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The EIGHTH GREEN MAN

by G.G. PENDARVES



"A big heavy figure mouthed and gibbered at me."

DANGEROUS road, huh!" Nicholas Birkett slowed down and frowned at the battered old sign-post. "I'll take a chance, anyhow!"

"I should try another road," I said abruptly.

"But this one leads right down to the valley, and will save at least ten miles round."

"It's a dangerous road—very dangerous," I answered, with the conviction growing fast within me that the sign-post gave only a faint inkling of the deadly peril it guarded.

Birkett stared at me, his big brown hands resting on the steering-wheel. "What d'ye know about the road, anyhow?" he asked, his round blue

eyes blank with amazement. "You've never been this way in your life before!"

I hesitated. My name is famous in more than one continent as that of an explorer, and I had recently achieved an expedition across the Sahara Desert which had added immensely to my fame. In fact it was my lecture on this expedition, given in New York, that had brought about my friendship with Nicholas Birkett. He had introduced himself and carried me off to stay with him at his country estate in Connecticut, in a whirlwind of enthusiastic interest and admiration.

How could I make my companion understand the shuddering fear that gripped me? I—Raoul Suliman

d'Abre—to whom the face of Death was as familiar as my own.

But it was not Death that confronted us on that road marked "Dangerous" . . . something far less kind and merciful!

Not for nothing am I the son of a French soldier and an Arab woman! Not for nothing was I born in Algeria and grew up amidst the mysteries and magic of Africa. Not for nothing have I learnt in pain and terror that the walls of this visible world are frail and thin—too frail, too thin, alas! For there are times—there are places when the barrier is broken . . . when monstrous unspeakable Evil enters and dwells familiarly amongst us!

"Well!" My companion grew impatient, and began to move the car's nose toward the road on our left.

"I'm sorry," I answered. "The truth is . . . it's a bit difficult to explain . . . but I have my reasons—very strong reasons—for not wishing to go down this particular road. I *know*—don't ask me how—that it's horribly dangerous. It would be a madness—a sin to take that way!"

"But look here, old chap, you can't mean that you . . . that . . . that you're only imagining things about it!" His face was quite laughable in its astonishment.

I was frightfully embarrassed. How explain to such a rank materialist as Nicholas Birkett that instinct alone warned me against that road? How make a man so insensitive and practical believe in any danger he could not see or handle? He believed in neither God nor Devil! He had only a passionate belief in himself, his wealth, his business acumen, and above all, the physical perfection that went to make his life easy and pleasant.

"There are so many things you do not understand," I said slowly. "I am too old a campaigner to be ashamed of acknowledging that there

are some dangers I think it foolhardy to face. This road is one of them!"

"But what in thunder do *you* know of the damned road?" Birkett's big fresh-colored face turned a brick-red in his angry impatience. Then he cooled down suddenly and put a heavy hand on my knee. "You're ill, old chap! Touch of malaria, I suppose! Excuse my being so darned hasty!"

I shook my head. "You won't or can't understand me! The truth is that I feel the strongest aversion from that path, and I beg you not to take it."

Birkett looked me in the eye and began to argue. He settled down to it solidly. I had nothing to back my arguments except my intuition, and such a flimsy nothing as this he demolished with his big hearty laugh, and a heavy elephantine humor that reduced me to a helpless silence.

Opposition always narrowed Birkett down to one idea, that of proving himself right; and at last I said, "This is more dangerous for you than for me. I am prepared . . . I know how to guard myself from attack, but you—"

"That settles it," he interrupted, gripping the wheel and shooting forward with a jerk. "I can look after myself." His cheerful bellow echoed hollowly as the car dived into the leafy roadway under a branching archway of trees.

2

BIRKETT became more and more boisterous in his mirth as we sped along, for the road continued smooth and virtually straight, descending in a gentle slope to the Naugatuck valley.

"Dangerous road!" he said, with a prolonged chuckle; "I'll bet a china orange to a monkey that sign means a good long drink. Look out for an innocent little roadhouse tucked away down here. Dangerous road! I sup-

pose that's the latest way of advertising the stuff."

It was useless to remonstrate, but I noticed many things I didn't like along that broad leafy lane.

No living creature moved there—no bird sang—no stir of wings broke the silence of the listening trees—not even a fly moved across our path.

Behind us we had left a world of life, of movement and color. Here all was green and silent. The dark columns of the tree-trunks shut us in like the massive bars of a prison.

Shadows moved softly across the pale, dusty road ahead; shadows that clustered in strange groups about us; shadows not cast by cloud or sun or moving object in our path, for these shadows had no relation to things natural or human.

I knew them! I knew them, and shuddered to recognize their hateful presence.

"You're a queer fellow, d'Abre," my companion rallied me. "You'd waltz out on a camel to meet a horde of yelling, bloodthirsty ruffians in the desert, and thoroughly enjoy the game. Yet here, in a civilized country, you see danger in a peaceful hillside! You certainly are a wonder!"

"*Imshallah!*" I murmured under my breath. "It is more wonderful that man can be so blind!"

"Are you muttering curses?" Birkett showed white teeth in a flashing grin at my discomfiture. "I suppose it's the Arab half of you that invents these ghosts and devils. Life in the desert must need a few imaginary excitements. But in this country it needs something more than imagination to produce a really lively sort of devil. Something with a good kick to it."

Suddenly, ahead of us, the trees began to thin out, and we caught a glimpse of a low white building to our left. Birkett was triumphant.

"What did I tell you?" he cried. "Here I am leading you straight to

a perfectly good drink, and you sit there babbling of death and disaster!"

He stopped the car before a short flight of mossy steps; from the top of them we stood and looked at the house, glimmering palely in the dusky shade of many tall trees.

A flagged path led from where we stood to the house—a straight white path about fifty yards in length. On each side of it the tall, rank grass, dotted with trees and shrubs, stretched back to the verge of the encroaching forest. And within this spacious, parklike enclosure the distant house looked dwarfed and mean—a sort of fungus sprouting at the foot of the stately trees.

Birkett, undeterred by the menacing gloom of the whole place, cupped his hands about his mouth and gave a joyful shout, which echoed and died into heavy silence once more.

"Not expecting visitors," he grinned. "This is a midnight joint, I'll wager. Come on!"

At that moment we saw a sign at our elbow—a freshly painted sign—the lettering in a vivid luminous green on a black ground. It read:

"THE SEVEN GREEN MEN."

3

"SEVEN Green Men, hey! Don't see 'em," said Birkett, moving up the pathway. I followed, looking round intently, every nerve in me sending to my brain its warning thrill of naked, overwhelming terror crouching on every hand, ready to spring, ready to destroy us body and soul.

Then, suddenly I saw them! . . . and my heart gave a great leap in my body. They faced us as we approached the house, their grim silhouettes sharp and distinct against the white roadhouse behind.

The Seven Green Men!

"Gee!" said Birkett. "Will you

look at those trees? Seven Green Men! What d'you think about that?"

In two stiff rows before the house they stood, each one cut and trimmed to the height of a tall man. Their foliage was dense and unlike that of any tree or shrub I had seen in all my wanderings. A few feet away, their overlapping leaves gave all the illusion of metal, and seven tall warriors seemed to stand in rank before us, their armor green with age and disuse.

Each figure faced the west, presenting its left side to us; each bared head was that of a man shaved to the scalp; each profile was cut with marvelous cunning, and each was distinct and characteristic; the one thing in common was the eyelid, which in every profile appeared closed in sleep.

And when I say *sleep*, I mean just that.

They could awaken, those Seven Green Men! . . . they could awaken to life and action; their roots were not planted in the kindly earth, but thrust down deep into hell itself.

"The Seven Green Men! Well, what d'you think of that for an idea?" And my companion planted his feet firmly apart, clasped his hands behind his broad back, and gazed in puzzled admiration at the trees. "Some gardener here, d'Abre! I'd like to have a word with him. Wonder if he'd come and do a bit of work like that for me? A few of these green fellows would look fine in my own place. Beats me how the faces are cut so differently; must need trimming every day! Yes, I'll say that's some gardener!"

I put my hand on his arm.

"Don't you—can't you see they're not just trees? Come away while there's time, Birkett." And I tried to draw him back from those cursed green men, who, even in sleep, seemed to be watching my resistance to them

with sardonic interest. "This place is horrible . . . foul, I tell you!"

"I came for a drink, and if these green fellows can't produce it, I'll pull their noses for them!" His laugh rang and echoed in that silent place. As it died, the door of the inn was opened quickly and a man stood on its threshold.

For a long moment the three of us stood looking at each other, and my blood turned to ice as I saw the great massive figure of the innkeeper. Most smooth and urbane he was, that smiling devil! . . . most punctilious and deferential in manner as he summed us both up, gaged our characters, our powers of resistance, our usefulness to him in the vast scheme of his infernal design.

He came down the flagged path toward us, passing through the stiff, silent rank of the seven green men—four on one side of the path, three on the other.

"Good morning, sirs, good morning! How can I serve you?" His high, whispering voice was a shock; it seemed indecent issuing from that gigantic frame, and I saw from Birkett's quick frown that it grated on him too.

"If you've got a drink wet enough to quench my thirst, I'd be almighty glad," answered my friend, rather gruffly. "And about lunch . . . we might try what your green men can do for us!"

Our host gave a long snickering laugh, and glanced back at the seven trees as though inviting them to share the joke.

He bowed repeatedly. "No doubt of that, sir! No doubt of that! If you'll come this way, we'll give you some of the best—the *very* best." His whisper broke on a high squeak. "Lunch will be served in ten minutes."

I put a desperate hand on Birkett's arm as he began to follow in the wake of the innkeeper.

"Not past *them*, not past *them*!" I urged in a low voice. "Look at them now!"

As we approached, the trees seemed to quiver and ripple as though some inner force stirred within their leafy forms, and from each lifted eyelid a sudden flickering glance gleamed and vanished.

Beneath my hand I felt Birkett's involuntary start, but he shook me off impatiently. "Go back, if you like, d'Abre! You'll get me imagining as crazy things as you do, soon." And he stalked on to the house.

4

"ENTER, enter, sirs! My house is honored!"

Unaccountably, as we passed the threshold my horror gave place to a fierce determination to fight—to resist this monstrous swollen spider greedy to catch his human flies.

Power against power—knowledge against knowledge—I would fight while strength and wisdom remained in me.

I waved away the proffered drink.

"No, nothing to drink," I said, watching his smooth pale face pucker at this first check in the game.

"Surely, sir, you will drink! You will not refuse to pledge the luck of my house! You are a great man—a great leader of men, that is written in your eyes! It is a privilege to serve so distinguished a guest."

His obsequious whispers sickened me, and I gathered my resources inwardly to meet the assault he was making on my will.

When I refused not only to drink, but to taste a mouthful of the unique lunch provided, a sudden vicious anger flickered in his pale, cold eyes.

"I regret that my poor fare does not please you, sir," he said, his voice like the sound of dry leaves blown before a storm.

"It is better for me that I do not

eat," I answered curtly, my eyes meeting his as our wills clashed.

For a long, terrible minute the world dropped from under me: existence narrowed down to those malicious eyes which held mine. I held on with all the desperation of a drowning man tossing in a dark sea of icy waters—torn, buffeted, despairing, at the mercy of incalculable power.

With hideous, intolerable effort I met the attack, and by the mercy of Allah I won at last; for the creature turned from me and smoothly covered his defeat by attending very solicitously to Birkett's needs.

I relaxed, sick and trembling with the price of victory.

I had fought many strange battles in my life: for in the East, the Unknown is a force to be recognized, not laughed at and despised as in the West. Yet of all my encounters, this one was the deadliest, this evil, smiling Thing the strongest I had known in any land or place.

Must Birkett's strength go to feed this insatiable foe who battered on the race of men?

I shuddered as I watched him sitting there, eating, drinking, laughing with his host; his whole mind bent on the pleasure of the moment, his will relaxed, his brain asleep; while the creature at his side served him with hateful, smiling ease, watching with cool, complacent eye as his victim let down his barriers one by one.

In his annoyance with my behavior, Birkett prolonged the meal as long as possible, ignoring me as I sat smoking and watching our host as intently as he watched us.

Anxiously I wondered what the next move in this horrible cat-and-mouse game would be; but it was not until Birkett rose from the table at last that the enemy showed his hand.

"It's a pity you can't be here on Friday night, sir! You'd be just the one to appreciate it. One of our

gala nights—in fact the best night in the year at the *Seven Green Men*. You'd have a meal worth remembering that night. But I'm afraid they wouldn't let you in on it."

"Why not?" demanded Birkett, instantly aggressive.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you see it's a very special night indeed. There's a very select society in this neighborhood; I don't suppose you've so much as heard of it: *The Sons of Enoch*."

"Never heard of 'em." Birkett's tone implied that had they been worth knowing, he *would* have heard of them. "Who are they? Those seven green chaps you keep in the grounds—eh?"

A cold light flashed in the innkeeper's eyes; and my own heart stood still, for the flippant remark had been nearer the truth than Birkett guessed.

"It's a society that was founded centuries ago, sir. Started in Germany in a little place on the Rhine, run by some old monks. There are members in every country in the world now. This one in America is the last one to be formed, but it's going strong, sir, very strong!"

"Then why the devil haven't I been told of it before?"

"Why should you know of all the hole-and-corner clubs that exist?" I interposed. The innkeeper was probing Birkett's weakest part. How well—oh, how truly the smiling, smooth-spoken devil had summed up my poor blundering friend!

"It'll be a society run for the Great Unwashed!" I continued. "You'd be a laughing-stock in the neighborhood if it got out that you were mixed up with scum of that sort!"

"There is much that your great travels have not taught you, sir," answered the innkeeper, his sibilant speech savage as a snake's hiss. "The members of this club are those who stand so high, that as I said, I fear

they would not consent to admit you even once to their company."

"Damn it all!" Birkett interrupted irritably. "I'd like to know any fellows out here who refuse to meet *me*. And who are you, curse you, to judge who can be members or not?"

Our host bowed, and I caught the mocking smile on his thin lips, as the fish rose so readily to his bait.

I poured ridicule on the proposition and did all I could to turn Birkett aside, but to no avail. Opposition, as always, goaded him to incredible heights of obstinacy; and now, half drunk and wholly in the hands of that subtle devil who measured him so accurately, the poor fellow fairly galloped into the trap set for him.

It ended with a promise on our host's part to do all in his power to persuade the *Sons of Enoch* to receive Birkett and perhaps make him a member of their ancient society.

"Friday night then, sir! About 11 o'clock the meeting will start, and there's a midnight supper to follow. Of course I'll do my best for you, but I doubt if you'll be allowed to join."

"Don't worry," was Birkett's valedictory remark. "I'll become one of the *Sons of Enoch* on Friday, or I'll hound your rotten society out of existence. You'll see, my jolly old innkeeper, you'll see!"

And as we left the grounds, passing once more the Seven Green Men, their leaves rustled with a dry crackle that was the counterpart of the innkeeper's hateful, whispering voice.

5

OUR drive homeward was at first distinctly unpleasant. Birkett chose to take my behavior as a personal insult, and, being at a quarrelsome stage of his intoxication, he kept up a muttered commentary: ". . . insulting a decent old bird like that . . . best lunch ever had . . . damned if I won't . . . Sons of Enoch

... what's going to stop me . . . be a Son of Enoch . . . damned interfering fellow, d'Abre! . . ."

He insisted on driving himself, and took such a roundabout way that it was two hours later when we saw New Haven in the distance. Birkett was sober by this time and rather ashamed of his treatment of a guest. He insisted on pulling up at another little roadhouse, *The Brown Owl*, run by a New England farmer he wanted me to meet.

"You'll like the old chap, d'Abre!" he assured me, eager to make amends for his lapse. "He's a great old man, and can put up a decent meal. Come on, you must be starving."

I was thankful to make the acquaintance of both old Paxton and his fried chicken . . . and Birkett's restored geniality made me hopeful that after all he might not prove obdurate about repeating his visit to the *Seven Green Men*.

Old Paxton sat with us later on his porch, and gradually the talk veered round to our late excursion. The old farmer's face changed to a mask of horror.

"The *Seven Green Men!* *Seven*, did you say? My God! . . . oh, my God!"

My pulses leaped at the loathing and fear in his voice; and Birkett brought his tilted chair down on the floor with a crash. Staring hard at Paxton, he said aggressively, "That's what I said! *Seven!* It's a perfectly good number; lots of people think it's lucky."

But the farmer was blind and deaf to everything—his mind gripped by some paralyzing thought.

"Seven of them now . . . *seven!* And no one believed what I told 'em! Poor soul, whoever it is! *Seven* now . . . *Seven Green Men* in that accursed garden!"

He was so overcome that he just sat there, saying the same things over and over again.

Suddenly, however, he got to his feet and hobbled stiffly across the veranda, beckoning us to follow. He led us down the steps to his peach orchard behind the house, and pointed to a figure shambling about among the trees.

"See him . . . see him!" Paxton's voice was hoarse and shaken. "That's my only son, all that's left of him."

The awkward figure drew nearer, approaching us at a loping run, and Birkett and I instinctively drew back. It was an imbecile, a slobbering, revolting wreck of humanity with squinting eyes and loose mouth, and a big, heavy frame on which the massive head rolled sickeningly.

He fell at Paxton's feet, and the old man's shaking hand patted the rough head pressed against his knees.

"My only son, sirs!"

We were horribly abashed and afraid to look at old Paxton's working features.

"He was the *Sixth* Green Man . . . and may the Lord have mercy on his soul!"

The poor afflicted creature shambled off, and we went back to the house in silence. Awkwardly avoiding the farmer's eye, Birkett paid the reckoning and started for his car, when Paxton laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"I see you don't believe me, sir! No one will believe! If they had done so, that house would be burnt to the ground, and those trees . . . those trees—those green devils with it! It's *they* steal the soul out of a man, and leave him like my son!"

"Yes," I answered. "I understand what you mean."

Paxton peered with tear-dimmed eyes into my face.

"You understand! Then I tell you they're still at their fiend's game! My son was the *Sixth* . . . the *Sixth* of those Green Men! Now there are *Seven!* They're still at it!"

6

"How about staying on here and having another swim when the moon rises?" I said, apparently absorbed in making my old briar pipe draw properly, but in reality waiting with overwhelming anxiety for Birkett's reply.

It was Friday evening, and no word had passed between us during the week of the Seven Green Men, or Birkett's decision about tonight.

He was sitting there on the rocks at my side, his big body stretched out in the sun in lazy enjoyment, his half-closed eyes fixed on the blue outline of Long Island on the opposite horizon.

"Well, how about it?" I repeated, after a long silence.

He rolled over and regarded me mockingly.

"Anxious nurse skilfully tries to divert her charge from his naughty little plan! No use, d'Abre; I've made up my mind about tonight, and *nothing's* going to stop me."

I bit savagely on my pipe-stem, and frowned at an offending gull which wheeled to and fro over the lapping water at our feet.

As easily could a six-months-old baby digest and assimilate raw meat as could Birkett's intellect grasp anything save the obvious; nevertheless I was impelled to make another attempt to break down the ramparts of his self-sufficient obstinacy.

But I failed, of course. The world of thought and imagination and intuition was unknown and therefore non-existent to him. The idea of any form of life, not classified and labeled, not belonging to the animal or vegetable kingdom, was simply a joke to him.

And old Paxton's outbursts he dismissed as lightly as the rest of my arguments.

"My dear chap, everyone knows the poor old fellow's half mad himself with trouble. The boy was a

wild harum-scarum creature always in mischief and difficulties. No doubt he *did* go to a midnight supper at the *Seven Green Men*. But what's that got to do with it? You might as well say if you got sunstroke, for instance, that old Paxton's fried chicken caused it!"

7

"You don't mean to say that you're coming too?" asked Birkett, when, about 10:30 that night, I followed him out of doors to his waiting car.

"But of course!" I answered lightly. "You don't put me down as a coward as well as a believer in fairy-tales, do you?"

"You're a sport anyhow, d'Abre!" he said warmly. "And I'm very glad you're coming to see for yourself what one of our midnight joints is like. It'll be a new experience for you."

"And for you," I said under my breath, as he started the engine and passed out from his dim-perfumed garden to the dusty white highroad beyond.

A full moon sailed serenely among silvery banks of cloud above us; and in the quiet night river and valley, rocky hillside and dense forest had the sharp, strange outlines of a wood-cut.

All too soon we reached the warning sign, "Dangerous Road," and passed from a silver, sleeping earth to the stagnant gloom of that tunnel-like highway.

But hateful as it was, I could have wished that road would never end, rather than bring us, as inevitably it did, to that ominous green-and-black sign of our destination.

The sound of a deep rhythmic chant greeted us as we went up the steps, and we saw that the roadhouse was lit from end to end. Not with the mellow, welcoming radiance of lamp or candle, but with strange

quivering fires of blue and green, which flickered to and fro in mad haste past every window of the inn.

"Some illumination!" remarked Birkett. "Looks like the real thing to me! Do you hear the *Sons of Enoch* practising their nursery rimes? Coming, boys!" he roared cheerfully. "I'll join in the chorus!"

As for myself, I could only stare at the moonlit garden in horror, for my worst fears were realized, and I knew just how much I had dreaded this moment when I saw that the seven tall trees—those sinister devil-trees—were gone!

Then I turned, to see the huge bulk of the innkeeper close behind us, his head thrown back in silent laughter, his eyes smoldering fires above the ugly, cavernous mouth.

Birkett turned too, at my exclamation, and drew his heavy eyebrows together in a frown.

"What the devil do you mean by creeping up to us like that?" he demanded angrily.

Still laughing, the innkeeper came forward and put his hand familiarly on my friend's arm. "By the Black Goat of Zarem," he muttered, "you are come in a good hour. The *Sons of Enoch* wait to receive you—I myself have seen to it—and tonight you shall both learn the high mysteries of their ancient order!"

"Look here, my fine fellow," said Birkett, "what the deuce do you mean by crowing so loud? I've got to *meet* these nigger minstrels of yours before I decide to join them."

From the house came a great rolling burst of song, a tremendous chant with an earth-shaking rhythm that was like the shock of battle. The ground rocked beneath us; gathering clouds shut out the face of the watchful moon; a sudden fury of wind shook the massed trees about the house and grounds until they moaned and hissed like lost souls, tossing their crests in impotent agony.

In the lull which followed, Bir-

kett's voice came to me, low and strangely subdued: "You're right, d'Abre! This place is unhealthful. Let's quit." And he moved back toward the steps.

But the creature at our side laughed again and raised his hand. Instantly the grounds were full of shifting lights, moving about us—hemming us in, revealing dim outlines of swollen, monstrous bodies, and bloated features which thrust forward sickeningly to gloat and peer at Birkett and me.

The former's shuddering disgust brought them closer and closer upon us, and I whispered hastily, "Face them! Face them! Stamp on them if you can, they only advance as you retreat!"

Our host's pale, smiling face darkened as he saw our resolution, and a wave of his hand reduced the garden to empty darkness once more.

"So!" he hissed. "I regret that my efforts to amuse you are not appreciated. If I had thought you a coward"—turning to Birkett—"I would not have suggested that you come tonight. The *Sons of Enoch* have no room for a coward in their midst!"

"Coward!" Birkett's voice rose to a bellow at the insult, and in reaction from his horror. "Why, you grinning white-faced ape! Say that again and I'll smash you until you're uglier than your filthy friends here. No more of your conjuring tricks! Get on to the house and show me these precious Sons of yours!"

I put my hand on his arm, but the blind anger to which the innkeeper had purposely roused him made him incapable of thought or reason, and he shook me off angrily.

Poor Birkett! Ignorant, undisciplined, and entirely at the mercy of his appetites and emotions—what chance had he in his fatuous immaturity against our enemy? I followed him despairingly. His last chance of

escape was gone if he entered that house of his own free will.

"The trees are gone!" I said in a loud voice, pulling Birkett back, and pointing. "Ask him where the trees are gone!"

But as I spoke, the outlines of the *Seven Green Men* rose quivering in the dimness of the garden. Unsubstantial, unreal, mere shadows cast by the magic of the Master who walked by our side, they stood there again in their stiff, silent ranks!

"What the deuce are you talking about?" growled Birkett. "Come on! I'll see this thing through now, if I'm hanged for it."

I caught the quick malice of the innkeeper's glance, and shivered. Birkett was a lump of dough for this fiend's molding, and my blood ran cold at the thought of the ordeal to come.

8

OVER the threshold of the house! . . . and with one step we passed the last barrier between ourselves and the unseen.

No familiar walls stood around us, no roof above us. We were in the vast outer darkness which knows neither time nor space.

I drew an Arab knife from its sheath—a blade sharpened on the sacred stone of the Kaaba, and more potent here than all the weapons in an arsenal.

Birkett took my wrists in his big grasp and pointed vehemently with his other hand. In any other place I could have smiled at his bewilderment; now, I could only wish with intense bitterness that his intellect equaled his obstinacy. Even now he discredited his higher instincts; even here he was trying to measure the vast spaces of eternity with his little foot-rule of earthbound dimensions.

Our host stood before us—smiling, urbane as ever; and, at his side, the *Seven Green Men* towered, bare-

headed and armor-clad, confronting us in ominous silence, their eyes devouring hells of sick desire!

"My brothers!" At the whispered word, Birkett stiffened at my side and his grip on my arm tightened.

"My brothers, the *Sons of Enoch*, wait to receive you to their fellowship. You shall be initiated as they have been. You shall share their secrets, their sufferings, their toil. You have come here of your own free will . . . now you shall know no will but mine. Your existence shall be my existence! Your being my being! Your strength my strength! What is the Word?"

The *Seven Green Men* turned toward him.

"The Word is thy Will, Master of Life and Death!"

"Receive, then, the baptism of the initiate!" came the whispered command.

Birkett made a stiff step forward, but I restrained him with frantic hands.

"No! No!" I cried hoarsely. "Resist . . . resist him."

He smiled vacantly at me, then turned his glazed eyes in the direction of the whispering voice again.

"No faith defends you . . . no knowledge guides you . . . no wisdom inspires you. *Son of Enoch*, receive your baptism!"

I drew my dagger and flung myself in front of Birkett as he brushed hastily past me and advanced toward the smiling Master. But the *Seven Green Men* ringed us in, stretching out stiff arms in a wide circle, machinelike, obedient to the hissing commands of their superior.

I leapt forward, and with a cutting slash of my knife got free and strode up to the devil who smiled, and smiled, and smiled!

"Power is mine!" I said, steady-ing my voice with hideous effort. "I know you . . . I name you . . . Gaffarel!"

9

IN THE gray chill of dawn I stood once more before the house of the *Seven Green Men*.

The dark woods waited silent and watchful, and the house itself was shuttered, and barred, and silent too.

I looked around wildly as thought and memory returned. Birkett . . . Birkett, where was he?

Then I saw the trees! The devil-trees, stiff, grotesque and menacing in their armor, silhouetted against the white, blank face of the roadhouse behind.

The Seven Green Men!

Seven . . . no . . . there were eight men now! I counted them! My voice broke with a cry as I counted and recounted those frightful trees.

Eight!

As I stood there sobbing the words . . . eight . . . eight . . . eight!

over and over, with terror mounting in my brain, the narrow door of the inn opened slowly, and a figure shambled out and down the path toward me.

A big, heavy figure that mouthed and gibbered at me as it came, pouring out a stream of meaningless words until it reached my feet, where it collapsed in the long dewy grass.

It was Birkett—Nicholas Birkett! I recognized the horrible travesty of my friend at last, and crept away from him into the forest, for I was very sick.

THE sign was freshly painted as we passed it coming out, much later, for it was long before I could bring myself to touch Birkett, and take him out to the waiting car.

The sign was freshly painted as we passed . . . and the livid green words ran:

"THE EIGHT GREEN MEN."