

THRILLING MYSTERY


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THE FIEND OF

A Complete Novelette

By RAY

Author of "World of Doom,"

CHAPTER I

A Cry in the Night

I CAST aside the newspapers which I had been pondering all the way up from New York City on this 7.30 train which would land me at the little town of Sleepy Hollow at 10 P.M. I must say this assignment had no appeal for me—body-guard, you might say, for Sleepy Hollow's only millionaire family.

A fiend in human form prowling these lonely wooded hills . . . The police balked . . . The first murder a week ago—the body of old R. P. Morton, retired millionaire, found on the grounds of his Sleepy Hollow estate—the head wrenched from the body, evidently by a fiend of superhuman strength. And now, last night, the body of one Peter Green, found on a path at the edge of the village—the head wrenched from the body, evidently by a fiend of superhuman strength.

Even allowing for the usual newspaper exaggeration, the blood-chilling thing had set me shuddering. No wonder this Morton family was terrified tonight and wanted a body-guard.

"Sleepy Hollow! Last stop—Sleepy Hollow!"

I shoved the newspapers to the floor and stared out of the car window. It was a gloomy, overcast night. The train was winding slowly through wooded hills. Then it whistled, slackened and stopped. A small group of lights disclosed a wooden platform, a



*I swung, my finger on the trigger
of the gun*

A Creature Accursed Discovers a Magic

SLEEPY HOLLOW

of Gruesome Thrills

CUMMINGS

"Girl in the Golden Atom," etc.

little station, a few somnolent streets of dispirited straggling buildings.

The two or three people who got off the train stared at me as though a stranger was an enormous event. Lugging my suitcase, I inquired and found the only brick building in the village—the Town Hall, which was also the police station and the jail.

The constable had not yet gone to bed. "Sit down," he said. "You're a reporter? I haven't got anything much. The police of Cartersville, that's our county seat, fifteen miles west—they got this in charge—"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "George Halton—I'm the son of the Halton & Son Agency, New York City. We had a call this afternoon from John Morton. His secretary, Phillip Ober, telephoned. Then my father and I talked with Morton. I'm hired to come up here and live with them for a while. Sort of bodyguard. I guess they're pretty well scared."

THIS constable wasn't the usual type of hick policemen. He was a youngish fellow, and evidently not a bit dumb.

"Scared?" he said. "Well, I would not blame 'em—"

"Me either. What's this Morton family like? I don't know a thing, except I'm supposed to go up and guard them."

"John Morton's the head of it now."

"How old is he?"

"Oh, maybe thirty-five. Old man Morton was sixty-five. He got killed a week ago—"



From the portières came a giant shape

Elixir which Endows Him with Giant Strength

"Yes," I said. "I know about that."

"This John Morton's going to be our next mayor, I think," the constable added.

That electrified me. Peter Green, he who had been murdered last night, was a politician. The constable wasn't dumb; he understood my look.

"Green was runnin' for mayor, too," he said. "But, jus' the same, they were good friends."

"Queer," I murmured.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. That's what the police are thinkin'. But they was good friends—friendly political rivals—jus' the same. Besides, John Morton wouldn't murder his own father, would he? The same fiend did 'em both; you can't miss it."

Would John Morton murder his own father? How could anybody guess that?

The constable went on earnestly: "Young Morton an' Peter Green had another reason for being friendly. Gladys Morton—that's John's younger sister—she was engaged to Green—"

That might make Morton and Green friendly—and it might not.

The constable was saying, "An' besides, there's one big thing you can't get away from—what's got all of us stumped. This murderer's got super-human strength—no ordinary person could do these things."

A hush came to his voice and he let it trail away into silence. I could feel my heart beating faster.

"How do you mean?" I said.

He pulled his jacket around him as though he was cold. "Well, I guess you read about it—head wrenched from the body. Hell, you can read about things like that an' they don't mean much. But I—I saw the bodies. The head—pulled right off—"

His gaze clung blankly to my face with a far-away look as though he were seeing through me—seeing those gruesome murdered bodies.

I said, to fill up the silence, "Or chopped off, maybe. It isn't very unusual for a murderer to dismember—"

"But it wasn't anything like that," he interrupted with sudden violence. "You can tell the difference. I'm

tellin' you—pulled out—nothing cut—jus' wrenched!"

Shuddering picture his vague words were conjuring. And to my mind came a vision of this fiend—giant of a man—superhuman strength such as only a brutal giant could have—more animal than human.

Animal! Could some great, cunning animal—a gorilla, perhaps—be roaming these dark lonely hills? Wild thoughts! These were not isolated murders. There was a connection between Peter Green and the Mortons—a link which suggested a human motive.

"Strength," the constable was saying. "You can't get away from that. No ordinary person, even if he had the strength of a lunatic, could do it. You—you might try wrenchin' a head from a body—"

I MADE an effort at a wry smile. "Thanks," I said. "I'll pass that up."

"Nor anyone else that I ever met," the constable said. "An' there you are! John Morton's a little fellow—a head shorter than you or me."

"Who else is in the family up there?" I suggested.

"Nobody else, 'cept the women an' servants. There's Gladys—she's eighteen. An' her mother—the widow—she's about prostrated, I guess. She's in bed most of the time now since her husband was killed. There's Phillip Ober, young Morton's secretary. He's a thin, sissy-looking fellow—I could wring his neck with one hand. An' they got a Chinese butler—I think he calls himself Charlie Lee."

"A Chinaman?"

"Yeah, but that's not as fiendish as it sounds. He's about as big as up to your shoulder. Young fellow—educated at Columbia. Nice sort of fellow, too. I know him pretty well—I like him. An' that," the constable said, "is the whole layout. The police are sure satisfied we got to locate somebody—something—entirely different from any regular man."

I stood up. "That's true enough—"

"An' unless he's absolutely nuts," the constable added, "hell keep him—"

self out in the hills. He must know anybody could spot him if ever they seen him—"

Roaming these hills? Huddling by day, like an animal in some secluded lair. Roaming by night—

"You goin' up to Morton's now?" the constable asked. He was standing with me and we were facing the open door. The street outside was dark, save for the yellow glow from the small street light cluster in front of the Town Hall. Across the black sky, a flare of distant jagged lightning darted, and a moment later there was a grumble of thunder.

"Looks like a storm," I said. "How do I get up to Morton's?"

The constable rubbed his chin. "They got a car. They didn't come down for you?"

"I didn't know what train I'd take. And I wanted to consult you privately."

"It's about a mile," he said. "There was a taxi when the train come in—you should have tol' him then. I guess he's gone to bed now."

"I'll walk," I said with sudden decision. "A mile isn't far. That would be quicker than waiting, anyway. I want to beat that storm. You keep my suitcase. I can get along without it tonight."

He stood regarding me blankly. "You're armed?" he inquired.

I showed him my little automatic. "Even a man of superhuman strength goes down with a bullet in his brain," I said. But though I tried to smile, it somehow seemed a failure.

The constable nodded. "I guess you can take care of yourself. You don't look very helpless." He followed me to the door. "You jus' follow this street right out. Straight road all the way to Morton's. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," I said as we shook hands. "And thanks for what you've told me."

"That street gets pretty lonely pretty quick," he said as I went down the steps.

HE stood on the steps gazing after me. The street did indeed get suddenly lonely. There were two or three blocks of straggling dark build-

inga. A fringe for a block or two of shabby residences—and then abruptly I was on a lightless dirt road, in the woods.

Under other circumstances, by day, for instance, it might have been a brief, pleasant stroll. But it wasn't now. The trees crowded thick on both sides of me, sometimes with interlocking branches overhead so that I was in a leafy tunnel. Not a house; not a light; not a sound except the murmuring undercurrent of insect life which now was engulfed by a wind which was springing up, sighing with puffy bursts through the tree tops.

The darkness was so solid I could barely see to keep on the road. I had a small pocket flash. I sent its tiny white beam ahead of me for a minute or two. Then the vision came to me of myself as I was here, plodding along with a light marking me. I snapped off the light. The storm was coming, no doubt of that. The wind was increasing. The occasional lightning flashes were closer, more intense.

The brief glares lighted the scene with a dazzling eerie luridness; and after them the darkness seemed more solid than ever.

I began wondering how far I had gone. Almost a mile? By day one could judge. I thought now, perhaps only half a mile . . . I was walking fairly fast; peering, straining all my senses into an abnormal sharpness. And my thoughts were surging. A fiend of ghastly giant strength, prowling these woods. With sharpened fancy, I could picture him here near me now. Following me along. Watching a chance to leap upon me.

And then ahead of me I saw a little light. A glowing yellow spot. It shifted; vanished; came again. With breath stopped, I checked my advance and stood peering.

It was a lighted house window. Not Morton's. I knew I had only gone about halfway to Morton's. A little bungalow shack was here beside the road; a shabby, one-man farm, with a rambling wooden fence enclosing a few cleared acres here in the woods.

I went past the house, with the road

bending off to the left, plunging again into the woods. The glow was a light on a yellow window shade, drawn down over an opened window. The fence was still beside me when, from the silent house, came a woman's scream. A low, throbbing, tortured wail! It rose, eerie, gruesome, then died away into silence.

For an instant I stood frozen. Then a flash of lightning came. The scene all around me burst into a lurid glare. Ahead of me, on up the road, the huge gaunt figure of a man was standing! A monstrous shape. He saw me. He swung—came bounding!

CHAPTER II

The Body in the Tree

THE lightning glare vanished, but the glow from the house still showed me the oncoming figure. I made a leap off the road, into a heavy patch of tree shadow, and melted down, crunching. The rushing man seemed not to have seen where I had gone. The blob of him passed me as he dashed to the gate of the fence and stood there, peering. And from the darkness I said softly:

"Don't move! I've got you covered. I'll put a bullet in you if you move."

He stiffened; stood as though frozen, with only his head turning toward the sound of my voice. The radiance from the window fell full on him now—a tall, thin man with scraggly iron-grey hair; bareheaded; with an old raincoat flopping loosely around his shoulders, giving him a hunched, misshapen look.

A shotgun was in his hand, but he made no attempt to raise it. He stood and gasped:

"W—who are you? Come out here where I can see you!"

With leveled automatic I confronted him. But my menace was unnecessary, and already I knew it. The woman in the house again had cried with that eerie wail; then suddenly the blob of her showed at the window with the light behind it as she pulled aside the shade.

"Ezra—that you, Ezra?" she called. Broken, half-hysterical voice.

And the man before me said, "Yes, Annie. It's all right—go back in—be quiet—"

I will say that must have taken courage—his quiet admonition to her, and me confronting him with leveled weapon. Then he swung, tense, to find out what I was going to do to him and combat it if he could.

But already I had lowered my automatic. "You live here?" I said.

"Yes, I live here. Who are you?"

I laughed shortly. "We've evidently mistaken each other. I'm a special officer, from New York. I'm on my way to Morton's. I heard a woman's cry—"

"My wife," he said. "She's frightened. All this talk of a fiend around here—" He had lowered his voice. He came closer to me, and suddenly he dropped his gun and gripped my wrist. "If you're a policeman like you say—you better show me somethin' to prove it."

THAT old farmer had a grip like steel. "Easy," I said. "I can do that." I showed him the insignia under my coat.

"All right," he said. And his suspicion changed to agitation. "You—you didn't see anything as you come up along the road?"

I shook my head.

"I run out the other way," he added. "We thought—we thought we heard somethin'." And then he said, with a sudden stark note of horror in his voice: "Our little granddaughter—she's with us this week. An' we jus' found she's—she's gone!"

A child missing! Stolen from its bed by this roaming monster!

The old man was clutching at me now. "She—she's a sleepwalker. We thought she was cured of it—she ain't done it for a year. But that's what must've happened. She's wanderin' out here somewhere—"

"How long ago?" I demanded.

"Couldn't have been over five or ten minutes. My wife had jus' been in to see her. If you'll help—"

"You go one way—I'll go the other.

I guess she would stick to the road." I started back toward Sleepy Hollow. But I had just come along this part of the road! "It has to be the other way," I said. "How far did you—"

I had run back to join the old man, and the words died in my throat. A flash of lightning split the sky, with an almost simultaneous crack of thunder. The scene momentarily brightened with a lurid green glare.

"Oh, my God!" the old farmer gasped.

The darkness closed in around us, like a shroud enveloping us. And we stood clutching each other, nerve-shaken, weak, trembling.

We had both seen it in that second of flashing light. The crotch of a tree-limb, a hundred feet away perhaps, and fifty feet above us.

The gruesome, mangled body of the child, up there where the fiend had thrown it. . . .

I think I can never recall a more blood-chilling rush of horror than that which now surged over me. It blurred all my senses for a moment, so that everything was dim, far-away—as though I were no actor here, but a spectator, watching myself and the speechless, shocked, broken old man.

He broke away from me. He dashed through the gate, with his peering wife coming to meet him. And then, as in his numbed confusion he must have blurted out the horror, I heard her scream.

The thing for these seconds had struck me witless. I had dealt with murder before. But this—

A fiend, evidently of superhuman strength. Those reiterated words in the newspapers rang through my head.

I stood stiffly, automatic in hand. Then I ran a little distance up the road. That pathetic, broken little body may have been nearly over me, but, mercifully, I could not see it. And again I stood listening, peering. Nothing to see but almost solid blackness of heavy woods and tangled thickets of underbrush with the tunnel-like road winding on toward Morton's. Nothing to hear, but the wailing of

the hysterical old woman down at the house—the muttering rumble of distant thunder—the surge of wind high up in the trees.

THEN another flash came—Nature's torch to show me what was hidden here in the blackness. I chanced to be staring directly at it—diagonally forward across the road.

And that second of glare disclosed it clearly. A hundred feet from me. A thicket in a hollow by the roadside. A hunched but giant figure. A peering face, livid, ghastly green-white in the lightning. No mistaken identity this time—a face contorted, with a wild horror look on it, twisted by frenzied murderous lust into a monstrous travesty of human aspect.

The darkness after the flash sprung between us. But in that second I fired, with my shot a yellow stab and a cracking roar of sound like an echo of the thunder-clap.

But I had missed. The damnable shape must have leaped at sight of me. I heard the threshing, cracking of the underbrush.

I think I may have run a hundred feet or so into the thicket. The threshing was still ahead of me, growing fainter as I was outdistanced. Then it died into silence.

I turned back. Forced myself through the tangled underbrush to the road. Here was the hollow where I had seen the damnable thing.

My thoughts were running away with me. It had been a man—all that the newspapers and the constable of Sleepy Hollow had said he must be. And here on the ground where he had been crouching was tangible evidence. My hand-torch beam showed that this hollow was soft, muddy ground. It must have been raining earlier in the day. The road was dry, but there was still soft mud here in the hollow. And footprints showed where the fiend had been crouching—the huge, blurred imprint of his shoes.

And there was something else. A small, pale-blue rectangle. I stooped and picked it up; held my light closely upon it. A little oblong of bluish paper. It had been folded but not

crumpled. On neither side had anything seemingly been written.

I stared, puzzled. Then I folded it carefully in the original creases and put it in my wallet.

There was nothing else that I could find around here. And with that body dangling up there in the tree, the hysterical old couple in the farmhouse, certainly there were things I had to do better than standing there.

I dashed back to the house. The old couple were in the sitting room. Numbed. Witless.

"You got a phone?" I demanded.

THE telephone was here. Neither of them had thought to use it. I telephoned the constable at Sleepy Hollow. The operator gave me his home. He was evidently going to bed.

"Oh," he said, when I told him who I was. "You're at Morton's."

"No. A farmhouse—half or two-thirds the way."

"That's Jones."

"Jones—"

"I'm Jones," the old farmer said numbly.

I told the constable what had happened.

"Good God!" he gasped. "I'll get busy—they'll have to come over from Cartersville—"

"They'll be up to you presently," I interpolated to Jones. "You and your wife lock yourselves in here. Stay inside. It won't be long."

I said to the constable, "That's all. You won't need me here. I'm going on up to Morton's. And listen—I don't think I'll say anything about this up at Morton's—just yet."

I left farmer Jones and his wife locked in their cottage. I was closer to Morton's than I realized; it wasn't over quarter of a mile. I went swiftly past that tree where the mute evidence of the fiend dangled in the darkness.

The storm was still threatening, but save for those two or three flashes, it seemed to hang off. There was the feel of rain in the air. I don't suppose I was much over five minutes getting to Morton's. But it was a nasty five minutes.

I passed through an ornate brick entrance into the cultivated grounds of the estate. Window lights, and a light at the *porte cochere* entrance showed me a big, rambling brick and stone two-story structure, with ivy growing upon it.

I rang at the *porte cochere* door. It presently opened, disclosing a baronial hallway, dimly lighted, and here at the door a thin, pale-faced, youngish man with slick blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses.

"I'm George Halton," I said, "from New York. I guess you're expecting me."

He smiled. "Oh yes, of course. I'm Phillip Ober, Mr. Morton's secretary. Did you walk up? We'd have come down."

A young Chinese fellow was here with him. Small, slender but with the wiry, catlike movements of the Oriental. He looked queerly grotesque in his dapper butler's uniform.

Ober said, "Lee, tell Mr. Morton—"

But John Morton was already coming forward along the hall. I stepped inside, and Charlie Lee closed the door upon me.

If only I had known what was going to happen to me before I got out that door again!

CHAPTER III

A Smell—of Burning Flesh?

"**Y**OU walked?" John Morton said. "You shouldn't have done that. If I'd known—"

"It was nothing," I smiled. "I left my suitcase in town—I'll get it tomorrow."

I submitted while that little Chinese butler took my hat and outer coat, with the secretary lingering deferentially near us. The eyes of the Chinese lad seemed appraising me. An intelligent-looking fellow, but for all his American education the inscrutable look of the Orient still clung to him. As I handed him my coat, I said:

"Wait, I forgot—" I took my automatic from the overcoat and

transferred it to my jacket pocket. "Don't want that to get away from me," I smiled.

I hadn't forgotten the weapon, of course; and as I produced it, I swept these three men with a glance. The incident startled Ober and Morton—or at least, it seemed so. But there was no change in the bland aspect of the little Oriental.

And as I took off my outer coat, I glanced furtively down at the feet of these men. All small. And there were no muddy shoes here save my own.

"Let's go into my den a few minutes, Mr. Halton," Morton said. "I want to talk this over with you before you meet my mother and sister. Then we'll go upstairs. Your room is up there, near theirs."

We passed along the big baronial hall, luxurious with heavy-beamed high ceiling, hardwood floors upon which rich Oriental rugs were lying; a tremendous Yule-log fireplace half-way along, with the bottom of a broad staircase opposite it, curving upward.

A number of rooms opened from the hall. I saw a library; a writing room; a darkened billiard room, with its walls solid with oil paintings in heavy gilt frames. A music salon. We passed the staircase; passed the dining room entrance.

The hall narrowed. A door stood open, showing a little den, with a single small light between a couch and easy chair.

"Let's go in here," Morton added. He had named the rooms as we passed. "Tomorrow," he said, "I'll show you all over the house."

He gestured back along the dim hall. "I've had my secretary sleep down here—there are servants' rooms here, and this hall leads back and into the kitchen. My room is upstairs—the women don't want to be alone up there, of course. But we want the lower parts of the house protected also."

"And the butler?" I said. I lowered my voice, though we were here alone now, lingering at the door of the den.

"His room is down here," Morton

said. "And here is my father's chemical laboratory—"

HIS voice halted a little at the mention of his murdered father. Was it an assumed emotion? I swear I could not tell.

"We never go in here now," he added. "I'm not much interested in chemistry. But it was a passion with father in his latter years."

The open laboratory door was here in the narrow hall, directly opposite the door of the den. I saw a big, ghostly, dim interior, with board tables, shelves and a litter of chemical apparatus.

"Your father was a chemist?" I asked.

"Well, no. I wouldn't call him that. He made his fortune as a wholesale merchant. Dry goods. But when he retired, he went in for chemistry as a hobby. Research work. I think if he had lived, he might have attained fame at it. But he—didn't."

I learned nothing new, except that the women servants of the house had become frightened and beginning tonight, they went to their own homes at dusk. So we were six, here in this twenty-odd room, two-story building: the secretary; the butler; Morton; his mother, and his sister. And myself.

No one else here. But my thoughts ran wild. Was this, indeed, the lair of the fiend? Was he one of these three slender, frail men? Impossible! One of the two women upstairs whom I was to meet soon? Fantastic! None of these people, men or women, had a tenth the physical strength which the murderous fiend had demonstrated.

But I could not shake myself of the feeling that the murderer was here, now, somewhere.

Was he lurking here in some of these big, dark rooms? Did he, by some chance, know the layout of this rambling many-roomed building? Crouching, hiding in some dark hole by day—roaming out at night with the mad lust to kill? A modern Jack the Ripper! Was this his home, into which tonight I had come alone with my little automatic to offer protection

to this family? I wondered anxiously.

Pleasant thoughts! Certainly I gave no hint of them now to Morton. I found him a pleasant-voiced, smooth talker—a suggestion of the oratorical politician in his flow of words. His physical strength. The background of my mind kept always surging with that damnable thought.

Morton, I saw clearly, was no more equipped with physical strength than were Phillip Ober and Charlie Lee. I am a six-footer myself, and pretty husky. I felt that in a rough-and-tumble fight I could take on all three of these little fellows and knock their heads together. And when I thought of the fiend: the heads of murdered men twisted and wrenched from the body. A fifty-pound child hurled upward high into a tree.

"I suppose we might as well go upstairs," Morton said at last. He had spoken frankly, regretfully, of the death of his friend Peter Green. His political rival. But it was only a game to him and to Green, this little mayoralty of Sleepy Hollow. Green was to have been his brother-in-law. His sister had loved Green very dearly.

We went forward into the big hall and up the huge central staircase. Ober and the Chinese butler stood silently watching us.

"Can Mr. Halton come in, Mother?"

A girl's contralto voice said, "Yes—come in, John."

WE entered from the upper cross hall, into a small boudoir, with the communicating door open into a small bedroom behind it.

Gladys Morton said, "Mother has just gone to bed. But she does want to meet young Mr. Halton. She is glad he has come here to live with us."

She was a small, slim, very pretty dark-haired girl of eighteen. She looked like a high-school graduate. But her face was pale, and she was red-eyed now, though her manner was thoroughly composed, not willing to show her grief to a stranger, so that she smiled briefly at me as we shook hands.

"Come in," she said. "Mother will

see you." I followed into the room.

I stayed no more than a minute. Mrs. Morton lay in bed—an elderly, grey-haired woman who in her youth must have been very handsome. She was propped up on the pillows with a negligée around her shoulders. She, too, had been crying. She seemed weak. Her heavy-set face was puffy.

She gave me a cold, flabby hand. She smiled weakly, with parted blue lips and slightly panting breath which suggested a bad heart.

"It will be a comfort to have you here with John, Mr. Halton," she said.

We exchanged only a few sentences. Then Morton and I withdrew. But my heart was pounding. There was a little table with a night light on it beside Mrs. Morton's bed. A glass of water. A bottle of medicine. A handkerchief.

And lying there I had seen a small oblong of pale blue paper!

"I thought this would be a comfortable room for you," Morton was saying. He led me into an ornate, luxurious bedroom, diagonally across the hall from the women's suite. "Mine is just a bit farther along," he added. "Lord, that's a queer storm—it's been hanging around all evening."

But it seemed bursting on us now. There was no more lightning or thunder, but the wind came surging, shaking even this solid structure; and I could hear the driving rain.

"You'll be comfortable," he repeated. "The bath is here adjoining."

"Oh yes—thanks."

"I'll leave my bedroom door ajar—"

"All right," I agreed. We stood in the doorway, and I eyed him, though I was smiling. "If you hear me roaming around, don't get excited over it."

"You expect to—roam around?"

"Well," I said, "I don't know that I expect to sleep much. I can do that in the daytime."

He answered my smile. "Use your own judgment. It's a comfort to have you here. We're all nervous. I suppose that's about all it amounts to, anyway. Good night, Halton."

I left the bedroom door ajar, and

flung myself into an easy chair beside the bed.

AN oblong of pale blue paper! My mind flung back to that taboret at Mrs. Morton's elbow. I had almost a duplicate of that pale blue paper in my wallet now. The fiend had dropped it in that hollow by the roadside. I took it out of my wallet and examined it again.

No writing on it. There wouldn't be, of course, because now I realized its use. A paper of the sort that holds medicine in powder form. Familiar type and color of paper—I had often seen it.

The creases of the one I had in my hand now indicated such a use—they made a folded little packet, about an inch by two inches.

Strange loose ends to this diabolical mystery! But they seemed vaguely to be linked together: pale blue paper dropped by the fiend—a chemical laboratory downstairs here. . . .

With a new chill running through my veins I was forced afresh to the conviction that here at Morton's was the lair of the fiend.

My mind roamed on. I heard, for a time, the family moving about the house. The butler and secretary downstairs—I heard them locking up for the night.

Could there be, by any possible chance, any connection between this paper the fiend had dropped, and the one I had seen lying by Mrs. Morton's bed? Unwholesome looking woman. Queer, puffed, heavy face.

A roaming mind can dash far afield against all reason. The grim wild thoughts I was thinking had no sense to them, and I flung them away impatiently.

It was near midnight now. The house was silent, save for the outside noise of the storm. The thunder-storm aspect of it had evidently swept away. There was a steady gale of wind now, and a torrential driving rain.

I think perhaps I may have dozed in the chair. I had no plans. As a matter of fact, I think the calmest reasonable logic of my diverse

thoughts was telling me to go to bed. The police from Cartersville, investigating the murder of the little girl, would be roaming these hills all night. And by morning I might find that the fiend had been caught.

Then suddenly I realized that a slow horror was creeping over all my senses. A realization slowly coming to me now, so gruesome, noisome, so fraught with terrible meaning that it chilled my blood, tightened my heart, tingled the skin all over from feet to the roots of my hair.

I was smelling something! Through the partly opened bedroom door a little drift of vague, acrid smell was coming. A smell with an implication so horrible that I sat upright, snatched from drowsing into a tense shuddering alertness. Was it the smell of burning flesh?

CHAPTER IV

The Body on the Stairs

AT the bedroom door I stood tense, automatic in hand, sniffing, peering along the dim hallway, straining all my senses trying to determine what it was I was smelling, and from whence it possibly could be coming.

There was no way I could tell. Yet it was stronger out here in the hall. From Morton's bedroom? A little way down the hall I saw his door ajar—the room dark behind it. Upon impulse I went there; my rubber-soled tread was absolutely noiseless on the heavy carpet of the hall.

I was aware now that the storm outside seemed wilder than ever. A gale of gusty wind that pounded the rain against the sides of the building, so that I could have made plenty of noise here, and still been unheard.

At Morton's door, I paused. The smell did not seem coming from here. Was he asleep? Should I go in?

I hesitated.

Still undecided, I shoved very gently at Morton's door. An inside light in his bathroom cast a dim radiance on his bed. It was rumpled; it had been occupied, but it was empty

now. I paused a moment at the door.

With pounding heart I went into the bedroom. It was empty. The bathroom was empty. Morton's clothes were here. He had evidently gone to bed; then gotten up and left the room. Had he gone downstairs? What was he burning downstairs?

I padded swiftly back into the hall. There was no confusion in my mind now as to my attitude in this thing. I was playing a lone hand. Myself, here alone, pitted against—what?

I saw near me the top of a steep flight of back stairs. I could still smell that damnable stench, but no stronger here than back at my own room. I tried to orient myself with the lower floor of the house. This was the back. These stairs probably led downward into that narrow back hall near the kitchen. Under me would be Morton's den; across from it, his murdered father's chemical laboratory.

Was someone down in the laboratory now? Something diabolical going on down there?

I had no more than paused at the head of the narrow back stairs. There was solid blackness here; I got the impression that there was a closed door at the bottom, but I did not want to disclose my presence by using a flashlight.

SHOULD I go down here? Something told me not to do it.

I padded back; past my own bedroom; past the suite occupied by Mrs. Morton and Gladys. The boudoir door was closed; and, I assumed, locked.

I came to the head of the main staircase. The smell was stronger here. Quite evidently it was wafted up from below. There was a dim night light downstairs. It disclosed a section of the big hall. No one—nothing—in sight. Very slowly, carefully, I descended the staircase. Tense business, trying to see whatever may be lurking, watching you. The house was so noisy from the storm I could not determine whether there were any interior sounds down here or not.

Following a line of wall, I passed back along the big baronial hall. Soon I was beyond the light, almost in darkness. Like a hound following a trail, for the smell was much stronger now. The hall narrowed. Blackness ahead. The door of the den and the laboratory were not far from me. Beyond them would be the bottom of those back stairs.

I passed a portiered arched doorway which I knew was the dining room. And with the portières beside me, I stiffened.

Was that a cautious footstep?

There may have been a chance lull in the wind. Whatever it was, I could have sworn I heard a step in the dining room. I drew the portières slowly aside, thrusting the automatic muzzle ahead of me.

The dining room. Empty? It was so nearly black, I could not tell. I took a cautious step forward. I murmured:

"Come out of there! I've got you covered. I'll fire!"

The rattle of a gust of wind flung away my murmured words. Then indeed, unmistakable, I heard a step. A patter of running feet—a slap, as though something flat-footed, shoeless, was running.

The butler's pantry! The swinging door from the dining room was moving, as though someone had just passed through. I leaped; shoved the swinging door with my foot.

From farther on in the kitchen there came the grind of a window being flung open. I went through the dimly lighted pantry with a rush; but I was too late. In the dark kitchen the pantry light showed an open window, with the wind and the rain beating in.

I think that a certain sense of relief swept me. Someone had escaped out of here. The fiend, fleeing from the menace of my prowling? I stood a moment back from the window; then cautiously I reached, jerked down its raised sash, and locked it.

The fiend gone? There was still that noisome smell. I followed it to the door of the laboratory. No one here. But the fumes were far strong-

er; unmistakably the source of them was in this room. In the dimness, the big laboratory was eerie.

There was a copper-lined sink, with water faucets. A central board table, littered with chemical apparatus; and board shelves on the walls, with bottles standing in rows. All in a disarray, as though with the murder of old Morton, this room of his hobby which he loved had been left untouched by the family.

I saw that the laboratory had another doorway draped with a curtain. Something crouching over in a shadowed corner?

Then I saw that it was nothing alive—a little pot-bellied stove, queerly shaped as though it might be an incinerator, or a small furnace for the heating of chemical retorts.

THE fumes were coming from there! The little incinerator door was partly open—the fiend, startled by something, had left here and overlooked closing the door so that the stench had escaped into the house. I flung the small iron door wide. My flashlight showed the interior. Things charred, smoldering with a red glow in the furnace draft, and exuding a volume of acrid smoke.

Not the gruesome thing I had expected—but even more significant: a bloodstained flannel shirt was smoldering here. There was only a small fragment of it left amid a heap of ashes.

And a pair of smoldering old leather shoes—huge in size to fit a giant. The shirt and the shoes which the fiend had worn tonight when he was out murdering the little girl. The shoes which had made those muddy prints in the soft ground by the roadside.

I stared—incautious, witless fool to be standing there with a lighted flashlight in my hand! I suddenly heard the gasp of a panting breath as though some monster here beside me in the darkness had gulped in air upon the verge of a spring.

I whirled. The curtains across the room had parted. A vague stream of light-radiance from behind the cur-

tains made a head and a line of shoulder vaguely visible. A wide, hunched shoulder. Gaunt, contorted face stamped with a frenzied lust.

I leaped and fired. The stab of flame and the bullet went through the curtains; the crack was deafening here in the narrow confines of the room. Then darkness. Comparative silence. But I had fired too high. Or was this hideous thing impervious to a bullet?

I own that now there was a frenzy also upon me. With that shot ringing through the silent house to arouse all its inmates, I flung away the last vestige of caution.

The face was gone. There was nothing behind the curtains save a dim corridor with a single light. I thought I heard distant padding footsteps. I dashed after them; found myself again in the dim kitchen.

Nothing here.

A door led downward into the cellar. Had the fiend gone that way? No! There was what sounded like the swish of the pantry swinging door.

I must have charged like an infuriated bull. But how could I catch this fleeing thing, which seemed to know every inch of the intricate interior of the mansion? I plunged on through the dining room, out into the big front hall. No sound. Where was the family of this gruesome house? Hadn't my shot aroused them? Where had the fiend gone?

He was here, of course—lurking somewhere here, afraid of my weapon, waiting with his giant animal strength an opportunity to get his hands upon me.

Where was the Chinese butler? And the pallid little secretary? Their bedrooms were down here. It certainly was not over a minute since I had fired that roaring shot in the laboratory. I thought vaguely that there was a woman screaming now upstairs.

Was this blood, here on the hall floor, disclosed by my flashlight? It seemed like a smear of blood; but I did not stop to examine it. I found the door of the butler's bedroom just

beyond Morton's den. The door was open. Disheveled interior. The Chinese butler's uniform lay here on the floor. Bloodstained.

I dashed out. An adjoining little servant's bedroom had been occupied by Ober. Nothing here but his bloodstained garments. A rumpled bed, bloodsmeared. A trail of blood on the floor where the giant fiend had carried away this victim also.

FROM upstairs now, I could hear that woman's scream. I ran front; mounted the main staircase three steps at a time. The dim upper hall was unchanged; there was only the noise and rattle of the outside lashing storm; and the agonized voice of Gladys Morton from behind her locked door:

"John! John—where are you? Oh, what's happening?"

I shouted through the door: "I'm Halton. Are you all right?"

"Yes—all right. Where's John? What's happened?"

"I'm looking for him. Keep your door locked. I'll be right back."

I found him, indeed, within a few seconds. I stood again at the top of that steep narrow flight of back stairs. I had been too cautious before to light my flash; but I stabbed its beam downward now.

Shuddering, horrible scene there at the foot of the stairs with a closed door at the bottom. Hunched against the door, the weltering, pajama-clad body of John Morton—the head torn, wrenched out with so horrible an aspect that I snapped off my light and stood weak and trembling.

Then I ran back to the boudoir door. From behind it, Gladys again gasped:

"John—John—where are you? Mr. Halton—"

"I'm here!" I called.

She opened the door an inch or two. I saw the line of her white negligée, an edge of her pale terrified face.

"What's happened? Oh—where's John?"

I had no heart to tell her.

"I'm going to phone for the police,"

I panted. "You stay in there. Keep your door locked. Don't unlock it no matter what you hear!"

I drew the door abruptly closed; the click sounded as she locked it. There was a telephone here in the upper hall. I seized it. I would call Cartersville; have a police squad here as quickly as possible.

But there was no operator's inquiring voice; no sound of the buzzing current. The line was dead! The storm had pulled down the wires.

My cold, shaking hand touched the telephone table, where was a new horror. My hand was wet and sticky. Blood. My light showed the wet red smear. The fiend, himself now covered with blood, had been here! And now I saw the wrenched, torn wires.

I think I must have sat for a moment with stark horror freezing me. I saw myself, isolated now—here in this house with only the women behind their locked door.

Myself—and this blood-soaked murderous fiend. He had killed everyone in the house but me and the women. No help could come. Of course he had cut the wires downstairs as well as here.

And he was lurking—monstrous Jack the Ripper—frenzied now beyond all vestige of human reason—bent upon killing everyone in the house.

And there was only myself, now, to oppose him.

I stood up from the bloodsmeared little telephone table. I padded along the upper hall to the head of the main staircase.

Then, with automatic alert, very slowly I descended.

CHAPTER V

In the Clutch of the Fiend

THE lower hall was light enough so that I had no need of a flash. I left the staircase. I stood well away from the shadowed walls and draperies which so easily could have shrouded my antagonist. With what horrible, straining tenseness I stood

peering. Turning slowly, pointing the leveled automatic to left and right, behind me—that big baronial chair—was something crouching there?

No. It was only my shuddering fancy conjuring now a certainty that the fiend was somewhere here. A thing in monstrous human form—yet with no quality of a human antagonist about it. Somehow, I feared no bullet from these shadows. This murderer had used no weapon upon any of his victims.

I moved with slow steps the forward length of the hall, and back. The dark doorways of the front rooms yawned like cave mouths. Any one of them could be a lair for the monster. It was as though I were stalking some hideous giant animal—trying to hear it—trying to lure it out that I might take a shot at it. Trying, above everything, not to let it seize me—so that most assuredly I kept from entering those yawning black doorways.

Still no sound. The accursed gale and pelting rain still lashed the house outside. It seemed to mask whatever I might be hearing now of the lurking thing.

Then there came a lull. And I did indeed seem to hear something.

I moved past the dining room. Back across the hall I heard a little click. I swung, with every faculty alert, my finger on the trigger of the upraised gun. The dining room portières momentarily were behind me! Too close! Damnable error that I should have been outwitted. The fiend had tossed a coin to clatter across the hall.

As I peered that way, from the parted portières behind me a giant shape came with a leap. The impact flung me forward and down. My automatic futilely spat against the opposite wall; and as I fell sprawling, the weapon was knocked from my hand and went clattering across the floor.

I was in the grip of the fiend. His weight was on me; a knee in the small of my back; fingers fumbling, gripping my throat.

FOR that instant my senses went off into a whirling chaos of horror. But I fought; heaved upward; then fell again, twisting so that now I was face upward with my fists flailing.

That demoniac face was close above me now. Fiendish, leering face contorted with lust so that every vestige of humanity was gone from it, leaving only a stark, murderous frenzy. Wild, red-rimmed glaring eyes, with nothing in them of sanity, but only that same murderous lust. Dank hair straggling on a forehead wet with the sweat of a killer.

"A fiend, evidently of superhuman strength . . ."

For all my flailing efforts, I felt myself lifted high in the air; and then flung down again with the breath knocked from me. Was this blood, this wet sticking ooze that was smeared on my face? My own blood—or the blood of this panting monster? He was panting, not from his effort, but sucking in his breath like a ghastly, mouthing animal, triumphant at the kill.

My senses were whirling away. The fingers at my throat, stifling my breath, were like a tightening band of steel. My futile hands plucked and tore. A million whirling spots of light were in my eyes.

So this was the end! The gibbering, sucking breath of the fiend was engulfed by the torrent of sound in my ears . . .

Then dimly, far away as though I were envisaging myself floating in a black empty void, I seemed to feel knees against my shoulders. The grip on my throat was gone. Hands clutched my head, twisting it—pulling, wrenching as the knees pressed downward.

I may have gotten a little last despairing strength when the grip on my throat relaxed so that again I could gulp for air. I felt myself lunging again.

And suddenly the fiend had released my head and was on his feet—carrying me under one arm.

Was this the narrow back hall? The laboratory—he had brought me

here—to mangle and kill—to toss my body on the weltering pile of his other victims?

Again I was slammed to the floor; the ghastly gibbering, sucking breath was faster with the last triumph of a lust about to be consummated. Knees pressing my shoulders with a new violence, those maniacal hands spread on my face and head . . .

Then abruptly I was conscious of a change. One of the knees slipped sidewise off my shoulder. The lust of the sucking breath seemed mingled with a little gasp; a whine—a cry. The hands wrenching at my head were gone; came again, with a fumbling grip so that suddenly my own fumbling fingers seemed almost able to pluck them away.

Was that whining gasp a cry of fear? Was this ghastly fiend losing his strength? It seemed that a tremor shook the gaunt body as it sprawled upon me. Then suddenly he was off, lunging away, scrambling to his feet!

In my blurred confusion I was conscious only of a mingled hope and the desperation of terror. With every gasping gulp of air my strength was coming back, so that as the monster drew himself erect I was staggering up with him, my own fingers now seeking his sweating throat.

A cry of fear! His gasping cry was more than that now—a whimper of terror! His hands clawed at me. Futile, now! His gaunt body heaved and twisted in my grip as I wound a leg around his, struggling to throw him.

AND then I relaxed a little, holding him tightly but not heaving, for now he seemed to have ceased struggling. As though stricken, we both stood panting, with my arms and a leg wound around him.

His gaunt body of superhuman strength was shrinking. His bulging, taut muscles turned flabby as their strength oozed away. Wide, gaunt, hunched shoulders lowering, seeming to narrow as they sloped down to the aspect of a man of slender puny build.

Gruesome changing identity! My mind flung to encompass the truth of

it. This, the murdered old man Morton's chemical laboratory. He had been a research chemist. A drug—that pale blue oblong of paper, holding a drug. This fiend, murdering old Morton to keep for himself the secret of the drug . . .

And the effects of the drug suddenly had worn off now! The fiend, in the grip of my arms, lapsing into his true puny aspect. The hideous maniacal face was losing all its contorted frenzy. A pallid, frightened face now, with the sweat of horror bathing it. . . .

I stared. I murmured, "You—"

It was the pallid, meek, obsequious Phillip Ober, the secretary, who now stood trembling in my grip!

I can explain the strange details now. Old Morton had discovered this drug—for no diabolic purpose, but that it might bring strength and health to suffering humanity. A drug of amazing, though temporary potency, affecting the ductless adrenal gland. Mysterious workings of nature! Mysterious catalysts of that mysterious gland which under the influence of this drug, liberated its vast, unused store-house of strength.

A myriad little entities suddenly circulating in the blood; suddenly active to endow the muscles over all the body with a new contractive power. Engorging the muscles with temporary enormous strength.

Physicians who are studying it now are realizing that the brain impulses within us—that motivating force of the mind—allows us only a small portion of the latent contractive strength even our most puny muscular tissue possesses. The strength of a madman! Medically that is far more than a mere trite phrase, for with the frenzy of insanity, there comes a brain-release—the lightening of some mysterious check-rein, so that the muscles use a greater power than ever is normal to them.

THIS drug of old Morton's, the scientists are saying now, is like that—a thousand-fold enhanced.

Dangerous drug indeed!

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Upon some strongly seated mentalities, it might have no deranging effect. But upon the pallid little secretary, it was wholly diabolical. His twisted and doubtless latently murderous brain became inflamed with it. Superhuman strength—and a personality distorted into a lustful fiend, so that with demoniac pleasure he gloated in the metamorphosis from his own puny normality.

At his motives we can only guess—but they are fairly clear. He started his killings with the old man—so that he might possess the secret of the drug. For what money and fame he thought he might derive from it—and then, for his own lustful pleasure, as the bloody killing of old Morton made him lust for more.

Then he killed George Green. We have learned now that Ober aspired at one time for the love of Gladys Morton.

He and Green had angry words. The killing was revenge—and to confuse the police into thinking this was a Jack the Ripper.

He planned, of course, to kill all the Morton family one by one. In the end, he would have the secret of the drug beyond possibility of challenge. And as Phillip Ober, the Morton secretary, he would inherit a fair-sized legacy.

The murder of the little girl? Again this may have been to confuse the police with diverse, motiveless murder. But I think also that he had slipped from the house—to meet me. Afraid of this New York detective who was coming up to investigate. And with the murderous lust upon him, he must have encountered the wandering child—

Old Morton had perfected an antidote to the drug. With it, Ober could change his identity at will. He had taken the antidote just before I met him at the roadside. He had dropped the little pale blue paper; and the similar one at Mrs. Morton's bedside was a coincidence, of course.

Ober's mysterious movements within the house tonight, when he found me an armed adversary stalking him,

must always remain a matter of conjecture. Yet they too are fairly clear. Young Morton must have started downstairs—and Ober leaped upon him.

In some fashion then, Ober severely cut his wrist. And he scattered his blood everywhere he went.

It was Charlie Lee, the little Chinese butler, whom I had chased, and who in wild terror had escaped from the kitchen window, thinking the fiend was upon him.

And Ober doubtless still had had some rational plan for his own escape. He would kill everyone in the house. He spread his own blood in the butler's room, and in his own room. With his killings finished—the house a shambles—he would have gone into the woods; and a day later, appeared at the village to tell how the fiend had carried him off, wounded him, leaving him for dead in the woods.

I THINK I have covered all the strange details. The drug, as the inflamed Ober was crouching over me now in the laboratory, had swiftly worn off.

I stood now, gripping him, staring at his pallid, blood-streaked sweating face.

Terror on it.

"Oh—you've got me," he gasped.

Amazing slender, puny little figure here in my grip, with torn and blood-soaked garments, mute evidence of all that remained of the fiend.

"Why—it's you—"

And suddenly with a jerk, he snatched himself from me. A last despairing urge of a mind which had broken.

He made a leap headlong, like a diver plunging into water. A leap which crashed his skull full against the iron front of the squat little re-tort-furnace.

His body fell to the floor, lay writhing, with the blood welling from his head. The ghastly death rattle was in his throat. Then the gasping breath was gone. The shrunken, blood-soaked figure lay motionless. It was the end of the fiend of Sleepy Hollow.