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My unsuspecting guide was still ahead of me.

The Door of Doom

By Hugh B. Cave

THE great mansion, rising out of the depths of the moor before me, seemed to be a thing endowed with life-in-death. In spite of the immense height of its crumbling turrets, it seemed to be crouching with outstretched arms, waiting for me to come with-

in reach. I stood there in a clump of stubble, staring at it uneasily.

For the better part of an hour I had been groping my way across desolate miles of barren country, through the enveloping darkness. Back in the little village of Norberry, where I had inquired my

The "Deathless Four" defy a threat macabre—and each, in turn, finds what lurks behind the mansion's grim Iron Door.

way, the native Britons had peered into my face and cringed away from me, muttering maledictions and whispering among themselves. The tottering old inn-keeper, as ancient and as wise as the moor itself, had seized my arm in one trembling hand and pointed off into the lonely, terrifying expanse of waste-land that lay before me.

"There ain't nobody lived there for years," he mumbled. "It's the house of the undead, it is. Ain't nobody ever goes there, neither tradespeople nor travelers. Folks passin' near in the night-time has heard horrible things—things that ain't, by no manner o' means, human. Voices from the grave, they be, singin' death chants. . . ."

Now, having trudged my weary way across the moor and finally arrived before my destination, I hesitated to step within reach of those ancient walls. Yet I feared the ridicule of my comrades more than I dreaded this repulsive, malignant pile. With heavy feet I groped the last hundred paces. Passing through the stone gateway, I climbed to the topmost step and let the iron knocker fall into its worn grooves.

Above me the twisted walls of the house hung in a menacing mass, resembling nothing so much as a giant vampire bat with outflung wings. Behind me, as I stood there, lay the flat, bleak expanse of scrub through which I had come.

THE door swung open as I waited. For thirty seconds I remained motionless, staring over the threshold into the slanted, expressionless, deep-rimmed eyes of the Oriental servant who had opened it. Then the servant said softly:

"Who are you?"

"Captain Reed," I informed him. He drew the great door a foot wider and flattened against it to permit me to pass.

"You go inside," he said impassively.

"The others, they are all here, waiting for you."

I let him lead the way. As I paced along behind him, marveling that his sandalled feet made no sound on the thick carpet of the hall, I glanced about me and shuddered.

I had hardly expected this sort of thing, even after the three-hour drag on a once-a-day train and the four-mile tramp across an untraveled moor. Perhaps I should have been somewhat prepared, knowing the peculiar whims and idiosyncracies of James Lamoran, and after listening to Rojer Macon's quiet exclamations in the Army and Navy Club the preceding afternoon. Yet of all the possible places for the annual reunion of the Deathless Four, this was certainly the most gruesome, the most dismally black and horrible, that Lamoran's acute imagination could have conceived!

Worse than that, Lamoran had actually taken a two-year lease upon this ghastly structure, and intended to live here. Macon had run across him in Soho, and learned the news; and then later, in the smoking room of the club, Macon had chanced upon David Pell and me, and passed the word along.

"What kind of a place is it?" Pell had demanded, and both he and I leaned close to catch every word.

"What kind of place? Precisely the sort of place you'd expect it to be, old man, when Doctor Jim Lamoran rents it! Lamoran wouldn't live in a *house*, you know. He has to have a haunted graveyard or a ruined abbey replete with vampires and all the necessary horrible creeping affairs. I haven't seen the place, of course; but Jim informed me that it's out Norberry way, sunk in the center of the deadest, blackest, loneliest stretch of moor in Cheshire. It's been there, he says, for half a million years or so, allowing for exaggerations. At any rate, it has neither date nor postmark on it."

NOW, as I trailed silently after the corpse-faced Oriental, I began to feel that Macon's dry comments were more fact than mockery. Moreover, I could hear Macon's modulated voice emanating from a closed door at the far end of the corridor along which I paced.

"He'll be here," Macon was saying. "Eddy Reed might be late once in a while, but he always arrives eventually. I don't envy him his walk across the moor at this hour."

"Quite possible," this in Lamoran's voice, "that he thinks we're all quite mad. He probably asked directions in the village, and listened to the fantastic tales that surround this place. He'll be here, though."

The Oriental opened the door. I stepped over the threshold into a huge reception chamber where my three soldier friends were seated at one end of the long table. Instantly the three faces turned toward me, as the Oriental droned my name. Then, scrambling out of their chairs, Macon, Lamoran, and Pell swooped down upon me, making me welcome and besieging me with questions.

A strangely mingled feeling of joy and sadness came over me at that moment, as they led me to the table. We four had been through the great war together, side by side, from start to finish. We alone, of the members of a certain squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, had returned to tell of the horrors. They had named us—the newspapers and the men of the Army and Navy Club—the "Deathless Four," and we in turn strove to perpetuate the memory of our companions by coming together at least once each year for twenty-four hours of companionship.

WE were a strange lot, and yet the chains which bound us together have bound many a stranger group of men under the same circumstances. Doctor James Lamoran, the oldest among us, was a tall, finely

formed gentleman of infinite knowledge, eternally studying some intricate phase of occultism which happened to meet his attention. Pell was the portly, overstuffed, altogether prosperous banker. Rojer Macon, our youngest member and hero, since he had brought down more enemy Fokkers than the rest of us combined, was once again a smiling, irresponsible sportsman of the blue blood—happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care, and ready for anything with a tinge of adventure in it!

As for myself, I am an American. My father and my father's father were soldiers before me. It is in my blood. In the spring of 1916, despairing that my countrymen would ever see action in the great combat, I threw my lot with the R. F. C. Now, to-night, fourteen years later, I found myself sitting here in this most sinister of ruined houses, in company with the three dearest friends I had in the entire world.

"Why," I demanded of Lamoran, "did you lease this ghastly house?"

He smiled before he replied. Then: "You asked your way in the village?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you heard nothing?"

"I heard enough," I frowned, "to send me back to London as if all hell and the devil were on my tail. The yokels hissed at me and whispered like gibbets, calling this place the—"

"The House of the Undead, eh?"

"Yes," I shuddered.

"Maybe they're right," Macon grinned. "Ever since we got here I've been hearing the most gruesome creaks and groans and—"

"Where did the Chinese chap come from?" I demanded, ignoring his banter.

Lamoran's eyes narrowed very slightly, as if I had touched upon a vital point. He looked straight at me and said simply:

"That I don't know."

"What? You mean you didn't bring him?"

"He was here when I came, Reed."

"But they told me in the village—"

"That the house has been uninhabited for fifteen years? That is true."

"Then how the devil," Macon exclaimed, "did the fellow—"

"People who have lived in this place," Lamoran said quietly, "have either vanished utterly from the face of the earth, or have fled in terror. Off and on, for many hundreds of years, the house has been abandoned. For the past fifteen years it's been empty. And yet—"

HE stopped to light a cigarette, shrugged his shoulders in resignation, and finished softly:

"When the estate agent escorted me here to look the place over early last week, the door opened in our faces and Tai-tse-Kiang stood on the threshold to welcome us!"

"That's his name?" Macon scowled.

"Yes. Tai-tse-Kiang."

"It's easily explained, of course," I suggested. "The fellow was out of work in London, heard you intended to take over this place, and slipped in before you to sort of establish himself, eh?"

"On the contrary," Lamoran smiled, "he says he has been here—always."

"What?"

"Always."

"But that's pure rot!" Pell sputtered, rubbing his hands together.

"Perhaps. We shall learn the truth in due time, I dare say. Meanwhile—"

Lamorán stopped speaking. The service door at the opposite end of the hall had opened abruptly, and the Chinaman, Tai-tse-Kiang, was pacing mechanically forward with four wine glasses on a tray. I had an opportunity, then, to see the fellow more closely and in a better light, though the light, of course, con-

sisted of nothing more inspiring than a massive candelabrum suspended by an iron chain from the ceiling.

Unquestionably there was something peculiar about the Oriental's stolid face. The eyes, in particular, harbored no definite light or color; they were like the eyes of a dead creature, with a suggestion of some filmy substance masking the pupils. But that, I believe, is the rule rather than the exception with people of the Far East. They are renowned for their stolidity and lack of emotion; and this man was evidently merely significant of his race.

He said nothing as he placed the glasses before us. When he had finished, he retired quietly and closed the connecting door. Lamoran glanced at me, smiled queerly, and lifted the glass to his lips.

"To our less fortunate companions who cannot be with us to-night," he proposed, rising to his feet. Then, under his breath, so that only I, who was closest to him, could have heard it: "And to the succeeding events of this evening of madness!"

WE sat down again. Lamoran pushed his empty glass aside and bent forward.

"I have a bit of a treat for you," he smiled, "and for myself. As yet I've not made a complete inspection of my new home. To-night, with you three to accompany me, I propose to do so. There are rooms and rooms and rooms; half a hundred or more of them. What they contain I haven't the vaguest notion. Perhaps we shall find something, eh?"

"Maybe we'll uncover some ghosts," Macon grinned.

"So our ace of aces believes in the supernatural? Not you, Rojer!"

"Well—"

"A place like this," Pell said eagerly, "ought to contain some pretty valuable art treasures. That's my hobby, you know. Oriental stuff,

in particular. If your everlasting Chink weren't so infernally alive, I'd stuff him and put him in my London house, Lamoran!"

"Good! And you, Reed?"

"Ready for anything," I grinned, "providing we all stick together. I don't believe in ghosts unless I'm left alone. Then I'm like the rest of humanity. I don't say there aren't any, because some damned thing might overhear me or read my thoughts and swoop down to offer proof that there are."

Lamoran laughed easily. Rojer Macon, too, began to grin; but the grin vanished with uncanny abruptness. He was sitting nearest the service door. I saw him stiffen suddenly in his chair and twist about as if something had brushed past him. His laugh ended in a gurgle.

I confess that I did not see the thing take place. I was busily staring at Macon at the moment, wondering what had come over him. Then Pell's rasping voice brought me about again.

"My God, what's this!"

Pell and Lamoran were both peering at the table top. Macon, too, lifted his head at that hoarse outcry and looked in fascination. There, lying on the silken cloth precisely in the center of the four empty glasses, lay a flat square of white paper, with written words scrawled over its surface! It had *not* been there before!

"Something—something brushed by me!" Macon whispered sibilantly. "I felt it!"

PELL said nothing. He reached out with nervous fingers to pick up the paper; then withdrew his hand and licked his lips. Lamoran, more calm than any of us, lifted the thing and read the message aloud:

"The Iron Door on the lower corridor must not be opened. All other rooms in the house are yours; but the Iron Door bars the secret of the

Master, and death is the penalty for intrusion. There will be no other warning."

Lamoran let the paper fall again. The last word he had uttered—the word *warning*—seemed to hiss in a double crescendo through the chamber in which we sat.

"Where did it come from?" Pell said huskily.

"Something went past me, I tell you!" Macon muttered again.

"Nothing came into the room," I said feebly. "Yet, the paper was not here when Tai-tse-Kiang brought in the wine."

Lamoran's critical glance passed from Pell's face to Macon's, then to mine, and finally back to the damning sheet of paper. Suddenly, with thin lips and hands clenched, he lurched to his feet, scraping his chair out from beneath him.

"Kiang!" His voice seared across the room with the intensity of a lash.

The service door opened slowly. Once again the Oriental paced forward with automatic steps, looking neither to right nor left. He came to a motionless stop in front of the man who had summoned him.

"Yes, sir?" he said unemotionally.

"Did anyone enter this room just now?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you?"

"Outside the door, sir, in the event that you called."

"This bit of paper," Lamoran said stiffly, "was dropped on the table less than five minutes ago. Have you ever seen it before?"

He jabbed the paper abruptly into the Chinaman's hand. The Oriental glanced at it, nodded, and passed it back.

"It has been given to every new master of this house, sir, for the past thousand years. Many have disobeyed it, and died."

"How do you know that?" I demanded.

"I have seen them go, sir," he said, turning to face me.

"How long have you been here?" I pressed, trying to smile knowingly at Lamoran.

"Always, sir."

"Always, is it? How old are you?"

"I was born," the Oriental said quietly, "hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, at the time of K'ung Tsze and the Chon dynasty. It was I who assisted K'ung Tsze, whom you call Confucius, to inscribe the Ta Hsueh. I was, and I am, the servant of him who rules the universe."

THE man was mad. There was no other plausible explanation. Lamoran, however, insisted on putting further questions, evidently for the purpose of confounding him. Lamoran knew more about ancient Chinese lore than any of us.

"What is this Ta Hsueh?" he demanded.

"It is the third of the four books, sir. The first is Lun Yu, containing information about K'ung Tsze; the second is the Book of Mencius, a disciple of K'ung Tsze; the third is the Ta Hsueh, dealing with social and political matters; the fourth is Chung Yung, a thesis on conduct written by K'ung Chi."

"Hm-m. And where did you work with Confucius?"

"In the city of Chung-tu, sir, when the master was made magistrate in the year 498 B. C."

Lamoran nodded, with a half-concealed smile, and waved the fellow aside. Turning about with a positive lack of expression, the Oriental retraced his steps to the service door, and passed through.

"Stark mad," I shrugged. "Else he thinks we are utter fools."

"What he said about K'ung Tsze—was it right?" Macon demanded. "It's a bit over my head."

"It was right," Lamoran admitted. "However, any educated Chinese

could supply the same information."

"And this infernal paper?"

"That," Lamoran said darkly, "is beyond me for explanation. Unless—"

But he left the thought unfinished. Thrusting the sinister threat into his pocket, he turned about with a dry laugh and said:

"Come on. Let's have a look at the place. For the time being we'll just let the Iron Door alone. The rest of the house ought to provide enough to keep us occupied."

We walked into the main hall together. Lamoran led the way, with Rojer Macon pacing close beside him. Pell and I stepped into the gloomy corridor with our shoulders rubbing, and Pell, leaning close to mutter into my ear, said significantly:

"It's a damned hoax, Reed, instigated by that bloody Chink. He's got something in that room that's worth money—some priceless art piece or something. I tell you I'm going to have a look before I leave this place!"

I grinned at that. It was like Pell to be belligerent about such an affair. Whenever Pell's nose caught the scent of an art secret, nothing in heaven or hell could hope to keep him quiet!

I thought little of his threat then. Later I remembered it—acutely. Meanwhile, we set about our tour of inspection.

THE hour was long after midnight when we finally returned from our tour of the immense structure. We found nothing; nothing, that is, beyond a most amazing and confusing labyrinth of unused passages and abandoned rooms. The house was constructed in four tiers, with a narrow, evil-smelling tower leading up from the rear. Only those rooms on the lower floor were furnished and revealed any signs of recent occupancy; and of those, only

the library held any interest for me.

We were tired and, I imagine, somewhat disappointed, when we filed into the reception chamber. Once again the Oriental servant, Tai-tse-Kiang, fetched drinks for us.

"I suggest we turn in," Lamoran said quietly. "I, for one, am about done for."

"A sign of weakness," Macon grinned. "You should ask the Chinaman how he remains awake for five hundred years!"

"You, Reed?"

"I'd like to have a look at the library," I confessed. "I'll turn in later."

Lamorán stood up, emptied his glass, and nodded.

"Felt that way myself," he smiled. "I think you'll find something—interesting. Try the right hand shelf against the farther wall, second from the bottom."

I stared at him. He laughed, then turned away.

"You can take one of the candles from the candelabrum here," he suggested. "The sleeping chambers are on the next floor. I pointed them out to you, you'll remember."

He went out then, with Pell and Rojer Macon groping after him. When they had gone, I lifted one of the candles and, holding it face-high before me, prowled through the tomb-like corridors to the library door.

The library itself was a room of huge dimensions, lined completely around with shelves of dust-covered volumes. My boots made rather a thump-thump as I paced across it toward the particular section which Lamoran had mentioned, since the highly polished floor—dusty, of course, but solid nevertheless—was for the most part uncarpeted. A circular rug lay before the dead fireplace, supporting two deep leather chairs. Farther back stood a claw-legged table. Other than that there was nothing.

THE unsteady sputter of the candle cast my shadow in grotesque outlines before me as I advanced. I remember looking back and noticing the almost fantastic footprints, like the trail of a ghost-creature, made by my advance. There was another line of them, as well, leading in and out of the room, caused, no doubt, by Lamoran's boots when my host had been here before me. Beyond that the dust was unbroken. I went down on my knees beside a row of stolid bindings and set the candle on the floor.

I intended to have a look at Lamoran's significant shelf first, then seek the books I had come for. In short, I was eager to learn more of the history of this gaunt house and the strange folk who had inhabited it. But as I leaned forward, drawing out one of the large volumes, I saw that my own quest and Lamoran's suggested books were one and the same. The volumes he had told me to have a look at, because they would excite me were the very volumes I desired to examine!

I opened the book at random, scuffing the pages under my thumb and shifting the candle so that it might throw a better light. In a little while I came upon the following pages:

"Lord Burgell . . . mysteriously vanished during the hours between midnight and dawn. The servant, Tai-tse-Kiang, who had been a devoted guardian of the family for sixty years or more, discovered that Lord Burgell was . . . missing. This occurred on December 4th, 1732."

I read it again, quite unable to believe what I had stumbled upon. Tai-tse-Kiang—1732. It was impossible! That would make the man more than two hundred years old!

IT was, I reasoned, not the same man. Perhaps another of the same name, but most assuredly not the same individual who had poured

wine for the four of us less than half an hour past. Many English families kept their servants for generations and—

My head came up with a sudden jerk. Behind me, the library door, which I had cautiously closed upon entering, had swung half open under the pressure of some freakish draft from the outside corridor. Nevertheless I turned on my knees, with my shadow projected on the floor in front of me like a prostrate bat, and watched in fascination.

Then my blood chilled. I heard footsteps—heard them as distinctly as I heard the throbbing of my own heart—and yet there was no living thing within the radius of the candle-light! The book remained clutched in my hands as I crouched rigid. Step by step, mechanically, with deathlike rhythm, the unseen thing advanced across the floor toward me. Then, very abruptly, it halted. The hellish feet were directly beside me. Whatever it was, it stood above me.

I would have moved—would have lurched to my feet and fled from the room in terror—had not the next occurrence happened with such terrifying swiftness. The book was snatched from my fingers and replaced in its niche. A second book was drawn from the shelf, flung open, and placed in my rigid hands. Something indistinct, like a thin pencil of fog, indicated a line halfway down the left hand page.

My eyes fixed automatically on the indicated line, and I read the words. I remember now that the page was done in script, not in print, and that the book was incredibly old. I saw only two things: the name Tai-tse-Kiang and the significant date 1247. Then I heard a soft, throaty laugh at my shoulder, and the book was returned to its place.

HAD I wished to then, I could not have risen to my feet. My body was numb with something akin

to complete horror. I know that the footsteps receded across the floor with that same damned tread. I know that I stared after them and saw—nothing. Then the door swung shut, clicked, and I was alone.

For an eternity I remained there. My face must have been a ghastly color, stained with sweat. I do not know. I do know that I trembled violently with a sense of cold more intense than any I have ever experienced in the highest roof of the heavens. I do know that when I finally got to my feet, the candle had burned itself to within an inch of the floor, and only a flickering stump, with hanging wick, remained.

I had to walk slowly from the room, in order to keep that feeble light alive. The darkness, had it overwhelmed me at that moment, would have brought a scream from my dry lips. And I noticed one thing more as I paced across the floor—that the undead thing which had crept upon me, and thrust that infernal book into my hands, and laughed at me, had left no footprints in the heavy layer of dust.

When I closed the door of that room of horror and turned back along the corridor to go to my own chamber, there were but four tracks of footprints marring the even surface of the library floor. They were the impressions of my own boots, one set trailing in, the other trailing out, and the older prints made by the boots of James Lamoran.

I SLEPT but little that night. My room was a small one, with a single window and only one door, which opened on the narrow corridor that ran along the second-floor landing. The chamber was stuffy, yet I dared not leave the door wide lest that unnamed, formless inhabitant of the house should creep upon me. I did not stop to reason that if the thing were truly of another world, a closed door would hardly hinder it

—in fact, would only hinder my own escape. When a man is afraid, he seeks to confine himself as securely as possible.

I cannot say how many hours passed before I heard the thing approach. Perhaps two, perhaps three—but no more. This time, when the footsteps drew near along the corridor, they came, not from the direction of the stairway, but from the opposite end of the passage, where lay the rooms of my companions.

I lay quite still, flat against the wall, my fingers twisted around the wooden bedposts in preparation for the sudden leap that would bring me upright. Outside, those hellish footsteps came nearer and nearer—now at the door of my room—now hesitating before entering.

My nerves were on edge. I think I should have screamed to the high heavens if my door had opened at that instant. But the door remained closed. The footsteps began again, moving away, continuing to promenade down the passage. I heard them descend the great staircase; then they grew softer and softer and finally passed from the realm of my hearing.

For another long moment I lay tense. The footsteps did not return. I waited for an eternity, and nothing disturbed the complete silence of the house. In the end, I think, I dropped into a fitful sleep.

I dreamed that I heard a sing-song voice, an Oriental voice, moaning a soft, faraway chant. The sort of monotone that one hears occasionally in distant China, in the temples of Confucius or the shrines of Lao-Tze. After the ordeal I had gone through, the chant was soothing and almost beautiful. But then I did not know the significance of it.

MORNING came eventually. The warm sunlight, streaming in a straight line across my bed from the oblong window, woke me. I

looked about me then, at the mellow friendliness of the chamber, at the flat, shimmering expanse of moor outside, and laughed at the fears that had gripped me. I lighted a cigarette, dressed without haste, opened the door of my room.

There were footprints in the passage. They were my own, of course, and Lamoran's and Pell's and Macon's, made by us when we had climbed to our rooms on the previous night. I did not expect to find the prints made by the feet of the invisible thing that lurked among us. There were none in the library; there would be none here.

Lamoran and Macon were awaiting me in the reception chamber, which room had been set aside as our dining room. Pell, evidently, had not yet come down.

"Did you—inspect the book-shelf I recommended?" Lamoran said dryly.

I nodded.

"I want to talk to you about it," I said.

"Yes? I think I know your questions, old man. I don't know the answers."

"What answers?" Macon demanded, frowning at the one-sided conversation.

"Nothing, Rojer. A little historical matter. Where the devil is Pell?"

"Not down yet?" I asked.

"No. He's not used to staying up nights, I reckon."

"Want me to drag him out?" Macon proffered.

"Well—yes. You might as well."

Macon left us. We sat down, Lamoran and I, and I looked at him quizzically.

"I found the books," I said. "While I was reading one of them, something came into the library and lifted it from my hands, and laughed."

He didn't smile. On the contrary, he leaned abruptly forward, scowling at my words.

"Something?" he said slowly.

"Something," I shrugged, "is all I can call it. It possessed a voice; it made audible footsteps; yet it had no substance and left no prints in the dust of the floor. I heard it again after I had retired. It crept along the corridor, paused at my door, then descended the stairs."

"I wonder..." Lamoran said grimly. "Reed, do you know anything about the supernatural? That is, beyond the imbecile ideas of the ordinary layman?"

I WAS about to answer him, about to say that I knew something of Eastern forms of life after death, embracing vampires, mafui, voodoos, and some obscure claims of India's interior, when Rojer Macon returned. Macon's voice, flung out of a crimson, excited face, stifled my reply.

"He's gone! Pell's gone!"

Lamorán stiffened abruptly in his chair. I half rose, then fell back again, staring at Macon's excited, trembling figure.

"What are you saying?" Lamoran demanded in very curt, precise words.

"He's gone, I tell you! His bed hasn't been slept in!"

Lamorán's hands clenched on the edge of the table, crumpling the cloth in their grip. I saw his face lose color and his eyes dilate. He got to his feet swiftly and stood to his full height, with one hand still holding the table.

"Come with me, Reed," he said grimly. "I think I know."

I followed him. Rojer Macon, trailing along behind me, muttered and sputtered to himself in an undertone, demanding to know where we were going. Lamoran said nothing more. I thought I knew our destination, but I was in no mood to offer explanations.

We passed through four narrow corridors, all of which we had traversed the night before. At the

end of the last one we turned aside and entered a passage which was strange to me. I noticed a single line of footsteps in the dust, leading us deeper and deeper into the gloomy abyss of the great manse.

Finally we reached it: the Iron Door designated in that ghostly message which had been flung upon our banquet table the preceding evening. The trail of footsteps led directly to its massive barrier, and there ended. Lamoran swung about with a grim military precision and faced me.

"You heard the—thing—descending the stairs last night?" he demanded.

"I did."

"The thing you heard was Pell. He came here."

I nodded heavily. Lamoran was right; there was no argument. I watched with a strange sense of foreboding as Lamoran flattened himself against the door and seized the latch.

THE door was immense. It filled the entire end of the corridor, forming a block of ancient, solid iron more than eight feet in height and at least five in width. How thick it was we could not guess. The latch securing it was as heavy and thick as a bludgeon; it was so ponderous that Lamoran found difficulty in raising it from its grooved runway.

"Give me a hand," he grunted.

I moved forward to assist him. There was room on the bar for both of our hands without crowding; yet, in spite of our combined exertions, we could not raise the thing from its grooves.

Lamorán stepped back, wiping his sweating hands on his trouser legs.

"Damned thing is locked somehow," he grunted.

He surveyed the door bitterly, as if he would have liked to smash it down.

"Hadn't we better call out?" I sug-

gested. "If Pell is locked in there—"

He nodded. Flat against the door, I called Pell's name in a loud voice, shrill enough to penetrate beyond the barrier. Then I waited—we all waited—for a reply. There was none, unless—was it my imagination, or did I actually hear that same uncanny, mocking laugh that had terrified my senses in the library during the preceding hours of darkness? No, it was not imagination, for as I turned quickly to confront Lamoran I saw him whirl about, with a snarl on his lips, to peer at Rojer Macon.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he snapped.

"Laughing?" Macon muttered, recoiling. "Good God, Jim, I didn't—"

It came again, cutting into Macon's mumbled protest. Rojer stopped short, with ashen face, and fell back against the wall. Lamoran took a step forward, hesitated, and raised his arm savagely. I did not move.

"The same thing," I said heavily, "I heard last night."

FOR a full moment no movement passed between the three of us. We stared blankly, fearfully, into each other's tense faces. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the corridor with us. Yet those two successive laughs had come from our midst, mocking us, from somewhere within reach of our hands!

Lamoran's uplifted hands fell slowly to his sides. He turned about. His face had faded almost to the bleached whiteness of Macon's. Then, very suddenly, he snapped at me.

"Get away from that door!"

I moved quickly, with my eyes fixed on him. The instant my body was away from the barrier, he flung himself forward. His thick-set shoulder crashed against the metal with the force of a flung battering ram.

The sinister door withstood his attack without so much as a pro-

testing groan. The very force of his onslaught hurled him away from it. He tried again and again with the same lack of results until, holding his shoulder in pain, he staggered back and leaned against the opposite wall of the corridor.

"Nothing—but dynamite—will move it," he gasped.

He seized my arm abruptly.

"We've got to get some!"

"But—it will take hours."

"Damn it, man, don't you know the truth of this thing yet! Some infernal supernatural force is at work in this house. Pell is in there, under its influence. We've got to get him out!"

"There's a train at noon, from the village," I said weakly, realizing that we could not possibly obtain an explosive nearer than London. "I could leave at once and make it back here by midnight, on the late train."

"Not you. I need you here. Macon!"

"I'll go," Rojer said curtly. "By God, that's more in my line—action. I'm nothing but a damned parasite if I stay here."

"It's dangerous," Lamoran frowned. "There's the moor to cross. It'll be pitch black, full of pitfalls."

"I'll make it," Macon said grimly.

"Good! Get enough of the stuff to blow this infernal door to hell!"

Rojer nodded silently. Without a word, he turned his back on us. We stood there, Lamoran and I, beside the door that barred its dread secret, and watched our companion hurry down the passage. When he had vanished, Lamoran said dully:

"We can't do anything here, Reed, until he returns. Suppose we give the house a thorough once over, top to bottom, and pray to God we find something to work on."

WE made a systematic job of it, as we had been trained to do in the army. Starting at the tower, we searched every nook and

crevice of the upper floors, every abandoned tunnel, every blind room. We found nothing in those upper recesses, except the marks of our own footprints of the last evening. It was far into the afternoon when we reached the ground floor again.

There, in the reception chamber, we found Tai-tse-Kiang, the stolid Oriental, methodically arranging the table for our delayed luncheon. The sight of food, I think, took some of the grotesquery out of our souls and made us remember that we were, after all, human beings in human surroundings. We sat at the table and devoured the stuff in silence. More than once our glances met in strained silence. More often we found ourselves staring at the empty chairs which had so recently held the jovial grinning faces of Pell and Macon.

The repast over, we scoured the lower floor and the horrible, inky-black pits of the sunken cellars. Here again we found nothing; nothing but the inevitable silence and darkness which brooded over the entire manse. When we finally groped up the stone steps from the pits, night had fallen and the servant had dinner ready for us.

We began it in silence. From the dead, resigned glare of Lamoran's eyes, I did not in the least expect any such outburst as developed. But develop it did, when the Oriental servant was bending over Lamoran's shoulder.

Lamoran reached up suddenly to grip the man's arm.

"You know what happened here last night?" he snapped.

"I have guessed, sir," the Oriental shrugged.

"Do you know the reason?"

"Yes."

LAMORAN swung a livid face upwards. The entire affair had whipped all sense of reserve and all desire of caution out of his system.

He was completely, thoroughly angry at that moment.

"What is it, then!" he growled.

"The other white man, sir, dared to disobey the warning which was given you. This is the house of the Master. The Iron Room is the room of the Master. He who enters—also dies."

"Damned rot!" Lamoran snarled.

"You are speaking sacrilege, sir. Confucius—"

"To hell with Confucius! And with you! Of all the blasted, infernal—"

Tai-tse-Kiang listened impassively to the most furious, livid outbursts of vehemence that I had ever heard pour from Lamoran's lips. I knew, well enough, that Lamoran possessed a temper and a goodly store of invective, but never had I heard him release it with such crimson hate. In the end the Oriental said, very softly:

"That is worse than penetrating the Iron Door. The Master has ears—and hears."

Then he straightened up and backed away, releasing his arm from Lamoran's grip. As he came erect, the light from the hanging candelabrum illuminated his entire face; and I shuddered at the glittering, half subdued cruelty in his slanted eyes.

"That," murmured Lamoran, when he had gone, "will probably bring results, Reed. I'm going to turn in. Macon won't return before midnight, even with the best of fortune, and when he comes, we'll need steady nerves for the task ahead of us."

He rose from the table.

"You have a revolver?" he said suddenly.

"Yes," I said. "In my room."

"Better join it—and keep it warm," he smiled dryly.

WHEN I left Lamoran and retired to my own room on the second landing that night, I did not

remove my clothes. Perhaps it was the knowledge that I had, at the most, only two hours or so of available sleep. Perhaps it was the subtle premonition that something would happen even before those two hours had elapsed. At any rate, I threw myself on the bed without removing a single article of my garb. In fact, I added an extra burden. I removed the automatic revolver from my luggage and dropped it into my coat pocket.

I did not attempt to sleep. My thoughts mulled about in confusion. First the malignant face of Tai-tse-Kiang persisted in rioting through them; then the Iron Door in that half buried passage almost directly below me seemed to loom out of the darkness and mock me. Again I had visions of Rojer Macon groping across the blackened moor in the dead of night with his significant burden. And then, climaxing this series of nightmares, I heard something.

At first it was merely a whisper; then it increased in intensity until I recognized it as being a continuation of the soft, almost lovely Oriental chanting that had penetrated my dreams of the night before. This time, however, I knew it to be no dream, but reality. And rather than lie in my chamber, pondering futilely over the cause of it, I slipped from the bed, obtained a tiny pocket flash-light from my bag, and crept to the door.

The sound came from below. I tiptoed along the passage to the head of the great ramp, and there hesitated. I felt, then, something religious in the monotonous tone of it. It possessed the same quality of tone that I had heard more than once in far-away India, where the cowed priests of the Buddhist temples stand upon their flat housetops, with their followers kneeling in the streets below, and offer sunset prayers to their god.

I DESCENDED the ramp very quietly, making no sound that might interrupt. Following the intonations, I passed along the lower corridors, feeling my way in the dark without having recourse to the flashlight in my hand.

So I came at length to the corridor of the Iron Door. Even as I entered the mouth of that dismal tunnel, the chant ceased. I, too, stopped—and waited. A door opened in the pitch-like gloom far in advance of where I crouched. I heard footsteps, moving away from me. I followed them. They led me through a second series of short passageways to the head of the chill, black stone steps that twisted down into the pits. Undaunted, since I had traversed this same route during the afternoon, I continued.

My boots might click on those bare steps, I considered. Therefore I removed them; and as I went from step to step, deeper into the depths, I made less noise than a shadow. Far above me hung the doorway. Before me, as I reached the bottom level of the old house, extended that sinister labyrinth of subterranean pits and tunnels which Lamoran and I had so carefully inspected earlier in the day.

My unsuspecting guide was still ahead of me. I could hear him, and I guessed now his identity, for he shuffled along with an ominous scraping movement of sandal-shod feet. The man was obviously Tai-tse-Kiang.

DOWN here it was cold, with a penetrating chill that crept into my very bones. I hardly noticed it, so intent was I upon keeping track of my quarry as he paced through the network of interwoven ways. For perhaps three or four minutes I continued to creep after him, and then the sound of his progress ceased.

He was, I knew, in the most remote room of the cellars. This par-

ticular room had but one means of ingress, since it was the final chamber in a twisting chain of pits. I advanced silently to that opening and flattened against the stone. Then I saw him—or saw his indistinct form.

He crouched beside the opposite wall, twenty feet from me. His hands were uplifted. He had pushed aside a portion of the wall, revealing a secret niche which Lamoran and I had not previously discovered. Even as I watched, the Oriental slid forward with cat-like grace, and vanished within the opening.

Again I waited. I saw nothing. I heard nothing, except a half inaudible rasping sound, as of metal grating against metal. Then, with the same sinuous movement, the Chinaman reappeared and reached up to replace that section of the stone which hid his alcove from prying eyes.

I had barely time to secrete myself before he turned. Luckily, the wall beside me was irregular with protuberances, and I was able to pack myself into one of them. Almost before I had become motionless again, the Oriental shuffled past me, returning the way he had come. He looked neither to right nor left, and the light was so obscure that I could make out no detail of his features. This time, however, he walked with quicker step. Before many seconds had passed, he had vanished again.

I REMAINED in my hiding place until I could be certain that he would not hear me. Then I slipped out and drew the catch-latch on my flash-light. With the beam of yellow playing upon the floor at my feet, I advanced toward that mysterious section of wall which I had seen moved aside.

I found it. The stone slab was, to all appearances, a part of the solid whole; yet, when I discovered the correct inch upon which to exert pressure, it slid back under my fin-

gers as easily as a square of wood. Evidently it was nicely balanced with counter-weights.

Before me lay the hidden niche. Perhaps five feet across it extended, and it could have been no more than two feet in depth. It contained nothing more, at first glance, than a long iron lever which extended down through the stone ceiling.

I inspected the thing cautiously, without touching it. I was in no mood, just then, to put my hands on anything I did not fully understand; and this peculiar stick of metal, protruding from the roof of the alcove, was seemingly inexplicable.

But was it? It was connected, evidently, with the room above it, on the main floor of the house. I strove to remember the plan of those upper corridors. I tried to organize, mentally, the many rooms and passages over my head. And then, like a sudden cold shock, I knew the meaning of this iron rod. It hung directly beneath the door of the Iron Room!

IN its present position, more than three feet of it protruded below the ceiling of the cellar. Had it been pushed up to its full length, it would have extended into the very center of the Iron Barrier, forming a lock which no mortal could hope to shatter! This, then, was the thing which had baffled Lamoran's attack. This thing, crude and almost aboriginal in design, was the lock of the Iron Door!

Still I did not touch it. The Iron Door had been locked securely. Evidently the Oriental, with some fiendish plan in mind, had come here to release the lock. Now that the door above me was open, there was nothing left for me to do but go at once to Lamoran's chamber and tell him.

I turned about to step out of the niche. The light in my hand played its beam at my feet. My groping foot struck something soft, yielding. I stared down—at a human leg.

For a moment I stood rigid, frozen. Then, gulping down my fear, I dropped to my knees and peered into the narrow fissure which concealed the rest of the limp body. I stared into the dead, upturned face of Rojer Macon. I stared at the strangler's cord which still encircled Rojer Macon's dead throat.

After that, with the flash quivering like a cobweb in my groping hand, I ran back the way I had come. I wanted to look into Lamoran's face—to hear him talk—to plead with him to flee this madhouse of horror.

HOW long it took me to reach the stone stairs leading to the main floor, I am not sure. I know that I stumbled into blind passages and scraped the skin from my hands and tore my clothing and was altogether like a blind bird in a trap. I know that I fell while climbing the steps, and was on hands and knees when I reached the upper passage.

Then caution possessed me again. I began to realize that this was no time for blundering, blubbering fear. If I were to warn Lamoran in time to prevent further horror, I must be quiet as a ghost and as soft-footed as a cat. I dropped the flash-light into my pocket, drew my revolver, and crept noiselessly along the corridor in the overwhelming darkness.

I would have to pass the Iron Door. That thought alone terrified me. Yet it would have to be faced, if I were to reach Lamoran's room on the upper landing. Consequently I trod, eventually, into the fatal corridor.

The dread passage was no longer in abject darkness. One of the candle-brackets, set at wide intervals in the grim wall of the tunnel, had been recently ignited. It sputtered perhaps a dozen yards from me, filling a certain portion of the corridor with an unearthly globule of sickly yellow pigment. I noticed, too, that only one of the brackets had been

lighted, and that one was the particular candle that cast its glow directly upon the surface of the Iron Door. Obviously the Oriental had traversed this passage before me, and had created the light for some uncanny reason of his own.

I CREPT toward it slowly, with the utmost caution. There was no telling when Tai-tse-Kiang might return and find me here; no telling the consequences if such a discovery were to occur. Thus I had proceeded no more than half the distance to the Iron Door when a sudden, unexpected footfall caused me to hurl my bent body against the wall and flatten out like a clinging bat. Far in advance of me, at the very mouth of the corridor, I saw the shadowy outline of an approaching figure—a figure which came forward with dead, mechanical steps toward me and toward the door.

I watched it in fascination, until it entered the realm of light. Then, to my horror, I saw that it was James Lamoran!

I should have cried out to him, warning him, had not the expression of his tense face choked the words on my lips. His gaunt head was out-thrust, his hands hung lifeless at his sides; his body was a stiff, rigid thing that moved as if some exterior force were propelling it. His eyes were wide open, unblinking, and ghastly livid in the glow of that infernal light. He was not conscious, not awake. Either he was walking in his sleep—a thing which I had never known him to be guilty of—or he was under the influence of a somnambulistic trance brought upon him by hypnotic powers.

Trembling, but fascinated beyond power to move, I crouched in my place of hiding and watched him. He went straight to the Iron Door, stopped before it, and raised his dangling hands to seize the latch. The iron rod lifted easily in his fin-

gers. The great barrier swung slowly, ponderously inward with a rasping screech. Like a mindless automaton, Lamoran paced over the threshold into the forbidden chamber, and the massive portal rolled shut behind him.

I HEARD the latch click as the door closed. Perhaps it was that sinister thud which made me realize that I was entirely to blame for whatever might happen to my friend in that chamber of horrors. I lurched from my place of concealment. I stumbled blindly forward, with a half uttered, choking cry of delayed warning. My fingers twisted about the iron rod and strove to lift it.

The thing was fast again; immovable. Though I am no anemic weakling, I could not stir the latch from its grooves. In desperation I flung my entire body against the barrier, hoping to do what Lamoran had been unable to do on that other horrible occasion.

The result was the same. The door flung me back again, and again, and again. I pummelled it with my fists, kicked at it in my stockinged feet, madly, futilely, unreasonably. Then as I fell back with a sob, I was aware of the automatic clenched in my fist.

Savagely I jammed the muzzle against that mocking lock and jerked the trigger. Three bullets thudded into the metal, into the narrow, slot-like opening which held the iron rod. The roar deafened me. I heard a rasping clash of metal, heard a heavy, significant thud under my feet as my bullets released the counter-balance and let it fall into the death-pit in the cellars below.

The Iron Door creaked open under the weight of my body.

WHAT happened from that moment on, as I staggered over the threshold, is a maze of distilled horror. It occurred with such

rapidity that I can but vaguely recall it.

I saw my companion ten feet before me, his back toward me, pacing lifelessly across the stone floor. Beyond him I saw a towering, inhuman form with two glittering, greenish eyes that had the power to drag me forward.

The thing was a monstrous idol—a squatting, deformed image of the heathen Confucius. Its huge, vividly colored arms were crossed derisively over its flat chest. Its head was out-thrust on a sinewy neck. Its bare feet were curled fiendishly together, like talons. And there, prone upon the floor before it, lay the lifeless figure of the man who had been missing since the previous night. Pell!

All this I saw in the feeble light that penetrated from the outer corridor. It burned itself into my memory in the space of a broken second. Then I knew, instinctively, that Lamoran had been lured into this chamber by the formless specter of the House of the Undead. The idol, squatting before me, held some terrible power of death; and Lamoran was being forced toward it!

After that, I acted. Lunging to one side, I lifted the gun in my hand and jammed the trigger until the chamber was empty. I fired in madness, in positive hate. I aimed at the very center of that leering face.

The effect was instantaneous. The dead features, rotten with age, crumpled under the impact of four bullets. Lamoran, groping toward it, twitched suddenly as if with the ague, and became motionless. Then I was running forward, the smoking automatic still gripped in my hand.

He would have fallen had not my arm gone about his middle. As it was, he sagged down on my shoulder and could not speak for a full minute. I felt the cold sweat on his white face, felt his body quiver. Then he lifted his head limply and murmured:

"Thanks, Reed. You—were just in time."

I WAITED until he could stand erect. In another moment he got hold of himself and I was relieved of his dead weight. He turned slowly to examine the horror room.

"I was lying in my room," he said bitterly, pacing toward Pell's dead body, and speaking to me in jerky phrases, "when the thing came. Foot-steps—in the passage outside. My door opened. No one there. A strange force, hellishly hypnotic, took hold of me. Tried to fight it. Couldn't. It led me here. God knows what would have happened."

He was on his knees beside Pell.

"Good God, Reed," he said suddenly. "Look here!"

I groped to his side and stared down. There had been enough horror already; I will not attempt to describe Pell's body. Enough to say that some sharp instrument—a hideously long knife or sword—had slashed it nearly in twain, from skull to abdomen.

"Nasty," Lamoran shuddered. "Ugh! How the devil—"

He straightened up suddenly and stepped forward to the huge idol. I saw him poke his fingers into the shattered head. He grunted with satisfaction and called to me.

My bullets had scored four irregular holes in the thing's flat forehead, about an eighth of an inch apart, on an almost perfectly straight line above the eyes. Below that, the center of the face had crumpled in, revealing the tip of an ancient long-sword which extended, apparently, the entire length of the idol's bulk. Looking closer, I saw a narrow, significant slit running perpendicularly through the mass.

"Favorite trick of the ancients," Lamoran said raspingly. "There'll be a square flagstone in the floor under Pell's body. The victim walks toward this damned thing, steps on the

stone. Pressure releases a counter-weight or spring of some sort. The sword flashes down and out through the groove, cleaving the intruder from head to foot. I'd—I'd have got it when I knelt beside Pell just now if your bullets hadn't put the thing out of order. Ugly death!"

HE turned away heavily. His tired face was beginning to regain its normal color; but mine, I think, must have been as white as a death's-head.

"The thing—" I said brokenly, "the thing that led you here, that inhabits this horror house. What is it, Jim? If we don't learn—"

"I think I know. Help me get Pell to the reception hall."

We lifted Pell between us and carried him to the door. As we crossed the threshold, Lamoran glanced significantly at the shattered lock and looked at me in bewilderment.

"You had to shoot your way in here?" he demanded.

I told him of the counter-balance in the cellar, and of Rojer Macon. I knew then how this infernal door was operated. Once opened, to admit a victim, it had the hellish power of locking itself as soon as it swung shut again, and could not be released until that crude balance in the pit was reset. A simple enough mechanism in itself—worked with ordinary weights and counter-weights—but a device that had caused more than one unholy death in the darkness of the idol's chamber.

In silence we bore Pell to the reception hall. There we placed him on the long divan and decently covered his twisted body with an embroidered silk robe. Finally Lamoran turned to me.

"I've gone pretty deep into occultism, you know," he shrugged. "What I have to tell you is not mere twaddle."

"It is—truth?"

"I will tell you what I know. In

many of the secret cults of China and India, it is believed that every true idol of K'ung Tsze or Confucius is inhabited by the deathless spirit of one of the Master's disciples. The man who originally constructed this house—you'll find this fact in one of those books in the library—was an English nobleman who spent most of his time in the interior of China. When he came here, he brought the Confucian image with him. He himself was a member of a cult known as the K'ung Shah, now extinct. He obtained the idol in one of the most ancient temples of the Orient. He also brought with him a Chinese servant named Tai-tse-Kiang."

LAMORAN glanced at me. I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"That is all," he shrugged.

"Do you mean," I muttered, "that Tai-tse-Kiang is an 'undead,' that he is one of the Master's disciples, inhabiting the thing we have just destroyed? Good God, man, it is imposs—"

"Nothing is impossible."

"But such a creature, with the hor-

rible power of assuming human form, the power of life-in-death—"

"I think you will find," Lamoran said quietly, "that the power has been destroyed. The unseen specter of this House of the Undead was last known to be in my chamber, where he came to exert his influence on me. If you will go there, you may find the reason why Tai-tse-Kiang so jealously guarded the Iron Room from destruction."

I groped to the door, confounded by his words. His own voice was almost hypnotic at that moment; it was the voice of a man who had delved deeper—far deeper—into such matters of eternal mystery than most mortals dared even to think. Mechanically I climbed the great ramp to the upper floor and paced along the passage to Lamoran's chamber.

There I stopped, and an involuntary cry came from my lips. Tai-tse-Kiang, the Oriental servant, lay full length across the threshold, with his face staring upward in death.

The lower part of that face had crumpled in decay. The forehead, smooth and flat, was punctured with four bloodless bullet holes.