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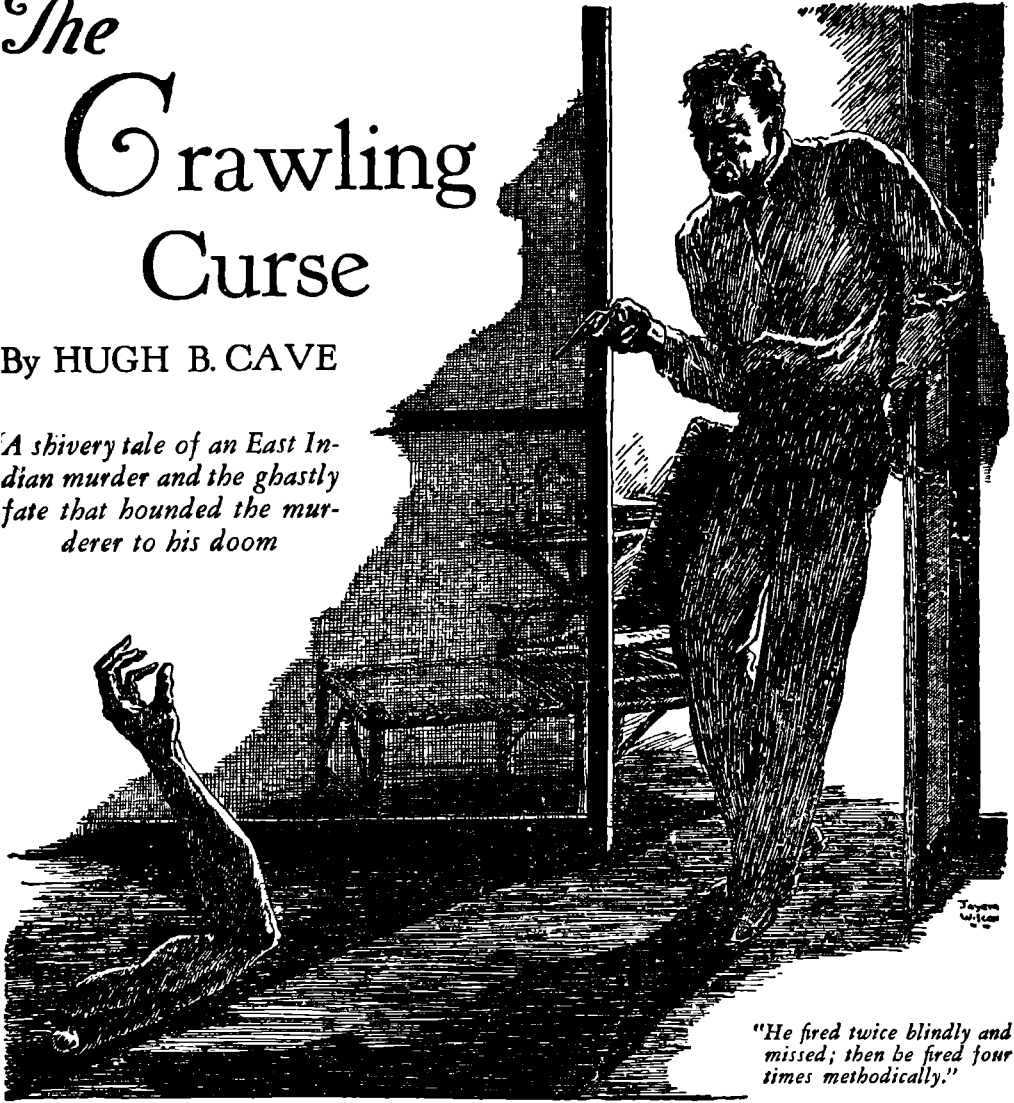
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The Crawling Curse

By HUGH B. CAVE

A shivery tale of an East Indian murder and the ghastly fate that hounded the murderer to his doom



"He fired twice blindly and missed; then he fired four times methodically."

VESKER, the Dutchman, paced methodically down the second-floor corridor and entered the room numbered 213. It was the room of the man he meant to murder; and without emotion or nervousness or any feeling whatever, he hid himself there to await his victim's arrival.

The hour was eleven o'clock at night, and Vesker's victim would return at eleven-fifteen. His name was Tenegai LaRoque, and he was a good man. He was part French and part Saputan, which

made him a half-caste in the eyes of certain white men and a king invincible in the eyes of certain up-river natives. Government officials had thought enough of him to overlook the fact that he was the illegitimate son of a Saputan sorceress, and remember that he was also the son of a distinguished French officer. Consequently he held a position of high importance in Bandjermasin.

At present he was playing bridge with his wife and his wife's friends. It was his wife's arrangement. His wife was

twenty-four and unforgivably lovely, and passionately French.

It was for her sake, as well as his own, that Vesker was hiding in Tenegai La-Roque's room. She and Vesker had planned the details together. Neither of them loved the man who was to be murdered.

The room was shadow-ridden and murky, and a very good place for Vesker's purpose. It was one of the best rooms in Bandjermasin's best hotel, which meant that it possessed two narrow windows and smelled a little and seldom saw light enough to dispel the lurking gloom. Tonight, as Vesker stood at the east window, the gloom was thick enough to be alive, and the view outside was one of black house-tops, twisted street-alleys, and occasional furtive eyes of ocher light.

Vesker stood and listened, and heard nothing; so he paced the room twice and then leaned against the wall with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was not afraid of what he was going to do. It would be quite simple and silent, and no one would know. No one but God, Vesker thought; and God was too busy with big affairs to worry about mere details.

There would be questions, afterward, and perhaps an official investigation. But that meant nothing. Bandjermasin was full of officious persons who had nothing to do but investigate this and that, without learning anything.

It was eleven-fifteen. Vesker dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, and flattened his body against the wall behind the door. From his pocket he took a short length of lead piping, which was heavy and very solid. And he waited.

Presently he heard some one coming. The door opened, and a tall, stoop-shouldered shape stepped over the threshold. Vesker lifted the lead piping and brought it down again mightily. There was a

crunch of bone, and a thin wheezing, and then the thump of a falling body.

Vesker stood over his victim and smiled thoughtfully. He put the weapon back into his pocket. Then he moved to the door, stepped out, listened intently, and came back again. He went to his knees and adjusted the limp body over his shoulder.

He closed the door of Tenegai La-Roque's room after him and carried Tenegai LaRoque to his own room, on the third floor. There he dropped his victim on the bed, and grinned, and breathed deeply with satisfaction.

No one would know.

LAROCHE was dead. Vesker bent over him and listened for the sound of a beating heart, and heard nothing. He fumbled with the man's wrist and felt no pulse. So he went to a cupboard and took out four empty burlap bags, and dropped them on the floor. Then, from a bureau drawer, he took a large sheet of waterproof canvas and spread that over the carpet. He put the dead man on it.

While he was doing this, Tenegai La-Roque's wife came into the room.

She was undoubtedly beautiful, this woman. Her hair was black and her eyes were black, and a tropical sun had darkened her skin so that it stood out in startling contrast to the off-white of her evening gown. She was slender and not too tall, and the lines of her body were daringly revealed by the fit of her dress. She came and stood beside Vesker and looked down into the dead face of her husband.

"You are a brave man, Corlu," she smiled.

Vesker looked at her. He wanted this woman. From the very first night of their friendship, when he had met her at an exclusive social affair, he had wanted her.

"Any man can be brave," he said, "for sufficient reason."

"And I am sufficient?"

He took her in his arms and buried his lips in her black hair, and there was no need to answer.

"I love you, Renee," he said. But he did not love her; he wanted her. And he knew the difference. He held her against him until the perspiration of his arms left wet lines in her dress. Then he released her and said quietly:

"This will not be pretty. You had better go."

"You will come to me later?"

"As soon as it is finished."

She kissed him and touched the body of her husband with her foot. Then she laughed softly, and went out, and Vesker locked the door after her.

He knelt beside the dead man, then, and undressed him, leaving him stark naked on the canvas sheet. Looking at what he had done, he smiled and said almost inaudibly:

"Yes, it will not be pretty. But it will soon be over, my friend."

He went to the bed and raised the mattress, and took out a leather case which contained instruments. Then he went to the door again and made sure that it was locked. After that he loosened one of the bulbs in the chandelier above him, because the bright light seemed to threaten his solitude. And finally, with the case of instruments on the canvas beside him, he knelt again beside the dead man.

IT WOULD have been an all-night job had he not known how; but among other things he had studied medicine and knew the use of scalpel and hack-saw. And he had no personal feelings about the task. It was mechanical and did not frighten him.

He began with the dead man's leg, and

at the first stroke of the knife the body twitched convulsively and the victim's lips parted to release a groaning monotone. Vesker stiffened and stared into the man's countenance. Then he listened again at the man's breast, and scowled. After that he worked very quickly.

He worked for an hour before he felt that he was not alone. The feeling grew upon him and annoyed him, so that he ceased his labor and rocked back on his knees. He had already removed both of his victim's legs and placed them to one side. The severed head and left arm lay with them on the canvas. Only the right arm remained, and it lay limp with its fingers slightly curled.

Vesker stared at it uneasily and told himself that the slow opening of the fingers was due to natural causes, and not to anything else. But a mist was forming over the fingers, or seemed to be, and it frightened him. The mist was like cigarette smoke, thin and gray and tenuous, and in motion. Was it taking form? No, of course it was not. That was only his silly imagination, and the lateness of the hour, and the unpleasantness of his task. And yet surely——

The mist *was* taking form. Vesker watched it and shrank away from it. It was a hand, now, like the hand of the dead man on the floor, except that these smoky fingers were malformed and exceedingly long. And they were descending slowly into the real hand. They were becoming a part of it.

The fingers of the dead man's hand opened, then, while Vesker watched them. The index finger pointed into his face accusingly, as if that other hand had given it the power of life. But of course it was not that; it was merely a mechanical reflex action caused by the severing of certain cords. Vesker laughed throatily.

He stopped laughing and held his

breath. Over the victim's torso a second mist was forming, and the mist was becoming a face. Yes, it was a face, a woman's face. How could there be a woman's face like that? Was it his imagination? No, because he was thinking of LaRoque's wife, and this woman was not LaRoque's wife.

It was almost no face at all, but what there was of it was vicious and sinister. The eyes were slanted and the cheekbones were high and the lips were full. The woman was a native, and very old. She was——

But that was foolish! There was no woman here at all. He was making her up in his mind and his inner consciousness was projecting an image of her. That was idiocy.

"There is nothing here," Vesker said aloud.

The woman's lips parted in a smile and seemed to form words to answer him. Vesker cursed and leaned forward and swept his arm through her. And then he laughed, because she was not there. She had never been there.

The hand of the dead man had shifted position on the canvas, and the index finger was still pointing at him. But that was only reflex action.

"I would make a poor professional," Vesker said, smiling. "My nerves are whisky-soaked."

He finished his task and put his instruments back into the case. Then he filled three of the burlap bags with portions of the dead man's body, and into the fourth bag he thrust the bloody canvas and the leather case. He wiped his hands on a towel and put the towel in his pocket. Then he unlocked the door and looked out.

The lights had been turned off in the corridor. Vesker took two of the burlap bags with him and went out, and locked

the door after him. He carried the bags down the back stairs, and a car was standing in the side street. The street was deserted, and the car was his own. He placed the bags in the rear compartment.

He returned to his room, then, and made sure that every trace of evidence had been removed before he took the other two bags down to the car. Then he sat behind the wheel and drove.

He drove to the east end of the waterfront and dropped one of the four bags into the sea, after weighting it with heavy stones. He drove farther and dropped the second bag from the end of an abandoned dock. The third bag and the fourth he took with him in a rowboat and transported far out into the bay.

Then he returned to the hotel and went straight to Renee LaRoque's room and let himself in with his own key. And the dead man's wife was waiting for him.

2

FOUR days later, when he first saw it, he was living in a private home in the European quarter with Tenegai LaRoque's wife. And he laughed, because he thought that the favorite cat of his mistress had eaten too much and was having cramps.

He had forgotten about Tenegai LaRoque. Four days had passed and there had been an investigation. Government officials had questioned the hotel authorities aimlessly and foolishly, because LaRoque had disappeared. Where had LaRoque gone? No one knew. Perhaps he had tired of the heat and monotony of Bandjermasin and taken silent leave of absence to Singapore. Other men had done that. He would come back.

So they had stopped asking questions and they were now wondering what LaRoque would say when he returned and

found his wife living with Corlu Vesker. Presently they would find something else to wonder about, and they would forget the whole affair. There would be a native uprising, or a Chinese merchant found stabbed, or something else to take its place.

So Vesker laughed when he first saw it, because he had nothing to worry about.

He was alone on the veranda, in the mosquito room. It was night, and a lamp burned on the table, and the wire netting was alive with droning insects. The glow of the lamp reached feebly out over the lawn and illuminated the veranda steps.

Vesker saw the thing on the steps. Then he saw what it was, and he recoiled so abruptly that he knocked the swizzle-stick out of the tall glass on the table beside him. For the thing was not a cat, but a human arm with a hand and five fingers, and it was sliding across the veranda floor toward him.

He stood up and drew a deep breath and walked toward it, because he did not believe what he saw. But he did not open the door of the mosquito room. He stood with his face pressed against the screen, staring silently. Then he shouted wildly:

"Renee! In the name of God, come quick!"

The thing was ten feet away and approaching like a large caterpillar, humping itself in the center and clawing forward with its five groping fingers. Vesker stood quite still and watched it. His eyes were wide and his face pale, and he was afraid.

"Renee!" he shouted. "Renee! Come out here!"

Then he took a small pearl-handled revolver from the bulging pocket of his linen coat, and flung the screen door open. He fired twice blindly and missed, and then he fired four times methodically. The thing ceased its forward motion and

reared like a swaying snake, with its five fingers opening and closing in the air. It fell backward with the impact of the last bullet. Then it wriggled away with incredible speed, while Vesker clung to the door and gaped at it.

In a moment Renee LaRoque came and stared at Vesker and said shrilly:

"What is it? What were you shooting at?"

Vesker looked down at the revolver in his hand, and looked at the veranda floor, and shook his head heavily.

"I must be drunk," he said.

But he knew better.

3

VESKER wrote a letter.

It was the evening of the seventh day, and the lamp on the table threw his big shadow grotesquely over the paper. He was alone in the room and he was afraid, and his letter was both a confession and a lie.

"I killed him, and there was a good reason for doing so. You knew him, Fournier, so you will understand."

Fournier—Captain Jason Fournier—was in charge of the native police squad which patrolled the evil quarter of Bandjermasin's waterfront.

"He was a half-caste and a rotter, and he deserved to die, but I should not have interfered except that he was dragging his wife's good name in the dust. He was playing with another woman and the authorities suspected it. For Renee's sake I had to stop it.

"That night I went to his room at the hotel and argued with him. He was drunk, Fournier. You have seen him drunk, and you know how utterly uncontrollable he can become. He attacked me and I struck him, and when I bent over him he was dead.

"Why am I telling you this? Because I know it will go no further. We are friends. And I need your help. A terrible thing has happened, and I am going mad thinking of it. Four days after I had hidden his body, a horrible beast tried to get into the mosquito room to kill me. It was his hand, Fournier. As God is my witness, it was his hand and arm. *His!* I shot it, and it went away, but last night it came again and tried to get into my window.

"That was about two o'clock in the morning. I heard a scratching sound, like rats, and I sat up in bed and switched on a flashlight. The window was shut, Fournier. I always sleep with my windows shut, thank God. And the thing was coiled on the sill, with its five fingers flattened against the glass. It had forced the screen up, but the window was locked. It was awful! You will laugh at me, thinking I am drunk, but I am not drunk and I was not drunk last night when the thing came. What I saw was real.

"I screamed, Fournier, and rushed to the bureau for my revolver. But the thing has a brain, because when I turned again to shoot it, it was not there. Renee came running into the room—she is my guest, you know, for the time being, until she gets over the shock of her husband's infidelity—and she asked me what was wrong. I told her. She said I was mad. But I am not mad, Fournier. I was never more sane or sober in my life. And it was LaRoque's hand, his arm and fingers, trying to kill me.

"You must help me. I can not go to the police. The police would not know what to do, anyway. This is a terrible thing and driving me crazy. I am afraid, because LaRoque was not a white man but a half-caste, and part Saputan. They say his mother was a sorceress.

"What shall I do, Fournier? You have

studied these things and know more than I. What shall I do?"

Vesker read what he had written. It did not give him courage; it frightened him more. Putting his beliefs on paper made him sure of them. He heard footsteps in the corridor outside his door, and he turned in his chair like a scared animal.

"Who is there?" he said harshly.

The knob turned and the door opened, and Renee LaRoque stood there. She wore yellow pajamas which were deep orange in the lamplight, and she had let her hair down so that it covered her shoulders and accentuated the white smoothness of her breasts. Vesker pushed his letter aside and stood up to meet her.

"Are you coming to me tonight?" she said softly.

"Yes."

"I'm tired of waiting, Corlu."

He held her passionately and kissed her until her eyes were wide with anticipation. Then he walked with her to the door.

"I will come in a moment," he promised. "I must finish a letter."

"To a woman?" she said quickly.

"There is no other woman. You know that."

She leaned in the doorway and pushed her hair back with smooth, slender fingers. Vesker lifted his hands and stepped close to her, and then stepped back again, laughing softly.

"As soon as I have finished the letter," he promised. And he closed the door after her.

He went to the table and began to read the letter over again, but it frightened him. He sealed it quickly, addressed the envelope, then turned the lamp low.

THE corridor was dark, and Renee LaRoque's room was at the other end. He tiptoed along, smiling and rubbing his

hands together softly. He was quite contented. Desire was greater now than fear, and in a moment he would forget about Tenegai LaRoque and about the creeping beast with five fingers.

He removed his necktie and carried it in his hand, and began to unbutton his shirt, because he was impatient. He was fumbling with the fourth button when he heard the scream.

He stopped abruptly. The scream was human, and came from the rear of the house where the servants' quarters were located. It was a vibrant shriek, full of terror.

Vesker stood quite still, waiting for it to come again, and after the scream he heard some one talking in a loud, frightened voice. Then he hurried down the corridor, and he was running when he reached the source of the sound.

It was the room of the Malay house-boy, Melgani. There was a light burning on the wash-stand, and the little brown-skinned native was kneeling foolishly on the carpet, with his bare arms uplifted and his face turned to the ceiling. From his lips poured a torrent of incoherent syllables which were prayers.

Vesker stood over him and frowned and shook him. The boy flung both arms around him and sobbed.

"What is it?" Vesker said sullenly.

The Malay muttered in his own tongue, pointing to the window. The window was half-way open and the screen was up. The white cotton curtains were moving indolently in the breeze.

"What is it?" Vesker said again. "Talk English, damn you!"

"Dem snake, *Tuan!*" the Malay whined. "Dem snake him come t'rough window affer me!"

"What snake?"

"Dem big white-color snake him hab twitchy head!"

Vesker stiffened and looked about the room fearfully. He said: "Where is it?"

"Him come 'cross floor! Him try climb on bed! Me yell, *Tuan!*"

"Where is it, I asked you!"

The Malay gazed about, too, and shook his head from side to side.

"Me—me not know, *Tuan.*"

And there was no snake. Vesker looked; Melgani looked. Holding the lamp, Vesker went to his knees and searched the floor, the corners, the bed-shadows. Rising, he searched the window-ledge, the wash-stand, the cupboard. There was no snake.

"Did you leave your window open?" Vesker demanded.

"No, no, *Tuan!* No!"

"Well, it's not here. It's gone again. Go back to bed."

Then he went out and walked slowly down the corridor to Renee LaRoque's room. But he was afraid again and he struck four matches, one after another, to light the way. And his hand trembled when he opened the door.

HE THOUGHT at first that Renee LaRoque was lying that way for his benefit, because she was lovely and passionate and because she wanted him. She lay across the bed, limp and relaxed and nearly naked, with her hair dangling and her white throat exposed.

But when he had shut the door and tip-toed toward her, he saw something else.

She was not lying there for him. She had been flung there. Her lips were blue and parted, and her tongue protruded. Her throat was blotched with crimson. Her yellow pajamas were not open because *she* had opened them, but because they had been torn open!

Vesker could not believe it. He still expected something else. So he sat beside her and caressed her body with his

big hands, and not until she failed to respond to his caresses did he realize that she was dead.

Then he moved away from her and stared at her, and licked his lips. He could not understand it. He still wanted her. She was limp and exquisite and warm, and yet she was dead. How could that be?

He leaned forward again to touch her, but terror took hold of him instead. He leaped to his feet and paced the room, turning always to look at her. The lamp was burning on the dressing-table, and its pink silk shade made a bloody glow of the light. Beyond that the window was open. Renee had never slept with her window open!

The hand had killed her! The hand which had gone to the Malay's room, first, by mistake! God in heaven!

Vesker stared at her and felt cold blood climbing through his legs into his body. He could not take his eyes from her, but he did not want her now; he was afraid of her. She was no longer lovely; she was something dead and cold and horrible. But he was afraid to leave her.

He stood and stared, until he saw another face in the room. It was the same face he had seen on the night of the murder. It was the old native woman, nameless and strange, hovering over the body of Tenegai LaRoque's wife, and smiling—smiling triumphantly, as if she were proud of something.

Vesker said thickly: "Who—who are you?"

The woman looked at him. She was only the face of a woman. She did not answer.

"What do you want?" Vesker moaned.

But she was not there any more. There was only the strangled body of Renee LaRoque, and the lamp with the red silk shade, and the open window.

And fear. The fear was a living thing that seeped into Vesker's brain, undermining his reason. He rushed to the bed and glared into the space where the woman's face had hung. He beat at the space with his fists. He muttered, and said meaningless things aloud. He screamed hysterically.

Then he sank to his knees and buried his face in Renee LaRoque's breast, and sobbed with terror.

4

HE DID not mail the letter to Captain Jason Fournier. When he left Renee LaRoque and returned to his own room, the letter was not where he had put it. He found it on the floor, torn into very small pieces.

He looked at the pieces a long time before he could find courage enough to pick them up. And then he burned them. He was afraid of them.

"It is a good thing," he said. "If I had mailed the letter, there would have been trouble. If they ever learn that Tenegai LaRoque's wife is dead, they will hang me."

He would have to hide the body. Pacing his room, back and forth for an hour, he thought of possible hiding-places. It was a quarter after three o'clock, his watch said. He would have to complete the task before daylight, or the native servants would know.

He went back to Renee LaRoque's room and rolled the body in the top blanket of the bed. That was considerate, he thought. The blanket was soft and woolly and would not irritate. Then he put the bundle over his shoulder and carried it upstairs to the top floor of the house, and up a final flight of wooden steps to the attic. It was very dark up here, and the only light was the probing eye of his flashlight.

He carried the body to the very end of the attic floor and laid it there. Then he held the flashlight in his hand and pointed its circular glare above him, to where three large cross-beams supported the sloping roof. One of those cross-beams was not a beam at all, but a hollow long-box containing seven thin water-pipes. He had opened it the first day, to repair one of the pipes, because the Malay servants did not know how.

He found a ladder and adjusted it carefully, and carried the blanket-wrapped body to the top of it. Resting his burden on the first and second beams, he sat a-straddle the third and pried the boards loose with his fingers. The seven pipes were of lead, and he bent them to enlarge the space. Then he stood on the beams and lowered the dead woman into the opening, and replaced the boards.

"They will never know," he said.

And he returned to his own room.

5

Two evenings later he had dinner at the Karnery Club, and one of his friends said slyly:

"So you're keeping bachelor quarters again, Vesker. Eh?"

Vesker said: "They never stay long, these lovely ladies."

It was a very special occasion. A brilliant young government chap was being married tomorrow and having his last fling tonight. Exclusively stag. Imported whisky, wine for those who preferred it, and sufficient of both to make a regiment drunk. The doors of the Karnery Club were closed and locked to strangers. Every man of importance was present.

Vesker had come by invitation. They were sorry for him. They thought Renee LaRoque had walked out on him and

taken the customary "silent leave." Most of Vesker's women had done that eventually.

"I suppose you'll be moving back to the shack, Vesker."

The "shack" was the small residential hotel exclusively reserved for government bachelors.

"Temporarily," Vesker smiled.

"Until romance wings through the window again, eh?"

"There are many fish in the water," Vesker shrugged. "Of course"—and he raised his eyebrows suggestively—"I loved her."

Ordinarily he would have been angry at their persistence, but tonight he did not mind. If they thought she had left him of her own accord, let them think so!

He spoke of it whenever the opportunity occurred. That was the best thing to do—make light of it. Left him? Of course, of course! Perhaps she had received a message from her husband, and had skipped off to him. These women!

"You've had pretty good luck with them, Vesker. More than most of us."

"Ye-e-es."

"Ever really been in love?"

"Always," Vesker grinned.

He wanted to ask certain questions. Captain Jason Fournier was here, and, as a pleasant surprize, Lord Willoughby of the British North. Willoughby knew Borneo forward and backward. He had made a special study of Dyak lore, and knew every inch of the Merasi, the Upper Barito, the black-water country, the inland—everywhere. Willoughby had spent years among the Ibans, the Penihings, the Long-Glits, the Saputans.

But Willoughby was a hard man to talk to. You had to lead the conversation to him. And how could you switch it from women to natives?

"I have one rival," Vesker said, feeling

his way along. "Heard recently about an up-river *kapala* who married fourteen women at the same time."

"Eh?"

"Probably a huge lie. The Dyaks don't do that, do they, Willoughby?"

Willoughby sucked the end of his pipe and uncrossed his legs. "It's possible," he said. "What tribe was it?"

"Damned if I know. The fellow was a Saputan, I think."

"Hard to believe, then, unless the chap was a *blian*."

One of the younger men frowned and said: "What?"

"A *blian*. Witch-doctor. Sorcerer. They have things pretty much their own way. If one of them wanted fourteen women, he'd take 'em."

"It's a queer thing, that," Vesker said. "The power they're supposed to have over the people, I mean. Absolute tommyrot, of course."

"Is it?"

"Eh?"

"You're a white man," Willoughby shrugged. "Being a white man, you can't see beyond the end of your all-important nose."

"You mean to say it's *not* tommyrot?"

"I do, emphatically!"

"I heard a tall yarn once," Vesker said hesitantly, "about a chap who murdered one of those fellows. Rather, a relative of one." Now he would have an answer to his questions! Willoughby would know and tell the honest truth. But how to ask him? How to put the case clearly, without overstepping the bounds of discretion?

"After murdering the native," he said slowly, "this chap cut the body up and buried it. And then, one night——"

One of the listeners rose, with a dry smile, and turned out two of the three electric lamps. The third lamp was be-

hind Willoughby's chair, and Willoughby was leaning slightly forward with his face in the amber glare of it. The rest of the room was in shadow, made furtive and restless and sinister by Vesker's words.

"One night a horrible snake-like thing crawled into the murderer's room, for vengeance. It was the murdered man's arm, with five twisted fingers on the end of it!"

"And did it kill him?" Willoughby asked quietly.

"I don't——" Vesker hesitated. He was going to say "I don't know," but then he would have to answer questions. And he wanted some one else to answer the questions. So he said bluntly: "Yes, it killed him."

Willoughby nodded, and the others watched him, waiting for his comment. He looked at them indifferently and said: "Well, what of it?"

"But such a thing isn't possible!" Vesker said.

"Why isn't it?"

"Why *isn't* it? Great Scott, man, a dead man's arm can't crawl out of its grave and——"

"Why not?"

"Well, how can it?"

Willoughby reached out and scratched a match on the cover of a book which lay on the table. He held the flame to the bowl of his pipe and stared at Vesker while he sucked the pipe-stem.

"With white men," he said, "it might be rare. Few whites know the secrets of necromancy. But you say the murdered man came of a sorcerer's family. A brother, was he?"

"I—I believe it was father and son," Vesker faltered. "Or mother and son."

"Well then, the father knew of his son's death, and the whys of it. So he raised the dead. You say the body was

dismembered. He raised enough of it to return the murderer's compliment."

"You absolutely believe in necromancy, Willoughby?" a listener protested.

"Absolutely."

"Seen it work?"

"A hundred times, in Saputan *kam-pongs*."

"You should have some good stories, old chap."

Willoughby smiled. He had a reputation for his good stories. They were not bedtime tales, either. They filled his listeners with nocturnal dread and very real shudders. But men like that sort of thing.

"I'll tell you one," Willoughby said. "It's not pleasant."

Creaking rockers filled the room with suggestive sound as the men drew closer. A door opened and closed, and a newcomer said: "What the devil!" Jason Fournier silenced him with a curt word and made room for him. There was no other sound after that, except the breathing of many men and the bubbling noise of Willoughby's pipe. The lamplight was yellow and feeble.

"IT HAPPENED in Ola-Baong, on the Upper Barito," Willoughby said. "The village *blian* was a wicked old Saputan named Merningi. He had a particular grudge against a chap who had run off with his favorite woman."

Vesker stared. Behind Willoughby's chair a mist was forming. It was cigarette smoke, of course—or pipe smoke. But why was it taking that particular shape? Why, in the name of God, was it becoming a woman's face?

"The Saputans, you know," Willoughby said, "have a particularly gruesome form of necromancy which leads a man to horrible death. They dress a corpse in the clothes of the intended victim and hide it

away in the jungle, to rot. As the corpse decays, so does the victim. I've known men to go stark mad looking for the hiding-place, to avoid such a death."

Vesker's fingers were white and bony on the arm of his chair. The shape behind Willoughby's head was fully materialized now, and hideously clear. It was the same shape, the same face—the same sinister old woman! Great God, was he the only one who could see it? Were the others all blind?

"Merningi, the *blian*," Willoughby said, "obtained the body of an old woman who had died of beri-beri, and dressed it in the clothes of his intended victim. Then he toted it into the jungle and secreted it there."

But Willoughby was not saying that! Willoughby was no longer there! His face was the woman's face, with boring black eyes and withered lips. And his body was the body of a nearly naked Saputan woman, clad in dirty gray sarong and grass sandals! In God's name, could the others not see it?

"The next day the victim took sick. There was no reason for it; he simply became ill. He didn't know what Merningi had done, you see; so he couldn't help himself. Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he became violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Vesker was unable to cry out. He cursed himself for being an idiot. There was no woman there! How under heaven could any woman be sitting there when Willoughby was occupying the chair? He closed his eyes and opened them again, and the woman was looking straight at him, smiling significantly.

"The fellow died. He simply rotted away until the life was gone out of his

body. I was with him when he gave up the ghost."

There was silence. Vesker leaped to his feet and cried harshly: "Stop it! Good God, stop it!"

Then one of the younger men turned on the lights and Willoughby, sitting in the chair, said with a dry smile:

"You asked for it, old man. Have a drink."

And the native woman was not there.

6

VESKER sat up in bed and stared fearfully at the thing on the floor.

He had come home late from the club, and he had been drinking heavily. His lips were thick and sour. His sight was blurred. His stomach ached.

But before going to bed, he had packed all of his clothes and possessions into two big suit-cases, and this was his last night in the accursed house which harbored Renee La Roque's dead body. A tramp freighter, leaving Bandjermasin in the morning, would take him to Kuching.

Climbing into bed, he had removed his clothes and tossed them on a chair. And now they were on the floor.

They were on the floor, and something was dragging them!

Vesker sat and stared. He was dreaming, of course. The whole horrible affair, from beginning to end, had been the product of his own imagination. How could a dead man's arm have life? How could it crawl along, like a snake, and drag a handful of clothes in its curled fingers? That was madness. He was drunk.

Besides, he had locked his door carefully and turned the latch on the window. He looked at the window now, and it was shut tight. Faint moonlight glowed through it, illuminating the room. But

the door was open, and the key was lying on the carpet!

Vesker screamed.

"I didn't mean to do it!" he shrieked. "I didn't mean to!"

The hideous thing paid no attention to him. It continued to crawl backward, pulling the clothes after it. How in the name of God had it gained admission? Had it clawed its way up the door and turned the lock with its fiendish fingers, after poking the key loose? Was there nothing it could *not* do?

But it was taking his clothes. What for? What good were his clothes? Did it think to imprison him in his room? Was it as foolish as that?

Vesker watched it. It slithered backward over the threshold, into the corridor. It turned to the right. Then it was gone.

Vesker leaped from the bed and slammed the door shut. He had other clothes; they were in one of the two suit-cases! At the club he could find a room for the rest of the night, and in the morning he would be far away from dead bodies and crawling hands, and faces that came from nowhere to leer at him.

Faces! He was on his knees, fumbling with the suit-case, and he remembered. He stood up, pawing his naked chest, stood with his eyes wide and his legs stiff as wood, huge and grotesque in loose-fitting pajamas. From his lips came a thick, bubbling sound.

He turned and ran to the door, and opened it. There he stopped, because the darkness of the corridor terrified him. He groped back again and sat on the bed, clawing with his fingers until the bed-clothes were wrinkled and sweat-stained.

"Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he be-

came violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Willoughby had said that. No, no, the woman had said it! Almighty God, the thing had taken his clothes! If he did not get them back——

He rushed to the open suit-case and pushed his hands deep into it, searching for a flashlight. Gaining his feet, he stood swaying. Where had the horrible creature taken his clothes? What dead body——

"Oh God, no!" he sobbed. "Not *her!* Not up there!"

But there was no other dead body. The thing had to have a dead body. Up there in the attic, in awful darkness, *she* was lying. Up there where he had put her, in the wooden casing which covered the water-pipes.

He ran to the door, and the glaring eye of the flashlight preceded him crazily as he groped into the corridor. The long corridor was full of moving shapes and suggestive sounds. It loomed over him and under him, clutching at him as he paced down it. He stopped twice and looked behind him. Merciful God, why had he hidden the body up there?

He gripped the railing with his left hand and held the flashlight rigid before him as he climbed the staircase. The light only made the surrounding darkness more hideous. Below him, when he was half-way up, a well of frightful gloom lay waiting. Above him was the sing-song of the wind outside the house, and the creak of wooden floors inside.

On the upper landing he found one of his socks. The hand had dropped it.

HE CLIMBED the final flight of wooden steps, counting them subconsciously as he went. Seven of them. Seven terrible ascents into a vault of horror. His slippers thumped thunderously. The

hammering of his heart was even louder.

He could hear his breath whine in and out, and at the top of the seven steps he stopped to push the wet hair out of his eyes. The flashlight made a ghastly yellow-ringed glare over the floor. Then he began the march of torment to the far end of the chamber.

And then the face came.

It was the woman's face, and it hung before him in the light, like a shadow. Its eyes drilled into him, and a triumphant leer curled its thin lips. But it made no attempt to stop him; it hung always before him as he stumbled forward.

With one hand he lifted the ladder into place, because he feared to put down the flashlight. Above him hung the three black cross-beams. And the face sat on every rung, always before him, as he ascended.

He stood swaying on the beams, high above the floor. The ceiling sloped over his head. Once, when he lost his balance and clutched wildly to steady himself, the flashlight threw a crazy figure 8 over ceiling, floor, and wall. And the face was always within it.

Trembling in every muscle, he lowered himself slowly and straddled the coffin which contained Renee LaRoque's body. He placed the flashlight between his legs, so that his hands were leprously white in the gleam of it as he leaned forward to loosen the boards. And on the other end of the beam, where the glare was pale, the face sat and watched him.

The boards came loose in his fingers. He dropped them and shuddered violently as they clattered to the floor beneath his perched body. One after another he let them fall. Then he stared at the thing in the coffin.

The face of Tenegai LaRoque's wife stared back at him, silent in death. His

own clothes covered her body. Her yellow pajamas and the soft blanket lay neatly folded under her feet. And on the other end of the beam, the old woman was still watching him.

He clawed madly, raking his fingers in dead flesh and tearing his clothes loose from it. His own breathing was louder than the sound of his exertions. The flashlight made his task hideous and terrible, until the dead woman lay naked under his outstretched hands.

Then he leaned back, with madness in his eyes. He held the clothes in the crook of his arm and stood erect on the beam, rocking from side to side. He glared at the face of the native woman and laughed at it, and the laugh was a jangling cackle.

"You won't kill me!" he screamed. "I know who you are! You're LaRoque's mother! You're the sorceress! But you won't kill me! I'm too strong for you!"

The face sat on the end of the beam and smiled triumphantly. It did not answer him. When he turned the flashlight and walked along the beam to the top of the ladder, it did not follow him.

He put one foot on the ladder and started down. His left hand pressed the crumpled death-clothes against his body. His right hand held the light and clung to the wooden rungs as he descended.

He reached the floor and stood swaying, and looked up triumphantly.

"You won't get me!" he shouted.

And then he stiffened. Above him, on

the black end of the third beam, something stirred. Vesker's lips writhed open to release a scream of terror. He flung himself backward.

He fell, and the flashlight clattered from his hand. His scream died to a whimpering moan. On hands and knees he clawed for the light, blindly, with his horrified gaze riveted on the thing above him. Then his twisted body became rigid, and he screeched wildly.

"No! No! Don't touch me! Don't——"

Above him, on the cross-beam, the thing slowly coiled.

"Don't touch me!" Vesker gibbered. "Don't—oh God, don't!"

The thing shot out and down with the speed of a leaping snake. It struck with vicious strength. A white, cold arm encircled Vesker's neck. Five twisted fingers buried themselves in the flesh of his throat.

Vesker's screech died to a gurgle. Wildly he staggered to his feet, clawing with both hands at the living-dead fingers which strangled him. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead. His eyes opened to hideous bigness and became white, glaring crescents. His breath choked in his throat. His face purpled.

He stumbled toward the exit, blindly. But he did not reach it. His legs went limp beneath him and he sagged to the floor. And the five living-dead fingers finished their task.

