

*This Mystery Story Will Hold
Your Interest to the End*

The Malignant Entity

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

"TELL you, Evans," said Dr. Dorp, banging his fist on the arm of his chair for emphasis, "the science of psychology is in much the same stage of development today as were the material sciences in the dark ages."

"But surely," I objected, "the two centuries of investigation just past have yielded some fruit. It cannot be that the eminent men who have devoted the

greater part of their lives to this fascinating subject have labored in vain."

The doctor stroked his iron-gray Van Dyke meditatively.

"With a few—a very few exceptions, I'm afraid they have," he replied, "at least so far as their own deductions from observed phenomena are concerned."

"Take Sir Oliver Lodge, for example—" I began.

"The conclusions of Sir Oliver will serve as an excellent example for my analogy," said the doctor. "No doubt you are familiar with the results of his years of painstaking psychical research as expounded in his books."

"I believe he has become a convert to spiritism," I replied.

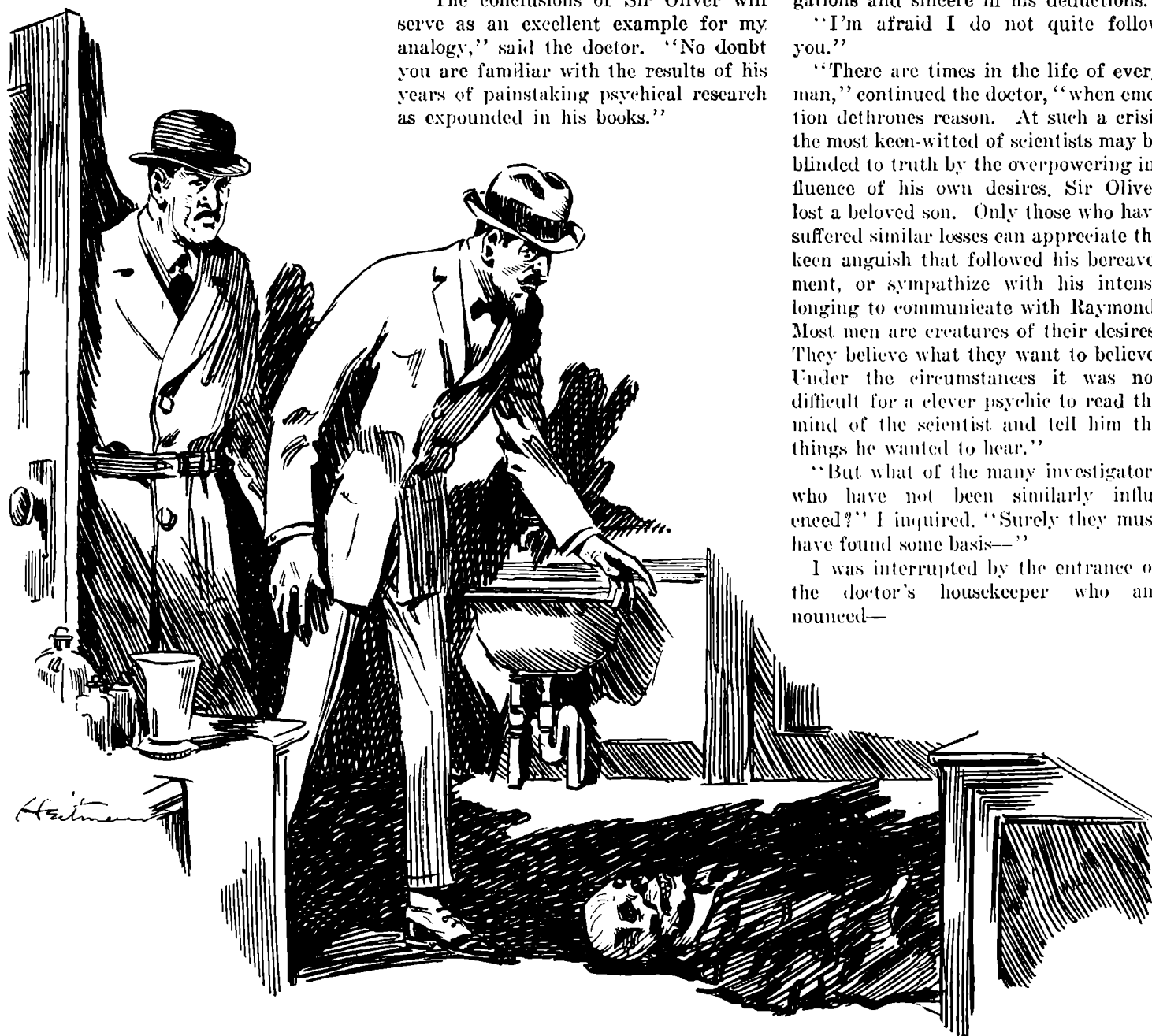
"With all due respect to Sir Oliver," said the doctor, "I should say that he has rather singled out such facts as suited his purpose and assembled them as evidence to support the spiritistic theory. It may seem paradoxical to add that I believe he has always been thoroughly conscientious in his investigations and sincere in his deductions."

"I'm afraid I do not quite follow you."

"There are times in the life of every man," continued the doctor, "when emotion dethrones reason. At such a crisis the most keen-witted of scientists may be blinded to truth by the overpowering influence of his own desires. Sir Oliver lost a beloved son. Only those who have suffered similar losses can appreciate the keen anguish that followed his bereavement, or sympathize with his intense longing to communicate with Raymond. Most men are creatures of their desires. They believe what they want to believe. Under the circumstances it was not difficult for a clever psychic to read the mind of the scientist and tell him the things he wanted to hear."

"But what of the many investigators who have not been similarly influenced?" I inquired. "Surely they must have found some basis—"

I was interrupted by the entrance of the doctor's housekeeper who announced—



"Beggin' your pardon, sir, a gentleman to see your, sir."

"Show him in," he said rather petulantly.

His frown of annoyance changed to a welcoming smile of recognition at sight of the tall, bulky individual who strode through the doorway.

"How are you, Doc," roared the big man as they shook hands cordially. "Haven't bothered you for a long time, have I? Got a case for you now that will make you put on your thinking cap all right."

"Sounds interesting," replied the doctor. "Let me present an old friend of mine, Mr. Evans, who writes a story every now and then when the spirit moves him. Mr. Evans, Chief McGraw of the detective bureau. We were just discussing our mutual hobby, psychic phenomena, when you came in," he continued after we had acknowledged the introduction.

"No doubt Chief McGraw's communication is of a confidential nature—" I began, with the purpose of taking leave of my host.

"Nothing secret about it so far as Dr. Dorp and his friends are concerned," interrupted the chief. "It may be that if you are a psychologist you can offer some solution of the mystery. Of course, I don't exactly know whether it's a case for a psychologist or not. Damned curious thing, and ghastly, too."

"Stay and listen if you are interested," said the doctor.

"If it has any smattering of psychology or the occult, you know my failing," I responded.

"Can't say as to that," said the chief. "It's queer enough, though—and horrible. You gentlemen have heard of Professor Townsend, I presume."

"You mean Albert Townsend, the chemist and inventor?" asked the doctor. "Assuredly. Who hasn't heard of him and his queer theories about creating life from inert matter? What has he done now?"

"I don't know whether it's something he did or something that was done to him, but anyway he's dead."

"Murdered?"

"That's the point I want you to help me clear up. I don't know. His daughter 'phoned the office this morning and asked for me. When I got on the wire I could hardly understand her, she was so hysterical. Sobbed out something about her father being gone and a human skeleton lying on the floor of his laboratory. I jumped in the car and took

Hirsch, the finger print expert out there with me. We found the frightened girl weeping in the arms of a motherly neighbor, who informed us that the laboratory was on the second floor.

"The whitened skeleton of Professor Townsend, fully clothed in garments that hung like rags on a scarecrow, lay on the floor of the laboratory."

"You made sure, of course, that it really was the skeleton of the professor."

"Beyond the least shadow of doubt. In the first place it was clothed in the professor's garments. His watch with his name in the back was ticking in the vest pocket. His monogrammed ring, a present from his daughter, circled a bony finger. On the bones of the right forearm were the marks of a fracture that had healed and the skull was slightly indented above the right temple. These marks resulted from an automobile accident in which the professor was injured two years ago. To make assurance doubly sure, we called in his dentist who readily identified his own work on the teeth."

"When was the professor last seen alive?"

"That is the feature that makes the affair so uncanny. He was alive, and apparently normal, mentally and physically, at dinner last evening."

"Most amazing!" exclaimed Dr. Dorp. "Suppose we go out—"

"Just what I was going to suggest," replied the chief. "My car is standing outside. Would you care to accompany us, Mr. Evans?"

"He would perish from curiosity if he couldn't see the thing through now," said the doctor when I hesitated. "Come along with us, old man. If two minds are better than one, then surely three minds are superior to two."

We piled in the chief's roomy roadster and were soon speeding toward the house of mystery.

II

PRESENTLY the car stopped before a two story brick house. Its upper windows, with shades half drawn, appeared to stare down at us with a look of sly cunning as if endeavoring to conceal some fearful secret.

A short, chunky individual, smooth-faced and with a decidedly florid complexion, met us at the door. Chief McGraw introduced him as Hirsch, the finger print expert.

"All alone, Hirsch?" asked the chief, looking about as we entered the spacious living room.

"Might as well be," replied Hirsch. "Miss Townsend is in her room with a neighbor. The cook and housemaid are out in the kitchen, scared green."

"Coroner been here?"

"No. He called me up about twenty minutes ago and said he had an inquest to attend to on the south side. Told me he didn't know how soon he could get here, but it would be several hours, at least."

"How about the prints?"

"All the finger prints in the laboratory seem to have been made by the same person, evidently the professor."

"Hum. Better 'phone headquarters right away and have them send Rooney out. He might come in handy to guard the death room in case the coroner is late."

"All right sir. I'll call up right away."

"Now gentlemen," said the chief, turning to the doctor and me, "let us go upstairs."

We followed him up the thickly carpeted stairway and along a broad corridor at the end of which he opened a door.

I started involuntarily at sight of the grinning, ghastly thing that lay on the floor. Not so Dr. Dorp. He knelt beside it and examined it minutely, his keen gray eyes alert for every detail. He even touched his fingers to the white forehead and prodded the shadowy depths of the empty eye sockets.

At length he rose and washed his hands at the porcelain lavatory.

"It seems incredible," he said, "that this man could have been alive yesterday."

"Just what I was thinking," responded the chief. "Those bones could not have been drier or whiter if they had bleached in the sunlight for the last ten years."

The doctor now turned his attention to the contents of the laboratory. He examined the collection of retorts, test tubes, breakers, jars, dishes and other paraphernalia spread on a porcelain-topped table set against the wall and reaching half the length of the room. The walls were shelved clear to the ceiling, and every shelf was crowded to its utmost capacity with bottles, jars and cans containing a multitude of chemicals. To these he gave but scant attention.

In the center of the immaculate white tile floor stood an open, glass-lined vat. From its height and diameter I estimated its capacity at about sixty gallons. This vat was more than a third full of a

colorless, viscous liquid that gave off a queer, musty odor.

"What do you suppose that stuff is?" I asked Dr. Dorp.

"Looks like a heavy albuminous or gelatinous solution," he said. "Possibly it is some special compound the professor employed in his experiments. Mediums of this nature are often used in the cultivation of colonies of bacteria and it is possible that he intended to use it as a carrier and food for the organisms it was his ambition to create synthetically."

"Any idea what caused the death of the professor?" asked the chief.

"I have a theory," replied Dr. Dorp, "but it seems so illogical, so wildly impossible, so—er, contrary to the teachings of science that I prefer to keep it to myself for the present, at least."

A heavy tread sounded in the hallway and a moment later a blue-uniformed officer entered.

"Hello, Rooney," greeted Chief McGraw. "I want you to see that no one disturbs this room or its contents until the coroner arrives. We are going downstairs now. Keep a weather eye on things and I'll send a man to relieve you soon. If either of these gentlemen want to come in at any time you may admit them."

"Yis, sor. I'll remember them."

We trooped downstairs. Two women were seated in the living room. Chief McGraw presented us to the younger, who proved to be the professor's daughter, Dorothy Townsend. She was a slender girl about twenty years of age with pale, regular features and a wealth of gold-brown hair. Her large, expressive eyes were red with recent weeping and her lips quivered slightly as she bowed to us in turn and introduced us to the stout, middle-aged neighbor, Mrs. Harms, who had been endeavoring to comfort her.

"Hirsch and I are going to run down to headquarters for a couple of hours," said the chief. "Would you prefer to come with us or stay here and look around?"

"I think we had better look around a bit if you don't mind," replied the doctor.

"All right. I'm going to send a man to relieve Rooney at six. Will be along myself a little later. If you discover anything new call me up."

When the two men were gone the doctor bowed before Miss Townsend.

"May I have a few words with you in private?" he asked.

"Certainly," she replied, rising, "in Father's study if you wish."

They entered the study, which was directly off the living room, and closed the door. They must have been gone about a half hour, but it seemed like two hours to me as, fidgeting inwardly, I listened to Mrs. Harms' family history, her account of the death of her beloved husband, and minute descriptions of six operations she had undergone, each time, to use her own expression, "standing at the entrance of death's door." She assured me, also, that she knew what it was to have death in the home. The Grim Reaper had visited her family a score of times, she averred, and only three weeks before, one of her roomers had been found dead in bed.

She prattled on with scarce a pause until the door of the study opened. I was glad when she went upstairs with Miss Townsend and left Dr. Dorp and me together.

"Come into the study," he said. "I have learned some interesting things, and it is possible that more await us in here."

Professor Townsend's study was neither large nor pretentious. It was obviously the retreat of a profound student as attested by the book-lined walls, many of the volumes of which were worn with much handling. The furniture consisted of a large, roll-top desk, a smaller typewriter desk on which stood a hooded machine, a filing cabinet, two office chairs and three comfortable overstuffed chairs, one beside the window, the other two placed conveniently under wall lights for reading.

A thick pile of typewritten manuscripts lay on the roll-top desk. The doctor divided them, handing me half and settling himself comfortably in one of the overstuffed chairs with the other half.

"Miss Townsend kindly brought these out of the files for me," explained the doctor. "I think it possible that they may shed some light on the mysterious cause of the death of their author. We can save time by dividing the work."

"I believe I can conduct a more intelligent search if you will give me some idea of what I am to look for," I said.

"Quite so," he agreed. "I had forgotten for the moment that you were not familiar with the details of my interview with Miss Townsend. Let me review it briefly.

"She finished school nearly a year ago, and since that time has been acting as her father's secretary, typing his manu-

scripts and attending to much of his voluminous correspondence.

"He has been working day and night in his effort to prove his theory that a living organism can be created from inorganic matter. During their months of close association she found him extremely irritable until one morning about three weeks ago. It appeared that his very nature had changed over night and she assumed that he had made some important discovery. She remembers the exact date owing to the fact that Mrs. Harms' roomer was found dead in bed on the night of the supposed discovery. This roomer, who was living under an alias, was found to be a notorious character known as Immune Benny, and is alleged to have committed numerous crimes, among which were several revolting murders, without ever having been convicted.

"After that night the professor's jubilant attitude kept up until his death. He paid no attention to his correspondence or manuscripts and spent the greater part of his time in his laboratory, presumably experimenting with numerous live animals which he had delivered each day. His first experiments, she stated, were with mice, rats and guinea pigs. He next used cats, rabbits and small dogs, then larger dogs until, on the day before his death he had two huge mastiffs brought to the house and took them into the laboratory. None of the animals taken behind that door ever reappeared, and she quite naturally assumed that they had been the subjects of vivisection. My theory, however, is that he—"

The doctor was interrupted by a loud rap at the study door. He rose and opened it, revealing a sturdy uniformed policeman. A frightened housemaid peered around his huge bulk. The man seemed greatly perturbed. His voice shook as he asked—

"Where's Rooney?"

"He's on guard in the laboratory," replied the doctor. "Are you the man sent to relieve him?"

"I'm Officer Burke. The maid, here, showed me to the laboratory, but Rooney ain't there. It's a horrible place. Don't blame him for leavin'."

"Yes. That skeleton on the floor isn't exactly pretty."

"That skeleton? You mean *them* skeletons. There was two of them, *and one was dressed in a cop's uniform!*"

With an exclamation of surprise and horror, the doctor threw down the manuscripts he was holding and rushed for the stairway. I followed breathlessly.

III

WHAT we saw in that awful room of death confirmed our wildest fears. A skeleton, with the bones whitened like those of the professor, lay on the floor facing the doorway. One bony arm was stretched across the threshold as if its owner had been attempting to drag himself from the room when struck down. A blue uniform bagged loosely over the bones, and on the feet were the heavy, hobnailed, square-toed shoes I had noticed on Rooney's feet some time before.

The doctor squinted at the star on the breast of the recumbent figure. Then he turned to Officer Burke who had come up behind us.

"What was Rooney's number?" he asked.

"942."

"Then this is Rooney's uniform and it probably is his skeleton. Call up the chief and tell him what happened. This is horrible—diabolical!"

"Your theory," I said, "does this shed any new light on it?"

"On the contrary," he replied, "it makes the case more baffling than ever. It seems incredible that such things can really happen. I tell you, Evans, there is some mysterious force at work here—something new and unheard of in the annals of scientific research. It is my opinion that the late Professor Townsend chanced upon some force hitherto unknown to scientists and played with it like a little child with fire until it suddenly destroyed him. The death of Officer Rooney is ample proof that this terrible force, whatever it may be, survived him.

"Now let us conjecture regarding the nature of this thing that has taken the lives of two human beings. We know that the professor's chief ambition was to create life from inert matter. All of his experiments in the laboratory were made with this object in view. All his printed works show plainly his firm belief that the thing could be accomplished, some of them going so far as to point out the processes by which he believed protoplasm, the primitive basic life substance, might be analyzed. As protoplasm is a compound of almost unlimited complexity in its physical and chemical constitution, our most skilled chemists have been unable to unravel its secrets. In fact, the further a chemist gets in his attempts at analysis the more baffling and complex he finds it to be. Being a compound composed of complex substances which are in turn composed of others still more complex, and so on, *ad infinitum*, its secrets are fully as inscrutable as those of the starry universe.

"The professor's first step, therefore, in this seemingly impossible undertaking, would be to analyze protoplasm. Assuming that he succeeded in reducing it to its basic elements his next problem would be to take similar elements and, through a process even more complex than the previous one, assemble and reassemble them until they were capable of sustaining life.

"Let us suppose that he did these things. Let us assume that he has succeeded in creating protoplasm. What next? We will say that he has taken some primitive form of life for a pattern, a moneron, perhaps, the most simple type of animal, consisting of a single cell of protoplasm. There still exists a difference between the moneron and the synthetically created cell. Chemically and physically they are the same, but the moneron is *alive*.

"What is life? Broadly defined as we recognize it on this earth, it is a temporary union of mind and matter. There may be, and probably is another kind of life which is simply mind without matter, but we of the material world know it not. To us, mind without matter or matter without mind are equally dead. The moneron has a mind—a soul—a something that makes it a living individual. Call it what you will. The professor's cell of man-made protoplasm has not. Can you conceive of any possible way in which he could, having reached this stage, create an individual mind or soul, an essence of life that, once united with his cell of protoplasm would form an entity?"

"It seems impossible," I admitted.

"So it seems," he replied, "yet it is only on such an hypothesis that I can account for the mysterious deaths of the professor and Officer Rooney."

"But I don't see how a moneron or a creature remotely resembling one could kill and completely devour a man in less than two hours," I objected.

"Nor I," agreed the doctor. "In fact I am of the opinion that, if the professor did succeed in creating life, the result was unlike any creature large or small, now inhabiting the earth—a hideous monster, perhaps, with undreamed of powers and possibilities—an alien organism among billions of other organisms, hating them all because it has nothing in common with them—a malignant entity governed solely by the primitive desire for food and growth with only hatred of and envy for the more fortunate *natural* creatures around it."

"If the professor did succeed in creating or discovering such a creature," I said, "it is evidently in this house at

this very moment. Unless it has the faculty of making itself invisible a thorough search should reveal its whereabouts, for having consumed two men it must be a monster of no mean proportions."

"That is true," replied the doctor, "however, we have another hypothesis that is equally worthy of our consideration if we accept the premise that the professor created a living creature. Judging from his writings he spent a considerable portion of his time studying and experimenting in microbiology. Suppose he succeeded in creating a microscopic organism, and that organism had the power to reproduce its kind. If it reproduced by fission, that is, by simply dividing itself after it had attained a certain size, the only check to its increase would be death or lack of food. The more food it could obtain that much more rapidly would it and its descendants multiply. Countless billions of such creatures might occupy this room and yet be invisible without the aid of a compound microscope. There is ample room for a swarm of such creatures numerous enough to devour a man to float in the air above our heads without revealing its presence."

The words of the doctor affected me strangely. Involuntarily I looked upward, half expecting a swarm of man-eating microbes to descend and devour me. For a moment I was seized with a feeling of panic so strong I could scarcely restrain myself from leaping for the door. The fact that the sun had just set and dusky shadows were thickening in the room augmented the illusion. I crossed the floor nervously and pressed the switch beside the door. Instantly the place was flooded with blue-white light from a cluster of powerful globes depending from the middle of the ceiling.

As I was recrossing the room my eyes fell on the contents of the glass-lined tank. I stared unbelievably for a moment, then called Dr. Dorp.

"What is it, Evans?" he asked.

"The liquid in this tank," I replied. "It has changed color. Something has turned it pink."

"The effect of the artificial light, no doubt," he said, coming up beside me. Then I saw the expression of doubt on his face change to one of surprise and wonder.

"You are right," he exclaimed. "It has not only changed color but a still more remarkable transformation has taken place. When we noticed it this afternoon, the tank was a third full of the colorless liquid. *This pink fluid reaches half way to the top!*"

IV

THE tread of many feet sounded in the hall.

Chief McGraw paused in the doorway, staring down at the blue-clad skeleton on the floor, a look of horror on his face. Behind him were four policemen in uniform.

"Is—is that the skeleton of poor old Rooney?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it is," replied Dr. Dorp.

The chief knelt and examined the star on the bagging blue coat.

"It's hellish, positively hellish," he said, rising. "Do you know what killed him?"

"We are working on a theory—" began the doctor, but was interrupted by the chief.

"Theories be damned!" he snapped. "Work on your theories if you want to. This thing has gone too far. I'm going to get some facts." He swung on the four men behind him. "Search the house," he said. "Look sharp for anything of a suspicious nature. An infernal machine, perhaps, or a blood sucking animal. There is a man-killer of some kind, human or otherwise, hidden in this house, and it's our business to find it."

When the men had departed he stepped over Rooney's skeleton.

"I'll search this room myself," he said.

He did, with professional thoroughness, looking for hidden panels and sounding the walls, both in the open areas and behind the shelves, for hollow spaces. Then he began opening the drawers in a tall cabinet that stood in one corner, disclosing surgical and dissecting instruments of various kinds, an indexed set of microscope slides with some extra lenses, platinum dishes, porcelain drying pans, crucibles, glass rods and tubing, pipettes, rubber tubing and stoppers, rubber gloves and aprons, and other miscellaneous laboratory paraphernalia.

The bottom drawer of the cabinet was quite large and deep. The chief cried out excitedly when he saw its contents.

"Good Lord! Look at that!" he exclaimed.

It was filled to the top with dry, white bones.

"Nothing but the bones of small animals," said Dr. Dorp, picking up a skull. "This, for instance, is the skull of a dog." Then, taking up another: "Here is the skull of a rabbit. Notice the characteristic chisel-shaped teeth. This one beside it once supported the be-

whiskered countenance of a common house cat."

"What do you suppose he was doing with them?" asked the chief.

"It is my belief that they were brought here to be killed and devoured by the same thing that killed the professor and Rooney."

"And that thing is—"

"At present, merely a shadowy theory, although it most certainly has an existence. There is a power in this house that is a menace to everyone under this roof—a malignant entity that destroys human beings in some mysterious manner unparalleled in the annals of science or human experience. This much we know, reasoning from effects. Reasoning from possible causes we are aware that the hobby of Professor Townsend was the endeavor to create a living thing from inorganic matter, and putting the two together it seems to me that the logical hypothesis would be that he either succeeded in creating a monster of a sort unknown to biologists, or discovered and developed unheard of powers and habits in a creature already known."

"If there's such a thing in this house, believe me I'm going to find it," said the chief, stamping out of the room.

"Now that we have a few moments to ourselves," said Dr. Dorp when McGraw had departed, "let us conduct a search, or rather an inquiry on our own account. I perceive that we have a very excellent compound microscope at our disposal and am curious to examine the liquid which has so mysteriously risen and changed color in the tank."

He took a blank slide from the cabinet drawer and a small glass rod from the table. As he was about to dip the rod in the liquid he uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"What's up now?" I asked.

"This amazing liquid has again become transparent," he replied. "The red tint is gone."

He plunged the tip of the rod into the viscous liquid, twisted it slightly and withdrew it. Although the liquid seemed quite heavy it slipped from the end of the rod much after the manner of the white of an egg. After considerable juggling he succeeded in obtaining a small amount which he smeared on the slide. He then placed the slide in position and adjusted the microscope with a practiced hand.

"Well," I asked, after he had peered into the eyepiece for a full ten minutes, "what is the stuff, anyway?"

"Here, look for yourself," he replied.

What I saw in the field of the microscope appeared to be a mesh work or foam work of exceedingly fine bubbles or perhaps globules. Granules of different sizes and shapes seemed imbedded in these globules and the whole was dotted at intervals with small white objects. While I watched several of these white objects seemed to dissolve and disappear. All of them apparently were endowed with life, for I noticed that they expanded or contracted spasmodically and seemed endeavoring to push their way through the surrounding bubbles.

"Seems to be a sort of foam," I said, "with something alive floating in it."

"The foam, as you call it, bears a singular resemblance to the basic life principle, protoplasm, when seen under the microscope," replied the doctor.

"But those white things—" I began.

"The white things," he went on, "are the living remnants of a complex organism that has been destroyed. They are waging an unequal and hopeless battle against assimilation by the globules that surround them. These faithful guardians of the organism when alive still fight, and will continue to fight the enemy until, figuratively speaking, the last man falls."

"But what are they?" I demanded.

"Unless I am very much mistaken," he replied, "they are—"

His answer was cut short by the appearance of Chief McGraw.

"Coroner and jury are downstairs," he said tersely. "I suppose they'll want your testimony. I'll leave a couple of men on guard here if you want to come down."

"Let us go down to the study and complete our perusal of the professor's manuscripts while the jury is in session," said the doctor. "We can thus save considerable time and will be on hand when they are ready to question us."

We met Coroner Haynes and his jurors at the foot of the stairs. They were about to go up for an inspection of the laboratory and its gruesome contents.

Dr. Dorp switched on one of the reading lamps and closed the door. Then he established himself in a comfortable chair with a pile of manuscripts and I followed his example. We found essays and articles on almost every subject pertaining to the transmission or generation of life. There were papers on anatomy, bacteriology, cell-structure, microbiology and embryology. There were treatises on evolution, spontaneous generation, and the structures and

habits of micro-organisms. A forceful and extremely impressive essay set forth the astounding theory that all life was merely a form of force generated from matter. The reasoning was, of course, purely analogical. The professor's contention, stated briefly, was that just as electricity, a force that is invisible and indefinable, is generated by the friction of particles of certain kinds of matter, so life is generated and springs into being when certain other types of matter come together in the right proportions and combinations.

"What is your opinion of this theory?" I asked Dr. Dorp.

"It is most cleverly put, but false because based on the false premise of the materialists that there are but two things in the universe, matter and force. They do not recognize the power that controls the force which moves the matter toward a fixed objective. That power is mind. Thus, to them, all life and all mind are merely forms of force generated originally from inert matter."

"If the professor succeeded in creating a living thing from inert matter," I said, "it seems to me that he has demonstrated his proposition."

"Why?"

"Because he was experimenting with dead matter and not with mind or living creatures. There would be no mind or soul involved to inherit its being from a parent mind or soul. A new life entity would be generated, as it were, from matter which formerly contained no life."

"I think," said the doctor quietly, "you would have stated the proposition more accurately had you said that a life entity—a mind without a body—had been induced to enter the body synthetically created."

Our discourse was interrupted by Chief McGraw, who informed us that we were wanted by the coroner.

V

DR. DORP did the talking before the coroner's jury. All the way through his testimony was negative. When asked if he had any idea what killed the professor and the policeman he replied that he had several ideas, but none of them would be worth bringing before the jury without more facts to substantiate them. I could see that his purpose was to get the inquest over with as soon as possible so we might continue the investigation.

After due deliberation a verdict of "Death from cause or causes unknown," was brought in and the coroner departed with his men.

"Now that the inquest is over, what do you suggest?" McGraw asked the doctor.

"My suggestion is that we immediately destroy the liquid in the glass-lined tank in the laboratory."

"Why?"

"Because I am convinced that it is at least one of the causes of the deaths that have taken place in this house."

"I suppose you have a good reason for your assumption."

"An excellent one, I believe. While you and your men were searching the house, Mr. Evans and I conducted a little investigation of our own. We put some of the liquid under the compound microscope and as we both saw the same things I am convinced that my eyes did not deceive me. Tell the chief what you saw, Evans."

I described the foam work, the granules and the white objects which appeared to be alive and struggling to escape.

"All Greek to me," said the chief. "What was it?"

"The foam work with its accompanying granules closely resembled protoplasm, the basic life substance."

"And the white things—"

"Were white blood corpuscles from the veins of a human being. They were the strongest of the human body cells to resist assimilation and consequently the last to succumb. The red corpuscles turned the liquid pink for a while but they had disappeared before we made our microscopic examination."

"Good Lord, why didn't you tell me this before?" demanded the chief. "Let's go up and destroy the stuff now. Those two men up there might be killed any minute."

We found the two policemen unharmed and made our plans for the destruction of the substance in the tank. Several demijohns of acid stood under the table and the doctor selected one nearly full of sulphuric acid.

"Open the windows," he ordered. "This is going to make a horrible stench."

Then he removed the rubber stopper from the mouth of the demijohn and I helped him hoist it to the edge of the tank. The scaring liquid struck the heavy fluid in the tank with a hissing sound and bored into it like hot water poured in a snow bank. The jelly-like mass quivered slightly, and pungent, nauseating fumes arose to torment our nostrils.

Then, suddenly, as if in horrible pain and awakened to the danger of its dis-

solution, the plasmic substance began to heave and billow toward the top of the tank with a movement suggestive of the writhing of a huge coiled serpent in its death agony. By directing the stream of acid at the various peaks that arose we endeavored to keep it all washed down to a common level. Then a dozen peaks rose simultaneously and I noticed that one was capped with a round ball in the center of which was a black spot.

"The nucleus!" cried the doctor excitedly, shifting the demijohn. "Pour it on the nucleus!"

We were too late. The thing upreared itself with amazing speed and lopped over the edge of the tank opposite us. We dropped the nearly-empty demijohn into the tank and rushed around to intercept it, just in time to see the ball containing the black spot separate itself from the stringy mass by which it was suspended, drop to the floor and roll under the table.

An exciting chase of several minutes ensued. The thing darted, or rather, rolled from place to place with amazing rapidity. The tile floor was cracked in a dozen places by blows from the clubs of the two policemen who assisted us. At length we drove it into the corner beneath the lavatory and advanced in close formation. I had armed myself with a large spatula, the doctor gripped a heavy pestle, the two policemen had their clubs and the chief held his automatic pistol in readiness.

As we drew close we moved with extreme caution, our nerves taut, our weapons ready to strike when the thing should make its dash for liberty. We waited breathlessly, but no movement came from the corner. I prodded the space behind the water pipes with my spatula. Still no sign of the thing we were after. Then I peered behind them and saw the reason—a hole an inch in diameter in the tile floor, probably drilled in the wrong place by a careless plumber and left unfilled because it was out of sight.

When I pointed it out to Dr. Dorp he shook his head solemnly.

"The Malignant Entity has escaped," he said. "No one in this house—in this community, even—is safe until it is captured or killed."

"You don't mean to tell me that little thing we were chasing around the room could kill anybody," said the chief.

"I am not so sure that it could kill any one now that it has been reduced to the size of a golf ball, although the cytoplasm surrounding the nucleus evidently has the power of quickly dissolving and assimilating living tissues. Its

growth, apparently, is only limited by the amount of food it can find."

"Maybe we'd better get the women out of the house," said the chief.

"The sooner, the better. I suggest also that you surround the place with men armed with shotguns. If that thing gets out and starts to grow I shudder to think of what may happen. Children will not be safe outside their own homes, and perhaps not even within them. Adults will be attacked as soon as the creature has attained sufficient size, and there is always the possibility that it may have the power to reproduce its kind. Organisms of this kind, as a rule, multiply with exceeding rapidity. Think of a thousand or perhaps a million such monsters roaming through the land. It is almost impossible to kill them because of the power we have just witnessed, of leaving the body, no matter how large it has grown, taking with it only enough cytoplasm to protect the nucleus and make a new start."

We were all gasping from the fumes that came out of the tank, and glad to get out of the laboratory.

When all were assembled in the living room the chief phoned headquarters for men and shotguns while Dr. Dorp and I explained what we had found to Miss Townsend.

After we had described our adventure in detail, the doctor said:

"It seems strange that your father left no record of his experiments with the monster."

"I feel quite sure that he left a record of some sort, though I have never seen it," replied Miss Townsend.

"Have you any idea where it is?"

"Perhaps in his safe in the study."

"I do not remember seeing a safe in the study."

"Naturally. It is hidden. Come and I will show you where it is."

We followed her into the study and she swung back one of the bookcases which was hung on concealed hinges, revealing a small wall safe.

"Would you mind opening it for us?" asked the doctor.

She turned the dial to number twelve, then pulled the lever. It did not move. She seemed surprised, set the dial more carefully and tried again with the same result.

"It's no use, I guess," she said. "The last number of the combination is twelve. He usually turned it back to one and then it was only necessary to turn it to twelve to open it. He must have locked it last night."

"Don't you know the combination?"

"No. Father was the only one who knew that."

"I wonder if you would object to our blowing the safe," he asked.

"Not if it will be of any assistance to you," she replied.

Chief McGraw, who had just finished calling headquarters, came into the room.

"Think you can get us a safe-cracker tonight, Chief?" asked the doctor.

"Get you most anything you want. What's in the safe?"

"We believe it contains some valuable information regarding the thing we were chasing a while ago."

"I'll get a man out here right away," said McGraw, going once more to the phone.

Officer Burke escorted Miss Townsend, Mrs. Harms and the two servants to the Harms home, where they were to spend the night.

Shortly afterward there arrived twenty policemen armed with shotguns and carrying several dozen bulls-eye lanterns. They brought extra weapons which were distributed to all of us who remained in the house, the chief, the doctor, the four policemen and myself. Burke was to remain on guard next door.

A ring of lanterns was placed around the house and the twenty armed men were posted at intervals between them. We then divided our forces as follows: One policeman was placed on guard in the laboratory. Chief McGraw with another policeman patrolled the upper rooms and halls. The doctor and one policeman remained on the first floor and I, accompanied by a strapping young fellow named Black, who had recently been admitted to the force, did sentry duty in the basement.

VI

THE Townsend basement was divided into three rooms, each lighted rather dimly by the yellow rays from an incandescent globe suspended on a short drop-cord. The furnace room and coal bins were situated at the rear end. The middle compartment contained a miscellaneous assortment of boxes, barrels, garden tools, household tools, canned fruits, empty fruit jars, bottles, and what not. The front room was used as a laundry.

Officer Black and I searched each room thoroughly, using a flash light in the dark corners and moving everything that wasn't fastened to the floor or walls. Several mice jumped out from behind boxes and barrels, but we saw no sign of the creature we were hunting.

We were peering behind the furnace when the sound of several loud squeaks came to us from the middle room.

With shotgun held in readiness, I moved stealthily toward the point from which the sound came. There, in the center of the floor almost under the yellow electric light bulb, I saw the fast disappearing body of a mouse under a mass of plasmic jelly.

My first impulse was to shoot, but on second thought, I decided to attempt to capture the thing alive if possible. Instructing Black to hold his weapon in readiness in case I failed, I unscrewed the lid from a large empty fruit jar and walked softly toward the center of the floor. I held the jar in readiness, expecting the thing to spring away at my approach with its former lightning-like rapidity. To my surprise it lay almost motionless on the body of its victim. I could see streaks of bright red flowing through the jelly-like mass as the blood of the mouse was drawn up for assimilation.

I clapped the mouth of the jar over the creature and still it made no effort to escape. Then, sliding a fire shovel which Black brought me, under the thing and its victim, I turned the jar right side up. It fell to the bottom of the receptacle, still clinging to the now formless mass that had once been a mouse and making no effort to escape. I put the lid in place and screwed it down tight.

"Now try to get away, you devil!" I cried, shaking the jar exultantly.

I almost dropped it a moment later as a muffled explosion jarred the building. Then I remembered Chief McGraw's safe-cracker, and hurried upstairs.

When I reached the living room, Dr. Dorp was emerging from the study in a cloud of plaster dust. In his hand was a thick, loose-leaf book.

"I have it," he called excitedly, waving the book. "The professor's diary."

"Don't get fussed over such trifles," I replied, waving the jar in return. "Look what I've got. Caught it alive, too."

I put the jar on the table and he squinted at it for a moment. The blood-bloated monstrosity had separated its shapeless hulk from the whitened bones of its victim and was sluggishly crawling up the side of the glass.

"You caught it, sure enough," he said. "I only hope it hasn't any little sons or daughters wandering about."

"I'll keep the house under guard for a couple of days," said Chief McGraw, who had come down to learn the result

of the cracksman's labors. "If there are any more of those things around they ought to show themselves by that time."

The doctor drew a chair up to the table and eagerly scanned the pages of the diary while we watched the antics of the thing in the jar. It kept getting lighter colored all the time, and more lively. By the time the cytoplasm had become transparent it was racing around, contorting its body into all manner of shapes. Sometimes it was flat, sometimes oval, and sometimes round. At times it put forth pseudopods, sometimes elongating them until it resembled a small cuttle fish.

"September twenty-third was the night Immune Benny died wasn't it, Chief?" asked the doctor.

"Right. Why?"

"Then this diary tallies with Miss Townsend's testimony. Here is the professor's entry made under that date.

"September 23, Nearly Midnight.

"Eureka! I have succeeded. I placed a tiny drop of syntheplasm on the slide tonight as I have done a thousand times before, and covered it with a weak, sterile solution of gelatine.

"I watched it steadily for a half hour but nothing happened until, suddenly, I noticed a tiny black spot forming in its center. I am positive there were no animalculae either in the syntheplasm or the solution, yet no sooner had the black spot become readily distinguishable than my speck of syntheplasm began moving about as if searching for food. Evidently it cannot subsist on gelatine.

"I next introduced a rhizopod into the solution. My animal slightly resembles it, but is larger and gets about much

faster. I wanted to compare the two but the rhizopod was quickly devoured. Now I know what to feed it."

"It is growing late so I will not read all the details to you," continued the doctor. "Suffice to say that the professor discovered his synthetically created creature would feed on nothing but living creatures. He fed it so many microscopic animals the second day that it grew to a size visible to the naked eye. Then he fed it gnats, mosquitos, flies, beetles, and finally mice, when it became so large he was forced to transfer it from the small porcelain dish in which he kept it, to a much larger one.

"The thing grew at a prodigious rate of speed. Its growth seemed only limited by the amount of living creatures it was permitted to devour. At length he was compelled to keep it in the glass-lined tank which he had been using for the culture of infusoria. Its victims were thrown into the tank alive and were quickly killed by the monster. He noticed that it was sluggish while assimilating its food, but moved with cat-like quickness when hungry. Though it had no eyes it seemed to sense the approach of food in some way and, toward the last, stretched forth pseudopods and snatched the animals from his hands.

"Yesterday the professor led two mastiffs into the room. Hardly had he closed the door of the laboratory before the monster was out of the tank. It killed and devoured the two big dogs in less than a half hour—then crawled back sluggishly into the tank to digest its meal. Thus ends the written record of the professor's adventures with the Malignant Entity. His whitened bones on the floor of the laboratory are mute testimony of what occurred this morning."

There was a moment of awed silence when the doctor finished his narrative. His eyes fell on the struggling thing in the glass jar.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

"Come," he said, taking up the jar and starting for the basement. "I will show you."

The chief and I followed him down the basement stairs and into the furnace room. He opened the fire-door and tossed the jar on the glowing coals.

The thing raced about spasmodically for a moment in the intense heat, then fell huddled in the bottom of the jar. Suddenly, as if inflated from beneath, it puffed upward and outward, almost filling the receptacle in a shape that resembled a human head. I thought this only a figment of my imagination at first—blinked—and looked a second time. The face of a man stared back at me from behind the curved glass, eyes glowing with malevolent hatred and lips drawn back in a snarl that revealed crooked, yellow fangs. For a moment only the vision held. The next instant the jar was empty of all save a tiny pile of white, flaky ash and the bones of the mouse.

Dr. Dorp shut the door suddenly and noisily.

"That face," I exclaimed. "Did you see it also?"

"A queer distortion of the gas-inflated protoplasm," he replied.

Chief McGraw seemed greatly perturbed. He drew a long black cigar from his pocket, lighted it and puffed nervously for a moment.

"Distortion, hell," he muttered. "It was a perfect double for the face of Immune Benny!"

THE END

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