

Strange

STORIES

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COMPLETE
STORIES
IN THIS
ISSUE!



FEATURING
THE CRAWLING CORPSE
A Novelet of Bizarre Sorcery
By ELI COLTER

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Strange STORIES

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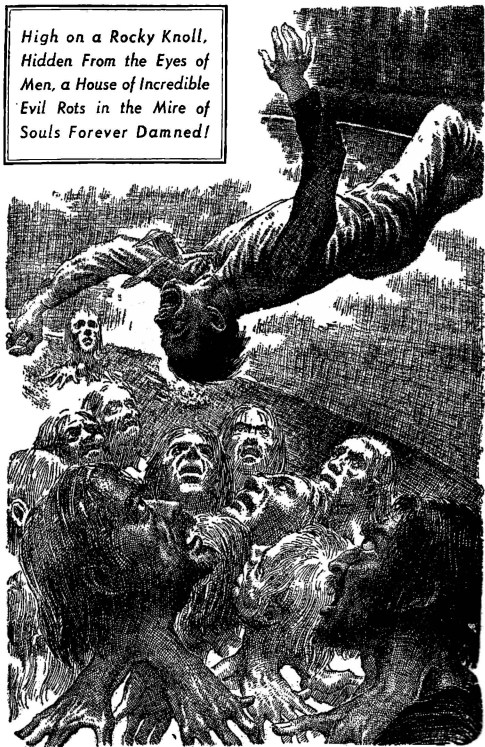
DECEMBER, 1939

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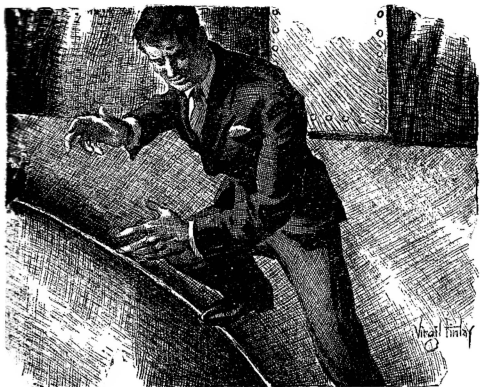
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*High on a Rocky Knoll,
Hidden From the Eyes of
Men, a House of Incredible
Evil Rots in the Mire of
Souls Forever Damned!*



Shrieking in terror, he pitched headlong into that pit!



The Crawling Corpse

By ELI COLTER

Author of "The Pride of Caius," "Outcasts of the Lazy S," etc.

CHAPTER I *Island of Dread*

I HAD gone into the market to purchase a cut of barracuda, had emerged from the market and had paused by the guard-rail for a moment to stand gazing out over the sea toward the spot beyond the mist-swathed horizon where Drugh Island lay. Drugh Island, obscure and unsung ob-

struction in the waters, which for too long had hidden and withheld Cyril from me, his best friend.

Cyril, my dear dead sister's grieving husband, who had gone off alone to nurse his overpowering sorrow after his wife's tragic riding accident and her sudden death. Cyril—one of the finest men I had ever known.

My uneasiness over his silence had grown to worry. By now I was begin-

A NOVELET OF BIZARRE SORCERY

ning to feel so badly upset that my nerves were ragged. If I heard nothing from him by the next mail boat, I wasn't going to let that silence continue without some action on my part.

I'd take a run out to Drugh Island and look him up, and make certain nothing had happened to him. Because, though he had written me faithfully during the past year, I had heard nothing from him in two months.

Feeling a little better for the resolution, I turned away from the guard-rail, absorbed in my uneasy musing, and started homeward up the wide plank wharf along which all the fish markets were strung. I hadn't gone ten feet before the wild-eyed tourist bumped into me.

I stepped sideward and would have proceeded on my way with a perfunctory murmur of apology, had he not halted in his headlong stride to stand staring at me. I was forced involuntarily to notice his eyes, dazed and dilated—even had I not heard clearly among the jumbled sounds he was muttering to himself the words "*Drugh Island*" and "*police*."

He blinked at me and addressed me in embarrassed self-abasement.

"Sorry! Pardon me! Awfully stupid of me to run you down. But I—I'm so beastly upset. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"It's quite all right," I said. "I wasn't looking where I was going, either. There's nothing wrong, I trust? Is there anything I could do for you?"

Relief flashed into his harried face. "I say, that's jolly sporting of you! Are you a resident here?"

"I am."

He blinked again, like a man vainly striving to collect sadly scattered wits.

"Then maybe you'd direct me to the local police station. I'd appreciate it no end, y'know."

I repressed a frown, a little sense of alarm leaping in me.

"Why, yes, I can do that. But—Drugh Island. Weren't you saying something to yourself about Drugh Island?" Drugh Island! Cyril's island! And—police!

The young Englishman answered me almost eagerly. "I've just come from Drugh Island. My uncle and I

were jaunting about a bit among the islands, on his vacation, y'know, and we stopped on Drugh, because a small settlement of islanders lived there and supplies would be handy. And he—I daresay it sounds balmy—but he—he disappeared!"

Swift apprehension chilled me. I heard the sharpness of my instant inquiry.

"Disappeared? What do you mean?"

"Why, why—just that, y'know."

His wild eyes clung to my face, and though he was little more than a boy, I felt a quick certainty that he wasn't erecting bogey mountains from innocuous molehills. Something decidedly dismaying had shocked him into incoherence and a state of frantic bewilderment.

HE WENT on speaking rapidly. "We had a camp back in the trees. We were going to rough it a bit there for a fortnight or so. Five days ago he went for a stroll, and he didn't come back."

"He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"Not a peep. Disturbing business, really. Though I wasn't exactly upset about him till the next morning, when he still hadn't returned."

"Didn't you conduct any sort of inquiry?" I interrupted.

"Oh, to be sure! But I couldn't get a thing out of the islanders. In fact, they were very vague, even frightened. I could see it in their faces. The old chap who keeps the grocery told me rather sharply that I'd better go on about my business quietly and say nothing about what had happened."

"He said that several other men had disappeared on the island, that no trace of them ever could be found, and the people on the island were afraid the place would get a bad name. Bad name, my eye! There's something bloody wrong on that island, y'know!"

Cyril! Was that why I hadn't heard from him? Was that why I had been oppressed lately by the unnerving conviction that all was not well with him? Had he gone out there only to vanish, as this boy's uncle had done? Had something ghastly happened to him, and to those others?

Yet a more terrible thought than that sank its fangs into the nerve tissue inside my skull. *Could Cyril Markheim have had anything to do with the spiriting away of the others?* Men in the sanity-destroying throes of grief go mad enough sometimes to commit incredibly terrible deeds, deeds which they in their right minds could not possibly have been capable of performing. I alone knew how desperately Cyril's grief had seared him to the core.

At all costs I knew that I must prevent the police from intervening! I heard the young Englishman's voice then, earnestly besieging my ears.

"So, if you'd be so kind as to direct me to the police, I'd be jolly well obliged to you."

I fixed intent eyes upon his face. "Listen, fellow—I'd investigate a little further if I were you. You're right, there's something damned wrong out there on Drugh. But you go kicking up a fuss, and you may never set eyes on your uncle again. Take it easy and do some expert snooping. It's bound to achieve results."

He frowned dubiously. "You—you think that would be the wise procedure?"

"I do. I think it's the only smart course to pursue. If discreet investigation didn't have any merit, there wouldn't be such a gang of private detectives running around loose. But we'll do our own detecting. I'll hire a boat and we'll beat it for Drugh Island hot-foot. We'll dig up your uncle—or blast the damned island off the map!"

He shrank, his eyes dilated again, and he bit his lip to prevent its trembling.

"I—I'm not going back there, y'know! I—daren't go back! I daresay it's beastly of me, but I'm afraid—afraid of what I'd find. Something about that ghastly old house at the end of the island— Oh, I can't go back!"

"But my uncle, you'll know him quick enough. He's a strappin' little old chap, with a jolly red face and curly white hair, and he's gotten his name and address tattooed on his right shoulder. Identification, y'know."

"Drey Glasscott. That's his name—

Sir Drey Glasscott. I'm Ken Glasscott. Tell you what—I'll stop in at the Krausmaugh Hotel here and wait for word from you—if I don't go balmy waitin'."

I laid a hand on his arm. "Listen, Ken. You're all shot to hell. You aren't fit to do anything. Leave this to me. I'll take a boat to Drugh Island and see what I can learn. The instant I unearth any clue as to what's going on, I'll communicate with you. Come along, now. This business calls for speed."

CHAPTER II

Evil Old House

SO I accompanied Ken Glasscott to the Krausmaugh Hotel and saw him settled in a room with a substantial lunch and a bottle of stout before him. Then I went back to the wharf and bargained for a grimy old thirty-footer with a sputtering engine to carry me to Drugh Island. It seemed to me that the two hours consumed in reaching the place, twenty miles offshore, were more like two years.

The infernal island looked innocent enough as the old thirty-footer drew up at the dilapidated dock. I paid the boatman off, and hurried away toward the grocery.

I found the grocery store owner a gaunt, tough skeleton of a man with a thin, secretive face. He was waiting on a customer when I entered the store.

Presently the customer went out, and the storekeeper turned to me.

"Some'n for you, Mister?"

I stepped close to his battered old counter. "Yes. A little information. A friend of mine lives here on the island. I'd be much obliged if you'd direct me to his place of residence. His name is Cyril Markheim."

A startled expression lit the gaunt man's wrinkle-embedded eyes.

"Why—ah—he lives straight down this street. That is, you go to the end of the street and some'n like a quarter mile beyond into the woods. Little

white cottage. Can't miss it. Only one around there."

"Have you seen him lately?"

His veiled eyes avoided my gaze. "Ain't, no. He don't come in much. Ain't been here in a week or more, I guess."

Something about that entire speech didn't ring just right. Not a great deal of thinking was needed to see what was wrong with it, either.

"You guess?" I said sharply. "Don't you know? There's only a handful of people living here!"

His gaze swung to mine, with evident reluctance, and he answered in a kind of defensive defiance.

"I ain't seen him for nigh onto two month. How do I know what he's been doin' with himself? I can't keep track of everybody on the island."

"There's too many people disappearin' on your damnable island, brother," I replied meaningly.

He started, and his sun-darkened skin lost a little color.

"I didn't say nothin' about anybody disappearin'. Just because you ain't seen a man for a few weeks, ain't no sign he's disappeared."

I leaned closer toward him over his neglect-scarred counter.

"Cut the stalling! I've heard on good authority that people who live here have been doing the vanishing act, and that you seem to know something about it."

"No, sir! Not none of us who lives here! Tourists, it is. Always tourists!"

Then he cut himself short, irate with himself for having unwittingly revealed so much. I gave him no time to concoct glib evasions.

"Oh, so it's tourists who do all the disappearing, is it? And you don't want Drugh Island to get a bad name, so you're trying to keep it quiet! Well, you'd better change your tune and tell me what I want to know."

I WAS getting madder by the minute. "If you refuse, you're going to learn to your discomfort that just one tourist too many has gone into the silence out here, and you'll have the police from the mainland hopping onto your neck.

"I'm not bluffing," I said, "and I haven't any time to waste arguing with you, so open up. What happens to these men who stroll casually into thin air—and forget to come back?"

The storekeeper went quite white, but he abandoned all attempt to dissemble further.

"Honest, Mister, nobody knows a dang thing about it. It's got us runnin' around in circles. Too scared even to talk about it above a whisper. We don't know what becomes of 'em! There ain't no way to know. They just go bargain' into that house—and then they never come out again!"

I scowled. "House? What house? For the love of Mike, man, be coherent, will you?"

He talked rapidly then, almost feverishly, as if he couldn't stop. The house in question was situated on the opposite end of the island miles from any other habitation. No one knew who had erected the building. It was simply an ancient, deserted structure standing open to the winds—and to any poor fool rash enough to dare its mute threat.

For it was evil. Unspeakable evil. Men just walked into it and never came out again! Tourists. Always tourists. The uncle of the Glasscott boy, now, and others like him. *Was Cyril Markheim among them?*

"The danged old house don't bother us islanders none," the grocer finished nervously. "We got sense enough to keep out of it. But you investigate all you want to, Mister, but for God's sake don't you go bargain' into that house and get disappeared. We've had enough of that!"

Which was in essence his last word. I was to stay out of that house. I wasn't even to go to that end of the island. Cyril wouldn't be hangin' around in that vicinity, the storekeeper said positively. Cyril was an islander and had more sense. No, sir, Cyril was prob'ly back home in his own cottage now, and I was makin' all this fuss for nothin'. I'd better go look and see.

* * * * *

But Cyril certainly wasn't in his cottage, I found when I reached it, and he hadn't been in it for weeks. There

was plenty of evidence to argue that he had gone out of the cottage intending to return shortly. His small dining table was set for a meal. I could write my name in the dust coating the dishes laid on the table.

The mute evidence in that cottage turned my heart to a gelatinous mess. I went out of there like a dust-devil, and started at a running walk toward the opposite end of the island, a pace that ate miles and that I could maintain almost indefinitely. I had nearly ten miles to cover before the *tabu* house would come into sight.

The deserted old abode was oddly situated at the end of a thick forest, located to decided advantage for anyone or any *Thing* desiring to establish seclusion and insure immunity from surprise. The building itself was composed of dull black stone, an imposing structure of three stories, with numerous balconies and gables ornamenting it, and an ornate gazebo and a big cupola thrusting up from its two main roofs. All the roofs were of slate, blackened by age and exposure to the elements.

IN SPITE of its florid ostentation, it was a striking and almost handsome old hulk. It was set squarely atop a knoll at least eighty feet in height. The knoll was completely surrounded by a clearing between four and five hundred yards across, and the clearing was solid marsh, matted with grasses, tangled creepers, moss and reeds. And it stank like the very devil, as most marshes do.

To step into that morass would mean to sink into its polluted slime up to one's neck, or further. The only possible approach to the knoll was a substantial stone walk, raised some six feet or more above the foul waters of the marsh, and about eight feet wide. Cautiously I ascended the steps and paused for an instant, scrutinizing the house.

There was nothing inviting about that devil's dwelling! Even from where I stood it loomed black and sinister. The window embrasures gaped and leered little blacker than the stone of the walls. I stirred myself to motion again, and advanced swiftly

along the walk. As I neared the knoll I discovered that a zigzag flight of steps led up the slope to the house, cut into the solid rock. I lost sight of the house for a few moments when I reached the foot of the knoll and began the ascent to the summit.

There again I paused involuntarily, and glanced uneasily about. The old storekeeper had been right—the house was evil. Evil breathed from its ancient walls, fumed from its blackened roofs in unholy effluvia, permeated the least of its moldy stones and reeked in the air within and without. The instant I passed through the main front doorway, from which the door itself had long been gone, that sense of evil increased a hundredfold.

I could feel it seeping from the dirty cobwebbed walls, I could hear its sibilant taunt assailing my ears, I could taste its acrid contamination on my tongue. And that filthy odor did not emanate solely from the marsh, that dank, revolting rot-scent of carrion. It was stronger here *inside* the house!

Afraid? Certainly I was afraid! I'd like to see the man who wouldn't have been. But I did not allow that fact to intimidate me or stay my feet. All the rooms were littered with dirt, with fragments of stained and yellowed paper most likely left there by other curious wanderers, with moldering plaster fallen from the denuded walls, with shards of shattered panes from the vanished windows.

My heart in my mouth, nevertheless I examined every last room, even to the top of the cupola and the gazebo. Nothing was there—nothing but the heterogeneous litter, the awful revolting odor, the oppressive evil that sank into my flesh and bones. Nowhere could I discover the slightest trace of any secret passageway, any hidden compartment, any concealed door. Nowhere could I find any least trace that other feet than mine had trod there for many weeks. *Nothing!*

Just an evil old windowless house that stank and turned your heart and skin and soul gelid with nameless fear. I was forced finally to reluctant admission of defeat. Sickeningly depressed by the futility of my eager

search, I returned to the ground story and started to leave the building. But—just outside the wry front door frame I stopped in my tracks with a shock of surprise and a sharp breath of relief.

CHAPTER III

The Masquerader

ANOTHER curiosity-seeker had ascended the knoll. He stood on the stone summit in front of the house, gazing quizzically up at me, a faintly humorous smile of understanding on his face. His sports coat and trousers, his open-necked shirt, the Panama hat pulled low over his face against the sun, all shouted "tourist" to the most casual eye. He proffered a genial, friendly greeting.

"Not much to see, is it, after a fellow walks all the way over here expecting something formidable and spooky?"

I laughed nervously, little amused and smartingly disgruntled by my inability to discover anything worth second appraisal.

"Not much. It's plenty dirty, and it smells to high heaven, but there doesn't seem to be anything particularly mysterious about it. The villagers say it's evil, and they're not so far wrong."

He shrugged. "Oh, they tell everybody that. I've been here perhaps a dozen times, always hoping to uncover something which previously had evaded my eyes. Unsuccessfully, I must admit. Even the cellars are nothing more startling than dull dreary holes in the ground."

"Cellars!" I said quickly. "Are there cellars under this house? Some job, to excavate for cellars in this rock! How many rooms are there below? How do you get to them? I didn't see any sign of a stairway leading down into any cellars."

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Really, I don't know just how many rooms there are in the cellars. I never bothered to make a count of them. But I'd guess there must be a

dozen or more, at the least. And they haven't been hewn out of the solid rick, Mr.—we might as well manifest some identity, by the way. I'm Harry Lavender. To the islanders, I'm just another tourist, but I'm really from the mainland straight across the channel."

I smiled acknowledgment of the self-introduction. "Glad to know you, Lavender. My name's Warfield—Myron Warfield. I'm a mainlander myself."

"Glad to know you, Warfield. As I started to say, the cellars aren't hewn. Evidently this end of the island has at one time been under sea. The salt marsh and the rock itself evidence that. The rock is honeycombed with caverns the sea gouged into it, reached via the highest cavern which is located nearly in the center of the knoll. The fellow who built this house simply erected it over the entrance cavern and used the old sea caves for his cellars.

"There's a flight of stairs going down, back of the house, but they're pretty smartly concealed. You'd never discover them unless you just happened to run onto the entrance, as I did. And you wouldn't see anything after you got down there."

"Nevertheless," I said grimly, "I'd certainly like to explore those cellars, if you'd be kind enough to show me the way into them. Did you ever come across any sign of anybody else being down there?"

"None at all, Warfield. I fancy nobody knows that the caverns are there. I'd been here several times and poked around all over the place before I chanced onto the stairway. Just come around this way and I'll show them to you."

I followed him to the rear of the huge building, where a deep recess in the thick walls was formed by two jutting wings that left an open area between. Lavender gestured toward the recess.

"You see? No indication of any opening is detectable in either walls or floor of the recess, yet it's very simple when you know the trick."

He pointed to the floor of the recess, slabbed stone, seemingly

laid quite as nature had left it. But the point of one slab corner jutted up in one spot a good eight inches above the others. Lavender placed one foot on the jutting slab corner.

"I discovered it this way. I started to step onto this upthrust corner to look at that window opening there. You see what happens."

He pressed down on the jutting corner. The entire huge slab, at least six by eight feet, moved and slid slowly aside on a horizontal pivot, revealing a passageway and stone steps leading steeply downward!

Lavender removed a small but powerful electric torch from his pocket, snapped the button that turned on the battery light, and swept the clear, white ray into the dark passage, bringing into view rough mold-green walls, the descending steps, and the faintly discernible floor of an extending tunnelway some thirty feet below. He gestured with his head toward the pivot slab.

"When you come out, you merely press on the slab again and it swings back into place. Ingenious devil, the builder!"

He started down the stairs, playing his torchlight before him, and I followed. The vile stench was even stronger here, and now there was mingled with it another odor constantly growing more noticeable as we descended, a heavy, sickish-sweet odor that reminded me of decayed lilies.

About halfway down the stairs I was suddenly conscious of some indefinable change in the illumination, and turned to glance back. The daylight was gone from overhead. The stone slab had swung shut. I stopped short, with an exclamation of dismay, and Lavender turned his head and looked up at me.

"Don't be startled, Warfield. I was, terrifically so, the first time I saw that. I ran back with the frantic idea of battering at the slab, only to discover that I had not the slightest cause for alarm. Some additional mechanism, manipulated by placing one's weight on the eighth step, shuts the slab as one comes down the stairs. But the same mechanism automatically swings the slab open again as you reascend.

Try it. Go on back and stand on the release step. I'll wait for you."

I hesitated only for an instant, then turned and sprang back up the stairs. Mechanical contrivances can fall into disorder. But this one hadn't done so. The instant my weight bore on the eighth step, the slab over the opening swung slowly aside, letting in the day and revealing a patch of far blue sky. I turned and again descended to rejoin Lavender, apologizing for being unduly fussy.

He gave me a good-natured grin. "That's quite all right, Warfield. This place is enough to give anybody the creeps. I expect it was just as well to make sure that the thing is in working order."

We reached the foot of the stairs and advanced through the tunnel passage, into and through three fair-sized caverns, which were exactly as Lavender had described them, damp dull old sea caves containing nothing to excite any man's interest. As we stepped into the fourth cavern his torch went out for an instant, but he immediately snapped it back on again, apologizing for carelessly plunging us into darkness.

We passed through the fourth cavern, down another short tunnel passage, and arrived at the fifth cavern. Here there was a heavy oaken door closing the passage. Lavender swung it aside, stepped back for me to precede him into the fifth cavern, which I did.

THEN I halted, staring, rigid, suspicious and alarm rousing within me.

This cavern was inhabited! It was furnished, very comfortably, with tables and chairs and a stove, with the numerous and sundry articles commonly deemed necessary for human comfort and convenience. A large electric chandelier hung from the ceiling, and Lavender snapped a switch and flooded the interior of the big recess with light. He swept off his hat and tossed it onto the nearest table.

And, as if with the same motion, he swept off the genial, commonplace expression on his face, as though it had been a mask he had worn with discom-

fort and discarded with relief. I saw his features clearly for the first time, heavy features now that the mask of assumed cordiality and casual pleasantry was removed. Humped nose, deep-set gray eyes, cold and calculating, thin, straight mouth—a hard face, a brutal face, a face that was the incarnation of all evil. He laughed, a leering, mocking sound that chilled me to the marrow.

"Yes, I live here, Warfield. You know now how men have disappeared on Drugh Island. They disappeared into these caverns—just as you have disappeared into them! Don't make any attempt to run for it. You couldn't get out. I reclosed and locked the slab when I switched off my torch."

He chuckled horribly. "There is no possible escape. And don't commit the folly of assaying any assault upon me. I have very efficient and slightly unpleasant means of stopping you. You have—shall we say—disappeared, Mr. Warfield."

CHAPTER IV

Hands of Horror

I SIMPLY stood and stared at him, the awful, sickening stench of his habitation in my nostrils, hate and horror in my brain, and the thought of Cyril Markheim welling and crying through my conscious and subconscious minds.

Cyril! And old Drey Glasscott! This was where they had come, had gone. I bit back the flood of excoriation and invective that surged to my tongue and looked at Lavender, driving my stunned brain to connected and orderly reasoning.

The man was not mad. That fact was entirely manifest. The light in his ice-gray eyes was quite sane, but it was evil as nothing else ever was evil in all this world. That he could so completely veil his true character behind that deceptive mask of pleasant affability; that he could successfully wear that utterly disarming manner as naturally as he wore his skin, was

proof enough of his consummate cunning.

Any attempt at physical combat would be foolishly wasted effort on my part. I'm not a pigmy, but this Harry Lavender towered above me. Neither am I any weakling, but he could have broken me in two with one arm.

I knew no arts of jiu-jitsu, no niceties of boxing skill, nothing but rough and tumble fighting. Even leaping on him when his back was turned could avail me little.

The sole hope of escape left me was to outwit him, and that was going to be no easy matter. He stood there looking back at me expectantly, and I realized what he was waiting for. He was waiting for a wild outbreak from me, gibbering terror and frantic appeal or denunciation.

Well, he shouldn't be tendered that gratification to his perverted ego! I set my teeth against the horror that rode within me. I shrugged my shoulders and laughed.

"Nuts!" I said. "What is this? Some new motion picture stunt?"

He started, blinked, and for an instant looked almost blank. Then anger flared in his ice-gray eyes.

"Well, you're a cool one! I was fully expecting you to lunge at me. I was ready and waiting for it. With this."

He drew from his pocket a small gun, peculiarly shaped, with an extraordinarily long barrel.

"It does not expel lead bullets. It shoots a stream of chemical solution that vaporizes and suffocates. It does not kill. It merely renders a victim unconscious and incapacitated for an hour or two, depending upon the amount he inhales before he falls. I am never without it. Most men are so eager to see the caverns that I lure them down as easily as I did you. When they prove uninterested, I—ah—"

He waved the gun suggestively. "I bring them down quite as easily. I always choose men much smaller than myself and consequently conveniently handled."

I yawned and deliberately sat down in a chair. "You're batty, Lavender.

Have you got anything to eat down here? I'm hungry as the devil."

Again he stared, slowly replacing the ugly little gun in his pocket.

"You're hungry! You're either un-human or you're completely callous. Have you no fear of these unknown caverns, of your looming hideous fate?"

I grinned at him. "You've been cribbing Bela Lugosi's technique. Naughty, naughty! Why the deuce don't you strive for originality? There should be an ounce or two of that precious commodity left in this cockeyed world. Anyway, I'm still asking whether you've got anything to eat down here."

HE SHOOK his head, and there was no mistaking the fact that he was puzzled and incredulous.

"I'm hanged if I don't think you mean it!"

"Oh, no! I'm merely talking to entertain you, you poor benighted heathen. I dine only on Sundays. Don't you subsist on edible foods? Or do you sport a menu of fossilized limpets and dehydrated sea-foam?"

He opened his mouth, then shut it again. Then he laughed.

"If this is your defensive armor, Warfield, it is of excellent metal. Yes, I have an extensive supply of food-stuffs, dried meats, tinned biscuits, all manner of canned fruits, vegetables and delicacies, supplies I bring from the mainland and that are amenable to long preservation.

"Come along into my dining room and indicate your preference. If you're curious about my lighting system, it is quite complete and it is generated by power from the sea. When I turned on the chandelier in this cavern, I also operated the switch that illuminates the entire establishment. The dining room is down this passage. You may precede me from here on."

"That's right, Lavender," I said. "Keep an eye on little Willie. If you don't he might sock you when you aren't looking."

Lavender shrugged. "That would be just too bad for little Willie."

I got up from the chair, walked past him and along the short tunnel pas-

sage toward which he had gesticulated. From the passage I emerged into another large cavern supplied with tables and chairs. There was also an electric kitchen stove in this room, and cupboards and shelves stocked with enough various and sundry foods to ration a regiment liberally.

I wasn't hungry, naturally. I was too badly nauseated by that disgusting fetor, too deplorably demoralized by the menace and peril of my predicament, too continually harassed by fear over what had happened to Cyril and old Drey Glasscott to be hungry. But food sustains, and I must preserve my strength at all costs.

I laughed casually. "The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast. I'll take a jar of that chicken and noodles, pickles, potato chips, tinned biscuits and crabapple jelly. You needn't bother heating the chicken and noodles. I'll take it all as is. And if you don't get a move on, I'm damned if I won't eat the junk jars, cans and all."

Somehow I sat with feigned calm while he opened jars and cans and dumped their contents onto pottery dishes.

Then he turned to me with mocking courtesy.

"And what will you drink, Mr. Warfield?"

"Whiskey. Neat. And plenty of it."

He screwed the top off a pint flask of rye and set it beside my plate with a small glass about twice the capacity of a jigger. I ignored the glass, tipped up the flask and drank about a third of the liquor without stopping. I ate everything he set before me and emptied the flask, shoved back my chair and gave him a look of approval.

"Swell meal. Thanks. Neat quarters you've got down in this old rock, too—for a man who follows your pursuits."

He frowned, and the grimace rendered his malign features startlingly diabolical.

"I fear I don't understand, Warfield."

"Oh, yeah? The devil you don't! I mean experimenting on human beings."

A wary expression blanked his icy eyes for an instant.

"Are you a doctor?" Lavender asked me.

"I am not. I'm a writer. Do you carry on down here all by your lonesome? Don't you have any loyal henchmen to grovel before your dark, diabolical will, and mop up the dirty work for you?"

"I have upwards of two hundred servants," he answered. "I don't know the exact number. I can't be bothered keeping track of them. If you think you're being smart, Warfield, I'll call your bluff. I will show you a few of my servants. A very few of them. I shall show you how admirable they are as servants, since they have no mind of their own, barely retaining enough intelligence to obey my will and my voice. As to why they obey me—we will go into that later."

The tone of his voice made my flesh creep. He stood there, staring at me with a fiendish leer, and then he called out something that sounded like, "Hans, open the door and come in."

But "Hans" was not the name he uttered. The door opened wide and I went rigid in my chair, feeling my mouth open and my eyes glaze with horror.

He had said—*hands!*

When the door first swung back, for an instant I saw nothing, nothing save a portal giving way to manipulation and a tunnel passage beyond. Then my gaze was jerked to the floor by the sense of movement there.

Hands! Just hands. Yes, that's what I said. Dead hands. *Live hands!* Hands amputated cleanly at the wrist, hands healthily colored, with blood in their veins, healed over smoothly at the area of amputation. Hands that entered the room swiftly, with unbelievable ease and rapidity of motion, crawling over the stone floor on their fingers like small sly beasts of some appallingly fabulous genre.

Lavender was watching me closely, I was subconsciously aware of that, and fiendish gratification warmed him at sight of my stunned revulsion. He laughed aloud.

"Oh, I've accomplished marvels, Warfield! Hands—hold this man, not too tightly. Just secure him where he sits."

CHAPTER V

Savage Surgery

WITH ghastly swiftness, the hands came crawling toward me, and in spite of my setting will and strength to endure with fortitude, I was cold all over, wet with clammy sweat from brow to sole, shaking like a man with palsy as I crouched there, waiting.

Seventeen hands! I counted them. In the next minute they were upon me. They gripped my ankles, clutched my arms, encircled my wrists and entangled the hair of my head. One even closed lightly about my throat. Too lightly. The touch of those murderously caressing fingers was hideous. I was rendered so completely helpless that I couldn't move limb, head, or torso. The mute power in those living-dead fingers was incredible.

Lavender laughed again. "That will do, hands. Release the man, clear the table and wash the dishes."

The hands deserted me, crawled down over me, crossed the floor and went swarming up the table legs. Lavender glanced at me.

"Servants, did you say? I never have to turn a plate. These hands are my willing dumb slaves. They know no will but mine. They will live as long as I can feed them properly. That is why they obey me so eagerly. I—*feed* them!"

He looked at me, patently expecting some remark or insult, waiting for it.

"I wouldn't swear to what I've seen. Maybe that whiskey was too potent," I told him evenly, though my self-control was at the breaking point.

"You're becoming annoying, Warfield. You are well aware that the liquor has nothing to do with what your eyes behold."

His eyes burned with the fanatical glow of the zealot.

"You accused me of experimenting on human beings—and I am guilty of doing just that. But for a purpose, mind you! Long ago my mind became occupied with a most engrossing idea.

Every muscle of the body and every nerve of the flesh acts at the behest of the brain, but nerves and muscles are not limited to that area of command. They can see without eyes, can hear without ears, within themselves.

"I had a blind friend in those days. I used to test him with all manner of things when I had him in my office. I knew he could not deceive me, for he had no eyeballs in his sockets. What seeing he did he *had* to do without eyes.

"I have sat and watched him tensely while he 'looked' at a picture by running his fingertips over it, and I proved that he really saw it. I gave him, for instance, a picture of me, a new picture which no one had yet seen. He had known me years before he had lost his eyes in an explosion accident. He ran his fingers over the picture, and then he frowned.

"'You gave me the wrong picture, Harry,' he said. 'This is a picture of you. It's a good one, too. But my Lord, man—I didn't know you'd gone bald!'"

Lavender chuckled harshly. "And I sat and watched him running small tabs of cloth between his fingers, telling me the colors by touch. The only colors that ever gave him a moment's pause were navy blue and black, and dark red and brown. He could not always be sure which was which. But that was close enough for me. I had

sufficient proof that he was *seeing* with the nerves in his fingertips.

"Then my notice was drawn to Helen Keller, and the wonders she has accomplished with her fingers. I traced-down, and got into touch with, a totally deaf man who had learned to hear with his fingers, placing them on your chest or your lips to 'listen' as you spoke. He heard clearly and did not miss a word. And that also was enough for me."

LAVENDER'S eyes shone. "Nerves could see and hear. That became, let us say, one angle, one facet of my experimenting—to determine to just what extent separate parts of the body could be trained to 'see' and 'hear' when acting independently, severed from the torso to which they had originally been attached, and by the same token separated from the brain in the head sitting on the torso.

"The next angle that interested me was this: Though the nerves and muscles acted at the will of the brain, did they need to be attached even indirectly to that brain to continue to obey it? Why could they not obey the brain when rendered *entirely independent* from it?

"Must they necessarily obey only the brain from which they had been severed, or could they be taught to obey *another* brain as well? These

[Turn Page]

questions intrigued and absorbed me to such an extent that I determined to find the answer to them. If all I dreamed could be accomplished, think what it would mean!"

I shuddered inwardly at the fanatic light in the man's eyes.

"Think of all the countless bodies embalmed and laid away in the earth to rot, of all the hands and feet so gone to waste, hands and feet that could by my method be saved and made into excellent servants for living men? Of course, my stumbling block was to keep them alive after severing them from torsos.

"I had to begin with *living* bodies, and complete my processes with them, before I could hope to revitalize and bring to life limbs taken from dead bodies. To experiment on living bodies, I had to obtain subjects. My fellow surgeon-scientists held up their hands in holy horror at even the expression of such a revolutionary idea.

"When they learned that I was seriously bent upon pursuance of the experimenting, they denounced me, they barred me from my profession and expelled me from my country. That did not deter me. I was wealthy, which counted for much. I converted all my holdings into cash, and started upon a pilgrimage in search of the perfect seclusion in which I could work unmolested and unsuspected. I found it here in these caverns. I could not have asked for more ideal quarters. Even my subjects—such as you, Warfield—come to me instead of my having to go in quest of them."

His voice was actually choked with pride.

"Already I have accomplished much, but I have far to go—so far to go. I have as yet to detach the hands and limbs from the living body so slowly, severing them such a small bit at a time, in order to keep them alive and functioning, you understand—waiting patiently till each severed spot is healed and feeding healthily from my serum—till finally the whole member is freed alive and whole and capable of sustaining itself!"

Lavender paused for a moment, shaken by his zeal.

"But I have no wish to weary you.

Later you shall see my laboratory and surgery, and I will explain more fully to you just how it is all done. Or—am I wrong? Are you uninterested? I suppose every man who ever achieved any great success was eager for at least one opportunity to exhibit what he had gained, to prove to at least one of his fellow beings that he was a miracle worker."

He looked at me almost with understanding.

"Continue to be as sensible as you have been, Warfield, and I will make an exception in your case. I will let you live. That is, I will let your torso live. I always throw the torsos away, because they are of no use to me. But if you really are interested in my progress, after I have removed your hands and feet and legs, I will leave your head in place and you shall be company for me."

I HAD the desperate desire to draw a long, shaky breath, but I repressed it. I had the panic-driven impulse to scream. But I didn't utter a word. I retained in some manner, God alone knows how, my self-control and my sanity.

"You've got the whip hand, you rotten heel!" was all I said. "What can I do about it? I suppose you keep your poor, helpless victims thoroughly anesthetized so that they don't know what it's all about!"

He shook his head. "Much to my regret, that can't be done. As long as the torso remains alive, I have to feed it, and it has to remain alive for so many weeks before the members heal off. If I administered anesthetics for all that period, the torsos would die of the overdose. They suffer a great deal, but so far I have found no way to prevent that."

The fiend shrugged complacently. "Well, I must be about my daily chores, Warfield. It is feeding time for my servants. Come along with me, and I will allow you to watch. Only—don't attempt anything, no matter how you rebel at what you see. Remember, I have these servants of mine guarding my safety at every step. This way, Warfield."

He gestured toward the door

through which the hands had come, and I rose shakily from my chair and preceded him. We passed down another corridor into the adjoining cavern, and from there on nothing existed but a horror of horrors.

In that next cavern a countless number of Lavender's "servants" were crawling about over the floor. Hands and feet, legs amputated at the knee, others at the hip joint. The legs had hands grafted to them, the crawling fingers supplying their mode of locomotion.

In the next cavern, placed upon a long, broad shelf, were perhaps fifty heads, terrible things, with open, unblinking dead eyes that leered and stared at me, with loose, drooling mouths that grinned foolishly, with hands grafted to the necks, so that they, too, had ten little finger-legs on which to crawl. My gaze leaped, seeking Cyril Markheim's face, some face that might be Glasscott's. They were not there.

Lavender addressed me in an undertone. "I haven't been able to advance so far with the heads. They are much more difficult to control." He raised his voice sharply. "Heads, we have a guest. Greet him!"

A grotesque chorus came from the pallid, cadaverous heads, a thready whisper like a gasp, which was yet distinctly intelligible.

"Welcome, stranger. Will you join us?"

Lavender chuckled evilly. "I taught them that. It's about all they know. But I shall grow more expert in handling the heads as my experimenting advances. It is, as I said, difficult to do much with them. They were once capable of thinking for themselves, and some lingering, rebelling impulse renders them slightly obdurate. I do not complain. All great things work slowly. I am grateful that I even manage to keep them alive. But we must get along to the pit. They are all growing restless from hunger."

He waved me ahead of him, and we advanced to a farther cavern. I went through the entrance doorway, intoxicated with loathing, certain I had seen the epitome of all earthly evil. I was to learn. *I was to learn!*

This cavern was about a hundred feet wide and two hundred feet long, vaulting up fifty or sixty feet overhead.

Off to one side was a roughly circular pit about ten feet deep and sixty feet in diameter. But in that pit!

CHAPTER VI

Vile Revenge

MY HEART congealed with horror. In that pit, flat on their backs, spread-eagled to the stone floor, lay Cyril Markheim and Drey Glasscott. They were both quite nude, and Glasscott's identification tattoo was plain to be seen on his shoulder. Their eyes were wide open, and their gaze swung to me. I saw swift recognition, wild joy and hope, leap into Cyril's eyes. I was so sickened at the sight that I slumped to the floor in a half faint, my fascinated gaze glued to those horribly betrayed human beings in anguish.

Above Cyril to his right was a large copper tank. From the tank a long tube ran down to connect with his right wrist. From the tube something was running into an opened vein in his wrist.

At his left lay a great flat bowl, no more than a foot deep but a good six feet in diameter. Suspended above the bowl was a glass tank containing a light blue liquid. Below the tank was a small globe. A tube ran from the glass tank to the globe. Another tube was fastened to Cyril's left wrist, running also to the globe.

Through one tube the blue liquid flowed down slowly into the small globe. Through the other tube blood drained slowly from Cyril's left wrist and flowed also into the globe to mingle with the blue liquid. A third tube extended from the mixing basin into the huge bowl, and from it a bright purple liquid was rilling. The big bowl was about half full of the purple stuff.

Glasscott was, of course, laid out in the same exact fashion.

Lavender's voice beat on my dazed senses. "These men I call my 'blood cows.' They are fully conscious, but completely paralyzed. They must remain conscious for the formula to work efficiently. It is contained in the copper tanks. It flows steadily into their veins, keeps them alive, maintains their state of paralysis, and feeds their blood-making functions.

"From the glass tanks, a chemical solution flows down to join the blood continually being drawn forth, a solution that breaks down the haemoglobin and liquefies the blood sufficiently for absorption. You shall see how my servants live."

He emitted a shrill low whistle. I had to crouch there at the edge of that cruel pit and watch—watch—watch while hands and feet and legs came crawling in wild eagerness from their caverns, crawling on their little finger-legs, even the heads, till the pit was fairly seething with them.

There was in the air that foul odor of carrion, that sickish-sweet smell from the chemicals, till my throat was closed and stiff and my stomach a ton weight in my body. Carrion! Dead things! Dead things alive and crawling. Crawling to their grisly feast!

A slanting runway led down into the pit, and they swarmed down it, went rushing across the floor to the big flat bowl, and plunged into the purple liquid.

Lavender sighed. "My pets! They absorb the fluid through their pores, you see. My 'blood cows' do not live long. They become emaciated, react no more to the serum, can supply no more blood, and I am forced to procure others.

"I throw them in the marsh when I am through with them, along with the useless discarded torsos, as well as into another deep pit at the end of the string of caverns. Which accounts for the odor you may have detected. I have long since grown so used to it that I am not aware of it any more."

I COULD only stare down into that pit, my eyes filled with horror. That was Cyril down there! His face was ravaged and drawn by the continual agony that racked his helpless

body. Both he and Glasscott were staring back at me, with an anguish-strained gaze which begged and pleaded for aid, for death, for life, for anything that could end their intolerable misery. Then I started. In Cyril's wide intent gaze there was a frantic attempt to convey some intelligence to me!

I crouched motionless, striving to read his eyes. Something was in that desperate stare of his far beyond the silent cry for aid, something vital and urgent. His gaze darted sideward, then back to me meaningly. I followed the direction of that swift glance.

Two of the disembodied heads were close to him, held on their perch atop the huge bowl's edge by their grasping finger-legs. And both heads were glaring straight at me, their features writhing in murderous hate. I looked back at Cyril. The suspense in his concentrated gaze cut through me like a stab. What was it he wanted me to divine? I hadn't grasped it yet. My own gaze jerked back to the heads, and with a violent start I realized that I had mistaken the direction of their malignant glare.

They were *not* looking at me. *They were looking at Lavender!*

He stood above me as I crouched there, and slightly to my right, close to the edge of the pit. Sudden understanding swept through me, making my heart pound and leap. Those pitiful heads obeyed him and fawned upon him because he fed them, but oh! how they hated him! They hated him for what he had done to them, with a consuming and undying detestation that knew no limit, that would know no restraint were it ever given sufficient opportunity to vent itself!

They retained at all times enough fear of him, that they would not dare to attack him when he was on his feet and alert to the first sign of danger. But—*if he were to be pitched prone and helpless into their midst!*

Like a flash the thought leaped between Cyril and me, as articulate as spoken words. Cyril's eyes widened, then blazed with triumph at having succeeded in conveying that thought to me.

I glanced up at Lavender. He was gazing down into the pit, at the heads, and he was quite aware that most of them were now turned toward him, malign hatred of him flaming in their dead eyes, writhing on their dead lips. Patently, he was fully aware of their hatred for him, but he knew his power over them, and was coolly confident of his ability to keep them firmly and continually under control. And he leered back at them, and he laughed. Oh, how horribly he laughed!

In that instant I moved. I knew that it was now or never. For one moment

was Cyril down there! The one human being I was fond of and honored above all others. And Lavender couldn't know that.

We can exert superhuman strength and will and intelligence when those we love are in danger and agony, when we would be helpless under all other impulse to action. And I looked down into Cyril's suspense-mad eyes—and acted!

FRANTICALLY I hurled myself headlong at Lavender's shins with all the fury-born strength of a wild

his attention was quite dissevered from me. I was, in his reckoning, a most negligible factor right then. I was too thoroughly stupefied, dulled, dumb and paralyzed by horror, too completely demoralized and sick to the soul, to be capable of any connected thought, let alone physical violence.

So he thought! Under any other circumstances I might have been, I am certain I *would* have been. But—that

man. He had no chance to defend himself. He had no warning that could grant him time to set himself against my onslaught. He was as he would not again be were I fool enough to let this opportunity pass—he was totally off guard.

My hurtling weight caught him full on, like a football tackle perfectly executed, bowling him over like a ninepin. He reeled, clawing and fighting desperately for balance. Then,

shrieking in utter terror, he pitched headlong into that pit!

Like a foul and noisome sea, those living-dead things crawled to wreak vengeance upon him. Like an inexorable tidal wave they engulfed him, biting, kicking, clawing, tearing, hiding him completely from my sight. For an instant his shriek of horror rose to screams of agony that shattered the air.

Then Harry Lavender gulped hideously, and died. And even as he died, in an orgy of frenetic destruction the crawling dead tore him apart, battered his bones and shredded his flesh.

I knew that once they had finished with him, they might turn on Cyril and Glasscott and me. Again it was now or never. I struggled to my feet, dashed around the pit and raced down the runway. I bent over Cyril and Glasscott, loosed the hellish tubes from their wrists, and with a strength I had never known before dragged them up the runway, out of that vile cavern, through the connecting tunnel and into the next recess.

I slammed shut and bolted the heavy oaken door. I clawed my shirt from my body, ripped it into strips, bound their wounds to stop the bleeding. Then I sank down beside Cyril, panting and wet with the sweat of exertion and weakness. I heard the bodiless hands and feet approach and assault the oaken door, pounding and tugging, the heads mouthing obscene gibberish. But all their combined efforts were not enough to jar the massive portal. Lavender had protected himself well against untoward eventualities.

Within a few moments my momentary spell of weakness passed. I got to my feet and looked about. With little searching I found the cavern Lavender had fitted as laboratory and surgery. In short time I had Cyril's and Glasscott's wounds cleansed and thoroughly dressed.

The crawling dead were still battering at the door, and their frantic clawings to escape made my flesh writhe. I managed to get Cyril and Glasscott into the dining room where Lavender had installed his food sup-

ply, and bolted all the heavy doors behind me as I went. I knew we weren't out of danger yet.

I had to bring Cyril and Glasscott back to some kind of normal state. I remembered then that Lavender had locked the entrance slab. We had to find the working mechanism and release it before we could effect our escape.

The next three days are a shadowed haze in my memory. I know I worked over Cyril and Glasscott, feeding them with soups and strength-renewing liquids, virtually praying the life back into them. I know that Glasscott recovered hours sooner than Cyril did, as he had been in the pit only three days. I know that both Cyril and Glasscott explained how they had come there to have a look at the old house out of sheer curiosity, and how Lavender had lured them down as he had done to me.

I realize now that both Cyril Markheim and Drey Glasscott really recovered bodily movement and speech quickly, once they were freed of the influence of that dread formula. Though in looking back, it seems that an eternity passed before the last of that evil drug was dissipated, and the revivifying stream of life flowed through their veins.

WE HAD no trouble in getting out after all. We simply went to that spot where Lavender had switched out his electric torch when he was bringing me in. We looked about till we found the lever that manipulated the entrance slab. And the three of us went out of that fetid den, and closed the slab behind us, and descended the knoll together, and not one of us looked back at the evil old house as we advanced along the wide stone wall that crossed the marsh.

"I—I wonder what, how—those crawling dead things down there—" And my voice died on my tongue.

Cyril looked at me with haunted eyes. "They are quite dead by now. They had to be fed every day. They are grateful that you brought them the release of death, Myron. They wanted to die. It was all they asked."

He shrugged a little bitterly. "Come along, old son. Think of other things. Think of seeing Drey here back safe with his nephew. Think of some plausible excuse to make to Ken. Think—oh, think of something to make us laugh, anything—no matter how foolish it is! The sillier the better. We have to learn to forget."

I suppose that has practically become our law of life. Something to make us laugh, anything—no matter

how foolish it is, the sillier the better. We travel a great deal, Cyril and I, seeking new scenes, new surroundings and new faces.

If we seem consistently exuberant and hilarious, it is because we must keep our minds rigidly occupied with the trivial, the nonsensical and the ludicrous, allowing ourselves no moment of retrospection and serious thought—lest we go mad of remembering.

