

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 29

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Life-Eater

By HAROLD WARD

*A terror-tale of much power, about the frightful wraith from Beyond,  
which brought panic and death to the little town  
in the Louisiana swamplands*

## 1. The Terror

DEATH stalked through the little village of La Foubelle at the edge of the great swamp. Again and again it struck, fattening the tiny, cypress-draped graveyard until there was scarcely a house that was not in mourning.

No ordinary calamity this, but a horror. Men talked of it in awed, hushed whispers. Women, hollow-eyed and gaunt from worry, pressed their little ones to their flaccid breasts as they busied themselves with their household tasks. The coming of night found the streets deserted, the townspeople huddled, white-faced and frightened, behind closed doors.

"*La maladie sans maladie,*" they called it, this dark, formless, unspeakable terror that always came at night, striking down young and old alike—leaving in its wake a body shriveled and deflated, the skin puckered into a thousand wrinkles. They had seen their loved ones die, had these simple folk of La Foubelle—seen them twist and writhe in excruciating agony at the very last. Sometimes, when the victim was very strong, the thing took toll of him for days.

Jules Delatour, it was, who whimpered of having seen the horror hovering over the body of his dying mother—a black, transparent thing, he babbled, smoke-like and shapeless, its bestial face filled with malignant ferocity. But Jules was the village drunkard and had been in his cups the night his mother passed away, so no one believed his tale.

DOCTOR LAMONTAINE, sipping rum from a battered tin cup and poring over a volume of Cagliostro, noted the shadow that fell across the book as a man entered the cubbyhole of an office.

"Drink?" he growled without looking up, and shoved a second cup across the desk. "Rum. Good Jamaica rum. Help yourself."

The green-and-yellow parrot, swinging on its perch at his elbow, opened its filmy eyes and echoed its master's invitation.

"*Rum!*" it shrieked drowsily. "*Good Jamaica rum! Hotter'n hell! Hotter'n hell!*"

Lamontaine looked up when his visitor made no response to the double overture. Then he leaped to his feet, his hand outstretched, his eyes smiling a welcome under their bushy red brows.

"The dominie, by all that's holy!" he roared.

He dumped a pile of magazines from a chair, kicked them into the corner, and shoved it to his guest.

"No wonder you refused my invitation to guzzle," he chuckled. "You, the only teetotaler in the village. Sit down, my friend, and take a load off your feet."

The schoolmaster dropped wearily into the proffered seat and gazed at his host curiously.

"Will you never grow up?" he demanded whimsically.

Lamontaine shrugged his shoulders and returned the other's smile with a broad grin.

"I hope not," he chuckled. "The devil

of it, dominie, is that I've sipped the nectar from the cup of knowledge and now all that's left for me is the dregs. But come, my friend, what brings you, a sick man, out in the heat of the day? Have I not warned you repeatedly against it?"

The little dominie smiled wanly.

"Evelyn l'Brest was stricken today," he said finally. "She is like—the others. . . ."

There was silence for a moment. Lamontaine wagged his big head sagely; then he drew himself into his shell of professional reserve, for he knew that Noel Pelletier loved this slip of a girl who had been his pupil.

"I have already seen her," he said finally.

"There is nothing that you can do for her?"

Again the physician was silent. Then he arose and took a short turn about the tiny room. Returning to his desk, he dropped back into his seat and, filling the tin cup from the rum-jug at his elbow, he downed the contents at a gulp.

"I have told you before, my friend," he said finally, "that this is a case for a priest and not a physician."

The schoolmaster crossed himself.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed. "Then you still insist?"



"Upon his breast rested a thing."

Lamontaine nodded.

"It is a question of exorcism, not physic," he growled. "All night and all this day, when I have had the opportunity, I have pored over my books. I am more convinced now than before. Listen, my friend."

He leaned across the desk and tapped the jumble of books with his long forefinger.

"There is much knowledge in these," he said quietly, "knowledge that you men with religion in your souls will not admit. Black Magic? Certainly. You say that there is no such thing. I insist that it exists today just as it did in the beginning. True, the church has stamped it out to a large degree. But, nevertheless, there are many isolated cases—places far from the ken of men, such as here in La Foubelle—where it flourishes like the grass after a spring rain. Your people here are superstitious. They have given the devil fertile soil in which to plant his seeds."

"Admitted! Admitted!" the little schoolmaster said excitedly. "Against such ignorance one man can do nothing; a dozen could not handle the situation efficiently. Yet——"

Lamontaine held up a restraining hand.

"Books such as these of mine tell of strange, weird things," he interrupted, "horrible things—things of which the average man never dreams. Our ancestors knew more about spirit life—the life beyond the veil—than we shall ever know. Why? Because they lived closer to it.

"I have traveled in many lands and I have studied in innumerable out-of-the-way places," he went on heatedly, "but never have I seen such a rare opportunity for the devil and his imps as here in La Foubelle. And he has taken advantage of it, dominie. There is a terrible influence at work here—under our very noses."

The schoolmaster crossed himself again.

"*Désorienté!*" he exclaimed with a shudder. "Do you mean——"

"That there are many things the average man cannot—will not—understand," Lamontaine interrupted. "There are innumerable forms of spirit life—forms that function in various ways. Some of them—most of them, I might say—are kindly disposed toward us. Others are malignant. We have to deal with one of the latter in this case."

He filled and lighted his pipe, the little schoolmaster gazing at him with eyes that betrayed his horror and astonishment.

"*Désorienté!*" he said again. "You are beyond my depth, my friend. Explain yourself."

Lamontaine scratched his red beard reflectively.

"Primal earth forces," he said shortly, "elementals—spirit forms that have never evolved—subhuman nature spirits. They exist, together with innumerable other spirit forms, on the other side of the veil."

"*Mon Dieu!*" the schoolmaster gasped. "I can hardly believe it, my doctaire."

"These things are jealous of mankind, hating living beings because mankind has evolved," Lamontaine went on. "Why? Because they have never developed beyond the rudimentary stages. Consequently, they consider mankind their natural prey. One of these things is loose in our peaceful little village. Because it is out of its natural habitat, it must have vitality on which to live—human vitality. Otherwise, it ceases to be. So it feeds upon the vitality of those with whom it comes in contact, just as a vampire feeds upon human blood."

THE face of the little schoolmaster turned a ghastly white. He half rose from his chair, then dropped back again, his teeth chattering.

"Horrible! Horrible! Blasphemous!" he ejaculated.

Lamontaine shrugged his broad shoulders.

"In order to obtain this sustenance—this vitality to prolong its existence," he continued, "an elemental must, necessarily, in its early stages, prey largely upon the sick, the weak—those who are at a low physical stage. But eventually it satiates itself with their vitality and becomes stronger. Then it seeks its victims among the more powerful. That is the cause of this plague among the members of our community."

The schoolmaster leaned back in his chair, his thin face drawn and haggard.

"*Dieu avec nous!*" he said in a low, awed whisper. "Then Jules Delatour told the truth! And it is this—this horrible thing—that my little Evelyn is faced with, my doctaire? Is there nothing that we can do to combat it?"

Lamontaine patted the pile of books in front of him, his eyes wearing a strange, far-away look.

"That is what I have been studying," he said finally. "But, first, let us consider how this unholy thing chanced to come to us. There must be a reason. What caused it to break through the veil?"

The schoolmaster's hands trembled like those of a man with the ague.

"Explain!" he said hoarsely.

"Alone and unassisted, these primal forces cannot come to us," Lamontaine told him. "They must be aided by someone who is already here—someone who has the vitality to support them for the nonce. It must be one with mediumistic powers. Now do you understand?"

The little schoolmaster crossed himself again.

"It is unbelievable, horrible!" he said. Then, leaning forward, his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper:

"I would willingly give my life, doc-

taire, in order to save the woman I love. You, who know everything, perhaps can show me the way."

Lamontaine combed his long beard with his fingers, reflectively.

"My books have already told me that much," he said after a brief pause. "If you . . . care to take . . . the chance."

The other nodded, a hectic spot appearing in each cheek.

"Proceed!" he commanded hoarsely.

Lamontaine rose and, walking to the little medicine cabinet, filled a hypodermic with clear, colorless liquid.

"An injection of this liquid will lower your vitality to a point where you will be an easy victim," he said quietly; "far easier than Evelyn, who is strong and healthy and able to resist it. Why? Because you are already a sick man. I have a plan to trap this thing—it must be a secret between us—if you are willing to trust me and take the only way out."

For an instant there was silence. Then the little schoolmaster bared his frail arm to the needle.

## 2. *The Thing*

**R**UM-GUZZLER though he was, a soldier of fortune—a wild, barbaric throw-back, born a hundred years too late—Doctor Hugo Lamontaine was yet an occultist of international reputation and a physician of extraordinary ability. Possessed of a fortune which made him independent of his fellow-men, he followed the dictates of his own conscience, caring not a whit for the conventions. To him the esoteric practises of voodoo, obeah and demonology were open books; to study them he had followed his beard to the end of the world.

Tall and broad-shouldered, his hair as red as the blood that he had shed on a dozen foreign fields, possessing the whiskers of a Viking, slovenly in his attire, con-

stantly spoiling for a fight or a frolic, he was a man to be reckoned with under any conditions.

His insatiable craving for knowledge had brought him to the little village of La Foubelle. Slumbering at the very edge of the gigantic morass, uncontaminated by the presence of outsiders, its French-Creole inhabitants had clung, leech-like, to the customs and superstitions of their ancestors. Close association with the blacks who, brought from West India as slaves at an early day, had revolted and fled to the interior of the swamp, had intensified these weird beliefs. La Foubelle was a virgin vein of folklore and heterodoxies, witchcraft and bizarre customs. Lamontaine had deliberately thrown himself into the midst of the lives of these near-barbarians. He had ingratiated himself to them and, by degrees, had been accepted as one of them. Eventually he had become not only their physician, but their confessor as well.

The day had brought more than its accustomed load of suffering. The heat had made the afflicted ones worse. Making his evening rounds, Lamontaine was filled with a premonition of death lurking close at hand. He had the narrow street to himself. Men and women talked in low, hushed whispers, huddling together, sheep-like, fearful of the darkness that had dropped like a pall. Frightened children clung to their mothers' skirts, their black eyes beady with terror. From inside a tiny cottage came the sound of muffled sobs as a young mother rocked her first-born, slowly wasting away.

The bell in the little schoolhouse at the end of the lane clanged dolefully. Lamontaine halted in his tracks, his broad shoulders drooping like those of a defeated man. For the schoolhouse was also the church.

"*Bong! . . . bong! . . . bong! . . . bong!*"

He counted the strokes. When they

passed sixteen, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. It meant that little Evelyn l'Brest was not the victim.

"*Bong! . . . bong! . . . bong!*"

He counted on until the strokes passed fifty. Then, as they continued their doleful monody, he lifted his shoulders and took up his walk again. It would be old Kenny Tolan, he told himself—Kenny Tolan, eighty-two and long ago marked as a victim by the grim reaper.

And deep in his pagan heart, Doctor Hugo Lamontaine breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving.

Evelyn l'Brest, the schoolmaster's sweetheart, still lived. There was yet a chance.

Again he was halted by an agonized scream. It came from a cottage close at hand—the abode of Jacques d'Arcy, at the end of the side road. He whirled and dashed through the darkness in the direction of the low, thatched house with its single lighted window. A white, scared face stared at him through the darkness as a man rushed around the corner, his gun drawn, almost colliding with him in his mad rush. It was Pierre Le Front, the village constable.

"*Mon Dieu!*" the little man exclaimed. "You heard it, doctaire?"

Lamontaine nodded grimly. The constable by his side, he padded noiselessly over the soft earth between the rows of trees, covered with Spanish moss, that led to the d'Arcy home.

A man dashed toward them from the direction of the house. He saw them and, whirling, leaped into the thicket that banked the roadside. As he disappeared, he turned. Even though the moon was dead in the leaden sky, Lamontaine caught a glimpse of a lean, cadaverous face, of teeth over which the lips were drawn in a wolfish snarl, of deeply sunken eyes that glittered ominously.

The big physician seized the little constable by the shoulder, halting him with a

violence that almost jerked him off his feet.

"Your gun! Quick!" he snarled.

He jerked the weapon from the officer's hand and emptied it in the direction the fleeing man had taken. Then, dropping it at the astonished constable's feet, he dashed madly in the same direction.

Le Front followed. He heard Lamontaine crash through the dank grass and underbrush that bordered the fetid swamp. Then came the sound of a *bâteau* as it swung out into the water . . . the creak of oars in their locks. . . .

LAMONTAINE, his feet bogged by the mud, met the little man as he struggled through the tangled growth, and cursed fluently.

"*Mon Dieu!*" the constable panted. "Who was it? And what happened?"

"It was Aaron Kronk!" Lamontaine snarled.

From far out in the fetid waters of the swamp came a harsh, sinister laugh.

Constable Le Front dropped to his knees and crossed himself.

Aaron Kronk! Little wonder Pierre Le Front turned a shade paler under his coating of tan. Aaron Kronk! Master of *diablerie* and king of devils! He it was who, only a few weeks earlier, masquerading as the infamous Gilles de Laval, Baron de Retz, the blue-bearded monster of the Middle Ages, had involved himself in a saturnalia of blood from which only the bravery and occult knowledge of Lamontaine had rescued the community. Even now, two of his intended victims were in the hospital at New Orleans recovering from their injuries; the old house on the peninsula where he had made his headquarters was a mass of charred embers and smoke-stained masonry.

THEY hurried back toward the house of Jacques d'Arcy. Once more the wild shrieks assailed their ears, speeding

their footsteps. Mingled with the screams was a low, gurgling moaning. It grew fainter as they approached. By the time they reached the low, whitewashed gate, it had ceased.

The front door was thrown hurriedly open and a white face peered out at them, terror written in every lineament.

In a rustic wicker chair in the low-ceilinged room an old woman was weaving backward and forward, shrieking hysterically. Around her stood three other women—two of them neighbors, one a daughter. A fourth had opened the door.

They greeted the newcomers with gasps of relief.

"*On connaît l'ami au besoin*—a friend is known in time of need!" the younger woman exclaimed. "Eet ees ze doctaire!"

Lamontaine seized her by the shoulder.

"What happened?" he snapped.

She twisted her tattered handkerchief about her fingers nervously.

"Zat I do not rightly know," she finally managed to ejaculate. "*Père d'Arcy*, he ees dying, we theenk. We were weeth heem. We hear a noise outside. We look through ze window. Zere was a face peer-ing een at us—a horrible face, doctaire. Eet was ze face of *le Diable*."

She stopped, shuddering like one who suffers from the ague. Lamontaine glared at her and she continued.

"We scream. Zen ze awful face disappear' and through ze window come ze shape—ze shapeless shape! Lak' a ghos' eet was—wizout form, yet eet had ze form! *Oui*, I cannot explain eet, doctaire!"

She broke off her recital and gave way to shuddering sobs, her face buried in her hands. Lamontaine seized her by the shoulder again and shook her roughly. The old woman recommenced her hysterical howling.

"Talk!" Lamontaine snapped, shaking

the woman until her teeth chattered. "Time is of value now. Talk!"

The woman ceased her convulsive sobbing and looked at the big physician pathetically.

"Eet was awful—horrible!" she said finally. "Père d'Arcy, he give ze wild scream. Ze theeng—ze awful theeng—drop upon heem like ze great veil. Jacques, he moan again and again. Zen, ze moan, eet, too, stop. We have rush out and we are here. We are afraid of ze theeng. Zen you come——"

Lamontaine shoved her aside and, darting to the door of the sickroom, seized the knob and jerked it open.

The room was in darkness, yet the light, shining through the open door from the outer room, was strong enough to reveal the scene that was being enacted. Even Lamontaine, inured though he was to death and violence, shrank back.

Old Jacques d'Arcy lay upon the floor by the side of the bed. His face, glaring up at them, was twisted into a horrible contortion, the eyes protruding as if they had been squeezed from their sockets. His body was shriveled into a million wrinkles; it was like a toy balloon that has been deflated.

Over the dead man was a form—a strange, gossamer-like wraith, vague, shadowy, indistinct. The physician had an impression of malignant eyes glaring at him—of a slit of a mouth drawn back into a wolfish snarl. Yet there were no eyes—no mouth. The thing was shapeless.

Recovering himself, Lamontaine took a step forward. The hellish thing seemed about to spring at him. Then it drew back as if reluctant to leave the body of its victim.

Slowly it dissolved itself—floating away like a bit of vapor, through the open window.

Lamontaine turned to the others who

stood shuddering in the doorway. The old woman took up her hysterical wailing again.

A faint odor filled the room. It was strange, indistinguishable, horrible, nauseating. It was the odor of death.

The thing from beyond, gorged with vitality, had reached a point in its development where it was visible to human eyes.

### 3. *Out of the Night*

IT WAS apparent to Lamontaine that Aaron Kronk was the medium by which the horrific spirit form from the other world had been materialized. Yet the burly physician was puzzled. What sinister motive did the diabolical Kronk have in thus wreaking his vengeance upon the inoffensive, simple-minded inhabitants of the sleepy little village? They had done him no harm. Until a few weeks earlier, when Lamontaine had met and bested him in his struggle for the de Laval fortune, these people had never known of his existence.

Yet in Lamontaine's mind there was no doubt that Kronk was possessed of more than ordinary mediumistic ability and that it was through him that the terrible primal force had been developed. But why? He asked himself the question a hundred times as he completed his rounds of the sick, following the horrible death of Jacques d'Arcy.

It was late when he had finished. Now, even though it was well past midnight, he still sat in his darkened office, his feet upon the desk, his eyes, half closed, gazing out of the open window. He had kicked off his shoes and thrust his toes into carpet slippers. His shirt was tossed carelessly into the corner and his suspenders hung down over his hips.

The little village had long since quieted down for the night. Here and there a



dim light glimmered in a curtained window, marking the home of some helpless victim who was fighting the horror that was hovering over the peaceful little hamlet like a great pall—a horror that he, the man in whom these simple village folk had learned to place their trust, was unable to combat.

Lamontaine cursed aloud as he realized the futility of his struggle against the thing from beyond. He had found in his books no surcease of sorrow—no way to scotch the demon. It was something that he must think out—reason out for himself.

His only chance lay in the trap he had laid by means of the little schoolmaster. Had he done right in thus exposing Noel Pelletier to the terrible danger? There was no other way. He consoled himself with the thought that Pelletier had no desire to live if Evelyn l'Brest died. And unless he was successful in his assault on the malevolent spirit through the little dominie, Evelyn l'Brest must surely go.

And yet he had no set plan. He was trusting to luck—blind luck—hoping against hope that he would succeed.

There was a light footstep on the gravel outside the window. He looked out. It was Pierre Le Front, the constable, making his midnight rounds. Seeing the physician sitting in the open window, he had entered the yard. Now, at Lamontaine's invitation, he stepped inside.

The physician picked the rum-jug from the floor and, filling a cup for himself, tossed another across the desk to the officer and jerked his thumb toward the jug.

"Drink?" he growled. "Jamaica rum. It'll do you good on a night like this—a night when the very atmosphere tingles with death."

"*Mon Dieu!* Yes, yes!" Le Front ejaculated. "I, too, feel eet een ze air, doctaire."

He filled the cup and tossed off the

contents with an appreciative smack of his lips.

"Ze dominie ees worse," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I am go zere and stay ze night weeth heem w'en I feenish my round. He ees fear to stay alone."

Lamontaine cursed again—full, man-sized oaths.

"And there's not a damned thing that I can do," he mourned. "Not a damned thing!"

Le Front leaned forward, the better to see through the darkness the face of the man on the other side of the desk.

"Zen eet ees true, zat wheech ze dominie wheesper to me—zat ze theeng wheech we see awhile ago at d'Arcy's ees not a ghost—zat eet navaire lived lak' you an' me?"

For a moment Lamontaine made no answer. Then he nodded solemnly.

"True," he answered finally. "And the thing that's agitating my mind, my friend, is the reason for all this? Why should Kronk wreak such diabolical vengeance upon this little village?"

Le Front helped himself to the rum. Then, as the fiery liquor raced through his veins, he grew more loquacious.

"I theenk I know," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

He leaned forward and poured forth his story to Doctor Lamontaine. The big man listened quietly; then, when Le Front had finished, he burst forth.

"May a just God burn his damned soul in hell!" he snarled. "God! Le Front! Can a man be so cold-blooded for the sake of gold?"

"Zat ees my opinion," the constable said earnestly. "I haff reason' eet out een my head."

Lamontaine wagged his long red beard solemnly. That for which he had been groping for so long was gradually filter-

ing through his brain. He was beginning to see a bright and shining light.

"In the morning I will go to N'Orleans and look into that," he promised.

The little constable nodded and, helping himself to the rum again, left to take up his lonely vigil in the bachelor quarters of the schoolmaster.

Neither of them noticed the sinister figure that had been standing in the darkness close beside the open window listening to their conversation. Now, as the constable left, he darted to the shadow of a near-by bush, his sunken eyes gleaming malevolently at the big man who sat just inside the window, his long beard resting on his breast, his head bowed in thought.

It was Aaron Kronk.

LAMONTAINE was weary—horribly so. All of the night before he had sat by the bedside of one of the dying villagers. The day had been spent in study and in making his rounds. Now, sitting with his feet upon the desk again, his chair tilted backward, he tried to concentrate—to reason out the horrible events of the past few days. What Le Front told him had placed things in a new light. If it proved correct, he might be able to win yet over the monster from beyond the pale.

Then outraged nature finally gave way, and he slept.

Someone was looking at him. He knew it—*felt* it. He was aware, too, of a feeling of bodily discomfort—a peculiar sensation that, beginning in his brain, crept down through his nerves and muscles, leaving him cramped and paralyzed. His subconscious physician's mind automatically analyzed it as a sort of *rigor*. It constricted his throat, twisting itself around his huge limbs like hoops of steel, crushing him like an incubus. He fought with himself in an effort to open his eyes. A voice was commanding him to sleep. He mastered the desire and raised his eye-

lids. A mocking face was glaring into his own. It was that of Aaron Kronk.

Hugo Lamontaine had yet to know the meaning of fear. He had faced death laughingly in a thousand ways on modern battlefields. Yet, gazing into the malevolent eyes of Aaron Kronk, bound hand and foot by invisible bands, he realized now what it meant. The thin man was gazing at him with malignant ferocity. His eyes, bearing a message of hatred, seemed to tear the physician's brain from its very roots. He tried to struggle against them, but in vain. They dissolved themselves into a single, glittering orb—an eye that whirled and grew closer and closer like the headlight of an oncoming locomotive.

A voice commanded him to sleep . . . sleep . . . : sleep. . . .

Then consciousness left him.

In spite of the command that had chiseled itself into his brain, he was subconsciously fighting against it. He floated back from his hebetude . . . wondered if he was dreaming. At first he believed that he was—that he would soon wake up and find that he suffered from a nightmare. Then, by slow gradations, realization crept over him. . . .

He was surrounded by something. It enveloped him like a thin cloud, pressing him down like a weight, inhibiting his breathing. He tried to struggle against it—to open his eyes. But that commanding voice continued to order him to sleep . . . *sleep*. . . .

His throat and chest seemed to constrict. He attempted to summon his laggard will-power—in vain. The slow, relentless pressure continued. The breath was being slowly pumped from his body, from his lungs, his heart. . . .

He knew that he was on the verge of asphyxiation—that his huge frame was being slowly deflated—robbed of its vitality as surely and inexorably as it had

been stolen from the emaciated body of old Jacques d'Arcy. He tried to open his eyes. They were held down by invisible fingers.

He did not realize that he had succeeded. Yet he suddenly found himself looking into two gleaming orbs—red, blood-shot, filled with hatred and demoniac fury. Upon his breast rested a *thing*—a horrible, nauseous, formless monstrosity, shapeless, faceless, headless. Yet it had a face and head, for its eyes were the eyes that were glaring into his own. And, too, it had a mouth—a red gash framed by leathery lips. It was pressed against his own in a clammy, vacuum-like kiss. It was lapping his breath, sucking the vitality from his great body, deflating it until it was rapidly growing as flat as a bursted tire. Its long, sinuous arms were fastened about him, its legs wrapped, leech-like, about his own.

And, knowing these things, Lamontaine brought to his aid all of the tremendous will-power that was his heritage. He tried to push the incubus from him, but he could not lift his arms. But as he struggled, he felt the mental influence that was oppressing him gradually lessen.

A sort of inertia swept over him and he ceased his struggles for an instant. The incubus, which had been driven back a pace, sprang forward again, once more pressing him to his chair.

Somewhere in the distance a dog howled dolefully. It awakened him from his lethargy. Subconsciously he knew that it foretold the death of someone. Was he to be the victim? Like a man in a dream, he threw his arms about. His twitching fingers came in contact with something cold and hard. A thrill went through his benumbed body. It was his gun snugly tucked away in the open drawer of his desk.

His fingers clutched the weapon spasmodically. He felt the thing that was

smothering him shrink away. With a tremendous effort of will, he drew the weapon from the drawer, pressed it protectingly to his breast. Again the loathsome spirit form shrank back.

His breath was returning to him now. And with the fresh night air came realization. He remembered that elementals fear the touch of iron; the steel from which the gun was made had been manufactured from this element.

He thrust the weapon forward until it touched the horrible monstrosity pressing him down—passed through its vaporish body. It squeaked like a cornered rat as it darted away.

Then it slowly floated out through the open window, leaving him gasping and panting. . . .

#### 4. Exorcism

CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Doctor Lamontaine slowly. For a few moments he lay in a daze trying to recollect what had happened. He opened his eyes. The first gray of dawn was breaking in the east. He straightened up, almost overturning the chair in which he was still sitting.

He wondered if it had all been a dream. The sight of the gun lying on the floor beside the chair told him that such was not the case. His throat and lungs ached; the pressure on his windpipe had been such that breathing was still difficult. He leaned across the desk, and picking up the rum-jug, managed to pour himself a drink. The potion strengthened him. He staggered back to the living-quarters in the rear of the house and brewed himself a pot of strong coffee. Mixing rum with the black coffee, he gulped down several cupfuls. Feeling better, he returned to his little office and, filling and lighting his pipe, sat down to think the problem out.

Bit by bit the happenings of the night were coming back to him. Somewhere in the hidden fastness of the fetid swamp the man who called himself Aaron Kronk had his habitat. From this hiding-place he was directing the campaign which was rapidly laying waste the little hamlet of La Foubelle and which would, unless speedily checked, make of it another deserted village. In the red-headed physician he had recognized the only barrier in his way; therefore he had set upon Lamontaine the dreadful thing that his sorcery had conjured from behind the veil. His hypnotic power had paved the way for the monstrosity's attack. Only the chance finding of the gun with its content of iron had kept him from glutting his vengeance to the full.

Why? Lamontaine believed that he knew the reason and could bring the orgy of horror to a stop. It was a question of obtaining the evidence. Little use to search for Kronk in the midst of the swamp. It was filled with tiny islets and oases where a man might hide for weeks without being found. No, there were other ways of laying the fiend by the heels.

The red-haired physician's battered car was in the shed at the rear of the house. Scribbling a hasty note to Le Front, telling him that he had been called away for the day, he hurried out and climbed painfully beneath the wheel. Five minutes later the little village lay behind him and he was on his way to New Orleans.

It was late in the evening when he returned. Instead of stopping at his own home, he skirted the village, coming in from the opposite direction. The streets were deserted, with only an occasional light showing in the windows behind which the afflicted lay fighting their battle for life. He drove straight to the little cottage of the schoolmaster and, parking his car in the rear, hastened inside.

Le Front was there. The dominik looked up at the newcomer with feverish eyes in which there was no light of recognition. Lamontaine hastily mixed him a sleeping-potion, then turned to the constable.

"Worse," he said non-committally.

Le Front nodded.

"I theenk zat devil weel come for heem tonight," he answered, crossing himself hastily.

Lamontaine gave him his instructions. He made several trips to the car, returning each time bending under the weight of many packages. Laying them on the floor, he turned to the physician.

"You are determin' to see thees theeng through?" he asked.

Lamontaine nodded.

Le Front turned and, without a single backward glance, hurried out of the house like a man laboring under a great fright.

**T**URNING the kerosene lamp down low, Lamontaine busied himself in the semi-darkness with the packages that Le Front had carried in from the car. Most of them contained long strips of iron rolled as thin as tin. Using a small tack-hammer, he nailed them over all the doors and windows except one. He took great precautions to see that all the holes were covered, not even a keyhole being left open. The window that he did not close, he stripped with iron so that when it was pulled down, the strips protruded over the edges.

His task completed, he opened the window again and, leaving the lamp turned low, settled down to his lonely vigil. In his hand was a small pentagon made of iron, attached to a handle. This was his only weapon.

The sick man on the bed breathed heavily, the result of the sleeping-potion Lamontaine had given him. The physician was weary after what he had gone

through the night before and the activities of the day; yet he did not sleep.

Then that for which he had been waiting made its appearance.

Lamontaine drew a quick breath. There had been no sound, yet its dim shadow was easily discernible as it lurked for a moment in the darkness. The big physician, his eyes apparently closed, watched it with a queer, tingling sensation creeping up and down his backbone as it waited, seemingly planning its attack.

It finally drew itself slowly through the window, a cloud-like, shapeless monstrosity, almost formless, yet having the general outlines of a human being. It was horrible, grotesque, diabolical.

For a moment it floated in midair as if debating which of the two men to attack. Then, its mind—if mind it had—made up, it settled down over the bed where the little schoolmaster lay.

Lamontaine's hand moved slowly to the window. He was about to pull it down. . . .

From outside came a muffled report. Lamontaine slid slowly from the chair as a bullet grazed his head.

The window crashed shut. The automatic latch clicked. He was locked inside the room, unconscious, with the sick man and the horrible thing from the beyond, caught in the trap of his own making.

The monstrosity hovered, bat-like, over the form of the little dominie for an instant. Then it settled like a malignant miasma. Its vaporish arms wrapped themselves about the sick man; its cruel slash of a mouth was pressed against the lips of its victim. Sleeping though he was, his senses dulled by the potion Lamontaine had given him, Pelletier, nevertheless, groaned in agony. Lamontaine, who had tasted the power of the hellish thing and lived, alone knew the torture the other's stupefied body was undergoing. He was

dizzy from his own injury, his head spinning like a gyroscope. Yet he managed to drag himself to his feet, the handle of the pentagon in his hand.

It took him a moment to see things clearly—to make out the outlines of the diabolical creature crouched upon the dominie's breast. Then something within his brain exploded like a bomb. He charged forward, roaring angrily.

The spirit form squealed like a cornered rat as the cold iron touched its vaporish body. Then it whirled away, turning on Lamontaine, its serpentine arms stretched forward like tentacles.

Lamontaine dodged around the bed, the pentagon extended like a sword. For a moment the creature crouched close to the floor, its smudgy, shapeless face turned toward its attacker. Every detail of its exaggerated deformity was brought out in bold relief. Its dead, slate-like eyes glared malevolently. Its incredibly horrible mouth snapped like that of an angry cuttle-fish.

Lamontaine charged again. The thing dodged toward the window through which it had entered, only to bound back again with a squeal of fright as it came in contact with the iron bands. It twisted in midair like a vortex and bounded toward Lamontaine. The big man held it off with the pentagon. It floated through the air with incredible speed, touching the form on the bed again as if loth to be cheated of its victim. But once more Lamontaine warded it off with his exorcistical pentagon. It squealed wildly and darted away again.

Little by little, he drove it into a distant corner. It dodged from side to side, but the five-sided iron emblem always stood in its way. It shrieked like a cornered rat. . . .

Suddenly it changed tactics. Leaping high into the air, it crashed against the

ceiling and bounded back upon the bed. Its long, spiderish legs wrapped themselves about the body of its victim again. In spite of his stupor, the sick man shrieked with misery as the monstrosity strove to lap the last of his vitality. Its slit of a mouth was pressed close to the face of the dying man. One attenuated arm was twisted about the frail body. The other was stretched forth in an effort to seize Lamontaine. It succeeded . . . the big physician felt himself jerked through the air.

He swung the pentagon forward. The weight of the physician's body as he was thrown through the air worked to the undoing of the monstrosity. The iron pentagon pierced the vaporish body—went through it and touched against the bared breast of the man on the bed.

The wraith-like form faded into nothingness. All that was left was the horrible, stifling odor of diabolical hatred. . . .

Upon the white flesh of the dominie's breast was a five-sided mark where the pentagon had touched. . . .

Lamontaine whirled as he heard the crash of glass. The shade was pushed aside, and through the opening peered a saturnine countenance, the sunken eyes gleaming with malevolence. In the claw-like fingers was a revolver.

The physician threw himself sideways as the gun crashed. The bullet missed him by the fraction of an inch. He brought the iron pentagon down across the wrist of the other with a wild, overhand blow.

Aaron Kronk uttered a scream of rage as the weapon dropped from his fingers. He leaped away from the window, his broken arm hanging uselessly by his side. Turning, he raced madly in the direction of the swamp.

A second report split the darkness as Constable Pierre Le Front, lying in am-

bush in accordance with Lamontaine's orders, fired. Kronk's cadaverous form crashed to the ground. He rolled over and over, then lay still.

Le Front ran forward. Bending over the crumpled form of his victim, he strove to gaze into the twisted face. The other's long arm reached out and, seizing him by the ankle, gave a sudden jerk. He went down like a log, his weapon exploding harmlessly in the air, all the wind knocked from his body.

Kronk bounded to his feet like a rubber ball. Then, kicking the weapon from the unconscious man's hand, he charged through the long, dank grass that lined the edge of the swamp.

### 5. *Denouement*

LAMONTAINE, climbing through the broken window, saw what had happened and increased his speed. As he reached Le Front, the little constable pulled himself to a sitting position and reached for the gun on the ground. Lamontaine seized it and emptied its contents after the fleeing man.

Kronk chuckled derisively as he leaped into his boat and pushed it out into the blackness of the swamp.

Lamontaine returned to the house, the crestfallen little constable at his heels. Hastily mixing a potion, he raised the sick man's head and forced a few drops between his lips. Pelletier stirred weakly, then opened his eyes.

"Did it—come?" he asked finally.

Lamontaine nodded.

The dominie winced as he straightened himself in bed.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he gasped. "My entire body aches." Then he noticed for the first time the mark of the pentagon on his breast. "That?" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

"The brand of a man who was willing to go through hell for the sake of the woman he loved," Lamontaine answered. "Your worries are over, my friend. Evelyn l'Brest will live—to make you a good wife. The horror is ended.

"It is easily explained, once we understand," Lamontaine said enigmatically, stretching forth his hand for the rum-jug and filling the battered cup. He waited until the constable had poured a libation. The two men touched cups silently and drank.

"You gave me the idea," he continued. "In N'Orleans today I confirmed my suspicion. A man answering the description of Kronk has secured title to the whole of the swamp. It is wanted for a paddy by the rice corporation. Kronk—or Koshier, as he is known there—stands to make a cool million if the swamp can be drained.

"Unfortunately—for him—the natural watercourse leads through the site of the village and thence to the creek which empties into the peninsula. There is no other way. It was necessary, therefore, for him to get rid of the village. But

you La Foubellites are stubborn and superstitious. You would never leave your homes, nor sell them, knowing that the dead in your cemetery would be disturbed——"

"*Tout au contraire!*" Le Front interrupted excitedly.

"Exactly. Therefore he took this method of frightening you to a point where you would leave your homes."

Le Front scratched his grizzled head wonderingly.

"Eet does not seem possible," he said. "I can scarcely believe it."

Lamontaine massaged his bruised throat tenderly.

"Perhaps it was all a bad dream," he said with a wry grin. "Kronk is a mesmerist of ability. Maybe we were all hypnotized *en masse*."

He jerked his thumb toward the rum-jug.

"Drink?" he queried. "Rum. Good Jamaica rum. Good liquor hurts nobody."

The parrot opened its filmy eyes and gazed at its master languidly.

"Rum!" it croaked. "Good Jamaica rum! Hotter'n hell! Hotter'n hell!"

