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VOL. I, No. 2

CONTENTS

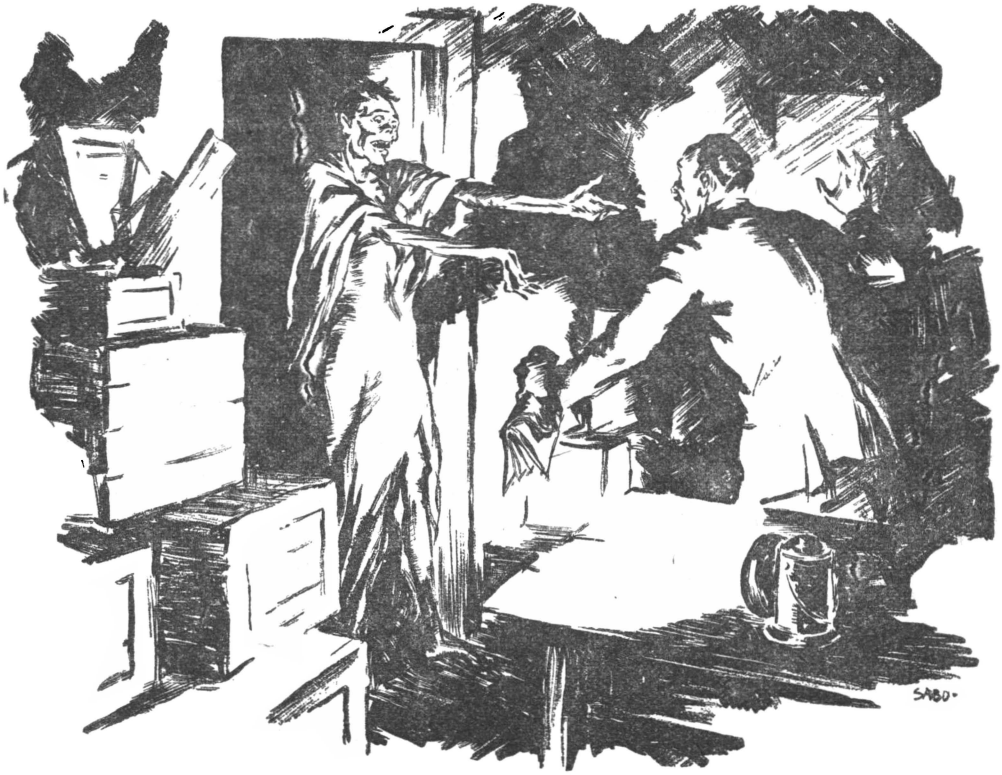
FEBRUARY, 1930

COVER DESIGN	H. W. WESSOLOWSKI	
<i>Painted in Water-colors from a Scene in "Spawn of the Stars."</i>		
OLD CROMPTON'S SECRET	HARL VINCENT	153
<i>Tom's Extraordinary Machine Glowed—and the Years Were Banished from Old Crompton's Body. But There Still Remained, Deep-seated in His Century-old Mind, the Memory of His Crime.</i>		
SPAWN OF THE STARS	CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN	166
<i>The Earth Lay Powerless Beneath Those Loathsome, Yellowish Monsters That, Sheathed in Cometlike Globes, Sprang from the Skies to Annihilate Man and Reduce His Cities to Ashes.</i>		
THE CORPSE ON THE GRATING	HUGH B. CAVE	187
<i>In the Gloomy Depths of the Old Warehouse Dale Saw a Thing That Drew a Scream of Horror to His Dry Lips. It Was a Corpse—the Mold of Decay on Its Long-dead Features—and Yet It Was Alive!</i>		
CREATURES OF THE LIGHT	SOPHIE WENZEL ELLIS	196
<i>He Had Striven to Perfect the Faultless Man of the Future, and Had Succeeded—Too Well. For in the Pitilessly Cold Eyes of Adam, His Super-human Creation, Dr. Mundson Saw Only Contempt—and Annihilation—for the Human Race.</i>		
INTO SPACE	STERNER ST. PAUL	221
<i>What Was the Extraordinary Connection Between Dr. Livermore's Sudden Disappearance and the Coming of a New Satellite to the Earth?</i>		
THE BEETLE HORDE	VICTOR ROUSSEAU	229
<i>Bullets, Shrapnel, Shell—Nothing Can Stop the Trillions of Famished, Man-sized Beetles Which, Led by a Madman, Sweep Down Over the Human Race.</i>		
MAD MUSIC	ANTHONY PELCHER	248
<i>The Sixty Stories of the Perfectly Constructed Colossus Building Had Mysteriously Crashed! What Was the Connection Between This Catastrophe and the Weird Strains of the Mad Musician's Violin?</i>		
THE THIEF OF TIME	CAPTAIN S. P. MEEK	259
<i>The Teller Turned to the Stacked Pile of Bills. They Were Gone! And No One Had Been Near!</i>		

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It was a corpse, standing before me like some propped-up thing from the grave.

The Corpse on the Grating

By Hugh B. Cave

IT was ten o'clock on the morning of December 5 when M. S. and I left the study of Professor Daimler. You are perhaps acquainted with M. S. His name appears constantly in the pages of the Illustrated News, in conjunction with some very technical article on psycho-analysis or with some extensive study of the human brain and its functions. He is a psycho-fanatic, more or less, and has spent an entire lifetime of some seventy-odd years in pulling apart human skulls for the purpose of investigation. Lovely pursuit!

For some twenty years I have mocked him, in a friendly, half-hearted

fashion. I am a medical man, and my own profession is one that does not sympathize with radicals.

As for Professor Daimler, the third member of our triangle—perhaps, if I take a moment to outline the events of that evening, the Professor's part in

what follows will be less obscure. We had called on him, M. S. and I, at his urgent request. His rooms were in a narrow,

unlighted street just off the square, and Daimler himself opened the door to us. A tall, loosely built chap he was, standing in the doorway like a motionless ape, arms half extended.

"I've summoned you, gentlemen," he said quietly, "because you two, of all

In the gloomy depths of the old warehouse Dale saw a thing that drew a scream of horror to his dry lips. It was a corpse—the mold of decay on its long-dead features—and yet it was alive!

London, are the only persons who know the nature of my recent experiments. I should like to acquaint you with the results!"

He led the way to his study, then kicked the door shut with his foot, seizing my arm as he did so. Quietly he dragged me to the table that stood against the farther wall. In the same even, unemotional tone of a man completely sure of himself, he commanded me to inspect it.

For a moment, in the semi-gloom of the room, I saw nothing. At length, however, the contents of the table revealed themselves, and I distinguished a motley collection of test tubes, each filled with some fluid. The tubes were attached to each other by some ingenious arrangement of thistles, and at the end of the table, where a chance blow could not brush it aside, lay a tiny phial of the resulting serum. From the appearance of the table, Daimler had evidently drawn a certain amount of gas from each of the smaller tubes, distilling them through acid into the minute phial at the end. Yet even now, as I stared down at the fantastic paraphernalia before me, I could sense no conclusive reason for its existence.

I turned to the Professor with a quiet stare of bewilderment. He smiled.

"The experiment is over," he said. "As to its conclusion, you, Dale, as a medical man, will be sceptical. And you"—turning to M. S.—"as a scientist you will be amazed. I, being neither physician nor scientist, am merely filled with wonder!"

HE stepped to a long, square table-like structure in the center of the room. Standing over it, he glanced quizzically at M. S., then at me.

"For a period of two weeks," he went on, "I have kept, on the table here, the body of a man who has been dead more than a month. I have tried, gentlemen, with acid combinations of my own origination, to bring that body

back to life. And . . . I have—failed!

"But," he added quickly, noting the smile that crept across my face, "that failure was in itself worth more than the average scientist's greatest achievement! You know, Dale, that heat, if a man is not truly dead, will sometimes resurrect him. In a case of epilepsy, for instance, victims have been pronounced dead only to return to life—sometimes in the grave.

"I say 'if a man be not truly dead.' But what if that man *is* truly dead? Does the cure alter itself in any manner? The motor of your car dies—do you bury it? You do not; you locate the faulty part, correct it, and infuse new life. And so, gentlemen, after remedying the ruptured heart of this dead man, by operation, I proceeded to bring him back to life.

"I used heat. Terrific heat will sometimes originate a spark of new life in something long dead. Gentlemen, on the fourth day of my tests, following a continued application of electric and acid heat, the patient—"

Daimler leaned over the table and took up a cigarette. Lighting it, he dropped the match and resumed his monologue.

"The patient turned suddenly over and drew his arm weakly across his eyes. I rushed to his side. When I reached him, the body was once again stiff and lifeless. And—it has remained so."

The Professor stared at us quietly, waiting for comment. I answered him, as carelessly as I could, with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Professor, have you ever played with the dead body of a frog?" I said softly.

HE shook his head silently. "You would find it interesting sport," I told him. "Take a common dry cell battery with enough voltage to render a sharp shock. Then apply your wires to various parts of the frog's anatomy. If you are lucky, and strike the right set of muscles, you

will have the pleasure of seeing a dead frog leap suddenly forward. Understand, he will not regain life. You have merely released his dead muscles by shock, and sent him bolting."

The Professor did not reply. I could feel his eyes on me, and had I turned, I should probably had found M. S. glaring at me in honest hate. These men were students of mesmerism, of spiritualism, and my commonplace contradiction was not over welcome.

"You are cynical, Dale," said M. S. coldly, "because you do not understand!"

"Understand? I am a doctor—not a ghost!"

But M. S. had turned eagerly to the Professor.

"Where is this body—this experiment?" he demanded.

Daimler shook his head. Evidently he had acknowledged failure and did not intend to drag his dead man before our eyes, unless he could bring that man forth alive, upright, and ready to join our conversation!

"I've put it away," he said distantly. "There is nothing more to be done, now that our reverend doctor has insisted in making a matter of fact thing out of our experiment. You understand, I had not intended to go in for wholesale resurrection, even if I had met with success. It was my belief that a dead body, like a dead piece of mechanism, can be brought to life again, provided we are intelligent enough to discover the secret. And by God, it is *still* my belief!"

THAT was the situation, then, when M. S. and I paced slowly back along the narrow street that contained the Professor's dwelling-place. My companion was strangely silent. More than once I felt his eyes upon me in an uncomfortable stare, yet he said nothing. Nothing, that is, until I had opened the conversation with some casual remark about the lunacy of the man we had just left.

"You are wrong in mocking him,

Dale," M. S. replied bitterly. "Daimler is a man of science. He is no child, experimenting with a toy; he is a grown man who has the courage to believe in his powers. One of these days. . . ."

He had intended to say that some day I should respect the Professor's efforts. One of these days! The interval of time was far shorter than anything so indefinite. The first event, with its succeeding series of horrors, came within the next three minutes.

WE had reached a more deserted section of the square, a black, uninhabited street extending like a shadowed band of darkness between gaunt, high walls. I had noticed for some time that the stone structure beside us seemed to be unbroken by door or window—that it appeared to be "a single gigantic building, black and forbidding. I mentioned the fact to M. S.

"The warehouse," he said simply. "A lonely, God-forsaken place. We shall probably see the flicker of the watchman's light in one of the upper chinks."

At his words, I glanced up. True enough, the higher part of the grim structure was punctured by narrow, barred openings. Safety vaults, probably. But the light, unless its tiny gleam was somewhere in the inner recesses of the warehouse, was dead. The great building was like an immense burial vault, a tomb—silent and lifeless.

We had reached the most forbidding section of the narrow street, where a single arch-lamp overhead cast a halo of ghastly yellow light over the pavement. At the very rim of the circle of illumination, where the shadows were deeper and more silent, I could make out the black mouldings of a heavy iron grating. The bars of metal were designed, I believe, to seal the side entrance of the great warehouse from night marauders. It was bolted in place and secured with a set of immense chains, immovable.

This much I saw as my intent gaze

swept the wall before me. This huge tomb of silence held for me a peculiar fascination, and as I paced along beside my gloomy companion, I stared directly ahead of me into the darkness of the street. I wish to God my eyes had been closed or blinded!

HE was hanging on the grating. Hanging there, with white, twisted hands clutching the rigid bars of iron, straining to force them apart. His whole distorted body was forced against the barrier, like the form of a madman struggling to escape from his cage. His face—the image of it still haunts me whenever I see iron bars in the darkness of a passage—was the face of a man who has died from utter, stark horror. It was frozen in a silent shriek of agony, staring out at me with fiendish maliciousness. Lips twisted apart. White teeth gleaming in the light. Bloody eyes, with a horrible glare of colorless pigment. And—*dead*.

I believe M. S. saw him at the very instant I recoiled. I felt a sudden grip on my arm; and then, as an exclamation came harshly from my companion's lips, I was pulled forward roughly. I found myself staring straight into the dead eyes of that fearful thing before me, found myself standing rigid, motionless, before the corpse that hung within reach of my arm.

And then, through that overwhelming sense of the horrible, came the quiet voice of my comrade—the voice of a man who looks upon death as nothing more than an opportunity for research.

"The fellow has been frightened to death, Dale. Frightened most horribly. Note the expression of his mouth, the evident struggle to force these bars apart and escape. Something has driven fear to his soul, killed him."

I REMEMBER the words vaguely. When M. S. had finished speaking, I did not reply. Not until he had stepped forward and bent over the dis-

torted face of the thing before me, did I attempt to speak. When I did, my thoughts were a jargon.

"What, in God's name," I cried, "could have brought such horror to a strong man? What—"

"Loneliness, perhaps," suggested M. S. with a smile. "The fellow is evidently the watchman. He is alone, in a huge, deserted pit of darkness, for hours at a time. His light is merely a ghostly ray of illumination, hardly enough to do more than increase the darkness. I have heard of such cases before."

He shrugged his shoulders. Even as he spoke, I sensed the evasion in his words. When I replied, he hardly heard my answer, for he had suddenly stepped forward, where he could look directly into those fear twisted eyes.

"Dale," he said at length, turning slowly to face me, "you ask for an explanation of this horror? There is an explanation. It is written with an almost fearful clearness on this fellow's mind. Yet if I tell you, you will return to your old skepticism—your damnable habit of disbelief!"

I looked at him quietly. I had heard M. S. claim, at other times, that he could read the thoughts of a dead man by the mental image that lay on that man's brain. I had laughed at him. Evidently, in the present moment, he recalled those laughs. Nevertheless, he faced me seriously.

"I can see two things, Dale," he said deliberately. "One of them is a dark, narrow room—a room piled with indistinct boxes and crates, and with an open door bearing the black number 4167. And in that open doorway, coming forward with slow steps—alive, with arms extended and a frightful face of passion—is a decayed human form. A corpse, Dale. A man who has been dead for many days, and is now—*alive!*"

M. S. turned slowly and pointed with upraised hand to the corpse on the grating.

"That is why," he said simply, "this fellow died from horror."

His words died into emptiness. For a moment I stared at him. Then, in spite of our surroundings, in spite of the late hour, the loneliness of the street, the awful thing beside us, I laughed.

He turned upon me with a snarl. For the first time in my life I saw M. S. convulsed with rage. His old, lined face had suddenly become savage with intensity.

"You laugh at me, Dale," he thundered. "By God, you make a mockery out of a science that I have spent more than my life in studying! You call yourself a medical man—and you are not fit to carry the name! I will wager you, man, that your laughter is not backed by courage!"

I fell away from him. Had I stood within reach, I am sure he would have struck me. Struck me! And I have been nearer to M. S. for the past ten years than any man in London. And as I retreated from his temper, he reached forward to seize my arm. I could not help but feel impressed at his grim intentness.

"Look here, Dale," he said bitterly, "I will wager you a hundred pounds that you will not spend the remainder of this night in the warehouse above you! I will wager a hundred pounds against your own courage that you will not back your laughter by going through what this fellow has gone through. That you will not prowl through the corridors of this great structure until you have found room 4167—and remain in that room until dawn!"

THERE was no choice. I glanced at the dead man, at the face of fear and the clutching, twisted hands, and a cold dread filled me. But to refuse my friend's wager would have been to brand myself an empty coward. I had mocked him. Now, whatever the cost, I must stand ready to pay for that mockery.

"Room 4167?" I replied quietly, in a voice which I made every effort to control, lest he should discover the tremor in it. "Very well, I will do it!"

It was nearly midnight when I found myself alone, climbing a musty, winding ramp between the first and second floors of the deserted building. Not a sound, except the sharp intake of my breath and the dismal creak of the wooden stairs, echoed through that tomb of death. There was no light, not even the usual dim glow that is left to illuminate an unused corridor. Moreover, I had brought no means of light with me—nothing but a half empty box of safety matches which, by some unholy premonition, I had forced myself to save for some future moment. The stairs were black and difficult, and I mounted them slowly, groping with both hands along the rough wall.

I had left M. S. some few moments before. In his usual decisive manner he had helped me to climb the iron grating and lower myself to the sealed alley-way on the farther side. Then, leaving him without a word, for I was bitter against the triumphant tone of his parting words, I proceeded into the darkness, fumbling forward until I had discovered the open door in the lower part of the warehouse.

And then the ramp, winding crazily upward—upward—upward, seemingly without end. I was seeking blindly for that particular room which was to be my destination. Room 4167, with its high number, could hardly be on the lower floors, and so I had stumbled upward. . . .

IT was at the entrance of the second floor corridor that I struck the first of my desultory supply of matches, and by its light discovered a placard nailed to the wall. The thing was yellow with age and hardly legible. In the drab light of the match I had difficulty in reading it—but, as far as I can remember, the notice went something like this:

WAREHOUSE RULES

1. No light shall be permitted in any room or corridor, as a prevention against fire.
2. No person shall be admitted to rooms or corridors unless accompanied by an employee.
3. A watchman shall be on the premises from 7 P. M. until 6 A. M. He shall make the round of the corridors every hour during that interval, at a quarter past the hour.
4. Rooms are located by their numbers: the first figure in the room number indicating its floor location.

I could read no further. The match in my fingers burned to a black thread and dropped. Then, with the burnt stump still in my hand, I groped through the darkness to the bottom of the second ramp.

Room 4167, then, was on the fourth floor—the topmost floor of the structure. I must confess that the knowledge did not bring any renewed burst of courage! The top floor! Three black stair-pits would lie between me and the safety of escape. There would be no escape! No human being in the throes of fear could hope to discover that tortured outlet, could hope to grope his way through Stygian gloom down a triple ramp of black stairs. And even though he succeeded in reaching the lower corridors, there was still a blind alley-way, sealed at the outer end by a high grating of iron bars. . . .

ESCAPE! The mockery of it caused me to stop suddenly in my ascent and stand rigid, my whole body trembling violently.

But outside, in the gloom of the street, M. S. was waiting, waiting with that fiendish glare of triumph that would brand me a man without courage. I could not return to face him, not though all the horrors of hell inhabited this gruesome place of mys-

tery. And horrors must surely inhabit it, else how could one account for that fearful thing on the grating below? But I had been through horror before. I had seen a man, supposedly dead on the operating table, jerk suddenly to his feet and scream. I had seen a young girl, not long before, awake in the midst of an operation, with the knife already in her frail body. Surely, after those definite horrors, no *unknown* danger would send me cringing back to the man who was waiting so bitterly for me to return.

Those were the thoughts pregnant in my mind as I groped slowly, cautiously along the corridor of the upper floor, searching each closed door for the indistinct number 4167. The place was like the center of a huge labyrinth, a spider-web of black, repelling passages, leading into some central chamber of utter silence and blackness. I went forward with dragging steps, fighting back the dread that gripped me as I went farther and farther from the outlet of escape. And then, after losing myself completely in the gloom, I threw aside all thoughts of return and pushed on with a careless, surface bravado, and laughed aloud.

SO, at length, I reached that room of horror, secreted high in the deeper recesses of the deserted warehouse. The number—God grant I never see it again!—was scrawled in black chalk on the door—4167. I pushed the half-open barrier wide, and entered.

It was a small room, even as M. S. had forewarned me—or as the dead mind of that thing on the grate had forewarned M. S. The glow of my out-thrust match revealed a great stack of dusty boxes and crates, piled against the farther wall. Revealed, too, the black corridor beyond the entrance, and a small, upright table before me.

It was the table, and the stool beside it, that drew my attention and brought a muffled exclamation from my lips. The thing had been thrust out of its

usual place, pushed aside as if some frenzied shape had lunged against it. I could make out its former position by the marks on the dusty floor at my feet. Now it was nearer to the center of the room, and had been wrenched sidewise from its holdings. A shudder took hold of me as I looked at it. A living person, sitting on the stool before me, staring at the door, would have wrenched the table in just this manner in his frenzy to escape from the room!

THE light of the match died, plunging me into a pit of gloom, I struck another and stepped closer to the table. And there, on the floor, I found two more things that brought fear to my soul. One of them was a heavy flash-lamp—a watchman's lamp—where it had evidently been dropped. Been dropped in flight! But what awful terror must have gripped the fellow to make him forsake his only means of escape through those black passages? And the second thing—a worn copy of a leather-bound book, flung open on the boards below the stool!

The flash-lamp, thank God! had not been shattered. I switched it on, directing its white circle of light over the room. This time, in the vivid glare, the room became even more unreal. Black walls, clumsy, distorted shadows on the wall, thrown by those huge piles of wooden boxes. Shadows that were like crouching men, groping toward me. And beyond, where the single door opened into a passage of Stygian darkness, that yawning entrance was thrown into hideous detail. Had any upright figure been standing there, the light would have made an unholy phosphorescent specter out of it.

I summoned enough courage to cross the room and pull the door shut. There was no way of locking it. Had I been able to fasten it, I should surely have done so; but the room was evidently an unused chamber, filled with empty refuse. This was the reason, probably,

why the watchman had made use of it as a retreat during the intervals between his rounds.

But I had no desire to ponder over the sordidness of my surroundings. I returned to my stool in silence, and stooping, picked up the fallen book from the floor. Carefully I placed the lamp on the table, where its light would shine on the open page. Then, turning the cover, I began to glance through the thing which the man before me had evidently been studying.

And before I had read two lines, the explanation of the whole horrible thing struck me. I stared dumbly down at the little book and laughed. Laughed harshly, so that the sound of my mad cackle echoed in a thousand ghastly reverberations through the dead corridors of the building.

IT was a book of horror, of fantasy. A collection of weird, terrifying, supernatural tales with grotesque illustrations in funereal black and white. And the very line I had turned to, the line which had probably struck terror to that unlucky devil's soul, explained M. S.'s "decayed human form, standing in the doorway with arms extended and a frightful face of passion!" The description—the same description—lay before me, almost in my friend's words. Little wonder that the fellow on the grating below, after reading this orgy of horror, had suddenly gone mad with fright. Little wonder that the picture engraved on his dead mind was a picture of a corpse standing in the doorway of room 4167!

I glanced at that doorway and laughed. No doubt of it, it was that awful description in M. S.'s untempered language that had made me dread my surroundings, not the loneliness and silence of the corridors about me. Now, as I stared at the room, the closed door, the shadows on the wall, I could not repress a grin.

But the grin was not long in duration. A six-hour siege awaited me before I could hear the sound of human

voice again—six hours of silence and gloom. I did not relish it. Thank God the fellow before me had had foresight enough to leave his book of fantasy for my amusement!

I TURNED to the beginning of the story. A lovely beginning it was, outlining in some detail how a certain Jack Fulton, English adventurer, had suddenly found himself imprisoned (by a mysterious black gang of monks, or something of the sort) in a forgotten cell at the monastery of El Toro. The cell, according to the pages before me, was located in the "empty, haunted pits below the stone floors of the structure. . . ." Lovely setting! And the brave Fulton had been secured firmly to a huge metal ring set in the farther wall, opposite the entrance.

I read the description twice. At the end of it I could not help but lift my head to stare at my own surroundings. Except for the location of the cell, I might have been in the same setting. The same darkness, same silence, same loneliness. Peculiar similarity!

And then: "Fulton lay quietly, without attempt to struggle. In the dark, the stillness of the vaults became unbearable, terrifying. Not a suggestion of sound, except the scraping of unseen rats—"

I dropped the book with a start. From the opposite end of the room in which I sat came a half inaudible scuffling noise—the sound of hidden rodents scrambling through the great pile of boxes. Imagination? I am not sure. At the moment, I would have sworn that the sound was a definite one, that I had heard it distinctly. Now, as I recount this tale of horror, I am not sure.

But I am sure of this: There was no smile on my lips as I picked up the book again with trembling fingers and continued.

"The sound died into silence. For an eternity, the prisoner lay rigid, staring at the open door of his cell. The opening was black, deserted, like the

mouth of a deep tunnel, leading to hell. And then, suddenly, from the gloom beyond that opening, came an almost noiseless, padded footfall!"

THIS time there was no doubt of it. The book fell from my fingers, dropped to the floor with a clatter. Yet even through the sound of its falling, I heard that fearful sound—the shuffle of a living foot! I sat motionless, staring with bloodless face at the door of room 4167. And as I stared, the sound came again, and again—the *slow tread of dragging footsteps, approaching along the black corridor without!*

I got to my feet like an automaton, swaying heavily. Every drop of courage ebbed from my soul as I stood there, one hand clutching the table, waiting. . . .

And then, with an effort, I moved forward. My hand was outstretched to grasp the wooden handle of the door. And—I did not have the courage. Like a cowed beast I crept back to my place and slumped down on the stool, my eyes still transfixed in a mute stare of terror.

I waited. For more than half an hour I waited, motionless. Not a sound stirred in the passage beyond that closed barrier. Not a suggestion of any living presence came to me. Then, leaning back against the wall with a harsh laugh, I wiped away the cold moisture that had trickled over my forehead into my eyes.

It was another five minutes before I picked up the book again. You call me a fool for continuing it? A fool? I tell you, even a story of horror is more comfort that a room of grotesque shadows and silence. Even a printed page is better than grim reality!

AND so I read on. The story was one of suspense, madness. For the next two pages I read a cunning description of the prisoner's mental reaction. Strangely enough, it conformed precisely with my own.

"Fulton's head had fallen to his chest," the script read. "For an endless while he did not stir, did not dare to lift his eyes. And then, after more than an hour of silent agony and suspense, the boy's head came up mechanically. Came up—and suddenly jerked rigid. A horrible scream burst from his dry lips as he stared—stared like a dead man—at the black entrance to his cell. There, standing without motion in the opening, stood a shrouded figure of death. Empty eyes, glaring with awful hate, bored into his own. Great arms, bony and rotten, extended toward him. Decayed flesh—"

I read no more. Even as I lunged to my feet, with that mad book still gripped in my hand, I heard the door of my room grind open. I screamed, screamed in utter horror at the thing I saw there. Dead? Good God, I do not know. It was a corpse, a dead human body, standing before me like some propped-up thing from the grave. A face half eaten away, terrible in its leering grin. Twisted mouth, with only a suggestion of lips, curled back over broken teeth. Hair—writhing, distorted—like a mass of moving, bloody coils. And its arms, ghastly white, bloodless, were extended toward me, with open, clutching hands.

IT was alive! Alive! Even while I stood there, crouching against the wall, it stepped forward toward me. I saw a heavy shudder pass over it, and the sound of its scraping feet burned its way into my soul. And then, with its second step, the fearful thing stumbled to its knees. The white, gleaming arms, thrown into streaks of living fire by the light of my lamp, flung violently upwards, twisting toward the ceiling. I saw the grin change to an expression of agony, of torment. And then the thing crashed upon me—dead.

With a great cry of fear I stumbled to the door. I groped out of that room of horror, stumbled along the corridor. No light. I left it behind, on the table,

to throw a circle of white glare over the decayed, living-dead intruder who had driven me mad.

My return down those winding ramps to the lower floor was a nightmare of fear. I remember that I stumbled, that I plunged through the darkness like a man gone mad. I had no thought of caution, no thought of anything except escape.

And then the lower door, and the alley of gloom. I reached the grating, flung myself upon it and pressed my face against the bars in a futile effort to escape. The same—as the fear-tortured man—who had—come before—me.

I felt strong hands lifting me up. A dash of cool air, and then the refreshing patter of falling rain.

IT was the afternoon of the following day, December 6, when M. S. sat across the table from me in my own study. I had made a rather hesitant attempt to tell him, without dramatics and without dwelling on my own lack of courage, of the events of the previous night.

"You deserved it, Dale," he said quietly. "You are a medical man, nothing more, and yet you mock the beliefs of a scientist as great as Daimler. I wonder—do you still mock the Professor's beliefs?"

"That he can bring a dead man to life?" I smiled, a bit doubtfully.

"I will tell you something, Dale," said M. S. deliberately. He was leaning across the table, staring at me. "The Professor made only one mistake in his great experiment. He did not wait long enough for the effect of his strange acids to work. He acknowledged failure too soon, and got rid of the body." He paused.

"When the Professor stored his patient away, Dale," he said quietly, "he stored it in room 4170, at the great warehouse. If you are acquainted with the place, you will know that room 4170 is directly across the corridor from 4167."