

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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"So we found Tony! His eyes—awful contrast to his grinning mouth—mirrored a terror too profound for any words to convey."

"VERY well, Mr. Drewe! I'll sign the agreement, though no one but you would drive such a devil's bargain."

The speaker's tall, emaciated body vibrated with indignation, and his strange light eyes blazed like incandescent lamps. There was something of the brooding menace of the gray sea in the latter, and a note in his voice reminded me of the sullen mutter of the wind before a storm.

A little shiver of apprehension ran through me as I turned from him to my brother-in-law, Jason Drewe. Nothing could have been more utterly and infuriatingly complacent than the latter, who was leaning back in the most comfortable chair my office afforded, with an

expensive cigar in his mouth, his big frame clad in the smartest of light tweeds, and an orchid in his button-hole.

Jason was an extremely wealthy man, young enough to enjoy his money, and with a son to inherit his millions one day. The loss of Mavis, his wife, had been more of an annoyance than a grief to him; he felt that she had died merely to make things awkward for him—in fact, he added her death to the many grievances he treasured up against her.

I knew that if there is such a thing as a broken heart, he broke my sister's, and I hated him for it. I would have cut off all intercourse with him, only that I had promised Mavis to keep an eye on the boy, and

counteract his father's influence as far as possible. Jason knew nothing of this; he believed I hung on to him for the sake of his wealth and twitted me with it quite openly, in spite of the fact that I was never indebted to him for a single dime, and would have cleaned the streets, or sold "hot dogs" rather than owe him a penny.

It seemed absurd to pity him, especially at this moment of his triumph, when he had succeeded in getting the land he wanted at the price he wanted, and was sitting there before me as pink and pleased as a prize baby after its bottle.

Eldred Werne, whom Jason had just cornered so successfully, was the one whom most people would have pitied. But I had only admiration for anyone as determined and strong of soul as Werne. Poor and desperately ill though he was, he was not an object for pity.

As junior partner in the firm of Baxter and Baxter, real estate agents, I was present to witness the signatures and conclude the deal between Werne and Jason; and I wished a thousand times that Baxter and Baxter had never had this affair entrusted to them. It was a sordid, despicable business altogether.

"I'll sign," repeated Werne, drawing his chair closer to my desk, and taking up the parchments in his thin, blue-veined hands. "The land shall be yours at your own price—for the present!"

Anger and instant suspicion showed in Jason's small, heavy-lidded eyes.

"What the devil do you mean?" he said. "If you sign these papers the land is mine, and there's no power on earth can make me pay more for it than the sum set down there in black and white."

"I wasn't thinking of money." Werne's voice was strangely quiet and yet so full of menace that again I felt every nerve in my body thrill

to it. "I am sure you will never pay more in money."

"You're right — dead right, Werne," Jason's resonant voice echoed through the room.

"And yet—I think you will pay more in the end. Yes, in the end you will pay more, Mr. Drewe."

Jason turned to me blustering and furious.

"Aren't these deeds water-tight? What does he mean? If there is any flaw in these agreements I'll stamp you and your fool firm out of existence!"

Before I could reply, Werne began to laugh. He sat there and laughed long and dreadfully, the bright color staining his thin cheeks, his gray eyes brilliant and malicious. He laughed until the cough seized him, and he leant back at last utterly exhausted, an ominous stain on the handkerchief he pressed to his lips.

"Let me relieve your natural anxiety, Mr. Drewe," he said at last, his hoarse voice still shaken with mirth. "You will pay more, but not in money! Not in any material sense at all."

"What in the name of common sense do you mean?" growled Jason.

"There is nothing common at all in the sense of which I speak. It is very uncommon indeed! I refer to payments which have no connection with money—nothing which can be reckoned in dollars and cents."

Jason looked uncertain whether to call police protection or medical aid, and he watched Werne narrowly as the latter signed the documents.

When the signatures were completed, Eldred Werne got to his feet and stood looking down at Jason—a long, strange, deep look, as if he meant to learn the other's every feature off by heart. Behind Werne's eyes once more a sudden terrifying flame of laughter danced—flickered—and was gone!

"You don't fear any payment that

will not reduce your bank account, then?"

"What other payment is there?" asked Jason in genuine surprize.

"You're wonderful!" said Werne. "So complete a product of your age and kind. So logical and limited and—excuse me—so thoroughly stupid!"

Jason's fresh-colored face turned a deep purple.

"If you were not a sick man——" he began.

"And one, moreover, whom you have thoroughly and satisfactorily fleeced," interpolated Werne.

"I should resent your remarks," continued Jason pompously. "As it is, I see no use in prolonging this conversation."

"Stay!" cried Werne, as Jason put on his fur coat and prepared to depart. "It's only fair to warn you that if I die out there in Denver City, I shall come back again! I shall be in a better position then, without this wretched body of mine. I shall come back—to make you pay—a more satisfactory price for my Tareytown acres."

Jason stared, standing in the doorway with one plump well-manicured hand on the door-knob, looking like a great shaggy ox in his fur coat, and with that air of stupid bewilderment on his broad face.

"Wha-a-a-at?" he stammered. Then, as the other's meaning slowly dawned on him, he leaned up against the door and showed every tooth in his head in a perfect bellow of mirth. "Are you threatening to haunt me?" he choked, the veins on his forehead swelling dangerously. "Well, my good fellow, if it gives you any comfort to imagine that, don't let me discourage your little idea. You'll be welcome at Tareytown any old time! The Tareytown specter, eh? It'll give quite an air to the place! What kind of payment will you want—moonshine, eh?" Jason almost burst with the humor of this re-

mark. "Moonshine and ghosts! Seems the right sort of mixture!"

With a last fatuous chuckle, Jason opened the door; and, through the window, I saw him get into his new coupé and drive off, his face still creased in enjoyment of his last sally.

"The descent of man," murmured Werne, half to himself. "There's no doubt that Jason Drewe has descended a considerable way from the apes! The fool—the blind, besotted fool!"

2

IT WAS a perfect day in the late autumn of that same year, when, for the first time, I saw the Tareytown estate.

I dismissed my taxi at the huge stone gateway, and walked slowly up through the woods. After the hectic rush and noise of New York, the golden stillness around me was deeply satisfying; and I thought of poor Eldred Werne, who would never know the beauty and healing peace of this place again. I had seen the notice of his death in Denver City, only a month after he had signed away his rights to these lovely Tareytown woods, and I had thought very often since of the lonely bitterness which must have clouded his last days.

Glimpses of the blue, shining Hudson shone between the trees, and beyond, the flaming russet of the Palisades. On all sides the country stretched out to dim, misty horizons for which Werne's dying eyes must have longed in his exile.

Then, quite suddenly, a chill passed over me. I became aware of the ominous and unusual stillness of the brooding woods. Neither bird nor squirrel darted to and fro among the leaves and branches—not even a fly buzzed about in the hazy sunshine.

I looked around in gathering apprehension. What was it that began to oppress me more and more? Why

did the tall trees seem to be listening?—why did I have the impulse to look over my shoulder?—why did my heart thump and my hands chill suddenly?

With a great effort I restrained myself from breaking into a run, as I continued upward toward the house. The path doubled back on itself across and across the shoulder of the hill on which the house, Red Gables, was built; and it was fully ten minutes before I arrived breathless in sight of its red roof and high old-fashioned chimney-stack.

In a corner of its wide porch, I caught a glimpse of a boy's figure and let out a loud halloo, glad of an excuse to break the queer, unnatural silence.

There was an answering hail, and my nephew, Tony, came running down the path to meet me.

"Hello, Uncle John! I was waiting for you! Did you walk up through the woods—alone?" The boy's voice held an awed note, which was emphasized by the look of fear in his dark eyes.

He was only eight years old, and exactly like his mother. Thank heaven, there was no trace of Jason's complacent materialism in his son . . . mind and body, Tony was an utterly different type. I loved the boy, and a real friendship had developed between us, despite the disparity of our years. He was curiously sensitive and mature for his age, and it was a great thing for a bachelor like myself to have a child make a little tin god of me, as Tony did.

"And why not walk alone through the woods?" I demanded, looking down at him as he rubbed his head against my arm like some friendly colt.

"I wouldn't," he replied simply.

"Why not, old man? There aren't any wolves or bears or even Indians left here, are there?"

"Don't laugh, Uncle." The boy's

voice sank to a whisper. "There isn't time to tell you now, but there's something in those woods. Something you can't see—that—that is waiting!"

I stared at the boy, and once again the cold chill I had experienced during my walk up to the house crept over me.

"Look here, Tony," I began. "You mustn't get——"

"There is—there is, I tell you!" He was passionately in earnest. "Something that laughs—something that is waiting!"

"Laughs—waiting!" I echoed feebly.

"You'll hear it yourself," he answered. "Then you'll know. Father won't let me speak about it to him, and says if I'd play games instead of reading books, I'd only hear and see half what I do now."

"About as much as he hears and sees," I murmured to myself.

"I am sure Father hears it too, only he won't say so," continued Tony. "But I've noticed one thing—he won't let anyone knock at the doors. The servants even go into his study without knocking, and he was always so—so——"

"Exactly!" I said dryly; "I understand."

The small hand in mine gave a little warning pressure, and I saw Jason Drewe's big frame and massive head loom up in the comparative dimness of the interior, as Tony and I reached the entrance door of Red Gables.

"Well, John!" boomed my host, as he rose from the depths of a vast chair and came forward, cigar in hand. "Made your fortune yet?"

It was the form of greeting he invariably gave me; for he was that irritating type of man who uses a limited number of favorite witticisms and sticks to them persistently, in season and out of season.

Today, however, his complacent heartiness was obviously an immense

effort to him, and I was quite startled by the change in his appearance. He seemed conscious of it himself, but there was a certain bravado in the sunken eyes he turned on me, which defied me to remark on his ill looks.

I was certainly shocked to notice how much thinner he was, how gray his skin, and how hunted and restless were his eyes, as he kept glancing from side to side with a quick upward jerk of his big head, as though he were listening for some expected and unwelcome summons.

He motioned me to a chair and poured out drinks with a fumbling sort of touch, which further indicated the change in him since I last saw him in the office of Baxter and Baxter.

Tony curled up at my side on the arm of my easy-chair, as quiet as a doormouse, taking no part in the conversation, but his precocious intelligence enabled him to follow the drift of it; that I could swear to. He annoyed his father, this silent observant child, and in the middle of a discussion Jason turned irritably to the boy.

"Why don't you go off and amuse yourself out of doors like any other boy of your age? You sit round the house like a little lap-dog and waste your time with books—always mooning about like someone in a dream! Just like your mother—just like her," he finished in an exasperated mutter.

When we were alone, Jason turned to me with a frown. "More like a girl than a boy!" he commented bitterly. "About as much pep as a soft drink! What's the use of building up a business and making a future for him, when he'll let it all slip through his fingers later on?"

He went on talking rather loudly and quickly on the subject, with no help at all from me, and it struck me he was talking in order to defeat his own clamorous unpleasant

thoughts; working himself up into a pretense of anger to make the blood run more hot and swift in his veins.

As far as he was able, within the limited scope of his primitive nature, Jason loved the boy, and every hope and ambition he cherished was centered round Tony, and Tony's future. I just let him run on, and speculated with increasing bewilderment on the cause of my brother-in-law's obvious uneasiness of soul. It must be something tremendous to have shaken his colossal egotism. I argued to myself, and moreover it was something he was desperately anxious to hide—some unacknowledged fear which had pricked and wounded him deep beneath his tough skin.

"I'm not satisfied with that school of his—not at all satisfied!" he went on. "I ask you now, what's the use of filling a kid's head with all that imaginary stuff when he's got to live in a world of Jews and politicians and grafters? How's he going to grind his own when his darned school has exchanged it for a silver butter knife? How's he going to——"

He broke off with a queer strangled groan as a sudden clamorous knocking sounded—a loud tattoo like the sound of war-drums through the quiet house.

The big sunshiny room darkened suddenly and a puff of wind from an open window at my side breathed an icy chill on my cheek. The horror I had recently experienced in the woods swept over me again, and I saw Jason's face set in a mask of fear and loathing.

Silence held us bound for a perceptible moment, and in the quiet a loud, echoing laugh rang out.

It sounded as though someone were standing just outside the house, and I had a vivid mental image of a figure convulsed and rocking with mirth. But this figure of my imagination did not move me to laughter

myself, although as a rule nothing is more contagious than laughter—but not this—not this hateful mirth!

I dashed to the window and looked out; then, making for the door in blind haste, I stumbled out on the porch and ran round the house in a queer frenzy of desire to learn who—or *what*—had stood there laughing . . . laughing . . . laughing.

I only caught a glimpse of frightened faces in the servants' quarters at the back of the house as I dashed past, and saw windows and doors being hastily slammed.

When I got back to the living-room again Jason was gone, and I sat down breathless, and shaken to the very soul. I had stumbled on to the secret—or part of it—with a vengeance; and I sat with my unlit pipe in my mouth for the better part of an hour, until the first overwhelming horror of the episode had faded a little.

Jason came in just as I was thinking of going up to my room to change for dinner, and any idea I might have entertained of asking him for explanations was foiled by the extraordinary change in him.

He was his old self again. Large, pink, and prosperous, he breezed into the room and stood with his hands in his pockets, grinning down at me from his massive six feet odd. If there was something defiant in the gleam of his blue eye, if his voice was harsh and his grin a trifle too wide, it needed someone who knew him as well as I did to detect it.

I never liked or admired him as much as I did at that moment; and the determination came to me, to stand by him in this trouble of his, to stay and fight it out, and give what help I could to him and the boy.

I am not a superstitious man, nor counted credulous by my friends or enemies. But here was something inexplicably evil which brooded over

the lonely woods of Tareytown like some dark-winged genie.

I went slowly and thoughtfully up to my room, my mind heavy with doubt and perplexity, and as the night wore on and darkness closed in about the house, so did my mind grow darker and more fearful.

3

“WELL, Soames! Rather a change from your roof-garden in New York—eh? How do you like it here?”

The old gardener folded his gnarled hands one over the other on the handle of his spade, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

“It was an unlucky day for the master when he came to Tareytown, sir—an unlucky day!”

“How’s that? Won’t your plants grow for you?”

“You know, sir! I see by your face that you know already!”

“I must confess there’s something a bit depressing about the place,” I answered. “It’s just the time of year, no doubt. There’s always something melancholy about the fall.”

“There’s nothing wrong about the time of year,” said the old man. He leaned forward and his voice sank to a whisper. “Haven’t you *heard* it yet?”

I gave an involuntary start, and he pursed up his mouth and nodded.

“Aye, I see you have!”

He came closer and peered up at me, his brown face with its faded blue eyes a network of anxious wrinkles.

“Sir, if you can help the master, for God’s sake do it! He’s a rare hard one, I know, but I’ve served him for thirty-five years, and I don’t want to see no harm come to him. He won’t own up that he hears anything amiss, nor go away from this accursed place with the boy, before any harm comes to either of them. He’s that angry because he don’t understand—*won’t* understand there’s something more

than flesh and blood can hurt us sometimes!"

The old man's words came out in a flood, the result of long-suppressed anxiety, and I marveled that a man of Jason Drewe's type should command such solicitude from anyone.

"I'm all in the dark, Soames," I said slowly. "Who is it that knocks—that laughs?"

The gardener's eyes grew very somber. "No mortal man—no mortal man, sir."

"Why, Soames, you're as superstitious as they make them," I said, trying to make light of his words.

"See here, sir," he said, pulling me by the sleeve into the deeper shade of the shrubbery behind us. "I'll tell you what I've never spoken a word of yet. I'll tell you what I overheard one night when this—this *thing* first came here. I was pottering about late one evening, tying up bits of creeper against the wall outside the master's study. I heard the knock—loud and long as if the emperor of the world was a-knocking at the door, and I looks up to see who was there. The door was only three or four feet from where I was standing with bass and seissors in my hand. And there was no one at all on the steps nor anywhere near the house. While I was a-staring and wondering I heard the laugh! My blood went cold, and I just stood there shaking like a poplar tree in a wind. And since then, night after night, that knock and that laugh comes as regular as the sun sets!"

I stared at my companion in incredulous horror.

"And one time," he continued, "I heard the master call out. Terrible loud and fierce his voice was: '*Have you come for your moonshine, Eldred Werne?—take it!*' And with that, a bottle of whisky comes hurtling through the window and fell almost at my feet. I felt a wind blow across my face same as if it blew right off an iceberg; and as I stood there afraid to move hand or foot, I heard the laugh

way down among the trees, getting fainter and fainter just as if someone was walking away down the path—and laughing and laughing to himself all the time!"

I listened aghast to the old man, and a vivid picture arose in my mind of Eldred Werne as I last saw him in life—the tall, emaciated figure, the arresting face with its beautifully chiseled features, and above all the strange gray eyes as they had dwelt in that last deep look on Jason, the burning mocking fire which lit them and the fathomless contempt of the strong mouth."

"You will pay—you will pay!" The words rang in my ears as if Werne were standing at my side speaking them at that very moment.

I sat down abruptly on a fallen tree, and lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

"Now look here, Soames," I said at last. "We mustn't let this thing get us scared out of all common sense and reason. I admit it's a beastly unpleasant business, but I can't—I won't believe yet that there is no natural explanation of these things. Someone who owes him a grudge may be putting one over on Mr. Drewe. It may be a deliberate plot to annoy and frighten him. There was a—er—well, a misunderstanding between your master and Mr. Werne over the purchase of this Tareytown estate, and Mr. Werne was quite capable of planning a neat little revenge to square his account a little. He was a very sick man, remember—and sick men are apt to be vindictive and unreasonable."

"I guessed as something had happened between the two," murmured Soames, "but I didn't rightly know what it was."

"You and I will watch the house from now on," I said. "We'll arrange to be outside, one or other or both of us, directly after sunset. And if—if we see nothing, if we find no one there——"

"Aye—you won't, sir!"

"Then I shall do my best to persuade Mr. Drewe to leave this place and return to the city."

"And that you'll never do. He'll never give in and go away, not if it means his death. The master is terrible obstinate, and he fair blazed up when I kind of suggested he wasn't looking just himself, and that maybe Tareytown didn't agree with him."

And remembering Jason's defiant eyes and the bluff he put up last evening for my benefit, I was inclined to agree with Soames.

"I'll do what I can," I said, getting up and brushing off twigs and leaves.

"I'm thankful to know you're here, sir. There was no one I dared say a word to until you came. The servants are in mortal terror, and never a week passes without one or more of them leaving. Soon we won't be able to get anyone to stay a night in the place!"

"If your master could be persuaded to send the boy away for the rest of his vacation——"

"He won't do that," was the lugubrious reply. "That would be sort of owning up that there *was* something here he was afraid of! He'll never admit that—never!"

4

OUR first vigil took place that night. The boy was safe indoors—he never went over the threshold of the house after dusk fell, I noticed. Jason had established himself with his favorite drink, a stack of newspapers, and a box of cigars, in his library. I left him looking as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar—and as gray!

Soames and I planted ourselves in strategic positions on either side of the porch, where we could see both the big entrance door, and the whole of the front porch which ran in front of the library, dining-room, and sun-parlor.

A pale moon sailed serenely overhead, and I felt a passionate longing to be as far away from this evil-haunted little piece of earth as was the moon itself. Revolt which was almost nausea seized me, as I looked around at the shadowy woods, and felt the unnamable creeping horror which waited there.

Slow minutes passed. The shadows grew denser, and the silence so profound that the falling leaves rattled like metal things on the dry ground, and the creak of the great trees made my heart thump furiously against my ribs.

I could see Soames' small tense figure bent forward in a listening attitude, his face turned toward the entrance door. He looked like a terrier-dog straining eagerly on a leash.

My eyes roved restlessly to and fro, and fell at last on the long, uncut grass which grew about the tree-trunks. Quite suddenly I saw the reeds and grasses bend and quiver as if before a strong wind. In a long thin line they bent—a line advancing rapidly from the blackness of the trees out toward the open—toward the house—toward the entrance porch, with its broad steps gleaming silver in the moonlight.

My hand flew to my throat to stifle the cry that rose as I saw that sinister trail being blazed before my eyes. It advanced to the extreme edge of the tall grasses in a direct line with the entrance-door.

A moment of unendurable suspense—an agony of terrified expectant waiting! Then it came—loud—thunderous—awful as the stroke of doom! The knocker had been removed from the door, and on the bare wood itself beat that devil's tattoo.

I was paralyzed with the shock and thunder of it, and only when I saw Soames stumbling forward, and heard his hoarse cry, did I move—stiff and uncertainly as a man might move after a long illness.

We clutched each other like two terrified children when we arrived at the foot of the steps, and I felt Soames's body shaking against my own.

Then, abruptly, the infernal racket ceased; and in the momentary silence which ensued, a laugh broke out that sent our trembling hands over our ears, but we could not shut out the sound of that demoniac laughter. Uncontrolled and triumphant it rang out again and again, and the vision of someone rocking with mirth rose as before in my imagination.

But nothing was there on the porch in the moonlight!

The whole porch was visible in the clear white light. No one, no thing, could have escaped our staring, straining eyes. There was no one there, and yet almost within touch of our outstretched hands some invisible, intangible Thing stood laughing—laughing—laughing. . . .

5

AFTER that night the horror fell more and more darkly.

Soames, who was out all day working in the gardens and shrubberies, noticed increasingly sinister signs that our invisible enemy was marshaling his forces, and closing in on the last stages of the siege.

More and more frequently the old man would see the grasses bending and swaying around him in loops and circles, as though the laughing Thing moved to and fro in the mazes of some infernal dance. Often Soames felt the chill of the Thing's passing, and noted the shriveled, blighted foliage which marked its trail.

The woods grew darker with every passing day, despite the thinning of the leaves. The autumn mists which lay so white and cloudlike in the valleys of the surrounding country, drifted in among the trees on the Tareytown estate like gray, choking smoke, dank and rotten with the

breath of decay, shutting out the sunlit earth beyond, and the clear skies above, rolling up around the house with infinite menace and gloom.

Louder and more clamorous grew the nightly summons, and the laughter which followed echoed and re-echoed about the house throughout the night, sounding at our very windows, then growing faint and ominous from the depths of the brooding woods.

6

AT LAST, the boy's terror precipitated a crisis.

Jason, who had brought this cursed thing upon himself, it seemed, refused to acknowledge that he had been wrong, to make any amends which lay within his power, or even to move from the place which Eldred Werne had loved so passionately in the flesh, and haunted so persistently in the spirit.

Jason's courage, though I admired it in one way, was not of the highest order. I mean that his conduct was guided by no reason, but only by blind impulse.

I tackled him more than once about Tony, and only succeeded in rousing furious opposition.

"What the devil are you driving at?" he roared at me. "This is my house, isn't it? These are my woods and my lands. I paid for them according to my bond. No one is going to drive me out—no one, d'you hear?—neither man nor devil!"

"But Tony!" I protested. "You ought to consider him. He hears the servants talking. He hears whatever it is that comes knocking at your door, Jason—you know best what it is! The boy is almost beside himself with fear. Can't you see he is desperate? He doesn't eat or sleep properly. D'you want to kill him as you did his mother?" I added bitterly, remembrance of my sister's lonely,

unhappy life with Jason goading me to speech.

But Jason was always impervious to anything he wished to ignore, and he brushed aside my last words and returned to Tony.

"The boy has got to learn—he's got to learn, I say! If this house is good enough for me, then it's good enough for him, too. Tony'll stay here with me to the end of his vacation. If I give in about this thing, it will be the thin end of the wedge. He'll expect me to indulge every girl's fad and fancy he has—and the Lord knows he's full of them! Here I stay, and here he stays, and that's all about it. Why on earth do you stay yourself, feeling as you do?" he added roughly. "If you're afraid, I'll excuse you the rest of your visit."

I didn't trouble to deny the fact that I was afraid, and went off cursing myself for interfering, and probably making Tony's relations with his father even more difficult.

7

THAT evening Jason seemed absolutely possessed. Whether he had been drinking heavily, or whether his endurance had reached the breaking-point suddenly in the long, silent combat of wills with his invisible enemy, or whether the blind gray figure of Fate had written the last chapter, and he had no choice but to obey, I do not know.

Everything that happened that last fatal night seemed obscured and fogged with the waves of terror and desolation that swept over the house and the surrounding woods.

From early morning the attack on us strengthened perceptibly. Every hour I felt we were fighting a losing battle, and I had no comfort for Soames when he sought me out, and led me off to the potting-sheds after a pretense of breakfasting.

Tony had remained in bed, to his

father's unbounded disgust. The boy had spent a sleepless night and I had given him a bromide and persuaded him to stay in his room to rest.

"Making a mollycoddle of him!" growled Jason, his eyes light and dangerous as a wild boar's above his flabby, sallow cheeks. He put down his cup with a rattle on the saucer, and scraping his chair noisily on the polished flooring, he rose and strode heavily out of the room, and I heard the stairs creak under his weight as he went up to the boy.

Throughout the day, his evil mood grew on him, and Tony could do nothing right.

"Mark my words, sir," Soames had said to me as we stood in the potting-sheds that morning. "I've a feeling we've about come to the end! That Laughing Devil will knock for the last time tonight—for the last time! Mark my words!"

And as the day wore on I felt more and more assured that Soames was right.

Every hour the sense of imminent and immense danger grew heavier, and every hour Tony grew more and more nervous and Jason more brutally obstinate; for the sight of the boy's terror goaded his father into senseless anger.

The sun set that night in a bank of heavy dull cloud, which spread and darkened until thick impenetrable dusk closed about us.

With the coming of twilight we waited in fearful anticipation of our usual visitation; but dusk deepened to night and no summons sounded at the door, no mocking horror of laughter was heard at all.

Yet this silence brought no feeling of reprieve. Rather our expectancy grew more and more tense, and Tony sat by the fire with cold shaking hands thrust deep into his pockets, and tried to prevent his father noticing the ague of fear which shook his thin little body.

Jason did not send him to bed at his usual time—we all sat there waiting—just waiting!

The big logs smoldered dully and reluctantly on the hearthstone. Jason's face was a gray mask; his thick lips sneered; his eyes gleamed between their puffy lids. He was like a cornered animal of some primeval age—a great inert mass of flesh slumped down in his big chair by the dying fire.

Nine—ten—eleven! The torturing hours crept on and still we sat there like people under a spell, just waiting—waiting!

With the deep midnight chime of the clock in the library, the spell was broken with a hideous clamor that made Tony leap up with the shriek of a wild thing caught in a trap.

Jason got to his feet in one surprising movement, and stood with feet apart and lowered head, as if about to do battle.

I sat clutching the arms of my chair, held by a blind terror that was like steel chains about me.

It was the Laughing Thing at last! Long and furiously the knock resounded, sinking to a low mutter and rising to a crescendo of blows that threatened to batter down the heavy door. And over and above the thunderous blows rose the high mocking laughter—triumphant, cruel, satisfied laughter!

I blame myself—I shall always blame myself for what happened then. I might have held the boy back—guarded him more closely when he was too frenzied with fear to guard himself. But I did not dream what he was about until it was too late! When he ran from the shelter of my arms, I thought he meant to seek another refuge!

But no—the boy was crazed beyond all reason and control, and ran desperately to the very horror which had driven him mad.

I heard his quick, light steps along the hall, and I thought he was making

for the staircase, not the door—my God, not the door!

There was the quick rattle of a heavy chain, the groan of a bolt withdrawn—then a long, wailing shriek of terror!

With one accord Jason and I dashed out into the hall—Soames came rushing from the kitchen-quarters—and there stood the door flung wide, and from the porch without came a long exultant peal of laughter.

We flung ourselves forward and out into the night. In the distance among the trees we heard the dying echoes of that infernal laughter—then nothing more.

8

UNTIL dawn we searched the woods of Tareytown, and as the first gray glimmer of light broke in the east we found him.

Have you ever seen anyone dead of a sudden violent poison—such as prussic acid—with teeth showing in a terrible grin—the muscles of the face stiffened in inhuman laughter? It is the most dreadful of all masks which death can fix on human lineaments.

So we found Tony!

His eyes—awful contrast to his grinning mouth—mirrored a terror too profound for any words to convey. Eyes which had looked on the unnamable—the unthinkable; spawn of that outermost darkness which no human sight may endure.

THAT night was the end of my youth and happiness. Jason packed up and went for a prolonged tour of Europe with his fears and his memories, and I have never seen him since.

For myself, I live, and will always live, on the Tareytown estate, where perhaps Tony's spirit may wander lost and lonely, still possessed by that evil which caught him in its net.

I must remain at Red Gables, and perhaps here or hereafter I may atone

for the selfish fear which made me fail Tony in that desperate crisis.

Somewhere—somehow, beyond the curtain of this life, I may meet the Thing which laughed—the evil, bitter Thing which once was Eldred Werne—the Thing which may still possess

the boy and hold him earthbound and accurst.

I failed Tony once, but I will not do so a second time. I will offer my own soul to set him free—and perhaps the high gods will hear me and accept the sacrifice.