory.

But that last time I was drunk—happily drunk. I was in a former haunt of mine called the Owl, when Chester Vermis came in. I'll say came, because I'd



One of the most unusual novelettes we have ever printed!

CHAPTER ONE

A Blob in a Jar

IF NOT THE LAST, at least that was one of the last times I was ever drunk. I've tried it a few times since, but only a few. Some may find forgetfulness in the vine; but not I. The things that writhe and twist within the alcohol-heated vapors of my brain—listen, I tried it a few times. But they used to lock me

get in trouble trying to express more exactly his particular way of getting about. He dreamed in, and while he dreamed he minced, and while he did these things his beastly inferiority com-

They would have thought me insane had I told them what I knew; that this man was not my old friend, Chester Vermis, at all, but solely a mass of gelatinous plasm which could assume at will the form and identity of anything in the world . . . even the beloved and dear figure of my own June!



plex was working right along, so that every movement seemed at once to seek unobtrusiveness and yet to want approving notice.



But if he should begin speaking—and he would—his first appearance would be immediately obscured, and the listener would conceive an immediate and violent distaste for the hunched, robust little gnome. It isn't uncommon, a shy person's attempting to cover up with hot air and braggadoccio. It's never a happy combination, though.

Watching Chester, I felt very unhappy, because I liked him. Chester and I had been drawn together at school, and had

remained close ever since. I could always feel sympathy for his timidity, because I was never any red-nosed bully, myself. I clenched my teeth, just thinking about it. Chester was smart. I mean he was one of the smartest, and could have wrapped any of the others about his little finger; except that he was always so eager to be wrapped about theirs.

He came immediately to my booth and sighed into the place opposite.

He sighed out an order for something light and soft, and then turned owl-eyes in my direction. They glittered, excited, like the time he was chosen water-boy—as a gag, if he had only been able to see it.

"Well, Mortimer," he began, shying as usual from the odium of mouthing a nickname, "Mortimer, you're intoxicated." He pointed a carefully pruned fingernail at me. "You're drunk, and right when I want to acquaint you with my success. I'm a genius," he sighed. "From now on in the scientific world I am an important man."

I twisted a thumb at a roving waiter and then shifted it into Chester's ribs. He jumped. "You'll never be important," I grunted, "you imitation of a real man."

HE DIDN'T mind. "Speak for yourself, John," he smiled. "But what makes me this way, Mortimer, what does it? Why are some one way, some another? Why do some animals rush to attack blindly, while others slink and cower? Why do some choose to live subzero, others to seek hot rocks? Some to build nests, others to knit on tiny garments?"

"Another of the same," I said to the waiter.

"I'll tell you," Chester said, "it's instinct." He and I nodded soberly, completely agreed that he had made a world-shaking pronouncement.

"You're too tight to listen," he com-

plained, "but I've got to talk. Well, so I began thinking about instincts and what causes them. I began seeking whatever glandular secretions it must be. Glands, I mean, must heighten whatever tendency is already there. Everyone has, to some slight degree at least, every instinct, to slink and to bully, to love and to hate—so the problem was simply to find what caused certain ones to become dominant."

He breathed wearily into the too large collar of his immaculate shirt. "I found it," he said, and I began wishing the last few had been left in the bottle, because something told me he was dead serious, and that I should be paying attention.

"Now, obviously," he lectured in imitation of our old chemistry professor, "you have nothing at all when you have only a vial of sickly colored gland extraction. It's got to work on something, and something with the particular instinct you seek."

"If they'll leave me alone, I'll leave them alone," I muttered truculently.

Chester said: "I started with worms. Their desires are few: to feed, to reproduce according to their own idea of the subject—division, of course, and to go on living, in spite of—er, heck."

I arose. "Let's go." I knew with fatalistic certainty that eventually I would be dragged to his musty laboratory, so I wanted to save time.

"**Y**OU mean," I was asking as I pointed at a jar, "that that gob of detestableness is alive?"

"Indeed, yes," Chester Vermis simpered. "That is earthworm tissue, artificially fed. Not only alive, but growing—as such vivisected bits do quite often in labs."

The gob, I could estimate, was nearly the size of a hickory nut. "What's it good for. I mean, what's its particular bag of tricks?"

"That," he said, awed of himself, "is

as near as man has ever come to the pure, disembodied will to live." I stared at him sidewise as he continued. "I'd show you, except that too often isn't good for it. I can take it and crush it almost to shreds; I can immerse it in weak solutions of acids. But still it clings to whatever life it has in it. I built up that one instinct in it, practically at the exclusion of all others. Except hunger, of course; do away with hunger and you destroy life, so I have to build that up parallel with the major instinct. . . . "For instance, look at this—"

It was another blob. In a larger jar, this one was the size of an indoor baseball. It seemed to maintain a perpetual shimmering vibration. I watched fascinated while Chester prodded with sterile scissors through an air-lock. "I'll soon have a method perfected to keep them living right in open air," he murmured. His scissors neatly snipped the blob in two, and brought one of the still jittering halves out. It went into the incinerator.

"That shimmering—that's its method of eating, absorbing liquid. I have to keep him trimmed down, or he'd get beyond me." Apparently he hadn't noticed that he was making me just a little ill.

He had a dozen or so other jars. One curious one, incidentally, that kept dividing at the rate of once every few minutes. These—naturally many of them—were very small. He said they would have become too fine even for a microscope except for his continual weeding out.

All these jars were worm tissue. But there was one more, he said—his prize. What he had accomplished so far, he thought, was just a start. It wasn't any different to look at.

"This," he explained, "was started from a muscle in the hide of a chameleon. Pigmentation, you know, is controlled in that case by the manipulation of color-filters, as you might call them, which absorb all light rays except those desired

to imitate the background. But I have carried it even further than that. I have there the start of what will be the pure essence of imitativeness."

"All except shape, of course," I told him tolerantly. He smiled.

"This happens to be a hybrid. Instinct within him also is that motivation which causes certain tree worms to stiffen out to resemble twigs when danger is sensed, and certain caelephoids and jelly fish to turn to dangling bits of moss. Ever hear of 'keeping up with the Joneses'? How about all clothing styles? It's all the instinct to camouflage, to become an indistinguishable member of the herd and be safe."

HE LAID a marble near one wall of the glass jar. For a moment nothing happened, but when it did I had the impulse to rub my eyes. Because there were two marbles. The jelly thing on the floor of the jar had slowly gathered itself together, hoisted its center, pulled in its base, until it was round. And while this was going on the color was changing from milky transparency to grainy red. The marble was what I used to call a "meatie"!

Chester went on to say that the thing would keep that pose as long as it was frightened, or had any other reason to do it, and that when again disturbed it would probably revert to that form last used, until some newer form were presented.

"Remember that I'm building into these things something more than mere senseless impulse. It's driving instinct. Such tendencies, evolved amply enough, approach almost the effectiveness of a mind. Nature herself is nothing more than a universe of instinct—she evolved our brain from brute instinct. I have her help in this case—she always tries to make the best of a bad situation; only this one is ideal. Nature and science make a fine team. Ever hear the theory that eyes

developed from some Lower Palaeozoic creature's happening to have warts that were extra sensitive to the sun's rays?"

He laid a black cube near the jar. For a while the thing maintained its first form, the marble. But finally, reluctantly, it switched, and there were two black cubes. Chester did the same thing with a yellow eraser.

Some things it couldn't quite manage, such as the cigarette that I tried. "You can't expect too much," Chester protested. "Not at this early stage. But later, when it's larger, further developed . . ."

I didn't like it, and I think I told him so. It made my flesh crawl, somehow, to think that here in this row of jars were all the impulses that made us tick. Looking down the line, I could almost see into my own brain, the way it would be subconsciously seething with such things; to eat, to live, to reproduce, to ape. All except my present impulse, to get very drunk.

Here was a dumpy little guy in a dinky lab, and he was playing God, and I just didn't like it. I think that all my liking for Chester ceased with that moment.

I went and did get very drunk and nearly forgot it. And a lot of unimportant things happened between then and the day when I realized that had been my last time to see Chester Vermis alive.

I went to London, upon suggestion from my paper, and had a go at war-corresponding. But I came home because over there I picked up an American wife who had a loathing for cold rooms, dropped consonants and condescension.

Three months, six months—although it doesn't matter, it was nearer the latter. In the meantime, Chester, forgotten by me, had got further than merely a man playing God. He was a man doubling for Satan.

Of course I didn't know. I never will know it all. I'll tell what I can, but still: I never will know!

CHAPTER TWO

In a Police Station

AFTER our immediate concern of settling into an unprepossessing little house out on the brink of the Palisades, my thoughts naturally enough reverted to my old friend. I went to look him up.

The landlady who cared for his room and other worldly necessities—and stayed strictly out of his lab—knew me quite well. "Oh, Mr. Reed," she greeted with worried eyes, "I'm so glad you're back. I hope you can do something with poor dear Mr. Vermis."

"Why, something wrong?"

"I must tell you—I know it's none of my affair, but we all think so much of him, we who really know him. And to see him go this way—" She had me worried now, and I hurried along her apologies. "You'll see when you go up what I mean. You can't tell it at first—he's just the same. But then you start getting a queer feeling and you know he's—well, odd."

I asked in what ways.

"Well, he used to be such a talker. And now he just says the same things over and over, if he talks at all. Just a few things about his work—how well it's coming. And mercy knows what he eats, because he won't come down with the other boarders. It's a fact, Mr. Reed. He won't leave his flat daytimes. I do happen to know he's slipped out nights a time or two, but daytimes he just mopes around, and when you question him his eyes are bright and interested and normal, but he just shakes his head and insists he's eaten."

"How long's he been this way?"

"I'd say bad this way only a week and a half. He's been distracted like for months, sometimes happy and somehow triumphant, and sometimes almost frightened. And then he seemed to become

normal again, except for these other things he does, or rather won't do."

"His mind?"

"Mr. Reed—it's a terrible thing to say, but I think it is. He's—insane."

I went on up. Chester's voice called a come-in and I entered the one room, beyond which lay his thrown-together lab.

One look at Chester Vermis and my fears vanished like a puff on the horizon. He was his normal self, utterly. Timidly happy, he seemed about like a pleased terrier. He did seem quieter after a bit, with less of his former temptation to boast and bluster. But as I sat studying him, and him me, I could find nothing amiss, even in the eyes. Utterly and completely, he was Chester.

"How's the work?" I asked after telling him of my marriage, of the trip and such small talk.

"Coming remarkably," he smiled. "Remarkably. I'm experimenting with instincts."

"Yes—I knew. I was up, you know."

"Oh, certainly. Odd—I had forgotten."

It *was* odd, I reflected. Could he have forgotten so soon? I wondered why his eyes were suddenly so bright and wary. They oggled owlishly as ever, but beneath was a beady intentness.

AS WE talked he seemed determined to revert continually to his experiments. And I decided not to allow it. I didn't think, if indeed he had been working too hard, that I should aggravate the matter. But I simply couldn't keep him off it—his work. His gaze would go dull, almost uncomprehending, if I mentioned anything of the outer world.

Always was his rejoinder: "Odd, I had forgotten. But now you take the will to survive . . ." and he would be off on an interminable lecture, almost word for word the same things I had heard that first night. He had evidently gone over it so much with other people, the landlady

and the like, that it was all but memorized. "Why, even clothing styles—keeping up with the Joneses . . ."

I tried to get him to go to the corner for a coke so I could hoist a needed stein. He begged off. "Now the instinct to re-produce . . ."

Unaccountably I began sweating. I was surprised to feel something closely akin to terror creeping through my veins. I couldn't have said why; or rather, I wouldn't have let myself say why. I just sat there and studied this utterly normal little man, Chester Vermis, and became panic-stricken.

His every mannerism was there, just as it should be. When he spoke he sighed it, simpered it, or sometimes uttered it with that cock-sure braggadoccio. "I shall be a very great man . . ." I was fear-ridden because he was simply *too* normal; not an unexpected new word, or expression or manner of hitching his pants. You might have expected a little something new and interesting after six months. But all the king's horses couldn't drag him into a situation or speech wherein his reaction might have been at all uncertain, or of a wider latitude than his cloistered laboratory.

This was the very epitome of the little grinning scientist I had known. I peered once more into those brilliant eyes. I glanced on into the lab, and could only just make out the bulking shadow of some tin thing. A tank.

Back to Chester's eyes again. My skin frosted, my breath hung suspended in my lungs. Chester Vermis was utterly normal, and yet I had the sudden mad feeling that he was a deadly and alien thing. Somehow, he was *other*.

I backed to the door while he smiled agreeably. I crept without shutting the door to the landing. There my panic refused to be controlled and I ran down stairs and jammed through the door into the lower hall.

The astonished landlady was there, evidently awaiting my return. She had expected me to see that Chester was not right. But she hadn't expected this reaction.

"Why—what in the world . . ."

But I didn't answer; there wasn't a thing I could have said without branding myself as the madman she had thought Chester was.

She had thought Chester mad, but I knew better. He was a perfectly normal Chester up there. *But, it wasn't Chester!*

WHATEVER the thing was that *'twasn't* Chester, this is the way it finally traced me.

Since my return from Europe, I had been assigned the night police shift as a sort of temporary punishment for throwing up the assignment. I was down at the station the night the boys got Max Shiller.

It was a sticky business, the kind a paper like mine handles very carefully, if at all. But I went in to have a look at Max. He had given himself up, the boys told me, and that seemed funny. We of the press had known for some time that the police were despairing of ever catching the man, whoever he might be. Such things are hard to trace—a crime committed in the dead of night, unpremeditated and unprovoked. You just see your young and tempting victim and you strike, and after consummating your grisly deed and making sure no living victim lingers behind, you skulk back into the greasy shadows that spawned you.

But Max had walked right in, and I wondered why as much as the police, so I went into the dark room where a blinding cone of light sprawled onto a chunky brute of a man. I got the immediate picture of a person so completely terrified that even thinking comes hard. He was readily admitting his crimes:

"Honest, something just comes over

me and I can't help it. I can't hardly remember even, afterwards. I'm always sick at myself. But—Gawd, never again. Lock me up, keep me there."

"Same like they all claim," one of the boys muttered to me. "Building up with 'I'm not responsible' to an insanity plea. Nuts."

But Shiller was hurrying on. "This girl, se—I seen her and something comes over me and I reach out to touch her . . ."

"Skip that," a surly voice barked. "We know what you did, and we know why you did it. What we want to know is how in God's name you killed this one. Usually you strangle them. But this one—we found her and she was awful, just like being thrown in acid, all eaten away. We want to know about that, and about why you came to us. What scared you?"

"Scared? Gawda' mercy, listen. I know what I done—pretty awful. I took her outer clothes off and threw her down and started on her underthings and—"

"Skip it, you swine!"

"Okay, okay, but listen. I didn't kill her. Honest, I hadn't even thought of killing her, yet, see—when all of a sudden I caught sight of this fellow standing and watching me. Not saying a word there in the shadows at the end of the park bench—just watching.

"But when he seen I had sighted him he came up all at once and began fighting. Well, I had to fight back." Listening, I couldn't help thinking of a jungle thing, crouching and snarling over its prey. "We fought like hell, and I had thought he'd be soft and easy. He was a short, dumpy little bird with big, glittering eyes that just bored right into you, but even while we were fighting—honest now, he was sort of smiling and looking friendly.

"BUT he sure wasn't friendly. I seen right away he was gonna kill me, because every time I'd knock him down he'd just come back for more. Pretty soon

I got winded and he seemed to wrap all around me. And so help me I had a feeling like I was drowning. His hands was still squeezing my ribs, but yet something came up and covered my face all cold and wet and sticky like and I couldn't breathe. Just plain hellish. I knew I'd better run, so I did."

"I see. So you didn't kill the girl and we'll just turn you loose!"

"No, listen. After only a few steps I knew he wasn't following me. I'd thought of course that he was saving the girl. But when I turned and looked I seen he chased me away—so *he* could have her!" My skin tightened.

"Listen," the sweating man repeated, "he wanted her! He'd forgotten me, so I stood and watched—too long. He sort of crouched down, and it seemed like he was gonna do—what you might expect. But listen, this's what got me. Here was this dumpy little guy sprawling down there, and you know what?"

"Well, what?"

"You won't believe me," Max Shiller groaned. "I know you won't. But listen: I watched and as he got to work on the girl he seemed to be all slobbering like. And I watched and it seemed like he was losing his shape. I kept watching and pretty soon it wasn't even a man! Honest, it musta been a ghost or something—he just seemed to melt right down on top of the girl and turn into a blanket of whitish stuff that reflected the moon and I ran."

"That all?" In the bitter question it was evident that Max Shiller hadn't encountered belief. The cops were all swearing softly.

"He isn't just acting crazy," the one with me said. "Boy, he really is."

"No, that's not all," Max went on. "This's the worst, reason I came here. I had watched just a minute too long. I had seen this thing sort of raise up again from the girl, from what was left of her.

It seemed to sort of gather itself together, to raise up in the middle . . ." I thought here for some reason of a laboratory table, and a glass jar, and a thing in it rearing up to take the shape of a red marble—

"But I didn't see any more because I wanted to get away before the thing took shape. Only I was too late. When I looked over my shoulder here was a sort of lumpy shadow following, skittering along after me. I kept looking and every time he was taller and pretty soon he was the dumpy guy again. I couldn't get away and I kept thinking of him catching me and sprawling all over me and turning to white stuff and so I came here. I don't care—I'm not scared of you nearly so much as the dumpy guy. He'd be waiting if you turn me loose."

"Don't worry, we won't."

The cop said to me: "Crazy, all right. He'll cop an insanity plea for sure."

"Sure is," I said, trying to sound convinced. The way my thoughts were racing away with me I began fearing there were two nuts instead of one: Max and I. Or else there were two who weren't crazy: Max and—I.

I LEFT in a hurry, because I figured if I gave myself time to cool down and think it over I'd see things sensibly. The thoughts that were occurring to me—why, they weren't just mad. They were impossible. I had the overwhelming impulse to spill it all to the cops, but I knew I'd get laughed at.

I was just swinging around the corner from the station toward a cab stand when I sensed that someone had fallen in step with me. I looked and saw that it was Vermis, Chester Vermis, as life-like as day. "Oh, hello," I mumbled, noting in spite of myself how he might easily be described as a dumpy little individual, with glittering, boring, friendly eyes . . .

He smiled cheerfully and kept tagging

along. I had to say something. "Where you heading?"

He shook his head vaguely, and his smile broadened disarmingly.

"See here, Chester," I said suddenly, stopping, "I've got to have this out. My God, maybe I'm crazy—if I am I'll explain someday and you'll understand. But speak to me—say anything. Just convince me that everything is all right with you."

His head bobbed. "Sure, sure, coming along fine."

I tried again. "Tell me about your work, anything, man, anything. The old school days. Cuss, laugh, do anything except be such a damned normal edition of yourself."

"Nothing's wrong," he droned. "Everything's coming along fine." I kept trying, but it was always like that. There was a ready answer for everything I said, and there was nothing wrong with it that I could put my finger on. It just seemed as if they never quite fitted.

You damned fool; quit kidding yourself. You know the answer to that one. The answers don't fit, because they're stock answers, made to fit any of a variety of questions, chosen from a limited stock.

No, God no . . .

It's true, though. He's learned a certain number of things to say, is learning them right along. He picked them up in the lab from—from Chester . . .

"Who . . . who are you?" I breathed, and waited.

"Why," he responded, "Vermis—Chester Vermis." That was what the landlady would have called him. But I would have called him Chester.

He seemed suddenly to sense that he had made a mistake. A blank, wary look crept over his face. I went sort of out of my head and hit him in that grinning face, as hard as I could. I stood appalled a second, thinking what if I had it wrong, what if this were really Chester and not an imitation. I noted that the face didn't

seem angered; it still wore a sort of bewildered and overfriendly smile. And beyond that was a look of deep, undimmed affection.

But when the edges of the body and face began crawling in on themselves, melting together and turning paler, whiter, and when the clothing didn't fit at all—why I turned and ran.

CHAPTER THREE

Abomination in the Boudoir . . .

I REACHED home after a wild, all-over-town flight. I had been pursued by the terrible fear that the thing would follow me. I couldn't help thinking of it, a blanket of milky-white filth now, scrambling in pursuit, moving like some giant amoeba. It had an attachment for me—that was obvious. I sensed no direct threat, only a hideous, fawning friendship.

No doubt it had realized its mistake in killing Chester—well, it *must* have killed Chester. He must have worked with it, increasing its size and powers and not even have realized its awful danger, that it would become too much for him. He had hinted he could put almost a brain in it. It had used that near-brain to plot cunningly. It had killed him, existed awhile on the food he kept in the tank for it, but finally it had been driven out by starvation—out to discover how human beings fed. The old landlady had said Chester had gone out a few times recent nights.

It had witnessed Max Shiller at his frightful act and had taken over, imitating him as closely as possible. But still it hadn't found food, unless it reverted to its original form and absorbed this thing beneath it. . . .

Perhaps soon it would learn to feed as human beings did, to emulate every human act and trait to perfection. And

then how would any man ever find it, ever suspect?

God pity a profaned world.

That was what it wanted of me. It had seen me up at the lab, recognized in me friendship. It wanted me for a new master, someone to continue feeding it, teaching it.

I hadn't dared take any chance of its following, and felt reasonably certain that I had shaken it off before reaching home. Surely it wouldn't be equal to catching a cab, as I had done, even if it returned to Chester's form. It had been a horrified cab driver that had glanced into a rear-view mirror and had seen something whitish slipping along after us. It had been a pale, sickened face that had breathed, "God in heaven . . ."

I awakened June. I must have been a startling sight. She arose amidst a jumble of bed clothes and stared questioning at me. To study her exquisite body was to imagine it beneath that sprawling thing, to imagine it clothed in a cloak of nameless plasm . . .

"Listen," I began, "I can't possibly explain—you'd think me insane. But if you ever see a man around here, a little dumpy man or any stranger—why don't trust him. He's dead. Call me at the office, or call Gwen Benning and have her come over for you. She'd be nearer and could get here first."

She nodded, but without understanding. "I wish—Morrie, I wish you'd explain. You're trembling all over." I just couldn't explain, though. Three weeks married, and to tell her such a madman's tale. She'd have thought herself married to a psychopathic case.

But within the sanctity of her arms, in the presence of her soothing rationality I began slipping back to my former state of mind. I began doubting again. Why, such things just didn't happen. Science was one thing, but to create such a supernatural horror was quite another. Ridicu-

lous. In fact, if I traced back I didn't have a single thing to go on, not really. Only my own idiotic impression there in the lab, and a tale told by an admitted pathological murderer attempting to escape from the chair. Back there when the illusion of melting occurred—well, it was only a trick of the moon.

Must apologize to Chester tomorrow . . .

Poor fool, didn't you realize the thing might possess unsuspected senses, other senses? It didn't need eyes nor ears to imitate; why should it need them to follow?

I WAS doing some rewrite stuff early the next night when the telephone girl switched a call to my desk. My mind was calmed, bemused by the rational world of stuttering typewriters and columns of international intrigue, so I wasn't prepared. I had convinced myself last night.

"Listen, Morrie—" It was June's voice, softly modulated. It was even softer than usual, like that of a person looking over her shoulder to see if someone else were hearing.

"Yes?" I questioned tensely, while my nerves seemed to go on end.

"Listen, Morrie. You got me scared last night about a—a short, dumpy man. Remember? Well, I wouldn't have thought so much about this, only for that."

"Yes? Well?"

"I think he's here."

"There? Where?"

"I have to speak softly. I saw him at least two hours ago—seemed to be passing out along the dirt path and I didn't think anything about it. Then I thought I saw his silhouette come back by . . ."

"That all?" I prayed it was.

"Well, I'm not sure. But it's been so warm—you know I keep the French window open. And I have a feeling he's out there, in the shadows. I thought just now that I caught a shifting movement out

there—not more than ten feet from here at the telephone.”

“I’ll be right out,” I said. “Don’t get too scared—maybe it’s your imagination . . . and mine . . . but be careful!”

“Yes, Morrie, I’m certain now.” Her voice was taut, threatening to rise. “I caught another movement, and I can see one shoulder faintly. Oh, Morrie, I was never so scared. I can’t see his eyes, but I have the feeling he’s looking right in, watching me. . . .”

“Don’t move,” I shouted, not minding that all eyes in the office shifted to me while the clatter of typewriters ceased. “Listen—call Gwen Benning. I’ll try to beat her there. But call her.”

“I will. I don’t think he really can see me here. My red robe is dark at night. But I will . . .”

“It doesn’t have to see,” I groaned and hung up on her gasp.

I flung out and after a minute’s frantic search was pushing on the floorboards of a cab, dreading the snail-like half-hour the trip was bound to consume.

The business district slipped behind, outskirts thinned became wooded country. At last I could see the light through shifting trees. Lights—it could mean anything, or nothing. I left the driver without paying him and went around to the French window, the quicker way of reaching the bedroom. I hopped across the sill. There was no form in the dense shadow to the left.

“Oh, thank heaven,” I whispered as I adjusted my eyes to the interior. The lights were ablaze and June stood carved to attention over near the telephone. I had frightened her, evidently, vaulting in.

“I was so horribly scared,” she whispered as I drew her against me!

“It—he must have gone,” I said. “Didn’t you call Gwen?”

She shook her head slowly. “I—I thought it wouldn’t see me . . .”

I went back out, paid off the driver

and sent him back to town, alone. Some one else could finish my rewrite. Hell with it—I’d stay with June.

She still stood rigid, great moist eyes wondering and frightened. Brilliant with doubt and indecision. Her lips moved, fighting for words.

“WHAT—” she began. “Morrie, I wish you’d explain. You’re trembling all over.”

“Let’s forget it,” I said, fighting for a return of common sense. “If you ask me, I think I’m as looney as a jaybird. I won’t try to explain—I’m sure no one was really there. I got you all excited, that’s all.” I dropped my shoes on the rug. “Come on, let’s tumble in.”

Automatically she began to obey, while her worried eyes sought mine. Her hands loosed the belt of the sheer, wrap-around negligee, began slipping the garment from one shoulder.

In spite of me, my breath caught in anticipation. This utter loveliness—God, if it were threatened. Clammy, alien hands, crawling over this fragile flesh. Human defilement at first, until the thing changed, melted. . . .

I must forget it, must concentrate all my attention on the pale dream of June’s nearly unrobed figure. Here lay forgetfulness. Here was heaven, however narrowly saved from the taint of hell.

With some quirk of modesty she had half turned her back while slipping the pink negligee lower. It crumpled about her waist. I gasped with near pain at the beauty of her. She hadn’t even a night-gown beneath. I had only just time to think again of the color of that night-gown, only a shade darker than her own flesh. Odd—she had said red robe. . . .

And then she turned round.

Wherever Chester Vermis may be at this moment, I hope he is writhing in the hell of innermost hell, to recompense me for that ghastly, fearful moment.

June swayed round, the subtle willowy bend of her body so familiar, so normal, so dear to my every sense. And my eyes swept involuntarily over the gentle swell of her abdomen, up to the mellow contour of her breasts.

There should have been a shy blush of pink at the tips. But there was nothing. I cried out; my eyes crawled from their sockets. No; smoothly ivory over their entire surface, her breasts were without sign of nipple!

I flung upright, screaming mindlessly. My hands crushed at the sides of my head. "You!—Oh, God, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

A weapon—anything. A knife, to tear this unnameable abomination into reeking shreds. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

How Horror Feeds . . .

IT KNEW something was wrong, even as it had sensed its other mistake while in the form of Chester back there last night. Its eyes strayed over the figure it had stolen. Stolen—from June, wherever she might be.

It cowered back, this thing, and while its eyes never lost that look of pin-point brightness and pleading and above all that nauseating attachment, still fear came into them, an indescribable and alien fear. It had almost succeeded in getting into my home so that it would have a keeper. But somehow it had erred—it must be watchful, now—very watchful. . .

It couldn't have known, of course, studying June and her every contour and mannerism and even the things she had said over the phone—it couldn't have known what lay out of sight beneath her robe. Her *red* robe. Instinctively, without thought or conscious effort, easily as a tree toad flattens its barklike hide to the trunk of a tree or a chameleon flickers to a new color, it had sensed a thing to

imitate and had accomplished it. It had come in and known without knowledge that it must clothe itself. A pink negligee had been handy to the hands of the girl-thing. . . . Thank universal goodness that it hadn't found utter perfection, or I would never have known!

I reached for it with my bare hands. But it uttered a cry like nothing on this earth—yet only a faint sigh, and it fled. It evaded me and turned on its gracefully fleet feminine limbs. It raced through the living room, down the hall, and a dreadful change was coming over it. I followed fast as I could, but my legs were dragging and my stomach was churning with nausea.

I reached the outer door just after the thing reached it. I have never been certain just what I saw. It was quite dark there, mercifully dark. But there was something just slipping under the door, just the dragging end of a sort of milky-white blanket. A ghastly blanket of mind-rocking filth that left a faint dew of ichor on the floor.

I remained crouched there before the door, hands still extended as if to clutch something that I felt it would have meant insanity itself to touch. My eyes were fixed on a point remotely past that door, out somewhere in the night, where a sloping, billowing thing of amoeboid formlessness would be fleeing through the dark.

What would its next move be? Where would it strike next? There could be no fathoming an answer; human psychology couldn't be applied to such alien life. Its own psychology—well, poor Chester had said it would tend when frightened to revert to some previous form, to repeat possibly some former series of actions. What next—

The door opened before me and June came in.

I felt certain it was really she and cried out my relief. But even as I looked again

a great doubt engulfed my soul. The *other* had been so lifelike, so normal. The thing didn't only imitate; it reflected, like a mirror.

I PICKED her up like a sack of wheat. At least, I realized, she was warm. Would that other thing have been able to imitate warmth as well, or would it have in spite of itself a reptilian and un-earthly coldness? Could it, while creating for itself a human mechanism, assume normal function for its sham body and mock parts?

I bore June into the bedroom, threw her onto the bed and began ripping the clothing from her body.

I tried to sob some word of explanation to her. "If you're June I'll explain. . . . If you're that other thing I'll—I'll. . ." Fool!—you'd what? Didn't you know that the thing probably couldn't be killed, that it would cling tenaciously to its fiend-inspired life until every fibre of its being were riven?

The red robe—thank heaven for red!—sundered beneath my crazed fingers. Buttons showered.

"Morrie, no—you're mad. . . ."

She lay sprawled on the bed, her great moist eyes pleading and fear-tinged, aching up to my own. My hands managed to part the shreds of her garment, to find the one beneath and tear it in turn, on through the fragile sleeziness of the nightgown.

Then I breathed a thousand thanks to a thousand nameless gods. No longer afraid, she seemed to sense that something horrible had occurred. Whimpering with pity she began stroking my fevered head. I lowered my head, cushioned it in her arms. My June . . . my own, real June!

"What—" she began. "I was safe—Gwen came in five minutes and I went with her."

I struggled to right my chaotic thoughts. Inevitably they took up where they had left off when June had appeared. What would the thing's next move be? Was this phase of the horror really over? What would happen next, possibly even during this very moment. . . . Human psychology. . . . The psychology of instinctive duplication. . . .

It was clever. It had followed me last night, found where I lived; it had sensed that ideal security for itself lay in June's own likeness. But it had to be canny, careful to be sure that June was first gone before it attempted the fraud. Then—it had known where June went before it risked alarming me.

Did that mean anything? It meant that likely the thing had followed her, then come back the quarter mile to this house. All right; bewildered and frightened as it now was, what would its reaction be? Why, to repeat, to return to Gwen's, and with that same fraudulent form. . . .

"Great God!"

I clutched June tensely, shook her. "June, listen to me. Did you come back with Gwen? Was she all right?"

"Why—why of course!"

"She let you out at the gate? She drove off immediately after you both saw I was here?"

"Yes. I heard her car start. Morrie, for heaven's sake tell me—"

"But *it*—it would follow," I whispered as if she would understand. "It would take your form again and go back to her, imitate all the things it saw you do and say. Perfectly normal, until—"

"Morrie! I did—I remember now I commented to her that it must only have been a loitering tramp, because we passed someone passing back up the road—a short, dumpy figure!"

"Listen," I gasped, "I've got to hurry—no time to lose. Lock all the doors, the windows. Gwen—poor Gwen. . . ."

THERE wasn't time to take June with me. I ran, still shouting orders, from the house and turned through the stagnant breath of the night toward the Benning's home. Gwen would be there alone—her husband was still pounding a typewriter down at the office, doing my own rewrite stuff. No, not alone; with Gwen would be a thing smiling happily, a thing exactly in the image of my old friend, Chester Vermis!

The door to the modest little home was locked. Yes, she would have locked it after her. She wouldn't have known that danger had already entered, and was waiting.

The third lunge of my shoulders and the hinges groaned protest; the fourth, and I could enter. There was still a hall light on. She wouldn't yet have turned off any lights; she would have encountered a dumpy little gnome of a man, smiling affectionately, before she had the chance.

Her door would be somewhere down this hall. The second door was it.

One glimpse brought me clutching at the door-frame, praying that the lights might go out.

I couldn't stand to look at what the thing had done to her. It had been—hungry. Still not feeding like the human beings it aped, it had reverted, slid back down the scale of its distorted, damnable evolution, back to the semi-fluid milky-white fester of its original tissue. Then it had fed.

Just as Max Shiller had seen it, God pity him for that fate; just as the police had found that other victim.

Horror had killed her, the unthinkable horror of being encircled and lapped at, digested by oozing tides of hungering filth. It would have slipped about her head, just as Max had described it; it would have dribbled into her mouth, poked into her eyes, alien digestive juices functioning frightfully. It would have

been scintillating all over, glittering and shimmering in the pleasure of gratifying its cosmic instincts.

Evidently it had caught her while it was still in man shape, subject to the mortal whims it aped. Because she had been stripped; what pitiful fragment was left of her wore no clothing. The thing had learned to do that from Max Shiller. Whatever other unthinkable attempts at human acts, it had made upon her—no; I'll stop before thinking of that ultimate horror. . . .

But it had seen her naked, before killing her. It had seen a woman naked—*finally!*

Before I had even time to think more of that I was moving, running. Back, back to our house where June waited unprotected. The one thing to save us before had been the thing's ignorance. Now it was no longer ignorant.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Moon and a Girl and a Horror

THE very hint of a breeze had sprung up to drift through the night-clothed oaks. It whispered with me my wordless prayer to an unrelenting fate. It moaned with me my curses to a jibbering moon. It sobbed out with me the knowledge of black damnation.

The house hunkered with its back close to the brink of the Palisades. Beyond, beneath I could see the steely ribbon of the Hudson River as I came along the path and rounded into the gate. . . .

Yes—it would be so; surely I hadn't expected to find that nothing had happened.

A short, dumpy figure was brushing through the French window. Apparently I hadn't yet been sensed. He—it—turned toward the sheer, tree-fringed bank of the river. Once before tonight it had made the mistake of leaving June alive to ap-

pear and confirm its fraud. Now it would hurl her down the banks and into the river, wanting nothing from her save her identity.

That was what it was going to do with the still, unstruggling form slung over its shoulder.

It hurried faster when I screamed. Its machine-like, unfathomable mind would have but one fixation of purpose, to get rid of June at all cost.

I tore along after the duo through the tangle of clutching ivy, through battering branches, through the subtle complicity of the moon's pagan shadows. I caught up at the very brink.

There wasn't much light. That's what in the end made things so bad. But I could make out the thing's face, the fixed and friendly grin there. "No," I heard him mouth, "everything's all right—coming along fine. . ." Words gleaned from back when it was spying on its master, preparing to take over this present dumpy form.

"You nameless. . ." Even as I fought with it my mind struggled for things sufficiently blasphemous to curse it with. But it wouldn't have appreciated, because it wasn't a thinking and rationalizing being. It was only a reflection. Only a blob in a test tube.

For a time it battled using its human form, munching something that answered for muscles and sinews to meet my crazed blows.

I became aware at length, and with the sense that I had heard it all along, of June's sobbing voice encouraging me from the shadows. She had revived from that darkness the thing's vile touch had flung her into. I couldn't tell where she was.

"There—at your feet, a butcher knife. I saw him at the window breaking in. I got the knife but couldn't—"

A knife at my feet. But I couldn't pause to reach it. Unhuman, unanimal hands were gouging at my face, seeking my

throat. My own fists were battering into grinning, familiar features until great goutts of red pain seemed to dangle from my wrists. My arms jarred to the elbows. Could I ever win? Could I make it suffer pain?

Finally I saw that I was accomplishing something, after a fashion. "Don't—don't look at it. . ." I panted toward June, wherever she might be.

ITS outlines had just begun to blur, the grin still implanted to grow hazy, and a whitish coating to film its exterior and to take on a shimmering translucence from the moon—when that moon dipped blackly beneath a cloud.

I think—I'm *sure* there was no pause, not even an instantaneous pause in the conflict. I was fighting it, practically gripping it, all during the blackness.

But then the cloud released the shimmering moon and icy sheathes of light tormented down. And the utterly naked thing that I was fighting was June, my wife!

Hellishly cunning, it had chosen another and safer form, even as a tree-worm freezes instantly into the semblance of a twig.

Involuntarily I stopped, stepped back. "June—for heaven's sake, where are you? Tell me—speak!"

Two voices spoke, one trailing the other only belatedly enough for mindless senses to have registered and mimicked the words. "Here—I'm here, Morrie. . ."

The first voice came from on back in the shadows. I know it was the first, the genuine one. I stooped, sent my fingers scrambling over the ground until they found the butcher knife. As I straightened I looked back and saw her behind me there, June.

I know it was June back there.

So I went after the thing in front of me, the thing that had slipped the likeness of June's soft body about itself. I went after it with the knife.

TEST-TUBE FRANKENSTEIN

I thought the thing would never die.

I had to hack the head clear from the body. I had to tear the limbs entirely from the torso before they would cease flopping. If only the thing had possessed the mercy to revert once more, it wouldn't have been so bad. I could have relished mangling its test-tube form. But God!—not *this* form.

A LITTLE heap of twitching parts sprawled at my feet. A shocked moon watched as I shoved them off the cliff.

Then I turned and took June's blessed body into my arms. That's all. . . .

Any one hearing these things naturally might think even as I sometimes do: that I was stark, staring mad. That alcohol fumes had mounted to my brain, leaving me in the constant clutch of horror.

An even easier explanation would be that it is simply an alibi that I have prepared in case of need. That I, like Max Shiller, have concocted a fairy-tale to cover the brutal and callous murder of my old friend, Chester Vermis.

These things don't bother me, because I *know*. That is, I know all except that which would be knowledge as dear to my soul as cool droplets to a desert-parched tongue.

Will June someday forget herself? Is she perfectly normal and—human? Or did I make a terrible mistake out there on the cliff and let the thing make its awful substitution?

Was it really my wife I killed out there and hacked to pieces?

The creature that I sometimes hold in my arms, so soft and warm and alluring—will she someday forget herself? Will she melt at the edges and trickle through my arms and sprawl on the floor, a great pool of shimmering, milky-white detestableness? Unless that should happen—

Merciful God, sir, *I'll never know!*

THE END