

# The Crawling Death

By P. A. CONNOLLY

THE JUNE breeze blowing softly through the open window disturbed the papers on my desk, and also my piece of mind. My office was hot and stuffy, and the cooling zephyr whispered of better things out of doors. With a sigh, I pushed back my chair and ruefully contemplated the unanswered correspondence on my desk.

Across the way my gaze encountered the terra cotta facade and glaring plate glass of a hideous office building. Beyond it, although invisible to the physical eye, were lush meadows and cool woodlands and a beautiful hard dirt road. And my new six cylinder was standing at the curb.

I glanced at my watch. Three o'clock. With my hand at my desk, I hesitated as my correspondence stared back at me accusingly. And then:

"Mr. Hayden, I will take that dictation now," a brisk, peremptory voice declared.

"Don't let me catch you at it," I growled as I banged down the top of my

desk. And, snatching up my cap, I dashed past a startled young lady and almost over a diminutive messenger boy who loomed suddenly in the door-way. He held out a telegram.

"This is where my joy ride is knocked in the head," I exclaimed savagely. Tearing open the envelope, I read the following:

*"Will arrive tomorrow ten A. M.  
to inspect Hedgewood. Meet us.  
F. S. Avery."*

"Us," I muttered, "how many is 'us.'" With the message in my hand, I rushed into my partner's room, happy for the excuse the telegram offered.

"Jim," I said hurriedly, "get your hat and come quick. We're going to take a spin into the country."

Jim glanced up out of lazy eyes, his big form sprawling all over his large, easy swivel chair.

"Sorry, old man," he drawled, "but we can't both neglect the business. You



run along and take your pleasure trip, and I will stay here and perform my daily toil."

"All right," I said, darting to the door. "I'll wait two minutes in the machine."

I had started the motor and was sitting at the wheel when Jim sauntered leisurely out of the building lobby.

"Jimmie," I said, as I threw in the clutch and threaded carefully through the downtown traffic, "do you believe in spirits?"

"Only in the wet, Dickie. You're not going to get extravagant and buy me a drink, are you?"

"No, Jimmie, I'm not, but I am going to take you out to the 'haunted house.'"

Jim's eyes lit up.

"Have you heard from the Avery's? Are they going to take the place?"

"I believe so," I said, handing him the telegram. "Their correspondence would indicate it, and they certainly wouldn't come way out here if they didn't mean business."

"Good," said Jim, "I am glad, however, we will have a chance to inspect the old house before it is taken over. What shape is it in?"

"The object of this trip, my boy, is to find out. Mr. Ormond said he would leave it in first-class condition, and as he has been gone only a week I don't imagine it will need anything but an airing and dusting."

Jim bent over to light a cigar as I increased the speed.

"Dick," he said, "why not take advantage of this opportunity to try to unravel the mystery that surrounds Hedgewood. What do you say to staying there all night?"

"You don't mean to say," I exclaimed, "that you take any stock in the absurd stories that are floating around about Ormond and his house?"

Jim smoked in silence for a full minute.

"Yes, Dick, I do," he replied finally.

I glanced at my companion in surprise. His face was serious. Light-hearted, frivolous Jim Akins, society man and all round good fellow, a believer in ghosts! And old-fashioned, conventional ghosts, too. I let this thought sink in as we ran along smoothly and quietly, the soft purring of the engine the only sound breaking the silence of the deserted country road we were now following.

"What is your version of the story?" I asked at length. "I have heard so many I can't keep track of them."

"Mine? Oh, mine is the orthodox one. The Ormonds always had a bad reputation. They are said to be a family of

stranglers; that is, once in every second or third generation one of them has been born with this mania. The first one to develop it choked his wife to death, and was effectually cured of the habit by his father; who cut off both his hands. The natives here say that it is his spirit which now haunts the place, seeking its lost hands."

"Bosh, Jim," I said. "Mere idle superstition."

"Maybe; at the same time I—"

"I also believe, as you know," I interrupted, "in psychic phenomena, and curiously enough it was my article in last month's *Observer* on the subject that caused Ormond, who is an investigator, to place the business in my hands."

"Did Ormond come to you in person?" Jim asked quickly.

"Yes."

"The present Ormond is said to have inherited the curse, and to have the 'Ormond hand.'"

"The 'Ormond hand'?"

"Yes; immense, hairy, spider-y things—"

My involuntary start swerved the machine toward the ditch.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I replied, and lapsed into silence.

As a matter of fact, Jim's last words had given me a disagreeable sensation. For ten days, ever since John Ormond's visit, I had been struggling with an uncanny feeling which threatened to become an obsession, and which was induced wholly by the singular malformation Jim spoke of.

I had found in Ormond a refined, highly cultured gentleman, well past middle age, charming in manner and appearance. At the time I had noticed nothing peculiar about him except that during the whole of our interview, which lasted, perhaps, thirty minutes, he persistently kept his hands hidden beneath his slouch hat which he held in his lap.

When he rose to leave his hat dropped to the floor, exposing his hands. At the sight I had instinctively recoiled. Never before had I seen such hands. Large they were, singularly large and bony, and possessing monstrous power. It was not, however, their size that had impressed me so disagreeably, but the fact that they were in constant motion. The fingers writhed and twisted about each other like snakes or, as Jim expressed it, like huge, hairy spiders.

I recalled how he stood, regarding me curiously, coldly, but making no further effort to conceal his deformity. And then, without a word, he had extended his right hand, and, without volition on my

part, indeed against my will, my own hand had been drawn to arm's length and dropped inert and lifeless into that huge, hairy clasp. I shuddered then, and I shuddered again at the recollection. Imagine such a hand at one's throat. *Ugh!*

It was this, and a certain promise that he had exacted from me, and which at the time seemed absurd, that gave rise to a vague uneasiness and mistrust. Not that I apprehended any difficulty or danger, but the thought persisted that I was dealing with a madman, one who, under certain circumstances, might prove a dangerous customer.

But little was known about John Ormond, and nothing of an evil character except that which always attaches to any man who presumes to live entirely to himself. He had always occupied the old house to which we were going, as had his ancestors before him, and, with an old servant who was now with him in Europe, lived in the utmost seclusion.

This fact, and the vague rumors Jim had spoken of, were sufficient to keep the townspeople aloof, a result he evidently much desired.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE exhilarating rush through the clean, sparkling air soon banished the senseless feeling of uneasiness I had been harboring, and I gave myself up to the enjoyment of the ride. Life may hold better things than a perfect going automobile, a good country road and a bright June day, but I don't know where they are or what.

Hedgewood was situated about ten miles from town, but we reached our destination all too soon. As we approached the property we slowed down in order to get a better view. The land had a frontage on the road of about one thousand feet, and ran back for perhaps twice that distance. It was, so far as we could see, entirely surrounded with a high and impenetrable hedge fence broken only at the entrance by two square stone columns, which supported a heavy iron gate.

Through the bars of this gate we could see a man at work among the shrubbery.

"Hallo!" I called.

The man looked up, and upon my signal came reluctantly toward us. He was a young fellow of twenty or thereabouts, with a rather stupid expression which gave way to distrust when I demanded entrance.

"You can't come in here," he said.

"This is private property."

"Yes, I know," I answered, "but Mr. Ormond has put the place in my care."

Upon my answer, he slowly produced a key, and inserting it in the padlock swung back the massive gates.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"No, sir, I work here in the mornin' taking care of the grounds, but I'm goin' to quit. It's too skeery."

"Well, it won't be so lonesome after this. There will be some people down tomorrow to take possession. And by the way," I added, "I wish you would help us fix up things at the house before they come. Jump in."

He shook his head vigorously.

"You couldn't get me in that house. It's bad enough out here."

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"I ain't had no trouble, and I ain't huntin' any. I'd find it quick enough if I went in there." He jerked his thumb toward the house.

"What would you find?" I asked, smiling.

He came closer to the car, his dull face looking ludicrous under its mask of terror.

"Ha'n'ts," he whispered, "big, hairy things that crawl around the floors like rats or spiders. Only they ain't, they're hands!"

With a snort of disgust, I threw in the clutch and we darted toward the house, leaving the rustic staring after us with his scythe suspended in mid-air. The front part of the grounds was covered with a heavy growth of forest trees, amid which, and about fifteen hundred feet from the entrance, stood the house.

It was a massive structure of Colonial style, and in a good state of preservation in spite of the fact that it had been built in Revolutionary days. We pulled up at the wide veranda, and, leaving Jim in the machine, I ran up the steps and finding, after some trouble the proper key, I threw open the door and entered the large central hall.

The house was dark and stuffy. Jim joining me at this moment, we went from room to room raising the shades and windows. We had both experienced a feeling of depression upon first entering the house, but this soon wore off under the refreshing influence of the light and air. The rooms were large, with high ceilings, and well furnished, most of them in the fashion of a by-gone day, but the living-room and library and several of the bedrooms were fitted out in the most modern style.

On the library table I found an envelope which contained a key and a letter addressed to me, which read as follows:

*"Mr. Richard Heyden,  
"Dear Sir: You will remember when I left Hedgewood in your charge, with instructions to find a suitable tenant, that I requested that neither you nor your tenant should enter the room with the red-paneled door. I now wish to emphasize that request, and to remind you that you gave me your word of honor that my wishes in this respect would be obeyed to the letter.*

*"I am enclosing the key to the room to be placed with the others you have, and which you will give to your prospective tenant with the same instructions you have received. It is unnecessary for me to explain why I do this except to say that I expect you to use the same care in selecting a tenant as I trust I have shown in choosing an agent. It is a mere matter of honor, or the sure penalty that follows a breach of honor.*

*"Yours very truly,  
"JOHN ORMOND."*

"Well," I said, as I strung the key on the ring with the others, "this is a nice Blue Beard proposition to put up to a practical business man. The old fellow is plumb crazy."

It was while we were on the second floor, going from room to room and opening the windows, that I had my first view of the door with the red panels. Jim was close to it at the time, in fact had started for it, when I called:

"You can't get in there, Jim; that door is locked." He continued, however, and, reaching the door, turned the knob. I saw him twist his body, and give a sudden wrench. He turned as I ran up, with a puzzled look on his face.

"Try that knob, Dick," he said.

"No use, Jim; the door is locked, and, at any rate, I have orders not to allow anyone in that room. It is Mr. Ormond's private apartment."

"Try the knob, anyway," he insisted.

I carelessly took hold of the knob and gave it a slight turn. I dropped it and looked at Jim; his eyes had a queer look in them.

"What do you make of it?"

"Nonsense, Jim; come away," and I took him by the arm and started with him down the hall.

"Dick," he said, stopping short, "there is some one in that room!"

"You're crazy, maa. The knob is rusty from disuse. Now get busy. I'll go down and try again to get the boy, and you start in to dust some of the furniture. We've got a big job in front of us if we want to get back before dark."

I had been gone about ten minutes and was returning with the boy, whom I had persuaded after some effort and a generous tip to help us in the house, when I heard a roar from Jim on the second floor. At the same instant I noticed that the bunch of keys, which I had left on the library table, had disappeared. At Jim's cry the boy with me ran down the steps and across the lawn, while I mounted to the second floor, two steps at a time.

My suspicions were verified for, as I reached the landing, I saw Jim's figure pressed against the door with the red panels, which was part way open, and endeavoring vainly to crowd through the small aperture. I called to him sharply and ran hurriedly to pull him away, when suddenly he uttered a shriek, this time of fear, and, releasing his hold, fell backward to the floor with a crash. And the partly opened door closed and snapped.

### CHAPTER THREE

JIM sprang to his feet, and with a cry of rage threw the whole weight of his body against the heavy door.

He was frantic with fury. I leaped upon him and by sheer strength carried him, kicking and cursing, the length of the hall where I threw him into a settee.

"There, you confounded chump!" I shouted. "For two cents I'd punch your face in. What do you mean by disobeying orders?"

We glared at each other for a moment, and then a sheepish look crept into his face.

"I'm sorry, old man," he said, "but I was dead sure there was some one in there and I wanted to find out who, or what, it was."

"Well, I hope you found out to your satisfaction."

"Not to my satisfaction, no. But I found out that there is some one, or something, in that room."

"Jim, are you getting crazy, or is it just plain drunk?"

"It's neither, Dick, and you know it. And you also know there is something on the other side of that door, and if you were half a man you would help me find out what it is."

"I'm man enough to keep my word, and that I hope will be the final word on this subject. Your fool yelling has scared the boy into a panic, and I suppose we'll never see him again."

And with that I marched him down to the main floor, where I started him to dusting the furniture, hoping that he would not forget the cobwebs in his brain.

But I am free to confess that I cast more than one curious glance at the room with the red paneled door, while I was performing a like service upstairs.

Before the inspection of the premises was half completed on the following day, Mrs. Avery declared enthusiastically in its favor. She was young and pretty and romantic, and the fine old place, with its historical associations, appealed strongly to her nature. On the way back to the machine, Jim detained me with a look. When we were out of hearing of the others he turned to me impetuously.

"You are not going to rent that house to those people," he asserted.

"I am not!"

"No, you are not!"

"Why?"

"Because I won't have it," he declared. "It would be criminal."

"Since when did you acquire the right to dictate the policy of the firm?"

"Damn the firm, and you, too! I say you will not allow that pretty young thing to live in this devilish place. It might mean her death, or worse. I stopped here last night!"

"You?" I demanded in amazement.

"How did you get in?"

"Window," he announced.

"And did you go into the forbidden room?"

"No, I did not because I couldn't get in. I tried, I'll admit. And I guess I'm glad I didn't succeed. Now, Dick, see here. You just cool off and listen. I felt and heard things last night that convinced me that that room is occupied by something that is not human!"

"By what?"

"I don't know what. I wish I did. You believe in the supernatural, Dick, only you call it by some other name. Put these people off for a week and let's investigate. It is worth the effort, and it might save a tragedy."

"I can't, Jim," I said, somewhat impressed, and considerably mollified, by his serious manner. "They have taken the place and are going to remain tonight, and have their effects and servants come on from New York at once."

"Then," said Jim with decision, "I'll tell Mrs. Avery just exactly what has happened and scare her off."

"Jim, you're a fool," I retorted, "can't you see that Mrs. Avery is just the kind of woman who would be delighted to have a 'ghost' in the house? You just leave this to me. I'll tell Avery about the whole affair and your suspicions, and advise him to keep it from his wife. I'm bound to tell him about the room, anyway, and entrust him with the key. It will be a matter of honor with

him, but judging from his looks his curiosity won't get the better of it. I wouldn't say the same for his wife. Not that she isn't strictly honorable, you know, but a woman's curiosity—"

"By the way, Jim," I added, "what did you see last night?"

"Nothing. I *felt* and *heard* it. But I won't tell you what. You politely suggested yesterday that I was drunk or crazy, and I don't care to invite a second criticism of my habits or mentality. I'll simply say this, that the danger, or evil influence, or whatever it is, is confined to the one room. The rest of the house seems to be free from it."

I left Jim brooding, and rejoined the Avery's somewhat worried, I admit, and regretting the restrictions that prohibited me from entering the room. I had always taken a deep interest in all that pertained to the supernatural, but had never had any actual demonstration of its existence. All matters pertaining to the unknown, or the unseen, life, or to life after death, held a strange interest for me. Not that I was a spiritualist in any sense of the word, or at least not in the sense in which the term is generally understood, but I did believe that there were unseen forces, not human, constantly present and working among us.

That this influence or power worked for both good and evil I had no doubt. What these forces were—whether they were human souls after transition to the spirit form, and shackled for some unknown cause to the earth life, or the product of some other sphere, or whether they were purely demoniacal—I did not know, nor do I know now. I simply know that they exist, and that they exert a constant influence upon mankind.

That something out of the ordinary was amiss with the room with the red paneled door I had no doubt. Mr. Ormond's peculiar attitude and the extraordinary effect made upon Jim, hard-headed, practical Jim, convinced me of this. But what was it?

On some pretext I got Mr. Avery away from his wife and told him all the circumstances. He looked annoyed at first and then anxiously at his wife. Finally he burst into a hearty laugh.

"All right," he said, "I'll accept the key and the secret and will agree to keep both from my wife. I don't take a bit of stock in all of this rot your friend has been telling you. At the same time I know what effect this story and these conditions would have upon my wife, who is emotional and very romantic. Furthermore, I don't want anything to interfere with the pleasure of our honeymoon here."

And when I left them, envious of their happiness and beautiful surroundings, I breathed a prayer that if any sinister presence were in that house, they might not come under its baneful influence.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

THE summer passed uneventfully, with no word from our tenants, except for the monthly remittance. And then, one morning late in October, as Jim and I were preparing to make a visit of inspection to several properties, I was called to the telephone, and in answer to my response a voice, which, in spite of its tremor and excitement, I recognized as Avery's, asked me to come immediately to Hedgewood. It was not until we were in the car that I told Jim, who was driving, to head for Ormond's place, and put on all speed.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, obeying my wishes, but taking time to cast a curious glance at me.

"I don't know. Avery telephoned me to come at once on a matter of great importance."

It was only good fortune that kept Jim from arrest for breaking the speed law, for twenty minutes later he drew up in front of the gate at Hedgewood. Avery was there to meet us. His face was pale, and his eyes had a look of horror in them.

"What's the matter?" I demanded, as he jumped into the car and we drove to the house.

"Brooks is dead—murdered, I think."

"Who is Brooks?"

"My brother-in-law; he came last week to spend a few days with us and—"

"Was he in the secret room?" I demanded. He flushed and stammered.

"Yes—yes. I told him the story and showed him the key, but put him on his honor not to use it. I didn't think he'd do it. But it seems he was interested in that sort of thing. And—and—" His voice trailed off, then suddenly rose, and he turned on me in a fit of fury. "What the devil do you mean by putting us in a house like that?" he snarled. "What devilish thing have you got in that room? It might have been my wife—*my wife!*"

He stood over me with distorted face and threatening gesture.

"Sit down!" I said coldly. "I told you the conditions. I know nothing of the room other than what you know. Where is your brother-in-law?"

He sank back in the tonneau, his face twitching nervously, while the car drove slowly toward the house.

"He is still in the room," he whispered with a shudder, "and I can't get him out."

"Can't?" I asked.

"No, I am not a coward, but I dare not go into that room; I tried once, and—"

He buried his face in his hands. Jim turned and looked at me queerly.

"I know why he can't go in," he said, "the *thing* that's in there won't let him."

By this time we had reached the front porch.

"Where is your wife, Avery?" I asked, laying my hand on his shoulder.

He looked up haggardly.

"Thank God she is safe! She is visiting in town and knows nothing of this."

Jim had shut off the power and darted to the front door. I followed closely, with Avery behind me. In this order we ran, leaped rather, up the broad staircase and down the upper hall. Breathless, we paused at the room with the red door panels. The door was tightly closed, but the key was in the lock.

Jim grasped the knob and turned the key. We all heard the bolt shoot sharply back. With all his strength, he threw the full weight of his body against the door, but it resisted all his efforts. Forgetting Mr. Ormond's instructions, forgetting my word of honor, I, too, added my strength to Jim's and slowly, slowly, the door yielded.

Distinctly I felt the pressure of a resisting force on the other side. Then, suddenly, the door half open, I heard a horrid, half strangled shriek from Jim, and at the same moment I felt a cold, clammy hand at my throat. An enormous hand! The fingers reached round and met at the back of my neck.

I tried to cry out. I struggled feebly, helplessly. The light flickered before my eyes, died out, and as consciousness left me I saw, clasping and clutching, the hand of John Ormond as I had seen it in real life months before.

When I came to, I found Jim and Avery bending anxiously over me. I sat up, and instinctively my hand went to my throat. A dull ache persisted there.

"What's the matter?" I asked thickly.

"Devils," said Jim, and beckoned over his shoulder.

I sat up, and then recollection came to me.

"Were you attacked, too, Jim?" I asked.

"Yes, but I was expecting it and escaped with only a slight squeeze."

"And you?" I asked, turning to Avery.

He shuddered and shook his head. "Not this time, but when I was alone."

"Did you see anything when Jim and I forced the door?"

He looked puzzled.

"No, I can't say positively. I thought, just before you both screamed, that I saw a pair of enormous hands shoot out from the doorway and clasp each of you by the throat, but it may have been imagination. I saw nothing distinctly."

We retired from before the red paneled door, which was again tightly closed, and held a consultation.

My mind was fully made up. The matter had gone too far, and was of altogether too serious a nature to allow a promise, exacted under commonplace circumstances, to obtrude and interfere under unusual and startling conditions. Besides, a plain duty lay before me. The dead body of a man was on the other side of that door and must be gotten out.

"How do you know he is dead?" The thought suggested the question.

Avery was still under strong nervous excitement.

"I was part way in the room before my throat was clutched. I saw his body on the bed, his head hanging over the side, his mouth open, and eyes staring. He was dead!"

A convulsive shudder shook him as he recalled the gruesome picture.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we have got to get the body out." And to Jim: "and you and I will solve the mystery."

"I'm with you." And Jim's lower jaw clenched.

"If this is the work of human beings, which I strongly suspect, the matter will be comparatively simple, although more dangerous. If it is of supernatural agency, it may not be so easy. Let me say to start with, gentlemen, that I believe in the supernatural. I believe there are unseen forces about us with power, at times, to inflict harm upon human beings. This may be one of the times. The only way to counteract or overcome the power of one of the beings of the outer circle is by an absolute freedom from fear. A brave front alone will not do. There must positively be no shadow of fear in your heart. Do you understand, Jim?"

"Yes," he said, and I saw by the look on his face that he meant it.

"And you, Avery?"

He was sitting with his face in his hands, his whole attitude one of utter misery.

"I'm not up to it, boys," he muttered, without looking up.

"Then you go down to the lower floor, or, better still, go out into the grounds. The air will do you good. We'll join you presently."

"Jim," I said in a low tone, when Avery had shuffled down the stairs, "we will put this in the form of a test. If

there is a man in that room, we will meet with the same powerful resistance when we attempt to enter. If it is not a man, if the force in there is of supernatural origin, there will be little, if any, opposition if we show that we are entirely unafraid. Do you understand?"

He nodded impatiently. Jim had been a famous football player in the old college days, and I knew him to be a man of undaunted physical courage. I could not ask for a better companion in any venture requiring cool nerve and daring.

Together, we approached the door, and this time it was my hands that grasped the knob and key.

"Jim, you have no fear!" I asserted it as a fact.

"No!"

"Nor have I. Come."

I turned the key and the knob at the same moment. There was a suggestion of resistance which vanished almost instantly. The door was thrown open and we both crossed the threshold. A cold air, like a gust of wind, struck our faces.

The room was dimly lighted from partly opened slats of a blind at one of the windows. And then a peculiar thing happened. A pair of heavy curtains, hanging before a closet or alcove, were drawn apart and fell together as though separated by unseen hands.

## CHAPTER FIVE

JIM looked at me, and then with one bound, leaped toward the curtains and tore them apart. He disappeared from view, but reappeared almost instantly, brushing the front of his coat.

"Nothing in there, but I felt something like a big rat crawling up my coat. Ugh!"

We gazed about the room. It was furnished in the style of the past century, with heavy walnut chairs and dresser, and a massive canopied bed from which the curtains had been removed. And upon the bed lay the figure of a man in the position which Avery had described. It took but one glance to see that he was dead. Together we lifted the body and carried it, without molestation, to the hall. Instantly the door closed with a crash behind us.

We bore the body of the man to the room which he had occupied in life. Then we took Avery and his effects back to town with us and left him at the house where his wife was visiting. I promised to get a doctor's certificate, and to see an undertaker, and have the body properly prepared for shipment to New York. Fortunately, there were no marks upon it, and as the man was known to have had



serious heart trouble no fears of embarrassing explanations were anticipated.

Upon my return to the office, I found a cablegram awaiting me. I tore it open with trembling fingers. It was from Italy and signed "Ormond," and contained this brief statement: "*Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.*"

I read the characters with quickening pulse. Was it possible that the man was aware of what had happened? Could he have an agent concealed in the house to keep him informed of all that occurred? Or was the man so finely constituted and possessed of so keen a knowledge of, and power over, the unseen forces of the universe that he could keep in constant telepathic communication with affairs in all parts of the world?

My reading and belief did not forbid the thought; I knew Ormond was in Europe, I had seen the notice of his arrival in Liverpool months before, and had received several letters from him acknowledging remittances, one of which had arrived but three days before. The cable bore the date of the preceding day—the day on which Brooks was murdered.

I laid it on my desk and shuddered. In my imagination I saw the yellow slip of paper assume the grisly shape of John Ormond's hand. Was it possible that I, too, would fall a victim to that terrible unseen power which we had left behind at Hedgewood?

But no! and I clenched my teeth. I was possessed of a still greater power, and I would cope with and overcome that other force, or lose my life in the effort. *For Jim and I had determined to spend that night in the room with the red paneled door.*

It was dusk when we arrived. The house looked especially gloomy and uninviting in the closing darkness.

The trees, stripped of their foliage, appeared gaunt and spectral against the sky. There was no wind. The usual woodland sounds, the sighing of the trees, the scraping of boughs, the twitter of birds and insects, were absent. An ominous silence brooded over the place.

I waited at the top of the steps while Jim was doing something about the car. He had shut off the power. I noticed that he examined the gasoline and water tank, and then, before joining me, he started the engine and immediately stopped it. Was Jim preparing for an emergency, I wondered? Was he going to flunk at the last minute? Courage in broad daylight sometimes evaporates under the spell of darkness. But one glance at Jim's face as he rejoined me was reassuring. The square set jaw, the eager look in his eyes—these did not denote a failing courage.

The intense silence was broken by the shooting back of the heavy bolt in the front door. Together, we entered the hall and stood a moment in the darkness. The house felt close and oppressive. Walking over to the switch, I flooded the rooms with light. Jim threw open several of the windows and let in the cool autumn air.

"There, that looks and feels better. How is your nerve, Dick?"

"I've got a grip on it," I replied, "but we're not to have such things as nerves tonight."

"Right you are; but I've brought this along as a substitute." He showed the butt of an automatic.

I smiled.

"What do you expect to do with that, Jim? Shoot ghosts?"

"I'll shoot anything that shows itself, man or ghost, or—devil."

Jim went to the piano and woke the echoes of the old house with selections of popular songs, while I found a congenial book in the library, and for an hour or more lost myself in its contents. About ten o'clock Jim sauntered in, smoking a pipe, and looking bored.

"There's nothing doing down here, Dick," he said. "Let's go upstairs."

I laid down my book and together we mounted the steps. On the landing I turned the electric switch which lighted the hall. Back in the shadows we could see the dull gleam of the red paneled door. Not a sound broke the stillness. The thick carpet on the hall floor buried the sound of our foot falls as we approached the room. For a moment we paused in front of it, while I selected the key. And then, just as I was about to insert it in the lock, the knob rattled loudly. We looked at each other.

"Are you afraid, Jim?"

"No!" he answered.

"Because, if you are, you'd better not go in. Remember Brooks."

He paled slightly and swallowed once or twice.

"I'm not afraid, I tell you."

"Very well; here goes."

I turned the key and the knob, and pressed against the door. Again I felt a resistance which gradually yielded, then ceased altogether, and, the door giving away under my weight, I was precipitated into the room. The place was dark, but Jim had brought an electric flashlight which he was now darting around the room.

Suddenly he gave a startled exclamation.

"Quick, Dick, look!"

He pointed toward the bed. It had been made up probably years before. The

linen and counterpane, once snowy white, were yellow with age. The impression of Brooks' body still remained. Then, before our eyes, the pillows were taken up and laid at the foot of the bed, the covering was turned back, and the pillows returned and neatly arranged, just as a maid would do. Only there was no maid, absolutely nothing. Jim's hand was clutching my arm.

## CHAPTER SIX

"EASY, old man, easy! This is only part of the performance," I said. "We are going to remain for the whole show."

Do not think that I am endowed with any superlative degree of courage. I am not. If I had obeyed my natural impulse I should have fled in a panic that instant. In fact, I should never have gone into the room. But I had undertaken this thing deliberately. I knew, or believed I knew, the conditions and consequences. If this were mere trickery, a close and careful investigation would reveal it. If it were of supernatural origin and some malevolent force was at work in this room, I was convinced that a cool and fearless attitude would overcome it.

The whole matter lay with one's nerves. If one had absolute control over them, the powers of darkness could inflict no injury. My studies and investigations into the occult assured me of this. And it was because Jim had no such assurance, because his courage was purely physical, that I was apprehensive on his account.

As if in contradiction to my thoughts, he uttered a grim laugh.

"Well," he said, "if this is an invitation for us to go to bed, I'm going to accept." And, handing me the flashlight, he deliberately walked over and threw himself upon the bed.

"It's too early, Jim," I said, vastly relieved at this display of nerve. "I'm not a bit sleepy, and besides we have some work to do."

Suddenly he sprang to his feet and brushed his clothes violently.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The rats in this house are awfully cheeky," he said. "I felt two as big as cats crawling up my legs."

I had seen no rats, although I had kept the circle of light full upon him.

We had brought a coil of wire and some electric fixtures, and while I held the door open, Jim tapped the hall wires and in a few minutes we felt more comfortable in a well-lighted and ventilated room.

A large, old-fashioned grate occupied one end of the room, and as on our first

visit we had discovered a fuel box in one of the empty rooms, we presently had a cheerful fire burning.

I had brought the book from the library which had so interested me, and, lighting my pipe and finding an easy chair, I prepared for such comfort as I might enjoy under the circumstances. I looked up from time to time at Jim, who was reclining on a couch, smoking placidly.

"Jim," I asked presently, "did you ever read 'The Haunted and the Haunters?'"

"No," he replied, "what's it about?"

"It's a ghost story with two men in a similar position to our own. One of them ran!"

"And left the other in the lurch? He must have been a rum guy; but that's the way with stories. They're always making a hero of one and a coward of the other fellow.

"Say, Dick," he continued, with a yawn, "let's have a game of Cribbage."

"Good thought," I answered. "Got a deck of cards?"

"Yes, I brought 'em along for the purpose."

While were arranging the table and chairs, Jim walked over to what appeared to be a heavy, box-like frame on the far wall.

"Hello!" he said, and then: "It's the picture with its face turned toward the wall."

He proceeded at once to turn the picture, for such it was, face outward. It proved to be a full length portrait of a young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, dressed richly in the style of the latter part of the Eighteenth Century. The face was an evil one, the eyes hard, the mouth cruel and treacherous. It was the likeness, undoubtedly, of one of the Ormonds, as the family characteristic stood forth prominently. The hands—enormous, monstrous hands—were depicted with careful detail as if the owner were proud of them.

The repugnant face, and those fearful hands, made a distinctly disagreeable impression on me, and I asked Jim to return the picture to its former position. He endeavored to do so, but found it immovable. Again he tried with all his strength, and failed. And at that moment a horrid laugh sounded through the room. Jim turned on me, his lips twitching.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded.

"I didn't," I said. "But come, if it is any satisfaction to the owner of that face to have it exposed to view, why let it hang. Let's get to our game."

We drew up our chairs. Jim sat with his back to the picture, the hands of which drew my eyes like a magnet; the whole figure brooded over us like an evil spirit. We played indifferently for an hour. Jim stopped to fill and light his pipe. As he was about to reach for the deck which lay in the center of the table, it was quickly lifted and, unsupported in the air, the cards began to fall in two piles. We watched them with staring eyes and rigid muscles.

Some unseen being was sorting the cards!

"The euchre deck," Jim whispered. "It wants to get into the game."

As if in confirmation of the words, the pack containing the face cards was taken up and skillfully shuffled. It was then passed to me to cut. I cut. Again the pack was raised and two cards drifted to me, two others falling at the empty space between Jim and me. This was repeated until I had twelve cards. The other twelve were then raised, were slipped rapidly between invisible fingers just as a skillful player would do, and then hung motionless, fan shape.

"I'm not in it, it seems. Play the game, Dick, if you know what it is."

"I think I do, but I'll know in a second," and I picked up and sorted the cards, made a discard and led an ace. Immediately a small card in the same suit dropped on my lead. The strange game continued.

Suddenly Jim leaned forward and looked into the hand of my opponent. I heard a smacking sound, like a blow, and Jim drew back with a cry, a livid mark on his face.

And then, before I could say a word, he sprang to his feet and, drawing his gun, shot once, twice, into the center of the suspended hand of cards. They flew in all directions, and at the same instant the automatic was snatched from his hand and he reeled violently backward and fell to the floor with a crash.

For a moment he lay there, then rose slowly on his elbow and stared stupidly around. Suddenly his eyes fixed and bulged. He got to his hands and knees and backed toward the wall, crab fashion. His eyes remained fastened, immovably, on some object that seemed to be creeping upon him. And then a blood-curdling shriek came from his lips, and with a cry of "Take them away, Dick, take them away!" he rose, pulled open the door and dashed down the hall and the stairs.

In another second I heard the crash of the front door, the sound of the quick explosions of the engine in the automobile, its rapidly retreating echo, and then silence—utter, absolute silence. It had all

happened so quickly I had been petrified into inaction.

With a cry of fear, I leaped to the door, only to have it slammed to in my face. With desperate, heart-breaking efforts, I endeavored to wrench it open. Useless!

I was trapped, alone, in the room with the red paneled door!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**S**LOWLY I regained my equilibrium and calm. Not without the strongest exercise of will power and reasoning, however.

Why I was not crushed, annihilated, in that moment of demoralization, I will never know. I only know that for some purpose the unseen power in the room was quiescent. But not for long.

As I turned, with my back to the door, I became dimly aware of some presence in the room. The temperature began to fall rapidly, although the fire burned brightly.

By this time I had recovered fully my grip upon my nerves and I waited, tensely but calmly, whatever was to follow. Then, quickly, like a candle, the fire was snuffed out.

"Come!" I said, "that trick has been worked threadbare. Can't you originate something new? I suppose," I continued, merely for something to say, "that the light will go next, although I am curious to know how you will get around a comparatively new element like electricity."

As if in answer to my words the thirty-two candle power lamp went out. I was in blank darkness! With an effort I repulsed the sudden rush of fear that assailed my heart; I resolutely ignored the hideous sensation that played up and down my spine, and, groping my way over to where the lamp hung, I reached for it, at first confidently, then, as it evaded my grasp, with frantic, desperate hands that stabbed and clawed the midnight gloom. At last, with a sigh of infinite relief, my hands closed round the still warm globe. *The key had not been turned.*

Back to the door I went with a leap, and peered through the keyhole. The lights in the hall were burning. I reached up and caught the cord that had passed through the crack made by the door settling away from the jamb. I pulled this gently, then walked, with the cord passing through my fingers, until I came again to the lamp. The circuit was intact. And yet I could get no light!

All of this time I was conscious of a presence near me. I felt something fol-

lowing my every step. I knew instinctively that if I gave way for a moment to the fear that was driving me, it would leap upon me. I again backed to the wall and waited. I had no knowledge of the time, of how long I had been alone.

The silence and darkness became unbearable. If the *thing* that was in the room with me would only show itself, would utter some sound, it would be a relief. This waiting, this suspense, were more terrible than any sight or sound could possibly be, and I knew that unless something happened quickly, my nerves would give way.

And then, after what seemed hours, when I felt that I must shriek aloud, I saw in the far corner of the room a dim, misty figure shaping itself into the darkness. At first I could make nothing of it, but gradually it resolved itself into the figure of a boy. A boy of about ten years of age, with yellow curls hanging about his face.

He was dressed in a rich, black velvet suit, silk hose and a pair of high-heeled, silver-buckled shoes. The face was handsome, but too matured for one so young. The eyes were hard and cruel, the mouth treacherous. Somewhere I had seen those features before.

My eyes lifted for a moment to the wall where the picture hung. I took a quick inhalation. Although the rest of the room was in pitch darkness, the picture stood out boldly, in a light seemingly emanating from itself. The eyes were gazing upon the figure of the boy below and, it seemed to me, the lips twisted into a sardonic grin. I understood now. The boy was the original of the picture, which was made at a later period in his life.

My attention was now called to the figure of the boy. He seemed to be calling some one. Presently into the field of vision romped a big Newfoundland puppy with which the boy played for a few minutes. In the play, the dog leaped upon the boy, bore him to the ground and soiled his clothes sadly.

In an instant he was on his feet, his face distorted with rage, his eyes gleaming savagely. He sprang upon the dog, and the monstrous Ormond hands, looking particularly grotesque on one so small, elenched around the dog's neck, the fingers interlaced at the back. The terrible grip did not relax until the dog rolled over and lay still.

The boy got to his feet and was viciously kicking the unresponsive figure when a woman, apparently a servant, appeared on the scene and seemed to remonstrate with the youth. He flew at

her in a rage, with great hands outstretched, but she fled in terror.

Suddenly he cringed and trembled violently, looking about with furtive eyes for a way to escape, as the figure of a man stood before him. A tall man, stern and dignified. He was an Ormond, and apparently the father of the boy. He pointed accusingly to the dog. The boy cowered in terror.

Then all the figures vanished, and I was again in blank darkness. During all this time not a sound had broken the intense silence.

Again my staring eyes saw a vague form taking shape. Again the picture flamed into view. This time the vision was that of a young man of twenty-eight or thirty. It was the exact counterpart of the picture on the wall, only more evil, more sinister looking.

Presently he was joined by a young and beautiful woman. She seemed to be pleading for something. He repulsed her. She fell to her knees, her hands uplifted. Then the same look I had seen when he strangled the puppy leaped into his face, and with a snarl which I could almost hear, he fell upon her and bore her to the earth, his horrid fingers encircling her fair young throat.

I tried to tear my eyes away, but could not, and there, before my sickening vision, I beheld a re-enactment of the terrible crime that had been committed in this room years before.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

PRESENTLY the form of the woman lay quiet, and the man rose to a crouching position. His eyes glared and then changed to an expression of terror. Before him stood the figure of his father, his finger pointing accusingly to the still form of the woman.

Again utter blackness for what seemed an interminable period. And yet again I saw an emanation from nothingness, that grew into a filmy form—this time the elder Ormond. He stood pondering deeply. Then a look of resolve, of terrible unchanging resolve, gathered upon his face. He clapped his hands. A servant appeared and received some instructions.

Presently there walked, or rather slunk, into the room the figure of the younger Ormond. He seemed to be livid with terror. Some words were spoken. Then the older man took a handkerchief and blindfolded the younger one. Without resistance, he was led to a heavy table where he was made to kneel down. At a word of command, the huge, monstrous hands were extended and laid

palm downward upon the table. Then the father, taking a large sword from the wall, stepped to the side of his son and with one blow sheared off both hands.

Instantly the light flashed on, the fire burned cheerfully in the grate. The picture on the wall looked down sardonically. Was it then all a dream?

I looked around for Jim. He was not there. I looked at my watch. But five minutes had elapsed since he left me. Again I tried the door and the window. Both were immovable. For one moment I considered jumping to the ground, but I discarded the idea immediately on account of the height. And again the fire in the grate disappeared. It was snuffed out like a candle. The electric light followed, and thick darkness once more enveloped me.

Watching intently, I saw the shapeless mist gather in the far corner, take form and assume the semblance of life. This time it was the figure of a bent old man with scanty gray locks. He was sitting on a bench, crooning back and forth over some object that lay in his lap. Suddenly he raised his head and peered eagerly, almost wistfully, at the picture on the wall which, in the midst of the glow surrounding it, leered back mockingly. The figure raised its arms as if in supplication, and I saw that both hands were gone at the wrists.

It was the face of Ormond, the uxoricide, old, hardened, evil, as it must have looked in the later years of his life. The old eyes fell again to the object on his lap which he fondled with his stumps of arms. They took life and began to crawl up the front of his coat, and I saw to my horror that they were severed hands. Large, hairy, monstrous hands!

For a time they nestled, one on either shoulder. The old man still weaved back and forth, his twisted mouth mumbling words. Suddenly he stopped and listened intently. One of the hands seemed to be imparting information to him, for it writhed and ran up and down his body. Then it stopped and poised motionless on his knees, and I saw that it had raised itself on three fingers and thumb, its long bony index finger pointing outward.

It was a moment before I realized the fearful significance of this. When I did I almost collapsed. The great, grisly hand, with rigid index finger was pointing directly at me!

Slowly the old eyes followed the direction of the finger; slowly, slowly, they raised and at last looked full into mine. In vain I tried to lower my lids, to turn my eyes away. Those fierce, cruel, devilish orbs held them immovable. He leaped



quickly to his feet. A look such as I had seen when he strangled the dog and the woman distorted his features.

He sprang toward me, then stopped short and looked at his useless arms. He gnashed his teeth in rage, but quickly whispered something to the two hands that were hanging to his shoulders. They seemed to understand, for immediately they crept rapidly from their perch, down his body, and to the floor. For an instant only they paused. Then, like monstrous spiders they crawled slowly in my direction.

I realized that the crucial moment had come, that now or never I must assert my will power, my courage, or I would never leave the room alive. Stiffing the shriek that rose to my lips I summoned all my remaining courage. I reiterated aloud my oft-repeated theory that the spirits of the dead could have no power over the living in the face of undaunted courage. Was mine undaunted? Yes! Yes! I shrieked it aloud. No power, however devilish, would overcome it.

And slowly the creeping, crawling hands, like huge, hairy spiders, approached me. They reached my feet. My heels kicked the wall. They had now clasped my ankles. Their clutch burned like fire. The figure of the old man was dancing in fiendish glee. The picture on the wall seemed to gloat. And now I

felt them crawling up my legs, the long nails of each finger digging sharply into my flesh.

My own hands seemed powerless. As they hitched themselves heavily, cumbrously over my stomach and heart I turned deathly sick. I felt I must soon give way. I don't know that I screamed, probably I did, for the inside of my throat ached intolerably.

If I could only get power into my own hands! I was no weakling. I could cope successfully with strong men. To use my hands before those others reached my throat! The vulnerable point. I thought of Brooks, of Jim—the coward! I gasped for breath. Oh, God, help! With one supreme effort, I unloosed the power that held me.

My own hands shot with desperate, superhuman strength to those monstrous things that were already clutching my throat. With one last effort of will I tore first one, then the other, from my throat and with a shriek of horror and loathing I dashed them from me. I heard a crash of glass. The picture before me was dissolved from view. I reeled and fell just as a loud *honk! honk!* sounded on the air.

I was dimly conscious of a crash of doors, of a blinding light, of Jim's voice—then utter, complete oblivion.

## CHAPTER NINE

LITTLE more remains to be told. Three months later I was removed from the hospital, a broken man. The serious attack of brain fever, following my terrible experience, was all but fatal.

During the whole period Jim never left my side. His remorse was pitiable. He has never ceased to execrate his cowardice in forsaking me.

But I do not now hold him a coward. On the contrary, I consider his act in coming back for me, after what he had seen, one of sublime courage.

I have no explanations to make, no theories to advance. I must add, however, that the portrait was found to have been torn from top to bottom, and the heavy glass protecting it, shattered into a thousand pieces. Back of the canvas was a cavity, in which rested the skeletons of two immense hands, and a manuscript which, so far, has defied all attempts to decipher. It may contain an explanation of the facts which I have related.

I no longer take any interest in the occult. My one thought and hope now is to live down, if I may, the recollection of that night of horror.

One word more. The last Ormond was found dead in bed, in a little hotel in Italy, on the same night I spent in the room with the red-paneled door.

## Table of Contents

The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

DRACONDA -----	3
JOHN MARTIN LEAHY	
THE CRAWLING DEATH -----	18
P. A. CONNOLLY	
THE CLOSED ROOM -----	27
MAEBELLE McCALMENT	
THE PHANTOM VIOLINIST -----	32
WALTER F. McCANLESS	
LUCIFER -----	36
JOHN D. SWAIN	
THE SPIDER -----	39
ARTHUR EDWARDS CHAPMAN	
THE AMAZING ADVENTURE OF JOE SCRANTON -----	41
EFFIE W. FIFIELD	
THE IRON ROOM -----	46
FRANCIS D. GRIERSON	
PRISONERS OF THE DEAD -----	51
PAUL SUTER	
THE DEATH PIT' -----	57
OSCAR SCHISGALL	
THE WAX IMAGE -----	67
BURTON HARCOURT	
POISONED -----	69
FARNSWORTH WRIGHT	
THE MAGIC MIRROR -----	73
MARY S. BROWN	
THE INVISIBLE MONSTER -----	75
SONIA H. GREENE	
THE PEBBLE PROPHECY -----	77
VALENS LAPSLEY	
THE TELL-TALE HEART -----	80
EDGAR ALLAN POE	
WEIRD CRIMES -----	81
SEABURY QUINN	
THE EYRIE -----	85
THE EDITOR	
THE SURVIVOR -----	94
EDWIN G. WOOD	

---

For Advertising Rates in *WEIRD TALES* apply to YOUNG & WARD, Advertising Managers,  
168 North Michigan Blvd., Chicago, Ill.