

« « « Gripping Tales of the Uncanny » » »

Strange STORIES

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The Curse of the House



*Brian Droome stood in the doorway,
a knife in his hand*

*Twelve Generations of Evil
Incarnate Rise to Avenge
the Abode of Secrets
Forbidden!*

By **ROBERT BLOCH**

*Author of "Eyes of the Mummy,"
"Feast in the Abbey," etc.*

"DID you ever hear of a haunted house?"

I nodded slowly.

"Well, this case is different. I'm not afraid of a haunted house. My problem is that there's a house haunting me."

I sat silent for a long moment, staring at Will Banks blankly. He in turn regarded me calmly, his long, thin face impassive, and his gray eyes shining quite rationally as they focussed at random on various objects about my office.

But a slight, almost imperceptible twitching of the lips indicated the undoubtedly hyper-neurasthenic tendencies which his calm exterior hid. Nevertheless, I mused, the man had courage. Victims of hallucination and obsession are usually quite unstrung, and their schizoid tendencies

generally are uncontrollably manifested. But Will Banks had guts. This thought came quickly, then was overmastered by curiosity regarding his statement: "There's a house haunting me."

He had said it so matter-of-factly, so calmly. Too calmly. If he had been hysterical about it, or melodramatic, then it would indicate that he realized his plight as a victim of an obsession and was trying to fight it. But this acceptance implied implicit faith in his delusion. A bad sign.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me the story from the beginning," I said, a bit nervous myself. "There is a story, I presume?"

Banks' face, all at once, displayed genuine agitation. One hand rose unconsciously to brush back his blond, straight hair from the perspiring forehead. His mouth twitched more perceptibly.

"There is a story, Doctor," he said. "It isn't an easy story for me to tell and it won't be an easy story for you to—to believe. But it's true. Good God," he burst out, "don't you understand? That's what makes it so awful. It's true."

I ADOPTED a professional suavity as I ignored his emotion and offered him a cigarette. He held it in nervous fingers, without lighting it. His eyes sought mine imploringly.

"You aren't laughing at me, are you, Doctor? In your capacity—" (he could not bring himself to say "psychiatrist") "you must listen to a lot of things that sound peculiar. You do, don't you?"

I nodded, offering him a light. The first puff braced him.

"And Doctor, another thing. You fellows have some kind of medical oath, don't you? About violating confidences, and all that sort of thing? Because there are certain—"

"Tell your story, Mr. Banks," I said, briskly. "I promise you that I'll do what I can to help, but in order to help you I must have absolute sincerity from you."

Will Banks spoke.

"I told you that I'm haunted by a house. Well, that's true, strange as it may sound. But the circumstances are stranger still. To begin with, I'm going to ask you to believe in witchcraft. Get that, Doctor? I'm going to ask you to believe. I'm not arguing with you to convince you, although I think that can be done. I'm merely asking you. That in itself should convince you of my sincerity and my sanity. Unless I miss my guess, the sure indication of a psychotic personality is when the deluded puts up a long, fantastic argument to convince his hearer. Am I right?"

I nodded. It was true.

"Well, I'm merely asking you to believe in witchcraft for the duration of my tale. Just as I believed, years ago, when I went to Edinburgh. I had been a student of the lost sciences men choose to call the Black Arts. I was interested in the use ancient sorcerers made of mathematical symbols in their ceremonies—surmising that perhaps they were unconsciously employing geometric patterns which hold keys to the outer cosmos, even the Fourth Dimension recognized by modern-day scientists.

"I spent years in the fascinating pursuit of olden devil-worship, traveling to Naples, Prague, Budapest, Cologne. I shall not say what I came to believe, nor shall I do more than hint at the survival of demon-worship in the modern world. Enough that after a time I established connections with the vast underground system controlling hidden cults. I learned codes, signals, mysteries. I was accepted. And material for my monograph was being piled up.

"Then I went to Edinburgh—Edinburgh, where once *all* men believed in witchcraft. Talk about New England witch-baiters! That's childish stuff compared to the Scottish town where not twenty or thirty old hags, but thirty thousand witches and sorcerers once lived and lurked. Think of it; three hundred years ago there were thirty thousand of them, meeting in old houses, creeping through

underground tunnels in which lay buried the black secrets of their blood cults. *Macbeth* and *Tam O'Shanter* hint of it, but vaguely.

"Here in ancient Edinburgh I hoped to find the final corroboration for my theories. Here in the veritable witches' cauldron of wizardry, I settled and began to investigate. My underground connections served me, and after a time I was admitted to certain houses. In them I met people who still live a secret life of their own under the very surface of a quiet, modern Scottish city. Some of those dwellings are many hundreds of years old—still in use—some in use *from below*. No, I won't explain that.

"Then I met Brian Droome. 'Black Brian' Droome he was called, and in the coven he had another name. He was a gigantic man, bearded and swarthy. When we met I was reminded of descriptions concerning Gilles de Rais—reminded in more ways than one. Indeed, he did have French blood, though his ancestors had settled in Edinburgh hundreds of years ago. They had built Brian's house, and it was this house that I particularly wanted to see.

"For Brian Droome's ancestors had been sorcerers. I knew that. In the infamous secret history of European cults, the clan of Droome occupied a detestable eminence. During the great witchcraft craze of three hundred years ago, when the king's soldiers came seeking the burrows in which the wizards lay hidden, Droome House was one of the first to be ransacked.

"For the Droomes presided over a truly terrible cult, and in their great cellars fully thirty members of the family died before the muskets of the outraged militia. And yet the house itself had survived. While thousands of ransacked dwellings had burned in those terrible nights, Droome House had been left gaunt and deserted, but untouched. Some of the Droomes escaped.

"Those surviving Droomes returned. The worship went on, but in secret now; the Droomes were a

devout race, not easily moved to abandon their religious tenets. The house stood, and the Faith stood. Until this day.

"But now only Brian Droome remained, of all the line. He lived alone in the old house, a reputed student of sorcery who seldom attended the gatherings out on the hills where surviving believers still invoked the Black Father. My connections secured me an introduction, for I was greatly desirous of seeing the ancient dwelling and looking at certain inscriptions and designs which legend said were engraved on the stony walls of the cellars.

"Brian Droome. Swarthy, bearded, burning-eyed! Unforgettable! His personality was as compelling as a serpent's—and as evil. Generations had moulded him into the epitome of a sorcerer, a wizard, a seeker after things forbidden. The heritage of four hundred years had made a wizard of Droome.

IN boyhood he read the black books in his old house; in manhood he walked the shadows of its halls in a palpable atmosphere of witchery. And yet, he was not a silent man, he could talk a blue streak, and was remarkably well-informed and well-educated—in a word, cultured. But he was not *civilized*. Brian Droome was a pagan, and when he spoke of his beliefs he had the trusting manner of a fearless child.

"I met him several times at—gatherings. Then I requested the pleasure of visiting him at his home. I had to wheedle, I admit, because he was damnably reluctant. On the excuse of showing him certain notes of my own, I at last obtained his grudging consent. Others expressed genuine amazement when I told them; it seems that Droome had never allowed strangers in the great house was alone in the sense that he entertained no *human* company.

"So I called on Brian Droome. When I went, as I told you, I believed in witchcraft; believed, that is, that the art had been practised and had a scientific basis—although

I did not concede that its achievements were in any way connected with the supernatural.

"But when I came in sight of the House of Droome, I began to change my mind. I didn't realize the full extent of the change until later, but even at the time the first glimpse of Brian Droome's dwelling filled me—filled me—with horror!"

THE last words seemed to explode out of Will Banks. He went on, more softly than before.

"Now you must mark this. The house stood on a hillside against the bleeding sunset sky. It was a two-story house, with twin gables on either side of a peaked roof. The house rose out of the hill, like a gigantic head emerging from a grave. The gables were horns against the heavens. Two jutting eaves were ears. The door was wide as a grinning mouth. There was an upper window on each side of the door.

"I won't tell you that the windows were like eyes. They were eyes. Through their narrow slits they peered at me, watched me approach. I felt it as I have never felt anything before—that this house, this centuried dwelling, possessed a life of its own; that it was aware of me, saw me, heard me coming.

"I walked up the path, nonetheless, because I didn't know what was to come. I walked up and the mouth opened—I mean, the door opened—and Brian let me in. *It* opened, I tell you. Brian didn't open it. That was awful.

"It was just as though I had walked into a monster's head; a thinking monster's head. I could almost feel the brain buzzing about me, pulsing with thoughts as black as the shadows in the long, narrow, throat-like hallway through which we walked.

"Bear with me while I give a few details. There was a long hall, with a stairway at the further end, branching off into side rooms. The first side room to the left was the study Brian took me to. How well I know the geography of that house! Why

shouldn't I know it? I see it every night in my dreams.

"We talked. Of course it's important to remember what we talked about, but I really cannot recall. Brian, immensely forceful personality though he was, paled into insignificance beside the weight exerted by that ghastly house. If Brian Droome was the product of twelve generations, then this house was the twelve generations incarnate.

"It was something that had stood for three hundred and eighty years, filled with life all that time. Filled with evil life, filled with weird experiments, mad cries, hoarse prayers, and still hoarser answers. Hundreds of feet had trod its floors, hundreds of visitors had come and departed. Some, many in fact, had not departed. And of those, legend said that some had not been men. Blood had run in a slow, throbbing stream.

"And the house — not Brian Droome but the house—was an aged person who had seen all of birth and life and death and what lay beyond. Here was the real wizard, the true viewer of all secrets. This house had seen it all. It lived, it leered down from the hill.

"While Brian talked and I automatically replied, I kept thinking of the house. This great study, a monstrous room, filled with massive bookcases and long tables burdened with excess tomes; this great study with its olden oak furniture, suddenly seemed in my mind's eye to be stripped of all extraneous objects. It became an empty room again—just a vast wooden expanse with huge timbers that formed the rafters overhead.

"I imagined it like that, dusty and deserted, robbed of all signs of visible habitation. Still that damnable impression of life remained. An empty room here was never empty. The thought agitated me.

"It agitated me so much that I had to talk about it to Brian Droome. He smiled, slowly, as I described my sensations. Then he spoke.

"'It is a much older house than even you imagine,' he said in his

deep burring voice. 'I who have dwelt here all my life still do not know what further secrets it may possess. It was built originally by Cornac Droome, in 1561. You may be interested in knowing that at this time the hill on which it stood supported several Druidic stones, originally part of the circle-pattern.

"Some of these were laid in the foundations. Others still stand in the upper cellar. And another thing, my dear Banks—this house was not built, it *accumulated*.

"It was reared upward for two stories, that is true. The gables and eaves and roof were then as they are now, and the second floor remains unchanged. But the house had once only a single cellar. It was not until the Faith prospered that we built again. And we built *downward*.

"We built downward, I say. Just as a church spire rears toward Heaven, we of the Faith appropriately build toward our own Kingdom. First a second cellar, and then a third; finally passages under the hill for secret goings-forth when under duress.

"When Droome House was entered, the King's men never discovered the lower cellars, and that was well, for they would not have liked what they saw, being unbelievers and sacrilegious. Since then we have been wary of visitors, and the covens no longer meet; the lower cellars have fallen into disuse. Still, we have held many private ceremonies, for the Droomes had secret pacts of their own requiring certain regular rites. But in the past three hundred years we and Droome House have lived together in solitude."

Will Banks paused, drew breath. His lips twitched, he went on:

"I listened eagerly to his admissions concerning the cellars which I so desired to inspect. But something of his discourse puzzled me—his use of the word 'we' interchangeably, so that at times it meant the family, at times himself, and at other times it actually seemed to imply the very house!

"He arose and stood by the wall,

and I noted how his fingers softly caressed the ancient wood. It was not the caress of a connoisseur handling a rare tapestry, not the caress a master bestows upon a dog. It was the caress of a lover—the soft stroking motion of understanding and concealed desire.

"This old house and I understand one another,' Droome burred. His smile held no humor. 'We take care of one another, even though today we are alone. Droome House protects me even as I guard the secrets of Droome House.' He stroked the woodwork gently."

BANKS paused again, swallowed hard before continuing. "By this time a revulsion had set in. Either I was mad, or Brian Droome was. I wanted my information and then I wanted to get out. I wanted to get out, I realized, because I never wanted to see this house again. I never wanted even to think about it again. And it wasn't the well-known fear of enclosed places—it wasn't claustrophobia, Doctor. I just couldn't stand the place, or rather, the unnatural thoughts it aroused. But a stubbornness was in my soul. I did not want to leave without the information I had come for.

"I rather bungled things because of the unreasoning panic I felt, the unreasoning panic that rose in my heart as he lighted candles in the gray room and peopled the house with walking shadows. I asked him almost point-blank if I could visit the cellars. I told him why, told him about inspecting certain symbols on the walls. He was standing by a candelabrum on the wall, lighting the waxen taper. As it flared up, a corresponding flare flamed in his eyes.

"No, Will Banks,' he said. 'You cannot see the cellars of Droome House.'

"Just that and nothing more. The glare, and the flat refusal. He gave no reason, he did not hint of mysteries I had no right to know, he did not threaten harm should I insist. No, not Brian Droome. But the house—the house did! The house

hinted. The house *threatened*. The shadows seemed to coalesce on the walls, and a gathering oppression fell upon me, seized me in impalpable tentacles that strangled the soul. I cannot express it save in this melodramatic wise—the house *hated* me.

"I was silent. I did not ask again. Brian Droome tugged at his black beard. His smile signified that the incident was closed.

"'You'll be going soon,' he said. 'Before that, a drink with me to stay your journey.'

"He walked out of the room to prepare the drink. Then a mad impulse seized me. Yet the impulse had reasons behind it. After all, I had come to Edinburgh solely for this end. For years I had studied, and here lay a clue I sorely needed. It was my only chance of obtaining the information I desired, and if the inscriptions were what I fancied, I could jot them down in a notebook in a moment. This was the first reason.

"The second was more complicated. The house—it threatened me. Like a mouse in the grip of a cat, I knew my doom but could not keep still. I had to squirm, wriggle. Once deprived of Droome's company, even for a moment, panic gripped me like that cat, pouncing on the helpless mouse. I felt as though eyes were watching me, invisible claws extending on every hand. I was unable to remain in this room, I had to move. Of course I could have followed Brian Droome, but the other reason impelled me.

"I determined to enter the cellar. I rose quietly, on tiptoe, went down the hall. It was dark and still. Now don't misunderstand. It wasn't *haunted*. This was not a mystery-thriller mansion, with cobwebs and bats and creaking noises. It was merely dark, and the dark was old. Light hadn't shone here for three hundred years, nor sane laughter broken the stillness. It was darkness that should have been dead, but it was alive. And it oppressed and terrified a thousand times more than the sight of a ghost.

"I found myself trembling when I located the cellar door with the steps below. The candle I had slipped into my pocket before leaving the study came into my hands, wet with sweat from my palms. I lit it and descended the stairs. I left the house's head and entered its heart.

"I'll be brief here. The cellar was huge and there were many rooms, yet there was no dust. I won't go any further to describe the signs of life. There was a chapel and long walls with the symbols I sought, and an altar that undoubtedly must have been one of the Druid stones Brian referred to.

"But I didn't notice that. I never did see what I came to see. Because in the second chapel room I kept looking at the rafters. The long brown beams overhead against the cellar roof. The long brown beams with the great hooks on them. The great steel hooks. The great steel hooks that held dangling things! White, dangling things! Human skeletons!

HUMAN skeletons that gleamed as they hung in the breeze from the opened door. Human skeletons still so new as to remain hanging articulated. New skeletons on hooks on the long brown rafters.

"There was blood on the floor and strips of flesh, and on the altar a thing still lay—not cleanly stripped—yet. There was a vacant hook waiting, but the thing lay there on the altar before the black statue of Satan.

"And I thought of Brian Droome's mention of *private rites* still carried on by his family. I thought of his reticence concerning guests, and his refusal to allow me entrance to the cellar. I thought of the further cellars that lay below; if this were the heart of the house what might lie beyond in the *soul*?

"Then I looked back at the dancing skeletons that trod the air with bony feet and swung their gleaming arms as they grinned down on me in mockery. They hung on the rafters of the House of Droome, and the

House of Droome guarded them as one guards a secret.

"The House of Droome was with me in the cellar, watching me, waiting for my reaction. I dared not show it. I stood there, in fancy feeling forces quiver about me. Forces radiating from the bloodstained walls. Forces bursting from the outlandish designs cut in the stones. Forces rising from the floor, from depths still further below.

"Then I felt human eyes. Brian Droome stood in the doorway."

BANKS was now on his feet. His eyes were staring. He was reliving the scene.

"I threw the candle and struck him in the face with the burning end. Then I snatched up the unmentionable basin from the altar top and I hurled it at his head. He went down. I was upon him then, desperately tearing at his throat. I had to act first, because when he had stood there in the doorway I had seen the knife in his hand. A cutting-knife, a sawing-knife. And I remembered the thing still lying on the altar. That was why I moved first, and now I was wrestling with him on the stone floor, trying to wrest the knife away. I was no match for him.

"He was a giant and he picked me up and carried me to the center of the room, carried me toward the vacant hook that gleamed in the line of skeletons. Its steel barb projected outward, and I knew he meant to hang me there. My hands fought for that knife as he forced me down that grinning line of eyeless watchers. He lifted me high, until my head was on a level with his own madly distorted face.

"Then my hands found his wrist. Desperation gave me strength. I drove his wrenched arm back, upward. The knife entered his belly in one great thrust. The force spun him around and he fell back. His own neck caught against the steel hook hanging from the rafter. As his great arms released me he was pinioned. Blood gushed from his

corded throat as I plunged the knife home again and again.

"He died there, on the hook, and he mumbled, 'The Curse of my House upon you.' I heard the curse through red hazes of madness. It was not dramatically impressed on my mind—then. Instead, there was only the gnawing horror of our struggle and his death; the fear which caused me to race up those steps without turning back, grope through darkness to the study—and set fire to the house.

"Yes, I burned Droome House, as one burns a witch or warlock; as they destroyed wizards in the olden days. I burned Droome House so that fire might purify and flame consume the evil that leaped at me as I ran out of the blazing dwelling. I swear the flames nearly trapped me as I ran, although they had only risen a moment before. I swear I clawed at the door as though it were a living thing that grappled with me, seeking to hold me back.

"Only when I stood below the hill and watched the red glow arise did I remember Brian's words. 'The Curse of my House upon you.' I thought of them as the door broke into a gash of scarlet flame, and when the people came and clustered about I still remained, heedless of danger, until I saw the walls of that accursed mansion crumble into glowing ash, and the place of evil destroyed forever. Then I knew peace, for a while.

"But now—Doctor—I'm haunted."

Will Banks' voice became a whisper.

"I left Edinburgh at once, dropped my studies. I had to, of course. Fortunately I was not incriminated in the affair, but my nerves had been shattered. I was on the verge of a true psychotic condition. I was advised to travel, regain my health and strength to fortify my mental outlook. So I traveled.

"In England I saw it first. I was spending a week with friends at Manchester; they had a country place just outside the industrial town. We rode about the estate one

afternoon and I lagged behind to rest my horse. It was about sunset when I rounded a bend and saw the hill. The sky was red above it.

"I saw the hill first. And then, something grew on it. It grew. You've read about ghosts, Doctor? About how they manifest themselves with ectoplasm? They say it's like watching a picture come out in the solution in which a print is developed. It comes gradually, takes shape. The colors fill in.

"It was the house that did that! Droome House! Slowly, wavering lines grew solid as I recognized the damnable head that leered out of the hillside. The window-eyes were red with slanted sunlight, and they looked straight at me. 'Come in Will Banks,' they invited. I stared for a full minute, blinking and hoping with all my heart that the vision would go away. It didn't.

"Then I spurred my horse to a gallop and fled down the road to my friends, never looking back.

"'Who lives on the hill?' I gasped. Jessens, the banker friend I was staying with, gave me a look. Even before he spoke, I knew. 'No one,' he said. 'Trying to pull my leg, are you?'

"I kept still. But I left the next day. Went to the Alps. No, I didn't see the Droome House on the Matterhorn. I had a good solid six months of peace. But on the train back to Marseilles I looked out of the window at sunset and—there it was. 'Come in, Will Banks,' the eyes invited. I turned away. That same night I went to Naples.

"After that it was a race. For six months, eight months at a time I seemed safe. But if sunset found me near a hillside, be it in Norway or Burma, the damned vision re-occurred. I've put it all down. Twenty-one times in the past ten years.

"I grew clever enough about it all. After the third or fourth manifestation I realized that this combination of sunset and hillside was necessary to produce the image—for ghost I would not admit it was. I avoided being out in the open after dusk be-

gan. But in the last year or so, I've grown more hopeless.

"Travel has proved fruitless. I cannot escape it. Naturally, the story has remained with me alone. I dared not tell anyone, and several occasions served to convince me that nobody saw the apparition save myself. What has frightened me is the later developments of the thing.

"Now, when I force myself to gaze steadily at the house, I see it for a longer and longer time. And each time—this in the last three years, I have finally computed—that house appears nearer and nearer to the spot where I am standing.

"Don't you understand what it means? Sooner or later I shall be before the house, at the very door! And one sunset I may find myself inside! Inside, under the long brown rafters with the hooks, and Brian all bloody and the house waiting for me. Nearer and nearer. Yet God knows I'm always on the road when I see it up there on the hill. But I get closer to it every time, and if I enter that place of ghosts I know *something* waits for me; the spirit of that house—"

WILL BANKS did not stop of his own accord—I stopped him. "Shut up!" I rapped sharply.

"What?"

"Shut up!" I repeated. "Now listen to me, Will Banks. I've listened to you, and I haven't commented; I expect the same courtesy in return."

He calmed down at once, as I knew he would—I was not a psychiatrist for nothing, and psychiatrists know when to let their patients talk and when to shut them up.

"I've listened to you," I said, "without any gibes about witchcraft or fantasies. Now suppose you listen to my theories with the same respect. To begin with, you're suffering from a common obsession. Nothing serious, just a common, everyday obsession—a cousin to the one that makes a habitual drunkard see pink elephants even when not actually suffering from *delirium tremens*."

Banks bridled. I stared him down.

"It's undoubtedly a symptom of a guilt-complex," I said matter of factly. "You killed a man named Brian Droome. Don't bother to deny it. We'll admit it. We won't go into the motives, we won't even examine justification. You killed Brian Droome under very peculiar circumstances. Something about the house in which the deed occurred was strongly impressed upon your susceptible subconscious mind. In a state of tension following the killing, you fired the house. In your subconscious, the destruction of the house loomed as a greater crime than the destruction of the man. Right?"

"It did, Doctor—it did!" Banks wailed. "The house had a life of its own, a concentrated life that was greater than that of a single person. That house was Brian Droome, and all his wizard ancestors. It was Evil, and I destroyed it. Now it seeks vengeance."

"Wait a minute," I drawled. "Wait—a—minute. You're not telling me, I'm telling you. All right. In consequence of your guilty feelings this complex has arisen. This hallucination is a mental projection of your own guilt; a symptom of the weight you felt while keeping the story a secret.

"Understand? In psychoanalysis we have come to refer to confession as a *cathartic method* whereby the patient is often relieved of mental difficulties by merely telling frankly the story of his troubles. Confession is good for the soul.

"It may be that all of your problem has been solved by simply unburdening yourself to me here. If not, I shall endeavor to probe more deeply. There are some things I wish to learn regarding your association with witchcraft cults; I will need to find out certain details of your mental attitude regarding superstitions and the like."

"Don't you see?" Banks muttered. "You can't understand. This is real. You must know the supernatural as I do—"

"There is no supernatural," I

stated. "There is merely the natural. If one speaks of *supernatural* one might as well speak of the *subnatural*, a manifest absurdity. Extensions of physical laws I grant, but such things merely occur in a disordered brain."

"I don't care what you believe," Banks said. "Help me, Doctor, only help me. I can't bear it much longer. Believe that. I would never have come to you otherwise. Even drugs won't keep me from dreaming. Wherever I go I see that cursed house rising up out of hills, grinning at me and beckoning. It gets nearer and nearer. Last week I saw it here—in America. Four hundred years ago it rose in Edinburgh; I burnt it ten years ago. Last week I saw it. Very close. I was only fifteen feet away from the door, and the door was open. Help me, Doctor—you must!"

"I will. Pack your things, Banks. You and I are going fishing."

"What?"

"You heard me. Be ready at noon tomorrow. I'll bring the car around. I have a little lodge up in the Berkshires, and we can put in a week or so of loafing around. Meanwhile I'll get a slant at you. You'll have to co-operate, of course—but we'll discuss those details later. Here now, just do as I say. And I think if you try a tablespoonful of this in some brandy tonight before you go to bed you won't have any more house-parties in your dreams. Noon tomorrow, then. Good-by."

IT was noon the next day. Banks wore a gray suit and a nervous frown. He didn't feel like talking, that was evident. I chatted gayly, laughed a lot at my own stories, and swung the car up through the hills all afternoon.

I had it all planned out in my own mind, of course. The first notes on the case were down. I'd handle him easily the first few days, watch him for betraying signs, and then really get to work from the analytical side. Today I could afford to put him at ease.

We drove on, Banks sitting silent until the shadows came.

"Stop the car."

"Eh?"

"Stop it—it's getting toward sunset."

I drove on, unheeding. He shouted. He threatened. I hummed. The redness deepened in the west. Then he began to plead.

"Please stop. I don't want to see it. Go back. Go back—there's a town we just passed. Let's stay there. Please. I can't bear to see it again. Close! Doctor, for God's sake—"

"We'll arrive in half an hour," I said. "Don't be a child. I'm with you."

I piloted the car between the green borders of the encircling hills. We headed west against the fading sun. It shone redly on our faces, but Banks was white as a sheet beneath its glare as he cowered in the seat beside me. He mumbled under his breath. All at once his body tensed and his fingers dug into my shoulder with maniacal strength.

"Stop the car!" he screamed.

I applied the brakes. He was crackling.

"There it is!" he yelled, with something that was almost triumph in his voice. Something masochistic, as though he welcomed the ordeal to come. "There's the house, on that hill. Do you see it? There!"

Of course it was just a bare hillside, some fifty feet back from the road.

"It's grinning!" he cried. "Droome is watching me. Look at the windows. They wait for me."

I WATCHED him closely as he moved out of the car. Should I stop him? No, of course not. Perhaps if he went through with it this time he'd throw off his obsession. At any rate, if I could observe the incident I might get the clues necessary to unraveling the threads of his twisted personality. Let him go.

It was awful to watch, I admit it. He was screaming about the "House of Droome" and the "Curse" as he went up the hillside. Then I noticed

that he was sleep-walking. Self-hypnotized.

In other words, Banks didn't know he was moving. He thought he was still in the car. That explained his story of how each time the imaginary house seemed closer. He unconsciously approached the focal point of his hallucination, that was all. Like an automaton he strained up the green grade.

"I'm at the door," he shouted. "It's close—God, Doctor—it's close. The damned thing is creeping toward me, and the door is open. What shall I do?"

"Go inside," I called. I wasn't sure he could hear me in his state, but he did. I counted on such an action to break the thread for him; watched his reactions carefully.

His tall form was silhouetted against the sunset as he walked. And now one hand reached out, his feet rose as though crossing an actual threshold. It was—I admit it—horrible to watch. It was the grotesque pantomime beneath a scarlet sky, the mimicry of a madman.

"I'm inside now. Inside!" Bank's voice rose with fear. "I can feel the house all around me. Alive. I can—see it!"

Without knowing it, I too, compelled by a fear I could not name, had left the car. I started for the hill. "Stay with it, Banks," I called. "I'm coming."

"The hall is dusty," Banks mumbled. "Dusty. It would be after ten years of desertion. Ten years ago it burned. The hall is dusty. I must see the study."

As I watched in revulsion, Banks walked precisely along the hilltop, turned as though in a doorway, and entered—yes, I said entered—something that wasn't there.

"I'm here," he muttered. "It's the same. But it's dark. It's too dark. And I can feel the house. I want to get out." He turned again and made an exit.

"It won't let me go!"

That scream sent me scrambling up the hillside.

"I can't find the door now. I

can't find it, I tell you! It's locked me in! I can't get out—the House won't let me. I must see the cellar first, it says. It says I must see the cellar."

HE turned and walked precisely, sickeningly. Around a bend. A hand opened an imaginary door. And then—did you ever see a man walk down non-existent stairs? I did. It halted me on my charge up the hillside. Will Banks stood on the hill at sunset walking down cellar stairs that were not there. And then he began to shriek.

"I'm here in the cellar, and the long brown beams are still overhead. *They* are here, too. *They* are hanging, grinning. And why—it's you, Brian. On the hook. On the hook where you died. You're still bleeding, Brian Droome, after all these years. Still bleeding on the floor. Mustn't step in the blood. Blood. Why are you smiling at me, Brian? You are smiling, aren't you? But then—you must be alive. You can't be. I killed you. I burned this house. You can't be alive and—the house can't be alive. What are you going to do?"

I had to get up the hill, I couldn't stand hearing him shriek such things

into empty air. I had to stop him, now!

"Brian!" he shrieked. "You're getting down off the hook! No—the beam is falling. The house—I must run—where are the cellar steps? Where are they? Don't touch me, Brian—the beam fell down and you're free, but keep away from me. I must find the steps. Where are they? The house is moving. No—it's crumbling!"

I made the top of the hill, panting. Banks screamed on, and then his hands went out.

"God! The house is falling—it's falling on me. Help! Let me out! The things on the brown beams are holding me—let me out! The beams are falling—help—let me out!"

Suddenly, just before my outstretched hands could reach him, Banks flung up his arms as though to ward off an impending blow, then crumpled to the grass.

I knelt at his side. Of course I did not enter a house to do it. It was under the dying sun that I gazed into his pain-contorted face and saw that he was dead. It was under a dying sun that I lifted the body of Will Banks and saw—that *his chest had been crushed as though by a falling beam.*



NEXT ISSUE
THE CREEPER IN DARKNESS

The Story of a Soul Possessed

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.