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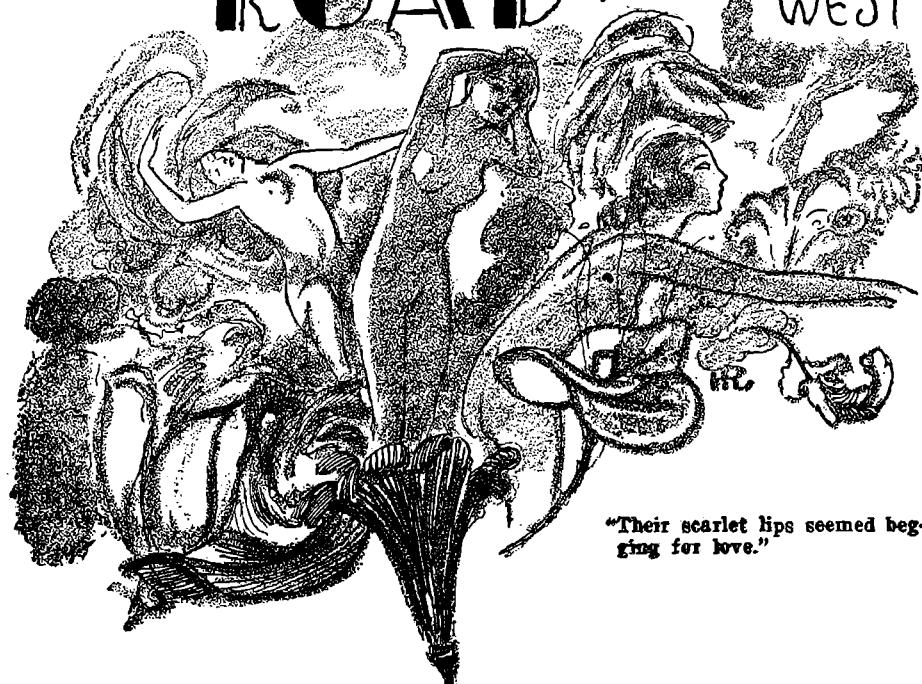
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The EMPTY ROAD

by WALLACE WEST



"Their scarlet lips seemed begging for love."

STANLEY WARDEN'S convalescence was peculiar in that he seemed to know in advance just how soon he would recover; when he would leave the hospital for his home and how soon he would be back at the office.

He had regained consciousness after an operation which had removed an abscess from the base of his brain with a feeling similar to that experienced when one steps from a dark alley into a brightly lighted street and is doubtful which way to turn.

During the days which followed it was borne upon him irresistibly that in those far places to which an anesthetic had swept him he had gained the ability to remember the future as well as the past.

As he gained strength this uncanny foreknowledge annoyed him more and more. It didn't puzzle him. For some reason it seemed quite natural that he should see his life unrolling far before him. But it took all the flavor from existence.

The endearments which his mother and Jerry Sanders, his fiancée, showered upon him when he returned to his apartment, the things he had to eat, even the weather and the news in the papers—all were as a twice-told tale long before they reached him.

He fancied himself as an unending series of figures, each one step ahead of the last, along which his soul—the spark which actually was alive—passed without variation, like a

beam of light traveling along a bas-relief in some old gallery.

Only his thoughts seemed free. He never could tell what he would be thinking in the future, but in spite of this his acts were as fixed by the law of cause and effect as though they had been graven in stone ages before.

He became more and more irked by the predestined nature of everything surrounding him. Forcing himself to the utmost against bonds which gripped him, he tried little acts of rebellion—knocked over an inkwell that according to his memory of coming events should have remained untouched—chose a different suit from the one in which he had seen himself attired.

Oddly enough he found it entirely possible to do these unimportant things, but afterward he would feel a faint, cold chill pass over him, as though he had dislodged a tiny stone in the abutment of the university which might topple the whole structure to ruin.

With more important acts, rebellion was much more difficult and painful. For instance, he tried to stay away from the office on the day when, according to the ordinary course of events, he would have returned to work, and when, in fact, he clearly saw himself taking his accustomed place at his mahogany desk.

For a few minutes he felt brave and daring, as though he were defying the laws of nature successfully. Then, though he strove to dally over his breakfast tray, the pull of some compelling power seemed dragging him to his feet.

Cursing, he clung to the arms of his chair, but something more powerful than himself was urging him to don clothes and hurry downtown. It wasn't a physical pressure, he realized—rather a mental urge, which, like the force that propels a drug addict to his narcotic, was driving

him to do something—driving him so powerfully that at last his will-power crumbled.

Gritting his teeth in fury he hurried into his clothing, ordered a taxi and arrived at his office at the very minute when he had seen himself entering the door.

As the weeks passed Stanley became more and more engrossed in experimenting with his new-found ability, at once fascinating and brutally terrifying.

Was there no such thing as a free soul? Were all beings chained to the law of cause and effect as the Hindus pictured mankind chained to the wheel of life, revolving over and over along the same path until Nirvana, or forgetfulness, put an end to the farce?

He made deeper excursions into his "memories", as he could not help but call them.

He saw himself married to this dark-haired, dark-eyed Jerry whom he loved. He saw himself a successful business man, a proud father, a pillar of the church; saw his children wed, and waited with baited breath for news of the coming of his first grandchild.

A happy life, he could not but admit. There were sorrows and worries, of course, but luck and hard work and right dealing seemed always to bring sunshine out of the clouds.

Delving still deeper he came to the end—even unto his death—and he could envision that as plainly as if it were tomorrow. He felt himself lying on his bed—tired, but not in pain. He saw the faces of children and grandchildren, and a worn, sweet likeness of Jerry bending over him.

He felt his breath drawing shorter, a strange numbness creeping over his body—and that was all.

Beyond that curtain he could not go, although more clearly than ever before he felt there was something

beyond that—something. Always he breathed a prayer of relief that that had been spared him—that if there were other lives as fixed as this he could not know it.

Coming out of such a reverie as this he would find himself filled with bitterness. Often such spells would come upon him while he was sitting before his grate fire while Jerry, who almost made her home at the apartment since his illness, and his mother, were in the kitchen concocting a supper to tempt his jaundiced appetite.

Once, in the access of his rage he hurled a poker into the dancing flames in which he had seen his future mocking him, and was cursing savagely when he caught a glimpse of the startled faces of the two women watching him from the kitchen.

And slowly he began to form an intense disgust for Jerry's gay, high-spirited way of looking at life; for the carefree manner in which she looked fate in the eye and made a "snoot", as she called it.

As she said mockingly one day when he felt particularly blue: "Why grouch, Stan? You know the old poem which the ghost recited as it sat on the tombstone:

Life is a joke and all things show it.
Once I thought so; now I know it.

"Smile, dearest," she continued, half plaintive, half laughing, as she perched on his knees before the fire and experimented with his nose and ruffled up his eyebrows. "You're too serious since you've been ill. You take life too soberly. Heavens! One would think you had the weight of the world on your shoulders! Remember, we don't know what's going to happen to us, and we should squeeze joy out of every happy moment we have, so that in case a rainy day comes we'll have some left over."

She kissed him then, and he held her tight and loved her. But the mood of playfulness she inspired passed and once more he found him-

self face to face with an unchanging fate.

If he only dared tell her—dared talk about it. But he knew she would think him feverish, and humor him—or mad, and be frightened at him.

So he kept silent and felt a greater and greater irritation at her gayety and devil-may-care attitude.

Her little acts of kindness began to infuriate him. Particularly he detested her habit of filling the room with flowers when she came. Their aroma oppressed him. Their massed blooms seemed to menace him.

Perhaps, he thought, this might be explained by the fact that once when a boy of five he had wandered into the conservatory at an uncle's house, and knocked down a shelf of blooming roses. Buried under the mixture of soil and bruised blooms he had almost suffocated before being rescued by a gardener.

This experience always had haunted him like a nightmare, and now after his illness it increased, and was made more annoying by Jerry's persistence in bringing in great loads of blooms. He hated to hurt her feelings by forbidding this, but raged inwardly.

Gradually a plan of rebellion against the whole scheme of things as they are began forming in his super-sensitive mind. It was an evil plan, he knew, and yet so great had the pressure become that he did not care.

Now, he reasoned, if it had been possible for him to knock over the inkwell, and dress in the wrong suit of clothes, and see a different show, why should it not be possible for him to break the chain entirely and escape into a realm where he no longer was at the mercy of the powers that be?

He remembered the day when he fought against going to the office, but his hatred of forces which bound him had grown so great that he was

blindly determined to make another effort.

A complete break it must be, he knew, if he were to escape. What should it be and how could it be accomplished so that like Ulysses, who was bound to the mast so that he might hear the Sirens and yet not succumb to their wiles, he, Stanley Warden, might be borne away in spite of his urge to fulfil his destiny?

The word "mast" decided him. A boat, of course, which would bear him away from the daily routine so he could not return. And the greatest break possible in the chain? A break with Jerry!

The thought stunned him. Yet, now that he had thought it over, that was the only way. A lesser break—such as quitting his job, easily could be mended, like a broken thread in a loom, and the cloth would scarcely show it.

But if he left Jerry for ever! There could be no return.

Slowly, during the long nights when he could not sleep and sat in slippers and lounging-robe before the fire staring into the flames he began composing a letter.

Should it be merely: "I have found I do not love you"? or "I love another"? or simply "You bore me to tears"? The latter, he decided, would be the most final. Jerry might think he was indulging his "weird humor" if he wrote the former, but "You bore me"—that she would never forgive.

So he wrote it. A neat little note, scorching and bitter, and, though he did not know it, filled with the agony of his too-enlightened soul.

Then, on a day when he happened to be passing near a steamship ticket office, he dashed inside and stammeringly asked for a ticket to London.

Strong hands seemed gripping him by the shoulders, trying to force him out the door and into the regular routine of life, which for a moment

he had escaped. Rubber bands seemed clogging his arms as he reached for his billfold to pay for the ticket.

Yet he succeeded, and, as the amazed clerk stared after this madman, he snatched the pasteboards, dashed out of the door, and after three blocks of frenzied walking caught up with that—that other self, and merged again into the everyday current of events.

As his sailing date approached he became more and more tender toward Jerry, trying in some dim way to make up for the hurt he must do her; for the horror and confusion into which he must throw her when she too would find the world of cause and effect tumbling about her, and a world of chance in its place. For of course the chain of her life—and of how many others—would be disrupted if his plan succeeded and he withdrew from his accustomed round. It would be as if a tiny but essential cog in a vast machine had rebelled against its duty.

Strangely he felt no great pity. He had become as a scientist, pushing pawns about a board. He had become—he scarcely dared think of it—in some way a god, operating outside the laws of the universe. Now that he had achieved that attitude he felt no fear of failure.

TOMORROW he sailed. Everything was arranged. His valises were packed. His mother had returned to her home. No one would know.

Midnight approached. He could not sleep.

"Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head."

He stumbled into his clothes and paced back and forth across the living-room. The *Celtic* sailed at 7 a. m. Beyond was darkness. He could not see. The chain was snapped and he

was walking down that lonely road shivering as with the ague:

"Because he knows a frightened fiend
Doth close behind him tread."

He pulled on his topcoat and hurried out into the street. The compulsion which had governed him so long seemed slackening. He moved without that terrible dragging which had at first encumbered his rebellion. And oddly enough he felt all at once frightened and lost and immeasurably lonely.

He posted the note to Jerry, and watched idly as the last mailman unlocked the box and slipped it into his pouch. That would mean Jerry would receive it next morning. At that time he would be far out on the Atlantic. The die was cast.

He turned down the street, shivering slightly in the raw, damp atmosphere of an early spring night. He would take a long walk and steady his nerves. God! He wished he had a drink.

A gentle touch on his elbow caused him to whirl in a sweat of terror. He had been sure there was no one nearer than the retreating mail truck. But it was only a little, wizened man in the red livery of a butler.

"Beg pardon, but are you Stanley Warden?" this one asked.

"Why, yes," he replied, lighting a cigarette with hands that shook ever so slightly. "What can I do for you?"

"My master, John Brown, who lives in the brownstone house across the street, is having a dinner party for some of his friends," the little man said with an accent faintly furrowed by some queer foreign phraseology. "One of the guests has been detained, and Mr. Brown has a superstition against sitting down with an empty chair at table. He asked that I find another guest, and since I know you by sight I thought perhaps—"

His voice trailed off. Stanley had a queer notion that he was being watched by other eyes. Suddenly he noticed that the butler was a hunchback—that his head was set at a queer thrusting angle. That accounted for his shortness of stature.

"Why, yes," Stanley laughed, a trifle discordantly. "I've nothing to do until dawn and I can't sleep. I'd be glad to join the party. Lead on, Macduff."

Without a word the butler turned and preceded him quickly across the street and into an imposing entrance. Odd, Warden thought. He never had noticed the sumptuousness of the place. It always had appeared to be a gone-to-seed residence of the Gay Nineties. But now!

THE hunchback bowed him into a lofty dining-room and vanished. A hasty glance assured Stanley that the place was really magnificent. That must be a real Gobelin tapestry, and the mold of the Parthenon still seemed to cling about those marbles. . . .

His host was advancing with hands outstretched.

"So glad you could come, Mr. Warden," he smiled, detaching himself from a group of guests and approaching with a slightly halting gait. "Never does to have an empty chair at table."

Warden found himself looking into a fathomless pair of jet eyes and gripping a long, sinewy hand that felt strangely warm and dry. As they returned to the table he tried to determine, without appearing rude, just what was the matter with his host's feet, but the latter walked slightly behind him with a hand on his elbow.

It was a strange company, that, grouped about the long table, which glimmered with linen and silver. Stanley noticed with a start that there were but eleven guests besides himself. His was the thirteenth chair.

A few of them he recognized as he was introduced: Solomon Levy, the broker, who was reputed to have made close to a billion on the stock market that season; Arnold Brutus, the criminal lawyer, who never had lost a case; Stephen Mathy, the author, who had been involved in an unsavory murder-suicide scandal not six months ago, but who had been pronounced blameless by a jury.

Others puzzled him. Somehow they were out of drawing, odd, a little repulsive. And all peered at him with an interest which seemed warmer than should have greeted a casual guest.

But the dinner, late though it was, was magnificent: food such as he never had dreamed of; wines that prohibition's fingers never had clutched; liquors like the breath of Venus.

He succumbed entirely to the spell and basked for an hour in the comfort and well-being which it invoked.

He was startled, when, after the last dish had been cleared away, his host arose abruptly, glass in hand.

"Here's to the World of Chance," Brown cried without preamble.

The hall suddenly re-echoed with the shout as other guests took it up.

Sfanley found himself on his feet with the rest, but he was strangely shaken as he saw the tight-lipped faces, around him. Suddenly the guests had changed from jovial good fellows into an army, deadly and ready for battle. The hawk nose of Levy protruded like that of a bird of prey. The long yellow fingers of Mathy were writhing like snakes over the back of his chair. A tall, skinny, crooked man at the end of the table set up a neighing whinny of laughter that made his flesh creep.

Brown was looking directly at him as all remained standing, their glasses drained.

"I do not want you to think, Stan," he said familiarly, "that your

coming here tonight was accidental. It was caused"—he paused and laughed lightly, his long white teeth showing—"caused," he repeated, "what a queer word!—it was ordered by me as a direct insult to the powers that be. We knew of your rebellion. That's why you felt the slackening of the pressure upon you lately."

Without warning a bay of laughter went up from the eleven guests, who seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Abruptly the host crossed to the side of the room, drew down an ornamental rapier which had been crossed with its mate above a mantel and stalked to a great cobweb, which, strangely enough, was gently swaying between two tapestries at one corner of the otherwise immaculate room.

"Look," he ordered sharply. "You are a novice. This will be your initiation. This represents the world of cause and effect. He pointed to the gleaming strands which met each other with geometric precision. The spider that meshed this—" Brown stood silent a moment.

"Cause and effect!" he continued after an interval. "Warden, you stand in the presence of a company of the free lances of the universe who no longer are bound by cause and effect, even as you no longer are bound."

A snarling cheer greeted his words.

"Time was," continued his host when the noise had subsided, "time was when the universe was as closely knit as this tapestry—when every joint fitted as neatly as do the meshes of this web. But," with the point of the rapier he tore a long, ragged slit in the shimmering network, "that has passed. You stand in the presence of those who are tearing at the web of things as they are; who are no longer bound; who are striving to create a world of chance."

"You may have thought," he continued, "that you alone could read

the future. All those about you could do so at one time. Could, I say, for they too have broken the chain, and for them now there is no future. All is the present.

"Levy, here, carves his own way, like this," and Brown slashed another hole in the web. "Mathy, too, does his bit. Aviglon, that tall, skinny chap, is ripping at the laws of government. Each in his own way is breaking down, tearing apart this foolish web which is life as ordinary people know it.

"Strand by strand," he illustrated neatly with the point of the weapon, "we are gnawing at the foundations of things. Look at your web now—torn and shattered. A few more recruits, a few more blows and—" With a long sweep of the sword he brought the entire web to the floor and trampled it under foot.

"You do not believe," he continued gently. "No wonder. But you will. Why, our first venture was a masterpiece. What was it? The World War, of course! Did you not realize it? Did you not at the time stand in amaze that a poor fool's bullet should plunge the world into madness?

"Ah, but it was cleverly done," he bowed to Levy. "So gently done. A man made mad conveniently—a statesman stricken with apoplexy—a king with a bad case of gastritis—a bankrupt baron trying to recoup his fortune—a little twist here and there—a faint change in the ordinary current of life—and behold—"

There was no doubting this dynamic individual. Stanley found himself still standing, half-filled glass in hand, although the others had sat down long ago.

"And now?" he breathed.

"Now? Look about you. Frenzied speculation—nations at bay and armed to the teeth—intrigue—racketeering. The time is about ripe. A few more willing, strong hands such as yours and we will give the push

which will send this little civilization toppling into oblivion. After that we will be lords of creation in a world ruled only by ourselves."

"But how will you rule?" puzzled the neophyte. "With the laws of the world toppled, with what will you control it? Will it not crumble into dust about you?"

"We will rule through will-power," snapped his host. "Look, it is simple. I will demonstrate."

He picked up a goblet of wine and held it against the light so that it threw amber shadows across the snowy cloth.

And, as Stanley stared—it vanished!

"Try it," said Brown. "I will help you. It's difficult at first."

Stanley held up his glass, still warm from his hand.

"Will it to vanish," whispered Brown.

As the younger man concentrated on the bright object, wheels and cogs in his mind seemed to mesh for the first time. He likened the sensation to that felt by a paralytic, who after years of immobility finds that he can once more move his arms.

And slowly the glass faded, gleamed iridescently a moment like a fairy bubble—and was gone.

"Simple," laughed Brown, evidently elated. "The Rosicrucians knew the trick long ago, but didn't apply it."

"Look," he continued. "I will show you something more worth while. Don't cross your will with mine or disaster may result. Just let yourself go as if you were taking ether."

Brown leaned forward with his hands on the table and smiled. As he did so the walls about them melted away. With such suddenness that there was no feeling of movement the whole table with its twelve guests was transported to an elevation of several thousand feet. Below them

(Continued on page 854)

The Empty Road

(Continued from page 768)

the lights of the town twinkled gayly. In its slip on the East River Stanley thought he glimpsed the *Celtic*, which was to take him to London in the morning. Odd! He gasped, elated with the wonder of it all.

"It's chilly here," said the host, still resting his fingers on the tabletop. "We will return."

As he spoke they were again in the warm atmosphere of the dining-hall.

"And my reward if I join you?" queried Stanley, still on his feet.

"Power beyond your wildest dreams, you fool!" shouted his host. "An equal place with us in the realm of free spirits. Why, we shall be as the gods of old and rule the world as Jupiter and his favorites did from Parnassus. We can defy death. We can be lords of life itself!"

For some reason Warden still hesitated. Although the theory seemed real enough, it was beyond his grasp—just as the fourth dimension was. It sounded magnificent and yet—and yet—he wanted something tangible.

Brown seemed to read his mind.

"Oh, I see," he nodded, his black eyes sparkling evilly. "Doubting Thomas wants something real—something alive and within his limits. You will outgrow that, but in the meantime—Mathy, see what you can do for this youngster in the way of a tangible reward for his rebellion."

THE host sat down slowly and the author rose in his stead. Again his yellow, cigarette-stained fingers writhed upon the back of his chair as he smiled wolfishly upon the gathering.

"I believe it would not be amiss, after this wonderful evening," he breathed, scarcely audibly, "if we had a little glimpse of pleasure and youth and beauty. I have in mind a scene

from my new novel, *The Otherworldling*, which I shall make real to you."

He paused for effect, lit a long cigarette which was speckled with tiny spots of color, like a robin's egg, then continued reflectively, as his eyes roved over his auditors.

"Let us say we are in a world where evolution has taken a different trend, where the flowers have developed beautiful, semi-human bodies; where a man can float in a poppy daze without the unpleasant after-effects; where beauty is exotic and supreme; where the ones we love are transformed into beings we can possess voluptuously and without restraint."

His voice trailed off. His face seemed to shrink and harden. Only his widely spaced green eyes seemed alive as they blinked slowly. With a shock Stanley observed that their pupils dilated vertically like those of a cat.

As he stared the walls and table seemed to dissolve and take new forms. The night vanished. A great, warm sun caressed him. With the other guests he found himself wandering in a bower of giant flowers. A sweet, penetrating aroma, which seemed to have been pressed from all the blooms that ever had opened, swept over them.

He felt a touch on his elbow and turned to behold the flower-women. Strangely human they were, as they swayed shoulder-high on their slender stalks—nodding, bowing in the breeze, smiling gayly the while like ladies in some old, old cotillion. Their slender, naked bodies glowed pinkly in the sunshine, exquisite and beautiful. Their scarlet lips seemed begging for love. But their eyes were dead! Now and then one, stirred by the scented zephyrs, would break from her mooring, in the midst of what seemed a

gigantic rose, and drift toward them, arms outstretched.

"These are but the figments of my imagination," Stanley heard Mathy's voice crooning softly beside him. "They have no being of their own, and are built by me only for your delectation. They are made for love. Have pity upon them."

But the effect upon Stanley was not what the author evidently had expected. Something within him seemed fighting desperately for air. His old horror of flowers swept over him. This sticky sweetness reminded him nauseatingly of the time when he had been buried under the roses and had fought the petals and thorns and entangling roots for life. He panted for breath. He wanted to scream, to run wildly down this jewel-strewn path.

"But I see Mr. Warden is not yet satisfied," the silken, stubborn voice droned on. "Perhaps he dreams of Jerry, who is not here. Oh, yes, we know of Jerry. A charming maiden, but puritanical. We will place her here and see the effect. Look!"

And, as he turned a corner of the path, Stanley beheld in the center of a giant yellow rose the likeness of Jerry swaying slowly toward him. As beautiful as ever she was, yet changed, as when one sees the face of a friend in a nightmare, as if she had been "crossed" with a flower by some devil's chemistry.

"Jerry!" he gasped.

Slowly her face turned toward him, as gradually as when a sunflower swings toward the sun.

He shrieked with horror. It was the face of a saint in purgatory; of a soul in its death throes.

"Do not be foolish," intoned Mathy's voice, into which had crept a faint tinge of menace. "The silly girl seems to take it hard, but she will grow used to it and become happy here in this garden, with the perfumes, the sun, the other flower maidens—and you. She will be your

slave for as long as you wish. When you tire of her she will—pass on. Pluck your posy, my boy, and amuse yourself till dawn."

With a cry of anguish Stanley hurled himself upon Mathy, whose figure, apparently clothed in silks of strange colors, he could see beside him.

"You fiend! You devil!" he snarled. "Do with me what you will, but leave Jerry untouched."

His fingers closed upon the soft throat of the author. There was a crash of glassware and a thunder of chairs overturned.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the dining-hall had closed once more about them. He and Mathy were writhing in a tangle of dishes and napery while the other guests crowded about, trying to tear them apart.

"You fool! You utter fool!" he heard Brown shouting. "You almost killed them all. Get back, you fellows. Let me beat some reason into his young head. Damn me if I'll have rebellion among the rebels! It's my will that rules here. Back, I say!"

With a superhuman effort Stanley scrambled to his feet. He had gone berserk. Those crooked, vulpine faces about him seemed birds of prey, ready to tear his very soul to tatters.

With the strength of despair he gripped the now conscious Mathy by the heels and used the body as a flail to sweep a path before him toward the door.

He sensed that the others were reaching skinny fingers toward him. He saw Brown, all his suavity vanished, his face a mask of death, dancing about, a rapier in his hand, trying to get an opening.

And now, for the first time, he saw what was wrong with his host's feet.

The revelation drove him completely mad. He hurled the limp form of Mathy through the doorway, which had been blocked by the hunchback butler and a group of other horrors.

evidently from the servants' quarters, and leaped after it.

A lithe form dropped on his back from above, choking him, as he crashed against the entrance door. He heard the fellow's skull crush against the jamb.

By a miracle the door was unlocked. He dashed into the street and across it, toward his apartment. He couldn't resist turning to look back, however, and saw the whole ghastly crew piling through the door into the dim light of dawn.

That look almost proved his undoing, for some dim form gripped his leg and tripped him. The mob was on him, pulling at his clothes, scratching at his throat, and only prevented from killing him by their numbers and excitement.

Squirming and kicking he fought his way across the dim street. If he could gain his apartment! If he could call Jerry! If he could reunite the chain of the everyday world he knew he would be safe.

At the door he fought them off a

moment and snatched his telephone. "Humboldt 5225," he panted.

He heard the crash of the door as his enemies broke it down. He felt them upon him. The end had come!

Then, like a voice from heaven, he heard Jerry on the wire.

"It's Stanley, darling," he screamed. "Promise you won't read the letter from me that you will receive this morning, Jerry. Promise me that."

A skinny claw clutched the receiver but he held fast and as he fell beneath a stunning blow on the head rolled against the wall so they could not reach the cord.

"What on earth is that noise?" he dimly heard the girl answer. "Why of course I won't read the letter, silly. Are you ill? What makes you shout so?"

He could not answer, but as his senses reeled into darkness he felt the pressure about him relax; the blows upon his head cease. He had won back to the world of everyday, where demons in human form could not yet approach.
