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Fantasy

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THE Black Kiss

by Robert Bloch

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SCIENCE-FICTION
AND
WEIRD SUSPENSE



The Black Kiss

by Robert Bloch

All life originated in the sea and all land animals also came out of the watery depths. Some warm-blooded mammals have even returned to these parental waters. Of the ocean's denizens we probably know less than half—almost any deep sea fisherman can tell of creatures caught in their nets which defy classification. Therefore there may be more to the legendry of mermaids than the world cares to acknowledge. In any case, Robert Bloch, who scarcely needs more than a hint to hang a good yarn on, has gone to town with a story of the seacoast and something that came from off-shore to wreak a queer turn on an incautious mortal.

They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea,
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be.

—Chesterton: *Lepanto*.

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1. The Thing in the Waters

GRAHAM DEAN nervously crushed out his cigarette and met Doctor Hedwig's puzzled eyes.

"I've never been troubled like this before," he said. "These dreams are so oddly persistent. They're not the usual haphazard nightmares. They seem—I know it sounds ridiculous—they seem *planned*."

"Dreams planned? Nonsense." Doctor Hedwig looked scornful. "You, Mr. Dean, are an artist, and naturally of impressionable temperament. This house at San Pedro is new to you, and you say you've heard wild tales. The dreams are due to imagination and overwork."

Dean glanced out of the window, a frown on his unnaturally pale face.

"I hope you're right," he said, softly. "But dreams shouldn't make me look like this. Should they?"

A gesture indicated the great blue rings beneath the young artist's eyes. His hands indicated the bloodless pallor of his gaunt cheeks.

"Overwork has done that, Mr. Dean. I know what has happened to you better than you do yourself."

The white-haired physician picked up a sheet covered with his own scarcely decipherable notes and scrutinized it in review.

"You inherited this house at San Pedro a few months ago, eh? And you moved in alone to do some work."

"Yes. The seacoast there has some marvelous scenes." For a moment Dean's face looked youthful once more as enthusiasm kindled its ashy fires. Then he continued, with a troubled frown. "But I haven't been able to paint, lately—not seascapes, anyway. It's very odd. My sketches don't seem quite right any more. There seems to be a quality in them that I don't put there——"

"A quality, did you say?"

"Yes. A quality of *malignness*, if I can call it that. It's indefinable. Something *behind* the picture takes all the beauty out. And I haven't been overworking these last weeks, Doctor Hedwig."

The doctor glanced again at the paper in his hand.

"Well, I disagree with you there. You might be unconscious of the effort you expend. These dreams of the sea that seem to worry you are meaningless, save as an indication of your nervous condition."

"You're wrong." Dean rose, suddenly. His voice was shrill.

"That's the dreadful part of it. The dreams are *not* meaningless. They seem cumulative; cumulative and planned. Each night they grow more vivid, and I see more of that green, shining place under the sea. I get closer and closer to those black shadows swimming there; those shadows that I know aren't shadows but something worse. I see more each night. It's like a sketch I'd block out, gradually adding more and more until——"

Hedwig watched his patient keenly. He suggested "Until——?"

But Dean's tense face relaxed. He had caught himself just in time. "No, Doctor Hedwig. You must be right. It's overwork and nervousness, as you say. If I believed what the Mexicans had told me about Morella Godolfo—well, I'd be mad and a fool."

"Who is this Morella Godolfo? Some woman who has been filling you with foolish tales?"

Dean smiled. "No need to worry about Morella. She was my great-great-grand-aunt. She used to live in the San Pedro house and started the legends, I think."

Hedwig had been scribbling on a slip of paper. "Well, I see, young man! You heard these legends; your imagination ran riot; you dreamed. This prescription will fix you up."

"Thanks."

Dean took the paper, lifted his hat from the table, and started for the door. In the doorway he paused, smiling wryly.

"But you're not quite correct in thinking the legends started me dreaming, Doctor. I began to dream before I learned the history of the house."

And with that he went out.

Driving back to San Pedro, Dean tried to understand what had happened

to him. But always he came up against a blank wall of impossibility. Any logical explanation wandered off into a tangle of fantasy. The one thing he could not explain—which Doctor Hedwig had not been able to explain—was the dreams.

The dreams started soon after he came into his legacy; this ancient house north of San Pedro, which had so long stood deserted. The place was picturesquely old, and that attracted Dean from the first. It had been built by one of his ancestors when the Spaniards still ruled California. One of the Deans—the name was Dena, then—had gone to Spain and returned with a bride. Her name was Morella Godolfo, and it was this long-vanished woman about whom all the subsequent legends centered.

Even yet there were wrinkled, toothless Mexicans in San Pedro who whispered incredible tales of Morella Godolfo—she who had never grown old and who had a weirdly evil power over the sea. The Godolfos had been among the proudest families of Granada, but furtive legends spoke of their intercourse with the terrible Moorish sorcerers and necromancers. Morella, according to these same hinted horrors, had learned uncanny secrets in the black towers of Moorish Spain, and when Dena had brought her as his bride across the sea she had already sealed a pact with dark Powers and had undergone a *change*.

So ran the tales, and they further told of Morella's life in the old San Pedro house. Her husband had lived for ten years or more after the marriage, but rumors said that he no longer possessed a soul. It is certain that his death was very mysteriously hushed up by Morella Godolfo, who went on living alone in the great house beside the sea.

The whispers of the peons were hereafter monstrously augmented. They had to do with the *change* in Morella Godolfo; the sorcerous change which caused her to swim far out to sea on moonlit nights so that watchers saw her white body gleaming amidst the spray. Men bold enough to gaze from the cliffs might catch glimpses of her then, sporting with queer sea-creatures that gambled about her in the black waters, nuzzling her with shockingly deformed heads. These creatures were not seals, or any known form of submarine life, it was averred; although sometimes bursts of chuckling, gobbling laughter could be heard. It is said that Morella Godolfo had swum out there one night, and that she never came back. But thereafter the laughter was louder from afar, and the sporting amidst the black rocks continued, so that the tales of the early peons had been nourished down to the present day.

Such were the legends known to Dean. The facts were sparse and inconclusive. The old house had fallen into decrepitude, and was only occasionally rented through the years. These rentals had been as short as they were infrequent. There was nothing definitely wrong with the house between White's Point and Point Fermin, but those who had lived there said that the crashing of the surf sounded subtly different when heard through windows that overlooked the sea, and, too, they dreamed unpleasantly. Sometimes the occasional tenants had mentioned with peculiar horror the moonlit

nights, when the sea became altogether too clearly visible. At any rate, occupants often vacated the house hastily.

Dean had moved in immediately after inheriting, because he had thought the place ideal for painting the scenes he loved. He had learned the legend and the facts behind it later, and by this time his dreams had started.

At first they had been conventional enough, though, oddly, all centered about the sea which he so loved. But it was not the sea he loved that he knew in sleep.

The Gorgons lived in his dreams. Scylla writhed hideously across dark and surging waters, where harpies flew screaming. Weird creatures crawled sluggishly up from the black, inky depths where eyeless, bloated sea-beasts dwelt. Gigantic and terrible leviathans leapt and plunged while monstrous serpents squirmed a strange obeisance to a mocking moon. Foul and hidden horrors of the sea's depths engulfed him in sleep.

This was bad enough, but it was only a prelude. The dreams began to change. It was almost as though the first few formed a definite setting for the greater terrors to come. From the mythic images of old sea-gods another vision emerged. It was inchoate at first, taking definite form and meaning, very slowly over a period of several weeks. And it was this dream which Dean now feared.

It had occurred generally just before he awoke—a vision of green, translucent light, in which dark shadows swam slowly. Night after night the limpid emerald glow grew brighter, and the shadows twisted into a more visible horror. These were never clearly seen, although their amorphous heads held a strangely repellent recognizable quality for Dean.

Presently, in this dream of his, the shadow-creatures would move aside as though to permit the passage of another. Swimming into the green haze would come a coiling shape—whether similar to the rest or not Dean could not tell, for his dream always ended there. The approach of this last shape always caused him to awake in a nightmare paroxysm of terror.

He dreamt of being somewhere under the sea, amidst swimming shadows with deformed heads; and each night one particular shadow was coming closer and closer.

Each day, now, when he awoke with the cold sea-wind of early dawn blowing through the windows, he would lie in a lazy, languid mood till long past daybreak. When he rose these days he felt inexplicably tired, and he could not paint. This particular morning the sight of his haggard face in the mirror had forced him to visit a physician. But Doctor Hedwig had not been helpful.

Nevertheless Dean filled the prescription on the way home. A swallow of the bitter, brownish tonic strengthened him somewhat, but as he parked his car the feeling of depression settled down on him again. He walked up to the house still puzzled and strangely afraid.

Under the door was a telegram. Dean read it with a puzzled frown.

JUST LEARNED YOU ARE LIVING IN SAN PEDRO HOUSE STOP VITALLY IMPORTANT YOU VACATE IMMEDIATELY STOP SHOW THIS CABLE TO DOCTOR MAKOTO YAMADA 17 BUENA STREET SAN PEDRO STOP AM RETURNING VIA AIRPLANE STOP SEE YAMADA TODAY

MICHAEL LEIGH

Dean read the message again, and a flash of remembrance came to him. Michael Leigh was his uncle, but he had not seen the man for years. Leigh had been a puzzle to the family; he was an occultist, and spent most of his time delving in far corners of the earth. Occasionally he dropped from sight for long periods of time. The cable Dean held was sent from Calcutta, and he supposed that Leigh had recently emerged from some spot in the interior of India to learn of Dean's inheritance.

Dean searched his mind. He recalled now, that there had been some family quarrel about this very house years ago. The details were no longer clear, but he remembered that Leigh had demanded the San Pedro house be razed. Leigh had given no sane reasons, and when the request was refused he had dropped out of sight for a time. And now came this inexplicable cablegram.

Dean was tired from his long drive, and the unsatisfactory interview with the doctor had irritated him more than he had realized. Nor was he in the mood to follow his uncle's cabled request and undertake the long journey to Buena Street, which was miles away. The drowsiness which he felt, however, was normal healthy exhaustion, unlike the languor of recent weeks. The tonic he had taken was of some value after all.

He dropped into his favorite chair by the window that overlooked the sea, rousing himself to watch the flaming colors of the sunset. Presently the sun dropped below the horizon, and gray dusk crept in. Stars appeared, and far to the north he could see the dim lights of the gambling-ships off Venice. The mountains shut off his view of San Pedro, but a diffused pale glow in that direction told him that the New Barbary was wakening into roaring, brawling life. Slowly the face of the Pacific brightened. A full moon was rising above the San Pedro hills.

For a long time Dean sat quietly by the window, his pipe forgotten in his hand, staring down at the slow swells of the ocean, which seemed to pulse with a mighty and alien life. Gradually drowsiness crept up and overwhelmed him. Just before he dropped into the abyss of sleep there flashed into his mind da Vinci's saying, "The two most wonderful things in the world are a woman's smile and the motion of mighty waters."

He dreamed, and this time it was a different dream. At first only blackness, and a roaring and thundering as of angry seas, and oddly mingled with this was the hazy thought of a woman's smile . . . and a woman's lips . . . pouting lips, softly alluring . . . but strangely the lips were not red—no! They were very pale, bloodless, like the lips of a thing that had long rested beneath the sea. . . .

The misty vision changed, and for a flashing instant Dean seemed to see the green and silent place of his earlier visions. The shadowy black shapes were moving more quickly behind the veil, but this picture was of but a second's duration. It flashed out and vanished, and Dean was standing alone on a beach; a beach he recognized in his dream—the sandy cove beneath the house.

The salt breeze blew coldly across his face, and the sea glistened like silver in the moonlight. A faint splash told of a sea-thing that broke the surface of the waters. To the north the sea washed against the rugged surface of the cliff, barred and speckled with black shadows. Dean felt a sudden, inexplicable impulse to move in that direction. He yielded.

As he clambered over the rocks he was suddenly conscious of a strange sensation, as though keen eyes were focussed upon him—eyes that watched and warned! Vaguely in his mind rose up the gaunt face of his uncle, Michael Leigh, the deep-set eyes glowing. But swiftly this was gone, and he found himself before a deeper niche of blackness in the cliff face. Into it he knew he must go.

He squeezed himself between two jutting points of rock, and found himself in utter, dismal darkness. Yet somehow he was conscious that he was in a cave, and he could hear water lapping near by. All about him was a musty salt odor of sea-decay, the fetid smell of sunless ocean caves and holds of ancient ships. He stepped forward, and, as the floor shelved sharply downward, stumbled and fell headlong into icy, shallow water. He felt, rather than saw, a flicker of swift movement, and then abruptly hot lips were pressed against his.

Human lips, Dean thought, at first.

He lay on his side in the chill water, his lips against those responsive ones. He could see nothing, for all was lost in the blackness of the cave. The unearthly lure of those invisible lips thrilled through him.

He responded to them, pressed them fiercely, gave them what they were avidly seeking. The unseen waters crawled against the rocks, whispering warning.

And in that kiss strangeness flooded him. He felt a shock and a tingling go through him, and then a thrill of sudden ecstasy, and swift on its heels came horror. Black loathsome foulness seemed to wash his brain, indescribable but fearfully real, making him shudder with nausea. It was as though unutterable evil were pouring into his body, his mind, his very soul, through the blasphemous kiss on his lips. He felt loathsome, contaminated. He fell back. He sprang to his feet.

And Dean saw, for the first time, the ghastly thing he had kissed, as the sinking moon sent a pale shaft of radiance creeping through the cave mouth. For something rose up before him, a serpentine and seal-like bulk that coiled and twisted and moved toward him, glistening with foul slime; and Dean screamed and turned to flee with nightmare fear tearing at his brain, hear-

ing behind him a quiet splashing as though some bulky creature had slid back into the water. . . .

2. *A Visit from Doctor Yamada*

He awoke. He was still in his chair before the window, and the moon was paling before the grayness of dawn. He was shaken with nausea, sick and shuddering with the shocking realism of his dream. His clothing was drenched with perspiration, and his heart hammered furiously. An immense lethargy seemed to have overwhelmed him, making it an intense effort to rise from the chair and stagger to a couch, on which he flung himself to doze fitfully for several hours.

A sharp pealing of the door-bell roused him. He still felt weak and dizzy, but the frightening lethargy had somewhat abated. When Dean opened the door, a Japanese standing on the porch began a bobbing little bow, a gesture that was abruptly arrested as the sharp black eyes focussed on Dean's face. A little hiss of indrawn breath came from the visitor.

Dean said irritably, "Well? Do you want to see me?"

The other was still staring, his thin face sallow beneath a stiff thatch of gray hair. He was a small, slender man, with his face covered with a fine-spun web of wrinkles. After a pause he said, "I am Doctor Yamada."

Dean frowned, puzzled. Abruptly he remembered his uncle's cable of the day before. An odd, unreasonable irritation began to mount within him, and he said, more brusquely than he had intended, "This isn't a professional call, I hope. I've already——"

"Your uncle—you are Mr. Dean?—cabled me. He was rather worried." Doctor Yamada glanced around almost furtively.

Dean felt distaste stir within him, and his irritation increased.

"My uncle is rather eccentric, I'm afraid. There's nothing for him to worry about. I'm sorry you had your trip for nothing."

Doctor Yamada did not seem to take offense at Dean's attitude. Rather, a strange expression of sympathy showed for a moment on his small face.

"Do you mind if I come in?" he asked, and moved forward confidently.

Short of barring his way, Dean had no means of stopping him, and ungraciously led his guest to the room where he had spent the night, motioning him to a chair while he busied himself with a coffee-pot.

Yamada sat motionless, silently watching Dean. Then without preamble he said, "Your uncle is a great man, Mr. Dean."

Dean made a noncommittal gesture. "I have seen him only once."

"He is one of the greatest occultists of this day. I, too, have studied psychic lore, but beside your uncle I am a novice."

Dean said, "He is eccentric. Occultism, as you term it, has never interested me."

The little Japanese watched him impassively. "You make a common error, Mr. Dean. You consider occultism a hobby for cranks. No" —he held up a slender hand—"your disbelief is written in your face. Well, it is under-

standable. It is an anachronism, an attitude handed down from the earliest times, when scientists were called alchemists and sorcerers and burned for making pacts with the devil. But actually there are no sorcerers, no—witches. Not in the sense that man understands these terms. There are men and women who have acquired mastery over certain sciences which are not wholly subject to mundane physical laws."

There was a little smile of disbelief on Dean's face. Yamada went on quietly. "You do not believe because you do not understand. There are not many who can comprehend, or who wish to comprehend, this greater science which is not bound by earthly laws. But here is a problem for you, Mr. Dean." A little spark of irony flickered in the black eyes. "Can you tell me how I know you have suffered from nightmares recently?"

Dean jerked around and stood staring. Then he smiled.

"As it happens, I know the answer, Doctor Yamada. You physicians have a way of hanging together—and I must have let something slip to Doctor Hedwig yesterday." His tone was offensive, but Yamada merely shrugged slightly.

"Do you know your Homer?" he asked, apparently irrelevantly, and at Dean's surprised nod went on, "And Proteus? You remember the Old Man of the Sea who possessed the power of changing his shape? I do not wish to strain your credulity, Mr. Dean, but for a long time students of the dark lore have known that behind this legend there exists a very terrible truth. All the tales of spirit-possession, of reincarnation, even the comparatively innocuous experiments in thought-transference, point to the truth. Why do you suppose folklore abounds with tales of men who have been able to change themselves into beasts—werewolves, hyenas, tigers, the seal-men of the Eskimos? Because these tales are founded on truth!

"I do not mean," he went on, "that the actual physical metamorphosis of the body is possible, so far as we know. But it has long been known that the intelligence—the mind—of an adept can be transferred to the brain and body of a satisfactory subject. Animals' brains are weak, lacking the power of resistance. But men are different, unless there are certain circumstances——"

As he hesitated, Dean proffered the Japanese a cup of coffee—coffee was generally brewing in the percolator these days—and Yamada accepted it with a formal little bow of acknowledgment. Dean drank his coffee in three hasty gulps, and poured more. Yamada, after a polite sip, put the cup aside and leaned forward earnestly.

"I must ask you to make your mind receptive, Mr. Dean. Don't allow your conventional ideas of life to influence you in this matter. It is vitally to your interest that you listen carefully to me, and understand. Then—perhaps——"

He hesitated, and again threw that oddly furtive glance at the window.

"Life in the sea has followed different lines from life on land. Evolution has followed a different course. In the great deeps of the ocean, life utterly

alien to ours has been discovered—luminous creatures which burst when exposed to the lighter pressure of the air—and in those tremendous depths forms of life completely inhuman have been developed, life forms that the uninitiated mind may think impossible. In Japan, an island country, we have known of these sea-dwellers for generations. Your English writer, Arthur Machen, has told a deep truth in his statement that man, afraid of these strange beings, has attributed to them beautiful or pleasantly grotesque forms which in reality they do not possess. Thus we have the nereids and oceanids—but nevertheless man could not fully disguise the true foulness of these creatures. Therefore there are legends of the Gorgons, of Scylla and the harpies—and, significantly, of the mermaids and their soullessness. No doubt you know the mermaid tale—how they long to steal the soul of a man, and draw it out by means of their kiss."

Dean was at the window now, his back to the Japanese. As Yamada paused he said tonelessly, "Go on."

"I have reason to believe," Yamada went on very quietly, "that Morella Godolfo, the woman from Alhambra, was not fully—human. She left no issue. These things never have children—they cannot."

"What do you mean?" Dean had turned and was facing the Japanese, his face a ghastly white, the shadows beneath his eyes hideously livid. He repeated harshly, "What do you mean? You can't frighten me with your tales—if that's what you're trying to do. You—my uncle wants me out of this house, for some reason of his own. You're taking this means of getting me out—aren't you? Eh?"

"You must leave this house," Yamada said. "Your uncle is coming, but he may not be in time. Listen to me: these creatures—the sea-dwellers—envy man. Sunlight, and warm fires, and the fields of earth—things which the sea-dwellers cannot normally possess. These things—and *love*. You remember what I said about mind-transference—the possession of a brain by an alien intelligence. That is the only way these things can attain that which they desire, and know the love of man or woman. Sometimes—not very often—one of these creatures succeeds in possessing itself of a human body. They watch always. When there is a wreck, they go there, like vultures to a feast. They can swim phenomenally fast. When a man is drowning, the defenses of his mind are down, and sometimes the sea-dwellers can thus acquire a human body. There have been tales of men saved from wrecks who ever after were oddly changed.

"Morella Godolfo was one of these creatures! The Godolfos knew much of the dark lore, but used it for evil purposes—the so-called black magic. And it was, I think, through this that sea-dweller gained power to usurp the brain and body of the woman. A transference took place. The mind of the sea-dweller took possession of Morella Godolfo's body, and the intelligence of the original Morella was forced into the terrible form of that creature of the abyss. In time the human body of the woman died, and the usurping mind returned to its original shell. The intelligence of Morella

Godolfo was then ejected from its temporary prison, and left homeless. That is true death."

Dean shook his head slowly, as though in denial, but did not speak. And inexorably Yamada kept on.

"For years, generations, since then she has dwelt in the sea, waiting. Her power is strongest here, where she once lived. But, as I told you, only under unusual circumstances can this—transference take place. The tenants of this house might be troubled with dreams, but that would be all. The evil being had no power to steal their bodies. Your uncle knew that, or he would have insisted that the place be immediately destroyed. He did not foresee that you would ever live here."

The little Japanese bent forward, and his eyes were twin points of black light.

"You do not need to tell me what you have undergone in the past month. I know. The sea-dweller has power over you. For one thing, there are bonds of blood, even though you are not directly descended from her. And your love for the ocean—your uncle spoke of that. You live here alone with your paintings and your imaginative fancies; you see no one else. You are an ideal victim, and it was easy for that sea horror to become *en rapport* with you. Even now you show the stigmata."

Dean was silent, his face a pale shadow amidst the darker ones in the corners of the room. What was the man trying to tell him? What were these hints leading up to?

"Remember what I have said." Doctor Yamada's voice was fanatically earnest. "That creature wants you for your youth—your soul. She has lured you in sleep, with visions of Poseidonis, the twilight grottoes in the deep. She has sent you beguiling visions at first, to hide what she was doing. She has drained your life forces, weakened your resistance, waiting until she is strong enough to take possession of your brain.

"I have told you what she wants—what all these hybrid horrors raven for. She will reveal herself to you in time, and when her will is strong upon you in slumber, you will do her bidding. She will take you down into the deep, and show you the kraken-fouled gulfs where these things bide. You will go willingly, and that will be your doom. She may lure you to their feasts there—the feasts they hold upon the drowned things they find floating from wrecked ships. And you will live such madness in your sleep because she rules you. And then—then, when you have become weak enough, she will have her desire. The sea-thing will usurp your body and walk once more on earth. And you will go down into the darkness where once you dwelt in dreams, for ever. Unless I am mistaken, you have already seen enough to know that I speak truth. I think that this terrible moment is not so far off, and I warn you that alone you cannot hope to resist the evil. Only with the aid of your uncle and me——"

Doctor Yamada stood up. He moved forward and confronted the dazed

youth face to face. In a low voice he asked, "In your dreams—*has the thing kissed you?*"

For a heart-beat there was utter silence. Dean opened his mouth to speak, and then a curious little warning note seemed to sound in his brain. It rose, like the quiet roaring of a conch-shell, and a vague nausea assailed him.

Almost without volition he heard himself saying, "No."

Dimly, as though from an incredibly far distance, he heard Yamada suck in his breath, as if surprised. Then the Japanese said, "That is good. Very good. Now listen: your uncle will be here soon. He has chartered a special plane. Will you be my guest until he arrives?"

The room seemed to darken before Dean's eyes. The form of the Japanese was receding, dwindling. Through the window the surf-sound came crashing, and it rolled on in waves through Dean's brain. In its thunder a thin, insistent whispering penetrated.

"Accept," it murmured. "Accept!" And Dean heard his own voice accept Yamada's invitation.

He seemed incapable of coherent thought. That last dream haunted him . . . and now Doctor Yamada's disturbing story . . . he was ill—that was it!—very ill. He wanted very much to sleep, now. A flood of darkness seemed to wash up and engulf him. Gratefully he allowed it to sweep through his tired head. Nothing existed but the dark, and a restless lapping of unquiet waters.

Yet he seemed to know, in an odd way, that he was still—some outer part of him—conscious. He strangely realized that he and Doctor Yamada had left the house, were entering a car, and driving a long way. He was—with that strange, external other self—talking casually to the doctor; entering his house in San Pedro; drinking; eating. And all the while his soul, his real being, was buried in waves of blackness.

Finally a bed. From below, the surf seemed to blend into the blackness that engulfed his brain. It spoke to him now, as he rose stealthily and clambered out of the window. The fall jarred his outer self considerably, but he was on the ground outside without injury. He kept in the shadows as he crept away down to the beach—the black, hungry shadows that were like the darkness surging through his soul.

3. Three Dreadful Hours

With a shock, he was himself once more—completely. The cold water had done it; the water in which he found himself swimming. He was in the ocean, borne on waves as silver as the lightning that occasionally flashed overhead. He heard thunder, felt the sting of rain. Without wondering about the sudden transition, he swam on, as though fully aware of some planned destination. For the first time in over a month he felt fully alive, actually himself. There was a surge of wild elation in him that defied the facts; he no longer seemed to care about his recent illness, the weird warnings of his uncle and Doctor Yamada, and the unnatural darkness that had

previously shadowed his mind. In fact, he no longer had to think—it was as though he were being *directed* in all his movements.

He was swimming parallel with the beach now, and with curious detachment he observed that the storm had subsided. A pale, fog-like glow hovered over the lashing waters, and it seemed to beckon.

The air was chill, as was the water, and the waves high; yet Dean experienced neither cold nor fatigue. And when he saw the things that waited for him on the rocky beach just ahead, he lost all perception of himself in a crescendo of mounting joy.

This was inexplicable, for they were the creatures of his last and wildest nightmares. Even now he did not see them plainly as they sported in the surf, but there were dim suggestions of past horror in their tenebrous outlines. The things were like seals; great, fish-like, bloated monsters with pulpy, shapeless heads. These heads rested on columnar necks that undulated with serpentine ease, and he observed, without any sensation other than curious familiarity, that the heads and bodies of the creatures were a sea-bleached white.

Soon he was swimming in among them—swimming with peculiar and disturbing ease. Inwardly he marveled, with a touch of his former feeling, that he was not now horrified by the sea-beasts in the least. Instead, it was almost with a feeling of kinship that he listened to their strange low gruntings and cackles—listened *and understood*.

He *knew* what they were saying, and he was not amazed. He was not frightened by what he heard, though the words would have sent abysmal horror through his soul in the previous dreams.

He knew where they were going and what they meant to do when the entire group swam out into the water once more, yet he did not fear. Instead, he felt a strange hunger at the thought of what was to come, a hunger that impelled him to take the lead as the things, with undulant swiftness, glided through the inky waters to the north. They swam with incredible speed, yet it was hours before a sea-coast loomed up through the murk, lit by a blinding flare of light from offshore.

Twilight deepened to true darkness over the water, but the offshore light burned brightly. It seemed to come from a huge wreck in the waves just off the coast, a great hulk floating on the waters like a crumpled beast. There were boats gathered around it, and floating flares of light that revealed the scene.

As though by instinct, Dean, with the pack behind him, headed for the spot. Swiftly and silently they sped, their slimy heads blurred in the shadows to which they clung as they circled the boats and swam in toward the great crumpled shape. Now it was looming above him, and he could see arms flailing desperately as man after man sank below the surface. The colossal bulk from which they leaped was a wreck of twisted girders in which he could trace the warped outline of a vaguely familiar shape.

And now, with curious disinterest, he swam lazily about, avoiding the lights bobbing over the water as he watched the actions of his companions.

They were hunting their prey. Leering muzzles gaped for the drowning men, and lean talons raked bodies from the darkness. Whenever a man was glimpsed in shadows not yet invaded by rescue-boats, one of the sea-things craftily snared his victim.

In a little while they turned and slowly swam away. But now many of the creatures clutched a grisly trophy at their squamous breasts. The pale white limbs of drowning men trailed in the water as they were dragged off into the darkness by their captors. To the accompaniment of low, carrion laughter the beasts swam away, back down the coast.

Dean swam with the rest. His mind was again a blur of confusion. He knew what that thing in the water was, and yet he could not name it. He had watched those hateful horrors snare doomed men and drag them off to the deep, yet he had not intervened. What was wrong? Even now, as he swam with frightening agility, he felt a call he could not fully understand—a call that his body was answering.

The hybrid things were gradually dispersing. With eery splashings they disappeared below the surface of the gelid black waters, pulling with them the dreadfully limp bodies of the men, pulling them down to the blackness biding beneath.

They were hungry. Dean knew it without thinking. He swam on, along the coast, impelled by his curious urge. That was it—he was hungry.

And now he was going for food.

Hours of steady swimming southward. Then the familiar beach, and above it a lighted house which Dean recognized—his own house on the cliff. There were figures descending the slope now; two men with torches were coming down to the beach. He must not let them see him—why, he did not know, but they must not. He crawled along the beach, keeping close to the water's edge. Even so, he seemed to move very swiftly.

The men with the torches were some distance behind him now. Ahead loomed another familiar outline—a cave. He had clambered over these rocks before, it seemed. He knew the pits of shadow that speckled the cliff rock, and knew the narrow passage of stone through which he now squeezed his prostrate body.

Was that someone shouting, far away? . . .

Darkness, and a lapping pool. He crawled forward, felt chill waters creep over his body. Muffled by distance came an insistent shouting from outside the cave.

"Graham! Graham Dean!"

Then the smell of dank sea-foulness was in his nostrils—a familiar, pleasant smell. He knew where he was, now. It was the cave where in his dream he had kissed the sea-thing. It was the cave in which—

He remembered now. The black blur lifted from his brain, and he remembered all. His mind bridged the gap, and he once again recalled coming here earlier this very evening, before he had found himself in the water.

Morella Godolfo had called him here; here her dark whispers had guided

him at twilight, when he had come from the bed at Doctor Yamada's house. It was the siren song of the sea-creature that had lured him in dreams.

He remembered how she had coiled about his feet when he entered, flung her sea-bleached body up until its inhuman head had loomed close to his own. And then the hot pulpy lips had pressed against his—the loathsome, slimy lips had kissed him again. Wet, dank, horribly avid kiss! His senses had drowned in its evil, for he knew that this second kiss meant doom.

"The sea-dweller will take your body," Doctor Yamada had said. . . . And the second kiss meant doom.

All this had happened hours ago!

Dean shifted around in the rocky chamber to avoid wetting himself in the pool. As he did so, he glanced down at his body for the first time that night—glanced down with an undulating neck at the shape he had worn for three hours in the sea. He saw the fish-like scales, the scabrous whiteness of the slimy skin; saw the veined gills. He stared into the waters of the pool then, so that the reflection of his face was visible in the dim moonlight that filtered through fissures in the rocks.

He saw all. . . .

His head rested on the long, reptilian neck. It was an anthropoid head with flat contours that were monstrously inhuman. The eyes were white and protuberant; they bulged with the glassy stare of a drowning thing. There was no nose, and the center of the face was covered with a tangle of wormy blue feelers. The mouth was worst of all. Dean saw pale white lips in a dead face—human lips. Lips that had kissed his own. And now—*they were his own!*

He was in the body of the evil sea-thing—the evil sea-thing that had once harbored the soul of Morella Godolfo!

At that moment Dean would gladly have welcomed death, for the stark, blasphemous horror of his discovery was too much to bear. He knew about his dreams now, and the legends; he had learned the truth, and paid a hideous price. He recalled, vividly, how he had recovered consciousness in the water and swum out to meet those—others. He recalled the great black hulk from which drowning men had been taken in boats—the shattered wreck on the water. What was it Yamada had told him? "When there is a wreck they go there, like vultures to a feast." And now, at last, he remembered what had eluded him that night—what that familiar shape on the waters had been. It was a crashed zeppelin. He had gone swimming into the wreckage with those things, and they had taken men. . . . Three hours—God! Dean wanted very much to die. He was in the sea-body of Morella Godolfo, and it was too evil for further life.

Morella Godolfo! Where was *she*? And his own body, the shape of Graham Dean?

A rustling in the shadowy cavern behind him proclaimed the answer. Graham Dean saw *himself* in the moonlight—saw his body, line for line, hunching furtively past the pool in an attempt to creep away unobserved.

Dean's flippered fins moved swiftly. His own body turned.

It was ghastly for Dean to see himself reflected where no mirror existed; ghastlier still to see that in his face there no longer were *his* eyes. The sly, mocking stare of the sea-creature peered out at him from behind their fleshy mask, and they were ancient, evil. The pseudo-human snarled at him and tried to dodge off into the darkness. Dean followed, on all fours.

He knew what he must do. That sea-thing—Morella—she had taken his body during that last black kiss, just as he had been forced into hers. But she had not yet recovered enough to go out into the world. That was why he had found her still in the cave. Now, however, she would leave, and his uncle Michael would never know. The world would never know, either, what horror stalked its surface—until it was too late. Dean, his own tragic form hateful to him now, knew what he must do.

Purposefully he maneuvered the mocking body of himself into a rocky corner. There was a look of fright in those gelid eyes. . . .

A sound caused Dean to turn, pivoting his reptilian neck. Through glazed fish-eyes he saw the faces of Michael Leigh and Doctor Yamada. Torches in hand, they were entering the cave.

Dean knew what they would do, and he no longer cared. He closed in on the human body that housed the soul of the sea-beast; closed in with the beast's own flailing flippers; seized it in its own arms and menaced it with its own teeth near the creature's white, human neck.

From behind him he heard shouts and cries at his very back, but Dean did not care. He had a duty to perform; an atonement. Through the corner of his eye, he saw the barrel of a revolver as it glinted in Yamada's hand.

Then came two bursts of stabbing flame, and the oblivion Dean craved. But he died happy, for he had atoned for the black kiss.

Even as he sank into death, Graham Dean had bitten with animal fangs into his own throat, and his heart was filled with peace as, dying, he saw himself die . . .

His soul mingled in the third black kiss of Death.