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"You who walk in the farthest shadows by the black lakes of Haii, listen to me."

# The Death Watch

By HUGH B. CAVE

*What ghastly thing was it that came clumping into the big house out of that wild night of storm? A goose-flesh story with a real thrill!*

**I**N A WAY it was my fault. But I had known Elaine Ingram for years, and when she asked me for the details of her brother's passing I could not force myself to tell her the truth.

When she said to me that night, right after the funeral, "Did he ask for me before he went, Harry?"—I lied to her. I had to.

"Yes," I said, "he kept asking for you.

He kept saying how much he loved you."

"Did he say he would come back?" Elaine whispered.

"Yes," I told her; "he said he'd come back."

She and her husband, Peter Ingram, took over the old house out there at the edge of the swamp. Peter was a writer; he could make a living anywhere. And Elaine insisted on moving in because, she said, Mark would be coming back sometime and he would surely return to the house in which he had died.

For six months they lived in that house, and I got to be pretty good friends with Peter. He'd come over to the radio station every now and then and sit with me while I was on watch. Sometimes on the mid-watch, which is usually dull around four in the morning, he'd poke about, asking questions, and I'd tell him what I knew about being a radio man.

He had a natural aptitude for that sort of thing and before long he could have sat there at the bug and worked a shift without much trouble, if I'd dared to let him.

One night he was sitting there, watching me, and when a lull came and I leaned back to light a cigarette, he said suddenly: "Harry, I'm worried about Elaine."

I knew what the trouble was. Elaine was convinced, you see, that her dead brother would come back to her.

"She just sits there in the living-room," Peter said, "and never says a word. Old Yago sits there with her. Harry, I've got to do something about it. It's driving me insane."

I said: "Why don't you get rid of Yago?"

"Elaine likes him."

This Yago had lived in various shacks around town for as long as I could remember.

He claimed to be a Seminole Indian. He drank a lot, and folks said he was queer. Whatever he was, Elaine had taken a fancy

to him and hired him to work around the place; and now he was living there.

"Harry," Peter said, "I've got to convince her that she's wrong, that the dead don't come back. But she won't talk to me any more. If I sent Yago away, she'd just go deeper into those damned books of hers."

I thought it over for a few days, and one day I said to him: "Why don't *you* read up on spiritualism? You can't expect to argue with Elaine unless you can talk her language. Study the stuff for a while and you'll be able to pick the holes in it."

He was fooling with an old amplifier which had been lying on my desk. He looked up at me, stared a moment, then nodded. I didn't see him again for two weeks.

**B**ILL MACY said to me one day: "What the devil is Ingram up to? I was in the post office this morning and there were half a dozen boxes of equipment from the Beacon Radio Company, addressed to him. I thought he was a writer."

"The poor guy's got to have a hobby of some kind," I said. "He's lonely."

But that night, to satisfy my curiosity, I figured out an excuse for calling on him, and drove over there about nine o'clock.

It was a black night, and when the nights get black in Florida they're like ink. I drove slowly because the road was bad, and I could hear the frogs grunting in the swamp all around me, and after a while I saw the lighted windows of the house.

You can't imagine a house in a place like that unless you've lived in Florida and seen some of the left-overs from the boom. This place was enormous. It had about twelve rooms and looked like a small hotel, very ornate and elaborate, and yet it was the only house for miles around.

As I remember, some wealthy chap from New York figured the town would grow out that far, and sank a small fortune in

the house and then realized his mistake. He put it in the hands of an agent, who couldn't sell it—because who would want to live miles from civilization on the edge of a swamp filled with snakes and 'gators and bugs?

So the agent rented the place to Elaine and Mark and their mother—this was before Elaine married Peter Ingram—and I think they paid twenty a month for it. Then the mother died and Elaine was married, and Mark stayed on alone.

He was a radio man and a good one, but that house did something to him. We at the station noticed the change in him and begged him to move into town, but he bought a lot of books and told us to mind our own business.

He gave up his job in August. Bill Macy relieved him one morning at eight, and he said to Bill: "Tell Crandall I'm through." Just like that. When I heard it, I went out to the house and begged him to reconsider. I told him it was unfair of him to quit like that, without giving me a chance to get a man to replace him.

He stared at me, and there was a queer, dull light in his eyes, and his eyes never blinked. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I have work to do."

For a month I didn't see him. Then the rumor spread around that he was sick, and I went there to find out.

He was sick all right. That queer, dull light in his eyes had become a wild glare that scared me. He looked half starved and had a raging fever.

I drove back to town and got Doc Wendell. And that night, while Doc and I watched over him, Mark died.

Now Elaine and Peter and old Yago had the place, and when I climbed out of my car that night, Yago opened the door to me.

"Hello," I said. "Is Mr. Ingram at home?"

Yago nodded and I followed him inside to the living-room. It was an enor-

mous room, with a big fireplace and a lot of musty furniture, and Elaine was sitting there, reading. Yago limped over to a chair near the fireplace and paid no more attention to me, and Elaine looked up and said:

"Hello, Harry."

"I've got a swell story for Peter," I said. "Is he around?"

"He's upstairs."

She didn't get up to go after him, but just sat there, staring at me. She was a good-looking girl, Elaine, a little bit on the short side but slim and trim, with very even features. She seemed tired, though, and I could see that she hadn't bothered much about her looks lately. Careless, I suppose, because they didn't have many visitors and she seldom went anywhere except to the village.

"I'll go talk to him," I said, but she shook her head.

"He's working. I'm afraid he won't want to be disturbed."

Well, there was something queer in the air, and I didn't exactly know what to do. I could have laughed it off and gone up to Peter's workroom anyway, but something in the way Elaine was looking at me gave me the creeps.

"It is pretty late," I mumbled. "Maybe I'd better come around some other time."

But just then I heard a door open upstairs, and Peter called down: "Is that you, Harry?"

When I went up, I saw right away that he was in bad shape. He was wearing slacks and slippers and no shirt, and needed a shave, and looked all in. He couldn't have looked any worse after a week's drunk.

"Been a long time since I've seen you, Mister," I said.

He nodded, and kept on nodding for a moment while he stared at me. He seemed to be making up his mind to do something, and then rather abruptly he gripped my

arm and said: "Want to show you something."

**H**IS workroom was at the end of the hall and he didn't release my arm until we were inside with the door closed. "Even my wife hasn't been in this room for the past two weeks," he said. "Look."

I looked, and my mouth sagged open.

It was a big room and reeked of stale cigarette smoke. The shades were down. I guessed that they'd been down, and the windows, too, for a long time. And the whole back end of the room was piled with radio junk!

"What the devil," I demanded, "are you doing? Building a broadcasting station?"

"Look it over," he said quietly.

I looked it over. He had some ultra-short-wave apparatus that was unlike any "ultra-freq" stuff I had ever seen. The receiver apparently was still in the experimental stage, with loose wires and disconnected condensers sprawled in a mess, but the transmitter was what made me suck in my breath.

I knew what this "ultra" stuff was all about, but the weird-looking amplifiers Peter had hooked to his transmitter stumped me.

He saw me squinting with disbelief.

"Don't worry," he said. "It'll work. I'm throwing the ultra high-frequencies clear out of the spectrum with that amplification hook-up."

"About all you'll do," I said, "is drive the boys at the station mad, interfering with our reception. What's more, you haven't a license."

"For what I'm doing I don't need a license. Besides, it's far from finished. I'll be a month working on it yet before I'm ready."

I walked over to his desk, and he had a stack of radio books there that would have tested the learning of an advanced electrical engineer. I started to look them

over but he said gently: "Never mind those, Harry."

He pulled open a drawer. There were more books in the drawer—books of a different sort.

"Some of these were in the house when we came here," he said. "Mark must have been studying them. Others I obtained by mail, from a collector."

I skimmed through a couple of them, but it was all Greek to me. Stuff about the Black Mass and Bethmoora and the black lakes of Hali. Stuff about voodoo and the dark arts.

"Hell," I said, "only a nut would bother wading through this junk. What's eating you, anyway?"

"She reads it," he said.

"Who? Elaine?"

"Yes."

"You mean she takes this junk seriously?"

He nodded. I didn't like the way he stared at me, or the way he handled those books when he replaced them in the drawer. He seemed to resent my disbelief, and he touched the books the way some folks touch a Bible. Reverently, sort of.

Then suddenly he said: "Elaine mustn't know about this. You understand? She thinks I'm working on a novel."

"That's what I thought, too," I said.

"Well, you know better now. But you mustn't tell Elaine."

I told him I wouldn't tell Elaine. I told him he could stand some sleep, too, and if he didn't ease up a little he'd find himself in bed with a nervous breakdown.

His answer to that was a crazy kind of laugh, and the same sort of laughter kept coming in little gusts from way down inside him as he walked with me along the hall.

"I'll be over to see you soon," he promised, and held my hand for a minute; and I felt his eyes on me as I went down the stairs.

I turned, said, "So long," and walked into the living-room to say good-night to Elaine. Evidently I didn't make much noise. Elaine didn't hear me coming.

She was on her knees there in the shadows, and in front of her was a table on which stood a photograph of Mark. Her hands gripped the edge of the table and her gaze was glued to the photograph. I thought she was praying.

Naturally I took a step backward and would have faded into the hall again without disturbing her. But then I heard the words that were whispering from her lips.

"Hear me, O Mighty Nyarlathotep!" she was incanting. "You who walk in the farthest shadows by the black lakes of Hali, listen to me, I entreat you! And you, O Hastur, O Prince of Evil! Send him back to me, for my own god has failed me. Give him to me as he promised to return. . . ."

I stood there, chewing my lips and gaping at her. It didn't make sense. It was a mumbo-jumbo that scared me, and I felt little shivers crawling over me.

Then, while Elaine went on repeating those same words, I saw Yago, the Seminole. He was sitting on the other side of the room, staring straight at me. It was dark over there, and his eyes were like red coals in the darkness, and I suddenly had a feeling that if I intruded, those coals would burn me.

I'd had enough. I tiptoed out of there and closed the front door behind me as softly as I could. I got into my car and turned it around and drove back out of the swamp.

That night I stood the mid-watch, and jumped at every slightest sound. My nerves were as tight as fiddle-strings. Even the shrill cackle of code couldn't make me feel at ease, and once, while I was working the *S. S. Exhibitor*, a big housewife spider came slowly through the open door into the operating-room, and I went over backward with a shriek.

I didn't go near Peter Ingram's house for three long weeks. I wanted to forget what I'd seen there. But then one night . . .

**M**ACY was supposed to relieve me at midnight. At eleven, his wife phoned to say he was sick, so I called George Latham's home, to get George out. His wife answered. George was at the fights. When he came in, she said, she'd hustle him over to the station.

At one o'clock I'd been on duty for nine hours, and was all in, and suddenly everything went wrong. A Norwegian freighter was calling with important business, and a mad clatter of meaningless dots and dashes came out of nowhere to drown him out and tear my ears off.

For half an hour it continued unabated. When George arrived, I was a mental wreck and was cursing my head off.

"Listen to it!" I said.

And suddenly there was something else for us to listen to!

It was the voice of Peter Ingram! For a while it slurred up and down the scale, the way a phonograph sounds if you press a finger against the turntable, slowing it, then letting it speed up, then slowing it again. We couldn't distinguish words right away, because of the crazy variations in tone. But finally the tone leveled out, and Ingram's voice roared through the operating-room.

George Latham and I stared at each other, and neither spoke. I don't know what he was thinking, but my thoughts were back in the shadowed living-room of that big house on the edge of the swamp. I was standing there with Yago's glittering eyes on me, and I was watching Elaine—because the words that came roaring through the phones were almost the same words I had heard Elaine whispering, on that other occasion.

Something about the black lakes of Hali . . . about Nyarlathotep and Hastur and

the Prince of Evil . . . and Mark, Elaine's brother, who was dead and who had promised to come back.

It went on and on, on and on, and we listened to it. An S. O. S. couldn't have silenced the air-lanes any more completely. Both George and I knew that every operator within listening distance was doing exactly what we were—forgetting his job and concentrating on that weird, crazy babble of words from Peter Ingram.

Finally George said explosively: "I've been telling you for weeks that guy is goofy! Listen to him!"

I was listening. *"Harken to me, O Mighty Nyarlathotep! You who rule the midnight forests by the shores of Hali, hear me. . . ."*

"I'm going over there," I said.

For Peter's sake, I had to. For our own, too. The crazy fool was interfering with all kinds of important business. If he kept it up, he'd have the law down on his neck, and then maybe it would get back to us—we'd be criticized for having let him monkey around the station.

I didn't want to lose my job. I didn't want Peter to get into any trouble either, because, in spite of what I'd seen and heard, I still thought the world of Elaine.

So George Latham took over, and I backed my car out of the station garage and drove over to that house on the edge of the swamp. It was raining a little, and the road was black and dangerous, and there was a light in Peter's workroom, but the rest of the house was in darkness.

I stepped into a pool of water at the foot of the steps and began cursing. The door was locked; I had to knock, and then had to stand there for what seemed like an hour, waiting for someone to answer my pounding.

**O**LD YAGO opened up. I said, "I want to see Peter; it's important," and I pushed past him. He turned to stare at

me as I strode to the stairs. I could feel his eyes eating into my back. Not until I was halfway up the staircase did he close the door; and while I was hiking along the hall to Peter's workroom I heard the Indian climbing after me.

Peter's door was shut. I banged on it. A chair scraped inside, and there was a queer, heavy silence for about ten seconds—which seemed a long time—and Peter said: "I'm not ready for you yet. Go back to bed."

"It's Harry Crandall," I said.

"Who?"

"Harry Crandall. And I've got to talk to you!"

The chair scraped again, and I heard footsteps. I should have been prepared, I suppose. I should have remembered how thin and emaciated he'd been on my last visit. But the door opened, and I took one look at the man and stepped back, cold all over. He was like a ghost.

"Come in," he said. "I thought you were my wife."

I kept staring at him. His face was dead-white, and his eyes were like holes burned in a sheet. He hadn't slept, hadn't eaten, for days; I was sure of it. His hands shook, and a bulging little muscle at the side of his mouth kept twitching, and his breathing was hoarse and fast, as if the effort hurt him.

He closed the door, put a claw-like hand on my arm and pulled me toward the desk on the other side of the room. The desk was a radio table now—of a sort. It was cluttered with wires and paraphernalia, and in the midst of the chaos hung a microphone.

"I'm working on ultra high-frequency waves," Ingram said. "This outfit here"—and he pointed to the transmitter—"is a special apparatus for throwing the signals outside the known spectrum."

I put my legs wide apart and jammed my hands against my hips and glared at

him. "You weren't working the high-frequency waves a while ago," I growled. "You raised hell with everything on the Atlantic coast!"

"I was experimenting then. Probably had some parasites. That's ironed out. Now I'm ready to begin."

I glanced over his apparatus. I'm no Marconi, but I know enough about radio to know that ultra high-frequency stuff is all in the experimental stage, and damned deep. Evidently he'd been doing a lot of reading.

But the book that lay open beside the microphone was not a radio book. It was one of those tomes from the desk drawer and was full of stuff I wouldn't want to read unless I were good and drunk in broad daylight. Queer formulæ, queer names, rituals . . . all that stuff. Necromancy, I guess you'd call it. And some of those formulæ, if I know my languages, were in Arabic.

"This," I said, "is what you were sending out over the air?"

He nodded. His hand was pawing my arm again, pulling me aside, and there was an odd expression on his face—a queer twist of unholy anticipation—as he lowered himself into the chair. The hand that closed over that microphone was as thin and bony as the fist of a corpse.

"Listen," he muttered. "I'll show you!"

"But——"

"Don't worry. I'll not interfere with the station. What I have to say will go out where no human words have ever gone before. I've worked for weeks to reach out into the void. Tonight, just before you came, I had an answer."

"An answer from what?" I said, frowning.

"I don't know yet. But now——"

Well, I stood there and listened to him, and before many minutes passed I was cold as ice, and afraid. I'm a sober man; I've stood many a mid-watch alone, with

wind rattling the windows and rain hammering a dirge on the station-house roof . . . but the words that whispered from Peter Ingram's quivering lips scared me.

It was the same old stuff at first, but the ghastly eagerness in Ingram's half-mad face made it different. The guy actually believed he was talking to someone. You could tell by his eyes, by the way he glued his mouth to the mike.

He mumbled Arabic, then went back to English. "Listen to me, O Nyarlathotep, O ruler of the darkest dwelling-places of the far departed. Hear me, in the name of the twisted ones who crawl through the halls of Hell! Hear me, in the name of her who suckles the legless children of the vast Lake of Hali. The Mass is midnight black, and crimson blood flows from the wounds of the gods I have denounced. Take me to thine own scaly bosom and hear my prayer. . . ."

"I was an unbeliever, O Mighty One. I sought thee first with ridicule for my wife who believes in thee. I would have proved to her that there was no life after death, no hope, no return for the departed. Now I would bring the dead back to her, and this is the night. This is the night I have awaited, O Prince of Darkest Dark! He died when the wind wailed as it does tonight, and when the storm gathered. Tonight the way is open. . . ."

Peter Ingram wasn't talking for my benefit. He didn't even know I was standing there watching him, listening to him. When his voice trailed off he still sat there, gripping the mike, and his hands were shaking, and beads of sweat dripped from his wasted face and splashed on the open book in front of him.

The room was still as a tomb. The rain whipping against the windows seemed to make no sound, and wind whining around the house had no voice. Not for me. My heart was sledging, and I was cold, and scared.



Something here was all wrong. In a kind of daze, I realized that. Weeks ago, Peter Ingram had dug his teeth into a study of this stuff in order to prove to Elaine that she was wrong in her beliefs. He'd been determined then to convince her that her dead brother never would or could come back. And now he believed all that she believed, and more!

The man was mad!

"Listen," I mumbled. "For God's sake, stop this business. Forget it."

But he was whispering into the microphone again, paying no attention to me.

"Send him back to her, O Mighty One," he pleaded. "It was on a night like this that he died, and on his lips was a promise to return. Grant him that dying wish this night! Let him return!"

**S**UDDENLY he stiffened, sat there with his eyes closed and began to tremble from head to foot. I took a step backward, staring at him.

"Listen!" he shouted. "Listen, Elaine! An answer! I swore to you I'd get an answer, and I have! I am!"

Well, I didn't hear anything. I told them later, at the police station, that I did not hear anything, and I repeat it here, so help me God, *I didn't hear anything!* Peter Ingram sat there, sucking breath and gasping it out again, and I stared at him, and that was all.

For about one minute—one endless, horrible minute—that was all. Then I did hear something downstairs.

A door opened. The wind hurled it shut again, and glass broke—so I knew it was the front door. Then I heard footsteps.

They weren't the kind of footsteps you'd have made or I'd have made. They were heavy, house-jarring thuds that rattled the walls and shook the floor on which I was standing. They were slow, plodding steps.

Someone down there had come in by the

front door—which was locked—and was walking along the hall. Someone huge, heavy. My mind flashed to a picture of Frankenstein's monster, striding in out of the storm. . . .

Peter Ingram swung around in his chair and stared at the door. The door was closed. I think now that Peter expected the thing downstairs to come up and open that door—to come up in answer to the words he had mumbled over the mike. But Elaine's room was downstairs, and the thing strode along the hall down there, and I heard a door clatter open, and then—and then a woman was screaming.

God, that scream!

The sound came wailing up to us, shrill as the zero-shriek of a hurricane. It ripped and slashed its way through the whole house, drowning out the yammer of the rain, the voices of the storm outside. For one long, ghastly minute it continued unabated, and then it became a hideous gurgling sound, and I heard something else mixed up in it.

I heard a guttural, snarling voice, and a sound of human bodies thrashing about in a death-struggle. The voice was a man's.

"Damn you!" it bellowed. "You left me alone! You left me here to rot! Damn you!" And then the voice became a grisly peal of mad, maniacal laughter, and the woman's screams were silent.

About that time, I reached the door of Peter Ingram's workroom, and got the door open, and went stumbling down the hall toward the stairs. And the voice was still hurling out bursts of triumphant mirth.

It was dark down there. I think I yelled out: "Elaine, I'm coming! I'm coming!" but I'm not sure of that—or of certain other things, either. I do know that a scurrying shape sped along the lower hall while I was descending the stairs. That shape was whimpering and sobbing like a frightened animal, and it rushed to the front door, which was open, and it van-

ished into the night. It was Yago, the Indian.

I do know, too, that Peter Ingram stood there at the head of the staircase and kept shouting: "They answered me, Elaine! They answered me!"

But Ingram was crazy. The doctors said he was crazy.

Anyway, I got to the bottom of those stairs and found a light-switch and went stumbling along the lower hall to Elaine's room. The door was open, and I would have rushed in if the light hadn't shown me what awaited me.

THE room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, and the bedclothes were all over the floor, and the floor was red. Red with blood. Elaine lay in a crumpled, twisted heap against the legs of a dressing-table.

I didn't have to go any closer to know that I couldn't be of any help. I could see her face, her throat. Something with unbelievably powerful hands had torn her. . . .

I backed out over the threshold. I turned on all the lights and staggered to the foot of the stairs and stared up at Ingram, who was still up there, waiting.

"Come down," I mumbled. "For God's sake, Peter, come down here!" But he just stood there, gripping the wall with one hand, the bannister-post with the other, and he kept shouting: "I've had an answer! Tell Elaine to hurry! I've had an answer!"

I left him there. I staggered out of the house and got into my car and drove to town. When the police went there, about half an hour later, they found In-

gram pacing back and forth along the upstairs corridor, enraged because his wife would not go up to him. And they found Elaine in her room downstairs, as I'd left her.

Later they listened to me, and I told them exactly what I've told you, and they stared at me and exchanged glances and said firmly: "Yago is the man we want. We'll find him."

They didn't find Yago. They haven't yet. He was a Seminole Indian, and the Seminoles know every inch of the Everglades, every hiding-place of the great swamp.

Yago will never be found, and perhaps that's best. Because if they caught him, he might tell them the truth—or what I think is the truth—and he might make them believe it. And then they would question me again, and I might tell the whole truth.

I think about it when I'm alone on the mid-watch. I hear the wind wailing out of the swamp, and hear the frogs grunting . . . and I think of the night Elaine's brother died. Because in the very beginning I should have told Elaine and Peter *how* he died, instead of lying to them.

I should have told them that Mark was a raving maniac when Doc Wendell and I sat beside his bed that night. I should have told them that he not only promised to come back, but *swore* to come back—swore in a mad outburst of rage to return and destroy his sister for having deserted him.

The hours of the mid-watch are long and black . . . and more than once, on my knees, I've prayed for daylight. . . .

