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# Fantasy

READER No. 6

**The CRAWLING HORROR***by THORP McCLUSKY**Also..* **JACK WILLIAMSON****H. P. LOVECRAFT****A. MERRITT**

*Although it is possible that the basic idea of The Crawling Horror may have appeared originally in the pages of forgotten Gothic novels or esoteric spook lore, its appearance in Thorp McClusky's chiller is the first to come to our attention. Certainly the antagonist in this tale has never been allocated a name in any of the standard compilations of demonology, being neither vampire, ghoul, ghost, goblin, werewolf, succubus, or anything else out of a satanic thesaurus. It is still quite new to occult records. The idea has appeared, since on only a few occasions (most widely known being Don A. Stuart's Who Goes There?), and has still not found a permanent name for itself. Several of the collectors of this fearful legendry have affixed a name of their own for this being; they call it a "vombis." From this they have derived an adjective "vombic" which has come to mean in fan circles something like "weirdly sinister." Well, there is no question that the thing in Thorp McClusky's tale is weirdly sinister. But just how thoroughly "vombic" it is, you must see for yourself.*

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## The Crawling Horror

by Thorp McClusky

I AM ABOUT to set down on paper a sequence of indisputable happenings. At some of the incidents I was personally present, and the story of the others has come to me through the testimony of unimpeachable and trustworthy witnesses.

I am a country physician, having practiced in this single village all my life, as, indeed, my father did before me. The people here are farmers, mostly of Dutch or German descent, with a few Poles and Lithuanians.

About two miles beyond the village Hans Ludwig Brubaker had his farm. The farm is still there, and it is worked by relatives, but Hans has gone. No one definitely knows where, or *what*, he is. We can only guess.

Hans lived there alone. His mother, who outlived Brubaker, senior, died

in 1929 or 1930, and Hans was left by himself. The village naturally assumed that he would presently marry. But, for some obscure reason, he did not, although he showed a decided preference for one young woman.

Now there is no way of definitely knowing just when the strange progression of events, at first of seeming unimportance, began. But, with the whole story complete, although I cannot say *when* it began, I can tell *how* it began. I know that, during the first months, Hans did not suspect anything out of the ordinary. Obviously he misunderstood, and so ignored, the small beginnings which led slowly, step by step, toward horror. He told me, possibly three months ago, how it had begun.

"I thought the rats were fighting, at first," he explained, with the uneasy, deprecatory laugh of the person who does not expect to be believed. "There was a powerful lot of rats about the place; the cats kept them down somewhat, but there always seemed to be more growing up, scratching and squeaking in the walls.

"But the idea of their *fighting*; I remember thinking that there must be one awful big fellow in there somewhere. I could hear him scuffle, and then—*plop!*—down he'd come off a crossbeam between the walls, soft and heavy-like.

"And the cats heard him, too. I watched them for a few weeks, snooping around, excited-like, heard that big fellow go *plop* every once in a while, listened to the squeaking and running in the walls that seemed, somehow, scared. The idea got into my head that the big one was a killer. He was, too, there's not a doubt of it. Whenever he was in one place the rest were elsewhere; the mice began to desert the house for the barn. My cats got quite a number of them that way.

"Along about then a strange thing happened. One day I noticed a strange cat hanging around; white, she was, and pretty. She stayed around the porch while I was feeding my own cats, and I tried to pet her and feed her, but she wouldn't come near me and she wouldn't eat—seemed interested only in Peter, a big tiger-cat of mine.

"Well, that was natural, even if it did seem funny that she wouldn't eat. Peter watched her some, and that night he stayed out.

"He never came back. And I never heard the big rat, from that night on, in the walls again.

"You know how cats are around a farm—they earn their keep, and they're good company. I always had seven or eight, sometimes as many as

a dozen of them. And my cats began to disappear, one by one. In two weeks there were only a couple left.

"I couldn't understand it; I remember that I began to think somebody was poisoning them. The two that were left looked sick and scared, too, as if they knew something was wrong, and then, one day, they went away, and never came back.

"Even then I didn't have any suspicions that came near the truth, and for quite a while after that I didn't notice anything.

"But it began again. This night was colder, I remember. It must have been around the first of November. I had a chunk fire going. It was evening, and I was sitting with my feet in the oven. My shoes were on the floor on the left side of the chair, a big Morris chair that's in the kitchen—the fire was nice and warm, the doors were all shut, and I was smoking my pipe.

"The house was still as death; one of my two collie dogs was outside somewhere, and the other one, Nan, was lying close to the stove at my right, a foot or so from my chair, soaking in the warmth, sleeping. It must have been about half past nine; it certainly wasn't later than that.

"I enjoy that last hour or so before I get into bed; everything is done for the day and I can lie back and rest and think. I had everything arranged for solid comfort, the chair-back was set just right, and my pipe was going good.

"Looking back, now, and trying to remember, I must have dozed off for a few minutes. I forget whether I put my pipe out or not—maybe it just hung loose in my left hand and went out of itself; anyway, I found it on the floor beside the stove, afterward. Yes, I was probably just sleeping, with the pipe dangling in my hand.

"My right arm was hanging from the chair arm, limp-like, and as I began to come out of that little snooze I reached down to stroke the dog. But as I came wide awake I realized that there was something queer about that thing under my hand, beside my chair.

"It didn't *feel* like a dog's back. It was the right distance from the floor, but it was slippery, and there wasn't any hair on it. My hand kept moving, but right off I knew that, whatever I was petting, it wasn't any dog. I had the idea that if I pressed my hand down I could push my fingers right into it.

"All this took a lot less time than in the telling—maybe three or four seconds. I began to be scared. I turned to look, and God knows what I expected to see—certainly nothing like what was there.

"It was a slimy sort of stuff, transparent-looking, without any shape to it. It looked as though if you picked it up it would drip right through your fingers. And it was alive—I don't know how I knew that, but I was sure of it even before I looked. It was alive, and a sort of shapeless arm of it lay across the dog's back and covered her head. She didn't move.

"I guess I yelled then, Doctor Kurt, and I jumped out of the chair and reached for the poker. That slimy thing hadn't moved, but I knew that if it wanted to it could move like lightning. It was heavy-looking, too; I remember thinking that it must have weighed about fifty pounds.

"I hit at the thing with a poker, and quick as thought the whole mess started sliding across the floor, stretching out as worms do, oozing under the crack beneath the door that leads onto the porch. Before I knew it the thing was gone.

"I looked at Nan. She hadn't moved, and she seemed asleep. I shook her until she opened her eyes. And her eyes looked *dead*. . .

"Well, Doctor Kurt, you'll believe me when I tell you that I didn't sleep that night. I caught myself listening for noises, not that I knew what to listen for, except the sound of that thing sliding back into the house again; for I remembered that it could go through a crack! If I looked once around that kitchen, everywhere, I looked a hundred times.

"Peg didn't come back all night. That was strange, because she usually stayed right around close. It was just as though she was afraid.

"As it was just getting light Peg came up on the porch. I was glad to hear her, and I let her in quick. Then she saw Nan.

"She made a funny sort of howling noise, and her ears dropped flat against her head. Then she went for Nan. Froth was beginning to run from her mouth—it was just as though, although she was trying to kill Nan, she was deathly afraid. It wasn't pretty to see.

"Nan didn't fight back. She just lay there, as though she didn't see what it was, as though she didn't know enough to try to fight, or run. If I hadn't dragged Peg off, Nan would have been dead in another minute. And even after I had put Peg outdoors Nan didn't move much; she just shuddered a little, and she didn't even lick at the places where the blood was running down.

"I had to shoot her, then. It made me sick to do it. Then I dragged her out off the back porch and went to the barn to do the milking. I didn't eat any breakfast. I felt sick to the stomach.

"After I had finished the chores around the barn I got a shovel and went back to the house.

"*Nan's body was gone.* There wasn't a sign of her—not a bone or a patch of hair—nothing but a clean scuffed place in the grass. At first I thought I might have made a mistake; maybe I had left her around the other side of the house. But I went around to the front porch, and Nan was nowhere.

"The funny thing, Doctor Kurt, is that somehow I knew that it would happen just like it did.

"I didn't say anything to anybody, then. I just watched, and waited. And a few weeks later I saw the dog that looked like Nan, Doctor Kurt. It was Nan, yet it wasn't. I saw her hanging around the barnyard, and I whistled to her, absent-minded, and then I remembered that Nan was dead. But it looked like Nan, and I knew that it was waiting for Peg to come out.

"I knew that it wasn't Nan, Doctor Kurt, because it didn't come when I whistled.

"Two or three times that week I saw that dog that looked like Nan and that wasn't Nan hanging around, and each time she looked thinner and weaker. And then, after a few days, I didn't see her any more. She had just gone away.

"For two weeks nothing happened. Then, one day, I spotted a strange dog, a big dog, hanging around. And that night Peg vanished. She never came back.

"You can see how it was, Doctor Kurt? I began to see a sort of pattern to it. First the mice, then the cats, then the dogs. I got to wondering if it would get the cattle next, or maybe the people."

Abruptly, Hans paused. I think that, then, I carried it off perfectly. I did not utter a word, but merely waited impassively. Whatever I did, or omitted to do, it gave Hans confidence, for after a moment he went on.

"Doctor Kurt, as sure as I'm sitting here, it's gone from animals to humans!"

"Humans?" I asked.

Hans nodded. "It's happened," he said softly. "One afternoon, three weeks ago, I was standing in the yard—you know that along about then we were having stiff frosts every morning and night? I saw this strange boy coming down the road.

"He wasn't more than twelve or thirteen years old, and he was wearing odds and ends of clothes that looked as though he had picked them up any-

where. I looked at him, and right away I knew that he was a runaway.

"The kid as he walked along kept looking at the house as if he had half a mind to stop. But he didn't stop, just went on past, slowly, looking back from time to time. I went down the driveway, and I almost called out to him, but I didn't. It was as if something inside me said, 'Don't call—that thing you see there isn't a boy, it's Death in the shape of a boy.' That's what I seemed to think, Doctor Kurt; I was scared, and ashamed, too. I was so ashamed that I went right down to the road with the idea of yelling at the boy. Then I happened to look down at my feet.

"You know I told you that there had been a frost, Doctor Kurt? It was cold enough all night to form good solid ice. And there had been a thaw for a couple of days beforehand. Well, that slushy stuff in the road had frozen, not hard enough to hold a horse or a cow, but plenty hard enough to hold a fairly heavy man, because when I walked on it it didn't crack or break except once in every five or six steps. But where that kid had walked, the ice was broken at every step—and he looked to weigh not more than half what I do!

"I looked at those tracks in the frozen slush, Doctor Kurt, and then I turned around and walked to the house. I knew then that the thing had come back. Maybe my house is home to it; maybe, because it began in my house, it likes to come back.

"I wanted to tell, then. But I didn't dare; I was afraid people would laugh. But I'm going to tell now, because two days ago the Peterson kid disappeared, and he hasn't come back. And what's more, he'll never come back! He's part of that thing that began in my walls, with the rats."

Hans stopped speaking. I knew that there was nothing more for him to tell. The room was oddly silent. Presently he asked, "What can be done about it?"

I didn't know what to say. But I felt that I should say something, should try, at least, to quiet the man's nerves.

"Go home," I advised at last, gently. "Get a good night's sleep, and come back tomorrow. I'll have thought it over by then."

## II

That night I sat up late, pondering the story Hans had told me. Perhaps, at that time, I almost believed him. And in the morning, as I had expected, he returned.

It all looked much more impossible in the bright light of mid-morning than it had looked the evening before. I grasped at the idea that, although something extremely strange might be going on, yet the explanation might come, presently, of itself, in a purely matter-of-fact manner. In effect, that is what I told Brubaker.

Hans went away disappointed, almost angry. And not more than twenty minutes after he left my office, Hilda Lang came in. She seemed extraordinarily perturbed.

"Doctor Kurt," she began abruptly, "do you think that Hans is crazy?"

"Why do you ask?" I returned. Talking with her was different from talking with Hans. She was a beautiful young woman, tall, long-waisted, slender-limbed, with fair blue eyes and yellow hair and a gloriously clear skin. There was something imperiously demanding about her that disturbed me.

She looked at me. Then she made a curious, impatient gesture. "Oh, don't pretend. You know that Hans came to you yesterday with a story. He has told me the same things that he told you. Doctor Kurt—you know about—all this. Do you think he is crazy?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry on that account, Hilda. Hans is not crazy. He may be fooled, he may even be fooling himself; but he is sane."

Hilda sighed in relief. "Thank God for that. I was worried." Then, as a sudden, new thought struck her, she leaned forward tensely. "But if he is sane his story is true!"

She paused. I said nothing.

"I'm going to marry him," she said abruptly. "He's been afraid of this thing long enough. If there's nothing to it, it shouldn't keep us apart. And if he's in danger, two people in that lonely house are better than one."

I waited a long time, while the room hung silent, before I replied. "You believe in this danger, then?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe in it. As I believe in Hans, I believe in it."

And, in a little while, she went away. . . .

For the rest of the week I went about my usual routine. Hans, of course, did not come back. But I learned that he suddenly married Hilda, and that they were living at the Brubaker farm. A day or two later I drove out to see them.

Hans was working about the back of the house as I drove into the yard. He straightened slowly, put down the tools from his hands, and walked over to the car. He looked tired, as though he had not been sleeping well.



Shutting off the motor, I climbed from the car. Then, while I was close to him, Hans whispered hoarsely, "There is danger here, Doctor Kurt—I can feel it. I watch every night, Doctor. I have seen things that I haven't told *her* about. I can't tell her. I want to sell the place and go away, where it's safe. But Hilda laughs—she hasn't seen the things I've seen."

"Just what have you seen?" I asked.

He looked at me eagerly. "Come to the house, tonight, after Hilda has gone to bed," he whispered.

I nodded. Then we were at the kitchen door and there was Hilda, smiling, beautiful in her tall, strong fairness, welcoming me to her home.

That night, at eleven o'clock, I returned down the rutted road that led to the Brubaker farm. It was abysmally dark, but it was not cold. I remember thinking that it might snow before morning. Long before I reached the Brubakers' I could see two tiny yellow lights at the back of the house, the kitchen and the back bedroom. I drove past the house a hundred yards, parked the car alongside the road, and returned to the house on foot.

I did not look at my watch; so I do not know how long I stood outside in the driveway. Waiting like that seems interminable, I know. And, obviously, I could not come in until Hilda was asleep.

At last both lights were put out, almost simultaneously, and in a few minutes, as I had expected, the light in the kitchen flared up again. I walked softly to the rear door and knocked.

Hans let me in immediately. I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes slightly dazzled by the brilliance within, and it was not until I had been comfortably seated beside the table that I noticed, with a start, what Hans was doing.

He was sealing the bedroom door off from the kitchen with wax, making the passageway between the two rooms hermetically tight! He worked with the rapidity of one who does a task he has performed before. Presently he had sealed the doorway in its entirety. Then he put the remaining mass of wax in a piece of brown paper and carefully hid it way behind the woodbox in the corner. He came across the room and sat down close beside me. We talked in whispers.

"I'm learning, all the time, what the thing can do," he told me. "It came back three days ago. But I'm tired, tired to death. I haven't slept."

I looked at him, at the reddish, bloodshot color of his eyes, at his sunken cheeks.

"Why don't you sleep now?" I suggested. "I'll watch."

He looked at me eagerly. "You're safe. It can't come in unless you're asleep, or unless you invite it in. I've learned that. But if anything happens, wake me!"

I nodded. "It'll be all right. Don't worry."

Exhausted, he lay back and closed his eyes. He fell asleep almost at once.

Outside it had begun to snow, and the soft, heavy flakes made a steady rustling against the window. I looked out curiously; I noticed that the window had been nailed shut and the crevices stuffed with putty and painted over. I went outside impulsively and looked at the bedroom windows. They too were nailed and puttied tight, and I saw that the whole back end of the house had been freshly painted.

"He's got those two rooms airtight and watertight, all right," I thought.

Back in the kitchen again, I remembered, uneasily, that I was supposed to be on watch. But nothing had happened. Hans still slept, the fire still burned softly, the snow drifted and fell away from the black window-pane.

And then, abruptly as a flash of lightning striking into the room, the whole calmness with which I had surrounded myself, my whole sense of security, vanished as though it had never been. Not that there was any physical happening. There was nothing, in that sense. But there was a sudden, sweeping realization that some mighty, malignant force had turned its whole attention upon the house. . . .

I sat up sharply and walked to the door, where I stood listening. There was no sound from outside, and the snow, I could see out of the corner of my eye as I half glanced at the window, was still falling steadily. I waited, perhaps five minutes. And still that terrible awareness of some horrible force overhanging, impending, persisted. Then I threw the door wide, and stepped out upon the back porch. But nothing was there.

I turned back into the kitchen. And then I saw, fleetingly, something move at the kitchen window.

The window was beyond the table, beyond the light, beyond Hans' sleeping figure. It was grayish with the constant touching of fingers of snow. And it seemed to me that, for a second, I saw something slipping down the window-pane, something that clung to the pane like a colorless jelly, almost like a wave of watery foam, almost like a nothingness that moved heavily down the window-pane and disappeared below the sill.

The glimpse, or vision, whatever it was, was fragmentary. I remember that I thought, even as I crossed the floor toward the window to look out,

that it might well be illusion. But when I reached the window I paused stock-still, pondering.

The snow had been wiped cleanly from the sill, better than it could have been done with a broom. And I realized that here at last was evidence, physical evidence, that something had been pressed down upon the sill, a few moments ago, for I could yet count the flakes as they fell thickly upon the still bare wood.

My lips moving unconsciously while I uttered soundless words, I stood there, watching the snow fall rustling upon the sill until the wood was again unbrokenly sheathed with white. *Something* had swept that snow away!

I went outdoors again, and stood again outside the window in the snow. I looked down, and at my feet the snow had been packed down. And, leading away from the house for a short distance, I saw a sharply marked track, like the trail that might be made by rolling a large ball. And beyond the rectangle of light that the window loosed into the snow-ridden gloom, that track became a trail of human footprints!

Then my courage deserted me. Only one thought remained in my mind, to get back into that house as fast as I could. I got back into the kitchen at once.

Hans was awake. The cold air from the open door had roused him. He looked at me, at first uncomprehendingly, then alertly, and I saw that he knew, pretty well, what had happened. He sat up, stretching muscles stiff from sleeping half erect in a chair.

"Did someone come to the door?" he asked.

I shook my head, pointing to the window. "There was a sort of gray fog against the window. It lasted only a moment. I went outside. There are tracks in the snow."

Hans looked at me queerly. "Tracks like nothing on earth, or human tracks?"

My voice was harsh and high-pitched as I answered, "Tracks like—both!"

As the day slowly lightened, Hans stripped the molding of wax from the bedroom door, shaped it between his hands, and affixed it to the lump behind the woodbox. I left the house before Hilda awoke, and returned to the village.

At twilight I drove my car again into the Brubaker yard, and walked to

the house, grayish, apprehensive-seeming in the falling darkness. Entering the house I realized at once that Hans had told Hilda everything. Stamped on the faces and engraved in the speech of both man and wife was a determination to fight the thing that threatened their home.

Hilda—brave girl!—brought out a pinochle deck. But before we could sit down to play there came an interruption.

A car turned into the driveway, pulled up beside the house, and a farmer came in, a man named Brandt, who lived near by. He shook his head when Hans asked him to sit down.

"My Bertha!" he stammered eagerly; "have you seen anything of her?" I felt a tingle of fear.

"She's gone! She's run away—she's been going around too much with that Irish Catholic, Fagan. I put my foot down. 'I'll run away, papa!' she told me. And now she's done it. She's gone. Did she walk to town? Two miles?"

"It's a bad night out," Hilda said doubtfully.

"I think that if you inquire at the houses along the road you'll probably find her," I said.

Presently the man went out. "Do you think it was—that?" Hans asked, when he had gone.

I shook my head. It was perfectly plain what had happened.

We began to play pinochle. And nothing out of the ordinary occurred. The malignant influence seemed to have departed the vicinity, the house seemed more than usually cozy and peaceful, and from time to time I caught myself wondering if, after all, I might not be acting like a fool.

### III

The next night, also, nothing happened. Hans, with his first-hand knowledge of the thing, suggested that it had "fed" elsewhere, and that there would be a quiescent period. And, feeling that I was neglecting my practice, I stayed away from the farm for a few days. But, late Saturday afternoon, I found a note from Hans.

"It has come back," he had written.

After supper I took my car and drove out to the Brubaker Farm. There had been a heavy thaw which had held on for several days; the roads were mere ribbons of mud and dirty ice.

Both husband and wife looked inhumanly tired. I noticed that Hans had not shaved for two or three days.

"We didn't want to trouble you," he told me. "We've slept a little, in the daytime, taking turns. But even in the day we can feel the thing near the house. And we're deathly tired."

"Sit quietly and don't speak," Hilda said softly, "and you will feel it."

I sat as she had asked, and, striking inward at me, I could sense the same crawling horror that I had known before. I looked at the others.

"Yes, I can feel it. But Hans—Hilda—you're utterly exhausted. Lie down now and rest. I'll watch."

Hans nodded eagerly toward Hilda.

"Lie down and try to sleep, darling. Doctor Kurt will sit up with me. It will be safe."

Hilda stood up uncertainly and went into the bedroom. I poured out half a tumblerful of brandy, diluted it with water, and made Hans drain the glass. The liquor seemed to strengthen him, and I talked.

"We can beat this thing in two ways, Hans. We know that it is a mass of dead-alive cells controlled by a deathless malign entity. The Slavic peoples had the right idea when they, as they thought, trapped vampires in their coffins, drove stakes through their hearts, and sealed the coffins. What they did not truly realize was the nature of the being they combated. Because the thing is half physical it has, to an extent, physical limitations. It must sleep. And what, in effect, those old-timers did was to catch their vampire asleep and seal it in a box which, fortunately, happened to be strong enough to resist its physical strength. The stake through the heart meant nothing. It was the airtight, solid coffin that did the business, restrained the thing until, as its physical substance slowly died, so was its spirit rendered homeless.

"Now we know that this entity is strongly attracted to this particular vicinity. In the course of time it will find a permanent place where it can sleep, a barrel, perhaps, or a cistern, or an old trunk, or even a casket, if there's such a thing available. And, if we can find that hiding-place and, while the thing is within, seal its receptacle hermetically tight, we will have beaten it.

"There is yet another way to beat the thing, Hans. That way is for someone to invite it to absorb him, if it can. The entity will try, Hans, for it knows nothing of fear. Then, if the man's will is greater, the man will win.

Otherwise the thing will absorb him, continue to grow, and he will cease to exist."

Hans' eyes were closed. But when I stopped speaking he roused himself enough to mutter, "I'm—falling—asleep." Then his head drooped forward heavily.

Leisurely, I opened a book, and began to read. A night of wakefulness lay ahead.

The hours slipped slowly by. I could hear Hilda, through the half-opened bedroom door, breathing slowly and deeply. Hans, beside me, snored irregularly.

It was close to three when I heard footsteps sloshing up the driveway, passing around behind the house, hesitating, slowly ascending the steps. Then a knock.

Looking back now I think that, at that moment, I was horribly afraid, even though a revolver lay on the table and I certainly had no lurking fear that the thing would walk up to the house like that.

My body chilled with fear, I opened the door. And then I exclaimed with relief, for, outside on the porch, bedraggled with mud and slush, stood eighteen-year-old Bertha Brandt. She wore a shapeless, dirty, unpresed coat. When she saw me she shrank back away from the door.

"Bertha, you poor kid! Come in, and dry out those wringing wet clothes and tell me what's wrong."

I noticed that she looked curiously at Hans.

"There's been sickness," I explained, hurriedly. "Nothing serious—Hans has been up two or three nights." I looked at her squarely. "So you're back!"

She glanced at me timidly. "You know, then, that I ran away?"

"Yes, I knew—but here, sit down by the fire. There, take off your coat."

Suddenly, for some unaccountable reason, I remembered *why* I was at Brubaker's at three o'clock in the morning; I remembered all that Hans had told me about the strange white cat, about the dog that looked like Nan, about the boy who had wandered down the road. I laughed, then, at the silliness of it.

"This is Bertha, all right," I told myself. "She's the same girl she always was, right as rain, except that she's a little tired."

And, almost aping my thought, Bertha said, "Could I lie down beside Hilda? I daren't go home tonight. I daren't!"

I was pottering around the stove with my back turned toward the girl,

trying to warm over some coffee. "Lie down beside Hilda?" I said absently. "In a minute . . . in a minute."

I went to the corner cupboard and found a cup and saucer. Then I poured out the coffee, doctored it plentifully with milk and sugar, and turned back to Bertha. She was not in the room.

"Bertha?" I called softly.

The crawling, cold sensation had begun again at the base of my spine. To my inexpressible relief her voice answered from the bedroom. "Here, Doctor Kurt. I'm *so* tired!"

"Come and get your coffee. Then you can lie down and rest. What you need now is food."

"I know," she answered slowly. "But I'm *so* tired. And you said that 'in a minute' I could lie down with Hilda. It's been a minute."

Just like a child! But I was impatient. "You mustn't lie on Hilda's bed while you're all dirty. You'll have to wash first."

There was a little pause. Then the voice answered, still softly, "Hilda won't mind. Hilda's asleep. Hilda's *sound* asleep."

I went to the doorway and stood there uncertainly, half in gloom, half in brightness. I could see the figures of the two women lying on the bed, close against each other—almost, my imagination told me, melting together.

"Come, Bertha," I said mildly. "You're dirtying Hilda's bed."

There was no answer. As my eyes became more accustomed to the dimness I could see that, there on the bed, there were no longer two women. The two bodies were pressing together like ghastly Siamese twins, dissolving together into one.

My heart, in that instant, froze like a lump of ice. Somehow, my whole body trembling horribly, I leaped across the half-darkened room, knelt on the bed and dug frenzied fingers into the thing that had looked like Bertha and that was now *eating* the sleeping woman, dissolving her as might a powerful acid.

My fingers, beneath the muddy, tattered garments, sank deep, not into the firm flesh of a living girl, but into a yielding mass of protoplasmic slime!

Then I screamed. And, as I fought and tore at the flaccid, jelly-like mess I screamed again and again without pause, like a madman, without hearing my own voice, knowing only, from the tautness of my throat and the beating of my breath, that I shrieked.

It was like trying to grasp something that would not be grasped. The stuff, beneath the garments, ran like water in a bag. And I saw that the thing was slowly giving up pretense of human shape. The face was changing—the hands and arms and the contours of the body were dissolving. And, in the last second before it melted into shapeless slime, from that vanishing mouth came Bertha Brandt's voice, crying, "I didn't do it, Doctor Kurt! I didn't!"

Then the thing was only a mass of jelly, still clinging like some loathsome, colorless leech to Hilda's back and shoulders. My body shrinking, I crawled over it and through it, seized Hilda's arms, and pulled her off the bed onto the floor.

And then I screamed again, for of Hilda there was left only a half a body; her spine lay bare, her ribs curved nakedly, her skull gaped, her entrails drooped across the dingy carpet; it was like a slaughterhouse in hell.

Suddenly the light streaming through the doorway dimmed, and I saw Hans standing there, the gun in his hand. I saw the spurting, red flames, and heard the crash of firing. I saw the pulpy mass on the bed jerk and shiver as each slug tore through it. Then there was silence, yet through the haze of smoke I saw the mess of protoplasmic slime drip slowly off the bed and slide across the floor toward the horrible ruin that had once been a woman. And on my hands and knees I tried to push it back, scooping at it as, unconcernedly, the thing flowed across the floor, between my fingers, and again fastened upon Hilda.

Hans was kneeling beside me. But we couldn't keep the thing away from the dead woman—it wasn't possible.

Then, abruptly, Hans stood up. His face was ghastly white, like the face of a dead man. Without a backward glance he left the corpse with that awful thing still crawling over it, and went out of the room into the kitchen. And there I saw him take a pat of wax from the woodbox, heat it over the stove, and methodically seal the crevices in the kitchen door, leading out onto the porch.

When he had finished he nodded grimly at me, made a wide gesture that included kitchen and bedroom.

"A coffin, Doctor Kurt," he said slowly. "I have made a coffin of these rooms, and sealed the thing in it. When it is slime it cannot escape. And when it is in the shape of a human being we can fight it, so that it cannot unlock the door."

Then he went back into the bedroom. And, slowly, I followed.



We had been in the kitchen only a few minutes, but in those minutes the horror had finished its ghastly work. Nothing remained of Hilda; only a bag of clothes lay there, limply. And, nestling in them, glistened a great mound of watery, jelly-like stuff, faintly quivering, alertly alive.

Then I saw that Hans had brought matches and strips of newspaper. As I watched, he twisted the paper into spills, lit one, and plunged the flaming mass against the globule of colorless life on the floor!

The mound of stuff quivered and writhed, and slid swiftly across the floor. As it sought to escape, Hans, his eyes intent, his stubbled jaws grim, followed it about the room, always keeping the blazing paper torches pressed against the shrinking, unholy thing. The air was becoming thick with rancid smoke, and the odor of burning flesh filled the room.

Stumbling, sobbing, together we attacked the horror. Here and there on the floor and carpet showed brown, charred smears. The thing's silent, sliding attempts to escape were, somehow, more terrible than if it had cried out in agony. The smoke in the room had become a thick haze.

And then the thing seemed to gather purpose. It rolled swiftly across the bedroom floor, stopped upon the disheveled pile of clothes that Hilda had worn and, as we paused to light fresh spills, it changed.

It reared erect as a fountain might gush up. It put forth arms, developed breasts, overspread itself with color. In the time that it might take to draw a long breath the thing had vanished and a something that we knew to be that same ghastly entity, but that looked as Hilda had looked in life, stood naked there amid the jumbled clothes. Swiftly the entity—for I cannot call it by Hilda's name—stooped and drew about itself the skirt and blouse. Then, barefooted and stockingless, it walked into the kitchen.

Like a man awakening from drugged slumber, Hans leaped before the door, held up a blazing spill.

The thing spoke, and the voice was the voice of Hilda. "I want to go out, Hans." It moved forward slightly.

Hans, his features racked, almost unrecognizable, thrust the blazing paper before him menacingly. "You'll never leave this house. We're going to burn you!"

The thing that looked and spoke like Hilda shook its head, and I gasped to see the wavy, fine blond tresses undulate and shimmer with the gesture. And it smiled.

"You'll never burn me, Hans. I'm a prisoner, Hans. You want to destroy the thing that holds me, but you don't want to burn me to death, Hans. For as yet I haven't suffered, except from your fire. I'm Hilda, Hans!"

Then Hans asked hoarsely, and I saw that the fire was burning his fingers, "How can I know?"

The thing smiled. "You can't know, Hans. But if you destroy me, Hilda suffers. Let me go!"

Then Hans shook his head. "No. We will stay here until you starve, until you rot into nothingness."

Came the inexorable reply, "As I suffer, Hilda suffers. As I starve, she starves."

Hans looked at me, and I could see that he was nerving himself toward an incredibility. "Then, by heaven, Doctor Kurt, I will try *the other way!*"

He looked at the entity, at the thing that looked like Hilda.

"Come, Hilda," he said simply. "If you are a prisoner in that thing before me, hear me. I want to join you. I want to join you, and Bertha, and Nan, and God only knows what other unfortunate creatures with souls who have been overcome. But I do not surrender, and I cannot be beaten by guile. Let the thing come and attempt to subdue me. And help me, Hilda and Bertha and all the rest, help me."

He stood there before the door, his arms extended, his body rigid. And then the horror that looked like Hilda slowly moved forward, a smile on its lips, came closer and closer to him, touched him, was enfolded in his arms, lips touching lips. And Hans' strong arms flexed, and in turn it embraced him, a smile on its sweetly beautiful face. And as they stood there, the man and being whose very nature remains an unanswerable question, I prayed that the good overcome the evil. . . .

For minutes that seemed hours they stood there, motionless. Treading softly, I moved a step forward, and I caught a glimpse of the thing's eyes. And I was comforted, for I seemed to read in them something of humanity that could not have come to them through guile; I sensed that in truth those others who had been engulfed were fighting on the side of the man.

And, as I watched, the horror seemed to become frailer and weaker, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, as, before my eyes, the semblance of Hilda faded into nothingness and only Hans remained, holding tightly clasped in his arms a crumpled skirt and blouse. And even yet for long minutes Hans did not move, and I sensed that still some metamorphosis went

on, some change invisible to human eyes.

But at last Hans moved, and, looking at the bundle of clothes in his arms as might an awakened sleeper, he stroked them tenderly and put them gently down on the table.

At last he spoke to me, and his voice was the voice of the man I had known, but immeasurably more beautiful, immeasurably more strong.

"We worked together, we fought together, Hilda and Bertha and those unfortunate boys and Nan—and you, Doctor Kurt, too. And we have won."

He walked across the floor to the center of the room, and I watched the stout boards give beneath his weight. "And yet I can feel the thing inside me, like a devilish flame that would eat me if it could. It is in me, and I think that it cannot escape. I pray that it never overcome me and escape."

Then he looked at me thoughtfully. "In the eyes of the town, Doctor Kurt, there is a mystery here. Hilda is gone, and Bertha Brandt, and the Peterson boy. So you must go to your home, and you must say that you have been visiting me, and that I am insane. As for me, I will leave a note and go away. And the people will believe that I am a murderer, and that I have run away."

I bowed my head silently. He spoke the truth. He must go away. And the world would believe him a butchering maniac.

For a long time he did not speak, but stood there silently, his head sunk upon his breast, as he thought. Then, "I will walk to your car with you. I thank you—we all thank you—for what you have done. Probably I shall never see you again."

He led me from the house. Then I was sitting in the car, the motor running softly, while Hans stood there before me in the damp snow. He extended his hand.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," I said inanely.

And, while yet he stood there in the snow beside the house I drove away.

Thus it is that our village believes that Hans murdered with bloodthirsty abandon and then, fearing detction, mysteriously escaped.

I alone know the truth, and the truth weighs heavily upon me. And so I have begun to prepare a record of the true happenings in the Brubaker case, and presently I shall see that this record is brought before the proper authorities.

Meanwhile I wonder: where, and *what*, is Hans?