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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Before my very eyes the creature had slashed his own throat."



The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep

By G. GARNET

A powerful tale of the degeneration of the Kobolder family through centuries of inbreeding—the story of a grisly horror

Mr. Abiathar Hall,
Purchasing Director,
Americana Antiques, Inc.,
New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Hall:

I herewith tender my resignation, effective immediately.

Maybe what I have seen tonight is all in my mind. Maybe it never really happened and the events that I believe to have occurred are but morbid hallucinations. If so, then I am the victim of the maddest cacodemonia a man's mind has ever been blasted with and all the more

reason why I should resign this job and stop poking my nose into strange and unholy places. I'm through!

In all fairness to you, I suppose, I should give an account of what has occurred to bring me to this decision. I find it difficult to do so. I am no occultist. I have always scoffed at tales of spirits, ghosts, devils, or other spiritual manifestations. But tonight my faith in the fundamental reasonableness of God and Nature is shaken. Perhaps, as I've suggested already, I'm mad. After reading my account I suppose *you* will be sure of it!

How you ever suspected the existence of Kobold's Keep, even as only a legend, is a matter of wonder to me. It is marked on no map that I have ever seen. And I was practically on top of the place before I found anybody who'd ever heard of it.

I had dismissed the existence of Kobold's Keep as being, in fact, a legend, until one morning, while driving north along a narrow dirt road that wound among the mountains, I came to the village of Merlin.

While the attendant ministered to my gas tank at the hamlet's solitary filling-station I sat back and took stock of my surroundings. The mountain peaks that serrated the skyline ahead seemed to be even loftier, craggier, more forbidding than the ones I had come over already. I wondered whether my brakes and bearings would hold out until I got to the next town. The sour-faced, close-mouthed hill-billy who was pumping gasoline into my tank didn't impress me much as a possible repair man. And neither did the old fellow, whom I took to be his assistant, who was sitting at the base of the gas pump, knees drawn up under his chin, eyes shut tight, apparently fast asleep.

The old man caught my interest. He was, to say the least, an unusual type. His

long, lank, dirty gray hair fell to his shoulders in two braids, like an Indian's. His face, weather-beaten and hairless, was broad and lean, the cheekbones as prominent as a cat's, his nose thin and hooked. I was about to question the station attendant whether the old fellow wasn't a member of some Indian reservation hereabouts that I hadn't heard of, when I noticed his hair more closely. At first glance it had seemed to be a dirty gray, but I saw now that it was actually red—a faded, nondescript, pinkish red, but red, nevertheless. I'd never heard of a red-headed Indian.

The ancient, red-headed anomaly yawned. I observed a curious, crescent-shaped swelling in the center of his forehead. Its bottom border was fringed with little hairs, like misplaced eyelashes.

As if sensing my fixed stare, the old man's head lifted. I looked for his eyes to open. They seemed oddly sunken.

It was an unusually hot day. Yet, as I looked, I grew cold—cold and rigid, and a little sick; for the old man had opened his one, solitary, sky-blue eye. It was in the center of his forehead.

My horror must have been written on my face, for the old man's mouth slit in a frightful, toothless grin. I turned away hastily. . . .

Of course, I'd heard of similar cases of persons born with cyclopean eye formations as recorded in medical history. But being faced with such an individual unexpectedly, even in broad daylight, is enough to give anyone a start.

I JERKED my eyes away and tried to get a grip on myself—all the while being aware of that great, bulging, sky-blue orb fixed on me in dreadful contemplation.

"Have you ever," I asked the surly-faced attendant (as I had asked at every town, village, and hamlet in the state through which I'd passed), "have you

ever heard of a place hereabouts called Kobold's Keep?"

The attendant, who was screwing my radiator cap back on, looked up suddenly. He stared at me a moment; then, averting his gaze, finished what he was doing.

"Naw," he growled, and knocked a tomato can into the ditch with a rifled stream of tobacco juice. "Never heered of it."

A nasal, cackling laugh clattered on the still air.

"Don't ye believe him, mister! He's lyin', Jim is! He's heered of the place all right!"

Torn between repulsion and a horrible fascination, I slowly turned and gazed on the dreadful face of the ancient mountain cyclops who sat by the gasoline pump. His bulging eye rolled, glistening in the bright sunlight. His toothless mouth writhed with crazy mirth.

"Don't pay him no mind," the attendant muttered sullenly. "He's crazy."

The old man slapped his thigh with a renewed spasm of hissing laughter.

"If that don't beat all! 'Don't pay him no mind,' he says! I'm outen my head, I am! What you want to lie to the feller for, Jim? Tell him!" He paused, subsiding reflectively, "But you can't go thataway, mister. You gotta leave your autyomobile behind. It'll take more'n gasoline to git *that* thing over Black Knight Pass!"

Black Knight . . . Black Knight . . . I stared at the old fellow curiously. Shockingly repulsive as he still was, most of the horror I'd experienced upon first laying eyes on him was fast evaporating. He was simply a freak. . . . But what had he just said?

"Black Knight Pass," he repeated, pronouncing the "Knight" with the old Teutonic "ch" guttural—a sound that was dropped from modern English many cen-

turies ago. "It's the on'y way ye kin git over the ridge into the Devil's Millhop."

"Black *Knight*, you mean, don't you?" I said curiously.

The bulging blue eye blinked.

"Knight," the old man repeated, "Black Knight. . . . It'll take ye over into the Millhop, and there—there ye'll find the thrivin' town of Kobold's Keep!" His eldritch laughter whistled and sucked between his toothless gums.

"Iffen you listen to that loon," the attendant spat, "you're fixin' to git yourself in a peck o' trouble. You want to stay outen Kobold's Keep, brother!"

Then there *was* such a place!

"Yeah," he growled sourly. "It's there, all right. And so is hell!"

At the moment I was puzzled and irritated because of the fellow's manifest reluctance to have me go to Kobold's Keep. After all, what business was it of his? I tried to discover some reason for his attitude.

"Don't be askin' no questions and you won't be gittin' no lies," he responded discourteously. "You can't git to Kobold's Keep onless you walk or git a mule. And when you git there the main thing you'll be wantin' to do is to git out. So just drive on your way, brother, and forgit that you ever heered about the damned place!"

"But I've got to get there," I insisted. "I have business there."

One bushy black eyebrow lifted. "Business?" the mountaineer drawled incredulously. "Business in Kobold's Keep?"

"And why shouldn't he be havin' business there?" the old man cackled. "Kobold's Keep is a right smart town. Better'n this hole! Ye needn't be a-knockin', Jim, ye scut! Kobold's Keep is one o' the finest towns in these whole mountings!"

I began to lose patience. "I have business there! Damned important business!"

'And if I can't get there by car, then I'd just as soon leave it here and rent a horse or a mule for the trip.'

"Must be gosh-awful important," the attendant muttered.

"See here," I cried, "what the devil's the matter with the place? Why are you so damned anxious to have me stay away?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and spat.

"Believe it or not, mister, I'm tryin' to keep you out for your own good."

"Oh, nonsense! What is there to be afraid of?"

"Wal," he drawled, "for one thing—the people."

"The people? What's the matter with the people?"

"Yah!" the old cyclops screeched. "Ain't nothin' the matter with 'em! Don't you listen to that damn' fool, mister! The citizens o' Kobold's Keep are right fine, upstandin' citizens!" And the glistening blue eye in his forehead blinked emphatically.

The attendant swept the freak with a lowering glance. He turned to me and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"*He comes from Kobold's Keep. He's one of 'em. And he don't look so bad as the most of 'em. But that ain't the wust part.*"

He pulled a dirty rag out of his pocket and began to wipe the inside of my windshield.

"No?" I prompted.

"Naw," he drawled out of the corner of his mouth. "It ain't. The place is hexed. There's been a curse on it since the days when Injuns owned these mountings—afore the days o' my great-gran'pappy's great-gran'pappy, hunnerts and hunnerts o' year ago. That curse has been on it. And still is. I ain't askin' you to believe nothin', mister. I'm just tellin' you that no stranger who ever got into

Kobold's Keep ever lived more'n a day after leavin' it!"

"Whut's that he's sayin'?" the old man drooled. "Is that lowdown dawg tellin' more lies about the Keep? Don't ye believe a word he says, mister! He's plumb loony, he is! Why, I'll guide ye to the Millhop myself, I will! And cheap, too!"

"You're hired!" I agreed promptly, and turned to the attendant. "Could I rent parking-space over in that shed for a couple of days?"

He shrugged. "You can. And, I reckon, you'll be wantin' a mule, too." He seemed to give up all efforts to dissuade me from visiting Kobold's Keep.

"Two mules," I corrected. "One for my guide."

He laughed shortly and with a grim significance that, at the moment, entirely escaped me.

"That'll be all right," the cyclops croaked hastily. "I won't be needin' no critter. I'd ruther lead ye afoot."

"And see that he allus keeps a good ten paces away f'om the mule," the attendant growled, "or the critter 'll shy and throw ye as sure as God made little ducks!"

HE SAUNTERED around to the back of his shack behind the station and presently returned leading as ancient and wobegone-looking a beast as I've ever seen, alive or dead. He led the blind, spavined creature to within thirty feet of the old freak when the hobbling bag of bones suddenly snorted, as if he'd scented a mountain lion, reared up in terror, planted his front legs down with a crash, and refused to budge.

"Do ye git whut I mean?" the attendant leered.

Frankly, I didn't. But I could hardly afford to waste any more time trying to get around the patent stupidities of my filling-station mountaineer. I got down

to business. How much did he want for the use of the mule for a couple of days? I was willing to pay a reasonable rental.

"Rent this mule?" he grinned sardonically. "I ain't rentin', mister. I'm sellin'. I ain't so sure you're comin' back."

I flared with anger. Hadn't he my car as security?

He shrugged. "I'm sellin'. One hundred dollars. Take it or leave it."

It was an outrageous price to pay for that moribund animal, but it was too early to be looking around and I was too much in a hurry, anyway. I took it.

He drove my car into the shed, then got out and threw a mildewed old saddle on the mule.

"Must be mighty important business you've got in Kobold's Keep," he muttered as he tightened the cinch strap.

"You've been there, I suppose?" I ventured casually.

He looked up—shook his head slowly.

"Naw, mister. Once, when I was a young sprout, I clumb to the top of the Pass and looked down into the Millhop. I could see the shacks of the place way off below. Yeah. I could even see some of the critters who live there. But I never went down to take a closer look. I got better sense."

"That doesn't sound reasonable!" I protested. "What's there to be scared of? What kind of people live there?"

He glanced at the cyclops. The great eye in the center of the freak's forehead winked weirdly, the toothless black gums showing in a lipless grin.

"Same kind as he is, I reckon. On'y this'n seems like the best-lookin' critter that ever came outen the Devil's Millhop. That's why he's still here now, I reckon. The others what tried it got kilt or chased back. There was no puttin' up with the sight of them!"

Black Knight Pass . . . the Devil's Millhop . . . Kobold's Keep . . . it all

sounded like a Barnum's paradise. I guess I must have grinned, for the mountaineer scowled and I could get no further word out of him.

THE cyclops hopped to his feet with surprizing agility as I mounted my decrepit steed, and plunged down a steep embankment into a ravine that ran at right angles to the road. I hesitated, met the jaundiced sneer of the station attendant, then kicked the ribs of my blind mule so that he half slid, half dived down the road bank. The cyclops, turning, winked, then plunged into the woods, leading a good thirty feet or more.

Through silent, needle-cushioned pine forest, across dark and rocky mountain flanks, over verdant, flower-studded meadows the strange old fellow guided me. For all his apparent senility he was possessed of an astonishing vigor. His thin old legs skipped along with the spring and easy grace of youth. And when the country began to grow rougher, the grassy carpet sparser, and the rocks blacker and more cruelly sharp, he negotiated the difficult terrain with the supple, careless ease of a mountain goat, while my feeble old mule gasped and heaved and forced me to dismount and struggle along beside her over the crenellated rocks.

Our progress, however, was steady, and I found times during the smoother stretches in which to ponder certain strange peculiarities that I had noticed in the natives of this part of the state—and, more particularly, the peculiarities that I had observed in the eldritch fantasm who was my guide.

That he was a hybrid of some sort I had no doubt. Probably he was a Melungeon—one of those dark people who are descendants of early English settlers who took Indian wives. Still, I had never before met one who displayed such a

combination of physical degeneracy with wiry stamina. As I contemplated his skipping figure, his pale pink braids waving in the air, his ragged overalls constantly on the verge of slipping off, I couldn't help but fancy that he wasn't exactly human—that he was, really, a cloven-footed goblin, an emanation of evil possessed of the immortality and deathless strength of Satan.

I smiled to myself. That was giving my fancy entirely too much leeway. For the world to me was a reasonable place—and belief in devils, evil spirits and such I took as a matter of course to be the products of sick minds and the spawn of ignorance.

The cyclops had called the mountain we would have to cross the "Black Knight"—pronouncing it with the long unused Anglo-Saxon "ch" sound. Black Knight! Why, the word "knight" hadn't been pronounced that way since the Fourteenth Century—a hundred years before America was officially discovered!

I knew that the mountaineers inhabiting these peaks are, perhaps, the purest bred stock in all America—fair, blue-eyed folk, descended from the earliest English settlers, being born, marrying among themselves, and dying within the radius of a few miles, generation after generation. I have met many who have never yet seen a railroad train, although I suspect aircraft passing overhead have become a familiar sight by now. I have found many a treasure of furniture and brassware among their mean huts—articles inherited from father to son down through the centuries.

Yet—Black Knight! It worried me. Fourteenth Century stuff in Twentieth Century America! I concluded that the way he pronounced it must have been only a personal peculiarity.

Our ascent had become many degrees steeper. Then, quite abruptly, as we came

to a looming wall of rock barring our way, the cyclops vanished. I soon discovered that he had disappeared into a narrow cleft in the raw stone—a cleft that rapidly widened into wide, though unevenly graded, road. Overhead the sky gleamed like a crooked blue ribbon and thinned the shadows within the pass so that the figure of my guiding imp was a visible, though dim, silhouette. A cold, dank wind whispered about my ears and explored my summer clothes with chill fingers. I crouched close to my mule's neck for warmth.

Suddenly the path at the bottom of the crevasse grew straighter, smoother. Far ahead I could see the walls of the cleft fall away into sky, crystal-clear, a bright background framing the black silhouette of the cyclops, standing motionless, watching me like a monstrous, one-eyed ghoul. . . .

Thoughtlessly, I let my mule have its head, and it wasn't until she suddenly snorted, reared, and flung me to the hard rock that I realized I'd let her approach the cyclops too closely. I still was seeing stars while the clattering gallop of my panic-stricken animal drummed in my ears, sounding more faintly with every hoofbeat.

I PICKED myself up and plodded painfully up to where the cyclops stood, his bulging eyes sparkling giddily, his toothless jaws writhing in silent laughter.

We had reached the top of Black Knight Pass. I peered down and saw spread before me the panorama of the Devil's Millhop.

It resembles nothing so much as a huge black bowl with vertical sides, and almost perfectly circular. Perhaps it's as much as four miles in diameter. I could see absolutely not a single break in the great barrier of black cliffs that surround it. Then the ugly devil who was with me pointed

to a precipitous path dropping away from the lip of the pass down the face of the cliff by a series of narrow, natural steps. I believe now that it's the only route by which a human being may enter or leave that frightful chasm.

The terrain of the Devil's Millhop, while showing patches of green here and there, seemed to be the same color as the rocks—basalt black. And though I scanned every section of the place, the only habitations I could discern were some curious hutches of black stones, almost invisible against the soot-like ground, grouped near the center of the bowl. A narrow waterfall splashed from the distant cliffs like a sliver of pale silver, and fed a brook coursing through the center of the Millhop. The brook, after speeding down a sink about a quarter of a mile in diameter that indented the bottom of the bowl, seemed to disappear into the ground.

"See yander?" the cyclops pointed, grinning. "In the sink, where the brook disappears . . . see, that fine black mansion?"

I strained my eyes. Sure enough. It was quite pretentious, built in the style of—a castle? Anyway, I thought I could discern turrets. There seemed to be some kind of bulky affair hanging over the spot where the brook vanished—something that seemed suspended on an axis jutting from the building.

"Oh, that!" the cyclops cackled. "That's the mill! Gran'pappy Kobolder called it the Keep. He had him a fancy house across the water that he called the Keep. So when he come here, he and his three sons they built this mill to grind the corn they larned to grow. And the ole man—he called it the Keep!" The eye winked.

"When did this happen?" Those curious stone dwellings offered food for speculation.

"Oh, long, long, long time ago, I reckon." The cyclops sat on his haunches and grinned spasmodically. "The ole folks down yander"—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder — "they sometimes mumble lies of whut *their* great, great-gran'pappy done tole 'em. Maybe some of it ain't lies, though."

The eye winked confidentially.

"Maybe it ain't a lie that Gran'pappy Kobolder was a boss man—a Knicht, they called 'em in those days. . . . Yeah—a Knicht. Funny, ain't it? He was a sinful man, murderin' and thievin'—yeah. . . . They chased him plumb outen the land over there 'cross the water . . . and he come here with a slew of people who, I reckon, had been share-croppin' on his land. I reckon it was somethin' like that. . . . They come here and settle down. . . . But all that's a moughty long time ago, I reckon. Nobody knows how long. There's an old book made o' sheep-hide, seems-like, down yander in the Keep. Gran'pap wrote it hisself. He was full o' book-larnin', they say. A boss Knicht had to be, I reckon. But I don't figure it's in English. . . . Queer-lookin' printin'. Some furrin' language they spoke in them days, I guess. . . ."

The bulging blue eye regarded me contemplatively. I must have showed my excitement.

"Whut's on your mind?" he snarled, his black gums showing.

"Who owns that property?" I asked, trying to repress my eagerness. "Who is living there now?"

The old degenerate burst into a hilarious cackle.

"'Who owns it?' he says! 'Who's livin' there now!' Hee, hee!"

I snapped, "What's so funny?"

"I'll tell you who owns it, mister! The feller that built it owns it! And the feller who built it is the feller who's still livin' in it right this very minute! It's old

Robin Kobolder — the great-great-great-great-gran'pappy of us all down yander!"

I DIDN'T press the point. The fellow, of course, was quite mad.

The glistening eye studied me avidly.

"How come you're so all-fired sot on comin' here?" he inquired. "What you so het up about Gran'pappy Kobold and his ole mill?"

I explained as patiently as I could that I might buy it if the price was right. Now that I was completely recovered and rested I was on pins and needles to be moving down before night overtook us.

The huge blue eye rolled with high humor.

"Let's get going," I broke into his cackling.

He scampered down the side of the precipice as nimbly as any lemur. Evidently he knew every step, ridge and cranny by heart. I followed slowly, laboriously, clinging to the wall with trepidation, averting my eyes from the sheer drop below me, yet considering at the same time that it would require careful preparation and much delicate work with block and tackle to remove any possible purchase I might make in this strange crater.

When I got to the bottom I paused, sniffing disgustedly, for the smell of the ground was utterly fetid. I scuffed the soil with my boot, picked up a handful. It was loose, granular and flinty, reeking with an unpleasant chemical cacosmia. No wonder vast stretches of this bottom land were dark and barren. No possible thing might grow in it. Perhaps in some ancient day this had been the mouth of a monster volcano that had spewed up poisonous substances which, even today, carried the breath of death. . . .

A silence covered the valley like a choking blanket of dark swan's-down. An invisible cap seemed to seal the hole in

the ground hermetically against the murmurs of life outside—the whisper of summer breezes, the song of birds, the rustle of trees. But as we strode toward the cluster of stone hutches on the farther side of the bowl I began to distinguish the sound of the waterfall—echoing and re-echoing like water splashing inside a bass drum. It accentuated the silence by its very solitude.

When I had viewed them from a distance I could have sworn I'd seen men moving about among the black stone hutches, but, as we approached, they appeared to be strangely deserted. The houses, thrown crudely together, were shockingly primitive and foul. They squatted in aimless clusters like a colony of filthy black bugs. The rock, I surmised, was their sole source of building material. As far as I could see, not a tree existed anywhere in this monstrous bowl. In fact, the only green things I saw growing were the infrequent garden patches that grew in hummocks of what was, quite evidently, imported soil.

The cyclops halted before one of the larger hutches.

"Funnel!" he screeched. "Open up, ye blabbermouth scound'el! It's me, Glim!"

There was no reply. Perhaps it was my nerves—but I could not escape the feeling that I was being watched; that eyes—many pairs of eyes—were peering at me covertly; eyes glinting from between stone chinks—peering from around corners. . . . I could catch fleeting glimpses of bodies from out of the corner of my eye now and then, but whenever I turned quickly there was—nothing.

Enraged, the cyclops was kicking the tall slate slab that served as a door. And presently, slowly, inch by inch, the slab began to move outward. The cyclops stepped back, his huge blue eye blazing with wrath. A creature stuck its head out and peered at us.

I cannot adequately describe it. I can only say that Horror stared from that misshapen, rat-eared head. It was the head and face of a being scarcely three feet tall, capped with a matted bush of filthy black furze that straggled into the squinting, Mongoloid eyes. The creature had no nose. From where the nose was supposed to be the face shot out horizontally in a ghastly anostosis of the bone, both jaws opening forward and outward, the green-yellow fangs protruding beyond the lips like the mouth of a misshapen banshee.

"Git outen the door!" the cyclops screeched, and advancing a pace, grabbed the creature by the hair and jerked it out.

The tiny gargoyle had virtually no body at all. Its huge, chinless head sloped down to a scrawny infant's torso, a pair of crooked match-stick legs, and two tiny clubbed feet. Its bent toes and tiny fingers were webbed.

"That's Funnel," the cyclops said, nodding to the creature.

Glancing at the monstrous mouth, I understood the name. He stood there in the muted light, eyeing me, motionless. I stared a moment as the cyclops entered the foul-smelling hutch. Each slanting eye of the creature contained two beady pupils.

Within the rocky hutch a perpetual twilight reigned. The light filtered through the cracks and crannies between the slabs of the rock. In the center of the room was a table made of a single slab of slate supported by a block of hewn granite. Smaller blocks served as chairs. On the table were a broken clay crock and several clay mugs.

I FOLLOWED the cyclops' example and sat down at the table. He poured a dark, heavy-odored liquor into two of the mugs and handed me one. I watched him drain his, then sniffed at mine. A rather sweetish, though flat, scent.

The bulging blue eye winked confidentially.

"Not bad, eh?" He smacked his lips and filled his mug again. "We make it outen honey. It goes down even better'n White Mule."

I tasted it—and was rather shaken by its strength. A hazy memory floated around the inner depths of my mind . . . the memory of tales of ancient Cornish feasting-halls, where warriors rolled under the benches, drunk with a fermented liquor made of honey, water, and spices. . . . They called it mead. . . .

Idiocy writhed in the freak's gibbering mouth.

"Ole Gran'pappy Kobolder—we call him Kobold for short—wal, he was the one who fust mixed the fust mashpot full of this stuff. He mixed it up in Cornwall, and up in the fur North Country—and then he brought the idear with him here. He was a smart bugger, he was!"

My skin prickled.

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

But he didn't hear, apparently. And, presently, I remarked on the shyness of the populace around here.

The cyclops agreed. "They ain't used to visitors," he explained. "Shucks, the last time anybody come hereabouts was—wal, come to think of it, it was exactly a year ago to this very day. It were an old priest, I remember. Yeah. He crawled down Black Knicht and began prayin' for his salvation when he seen some of the ugly scound'els around here! I reckon he figured he'd come to an outcrop of Satan's kingdom!"

And the cyclops laughed with huge, nasal mirth, his rolling eye crinkling at the corners.

"I showed him around. Yeah. I took the holy scound'el down to the Keep itself! I showed him the furniture, the things that's been lyin' around untouched for hunnerts and hunnerts of years. Yeah.

... But when I showed him Gran'pappy's ole book, blamed if the rascal didn't claim that it was a fake!"

"A fake!"

"Yeah. The blamed ole fool claimed that Gran'pappy never wrote it. Said it was a Bible printed by some feller named Caxton!"

You can understand how I thrilled to my very soul. A Bible by Caxton! William Caxton, date—1477! I realized that I was on the verge of a priceless discovery.

THERE was a stealthy scuffling of foot-falls just outside the walls of the hutch—I'd been aware of them for several minutes now. I could almost feel the eyes peering at me through the chinks and envision the shapeless monstrosities crowding about the hutch to spy on me—to listen. My horror and disgust were giving way now to a misty sort of pity. Poor, hopeless, Godforsaken wretches! They were so desperately frightened of, yet hungry for, contact with the outside world. But, I sighed to myself, better that they stay here, unknown and unmolested. The milk of human kindness ran thin throughout the world. . . . Once I thought I heard a sound in the rear of the room—the dark threshold of what was probably a sleeping-chamber.

"Gran'pappy didn't cotton to that priest none," the cyclops was mouthing again. "When mornin' come, damn iffen we didn't find that priest lyin' in the door of the main room in the mill. His head was chopped clean off."

"Gran'pappy?" I repeated stupidly.

"Shore. Gran'pappy Kobold. He didn't like that old priest. He chopped his haid off!" He grinned more hideously than ever, and edged a little closer toward me. "Though, jes' between you and me, stranger, maybe the old priest stumbled against the door-jamb under which

Gran'pappy's ax-head is hangin', and the shakin' made it fall so that it hit the priest in the neck and killed him. . . . Still"—he shrugged—"ye can't tell about sperrits. They say that them what see's Gran'pappy's sperrit walkin' dies on the spot. Or, anyways, within twenty-four hours. It ain't never failed yit, mister!"

I pressed him for details about Grandfather Kobolder.

He grinned nauseatingly, winked, and leaned forward.

"He was the Knicht. The big boss man. But he was gittin' old—old and the cold was creepin' into his bones. He began cotchin' young uns when their mam-mies weren't lookin'—and then cuttin' off their haid and drinkin' their blood. It kept him young, it did. Mebbe, if they'd let him alone, he could live for ever thataway. . . ." The lipless mouth receded from the black, gangrenous gums. "But no—they druv him off. He and his three sons and his three daughters had to skedaddle for their lives! They come here . . . they settled down. . . ."

The cyclops filled his mug and drained it at a gulp, his eye shining bright.

"Yeah," he rasped, "but soon the cold come again. . . . The ole man needed blood. He tried to git his youngest son—but the scound'el took the knife away f'om him, stabbed him daid, cut off his haid, sculped him, and hung it at the belt! The murderin' whelp!"

I stared, transfixed at the glaring rage suddenly contorting that evil face. It subsided slowly.

"You," I ventured timidly, "you are all his descendants?"

"Yeah. His chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, and *their* chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, I reckon. Later on mebbe there was an Injun gal or two to mix with. But not often. It's been mostly—jest us!"

My gorge rose. These amorphous crea-

tures, a self-sustaining breed of compounded incests, had miraculously existed century after century through deepening shadows of insanity, through successive generations of horror and deformity, alone, shunned by the world, isolated from civilization, fit only for death!

A sudden weird mewling in the next room snatched up my shocked attention. I stared at the opening of the chamber. My eyes slowly lowered to the Thing that appeared on the floor.

Rolling, squirming, writhing its way out of the opening was a naked, armless, legless, eyeless, earless Thing. It paused on the threshold, as if it sensed our presence, mewed once, like a frightened kitten, then continued its weirdly painful progress until it reached the door. The cyclops got up, opened the door, and it rolled out.

I rose, nauseated. Through the wide-open doorway I could see that the shadows had lengthened considerably; that, in fact, time had passed so swiftly that it was nearly twilight. The idea of spending the night here, which I'd originally entertained, now left me trembling.

"Let's get on down to the Keep!" I cried. "Let's get on down. I want to see these things, buy them if I can, and leave!"

The cyclops licked the edge of his mouth with a thick, coal-black tongue. I shoved some bills into his hand and we both sallied forth into the deepening dusk, walking briskly to the brook and following it down into the sink.

"Buy them!" the cyclops kept hissing to himself with thoughtful glee. "Buy them—and leave!" He seemed to mouth the words as if they tasted good.

AS WE approached the old mill I was struck with the similarity of its design with that of several old castles of Norman vintage that I had seen in Eng-

land. The silent mill-wheel hung motionless on its broken, rust-eaten axis, the swift waters of the stream breaking about it futilely. As we came more closely toward the old mill house I was struck by the strength of the chemical vapors that swirled into my nostrils. I stopped, half suffocated.

The cyclops clutched my arm, grinning. "Come on," he snarled, "come on."

We stumbled to the bottom of that dank, mephitic pit, waded across the brook, and stepped across the threshold into the open doorway of Kobold's Keep.

Its interior was a revelation. Though laden and crusted with filth, everything was, perhaps, as the owner had left it unknown centuries ago. The spacious chambers were timbered with Gothic arches and ornamented with gargoyles of wood. The furniture was of an undetermined period. Certainly it antedated any of the so-called "period" furniture that we recognize today—and antedated it, I'll swear, by centuries. As I scuffed through the strange and ancient old house a feeling that was nearly awe encompassed me. If the story of old Robin Kobolder's voyage to the New World could be authenticated a new chapter would be added to American history!

At first I was suspicious of the extraordinary state of preservation of the woodwork and, especially, of certain stiff damask draperies I saw still hanging there. I am now convinced, however, that these objects are entirely authentic. And the most reasonable conjecture I can offer as to their preservation is that the strong chemical exhalations rising from the ground have served as an effective bactericide, halting the process of decomposition through the centuries.

Presently I found myself in a large, nearly empty room, whose paneless windows gaped upon the teetering millwheel and the yawning pit into which the brook

vanished. It had been, apparently, an armorer's workshop. A few blades of ancient design and all rust yet hung precariously on the walls. Glancing about, I perceived the huge bronze blade of a battle-ax hanging, edge downward like a guillotine, over the lintel of the door I had just entered. A black stain crusted the greater part of its surface.

A splintering crash!

I spun around, my heart beating wildly. The cyclops stood there, grinning at me, winking that ghastly eye of his. But when I saw what he had done my fright gave way to swift anger. He'd smashed one of those priceless chairs to fragments!

"You damned fool!" I yelled. "What did you do that for?" And, like a hen gathering in a lost chick, I fell on my knees and gathered together the pieces of the chair tenderly.

The cyclops shrugged. "We'll be needin' a fire, I reckon. We gotta have firewood!"

An authentic Fifteenth Century chair—firewood!

I warned him to keep his hands off the furniture while I prowled about.

The book lay on a huge work table near the center of the room. It was a Bible, all right—a Caxton Bible! My eyes devoured its priceless pages, my fingers infinitely tender, infinitely reverent. God! To find such a treasure in this dismal, misanthropic hole, alone, uncared for!

Suddenly I was aware of the crackle of flames. I glanced up—leaped to my feet with an oath.

The deformed wretch had built a fire on the ancient hearth with the broken pieces of the chair!

I aimed a blow at his blinking eye, but he ducked and skipped away nimbly, hissing like a frightened adder. But the

flames had completely engulfed the fragments. It was too late to save them. . . . The dancing flames painted eery chiaroscuros of scarlet light and stygian shadows on the walls.

I was suddenly aware how late it had grown. So engrossed had I been in the book that night had already slipped over the Devil's Millhop like a swift-flowing black melena, catching me unawares.

To be forced to spend the night in this mephitic hermitage was no pleasant prospect. But the book provided consolation. I sat cross-legged on the floor near the fire, and read it slowly, critically, picking my way, as you may well imagine, with sheerest delight through its ornate typography.

The cyclops sat on his haunches beside me, his glistening eye pondering the flames hungrily.

How long I sat there wading through the pages of Caxton's Bible I cannot say. Suddenly I was aware of a strange sound—a squeaking and a thrashing, as of badly greased machinery stirring to activity. Simultaneously there came a slow, crunching, grinding sound that shook the house in every rafter. It seemed to come from directly beneath me.

I leaped to my feet, scuttled to the window and peered out.

The ancient mill-wheel was turning! Slowly, at first, it began to pick up speed even as I stared and soon was spinning industriously, the blinding moonlight catching the spray dancing from its paddles like spume of liquid silver.

Puzzled and, I must admit, scared by this inexplicable event, I turned to the cyclops—and found him on his feet, facing me, a long, curving blade of oriental design clenched in one fist.

"Where did you get that?" I rasped, startled.

"Funny thing," he grinned horribly, "but it was a-lyin' right there where I was a-settin'."

The firelight scintillated on the bright steel. "It doesn't look so very old," I commented, more to myself than anyone else.

The black gums bared. "I reckon it ain't so old. Only a mite over four hundred years, I reckon. This is the knife that old Kobold's whelp used to sculp his old dad—and to cut off his haid! Feel that edge."

He extended the blade to me. I drew back.

The cyclops cackled mockingly, "Gran'-pap Kobold, he warn't feared of man nor devil!" The eye winked confidentially. "He'd as soon slit your throat as look at ye. That's the kind of man *he* was! Iron-fisted! He couldn't be puttin' up with the law. 'Cause he was the law hisself! That's why he come across the water. Not that he wanted to much, I reckon!" His laugh rattled through the room like loose bones. "But y' can't do much when the Devil sends a storm that blows ye across!"

"The cyclops laughed hissing and spat into the fire. His gaze swung back to my face with a sudden intensity.

"But, like I tole ye, he was a-needin' new blood . . . new blood. . . . The cold was a-creepin' into his bones." His taloned fingers curved and slowly clenched.

As I stared into that writhing face glistening with sweat, it seemed to take on a glow, an uncanny, greenish aura. The slack chin seemed to strengthen, to grow heavier, and in those grotesque, shriveled features burned a mad, brutal virility!

"But they caught him one night!" The cyclops' voice clattered with a harsh note of fury. A chill malaise crept over me as I stared into that terrible visage. "They

caught him!" the cyclops snarled. "They caught him and drove him out! And we run, my boys and my three daughters—we run! And then——"

The great burning eye closed slowly. And as I stared in sick horror it seemed that it was not really an eye at all. No—no eye at all, but a swollen scar—a scar from whose ends stretched two finer, dead-white lines that completely encircled the base of his scalp—the mark of the scalper's knife!

"The young scound'el stabbed me!" the horror roared in a strange, deep voice—a voice that I heard as if through a vast stretch of space and time. "He stabbed me!" he screamed madly.

I stared into the sunken blank walls of flesh covering the eyesockets. And, even as I stared, they lifted and I was gazing into a pair of mad, burning, red-rimmed eyes.

The knife flashed, and before my very eyes the creature had slashed his own throat, sawing the knife back and forth until the head dropped off, hit the floor, and rolled across the boards. I stared at it as if in a dream. I remember vividly an instant of crowning horror when the head, as it came to rest on the floor, looking at me, closed one eye in a ribald wink.

How I got out of that accursed house, across the moonlit crater, up the face of the cliff, and back to civilization is a confused nightmare of terror and madness. I can recall only flashes of my mad flight—the gibing creaking of the spinning millwheel, the dull crash of some heavy object as I fled from the room—an object that brushed my coat-tails as I passed under the door-lintel—the goblin laughter of the brook, the searing pain of my hands and knees as I tore them on the cruel cliff rocks, the eery moonlight sifting through a forest . . . gasping, stum-

bling, falling, plunging forward—ever forward . . . and, by some unfathomed miracle, the vision of a road sign which read in the bright moonlight: "You are Now Entering the City of Merlin. Go slow."

I woke up the filling-station keeper. He didn't seem very surprized to see me. His jaundiced grin swept me once; then, not waiting to hear my gasping explanations, he led me to a room—the room I am writing this letter in. . . .

It's no use trying to sleep. Sleep takes me back there. . . . The eye of the cyclops . . . the bleeding head . . . the ribald wink. . . .

If all these things are but the figments of a diseased mentality then I suppose I should be put away. . . . Maybe they didn't happen. . . . Maybe I'm crazy. . . .

I see dawn breaking over the hills. As soon as it gets a bit lighter I'm going to post this letter via the first bus.

Then I'm going to get in my car and drive like mad out of this accursed country!

Faithfully yours,
ROBERT DARNLEY.

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THE following newspaper clipping was included by Mr. Abiathar Hall with the manuscript of Mr. Darnley's letter:

May 5, 1936—The body of a man believed to be Robert Darnley, a professional art collector, was found in the wreckage of his automobile about three miles north of Merlin, Tenn. The car, which had sheared off a number of telegraph poles, had evidently been traveling at a high rate of speed. Glass from the shattered windshield had completely decapitated the body.