

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 30

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Creeper in the Crypt

By ROBERT BLOCH

A tale of stark horror in a gangster's hide-out in the dread cellar of an evil house in legend-haunted Arkham

IN ARKHAM, where ancient gables point like wizard's fingers to the sky, strange tales are told. But then, strange tales are always current in Arkham. There is a tale for every rotting ruin, a story for every little corpse-eye window that stares out at the sea when the fog comes up.

Here, fantastic fancy seems to flourish, nourished at the shriveled witch-paps of the town itself, sucking the graveyards dry of legend, and draining at the dark dugs of superstition.

For Arkham was a queer place, once; abode of witch and warlock, familiar and fiend. In olden days the King's men cleared the town of wizardry. Again, in 1818, the new Government stepped in to destroy some particularly atrocious burrows in and about some of the more ancient houses and, incidentally, to dig up a graveyard better left untouched. Then, in 1869, came the great immigrant panic in Old Town Street, when the moldering mansion of Cyrus Hook was burned to the ground by fear-crazed foreigners.

Even since then there have been scares. The affair of the "witch-house" and the peculiar episodes attendant upon the fate of certain missing children at All-Hallows time have caused their share of talk.

But that isn't why the "G-men" stepped in. The Federal Government is usually uninterested in supernatural stories. That is, they were, up to the time I told the authorities about the death of Joe Regetti. That's how they happened to come; I brought them.

Because, you see, I was with Joe Regetti just before he died, and shortly after. I didn't see him die, and I'm thankful for that. I don't think I could have stood watching if what I suspect is true.

It's because of what I suspect that I went to the Government for help. They've sent men down here now, to investigate, and I hope they find enough to convince them that what I have told them is actual fact. If they don't find the tunnels, or I was mistaken about the trapdoor, at least I can show them Joe Regetti's body. That ought to convince anybody, I guess.

I can't blame them for being skeptical, though. I was skeptical myself, once, and so were Joe Regetti and his mob, I suppose. But since then I have learned that it is wiser not to scoff at what one does not understand. There are more things on earth than those who walk about upon its surface—there are *others* that creep and crawl below.

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I HAD never heard of Joe Regetti until I was kidnapped. That isn't so hard to understand. Regetti was a gangster, and a stranger in the town. I am descended from Sir Ambrose Abbott, one of the original settlers.

At the time of which I speak, I was living alone in the family place on Bascom Street. The life of a painter demands solitude. My immediate family was dead, and although socially promi-

"There was something creeping across the cellar floor."



gent through accident of birth, I had but few friends. Consequently, it is hard to understand why Regetti chose me to kidnap first. But then, he was a stranger.

Later I learned that he had been in town only a week, staying ostensibly at a hotel with three other men, none of whom was subsequently apprehended.

But Joe Regetti was a totally unknown factor in my mind until that night when I left Tarleton's party at his home on Sewell Street.

It was one of the few invitations I had accepted in the past year. Tarleton had urged me, and as he was an old friend, I obliged. It had been a pleasant evening.

Brent, the psychiatrist, was there, and Colonel Warren, as well as my old companions of college days, Harold Gauer and the Reverend Williams. After a pleasant enough evening, I left, planning to walk home as I usually did, by choice.

It was a lovely evening—with a dead moon, wrapped in a shroud of clouds, riding the purple sky. The old houses looked like silver palaces in the mystic moonlight; deserted palaces in a land where all but memories are dead. For the streets of Arkham are bare at midnight, and over all hangs the age-old enchantment of days gone by.

Trees tossed their twisted tops to the

sky, and stood like furtive conspirators in little groups together, while the wind whispered its plots through their branches. It was a night to inspire the fabulous thoughts and imaginative morbidities I loved so well.

I walked slowly, contentedly, my thoughts free and far away. I never saw the car following me, or the man lurking ahead in the gloom. I strolled past the great tree in front of the Carter house, and then, without warning, balls of fire burst within my head, and I plunged, unconscious, into waiting arms.

When I recovered, I was already there in the cellar, lying on a bench.

It was a large cellar—an old cellar. Wherever I looked there was stone and cobwebs. Behind me lay the stairs down which I had been carried. To the left was a little room, like a fruit-cellar. Far down the stone wall to the right I could discern the looming outlines of a coal-pile, though furnace there was none.

Directly in the space before me was a table and two chairs. The table was occupied by an oil lamp and a pack of cards in solitaire formation. The chairs were likewise occupied, by two men. My captors.

One of them, a big, red-faced man with the neck of a hog, was speaking.

"Yeah, Regetti. We got him easy. We follow him like you say, from house, and grab him in front of tree. Right away come here—nobody saw not'ing."

"Where's Slim and the Greek?" asked the man who was playing solitaire, looking up. He was short, slim, and sallow. His hair was dark, his complexion swarthy. Italian, I decided. Probably the leader. I realized, of course, that I had been kidnapped. Where I was or who my captors were I could not say. My throbbing head cleared, and I had enough sense not to bluster or start trouble. These weren't local men—not with those clothes

—and there was an ominous bulge in the dark man's coat-pocket. I decided to play 'possum and await developments.

The hog-necked man was replying to the other's question.

"I tell Slim and Greek to go back to hotel with car," he said. "Just like you say, boss."

"Good work, Polack," said the other, lighting a cigar.

"I do my best for you, Joe Regetti," said the big man, in his broken dialect.

"Yeah. Sure. I know you do," the swarthy Regetti replied. "Just keep it up, and we're going to be all set, see? Once I put the snatch on a few more of these birds, we'll clean up. The local coppers are all stiffs, and as soon as I get a line on some more of these old families we'll be taking in the dough regular."

"I BEG your pardon," I said.

"Oh, awake, eh?" The thin Italian didn't move from the table. "Glad to hear it. Sorry the boys had to get rough, mister. Just sit tight and everything's going to be swell."

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied, sarcastically. "You see, I'm not accustomed to being kidnapped."

"Well, let me handle it," said Joe Regetti. "I'll show you the ropes."

"Thanks," I retorted. "You already have." And I pointed to the ones that bound my hands and feet.

"Sense of humor, eh? O. K. Hope your friends come across with the dough after they get this letter I wrote, or maybe the rest isn't going to be so funny."

"What next?" I said, desperately hoping that something would turn up to give me an opening of some sort.

"You'll see soon enough," advised the man. "First, I'm going to sit up with you down here for the rest of the night."

The Pole's face paled.

"No, boss," he begged. "You no stay down here."

"Why not?" rasped Regetti, harshly. "What's the matter with you, Polack—turning yellow on me, eh?"

"I'm not," whined the man. "But you know what was happen here before, boss—how they find Tony Fellippo's leg ly-in' on floor with no body left."

"Lay off the bedtime stories," Regetti chuckled. "You yokels make me sick with that stuff."

"But dot's true, boss. They never was for to find any more of old Tony Fellippo—just his leg on cellar floor. Dot why his mob go 'way so quick. They no want for to die, too."

"What do you mean, die?" snarled Regetti, testily.

The Pole's face paled, and his voice sank to a hushed whisper that blended with the cellar's darkness; a shadow voice in a shadow world.

"Dot what everyone say, boss. Dot house is witched—like haunted one, maybe. Nobody put Tony Fellippo on spot—dot feller, he too dam' smart guy. But he sit all alone here one night, and somet'ing come up from earth and swallow him, all but leg."

"Will you shut up?" Regetti cut in. "That's a lot of hooley. Some wise guy put the heat on Fellippo and got rid of the body. Only his leg was left to scare off the rest of his mob. Are you trying to tell me a ghost killed him, sap?"

"Yah, sure," insisted the Pole. "No man kill Tony. Not like you say, anyhow. Find leg, all right, but all over is lot blood on floor, and little pieces skin. No feller kill man like dot—only spirit. Vampire, maybe."

"Nuts!" Regetti was scornfully biting his cigar.

"Maybe so. But look—here is blood."

And the Pole pointed a stubby finger at the floor and cellar wall to the left. Regetti followed it with his gaze.

There was blood, all right—great, rusty blobs of blood, spattered all over the floor and wall like the pigments on the palette of a mad painter.

"No man kill odder feller like dot," the Pole muttered. "Not even ax make such mess. And you know what fellers they say about Fellippo's leg—was all full of tooth-marks."

"Right," mused the other, thoughtfully. "And the rest of his gang did get out of here pretty fast after it happened. Didn't try to hide the body, or do anything about it." He frowned. "But that doesn't prove any balony about ghosts, or vampires. You been reading too many bum magazines lately, Polack."

He laughed.

"What about iron door?" grumbled the Pole, accusingly, his red face flushing. "What about iron door back of coal in coal-pile, huh? You know what fellers down by Black Jim's place say about house with iron door in cellar."

"Yeah." Regetti's face clouded.

"You no look by iron door yet, boss," the man continued. "Maybe you find somet'ing behind door yet, like fellers say—dot where t'ing dot got Fellippo come from; dot where it hide. Police they not find door either, when they come. Just find leg, and blood, and shut up house. But fellers know. They tell me plenty about house with iron door in cellar; say it bad place from old days when witch-fellers live here. It lead to hill back of house; cemetery, maybe. Perhaps dot's why nobody live here so long—afraid of what hides on other side of door; what come out and kill Tony Fellippo. I know about house with iron door in cellar, all right."

I KNEW about the house, too. So that's where I was! In the old Chambers house on Pringle Street! Many a story I've heard from the old folks when I was a boy about the old man, Ezekiel Chambers, whose wizard tricks bequeathed him such an unsavory reputation in Colonial days. I knew about Jonathan Dark, the other owner, who had been tried for smuggling just before the terrible days of 1818, and the abhorrent practise of grave-robbing he had been said to pursue in the ancient cemetery directly behind the house, on the hill.

Many peculiar rumors were circulated about the moldering house with the iron door in the cellar at this time—about the door, particularly, which Dark was said to use as a passageway for bringing his stolen cadavers back to dispose of. It was even claimed that the door had never been opened when Dark was tried, because of his astounding and hideous claim that the key which locked it was on *the other side*. Dark had died during the trial, while in prison, babbling blasphemies that no man dared believe; monstrous hints of what lay beneath the old graveyard on the hill; of tunnels and burrows and secret vaults used in witch-days for unhallowed rites. He spoke of tenants in these vaults, too, and of what sometimes would come to visit the house from below when a wizard invoked it with the proper spells and sacrifice. There was more, too—but then, Dark was quite mad. At least, everyone thought it better to believe so.

Old tales die. The house had stood deserted for many years, until most men forgot the reason for which it had been forsaken, ascribing its vacancy only to age. The public today were utterly unaware of the legends. Only the old ones remembered—the old ones who whispered their stories to me when I was a boy.

So this was the Dark house to which I had been brought! And this was the very cellar of the tales in question! I gathered from the remarks between Regetti and the superstitious Pole that another gang had recently used it for a hideaway until the death of their leader; indeed, I even vaguely remembered some newspaper reports of Tony Fellippo's mysterious murder.

And now Regetti had come from New York to use it as a base.

Clever scheme of his, evidently—coming to an old New England town and kidnapping the local gentry to hold for ransom; then hiding them away in some old, deserted house so conveniently protected by superstition. I supposed that there would be more victims after me, too; the man was smart and cunning enough to get away with it.

These thoughts flashed through my mind during the argument between the Pole and his leader. But their altercation came to an abrupt halt.

"I wish you get out of here," the Pole was saying. "If you stay only one night dot t'ing he come. Dot's all Tony Fellippo stay."

"Shut up, you fool. Didn't we stay here last night, too, before the job? And nothing happened."

"Yeah, sure. I know. But we stay upstairs, not by cellar. Why not keep feller upstairs?"

"Because we can't afford to risk being seen," Regetti snapped, wearily. "Now, cut the chatter."

He turned to me.

"Listen, you. I'm sending this guy out with a ransom letter right now, to your friends back at the party. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut and sit tight. But any funny business means you're through, see?"

I kept silent.

"Take him in there, Polack, and tie

him up." Regetti indicated a fruit-cellar adjacent to the stairs.

The Pole, still grumbling, dragged me across the floor and into the room. He lit a candle, casting strange shadows over the cobwebbed, dust-drowned shelving on the walls. Jars of preserves still stood untouched, storing, perhaps, the crop of a hundred years ago. Broken jars were still strewn about on the tottering table. As I glanced about, the Pole tossed me into a chair beside the rickety board, and proceeded to lash me to it firmly with a stout rope. I was not gagged or blindfolded again, though the choking atmosphere about me served as a good substitute for both.

He left me, closing the door. I was alone in the candle-lit quiet.

I strained my ears, and was rewarded by hearing Regetti dismiss his henchman for the night, evidently to deliver the ransom note to the proper authorities. He, Regetti, would stay behind on guard.

"Don't run into any ghosts on your way," he called after his companion, as the big Pole lumbered up the stairs.

A slamming outer door was his only response. From the ensuing quiet I judged Regetti had gone back to his solitaire.

Meanwhile, I looked about for some means of escape. I found it at last, on the table beside me. The broken jars—glass edges to cut my bonds!

PURPOSEFULLY I edged my chair closer to the table end. If I could get a piece of that glass in my hands . . .

As I moved, I strained my ears once more to make sure that any noise made by the chair would be inaudible to Regetti, waiting outside. There was no sound from the chair as I reached the table, and I sighed with relief as I maneuvered my pinioned hands until they grasped a piece of glass firmly. Then I began to rub it

against the edge of the rope which bound them.

It was slow work. Minutes ticked away into hours, and still no sound from outside, save a muffled series of snores. Regetti had fallen asleep over his cards. Good! Now, if I could get my wrists free and work on my feet, I would be able to make it.

My right hand was loose at last, though my wrist was damp with mingled sweat and blood. Cutting away from behind was not a precise, calculated sort of job. Quickly I finished the work on my left, then rubbed my swollen fingers and bent over to saw at the ropes on my legs.

Then I heard the sound.

It was the grating of rusty hinges. Anyone who has lived in archaic houses all his life learns to recognize the peculiar, eery clang. Rusty hinges grating from the cellar beyond . . . from *an iron door*? A scuffling sound among the coal . . . *the iron door is concealed by the coal-pile*. Fellippo only stayed down here one night. All they found was his leg.

Jonathan Dark, babbling on his death-bed. The door locked from the other side. Tunnels to the graveyard. What lurks in graveyards, ancient and unseen, then creeps from crypts to feast?

A scream rose in my throat, but I choked it back. Regetti still snored. Whatever was going on in the outer room, I must not wake him and lose my only chance of escape. Instead, I had best hasten and free my legs. I worked feverishly, but my ears were alert for developments.

They came. The noise in the coal-pile abruptly ceased, and I went limp with relief. Perhaps rats were at work.

A moment later I would have given anything to have heard the coal rattling again, if only to drown out the new noise.

There was something creeping across the cellar floor; something crawling, as if

on hands and knees; something with long nails or claws that rasped and scraped. There was something croaking and chuckling as it moved through the cellar dark; something that wheezed with bestial, sickening laughter, like the death-rattle in the throat of a plague-stricken corpse.

Oh, how slyly it crept—how slowly, cautiously, and sinisterly! I could hear it slinking in the shadows, and my fingers raced at their work, even while my brain grew numb.

Traffic between tombs and a wizard's house—traffic with things the old wives say can never die.

Regetti snored on.

What bides below, in caverns, that can be invoked by the proper spell—or the sight of prey?

Creep.

And then . . .

REGETTI awoke. I heard him scream, once. He didn't even have time to get up or draw his gun. There was a demoniac scurrying across the floor, as if made by a giant rat. Then the faint sound of shredding flesh, and over all, a sudden ghoulish baying that conjured up worlds of nightmare horror in my shattered brain.

Above the howling came a series of low, almost animal moans, and agonized phrases in Italian, cries for mercy, prayers, curses.

Claws make no sound as they sink into flesh, and yellow fangs are silent till they grate on bone. . . .

My left leg was free, then my right. Now I slashed at the rope around my waist. Suppose it came in here?

The baying ceased, but the silence was haggard with horror.

There are some banquets without toasts. . . .

And now, once again, moans. My spine shivered. All around me the

shadows grinned, for outside was revelry as in the olden days. Revelry, and a thing that moaned, and moaned, and moaned.

Then I was loose. As the moaning died away in the darkness, I cut the final strands of rope that bound me to my chair. . . .

I did not leave at once, for there were still sounds in the other room which I did not like; sounds which caused my soul to shrivel, and my sanity to succumb before a nameless dread.

I heard that pawing and padding rustle along the floor, and after the shrieking had ceased, a worse noise took its place—a *burbling* noise—as if someone or something was sucking marrow from a bone. And the terrible, *clicking* sound; the feeding sound of gigantic teeth. . . .

Yes, I waited; waited until the crunching had mercifully ceased, and then waited on until the rustling slithered back into the cellar, and disappeared. When I heard the brazen clang of a rusty door grate in the distance, I felt safe.

It was then that I left at last; passing through the now-deserted cellar, up the stairs, and out unguarded doors into the silver security of a moonlit night. It was very good to see the street-lights again, and hear the trolleys rumble from afar. My taxi took me to the precinct station, and after I had told my story the police did the rest.

I told my story, but I did not mention the iron door against the hillside. That I saved for the ears of the Government men. Now they can do what they like about it, since I am far away. But I did not want anybody prying around too closely to that door while I remained in the city, because even now I cannot—dare not—say what might lurk behind it. The hillside leads to the graveyard, and the graveyard to places far beneath. And in olden days there was a curious traffic betwixt tomb and tunnel and a wiz-

ard's house; traffic not confined to men alone. . . .

I'm pretty positive about all this, too. Not alone from the disappearance of the Fellippo gang, or the wildly whispered tales of the foreign men; not alone from these, but from a much more concrete and ghastly proof.

It is a proof I don't care to speak about even today—a proof that the police know, but which is fortunately deleted from newspaper accounts of the tragedy.

What men will find behind that iron door I will not venture to say, but I think I know why only Fellippo's leg was found before. I did not look at the iron door before I left the house, but I did see something else in the cellar as I passed

through to the stairs. That is why I ran frantically up the steps; that is why I went to the Government, and that is why I never want to go back to witch-haunted, age-accursed Arkham. I found proof.

Because when I went out, I saw Joe Regetti sitting in his chair by the table in the cellar. The lamp was on, and I am quite sure I saw no foot-prints. I'm glad of that. But I did see Joe Regetti sitting in his chair, and then I knew the meaning of the screams, and the crunching, and the padding sound.

Joe Regetti, sitting in his chair in the cellar lamplight, *with his naked body chewed entirely to ribbons by gigantic and unhuman teeth!*