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The Ghoul Gallery

By HUGH B. CAVE

*The story of an eldritch horror that leaped out of the
black night*

LET me convince you, first, that the young man who came to my medical offices that night was not the type of man who gives way, without reason, to abject fear.

Yet when I stepped into my outer office and saw him slumped on the divan, I knew that he was in the throes of mortal terror. His face was ghastly white, made hideous by the mop of jet hair that crawled into his eyes. He raised his head sluggishly and glared at me like a trapped animal.

I nodded quietly to the girl who stood beside him. She stepped past me into the inner office, and I drew the door shut silently.

I had known this girl for years. For that matter, all London knew her, as a charming, lovely member of the upper set, a sportswoman, and a distinguished lady of one of England's famous old families. She was Lady Sybil Ravenal.

Tonight, half an hour ago, she had telephoned me, seeking permission to bring a patient—a patient very dear to her—to my suite. Now she stood before me, her hand resting on my arm, and said suddenly:

"You've got to help him, Doctor Briggs! He—he is going mad!"

"Suppose you tell me," I suggested softly, "what he is afraid of."

"I can't, Doctor. There is the family name to consider. He—he is Sir Edward Ramsey."

I started. That name, too, was well known to me and to the rest of London.

Sir Edward Ramsey, the favorite play-boy of the upper strata, noted sportsman, adventurer. I could not believe that such a man would be sitting in my offices, dragged into the depths of fear.

"You must tell me the cause," I said kindly. "Otherwise I can do nothing."

The girl's lips tightened defiantly.

"When a man comes to you with a broken leg," she said, "you don't ask him where he got it. Please!"

"A fractured leg is a physical malady. His is mental."

"But he comes to you in the same capacity, Doctor. You must help him!"

"I can only give you the usual advice," I shrugged. "Since you refuse to divulge the cause of his terror, I can only suggest that he get away from it."

I could see, from the obvious twist of her mouth, that she was keenly disappointed. She would have argued with me, perhaps pleaded with me, had not the door opened suddenly behind her.

I say "opened." In reality it was flung back savagely. Young Ramsey stood on the threshold, reeling, glowering at me out of smoldering eyes. I did not know, then, what made him intrude at that moment. I thought, foolishly, that he was afraid of being left alone in the dimly lighted outer office.

He staggered forward blindly, groping toward me.

"The thing!" he cried. His voice was high-pitched and nasal. "By God, it's following me! It's—it's——"



"In the space where that gleaming skeleton had hung before, a mad thing leered out at me."

I stared at him in bewilderment. There was no sound in my rooms at that moment—no sound at all except the half-inaudible humming of a machine in the adjoining suite—an electro-therapeutic machine used by my associate in the treatment of leucocythemia and similar afflictions.

Yet the boy's hands clawed at the sleeve of my coat. He flung himself against me muttering a jargon of words

that had no seeming intelligence. And then, very suddenly, his twitching face became fixed, staring, glaring at something beyond me. With a strangled sob of abject horror, he stumbled back.

I WAS beside him in an instant, holding his quivering body upright. As I looked at him, his eyes were wide open and rimmed with white, glued in mute terror upon a small table which stood

against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

The table was an insignificant one, placed there merely for ornamental purposes. I had covered it with a black cloth and lined it, along the back, with a small rack of medical volumes. In the center of the black cloth, facing into the room, I had set a human skull.

The thing was neither fantastic nor horrible, merely a very ordinary medical head bleached white. In the shadows, perhaps, the eyeless sockets and grinning mouth, with its usual set of enameled teeth, were a bit unconventional; but certainly there was nothing to excite such uncontrollable horror as gripped the man in my arms.

His eyes were full of sheer madness as he stared at it. His lips had writhed apart and were twitching spasmodically. He clung to me with all his strength; and at length, wrenching his gaze from the thing on the table, he buried his head in my arms and surrendered to the fear which overwhelmed him.

"Be merciful, Briggs!" he moaned. "For God's sake, be merciful! Come with me—stay with me for a day or two, before I go utterly mad!"

There was no alternative. I could not send a man away in such condition. Neither could I keep him with me, for my quarters were not fitted with additional rooms for mad patients.

I forced him into a chair, where he could not see the death's-head on the table. Leaving him with the girl who had brought him, I hurriedly packed a small overnight case and made ready for an all-night siege of it. When I returned, I found the boy slumped wearily in the chair with his head in the girl's comforting arms.

"Come," I said quietly.

He looked up at me. His bloodshot eyes struggled to drag me into focus.

"You—you are coming with me, Briggs?" he asked slowly.

"I am."

He pushed himself heavily out of the chair. As he turned, his hand groped for mine. He spoke with a great effort.

"Thanks, Briggs. I'll—try to get back a little courage."

THAT was my introduction to Sir Edward Ramsey. The account of our departure, and of our subsequent arrival at Sir Edward's huge town house, is of little importance. During the entire journey my two companions did not utter a word. The boy seemed to have shrunk into himself, to have fallen into the lowest depths of fearful anticipation. The girl sat stiff, rigid, staring straight ahead of her.

I remember one thing which struck me as being more or less peculiar, in view of the boy's social position. No servant opened the door to us. For that matter, the boy made no attempt to summon one by ringing the bell. Instead, he groped into his pockets for his own door-key and fumbled nervously with the lock. Turning his head sideways, he spoke to me stiffly:

"My man's—deaf, Briggs. Darned nuisance, but it's the only reason he—stays. The others cleared out long ago."

The door swung open. I followed Sir Edward down the carpeted hall, with the girl beside me. The boy was trembling again, glancing about him furtively. I was forced to take his arm and lead him quietly into one of the massive rooms adjoining the corridor.

There he sank into a chair and stared up at me hopelessly. I realized that he had not slept in many hours—that he was on the verge of breakdown.

Opening my case, I administered an opiate to deaden his nerves, although I had little hope that it would have the

desired effect. The boy's terror was too acute, too intense. However, the drug quieted him; he slept fitfully for the better part of an hour; long enough for Lady Sybil to draw me aside, motion me to a chair, and tell me her story.

She came directly to the point, softly and deliberately. They were in love, she and Ramsey. They were betrothed. Six weeks ago his love had changed to fear.

"At first he fought against it," she said evenly. "Then it took possession of him—of his very soul. He—he released me from my promise."

"Why?"

"Because of the curse that hangs over his family."

"And that is why you came to me tonight?"

"I came, Doctor," she said fervently, "because it was a last hope. I love him. I can not give him up. He lives alone here, except for a single servant who is deaf. I have been with him every day since this influence claimed him. At night, of course, I can not be at his side—and it is the night-time he fears!"

"And the cause of his fear?" I prompted.

"I—I can not tell you."

I knew better than to demand an explanation. Without a word I returned to my patient. He was not sleeping, for when I stood over him his eyes opened and he stared at me wearily. I drew a chair close to him and bent forward.

"I want you to tell me," I said simply, "the entire story. Only under those conditions can I help you. Do you understand?"

"That—is impossible."

"It's necessary."

"I—can't do it, Briggs."

"In that case," I shrugged, getting to my feet, "I shall take you away from here. At once!"

"No, no, Briggs! You—you can't!

The thing will—follow me. It trailed me to your offices. It——"

It was the girl who cut him short. She stepped closer and took his hands firmly, and looked straight at me.

"He is under oath to say nothing, Doctor," she said evenly.

"Under oath? To whom?"

"His father, Sir Guy."

"Then, of course, I shall see Sir Guy at once——"

"He is—dead."

I stood silent, glancing from one to the other. Suddenly the girl straightened up and stood erect, her eyes blazing.

"But I am not under oath!" she cried, almost savagely. "I will tell you——"

"By God, no!" The boy groped up, his face livid.

I understood, then, the courage in Lady Sybil's heart. Slim, lovely as she was, she turned on him fiercely, forcing him back into the chair.

"I am going to tell him," she said bitterly. "Do you hear? The oath does not bind me. I am going to tell Doctor Briggs all I know. It is the only way to help you."

Then, without releasing him, she turned her head toward me.

"This house, Doctor," she said, "is very old and full of musty rooms and corridors. It is made hideous by a terrifying sound that comes, always at night, from the upper galleries. The sound is inexplicable. It is a horrible note which begins with an almost inaudible moan, like the humming of an electric motor. Then it increases in volume to the pitch of a singsong voice, rising and falling tremulously. Finally it becomes a screaming wail, like a human soul in utter torment."

She waited for my questions. I said nothing. The boy had ceased his squirming and sat like a dead man, glaring at me out of lifeless eyes.

"The galleries have been examined many times," Lady Sybil said quietly. "Nothing has ever been discovered to provide an explanation. Four times in the past year the upper recesses of the house have been wired for electric lights; but the lights in that portion of the house never work. No one knows why."

"And that—that is all?" I murmured.

"I think that is all. Except—the history of the House of Ramsey. You will find that in the library, Doctor. I will remain here with Edward."

I hesitated. I did not think it vital, at that moment, to go rummaging through the library in pursuit of ancient lore. But Lady Sybil looked quietly at me and said, in an even voice:

"The library is at the end of the main corridor, Doctor. You will find the necessary books in section twelve."

I DID not argue. There was no denying that cool, methodical tone! Before I left the room, however, I examined my patient carefully, to be sure that I was justified in leaving him. He had sunk into complete apathy. His eyes remained wide open, as if he feared to close them. But the opiate had produced an effect of semi-torpor, and I knew that he would not soon become violent again. Thus I turned away and paced silently to the door.

By a singular coincidence the door opened as I reached it. On the threshold I came face to face with the servant, a ferret-faced fellow with deep-set, colorless eyes, who peered at me suspiciously as I went past him into the corridor.

In this manner, after prowling down the dimly illuminated passage, I came to the library, and sought the particular section which the girl had suggested. Section twelve proved to be not in the main library, but in a secluded recess leading into the very farthest corner. The walls

before me were lined with long shelves of books, symmetrically arranged. An ancient claw-footed desk stood in the center, and upon it a gargoyle reading-lamp which I promptly turned on.

The alcove had obviously been unused for some time. A layer of dust hung over it like a funeral shroud. Its musty volumes were sealed with a film of dirt, except—and this is what led me forward eagerly—for a certain shelf which lay almost directly beneath the lamp. The books on this particular shelf had been recently removed, and had been thrown back carelessly.

I took one of the volumes to the desk and bent over it. It contained, in some detail, a history of the house in which I stood, and a lengthy description of its occupants since time immemorial. Allow me to quote from it:

"Sir Guy Ramsey. 1858-1903." [Evidently the father of my patient.] "Eton and Cambridge." [Here followed an account of an adventurous and courageous life.] "In the year 1903, Sir Guy was suddenly stricken with an inexplicable fear of darkness. Despite all efforts to discover the reason of his terror, no cause was revealed, and Sir Guy refused to divulge any. In September of the same year, Sir Guy became utterly mad with fear and spoke continually of a certain 'specter' which had taken possession of him. Physicians were unable to effect a cure, and on the ninth day of the month of September, Sir Guy was found in the upper galleries, where he had, to all appearances, been strangled to death.

"His own hands clutched his throat; but upon his hands were certain marks and bruises which revealed the imprint of another set of fingers. In these imprints, the thumb of the unknown murderer's left hand was singularly missing. No clue has ever been discovered as to the identity of the assailant."

I closed the book slowly. Mechanically I opened a second of those significant volumes, which proved to be an account of the life and death of another of Sir Edward's forebears. From the dates, I judged the gentleman to be Sir Edward's grandfather—the father of the man whose fate I had just learned. His name, peculiarly, was also Sir Edward.

"On the twenty-seventh day of January, in the year 1881, Sir Edward was suddenly noticed to be prowling fearfully in the upper galleries. From that time on he was observed to be very much in the throes of acute terror; but when accused of this, Sir Edward refused to confide the nature of his fear. On February first he was found choked to death in the upper galleries, his own hands twisted into his throat and the imprint of another set of hands, with the thumb of the left hand missing, still evident on his dead wrists.

"The murderer was not discovered. For three years after Sir Edward's death, the galleries were closed and sealed, after a careful inspection by the police. At the end of that period they were again opened by command of Sir Guy, son of the deceased."

And there was one other passage—a paragraph or two describing the sudden death of some distinguished lady far back in the archives. Her name, according to the book before me, was Lady Carolyn.

"A woman" [the script said] "imbued with the same fearless courage which marked the men of her blood. In the final days of her life she lived alone in the London house. She left a single parting message, found after her death: 'I am becoming insane. The specter has ebbed my last bit of resistance. Madness is, after all, a fitting death—much better than eternal fear and horror.'

"This note was found on the morning of July third, 1792. Lady Carolyn was murdered, strangled to death by unknown

hands, on the night the note was written. Her unfortunate body was discovered in the galleries, her fingers still clutching her dead throat, and the marks of other fingers, with the thumb of the left hand missing, imprinted on the back of her hands and wrists. For three years following her death, every effort was expended to locate the fiend who had so brutally destroyed her. The attempt was without avail."

I make no effort to explain these quotations. They are significant in themselves. As for the specter, I could find no further mention of it. Page after page I turned, hoping to discover some clue which might lead to a solution. I found nothing.

I did, however, chance upon something of unusual interest, in the oldest of the heavy volumes. It was an account of a very ancient feud. The names mentioned were those of Sir Godfrey Ramsey (the date was in the century before the French Revolution) and Sir Richard Ravenal. The account gave mention of several brutal killings and disappearances, the majority of these executed by the House of Ravenal. The cause of the feud was not divulged.

The hatred between the two families, however, had come to an end with the death of Sir Richard Ravenal, who was, to quote the withered page before me, "an artist of unusual genius. In the year previous to his death, having formed a truce with the House of Ramsey, he did present to Sir Godfrey Ramsey one or two paintings of great value, executed by himself, as a token of eternal friendship. These paintings have been carefully preserved."

I sought faithfully for an account of the life of this same Sir Godfrey. Eventually I found it, and read the following:

"Twelve years after the Houses of Ramsey and Ravenal had formed the pact

of peace, Sir Godfrey was suddenly stricken with an incomprehensible terror which led to complete madness. He did call his son, Sir James, to him and say the following words: 'A curse has descended upon the House of Ramsey. It is a curse of horror, of torment. It is intended to make gibbering idiots of the men who bear the honored name of Ramsey. For this reason I command you to an oath of silence. The curse has taken possession of me, and I shall die. When you are of age, you, too, will be stricken by the specter. Swear to me that you will not reveal the nature of the curse, lest your sons and their sons after them live in mortal fear.'

"This oath was written into parchment and preserved. On the second day following its execution, Sir Godfrey was found lying in the upper galleries . . ."

I CLOSED the last volume with the uncomfortable feeling of having delved into a maze of horror and death. In the upper reaches of the very house in which I stood, countless members of the House of Ramsey had been hurled into madness and cruelly murdered. Even now, the man who occupied these whispering rooms and huge, empty corridors was being slowly forced under the same hellish influence of insanity. I understood now his reason for silence. He was bound by a family oath which had been passed down from father to son. He *could* not speak!

The influence of that mad room still hung over me as I paced across the library and returned to the room where Sir Edward and Lady Sybil awaited me.

The boy was sleeping. As I entered, Lady Sybil came toward me quietly and stood before me.

"You—have found the books?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Then you know why he is bound to silence, Doctor. He is the last of the Ramseys. I—am the last of—the Ravenals."

I stared at her. I had not suspected any connection between the names in those ancient volumes and the name of the girl before me. Peering into her features now, I felt suddenly as if I had been plunged into an affair of death itself. She—the last of the Ravenals!

"He has never broken the oath," she murmured, "not even to me. I have never remained here at night—never seen the specter. But I have questioned the servants who fled from here, and so I know."

I turned to my patient. He was sleeping peacefully now, and I thanked God that the terror had temporarily left him. Lady Sybil said softly:

"I shall stay here the night, so long as you are here, Doctor. I can not leave him now."

She walked quietly to the divan and made it as comfortable as possible. I did not suggest that she go to one of the sleeping-chambers on the floor above. For my part, I could not consider waking my patient; I would have to sit by him through the night. And I knew that she, too, preferred to be close to him. At any rate, I hadn't the cruelty to suggest that she remain alone, in one of those shadowed, deathly silent rooms on the upper corridor, through the long hours of sinister darkness that confronted us.

I think that she slept very soon after she lay down. When I bent over her a moment later, to drape a silken coverlet over her lovely figure, she did not stir.

I realized then that I was the only person awake in this massive, spectral house. I was alone with the unknown being that patrolled the upper galleries. I closed the door of the room and bolted it. Very quietly I returned to my chair and low-

ered myself. Then I sat there, staring fearfully into the deepening shadows, until I dozed into a fitful slumber.

IF THE specter of the House of Ramsey crept out of its hidden lair that night, I did not know it. When I awoke, a welcome sunlight was sliding across the floor at my feet, from the opposite window. I was alone in the room. Sir Edward and Lady Sybil had vanished.

I stood up. It was difficult to believe, in this glow of warm sunlight, that anything unusual had occurred during the night.

Evidently nothing had. The door opened behind me and the ferret-faced servant, scuffling forward, said evenly:

"Breakfast is waiting, sir."

I followed him to the dining-hall, and there found my two companions. Lady Sybil rose to greet me with a smile. The boy remained seated. His face was extremely haggard and white. He nodded heavily.

"Thought we'd let you sleep, Briggs," he said. "You earned it."

He did not refer again to the previous night. Lady Sybil, too, maintained a discreet silence. When the meal was over, I called her to me.

"I shall stay here," I said, "until I am sure that his terror does not return. I do not feel justified in leaving the house at the present time."

"You wish me to do something, Doctor?"

I gave her a prescription. In substance, the desired medicine was little more than a tonic, though it contained a slight portion of morphine. It would serve to keep the boy's nerves under control; but I realized even then that the cause of his fear must be removed before any medicine would benefit him.

Lady Sybil, however, promised to have

the prescription filled. She had other matters to attend to, she said, and would probably return some time in the late afternoon.

When she had gone, I sought out, once again, those significant volumes that I had found the night before. I studied them for a very long time. It must have been well after two o'clock when Sir Edward came into the library.

He slouched into a chair and remained there, without any display of animation or life. When I got quietly to my feet and replaced the last book on the shelf, he looked at me without emotion.

"Where to, Briggs?" he said dully.

"With your permission," I replied, "I should like to have a look at the galleries."

He nodded. I fancied that the slightest cloud of suspicion crossed his face; but he offered no objections.

I had difficulty in finding my way. The route which led to the upper levels was no easy one to follow, winding as it did through a succession of peculiarly dark and unlighted corridors. Eventually, however, I found myself at the bottom of a circular staircase that coiled upward into the gloom of the floor above. I mounted the steps slowly, holding to the great carved bannister for support; and, having reached the second landing, I followed the twistings of the passage by keeping as close to the wall as possible.

At the end of this circular passage, a curtained window revealed the street below. As I peered down and saw the pavement far below me, I could not repress a shudder.

Cautiously I continued along this corridor to the bottom of a second staircase. Once again, with heavy steps, I groped upward.

And here, at the top of the last incline, I found the upper galleries of the House

of Ramsey. The room lay directly before me. Its massive door, standing half open, revealed a thread of light from some hidden source—a gleam which penetrated like a livid, groping hand into the blackness of the passage.

I entered timidly, leaving the door open behind me. Before me extended a room of enormous size, more like a huge banquet chamber than an art alcove. The illumination was intense, coming as it did from a series of four broad windows set in the farther wall—windows which were uncurtained, and designed to flood the interior with light.

For the rest, the floor was lined with a smooth carpet of dull hue. The walls on opposite sides of me as I moved forward were devoted entirely to framed paintings. The rear wall, which contained the only entrance—through which I had come—was carefully covered with a soft gray drape, cut to outline the wooden panels of the door.

I HAD taken no more than a dozen steps forward into this strange chamber when I came to an abrupt halt. Before me, as I stood motionless, lay evidence that my patient had been here before me—a silk kerchief, embroidered in black with his emblem. I recognized it instantly. He had worn it on the previous evening, tucked in the breast pocket of his jacket. And now it lay here on the carpet, damnable in its significance as I stared down at it. So he had not slept the night through! He had come here—come to this death room, to keep some infernal midnight tryst!

I dropped the thing into my pocket. Having done this, I turned to inspect the magnificent works of art that surrounded me. And then, almost immediately after that first startling episode, came a second shock, a thousand times greater than the first!

The thing glared out at me with horrible malice. It hung before me, leering into my face. I recoiled from it with a sudden intake of breath.

It was a skeleton, painted in dull values of gray and white, with a single blur of jet-black background, created by an artist who possessed a fiendish cunning for horrifying the human eye. Every revolting effect of death was incorporated into that ghastly countenance. And yet, in a medical sense, the thing was far from perfect.

Even as I stared at it, I discerned a dozen very evident faults of construction. Hideous it was, but hideous only because the artist had sacrificed accuracy in order to make it so.

The eye-sockets, executed in a fiendish combination of gray pigments, were horribly empty and staring—but they were too close-set to be natural. The frontal bone, a streak of livid white, was terrible in its effect—but far too broad. The two superior maxillary bones, forming the upper jaw and bounding the glaring, vacant nasal cavity, were hideously formed—but were separated on the under surface from the row of broken teeth, in order to lend that maddening grin to the mouth.

There were other defects, easily recognizable. They were less significant. But as a work of horror, the skeleton before me was faultless. Never have I been so completely unnerved by something which I knew could hold no power over me.

I went toward it with irresolute steps, determined to inspect it at close range and then leave the room immediately. The singular glare of its dead features had sapped all my curiosity. I wanted to get away from it.

The painting was very old. Only three colors were evident—white, gray, and that sepulchral black. At the bottom of the heavy gilt frame I found the name of the artist—a name which choked on my

lips as I cried it aloud. That name, faint and almost illegible, was *Ravenal!*

Ravenal! "In the year previous to his death, having formed a truce with the House of Ramsey, he did present to Sir Godfrey Ramsey one or two paintings of great value, executed by himself . . ."

I left the room with an inexplicable sense of fear. Fascination it might have been, for that hideous thing behind me. Horror it might have been, for the slow realization that here—here in this fiendish picture—lay the secret of innumerable murders, and a hellish curse of madness!

THERE is little more to tell. The concluding event of my stay in the House of Ramsey was not long in forthcoming.

The hour was already late when I returned to the library on the lower floor. Sir Edward had not moved from his position. He greeted me with a nod; and the girl, who had returned during my tour of inspection, came toward me to give me the medicine I had ordered.

I forced the boy to take it. Then, in depressing silence, we sat there, the three of us, as the hour grew later and later. Lady Sybil and I made a feeble attempt to play backgammon; but the boy's glassy eyes haunted us. The game was a mockery.

When ten o'clock came, I rose and took the boy's arm.

"A night's sleep," I said sternly, "would be one of your best medicines."

He glanced at me wearily, as if it hurt him to move.

"You are turning in, Briggs?"

"I am."

He sank back into his chair with a half-inaudible murmur. I motioned quietly to Lady Sybil, thinking that if she left

him he would be certain to come with us, rather than be left alone. The girl had already prepared a room for herself on the upper floor.

But the boy did not move. As I drew the door shut, he looked up suddenly and spoke in a voice that was strangely harsh.

"Leave it open, Briggs. I'll—go to bed in a while. Closed doors are ghastly—just now."

In the corridor outside, I said good-night to Lady Sybil and climbed the stairs to my room. The room opened on an unlighted passage—a narrow, gloomy tunnel that twisted from darkness into darkness, revealed only by the glow of light from my own chamber.

The hands of my watch, as I laid the timepiece carefully upon the table, stood at thirty-two minutes after ten o'clock. No sound stirred in the great house. Lady Sybil, having climbed the stairs behind me, had gone to her room at the far end of the corridor. Below stairs, the servant of the penetrating eyes had evidently retired.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when I heard Sir Edward's step on the stairs. He climbed wearily, inertly. His tread moved along the corridor. I heard the door of his chamber open and close. After that there was nothing but an ominous, depressing, sinister silence.

I left my door open. Most men in my position would, I presume, have closed it and made haste to throw the bolt. But I found comfort, such as it was, in an open exit. I had no desire to be a rat in a trap.

Nervously I switched off the light and sank wearily to the bed. There I lay, facing the half-open door, striving to get rid of my thoughts. And there I lay when, a long time later, I was dimly conscious that the silence had dissolved into sound.

IT HAD no definite beginning, no positive substance. Only in the acute stillness of the capacious structure would it have been audible at all. Even then it was no more than a dead hum, like the drone of muted, smothered machinery.

It increased in volume. For fully sixty seconds, perhaps longer, I lay unmoving, as the sound became a throbbing, wavering reality. I twisted about to stare at the door, as if I expected the vibrations to filter into my room and take the form of some ghastly supernatural being.

Then I heard something more—the distinct tread of human feet advancing quietly along the passage outside! And I saw it—saw the hunched form of Sir Edward Ramsey, creeping slowly along the corridor. Visible for a moment only, he passed the open door of my chamber. An unearthly mask of sepulchral light surrounded him—an obscure, bluish vapor that seemed to rise out of the floor at his feet and hang about him like an ethereal cloak, a Protean winding-sheet. And I shall never forget the fear-haunted glare of the boy's eyes as he moved through the darkness.

He walked as though an inner force guided him forward. His hands hung lifelessly at his sides. His face was tense and ghastly gray, strained to an almost diabolical degree of expectancy. And then, passing out of my range of vision, he vanished.

I sprang from the bed and reached the door in a stride. There I stopped, with both hands clutching the door-frame. The sound of his footsteps had already died; but another form was coming silently out of the darkness and moving past me. The form of Lady Sybil—following him!

I did not hesitate then. I knew, as surely as if the walls themselves were screeching it out to me, that the boy was

going to those infernal galleries in the upper recesses of the house. And up there would be that eternal fiend of murder and madness—that unnamed horror which had for centuries preyed on the inhabitants of this ghastly dwelling.

Groping into the passage behind those two grim figures, I fell into the mute procession. Far above me, that dirge of hell had risen to a whimpering moan—a human voice in torment—rising and falling with my steps as I paced forward.

I saw the two figures before me now—the boy still enveloped in that weird mist; the girl silhouetted behind him. His tread was the tread of a man who had repeated this midnight journey many times and knew every creaking board, every turn of the passage, every twist of the long, winding stairways that led into the upper gloom.

He paced on—and on. Behind him crouched the girl, shadowing him as a jungle cat might shadow some unknown, half-dreaded quarry. I saw that evil shroud of unnatural light ascend the stairs, hovering about him—saw it grope down the second labyrinth—saw it climb again, up, up, into the stygian murk. The girl crept after him, and I trailed behind with the utmost caution, lest he should turn and find me behind him.

Only once—before the door of that chamber of abhorrence at the very roof of the house—did he hesitate. Then, swinging the heavy barrier open, he entered.

Through that open doorway, in triple intensity, came the voice of the House of Ramsey. It beat upon me in waves—a terrific summons, whining hideously, rising and falling with infuriate vehemence. And I knew, in that frantic moment, why Sir Edward had not fled in terror from this place of pestilence. He *could* not. That spectral voice possessed

a spell that would allow no man to leave. It was irresistible in its cunning!

I slunk forward. The girl had already crossed the threshold. As I slipped through the aperture, I saw them directly before me—Lady Sybil pressed flat against the wall; the boy, surrounded by that Protean well of light, standing motionless with both hands uplifted.

The room was a pit of blackness, except for that bluish cone of light. A chill sensation took possession of me. I knew that we were not alone. I felt a malignant, gloating presence, invisible but sentient. All about me emanated that tenuous thread of sound, high-pitched now and wailing in an almost articulate voice. *Human!*

The boy crept forward. He breathed heavily. His body quivered and trembled like a thing disjointed. I knew instinctively what he wanted. It was that grim thing on the farther wall.

Mechanically my eyes turned to stare at it. Then, overcome by what I saw, I fell back.

A wall of darkness faced me. To right, to left, above and below, not a single detail of its construction was visible—except one. There, in the very space where that gleaming skeleton had hung before, a mad thing leered out at me.

It was no dead rack of bones—not now. It was a face—a living, twisted, cruel face, set atop a writhing body. Even as I watched, a mist of phosphorescent light, bluish white, began to emanate from it. The rack of bones became a glowing torso, taking on human form.

Young Ramsey stood glued to the floor before it. Behind me I heard a stifled sob come from the girl's lips. I could not advance—could not move.

Slowly the thing changed contour. Slowly it twisted forward, coiling its sin-

uous way out of the great gilt frame. It was a skeleton no longer. It had become an undead form, indefinite in shape, swelling and contracting to grotesque mockeries of human mold. I saw a misty outline of ancient clothing hanging from its limbs—a garb that was hundreds of years old in style. And the face, lifted in terrible malice, was the face of an English nobleman.

It burned with a frightful glow, vivid and unnatural. The living dead hands writhed up—up to the thing's own throat, with evil suggestiveness.

And then, as if from a great distance, a strangled screech split the silence of that room of death. The specter's lips curled apart, revealing a double row of broken teeth. Words came through them. Vicious, compelling words.

"To strangle one's self is better than to be mad for eternity! Do you hear, Ramsey? To strangle one's self—"

Sir Edward stumbled back, away from it. I saw his hands jerk up to his throat. I saw that fiendish, dead-alive creature lunge toward him.

Then a thin cry rose behind me, from Lady Sybil's lips. I was pushed roughly aside. Sobbing wildly, the girl dashed past me and fell upon the great gilt frame, slashing at it with a knife-like thing which she clutched in her hand. Flat against it, she raked the canvas into ribbons, clawing, ripping at it in sheer madness.

I think it was the sight of her, overcome by the horror of what we had seen, that made me move. I swung about, lurched forward. Against the wall, close to that living monstrosity, reeled Sir Edward. His face was livid with insanity—insanity brought on by the damned thing that grappled with him. His mouth was twisted apart, thick with blood and foam. His body twisted convulsively. And his

hands—his own hands—were clenched in his throat.

That shapeless thing was all about him, hideously malformed. It had no limits, no bounds. It was a mold of bluish mist, with leering face and groping hands. And the hands—God, I can never forget them! They were huge, hairy, black. They were twined about the boy's wrists, forcing the boy's fingers into his own throat. Strangling him! Murdering him! And the thumb of the hairy left hand was missing!

With a mighty jerk I wrenched those fingers from their hold. Behind me the girl was still hacking at the contents of the huge frame, tearing the canvas. The wailing shriek rose to a frenzy—shrilled higher and higher.

Then, all at once, the voice became a sob—a sob of unspeakable anguish, as the girl's knife struck home. It gurgled into silence. The massive shape before me dissolved into a circular, throbbing, writhing wraith of fog, with only hands and face visible. The face lifted upward in agony; the hands clenched on themselves, doubled into knots. Before my eyes the thing became a blurred outline. And then—nothing.

Young Ramsey slid to the floor on hands and knees, in a dead faint. I whirled about, stumbling to Lady Sybil's side.

Neither of us noticed, then, that the room was once more in utter darkness. We were intent upon only one thing. Together we tore at that infernal painting, dragging it out of its frame, raking it to shreds.

The frame fell with a crash, hurtling down upon us. Lady Sybil reeled back with a cry of fear. I held her erect. Together we stood there, staring—staring into something empty and black and sinister.

PRESENTLY I found courage enough to grope for a match and strike it. I blundered forward, only to stop as if an outflung hand had suddenly thrust me back, while the match dropped from my fingers. I must have screamed.

But I was saturated with horror. I was immune to anything more. Grimly I found a second match and, with the yellow glare preceding me, stepped into the aperture revealed by the falling of the picture.

The space was long, thin, hardly more than three feet deep—a silent, ancient vault. There, lying at my feet, extended an oblong box, black and forbidding, with closed cover. A coffin.

I scratched another match, and lifted the cover slowly. Glowering up at me, made livid by the light of the match, lay a skeletal form, long dead, crumbling in decay.

I stared down at it for an eternity. It was repulsive, even in death. The skull was a grinning mask. The hands were folded on the chest—and the thumb of the left hand was missing.

Beneath those hands lay something else—a rectangular plate of tarnished metal, engraved with minute lettering. I picked it out with nervous fingers.

The legend was hardly visible. I rubbed the metal on the sleeve of my coat, scraping away the film of dust. But the engraving had been scored deep. Holding the match close to it, I made out the words:

Sir Richard Ravenal. Famous artist. Eternal seeker into the secrets of the undead. His body placed here secretly by his son, in accord with a request made before his death. The hatred between Ramsey and Ravenal may never die!

Mechanically I returned the inscription to its resting-place. The girl stood behind me. I stepped past her, out of the vault, and paced across the gallery to where Sir

Edward Ramsey lay motionless on the floor.

Lifting him in my arms, I turned to the door.

"Come," I said to the girl.

She followed me out of the room. In silence we descended the black staircase to the lower levels. There, in the boy's chamber, I lowered Sir Edward to the bed; and, bringing my medicine kit from my own room, I worked over him until he regained consciousness.

The boy stared up at me, reaching out to clutch my hand. He was weak, pathetically weak, but the haunted sheen of terror was gone out of his eyes. I moved away, allowing Lady Sybil to take my place.

Then I left them there—those two who loved each other with a love that was more intense than the most utter terror of this gaunt house.

I groped down the main staircase to the servants' level and roused the ferret-faced deaf man. Together we climbed to the galleries. There we dragged forth that grim coffin with its horrible contents.

Later, in the kitchen of that sinister house, we kindled a great fire. Into it we cast the remains of the shattered picture. Into it we threw the oblong box.

And we stood there side by side, with the scarlet glare of the flames reflected in our faces, until the curse of the House of Ramsey had burned to a handful of dead ashes.
