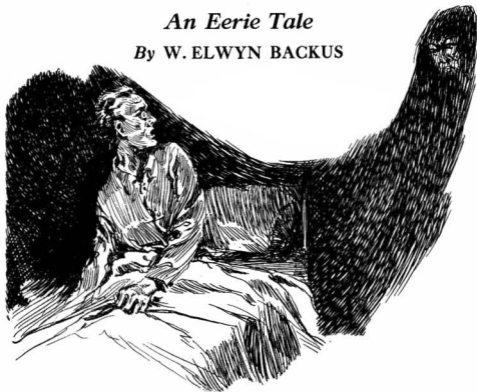


Gristly Horror Lurked in

# THE HALL BEDROOM

*An Eerie Tale*

By W. ELWYN BACKUS



A VICIOUS gust of wind shook the building, roaring off across the fields, dwindling to a rumbling sigh, only to give way to another terrific blast. With each fresh onslaught a deluge of rain swished against the windows till it seemed to the occupants of the big, raftered room that the lodge was about to be washed from its foundations. The leaping flame in the great, open fireplace cast weird, elusive shadows upon the walls and upon the pensive countenances of the five well-groomed men about the fire.

The room in which they sat was the living room of the comfortable country lodge belonging to Dr. Berg Herzog, A. B., J. D., renowned nerve specialist, who was included in the group. They had been discussing psychology, and from that had drifted on to spiritual-

ism. Every one of the doctor's guests was a practical, successful business man, who had little time, ordinarily, to give to the latter subject, were he interested. But tonight, the tumult of the elements without, the eerie shadows, and the insinuating warmth and comfort of the luxurious room combined to produce a tolerant consideration even of spirits.

"Assuming the existence of departed spirits desiring to communicate with us, how, then, shall they find a practical way to do so?" came querulously from Masters, dyspeptic and born cynic.

"You don't expect them to step up and beat a Morse tattoo on your skull, do you?" drawled Jim Reynolds, who was distinctly not dyspeptic, and who was inclined to frivolous wonden that

anyone should coddle that inconvenient malady.

"I don't think you'll find the spirits seeking 'practical' means of communication, but rather the opposite," ventured the doctor, with a smile. "The subconscious mind presents the likeliest medium."

"A lot of bunk," pronounced Masters.

"What became of that fellow—Nordmann, I believe you said his name was—who was afflicted with the illusion of the 'spook' eyes, Berg?" asked Gordon Sherwood, a close friend of Doctor Herzog's.

The doctor stared into the fire awhile before answering. Another blast of wind wrenched at the solidly built lodge, as though about to lift it bodily.

Stray drops of rain, driven down the chimney, sizzled in the blaze.

"Gentlemen," he said presently, "that was one of the strangest cases I ever had. It was in my mind when Gordon, here, mentioned it. I consider it a good example of what I shall call 'crime psychology.' Whether there is more to it than that you may judge for yourselves; I am going to tell you about it."

THIS Nordmann was a powerful specimen of manhood when he first came to see me, despite the fact that he had been drinking a great deal more than was good for him: A big Scandinavian, with heavy, brutal features; about thirty-five. A livid scar, running from the corner of his chin past his right eye, narrowly missing it, gave him a sinister look, though he was dressed well and with fairly good taste. There was a curious suggestion of pathos about the fellow in spite of his evident strength.

His story was an odd one: He had recently arrived in New York and had engaged a room in a lodging house. It was in this room, a few days after that he had taken possession of it, that a strange phenomenon first troubled him.

He admitted drinking pretty heavily since his arrival. He had come home as usual one night, about eleven-thirty, full of booze, but able to walk straight and to know what he was doing—he boasted that he could carry more and remain soberer than any other man alive. Sitting on the edge of his bed, removing his shoes, his eyes roved about the room. The gas jet was not lit, but a fire burned low in the gas grate.

A single picture hung in his room, depicting a country landscape during the winter, with a woods in the background. I recall his painstaking description of the scene, and I wondered at the time why he should lay so much stress on it. The wintry bleakness of the landscape, and the dismal woods, seemed to irritate him.

This night, as his gaze wandered to the picture, the reflection of the flickering grate fire on its glass face alone marking its position on the dark wall, a chill ran through his veins. Within the frame two tawny points of light slowly appeared and glared balefully out at him. He got the impression that a pair of eyes were watching him as from a great distance—out of the woods!

I told him that he had probably been looking at the reflection from some object in the opposite side of the room,

or from distant points of light outside shining through his window. But he said the blind was down, and he persisted in referring to the phenomenon as "Eyes." They had recurred twice since then at intervals of three or four days, before he had come to me. Lighting the jet caused them to disappear, he said, only to reappear with the darkening of the room again.

"Can't you give a fellow a shot of something that will chase them away?" he asked, plaintively.

"Drugging yourself won't help you," I told him. "Neither will liquor. Quit drinking and give yourself a chance."

He promised he would, paid my stiff fee uncomplainingly and went away.

Two weeks later he was back. His face was haggard and drawn, and he was leaner. I could see that he had been drinking heavily.

"Doc," he said, "you'll have to give me something to make me sleep. Them d—d Eyes don't give me any rest."

"You've been drinking again," I accused.

"Well—yes; I did take a few the last day or so. I tried going without it a while, but they began coming back every night then, plainer and plainer. I had to take a little drink once in a while or I couldn't o' stood it. That didn't seem to help much either, so I had to get drunk. But it seems like I can't get drunk enough to forget them eyes—and they're there every night now, burning into my brain all the time I'm there. When I ain't looking at the picture I can feel them staring out into the room. God! It's terrible." His big voice trailed off into a sort of child-like pathos which might have seemed ridiculous had he not been so desperately in earnest.

"Why don't you try another room—or turn the picture to the wall?"

"They'd follow me, anyhow—like them bells did that Shakespeare fellow I've heard tell about; and I wouldn't touch that damn picture for nothing!"

I could see that the man was rapidly going to pieces. This thing, imaginary or otherwise, had preyed upon his mind until he was all but a total wreck, mentally and physically. Nothing but an entire change of environment could benefit him. But my curiosity was piqued. I wanted a look at this room of his and the troublesome picture.

So I said, "Suppose you take me up to your room and let me see this picture."

He snatched at my suggestion eagerly. The prospect of someone's accompanying him into that hateful room seemed to cheer him up wonderfully. My car stood

in front of my office, and we got in it and drove right over.

On the way he opened up and told me a few things about himself.

It seemed that during the Klondike gold rush he and a partner of his had made a strike and "cleaned up." They had divided the "dust," sold their claim for a handsome sum, and each had gone his way. His partner had been a chap of "learnin'" and with a girl somewhere in the States, while he (Nordmann) had no such ties and preferred to spend some of his suddenly begotten wealth in seeing a bit of the world. He had taken in Paris, London, even Switzerland, but had liked Paris best, with its gay, wild life of the underworld. Finally he had drifted back to the States and New York.

Here he had found himself a comfortable room, not "fancy," but a place where he could feel at home. Having a tidy sum left, with no need to work, he had continued to take life easy. With nothing to occupy his mind, he had begun drinking heavier than was good for him—that is, more than he had been drinking. Then, one night, had come this illusion with subsequent repetitions culminating in his visit to my office.

Throughout his narrative I got the impression, somehow, that he was keeping something back—some dread secret that he guarded. I found myself speculating on a possible connection between the Eyes and his past.

ARRIVING before the house in which he lodged, I found it a fairly respectable looking frame dwelling of two stories, needing a coat of paint, perhaps, but with curtains at the windows and at least a clean vestibule. Nordmann fitted a key into the door and we stepped into a narrow hallway with a staircase leading to the mysteries of the second floor. Up these stairs we made our way in the dim light which struggled through the stained glass of the front door. I caught a glimpse of a white apron and a dust-cap disappearing into a doorway in the back part of the lower passage—his landlady probably.

A dozen steps along a narrow hall at the head of the flight brought us before a door on our right which Nordmann unlocked and swung inward, revealing an ordinary appearing, small room with drawn blind. A bed, washstand, dresser and one chair were its sole furnishings—and a single picture on the wall opposite that against which one side of the bed rested. Although the temperature of the April day without was fairly warm, a low fire burned in the gas grate. The air in the room was stale and uncom-

fortably warm. It has always been a source of wonder to me how some people can not only live under such conditions, but actually be comfortable. I secured Nordmann's reluctant consent to raise the window. This was by the foot of the bed.

I stepped over to the picture on the other wall expectantly. I don't know what I expected to see, but I was conscious of an eagerness which belied my conviction that this man was simply a victim of a hallucination.

What I saw was merely a cheap print in a gaudy frame, a scene of snow-draft fields with a dark copse in the background. That was all. I turned to find Nordmann regarding it over my shoulder.

"An ordinary enough picture," I said petulantly. "Nothing strange about it. Why don't you quit thinking about these imaginary 'eyes' and be a man. Cut out the booze, keep a little fresh air in this room, and find yourself something to do to occupy your mind during the day."

He seemed to catch some of the spirit of my confidence, and my presence in the room evidently fortified his nerve, for he laughed rather shamefacedly and mumbled some sort of an excuse and promise, adding a plaintive reference again to his inability to sleep.

Realizing his lack of will-power and taking pity on him, I agreed to give him a sleeping potion sufficient for several nights, to enable him to get some needed rest and strength of mind to fight this illusion. That he was suffering from the knowledge of a crime he had committed, I was convinced. I obtained his promise once more that he would let drink alone, but I had my doubts about his keeping it. He also promised me that he would try to get something to do the next day.

Before I left him I took the troublesome picture down from the wall and turned it over to show him that there was nothing unusual about it. It had the ordinary backing of cardboard held in place with small tacks, and was exactly like thousands of other cheap pictures seen hanging about almost wherever one goes. He seemed greatly relieved at this treatment of the thing, and even ventured to rap it recklessly a couple of times just to show his careless disregard of it. Then we hung it up again.

I took a look around for some object which might be responsible for the reflection of two such points of light as he had described, but I must confess that I discovered nothing of the kind.

He was to come in to see me again a week later, and let me know how he was

getting along. But when he showed up again at my office early the second morning afterward, more haggard looking than ever, I was not much surprised. In fact, I had been more than half expecting him. I could see that he was tremendously excited and nervous to an extreme.

My heart went out to the poor wretch. He was a victim of himself, and there was almost nothing that I could do for him.

"How's tricks?" I asked him, not knowing anything better to say.

"I've been through hell," he choked. "Sit down and tell me about it," I said, pushing a chair toward him. He dropped into it heavily.

I WAITED patiently while he stared across the room in silence for a minute or more, until I began to think he had forgotten me.

"I took that dope you gave me to make me sleep," he began presently, speaking fast and jerkily, "and got my first night's rest in a long while. That made me feel pretty good, and I went out next morning and looked for a job. I guess maybe jobs ain't very easy to find right now, though, and I didn't do no good. So I got somechow for supper early, then went back to my room to get some more good sleep.

"After you'd had that picture down I wasn't afraid of it any more. So when I got home I turned its face to the wall, sort of as a joke.

"Well, I turned out the light and went on to bed. For a while I laid there watching the back of that picture through force of habit; but I didn't see anything unusual. I began to get pretty drowsy and was about to fall asleep when I had an uncomfortable feeling that something was watching me from behind—out of the other wall that my bed sets against!"

He paused, and an involuntary shudder ran through his body. This thing certainly had him "buffaloed." I let him take his time about going on.

"It sounds funny, setting here in broad daylight," he went on, apologetically, "but I was afeard to turn over and look; and yet, I was afeard more to lay there with my back to that wall. Before I looked I knew what I would see. And the thought of them eyes loose, outside of that picture frame that until then had somehow locked them in, turned me cold.

"Finally I got up enough courage to turn my head. Sure enough, there they were, brighter and greener than ever—and less than three feet away! I could see the pupils in them plainly!

"For a moment I was too scared to move. I seemed paralyzed. Then, all of a sudden, the spell was broken. The next instant I had leaped clear of the bed in one bound, and was fumbling on the mantel for a match.

"I broke two before I got one to burn. All the time I could feel them boring into my back. When I got the gas jet lit and looked again they were gone. The rest of the night I sat up with the light burning. And I turned that picture around again. I wanted to keep them where they belonged."

It all struck me as so absurd that I wanted to laugh; but when I looked at his drawn face, and saw how deadly serious he was, I felt almost guilty. Whatever the cause, I knew that his hallucination was tragically real to him. I edged my brain for some practical means of helping the unhappy man.

"Of course this is all simply a disorder of the mind," I told him. "The 'eyes' are not really there, but you see them just as though they were. Now, I can help you if you will help yourself. Will you try?"

He said he would, but he didn't seem very certain about it.

"All right; here's what you must do: First, give up that room. Next, give up liquor, as much as possible; altogether if you can. And get out of the city—out into the open. Find some good, hard work to do where you will be thrown with other men. Don't loaf, and don't remain alone. Keep your hands and mind occupied, and mix with your fellow men constantly. You look husky. Try a lumber camp."

"I have been a lumberman," he said, bracing up a bit.

"Where?"

"Up North," he evaded, after a slight pause.

"All right," I said. "That's your cure. Go to it. If you don't, I'm through with you."

He thought that over a minute. His brain didn't work overly fast.

"I'll do it," he said, presently, with more determination than I thought he was capable of. He added, "And when I'm in shape again, I'm coming back here and show you what there is inside this old husk o' mine."

"That's the spirit," I responded enthusiastically. For the moment I believed he'd do it.

So he went out.

I EXPECTED him back in a couple of days. But he didn't come back the second, nor the third day. A week passed, and another; several weeks and several months in fact, without any sign

of him. His case had interested me strangely. Although I was busy with other matters daily, I thought of him a good deal. Finally I decided to inquire about him at his old quarters. So I drove round there one afternoon.

His landlady came to the door at my ring.

It was plain that she had seen better days. About fifty, rather the worse for wear, she nevertheless had that unmistakable atmosphere of refinement about her which cannot entirely be lost, once possessed. A dust-cap of suspected cleanliness adorned her head. That seemingly inevitable piece of apparel of landladies has always been one of mystery and fascination for me. I will find myself speculating on their origin, function and subtle camouflage so admired by their wearers, and so disconcerting to those who are obliged to regard them.

Yes, she remembered the gentleman in the second-floor-back. The big fellow who used to annoy her other roomers occasionally by falling up the stairs. Otherwise he was a model roomer, always paying promptly in advance, which was more than she could say for some of the others, she confided. He had left her house some months since, but had retained his room, paying her for a year in advance and requesting that nothing in it be disturbed.

Did she know where he had gone? No, she did not. He had left no address and received no mail. He was an odd man, rarely speaking a word to any one except when necessary.

I thanked her and went on. So he had retained his room. Why? Did it hold some strange fascination for him; or, did he merely wish to keep it to test the strength of his cure when he returned? Would he return, or would his determination forsake him somewhere else, letting him hopelessly down into the very depths? These were the thoughts that ran through my mind as I drove home.

One of my questions at least was answered less than a month later, when Nordmann himself walked into my office one afternoon.

Seldom have I witnessed a more striking change in any man. Gone were the haggard lines, the pouches under the eyes and the hollows round them. Hard as nails, his lithe six-foot-two-inches a striking example in physical perfection.

"Ah, you see, Nordmann," I told him after we had greeted each other; "exercise, fresh air and a change of environment turned the trick."

"Yes, that little vacation did me a lot of good, thanks to your getting me

started right. But I just let my imagination get my goat before. No more!"

What he had lacked before in confidence he now had in over-abundance. Somehow, I hated to see him go back to that room again.

"Well, I expect you'll want to find yourself some more cheerful quarters now," I ventured.

He looked at me curiously, as though reading my thoughts.

"N-o," he replied. "I figure on going back and laughing at that damn' picture on the wall. I'm going to stay with it until I show it up. I'm going to get even with it!" His voice dropped into a growl.

It was evident that he held a deep grudge against the thing. Just how he could get even with a picture I didn't clearly understand. We shook hands, and he promised to drop in to see me once in a while.

**I**T happened that I was kept unusually busy for the next three weeks, with the result that I found myself on the ailing list. I needed a rest, and decided to run up here for a long-denied vacation. I arranged with some one to take over my practice while I was gone, and came on. Here I stayed for two weeks.

At the end of that time I returned to the city and my practice.

Half expecting that Nordmann had been in during my absence, I inquired as to whether he had been there; but he had not. There was no good reason for me to bother about him, for, if ever a man had been cured, he had certainly seemed to be when I had last seen him. And yet, his case persistently recurred to my mind. I had an odd presentiment that he was in trouble. The fellow had aroused my curiosity and sympathy both. Recalling his pitiable condition before his cure, I was forced to a measure of admiration over his dogged determination to return to the scene of his previous illusion and conquer it thoroughly. I decided to look him up and find out how he was getting along.

As I approached the entrance to the dingy abode for the third time, I could not suppress a strange foreboding. I dreaded what I might discover within. I mounted the worn stone steps slowly and pulled the old-style bell knob. Somewhere in the inner regions the bell jingled.

Presently I heard footsteps. Some one fumbled with the latch, and the door swung inward a few inches. A dust-capped head peered out at me suspiciously.

"Oh, it's the gentleman that called before," she recited, meaning, no doubt,

that she remembered me from my last visit.

She pulled the door open and asked me in. I observed that she was in a state of considerable excitement.

"You'll be wanting to see Mr. Nordmann," she hurried on, before I could add a query to my greeting; "but they've taken him out."

"Taken him out?" I said. "Where? Who?"

"Didn't you know? Something terrible happened last night."

I began to wonder if there was something in premonitions after all.

"What happened?"

"Well, we don't exactly know what did happen," she went on, in her round-about fashion. "You see—if you don't mind my saying so—your friend, Mr. Nordmann, was pretty noisy at times. My other lodgers complained sometimes about his stumbling up the stairs at night when he came in. But he always paid me on the dot, and minded his own business. After he came back from that long trip he did pretty well. But of late, he began to get noisier than before, so that I was thinking I might have to ask him to look for another room. He looked so good when he first came back, but he got to looking worse and worse till I was almost afraid to say anything to him about the room even if I hadn't been sorry for him."

I saw there was no use trying to stop her, so I let her go on telling me about the matter in her own way. Sooner or later she would lead up to what I wanted to know.

"Night before last," she continued, "I heard Mr. Nordmann come in about eleven o'clock. He was fairly quiet, and I was just about to fall asleep when I heard him begin thumping about in his room. He was making such a racket that I made up my mind I'd go rap on his door and ask him to be a little quieter. I waited a minute, though, hoping he'd stop; but the noise got worse and worse. It sounded like he was throwing things around—something he had never done before."

"Just then, Mr. Stambley, the man across the hall, knocked on my door and said I'd have to do something or he'd leave, because he had to have his sleep. So I got out of bed, slipped something on quickly, and stepped out into the hall here."

"As I started up the stairs there was a dreadful crash in Mr. Nordmann's room. I was afraid to go up alone then, so Mr. Stambley said he'd go up with me."

At this point in her narrative the landlady paused and indulged in a shudder,

glancing nervously up the dimly lighted stairway.

"Mr. Stambley went ahead, but he didn't seem to be in a great hurry. It seems to me that it took us an age to climb those stairs. Strange sounds were coming from that room. The terrific banging and thumping continued louder than ever, and I could have taken an oath that I heard a growl several times, low and terrible. It went right through me.

"At the top of the stairs Mr. Stambley refused to go on ahead. He reminded me that it was proper that I should be the one to knock on the door and speak to Mr. Nordmann. Well, I saw he was a bit nervous; and what he said was true. So I started down the hall, with him trailing behind me. All the while that awful uproar kept right on. Just as I reached the door to Mr. Nordmann's room there was another frightful crash, accompanied by the sound of falling glass. And I am sure I heard that strange, low growl again over it all.

"I raised my hand and knocked weakly on the door.

"As though in response to a prearranged signal, the uproar ceased abruptly!

"The sudden quiet that followed terrified me far more than the previous din. I was frozen with an unreasoning horror of I knew not what. But I forced myself, somehow, to try the door, only to find, as I had expected, that it was locked. I called out to Mr. Nordmann, but received no answer.

"I remembered that I had no duplicate key to that door. It was here that Mr. Stambley seemed to recover from his former trepidation. He tried the door and offered to force it open for me. Convinced now that something dreadful had happened, I told him to go ahead.

"At his second lunge the lock gave way. But the door swung open only a few inches. Some object, lodged behind it, prevented its swinging back further without force. He jammed the door back as far as it would go and looked in, cautiously. I peeped over his shoulder, all a-tremble.

"The light was out, but a low flame flickered in the grate, throwing strange, pulsing shadows about the room. A curious conglomeration of odors pervaded the stale atmosphere. A soft hissing and the faint smell of escaping gas warned us that the gas-jet was still turned on, having, no doubt, been knocked out during the recent disturbance.

"Before I could caution him, Mr. Stambley had lit a match. Holding this in shaking fingers, he advanced into the room and lit the jet.

"As the light flared up a scene of utter desolation met our gaze. Indeed, at first sight, the chandelier seemed to be the only thing unbroken. The big looking-glass over the dresser was smashed into fragments. Both chairs and the small table were reduced to kindling. The grate burner was bent awry, and the window blind hung by a corner. The glass of the picture I had put on the wall was broken and its frame oddly distorted!

"At a sharp exclamation behind me, I turned quickly. The obstruction behind the door was explained. Huddled there, half reclining, half crouched, his back wedged against the wall, was Mr. Nordmann! His stout garments were torn to ribbons. One arm was thrown over his face in a pathetic attitude of defense. I shuddered as Mr. Stambley stooped and raised the arm.

"Nordmann was dead! His throat and face were horribly slashed and torn—almost beyond recognition. Mingled with whiskey fumes, and a warm, sickly odor in the room, was an unmistakable animal taint—like that of a dog!"

SHE put her hand to her throat and swayed a moment. Although the scene she had just recalled was one that might well shake any one's nerves, I perceived that she really enjoyed the telling of it. I suspected that her emotion was influenced by a desire to supply a fitting climax to her dramatic narrative. She regained her composure quickly and, thanking me for my preferred assistance, asked whether I should like to see Nordmann's room.

As we mounted the creaking stairs I could not suppress a slight shudder at the thought of that dismal room awaiting us, and of poor Nordmann's last moments in it. But if his landlady was still troubled with the nervousness exhibited the minute previous, she showed no sign of it now. She approached the door and opened it without hesitation. Once more I shivered involuntarily, as I hesitated on the threshold. A moment later I stood within the somber walls of the fateful room.

Everything evidently remained in the same condition as at the time of the tragedy. The landlady murmured an excuse for her neglect. The room presented the appearance of a wrecked bar-room. The lone chair had been broken into a dozen pieces as though frantically

used as a weapon of defense. Its legs, back and rungs were strewn all about the room, mingled with splinters of the broken dresser mirror. The blind still hung by a corner permitting the passage of sufficient daylight to disclose marks of violent blows upon the walls where Nordmann had evidently struck them with the chair in a vain effort to defend himself. By a miracle, the pitcher and bowl on the washstand had escaped destruction.

My eyes sought the strange picture on the wall. There it hung, its scene of bleak desolation glaring balefully out into the room. I almost hated it at that instant as much as Nordmann probably did. Dark and forbidding, its shadowy background of trees struck me almost as a menace. I wondered why some artists prefer to depict such dreary scenes rather than ones of sunlight and cheer. Then I realized that the whole matter was getting on my nerves.

But the strangest thing about the picture was the odd distortion of its frame, from which the glass had been smashed—or burst. It did not seem to have been struck, but rather to have been spread apart as from the passage of some large body through it! Three corners held and there was not a scratch on it, except where the top strip was snapped in two, the broken ends forced upward. I stepped closer to examine them. A wisp of tawny hair was caught in the splintered wood!

My thoughts leaped to the landlady's mention of the doglike odor when she had entered the room the night before. Was there some connection between that and this bit of coarse hair? She had known nothing of Nordmann's hallucination; yet she had promptly described the taint in the air as similar to that of a dog!

Idly my eyes strayed along the floor to a point beneath the bed. A scrap of white caught my eye. A moment later I held in my hand a torn sheet of paper on which a few lines were scrawled.

It appeared to be a leaf from a diary, probably jerked out in a moment of alarm. I drank in the words eagerly:

"... They are terrible close now. I can feel them on my back like they bite spring out at me any minute. God, 'How long. . ."

Here the writing ended in a blot. Doubtless it was while in the act of penning these words that disaster overtook him. It was like a message from the other world!

I looked up to find the landlady, too, reading past my shoulder in great excitement. She gave no heed to my belated apology which I had not thought of in my eagerness to read the scrawled lines when I had pounced upon the scrap of paper.

"Was a book found with more writing like this in it?" I asked.

"No," she answered in a whisper. "Nothing has been disturbed yet. You may look about if you wish."

I thanked her and glanced round the room speculatively. If he were writing in his diary when interrupted, tearing a leaf from it, the book should have fallen to the floor.

A bottle of ink on the washstand, with stopper missing, caught my gaze. That would be where he sat writing (for there was no table in the room), with his back to the picture. I stooped and looked on the floor about the washstand.

Then I saw it—a cheaply bound, gray-covered volume lying beneath the foot of the bed near-by. I picked it up and began turning the leaves excitedly. Yes, the writing was the same—and a page had been pulled out after the last one written on in the book, which was, as I had expected, a crude diary.

"May I have this in remembrance of my friend?" I asked.

I anticipated a refusal, but she acquiesced readily enough.

I put the book in my pocket, and, with a glance at the dark spot on the floor behind the door, I passed out of that chamber of gloom.

Not until I had left the house behind was my curious feeling of oppression dispelled.

Reaching my office again I opened the book with quickening pulse. I don't know what I expected to find, but I hoped to find some solution of the man's strange illusion or obsession there—I call it that for want of a better name. I had no qualms about reading it, for he had told me that he had no living kin. Poor devil—having and seeking no friends, and cursed with an incurable malady of the brain, more dread and fatal than a vendetta. I suppose I was as near to a friend as he had had for a long while. What manner of life had he lived to bring this thing upon him!

THE doctor gazed reminiscently into the fire for a minute. A log dropped apart with a sharp report and a shower of sparks raced up the dark flue. His guests waited intently for him to resume his narrative.

"I have that book here," he said, presently. "I am sure it will be of interest to you. Will you excuse me a minute while I get it?"

He crossed the spacious room to the book-filled shelves which lined another side of the room, and selected a small volume with a sureness suggesting frequent reference to it.

"This, gentlemen, contains Normann's strange account of the last several years of his unfortunate life. I shall quote from it."

He thumbed the worn pages familiarly.

"Here is an entry dated about a week after Nordmann had returned, 'cured':

"July 24, 1901: *They are coming back. Tonight I can see them far back in the darkness of the woods—waiting! Soon they will be burning again into my brain and flask as before.*"

The doctor skipped several entries, selecting another:

"August 3, 1901: *Started to go see the doctor today, but decided not to. I will fight them alone, staying with them till I beat them or they get me. They creep closer, closer every night, stealing forward while I sleep. I dare not destroy their lair and release them again—and I won't run away from them!*"

"Nordmann met his fate on the night of August 10. Here is the last entry he made prior to writing the page which I found on the floor:

"August 9, 1901: *Have given up search for work. Foremen say they can't use a wreck. No matter. Now I can have as much run as I like. Only it no longer dulls their devilish glare. But it helps me laugh at them. They grip my heart with cold fear—yet, somehow, I would miss them if they went away. Big, savage Skag—how he hated me!*"

"Who was Skag?" asked Reynolds.

"Who was the 'Iron Mask'! At what o'clock was Socrates born? Ask him something easy," grumbled Masters, who was, nevertheless, more interested than petulant.

"There's the diary," Reynolds retorted.

"Skag, gentlemen," said Doctor Herzog, "was a great Dane that belonged to Nordmann's partner, Emerson, back in 1897, when they made their

'strike' in the Klondike. Nordmann not only tells about the animal in his diary; but confesses to having killed its master and gives a complete account of the events which led up to the deed.

"Overtaken by an Alaskan winter, Emerson and Nordmann were cut off from the rest of the world for months. They had cleaned up more than thirty thousand dollars in 'dust' and nuggets before the winter caught them.

"Many long evenings they spent planning what they were going to do with their riches when they could go 'out' in the spring. But gradually the confinement of their small cabin, the monotony of their restricted diet, and the devil that is in all men resulted in petty quarreling. At first they quarreled simply for want of anything else to do. Generally they quarreled over their gambling, or about Skag, for whom Nordmann had developed a violent dislike that was viciously reciprocated by the animal.

"Yet the quarrel that resulted in Emerson's death was over neither of these things.

"Emerson took to babbling incessantly of the girl who was waiting for him in the States; he had not seen her in a year. Nordmann, growing weary of listening to Emerson's ramblings, passed some remark that Emerson resented. Result: a fight, in which Emerson was shot and Nordmann narrowly missed being chewed to death by Skag. In the end he succeeded in also shooting the frenzied animal; but not before he had received the slash in the side of his face, which left the jagged scar that he carried the rest of his days. Emerson died without regaining consciousness.

"Early in the spring Nordmann slunk out and reached the States. From thence he traveled over the world, trying to forget in a riot of spending and dissipation. Tiring of this finally, he returned to the States and settled down in New York. And there, brooding in his dingy little room, he was first troubled by the illusion of Skag's eyes."

The doctor laid the diary aside and paused a moment reflectively.

"I have now told you all the details known in this strange case," he said. "What was the cause of Nordmann's violent death?"

A hush descended upon the little group. The low moaning of the spent storm added to the atmosphere of mystery.

A harsh cackle of dry mirth broke the spell.

"Bunk—all bunk," rasped Masters.

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