

WEIRD TALES

MAY

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The Unique Magazine

*Thrills!
Mystery!
Excitement!*

THE MARK of the MONSTER

by JACK WILLIAMSON

a powerful tale of
weird horror



HAZEL HEALD
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Mark of the Monster

By JACK WILLIAMSON

*A vivid thrill-tale of the black altar on the hill-top, and the dark doom
that hung over two lovers like a living horror—
by the author of "Golden Blood".*

1. The Brooding Horror

BYOND the miserable poverty of Creston, its squalid ignorance and its rotting antiquity, there is something more appalling—something that has always seemed to me like a colossal, invisible spider, gloating over the broken victims in its intangible, unbreakable web. I had escaped it once; now I dared it again to set free Valyne Kirk.

Brakes shrieking, the antiquated bus pitched down the rutted mountain road. Carrying away all the sanity of the modern world, it left me alone and oppressed amid the sinister shadows of the time-crushed village.

I shuddered, for I felt that Creston was the unhappy ghost of a town, sprawling dead in this desolate vale. Its narrow, high-peaked houses were bleached and gray as decaying skulls; their broken windows leered like vacant eyeholes at the gloomy, frowning hills.

The spirited young all have fled from Creston. No children laugh in the ancient, cobbled streets. And I found nothing new in the years since I had gone—unless it was this spirit of festering evil, come to haunt the old town's tomb.

Valyne Kirk had promised to meet me; for I had come with seven years'

earnings, to take her away from Creston, for ever. Eagerly I looked for her, up and down the unkempt squalor of the narrow street. After seven years, the sweet memory of her burned still like a sacred flame within my soul. The picture of her quiet, violet-eyed face, framed in dark and shining hair, remained etched into my heart.

But she didn't come. And somber premonitions rose to cloud my joy. For in my pocket was that strange letter from Doctor Kyle, my aged adopted father. Upon my very heart was graven its puzzling and sinister warning:

My son, you write that you are coming home to marry Valyne Kirk. I shall not, I dare not, tell you why—but may God in his mercy forbid that so monstrous a crime should be!

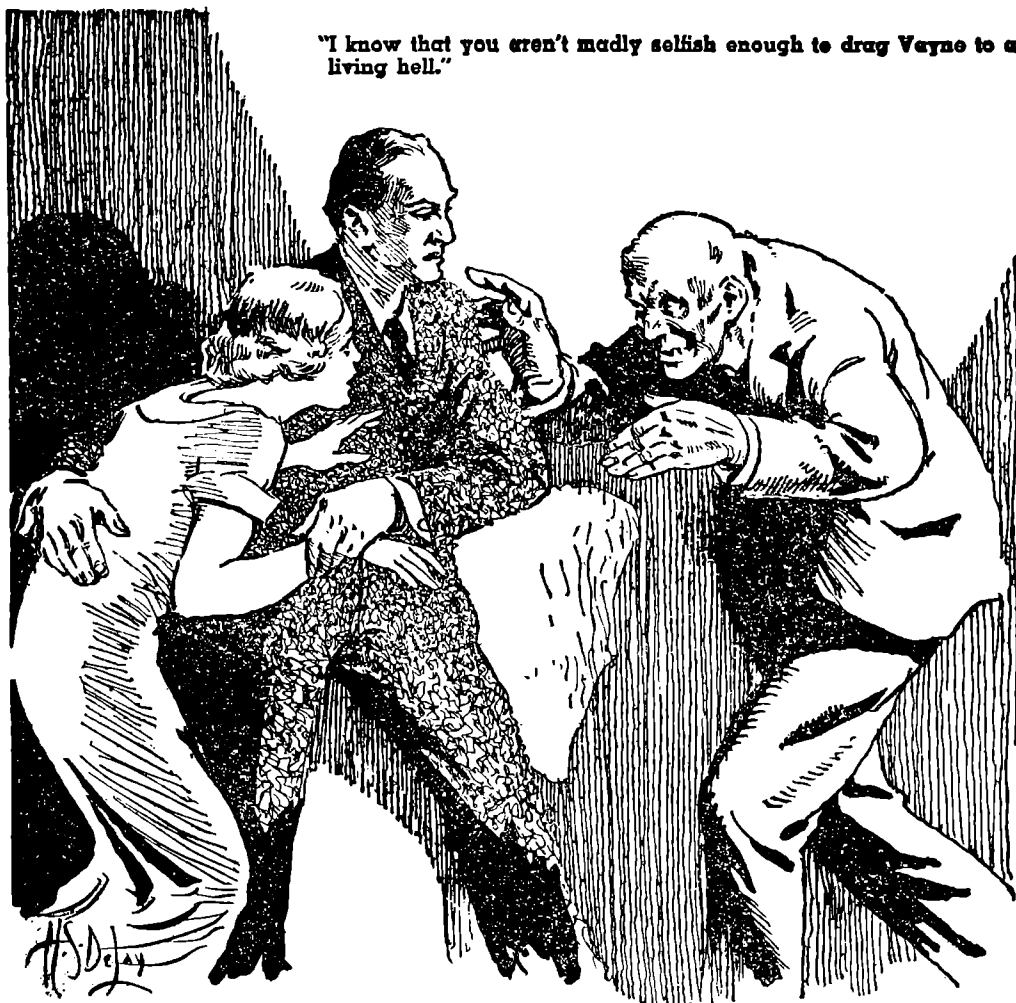
Have you never felt the strangeness in you, Clay? Have you never sensed the stain upon your soul? Are you never conscious of the black venom flowing in your blood?

Much as Sarah and I long to see you, we both prefer that you should live and die in your new foreign home, than that you should wed Valyne, and drench her life in terror.

Heed this warning—you must sense its truth, like a cold serpent coiled around your heart! And accept all our congratulations upon your new prosperity.

YOUR SECOND FATHER.

The ominous enigma of that message, woven into the strange memories of my youth, and my old nameless fears of hill-girdled Creston, still shrouded me with dread. But it had merely hastened my re-



turn from the Orient. For if there were any real reason why I couldn't marry Valyne, then the toil and peril of seven years had been in vain.

SHE didn't meet me.

I walked up the cobbled street, past grim, silent houses that I had known when I was a child. Some hoary evil, I thought again, had come down out of the forests to haunt them, since I had gone.

Gaunt, hoary-headed men peered at me from sagging doors. I knew the names of some; but their dull, rheumy eyes returned my greetings with stares of hostile

dread. Even haggard, one-eyed Dud Morrow, the postmaster, who must have handled all my letters to Valyne, and all of hers to me, did not know me until I spoke. Then he started and seemed to shrink from me, as if I had been afflicted with some fearful contagion.

"Valyne Kirk?" he mumbled hastily. "Why, since the old woman died in the summer, she lives at Doctor Kyle's house. Just half a mile up the hill."

He gestured as if to hasten me. And as I went on, I sensed a furtive murmur behind me in the narrow street, as if swift, unpleasant things were whispered.

Valyne had written of her mother's death, but not that she had gone to my foster-father's house. I wondered briefly at her silence.

Up the muddy road I hastened, through gnarled trees older than Creston, toward the house of Doctor Latham Kyle. No need to ask the way! I knew each turning, each battered oak, each moss-stained boulder. But I felt again that some secret evil had come down from the hills, to grasp this vale in tentacles of slithering horror.

An old, insidious fascination drew my eyes up the gloomy slopes of Blue Squaw Mountain. The tangled, monstrous trees of its forbidden fastness had filled my first nightmares. Often in childhood, driven by strange instinctive impulses that overcame my trembling fear, I had ventured into its immemorial wilderness. And once, in a desolate glade near the summit of the mountain, thick-walled with gnarled, gigantic trees, I had come upon a great circle of monolithic upright stones, that ringed a low stone altar black with fire and blood.

When I stood before that hidden sylvan altar, a singular, exhilarating terror had clutched my heart. I shook to the wakening of elder memories, more wonderful, more dreadful, than any I had known. Some savage compulsion made me kneel and strike my forehead against the altar stones until a jagged point was bright with blood.

But as soon as I left the circle of crude pillars, a frightened, utter revulsion had seized my sensitive, childish soul. Terrified and bewildered, I had run back to tell Doctor Kyle what I had found.

His thin lips had tightened strangely as he listened. The dark eyes deep beneath his shaggy brows had peered into mine, as if probing to my soul. Solemnly, his deep and hollow voice had warned:

"Soft, if you want to save your life,

your sanity, your soul, never go back to that circle of stones! And never tell another human being that you have found them. Forget. Promise me you will forget."

And I—then I must have been no older than six—I promised him. But I never forgot. I had never gone back; but that strange, instinctive dread clung still, a web of insidious evil that meshed my soul.

I strove to push that ancient, haunting memory from my mind, to think only of the beauty of Valyne Kirk. And her smiling image was clear in my mind, as I went up the hill toward the old stone house. But she came to me before I had passed the last turning.

I heard her voice from among the trees, on a dim wood road that ran a short way up the somber, forested slope of Blue Squaw Mountain.

"Help——"

She must have recognized me when I paused; for her voice came again, gasping and breathless, but with an eager joy crowding upon its fear.

"Clay!"

For my name is Claiborne Coe, and she has always called me that.

"Clay, is it really you? Oh, help me——"

Through the twilight under the trees, I saw the gigantic shape lumbering after her. I ran to meet a great, bearded hulk of a man. His faded overalls were dark with dried blood. His broad face, dark above the rusty beard, was twitching with lust. His eyes were bulging and glazed.

Valyne was at my side, panting:

"Oh, Clay, stop him——"

I called to him, "Stop!"

He mouthed some bestial sound, and came on, ignoring me. His great hands were twitching, as if already shredding the clothing from Valyne's lovely body.

I stood before him. He swung at me

carelessly, with one great hairy arm, as if to brush me out of the way. I ducked under his arm, and slapped his bearded face.

"Stop it, man," I said sharply. "You don't know what you're doing!"

For the first time, then, his glassy, protruding eyes seemed to focus on me. In the hoarse, cursing rasp of his voice I read the words:

"My gal. . . . Git out of the way! . . ."

His great arm swung at me again. I didn't move, and the open-handed blow jarred me to my feet.

I heard Valyne's quick voice, low and distressed:

"Clay! Don't let him hurt you. He's a beast! I was coming down to meet you, when I saw him on the road. I hid. But he must have seen me. He found me, chased me——"

Muttering in the tawny beard, the man came at me, now in earnest, with his hairy fists balled.

I fought him, then.

Always, since I was a child, I have sought to avoid physical combat. The reason is more terrible than cowardice; for a red demon seizes my body, with the first blow I strike. Blind destroying fury overwhelms all restraint. And afterward, when the calm of sanity returns, a crimson fog dulls the memory of the fearful things I may have done.

It is as if some malevolent fiend wakes in me, to fight. . . .

A .45 automatic was slung under my armpit, but that mad demon had neither knowledge nor need of the weapon. I was conscious of an unseeing, savage fury that flung me at the giant. Then scarlet chaos ruled my brain. . . .

When it ebbed away, Valyne was pulling at my shoulder with frantic hands.

"Come, Clay!" her urgent voice was pleading. "You've done enough to him. Too much——"

Her voice released the cold shock of sanity.

The bearded man was lying in the muddy road, gasping hoarsely for breath. Fresh blood, now, was mingled with the dry on his overalls. His lips were crushed to a crimson pulp, and two of his front teeth were gone.

A FAINT sickness came into me, to see what I had done. Once in Singapore two Macanese attacked me in a dark alley, with knives, and when my mind had cleared of its scarlet madness, their heads had been almost severed with their own weapons. Since then I have walked in dread of that indwelling fiend. . . .

But the bearded man was able to stand up, when I aided him. His bulging eyes stared at me, and then at Valyne, without any expression that I could read. He cleared his throat, and spat a scarlet stream of teeth and blood. He pulled out a big, nickel-plated watch, that ticked like a clock, and looked at it sullenly. Then, without a word, he went down the road toward the village, reeling like a drunken man.

I wished that he had cursed or blustered. There is deadly menace in the silence of a beaten man. His glassy, inscrutable eyes had given no hint of what hellish thoughts might be passing through his twisted, brutish brain.

Valyne called for my handkerchief, and bound it around my bleeding knuckles.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm not myself, when I fight. I might have killed him——"

She looked after the staggering figure, and her violet eyes were dark with dread.

"I'm glad—glad you beat him," she said, in a small, shuddery voice. "It was terrible to watch. But I've been so afraid! He's so strange, so dreadful! Perhaps now he'll let me alone.

"He's Jud Geer," she added, "the butcher."

I remembered Jud Geer, the butcher's son. He had been a queer, slow-witted bully. We smaller boys had dreaded him. It had been his perverted delight to torture us with gruesome objects from his father's shop, as when he bound and gagged little Tommy Lanning with the entrails of swine, and left him lying all night in a pool of blood and offal, where the rats came. . . .

When Valyne had done with the bandage, I grasped her small hands. She smiled at me. A queer, sharp little pain came into my throat, for her beauty was more exquisite than all my memories and dreams. I yearned to brush the haunting shadow from her pale face, to keep this strong lamp of joy burning for ever in her violet eyes.

"He doesn't matter," I told her, "Valyne darling."

It was sheer delight to be calling her that again, after seven grim and bitter years.

"He doesn't matter, for we shall soon be gone." I caught her precious warmth close to my heart. "Let's go—now!" I urged her, on a sudden impulse. "We can hire a car in the village, to take us down to the railroad."

"Clay——" she began, and hesitated doubtfully.

"I'm afraid of Creston," I told her. "I don't know why. But I've always dreaded returning—as much as I love you, Valyne! Every minute here is a torture to me. Let's go—today—right now!"

I could find no words for the singular dread that was seeping into me from the town's somber antiquity, from the forbidding gloom of these immemorial forested hills. I yearned to shake off the squalid poverty of Creston, its desolate, haunting decrepitude. I hungered for the lights

and the bustle and the laughter of a city that was alive.

But my feeling was more than that. It was horror of the brooding evil that lurked like an invisible spider in this vale of desolation. And Valyne shared my dread. Her hand grew tight on mine.

"I'm glad you've come, Clay!" she whispered tremulously. "I'll be so glad to get away. You can't realize what it has been to wait, these last few months, in Doctor Kyle's house! The terror——"

With a little frightened gasp, she checked the words.

"But we can't go tonight, Clay. The doctor and his wife will want to see you, after all these years——"

"We must," I said. "Doctor Kyle doesn't want us to marry, Valyne——"

Her face had grown paler, and her violet eyes looked down at the road.

"I know," she whispered. "I know! And I have promised him that I won't marry you, until you have come and talked with him."

"If we must," I yielded. "But there can't be any sane reason, Valyne—I know it!"

Hand in hand, we walked slowly up the steep, rutted road, toward the old stone house; slowly, for we were laying bright plans. I told her again of the small fortune I had brought back from the Orient, of the good position now promised me with an importing firm. We were planning our escape, for ever, from Creston's brooding horror. Slowly, too, because we were both heavy with unspoken forebodings.

But at last the gray bulk of the old stone house loomed up before us in the dying twilight. Pale yellow lights winked malevolently at us from the narrow, squinting slits of windows. Valyne opened the heavy, iron-studded oaken door, and we entered.

How often have I wished that we had

slammed that accursed door, and fled into the haunted night!

2. "*Fear Is Calling for You, Clay!*"

THE stone house was old. It had been old when I was a child; but now it had changed. Now it seemed to me that nameless evil had sprung, since I had gone, from festering roots sunk deep into its grim antiquity. For the age of it then had been mellow, aloof, austere, even kindly; now it was a leering, gibbering horror. It was as if the house had died since my departure, and was now a restless specter, haunting its own hollow corpse.

Sarah Kyle met us in the hall, standing motionless under vast, grimy roof-beams two centuries old. Seven years had changed her. Her teeth were gone. Her face was narrowed, sharpened, shriveled. Her eyes were sunken, curiously bright. She was stooped, until her posture suggested some queer, bright-eyed bird.

She took my hand in her horny claw, and welcomed me with a cackling laugh. Then she began to make apologies for the poverty of her house, and to hint transparently for news of my business in the Orient.

"May I see the doctor?" I said.

Her bird-like eyes fixed me, with their uncanny glitter.

"You had better see him, Clay, if you have come to marry Valyne," her cracked voice shrilled. "And ye had better take his warning. Don't walk too near the edge of hell!"

I stepped back, startled, demanding:

"Mother Kyle! What do you mean?"

"Latham will tell you," she said, "if your own strange blood hasn't written it on your soul!"

"Where's the doctor?"

Her white head jerked sharply.

"Latham's still at work," she told me,

"in his study in the attic. He's busy on his great book."

"His book?" I said, wondering.

"He is writing a history of the demonolatrics of Creston."

"I want to talk to him right away."

"You can see him after supper." Her thin nose jerked at me emphatically, like the beak of a bird. "He'll give you reason enough why you can't marry Valyne, and drag her soul to hell!"

Valyne rescued me from her cackling strangeness, and led me up to my old room.

There I met the two servants of the house. They, Eben Hand and his wife Josepha, were setting up my bedstead.

Eben Hand was a fat, panting man. There was no color in his blond hair, his vague pale eyes, or his pasty skin. Mute, he expressed himself very swiftly to his wife with white, pliable fat hands.

She was a big, dark woman. Her eyes were wide and sharp and black. Her raven hair was coiled into glistening, oily ropes. Her upper lip bore a thick, dark fuzz. She was doing the most of the work, issuing commands to her silent husband in a coarse, mannish voice.

She bowed to me, oddly, as I entered with Valyne and set down my light bag. Her dark avid eyes remained fastened on my face, while she told her husband:

"Eben, this is Clay. Ye remember little Claiborne Coe, Eben, that used to run through the village. Well, this is him, come back to take our Valyne away. Clay got rich, Eben, in them furrin parts!"

At that last sentence, Eben Hand's small, pale eyes shifted suddenly from his wife to me. They searched my person, and seized upon my modest gold ring. His white fingers made some swift, covert reply.

When they had gone, I said to Valyne:

"I don't like them—or this house! Can't we stay somewhere else, tonight?"

"There's no hotel in Creston," she told me. "And it would look strange if we went away tonight. Besides, you must stay to talk with Doctor Kyle. I promised him."

But even the electric warmth of her kiss couldn't thaw out the chill of my forebodings.

DOCTOR KYLE came down at last from his attic room.

He was a big man. Although his body and his limbs remained massively powerful, his head had become curiously fleshless. His yellow cheeks were hollow, his dark flaming eyes were very deeply sunken. His head had become almost completely bald, so that it gave the disconcerting impression of a yellowed skull.

We met at the foot of the stairs. His hand was very cold, as if he had been working too long without a fire in his attic study.

No smile broke the solemn preoccupation of his cadaverous face.

"You are welcome to your old home, Clay," said his deep, hollow voice. "I'm very glad to see you, but"—his shrunken face changed curiously—"I had hoped that you would heed the warning of my letter, and never come for Valyne."

"I have come for her," I told him bluntly. "And I'm going to take her away, in spite of anything you tell me."

His gaunt head shook.

"Clay," he said, "you were always queer and reckless. But I know that you aren't reckless, madly selfish, enough to drag Valyne away to a living hell! Not after you have heard; for there must be one drop of human blood left in your veins!"

"Of course I wouldn't hurt Valyne," I told him. "Go ahead and tell me; I've had enough vague hints."

But Josepha Hand was setting supper

on the table, and Valyne came toward us at the foot of the stair.

"Doctor," she said, smiling, "you've worked too late again! You know you shouldn't—"

Her light voice was swept away by his hissing whisper:

"Later, Clay. But it is a crime that God forbids!"

Valyne caught his arm, and mine, and drew us toward the table.

Sitting beside Valyne, so that sometimes my arm touched the firm warmth of hers, I wondered vainly what he could have to say. What demoniac purpose sought to bar me from her? What eldritch madness lurked in this ancient house?

As we ate, the man Eben Hand appeared suddenly in a doorway. He looked disturbed, his white hands fluttered agitatedly at his wife. And she called in a tone of startled dread:

"Doctor! You must go, Doctor! He can't get it quiet!"

Doctor Kyle's yellow, tight-skinned face grew a little paler. He rose hastily and followed Eben Hand through the doorway which, I remembered, led to the cellar stair.

Silently, the doctor's toothless, wrinkled wife watched the door with her too-bright eyes. She listened. Presently we heard a sound from below. It was a low scream—of tortured, animal agony.

When she heard it, Sarah Kyle relaxed as if with relief. Her bright eyes came back to the table; her brown, claw-like hands buttered a piece of bread. Her thin voice asked me:

"Clay, what business was ye in, in China?"

"One and another," I told her, absently. "The last was copper and tin, in the province of Szechwan."

I was looking at Valyne.

Her violet eyes were on her plate; her face was very pale. She was trembling;

her even teeth were sunk deep into her full red lip.

"Valyne!" I whispered. "What is it, darling?"

She merely shook her head a little. She didn't speak or lift her eyes.

"Copper and tin?" Sarah Kyle's cracked voice was repeating. "And ye found it profitable?"

Doctor Kyle silently resumed his place.

His wife asked some inaudible question, and I caught his whispered reply:

"It's restless—hungry, perhaps. Jud is late, today."

His dark, brilliant eyes looked across at me.

"I must beg your pardon for this mystery, Clay. Please finish your supper. Later you will understand." Then he asked, as if to launch a conversation, "Have you any collection of Chinese art?"

"No," I said jerkily. "Yes, a few pieces of good jade."

I had too much else to think about.

BEFORE the meal was done, there was a rapping at the back door. Answering it, Josepha Hand called:

"Doctor, it's Jud."

His haggard face was relieved.

"Let him in," he called. "Let him take it down to Eben."

The man Jud Geer passed across the end of the room, carrying a milk can. There was more fresh blood on his overalls. A stained bandage was wrapped around his head, to cover his lips where my fist had pulped them.

His glassy, bulging eyes rolled toward me. They rested for a moment upon Valyne's still-bowed head, and I caught a lewd glitter in them.

He went out toward the cellar. The doctor and his wife listened anxiously. I heard an eager, bestial whining, and the sound of thickly splashing liquid.

Jud Geer came back into the room.

W. T.—4

He stopped by Doctor Kyle's chair, so close to me that I could hear the tick of his cheap watch. He held out his great, reddened hand, and muttered something through his bandage. But his filmed eyes were looking not at the doctor, but at Valyne.

Doctor Kyle dropped some coins into his palm, and he put them into his pocket, without taking his eyes off the girl.

Josepha Hand had opened the back door. At her impatient word, the gigantic butcher abruptly jerked his eyes away. He picked up his milk can, and went out.

It was after he had gone that I looked at the floor where the can had rested. On the bare pine boards was a circle of dark red. I knew that its contents had been blood.

Before I had time to digest that disturbing discovery, Eben Hand appeared again. His puffy face was strained and ashen; his colorless lips were twitching; his fat fingers nervously spelled out some hasty message.

"What is it?" Doctor Kyle's hollow voice was apprehensive.

"He says it won't touch it," said Josepha Hand. "It won't taste it. And he can't get it quiet. It keeps whimpering. He thinks it knows *be's* in the house. He thinks it's calling for *him*."

With that last word, her dark head jerked at me.

Doctor Kyle's deep-sunk, flaming eyes came wonderingly to my face.

"It couldn't remember," he whispered faintly, as if to himself. "It couldn't know Clay, after all these years."

Again, from the cellar, I heard that eager, feral whining.

"It does," whispered Josepha Hand. "It wants *him*!"

And I perceived suddenly that all eyes were fixed upon me, glazed and distended with horror, as if I had been some ghastly apparition. In that abrupt and

fearful silence, Valyne's fork rattled shockingly on the floor.

3. "Your Father Was—Horror!"

WHEN the meal was finished, Doctor Kyle took me apart to the end of the room, and lowered his hollow voice.

"Clay," he said solemnly, "I beg you to trust me, as if I were your true father. I want you to leave Valyne—to go away, without making me tell you the secret of your life."

"Why?" I demanded, bluntly impatient.

"I love you, Clay." His voice quivered faintly with emotion. "I love you as my own son, in spite of what I must tell you. That is why I have never told you, and why I am unwilling to tell you now.

"If you go away from Creston, Clay, you may find some happiness. I beg you to go, and to heed my warning—never marry!"

I seized his arm. Despite his age, it felt hard and powerful as Jud Geer's.

"I'm not going," I told him flatly. "Life without Valyne wouldn't be life. And why shouldn't I marry? I'm healthy, without any stain that I know of."

He bowed his yellow, cadaverous head, resignedly.

"I see that I must tell you. It is better for my words to wreck your life, than to let you and Valyne plunge unwarned into the horror waiting——"

His voice stopped suddenly; his dark eyes flew toward the cellar door.

From below I heard a hoarse scream, thick, maddened; the clanking of a heavy chain; the shriek of rusty nails being drawn; the crashing of splintered planking.

The doctor stood voiceless, ashen, trembling, until Eben Hand burst again into the room, mouthing incoherent sounds, fingers flying.

"It's breaking out!" cried Joseph Hand. "It's coming to *him!*"

Her dark eyes darted to me again, terrible with an undisguised and savage odium.

Abruptly recovering himself, Doctor Kyle picked up a heavy chair and ran through the cellar door. His wife scurried after him, with her astonishing bird-like agility.

"Let me, Latham!" her thin voice shrilled. "Let me! It always heeded me."

The two servants followed them apprehensively.

Valyne was standing at the other end of the room, staring after them with stunned tragedy in her shadowed violet eyes. I walked to her hastily, and grasped her cold hands.

"Valyne," I said urgently, "you tell me! What have they in the cellar? What makes this house so strange? Why does the doctor want us not to marry?"

Her eyes, looking back at me, were dark and wide with dread. Her cold hands trembled.

"You're afraid, darling!" I cried. "Tell me—what do you fear?"

But a terrible intuition had already given me the answer.

"You're afraid of me!"

She looked at me in mute agony, without denial.

"I know only what he told me, Clay."

Her voice broke, and her eyes gleamed with tears. Her warm arms were suddenly around me, clinging with the pressure of urgent need.

"Remember I love you, Clay!" she sobbed. "Whatever you may be, remember that I love you."

SHE was still in my arms when Doctor Kyle came back up the stairs, walking with a hasty, shaken step. His voice quick and nervous, he called:

"Clay, will you please come with me

for a moment? And hurry! I think our lives are all in danger, if you don't."

Doubtfully, I said, "But why?"

"You'll understand when we have talked," he said, "but now there's no time. Come!"

I drew away from Valyne, and followed him. Unobtrusively, I loosened the .45 under my coat. I found no need of the weapon, however—then.

The great cellar of my memory had been cut in half with a heavy wall of new masonry. There was a massive connecting door, studded with iron bolts, pierced with a small opening thickly barred.

Eben Hand and his wife were waiting at the foot of the steps, beside Sarah Kyle. Hand's fingers were moving rapidly, as his wife watched them in the light of a kerosene lamp on a rough deal table. On the floor was another red circle, where the can of blood had rested.

The three were silent as I came down the steps. They retreated from me, as if I had been somehow—dreadful.

Doctor Kyle led me to the grating, and I became aware of a peculiar odor from beyond. It was an animal scent, powerful, acrid, unpleasant, yet certainly the scent of no animal I knew.

Through the bars came a whining, low, eager, bestial.

"Speak to it," Doctor Kyle told me, swiftly. "Doesn't matter what you say. Just use a firm, friendly tone——"

As I hesitated, some fiend of fortuity thrust into my mind Poe's macabre lines:

They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human—
They are Ghouls.

As I spoke it, a stronger wave of that feral effluvia came through the grating. It rocked me with nausea. I heard the clatter of a chain, the shuffling of some great, clumsy body.

And stark horror peered through the

bars, with eyes like twin scarlet pits of flaming hell. Its half-glimpsed face was monstrous, swollen, livid, queerly hairy, without a nose. It was the face of nothing sane or right or normal.

One fearful glimpse brought home the fearful aptness of my quotation. Then I heard a massive body drop in jangling chains upon the floor beyond. There was a low, singular sound, not unlike the contented purr of a gigantic cat. Then the sound of lapping. . . .

When I looked at the others, in the lamp's yellow glow, their apprehensive tension was gone, although they still looked askance at me.

"It's satisfied," said Josepha Hand, looking at her husband's fleeting white fingers. "Now it's willing to feed."

I swung upon my foster-father.

"Now," I pressed him, "you've got to tell me!"

His fleshless head jerked toward the steps.

"Come to my room." And when we were on the stairs, his hollow voice added: "Try to keep a grip on yourself, Clay, when you know. And pray to God that no other demon may ever be born into this accursed house!"

THE bare and ancient rafters were low upon his locked attic room. It was cold, and his two lamps could not dispel its sinister gloom. There were chairs, and an antique writing-desk. The shelves were heavy with dark and massive volumes in age-discolored bindings, whose titles, a glance told me, had all to do with the history of witchcraft, occultism, lycanthropy, demonology, and darker lore. A tall glass cabinet held crystal globes, grotesque little idols and figurines of wood and wax, parcels of dried herbs, and a few stained and rusted weapons.

"My study and museum," Doctor Kyle

boomed, as I shivered from the musty chill. "Here I have carried on my research into the evil practises that have festered in the hills of Creston. Knowing these people, I have gained access to precious material. Clay, even now there are hideous forbidden rites of demon-worship being——"

"Doctor," I broke in, "if you really have anything to say, say it."

"Sit down, Clay," he said.

But I was too much concerned to sit. I stood behind a chair, gripping the back of it with my hands. Doctor Kyle paced up and down before me, two or three times, running his lank fingers nervously across his bare yellow scalp, as if to flatten invisible hair.

"I suppose you don't remember your mother, Clay?" he asked at length, as if seeking an easy way into a difficult subject.

"No," I told him. "She died, and you brought me here, before I was two years old."

"We told you that she died," his voice rumbled, suddenly hoarse and low. "And you never knew of your twin?"

"You told me I was the last one of my family."

His flaming eyes stared at me, and his voice pealed solemnly:

"Your mother died only a few months ago, Clay. And your twin brother is still living."

Questions thronged my mind. But the stinging dust of horror had suddenly filled my throat. I could only listen, as that hollow voice went on, like a booming chant of doom.

"I shall begin, Clay, with the early history of your family." His lean hand gestured at the dark, heavy volumes on the shelves. "I have here the library of your grandfather, Eliakim Coe. From his private papers I have learned a great deal of

the secret history of Creston—and of your people.

"The first Coe in America came with a cloud upon his name—the Church had almost obtained his conviction on charges of demonolatry. The Henry Coe who founded Creston was a fugitive from the witchcraft trials of Salem, and in this inaccessible wilderness he carried on the evil worship that had roused the Puritan ire.

"These dark forests have hidden fearful things, Clay! It may shock you to learn that for four hundred years every generation of your family has dealt in every manner of Satanism, black magic, and demon-worship.

"Your grandfather, Eliakim Coe, was the last and the most powerful of a line of wizards. But he paid a fearful price for his power. He paid his daughter, Elizabeth, who was your mother."

"My mother!" I was bewildered and shocked.

"Your true father, Clay," continued that ringing, hypnotic chant, "was not the distant cousin, Esmond Coe, who married your mother over your grandfather's protests, and was found stabbed to death beside her on the morning of the bridal night. No! That crime was but the beginning of a frightful ceremony. And Eliakim Coe took his daughter, on the night following, to a circle of stones about an ancient altar on the summit of the mountain——"

"Once," the shuddering whisper was wrung from me, "I saw that altar!"

"And there," that dread, compelling voice throbbed on, "that diabolical ceremony was carried to its blasphemous completion. Stripped and bound, the virginal body of your mother was laid across the blackened altar. In response to the esoteric forbidden rituals of the wizard, a Dark Power came to claim the offering.

"And Eliakim Coe brought his daughter back, crippled and maddened, to give birth to you, Clay—and to your twin!"

"What"—I forced out the faint whisper—"what do you mean?"

Doctor Latham Kyle snapped his jaws together. His yellow lips were tight and hard as a mummy's. His deep eyes flamed at me. The boom of his hollow voice was startling.

"Clay," he said, "there are forces, powers, entities, that science has never glimpsed—because they are too colossal. But you must sense the tremendous shadows that fall upon our tiny earth from the frigid voids of space. Clay, you must know the fearful rulers of the fourth dimension! Your own dark blood must whisper to you——"

I had to nod, in spite of the outraged protest clamoring in my brain. For in the mystic Orient, as well as in my strange childhood, I had seen things that science and sanity could not account for.

"Then——"

The dry, husky whisper crept like an odious reptile past my lips.

"Then—my father was not a man? And I'm not entirely—human?"

The yellow skull nodded solemnly; the hollow voice intoned:

"That is the hideous truth, Clay, that I have feared to tell you."

Panic was rushing through my heart, like a black and frozen wind.

"So that's why," I breathed, "I've always felt—different! That's why I've always been a stranger among men! It's that evil blood that seizes my body when I fight, like a destroying demon——"

"Yes," the low, booming voice caught the word. "The demon in you." The flaming eyes lifted. "Through some accident of inheritance, the dark blood is recessive in you, Clay. Physically, you appear quite human. Psychically, you are also, save for the shadow of strangeness

that you feel, and for the waking of the demon when you fight.

"But I'm afraid for you, Clay!"

The terrible voice sank lower.

"Passion will awake that slumbering demon. It will transmute that shadow into reality. You must walk with care, my son, or you will lose all humanity, in a hideous reversion to the dark blood!

"If you married, you might become as monstrous as your brother. The strange blood was dominant in him. Tonight, in wishing to see you, he—or it—was displaying a fit of human emotion as rare as your fits of evil. For the most part, your twin is a mad monstrosity——"

"TONIGHT!"

My mounting terror seized the word, and I reeled under an avalanche of dread. Icy sweat drenched me. Sick, quivering, I sank against the back of the chair. It was a little time before my lips could form the faint query:

"Tonight? The thing in the cellar—that wanted me? That is my—my brother?"

Doctor Kyle nodded. His dark eyes looked quickly away, as if with pity. His voice throbbed to me faintly through the gray mist of dread:

"Your own brother, Clay. Its blood is your blood. Passion will cause your reversion to its form. What is equally dreadful, if you should marry Valyne, or any other woman, your children would probably be such things as it is!"

The chill gloom of the musty attic chamber was spinning around me. Fainter, ever receding, still I heard the booming tones:

"I attended your mother when you and your twin were born. I wanted to destroy the other, but neither she nor her father would allow. There was a strange perversity in her love. And Eliakim Coe desired the monster in the practise of

the dark art that was overwhelming him.

"As the strange being grew, your mother saw that it could never be reared in the world of men. When you were two years old—when Eliakim Coe died, a victim of the fearful powers he had summoned out of space—she left you in this household, and took the other into the forest.

"Clay, it was a dreadful, secret life that your mother led, for the next twenty years and more, in these dark mountains above Creston! She sacrificed herself for her monstrous son. She kept it in a cave, on Blue Squaw Mountain.

"She had no contact with the world, save for her infrequent midnight visits to me. But many a time, Clay, until the year when you left Creston, she stood beside your bed at night, and even touched your hair. But always she went back.

"A few months ago she came to me, ill. I told her that she was going to die. On the last night of her life, she coaxed your strange brother down from the cave, and gave it into my keeping. Since then we have kept it in the cellar.

"I still feel that it should be destroyed—as I wanted to destroy it when it was born. But I have preserved its life because of my promise to your mother, and because it will be a living exhibit to prove the authenticity of my book: *A History of the Sorceries and Demonolatries of Creston.*"

Fast in a frozen sea of dread, I dimly knew that Doctor Kyle was turning toward the door. I could scarcely hear him say:

"You may go back to your room, Clay. You see why you can never marry Valyne."

4. *At the Mercy of—Monstrosity!*

BACK in my own frosty room, I collapsed on the bed. I tried to think. But red chaos ruled my brain. Only one

clear thought emerged: If I couldn't marry Valyne Kirk, then I must die.

I tried to doubt what Doctor Kyle had told me. It was hideously incredible, and belief in it meant death. But the sober, convincing manner of his telling, the strangeness that had shadowed all my life, the lurking dread that festered in Creston, the hideous monster in the cellar—these combined to bring me maddening conviction.

I tried to think it a lie. But what reason had Doctor Kyle to lie to me, to whom he had always been a second father? What motive could he have for a deception calculated only to drive me away from Creston, a crazed and hopeless fugitive, for ever? And what lie could have darkened all my life, and set me apart from men, even in the distant East?

No! I could not escape the clutching intuition of horror. Strange and fearful blood burned through my body. In all the world was no being of my own kind—none save that chained monstrosity! And my love for Valyne could give birth only to terror, madness, and death.

Distantly, from below, I heard a sound like howling, and a chain clanking, and wood splintering. The monster—my twin——

Cold, trembling, I sat up on the edge of the bed. It was struggling; perhaps it would escape. A terrible resolve steadied me. I would never see it again.

I strode grimly to the window. Outside was night; the silent, immemorial forests of Creston; the gloomy, tangled slope of Blue Squaw Mountain, whose summit was crowned with that altar of frightful sacrifice.

Shrinking from the darkness and the horror of it, I was suddenly conscious of the weight sagging against my chest. There was a surer way. . . .

With a hand now steady, I slipped

the automatic out of its holster. It was heavy and cold and black. Its grim steel efficiency was a match for all the festering evil of ancient Creston. I snapped back the slide and watched the bright, blunt cartridge leap into the chamber.

I thrust the hard muzzle resolutely against my temple, hardly conscious of the quiet, swift rapping upon my door. But it was flung open, and Valyne rushed to me. Her urgent hand jerked my arm away.

"Clay! Clay!" gasped her terrified whisper. "I came because I was afraid you would!"

She stood before me. Her trembling hand still held down the gun. Her breast was fluttering to her quick breathing. Her violet eyes, wide, glistening with tears, held my face. The live, pulsating beauty of her slim body stung my own eyes with tears. Every soft line of it was infinitely precious. My resolution found new steel.

"Why shouldn't I?" I rasped the hoarse demand. "You know what I am! You know why we can't marry! And that the sooner I die the less likely I am to revert to—to something hideous!"

"I know what Doctor Kyle says." Her eyes probed to the back of my brain. "And you believe it, Clay?"

"I—I do. I tried not to. But my whole life points to the truth of it—even to the rage that struck down Jud Geer!"

"You must go away, Valyne," I said. I pushed her toward the door. "You must let me kill that fiend in me before it injures you."

Her body stood tremulously firm against the pressure of my hands.

"You don't understand, Clay," she told me, and a ringing strength was in her voice. "Even if it's true, I can't let you die—alone! For I love you, Clay."

I returned the gun to its holster, and caught her hands in mine. For I had

been touched and elated by the sudden conviction that our love was a pure flame that could burn all the tainting horror from my blood.

Her warm hands clasped mine, and she whispered:

"Clay, promise me that you will live as long as I do! Promise me that you will never again surrender to that horror! Just promise. And we will go away from Creston, in the morning, as we planned. Perhaps we can find a way to happiness. At least we can be together for a while—and together when we die!"

I promised. I thought we might consult some psychiatrist or occultist. . . .

THE glory of her love seemed for a little time to banish the sinister chill of evil from the room. I begged her to stay with me; for the dread that still haunted me was stronger than my regard for convention. And perhaps she would have stayed; for she too was strained and white with unuttered forebodings.

But there was a light, hurried knocking on the door, and old Sarah Kyle hobbled into the room. Her dark, pointed face was bloodless. Her small, bright eyes darted about the room, and a thin, anxious whisper lisped from her toothless mouth:

"Have ye seen it, Clay? Have ye heard it?"

"You mean——" I wet my lips. "You mean the thing in the cellar?"

Her glittering eyes met mine, veiled with unspeakable dread.

"Your brother," shrilled her tremulous whisper, "has broken his chains and gone."

I swayed, and caught Valyne to me, as if an icy dark wind had sought to drag her away.

The cracked whisper insisted:

"Have ye heard it?"

"Half an hour ago I heard the chain

rattling, and the sound of breaking wood."

The thin lips came together, like strips of dried leather.

"That must have been when it escaped. God knows where it went!"

Valyne whispered, into the fearful silence:

"What will it do, Mother Kyle?" Her big violet eyes came to me, with a naked horror pleading in them. "One day," she whispered, "I went down into the cellar, and it saw me through the bars. It wanted me, Clay! It tried to break out. For days it howled, and wouldn't touch its food.

"I'm afraid, Clay."

Her tense, trembling arms slipped around my neck, and her frightened eyes went back to Sarah Kyle.

Her thin lips still were pursed.

"I don't know what it will do," her thin voice said slowly. "It is cunning, and aflame with demon lusts. You're in danger, Valyne. Go back to your room, and lock the door. The rest of us must try to find it. The doctor and the servants are searching, now.

"And you must be careful for yourself, Clay. It was friendly, a while ago—it knew its own blood. But if it learns that you love Valyne, its affection will turn to jealous rage. . . .

"Listen!"

The whispered warning fell suddenly, and for a moment we were silent in the frosty room.

"I thought I heard it," said Sarah Kyle. "We must hasten. You must keep with me, Clay. The doctor thinks it will come to you."

In a shivering voice, Valyne said:

"Let me go with you."

"No, darling," protested the old woman; "you must keep out of its sight. Remember, once it went mad at sight of you. If it saw you again, we could never quiet it. And it might harm you."

Valyne acquiesced, and we took her to her room. She kissed me, and her lips were cold.

"Remember your promise, Clay," she whispered. "And tomorrow we shall go away together. Don't let it harm you!"

We heard the lock snap in her door, and went down the stairs.

Sarah Kyle took a kerosene lamp from the dining-table.

"We shall go to the cellar to begin." Her bright, sunken eyes darted at me suddenly. "Have ye any sense for it, Clay? Any intuition from the common blood? Do ye think that ye could trail it?"

"I don't know."

My dazed brain was still spinning blindly along the black, swift river of horror.

"The doctor says it will come to you," she was saying. "And when it comes, I can calm it. It ever heeded me——"

"It won't come to nobody," put in the flat, mannish voice of big Joseph Hand, who had just appeared out of the dark hall. "It wants that girl! It smelled the odor of her on *him*, when he came to speak to it. It broke out to git her, and it won't come to nobody——"

SARAH KYLE led the way down the steps, and I carried the lamp into the walled-off cell. The heavy door had been crushed outward, torn from its hinges as if by some terrific projectile. A broken length of rusty iron chain lay across the threshold. Beyond was a rude wooden trough, which had been overturned, to spill dark, clotted blood across the foul stone floor.

Suffocatingly strong in the room was that acrid, animal stench. Reeling with its nausea, I stumbled back toward the door. But an idea had struck me. The others had seemed unaware of the odor; perhaps I had an abnormal sensitivity to it. If I could follow the trail——

Faintly, then, I heard Valyne's scream.

I ran up the two flights of stairs to her room, vainly cursing the blind folly that had left her alone. Sarah Kyle came clattering along behind, carrying the lamp.

"Valyne!" I gasped, at the door. "Valyne, are you all right?"

The answer was the bang of a loose shutter.

The door was still locked. I kicked it twice, thrust my arm through the hole to twist the key that she had left in the lock. The yellow flicker of Sarah Kyle's lamp showed that the room was empty. The bed was turned down; a filmy pink night-dress was laid across the pillow.

The window was open; the unfastened shutter banged again.

Ashen-faced, Sarah Kyle was staring out into the frosty dark.

"It was outside," she whispered. "It climbed over the tool shed, and broke through the window. It has carried the poor darling out into the forest."

Her voice became a thin, fervid scream.

"I wish to God my husband had killed that fiend when it was born!"

"Where"—the wild whisper leapt from my lips—"where are the others?"

I heard her say, "Searching——"

Then my frantic voice was ringing through the gloomy halls:

"Doctor Kyle! It has taken Valyne!"

Ghastly echoes gibbered at me.

"Where could they all be?"

"Searching," said Sarah Kyle. "They must be outside."

"God! I can't stand here wasting time! Where could it have taken her?"

The stooped old hag came suddenly toward me and thrust the sputtering lamp into my face. The skeletal fingers of one claw-like hand sank savagely into my arm. Her piercing eyes transfixed me. Her high voice sank to a strained and husky whisper.

"Don't ye know, Clay? Doesn't your

own sleeping demon whisper it to your own stained soul? Won't your own dark blood draw ye there?"

Instinctively jerking back, I demanded:

"What do you mean?"

Her fingers clung to my arm with a terrible strength, and her voice rasped on with its unthinkable accusation:

"Have ye never felt the call of the elder dark beings that are your kin, Clay? Are ye never drawn to the black altar on the mountain, where your evil father came to your mother? Have ye no sense of the secret power of that circle of stones——"

"You mean"—the gasp broke from my lips—"you mean it has taken her—there?"

Her shriveled head jerked to a quick, sinister nod.

"It knows the place," she said, "for your mother often took it there. She told me it was ever most content in the occult power of that mystic circle. It must have taken Valyne there. And may she die before the demon-child is born!"

5. *The Beast in the Beast*

I THINK that Sarah Kyle tried to follow me up Blue Squaw Mountain. But desperation had lent me frantic wings. Her shrill voice fell behind, screaming:

"Wait for me, Clay! I can calm it! It always understood——"

The night was moonless and frosty and still. It was very dark beneath the gnarled and ancient trees, upon that rugged mountain slope. And it was many years since I had trod it. Again and again I sprawled and fell in the thorny tangles of undergrowth, or blundered heavily into the boles of gigantic trees. And once I rose, fingering my lacerated, bleeding face, to realize that I was lost. But grim urgency brought back youthful memories with the effect of preternatural vision. And obscure instincts brought me at last, breath-

less and fearful, to the leafy edge of that forbidden glade that since childhood I had apprehensively shunned.

There horror struck me motionless.

Red tongues of malevolent flame set lurid shadows into a fantastic demon dance against the surrounding dark wall of forest. Glowing sinister scarlet outlined the circle of rough-hewn monolithic stones, standing twice a man's height. Within that cabalistic circle I could see the low, blood-darkened altar—burdened with madness and terror!

Valyne Kirk lay across it, on her back, between two wan and ghastly fires. She was stripped nearly nude; her alabaster loveliness was bare to the red, mounting flames. Her wrists and ankles were bound with rope. She was motionless, and, I thought, unconscious.

Crouching over her, looming colossal and grotesque and hideous in the sinister gleam of the altar fires, was the monster I had glimpsed in the cellar dungeon—that dread creature of my own dark blood. It brought back those haunting lines from Poe:

They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human—

It was gigantic, yet vaguely man-like in outline. It was horned. Its long, angular legs ended in cloven hoofs. Its body was heavy, bulging, hideously gross. It was covered with coarse, dark hair.

The stench of it came to me where I stood, an odor overwhelmingly nauseating as that of a reptile's den.

The red flames burst higher, on either side of Valyne's helpless body, and suddenly I saw its face. To my mind came that other line:

They are Ghouls.

There are things that words cannot describe, even by suggestion. I can say that its face was grossly broad, and yet made

savage with an angular gauntness; that it was noseless, queerly hairy, livid; that its eyes were crimson lakes of flaming hell.

But the demon that glared from it escapes the words.

It is enough to say that when I looked into that creature's face, and knew that its blood was mine—then I realized that my promise to Valyne had been mad folly. If the blood of that beast was in my veins, then it must be spilled before its pollution touched another human soul.

It was curiously just, I thought, that one fiend should destroy another. For once I was conscious of no shrinking from combat. I was frankly glad of the red and dreadful rage that swept me into the fury of destruction.

As I leapt past the circle of tall stones, I saw that the twin fires were burning close to Valyne. Their crimson tongues would soon be licking her naked flash—unless I won.

The monstrosity saw me. With an uncouth, bestial snarl of surprize and rage, it lumbered toward me. Its hairy, taloned, foul-smelling hand slapped at me. The blow flung me to the frosty ground, at the foot of the black altar.

I stumbled back to my feet, plunging blindly toward it. . . . The gun under my coat was forgotten. And all the details of the fight have been fogged with that red madness. I know that I fought that being, body to body. I know that I staggered with the sickness of its nauseating effluvium. I remember being crushed in its powerful, hairy arms, being flung to the ground and kicked with its cloven hooves. I dimly recall that it battered at my head, with a great black stone from the altar. . . .

But when the shock of returning sanity struck me, it was slumping to the ground. I reeled over it, swinging a last desperate blow. It went wild; I stumbled groggily, to my knees.

THE gross, hairy bulk lay before the black altar. It quivered a little, and ceased to move. The mad horror of its face was hidden, for which I was thankful. I saw a little dark hole in the side of its long, flattened head, saw dark blood gushing out. That surprised me, for it was a bullet wound, and I didn't remember having drawn my gun. But in that crimson chaos—

Valyne moaned. I lurched to the low black altar, and lifted her from between the two licking fires. I untied the ropes. She was shivering. Her violet eyes looked at me, and it sickened me to see their mute and shrinking terror.

"The thing" — she choked — "the thing—"

"It will never frighten you again," I promised, "Valyne darling."

I carried her a little away from the inert horror by the altar, and wrapped my coat around her. My arms clung to her. The last embrace. . . .

From the moment I glimpsed that hideous face, my purpose had been clear. Hope and doubt alike had died before the grim resolve that never should another such demon be born into the world. Not if my death could prevent it. . . .

I was glad when Valyne seemed to drop again into unconsciousness—from shock and fear, I was certain, rather than from any injury. It was better that she shouldn't see me go.

I left her, and reluctantly touched the gray, motionless bulk of the monster. Its limp weight and the rush of blood from the little wound assured me that it was truly dead.

Resolutely, then, I strode toward the dark wall of forest that would hide my body, fumbling under my coat for the automatic.

"Clay!"

The strong hollow voice boomed from beyond the circle of stones, and gaunt

Doctor Kyle stalked into the crimson light. His powerful hand gripped a hunting-rifle. Gray smoke was curling from its muzzle. He stood for a moment between two red-lit pillars, and in the scarlet flickering his head looked more than ever like a skull.

He nodded to my voiceless question.

"Yes," he said, "I shot your brother, Clay—I should have killed him the day he was born. You were unarmed; he was getting the better of you. Sarah," he explained, "told us where you had come.—Valyne! is she all right?"

I turned for a moment to look at her motionless body. It wavered and faded with my tears, and my voice was husky when I said:

"She isn't harmed, Doctor. And you needn't fear that I shall wreck her life, or that there shall be born another of my blood. For I'm going—after my brother."

The sunken eyes that flamed from that gaunt, skeletal head were abruptly crimson in the firelight. Through thin lips came the ghastly rasp:

"Perhaps—perhaps that is best."

And I strode on, away from the twin red fires of the blood-stained altar, through the tall silent stones, toward the dark forest waiting to drink my blood. I was reaching again for the cold, comforting grip of the automatic. Its swift flame would burn all the horror and the madness from my brain. When I was dead, I thought with dim gratitude, I should be at last like other men. . . .

"Clay—"

It was Valyne's voice, faint, but urgent, frantic.

But I dared not stop, lest my love and her tenderness should sweep me into the black pit of a crime too hideous to name. I strode on, into the shadows that would hide and comfort me for ever.

"Clay!" It was a terrified gasp. "Come back to me. Remember your promise—"

But rasping against my brain was Doctor Kyle's fearful warning:

"Passion will wake your slumbering demon, Clay. You must walk with care, my son, or you will lose all humanity, in a hideous reversion. If you married, you might become as monstrous as your brother."

I heard his hollow tones addressing Valyne:

"Peace, my child. God has ordered it. I will care for you——"

I hastened on, lest my purpose fail too soon. . . .

The faint, desperate appeal came again:

"Clay—listen! It's all a trick. A ghastly hoax! *Listen!*"

A hoax! That word brought me back at a run. My outraged sanity had fought grimly against belief. But there had seemed no escape. What could have been the motive for so frightful a deception?

"My child!" Amazement boomed in the voice of Doctor Kyle. "What are you saying?"

"Listen!" repeated Valyne. "To that!"

She struggled to sit up, pointing at the dead monster. Wonderingly, I moved toward it, stooped. And abruptly, in the still, frosty air, I heard a familiar sound: the jangling tick of a cheap watch.

"It's Jud!" her faint voice said. "I heard his watch, when he was carrying me."

I flung back the hideous head, and tore at its ghastly face. It came away in my hands, a painted mask of wax and soft rubber adhesive. Beneath, dark with oozing blood, was the broad, bearded face of Jud Geer. The glazed, protruding eyes, still open, leered up with the fearful grin of death.

"Jud!" exclaimed the hollow, surprised voice of Doctor Kyle. "How could he——"

I ROSE abruptly to face him.

"You needn't act, Doctor," I told him, grimly. "This thing is your planning—though God knows what you hoped to gain by preventing my marriage to Valyne——"

"Clay!" he interrupted, still protesting. "Are you mad? Sarah and I have loved you since you were an infant. I was desolated at the thought of your suicide——"

"Suicide!" I grasped the word, with sudden understanding. "That's it! You were trying to drive me to kill myself. It's all part of a monstrous plot—everything from that letter you wrote me months ago, to Jud carrying Valyne up here. You were all trying to drive me to insane suicide! But, in Heaven's name, why?"

"I'll tell you, Clay." A hard ring came into his hollow voice. "We are poor in Creston. We live and die in bitter, grinding poverty. And we knew that you had made money in the Orient; that if you died, before your marriage, that money would be ours.

"The servants were ready to aid us, for a share. Jud Geer was useful, because he wanted Valyne. I shot him because I saw you were getting the better of him; I feared you were about to unmask him. Besides, he was becoming too impatient for his reward.

"My studies in the dark secret history of Creston supplied material for the hoax. Some of your forefathers really dealt in the black arts, Clay—some of them must actually have had a hand in the building of this altar.

"But out of respect for the dead"—and a twisted smile of terrible mockery crossed his gaunt, skeletal face—"I should tell you that your grandfather, Eliakim Coe, was no more than a common lunatic. He murdered your father in his bed, true enough. And he wrecked

your mother's life, if in a manner a little less picturesque than I told you.

"And your own youth, in the shadow of that crime, was strange enough to give some color to my account."

He smiled again in the red firelight, hideously.

"The details should be clear enough, if I mention Jud's private entrance to the cellar——"

The rifle lifted a little in his tense grasp.

"It was a fair plan, Clay." His voice rang grim and cold with triumphant menace. "And even now it shall not fail me!" His tone sank. "It is known that you and Jud were rivals for Valyne. It is known that you have fought, and that you both are violent men. I shall remove from Jud's body this artistic creation of mine, that made him your brother. And who will be surprized to find the three of you together, dead?"

Very abruptly, his rifle snapped to the

level. Its barrel flamed red in the glare from the altar, with a companion light to the twin fires of hell in the sunken eyes. Sparks burst from the muzzle, and the report shattered against the pillars of stone.

For once, then, I was completely thankful for that swift, deadly response to danger that has ever been independent of my conscious mind. I was myself surprized to feel the hard abrupt recoil of the automatic in my hand.

And Doctor Kyle had never learned of the weapon in my armpit holster. I think I had fired before he saw the gun; I am sure that he was dead before his aimless contracting finger pulled the trigger of the falling rifle.

Valyne and I have never returned to Creston. In the darkness we went down the farther slope of Blue Squaw Mountain, and morning found us in a green and peaceful meadow, whose sunlit fragrance washed away the horror of the night.