

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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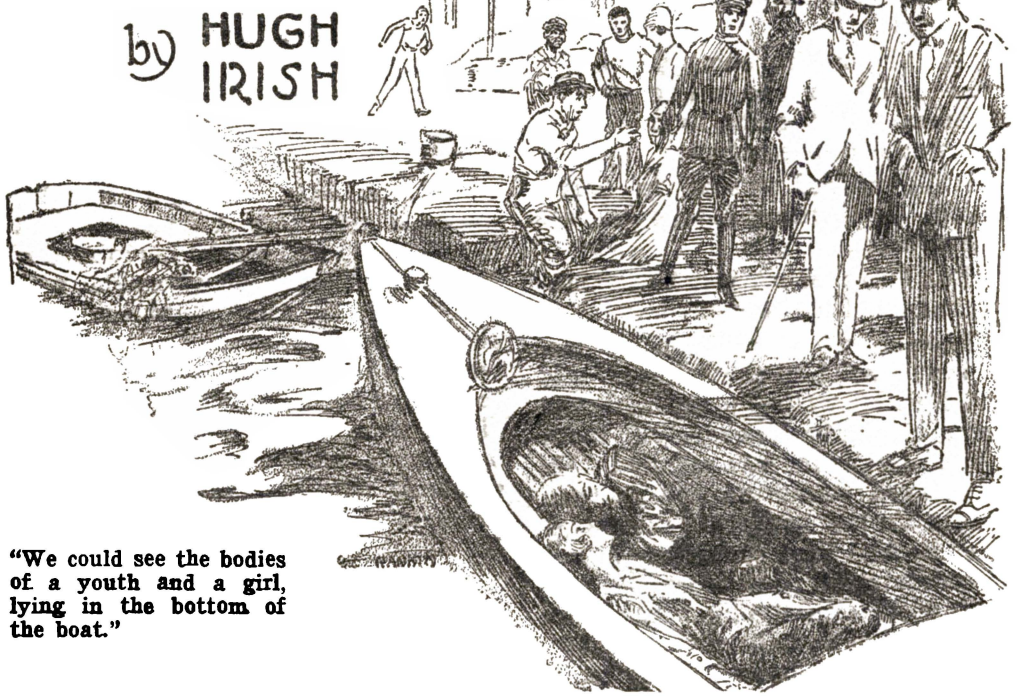
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The MYSTERY of SYLMARE

by HUGH IRISH



"We could see the bodies of a youth and a girl, lying in the bottom of the boat."

IT WAS accidental, my meeting the Chapmans at Tampa. I had been doing Florida, as most everybody does at least once, had gone down the east coast, and on to Havana in a Key West packet. I was now on my way north up the west side of the peninsula. I found that the real estate sellers of the east side of that incomparable sand-drift haven't anything on those of the west side, if anybody should ask you.

But the trip had all been different enough from selling farm machinery in Saskatchewan, which was my own specialty, and as I went down the hotel steps on the way to the railroad station I carried, besides my traveling bag, an equally heavy regret that my week in Tampa was up.

A hotel taxi was at the curb, and as I crossed the walk toward it, whom should I almost bump into but Estey Chapman and—as I had every reason to suppose—Estelle Morse? They had just come out of a shop, Chapman's arms laden with purchases, and were on the point of climbing into their car, parked in front of the store.

I must have stood in open-mouthed nonplus through a heartbeat or so when I recognized them. Then my amazement was swallowed up in our mutual greetings. Chapman put me right, in a bashful way, when I addressed Estelle as Mrs. Morse.

"Mrs. Chapman—now," he stammered, across his armful of parcels. They both laughed, easily, at my

momentary funk. One risks a contretemps or two, losing one's self for years, as I had done in the Northwest. I had left Estelle happily married to Professor Morse—an event following close on our university association—and Chapman burning the midnight electricity trying to break into print.

"You'll have to come up to the house and hear the whole story," Chapman said, turning to the car to rid his arms of the parcels.

Estelle nodded sweetly in confirmation. Everything Estelle did was done sweetly.

"But I was on my way to the station, man!" I half objected.

Chapman wouldn't listen to me. He waved me into the tonneau seat with Estelle, while he sat with the driver, his big back squarely in front of me. Chapman was massive. He had played center on the football team in his last two years at college.

Estelle had kept something of her old-time vivacity; but it seemed subdued, as though it might have run the gantlet of no telling what repressive memories. She had, to my taste, more than ever of brunette loveliness, yet she didn't look just fit, somehow, and I noticed that Chapman helped her into the car as though she were an invalid. I couldn't chaff her, as I once would have done. There was some subtle quality in her manner that stopped me. We talked of the old days, but we did so a little pensively.

The car traversed the city's streets and its citrus-screened outskirts, coming to a halt at last beside a sandy plot bordered in the distance with scrub pines. In the midst of the plot stood the Chapman residence, bare and bleak, sans veranda, sans stoop, and even sans shade trees. It was just a great plain unrelieved cube, with no projections of any kind about it save the cornices.

I found everything lovely inside though: large, brightly lighted rooms—the lighting was really extraordinary—and the rich furnishings were of the best, and in taste.

"You'll have a nice place of this, when you've had time to grow some trees," I said to Chapman that evening, as we sat outside at sunset, smoking.

"We have all the trees we are likely to have, soon."

There was abstraction in the manner of his reply, which, I thought, presaged the story I knew he had to tell me. I had sensed his attempts to get a start on it, all afternoon, and had wondered what there could be about it that was so deucedly hard to tell. But if he was at the door of the thing now he was diverted again, for at the approach of the sudden dusk of Florida latitudes, he started up suddenly with a scared look and an exclamation that we must go to join Estelle.

We found her in the music room, just seating herself at the piano. Something told me that if we had not come when we did the instrument beneath her hands would have summoned us. A sense of queerness struck me the instant we entered the room. It was the lights, I think. All the electric bulbs in the room, and there were ten times too many, were beaming garishly. I suspected Chapman or his wife of an odd passion for light, light, and yet more light, as though gloom or shadow were a deadly gas that must be kept off.

One of the maids was with Estelle when we entered. I noticed that. But she withdrew when we came in, as though she had been there merely to keep her mistress from being alone.

Estelle played for us until dinner was announced. After dinner, the three of us recalled old friends, tracing this or that one to his or her suc-

cess or failure. We went over a little of Chapman's work. A good deal of it I had never seen, though it was now being published. I had been out of touch with most prints for years.

ESTELLE left us at 10:30, avowedly to let us smoke without making her cough, but really, I knew quite well, to clear the way for Chapman's disclosures, that seemed so hard for him to disclose. The thing he told me could not have been told with her present. That's certain. We went to Chapman's den. It was already bedtime, and Chapman made no more false starts.

"Had Morse shown any signs of—of overstudy, before you went West?" he asked doubtfully, when we were settled in easy chairs.

"No." My answer was prompt; but, on his remaining silent, I reconsidered: "That is, he always seemed intent on his work, when at work, but he was able apparently to forget it when away from it."

"So he was, once," Chapman agreed. "But later on, his intensity at his work grew on him, while he lost entirely his way of letting go of it when he knocked off. Finally, he developed a tendency to drag his infernal science into everything that came up in everyday life. That got to be devilish unpleasant for Estelle, and, as I seemed the only one who could fetch him out of it even temporarily, they had me about as much as possible. It was Estelle's doings. But Morse wanted me, too. I think he felt that he was going a gait, mentally.

"His hobby eventually ran to botany—that is, to that phase of botany that considers its relation to biology in general. He delved into vegetable sentiency, and vegetable consciousness—can you imagine it?—and even into vegetable mobility! He finally came to more than half

believe that plants have not only feeling but a kind of mentality, or at least consciousness, and at the last he became next to noisy on the subject of chlorophyl and its powers."

Chapman stopped and stared at the floor. I shook my head, at what he had told me about Morse, and wondered, meanwhile, how much of the story I was to be cheated out of by his intimate relation to it.

"When Morse's mother died," he resumed, "she left him the old home place in Sylmare, on the northeast coast. He and Estelle used to spend their vacations there. It's a sleepy old town, but something of a summer resort for a few New York and Boston people who like to dodge the expense or the clatter of the more popular places. There's a writers' and artists' summer colony some eight miles up the coast from Sylmare, and I spent my summers there, what time I wasn't with the Morses. I was there—at the writers' roost—when the thing happened.

"It happened in June. The Morses had visited Estelle's people in Atlanta at the end of the school year, Morse going North a week in advance of his wife, to get together a corps of servants and put the old house in order. Estelle never liked mussing around a house. Morse telephoned me, on his arrival, and I went down the next day in my motor-boat. I knew that Estelle would want me to be with him as much as I could, while she was not.

"I found the house topsyturvy in the hands of the cleaners. To get away from the dust and litter, Morse and I went out for a spin in his car.

"The road ran along the foot of a cavelike forest that covered the hill. It used to be a fancy of Morse's that a dweller on some other planet, wholly unacquainted with our forms of life, would, on coming to Sylmare, be sure to think the trees the real life of the place, and that the people go-

ing about beneath them were some sort of rather unimportant parasitic form. At any rate, the gloomy old town on the sea slope was dark and dim with the shade of maples, beeches and elms, and its steep streets running down to the shell road along the beach were very like grottoes in some half-lit cavern with sloping floor.

"Imagine, now, a lot of men and women running down those dim aisles beneath the trees toward the old wharf on the bayshore, and you have a part of that which brought our forty mile an hour clip in Morse's car to a sudden stop.

"'Something's gone wrong, here, Ed!' I exclaimed, turning to Morse as the car slowed up.

"I don't think he heard me at all. His face was turned to the wharf, and his vibrant, ashen lips were articulating, 'It's another! It's another!'

"He unlatched the car door and jumped out, hurrying toward the wharf. I was at his heels, the chauffeur at mine.

"A fisherman's rowboat was drawn up at the wharf, and it had in tow a small motor-boat. In the last, as we drew nearer, we could see the bodies of a youth and a girl.

"'My God!' Morse gasped, stopping short and gazing stilly at the two forms in the boat. 'It's Frank Kirby and Alta Cline!'

"I heard the chauffeur whisper an oath as we went on toward the wharf.

"The youth and the girl looked about nineteen or twenty. They were dressed for outing. The boy had on a Naval Reserve uniform, queerly shot with little pricks and rents of the fabric, and the girl's knickers bore the same strange marks. Her bobbed brown hair lay about her sweet set face like a lovely soft frame about a picture. The youth had a powder-smoked bullet-

hole in his right temple, and the girl bore a wound quite like it. The queerest thing of all, however, was the great number of scratches and slight wounds on their faces, their hands, and their wrists.

"'The Ellis boys were like that!' I heard a woman near me whisper to another.

"'Mrs. Van Scoyk, too!' the other answered, with a straight, wild look. 'And Barry, also, I heard.'

"The coroner came pushing through the crowd about the wharf. His examination disclosed nothing we had not already seen, save a revolver with two empty chambers lying in the bottom of the boat. He gave directions for the removal of the bodies. As they carried the girl out of the boat, one of her dead, drooping hands still grasped and carried a small bag of fir tips, such as are used for stuffing aromatic pillows. Eyes filled, at that sight. Somehow, that was the most pathetic thing about the whole solemn scene.

"I turned to Morse for an explanation, but he shook his head, at my questioning look, and led the way silently to the group about the fisherman who had brought in the boats and was now telling and retelling his story.

"'I was 'bout seven miles down coast when I see their boat driftin' out to sea, engine dead and nobody rowin'. I could see 'em layin' as you saw 'em, here. They was so still that I rowed up to 'em, tryin' to make out what was wrong. But when I got near enough to see them scratches on their faces, I went weak as a cat; for I saw the Ellis boys, and Barry, too. It was all I could do to nerve myself up to towin' 'em in.' He shook his head and started up the beach.

"'You had no means of judging how far they had drifted?' Morse

asked, as we walked beside the man toward the road.

"'No; but I saw 'em leave the wharf, this morning. They was gay as two kids, then. Is it so, they was to be married next fall?'"

"'Yes, it's true, I believe,' Morse replied gravely, following me to the car.

"'What in the name of heaven do you make of this, Ed?' I asked, as our machine moved away.

"He shook his head, silently.

"'But what did they mean—about the Ellis boys, and Barry?'"

"'It's a long story—too long to tell here.' His eyes were on the driver, meaningly. I didn't know, then, as he did, that every servant in the town was already on the verge of pulling up stakes and leaving, because of this strange, deadly thing that was killing people right and left among them. True, these two latest victims had evidently killed themselves; but everyone seemed sure that it was The Thing that had brought it about.

"'Let's go home,' Morse suggested. 'I don't feel in the mood for a drive, now.'

"I nodded assent, and he gave the order to the driver.

"**W**HEN we got back to the house we found the library, at least, out of the hands of the dusters, and went into it. Morse was moody. It seemed an effort for him to begin the disclosures I felt he had brought me there to make.

"'In the first place,' he began, at last, when he saw that I couldn't or wouldn't talk of anything else, 'the two victims you saw at the wharf just now are merely the latest of a long series, though I'll admit that they have affected me more than has any of the others, because of their carefree youth and their promise of life and love and happiness. But I know of six such cases, directly; and,

indirectly, of a number of others. They are all without a parallel—that I can find—in human experience.'

"I shivered and shook my head, moving my chair nearer to his in the great, gloomy library.

"'The first of the more recent cases,' he went on, 'was that of Mrs. Van Scoyk. You didn't know the Van Scoyks?'"

"'I never heard the name until today. It was whispered, then.'

"'They summered here, or rather, she did. Van Scoyk ran out from the city usually Friday nights, going back Mondays. She went in for boating; she was, in fact, an expert with the oars.

"'I was away when the Van Scoyk affair happened. It was last summer. Mrs. Van Scoyk had been out on the bay in her rowboat. Toward evening, a passing boatman saw her leap from the shore into the water. This, mind you, was in sight of her splendid summer home on the North Bluff. She had everything to live for. The Van Scoyks were wealthy.

"'It came out at the inquest that several of her acquaintances had passed her as she rowed up the bay on her way home, but she paid not the slightest attention to any of their greetings. She seemed dull and dazed—dead alive, as one witness expressed it.

"'The boatman raced to her to get her out of the water, calling an alarm as he did so; but she could not be revived. She was dead. On the beach near by was her boat, and in the deep sand near the waterside she had molded with her hands a shallow grave, on which she had placed a bouquet of wild flowers.

"'Now comes the strangest part of this strange case: Mrs. Van Scoyk's clothing was all pricked and torn, and her face and hands were covered with mysterious scratches and small wounds, like those of the

two you just now saw at the wharf! I suppose you noticed that detail?"

"Noticed it! I was so struck with it that I saw little else—save the bag of fir tips."

"The fir tips . . . yes. That is . . . something." Morse had evidently forgotten my presence for the moment, and was staring at the floor in deep thought.

"I have studied closely three of the five cases that have occurred since that of Mrs. Van Scoyk," he went on, coming out of his abstraction. "The Ellis boys—you heard Gibbs mention them?—were two lads of twelve and fourteen. They, too, were drowned. They had been out clamming, but had come in and had tied up their boat in its usual place. Even at that, their death must have been attributed to accident, but for the fact that, when their bodies were recovered, their faces, hands, and clothes bore those same strange marks! Foul play, of some queer, crazy kind, was suspected. I looked for the affair to get into the headlines of the metropolitan press, but it didn't."

"The Barry case happened shortly afterward. Barry was a bachelor who lived with his unmarried sister, about half a mile up the coast. He was a farmer, a close-fisted one who wanted his own, and a man who apparently hadn't a thought above his meager daily savings. But Barry had one weakness—fishing. He had spent the whole of the day of his death somewhere on the bay, fishing. Plenty of people saw him rowing home at nightfall; but he stared straight ahead in the same half-dead way that Mrs. Van Scoyk had done, answering the hail of no one.

"Well, Barry never reached home; that is, he reached the premises, but not the house. His sister, hearing a shot, ran out to the barn-lot, where she found him dying. He

had shot himself with a small rifle which he kept at the barn for killing rats. Now, listen: Barry's face and hands and clothes bore the same queer marks that the others had borne!"

"If Morse meant to impress me, he succeeded. I sat staring from the library window into the gloom beneath the shrubbery without, almost as still and breathless as those forms I had seen lifted from the boat. When I at last looked up, Morse went on speaking.

"But of all the victims of this mysterious, baffling thing, those of today are the most touching. They were at the brink of life's sweetest period, the mating time. There was no opposition to their love affair. I am as sure as one can be of anything, almost, that there was not a cloud in their sky when Briggs saw them leave the wharf this morning!"

"In God's name, Ed, what can it be?" I cried out, springing up to pace the floor.

"He shook his head. 'Not one word has anyone ever heard any of them speak, between what happened—if anything happened—and their death.'

"Their wounds suggest—a fight with some bird or beast,' I hazarded.

"He looked at the floor, in thought. 'I can't think it,' he replied at last, raising his gaze to mine. 'The scratches are superficial, and there seems no sign of the claw or talon about them.'

"Has no search of the vicinity been made?"

"No. It's been talked of, but—well, for what would one search, in a case of this kind?"

"That silenced me, for the moment.

"But that is not the real reason a search has not been made,' he went on. 'There's the danger that a search would result in—more fatalities.'

"'I'm willing to risk it,' I ventured grimly.

"'Not alone!' he objected, startled by my remark.

"'Well, with a party, then.'

"'A party would be hard to handle, hard to control. It would destroy more evidence than it gathered. Besides, a party would look—silly, when you don't know what you're hunting for. A still hunt would be better.'

"'I took that as a sort of a challenge. 'I'll go with you, if you like,' I said.

"'When?'

"'I considered. I had an unfinished article overdue, and an idle typist up at the colony drawing pay while she flirted with no telling which one of the other scribblers or dabblers.

"'Would the day after tomorrow do?' I asked.

"'Perfectly. I have all the time there is.'

"'He had become laconic, but I could see that he was still tense and nervous. To relieve the strain, I asked: 'These other cases you mentioned, outside of those you have looked into, where did you learn of them?'

"'In the files of the local newspaper. I went to the bottom of the entire moldy heap. Fifty-four years! A fire had destroyed everything up to 1867.' He was walking the floor, now, his eyes gleaming like those of an ecstatic.

"'What did you find in the files?' I demanded.

"'I found eleven mysterious deaths in the fifty-four years!' he hurled at me, stopping short in his uneasy prance across the floor. 'Too many for one small town,' he added. 'I found, too, that all but one of them happened in summer, and they all exhibited a strangely identical lack of cause. Four of the eleven are known to have borne the strange

wounds we have seen, and I suspect that three of the others did. Their bodies were never recovered from the bay. Four of the eleven went in pairs, and were fishermen, without, I should say, a thought above their daily catch!'

"'There's something deadly abnormal about it, Ed,' I mused aloud, peering at the floor.

"'Yes—if the extremely rare, or possibly the unique, is—abnormal,' he countered.

"'He plainly was at his theorizing again, and I thought I might as well go to the bottom of it. 'You have—an idea about it, Ed?' I half asked.

"'He hesitated, standing with one foot on a chair to gaze gloomily through a window. 'Nothing credible, Estey,' he replied, at last. 'Nothing that I would care to advance, even to you.'

"'There was but one thought in either of our minds, I'm sure, when I left him, a few minutes later, and that was our proposed search for a thing that I, at least, hadn't the least idea of what we were searching for. He intended no publicity, no unnecessary risk, no self-sacrifice, at that time. I'm sure of that.'

CHAPMAN took up a cut-glass decanter from the desk beside us and went into a tiny lavatory just off the den for a turn of fresh water. It was a hot night. As he came out of the lavatory he snapped a switch, and I saw the lights in the library go out.

"'They're all in bed,' he said. 'There's no use having the place lit up like a power house.'

We drank some of the water, and Chapman lit another cigar. I had had enough of smoking.

"'Morse intended to play square,' Chapman resumed. 'I am positive of that. But when my telephone bell rang at an unearthly hour of the morning we were to go on our search,

I knew that something had gone awry. I got up and went to the instrument. Its metallic whine, as aloof and impersonal as though it was giving out the weather forecast, let me know that a milkman, early astir, had found Morse sitting at a raised window of his study, dead!

"I threw on my clothes and ran out to the boathouse. I had a key. There was a line of daylight low in the northeast, but no one was up. It was supposed to be a fifteen minute run to Sylmare, but I must have jerked the painter through a stay-irrig in the old wharf at the foot of the town in ten minutes at the most.

"Early as it was, a crowd of town-folk had gathered outside the window of Morse's study when I arrived. They fell back in whispering groups beneath the trees as I entered the gate. Naturally, Morse's death, following so close on that of Frank Kirby and Alta Cline, had fallen on them with cumulative effect. They were awed. In the dim light under the trees they looked as might a group of primitive men, huddled in the face of some unknown, mysterious danger.

"I approached the window slowly and in extreme dread, stopping short when I reached it, to stare fixedly into Ed's face as at the Medusa! It bore the baffling marks I was now familiar with, the marks I had seen on the youth and the girl in the boat!

"It was a moment between—him and me. Not pleasant, those rare moments alone with the dead. I don't know whether death really adds weight to what one has said, or believed, or advocated, before dying, but I do know that my mind brushed nearer Morse's queer theory, while I was standing there before his stark body, than ever before.

"Under the spell of his dead presence, I watched a green worm measure its laborious way along the sill of the open window between us, watched it rear its forward length in air,

pause an instant, then bring up its trailing rear, as though it were a dragged burden.

"The worm brought to my mind one of Morse's favorite arguments: that its kind are a significant connecting link between the two great divisions of life, animals and plants, its imperfect mobility relating it to the one and its green color pointing plainly to the other. He believed that its alternate movement of first one part of its body and then the other was due to its scant dole of mobile energy, sufficient only to animate half its body at a time.

"I turned from the window and went into the house. Everything was just as it had been the last time I saw him—everything but Ed himself. The familiar appointments of the study, the books on their shelves, the writing machine on its stand, the pens gleaming dully in their wire holder, seemed only to accentuate the dead man's inability to move. He was now like them—inert. Somehow, they brought out the fact, subtly, that he was still all there except that mysterious quality called consciousness, with its accompanying parallel, the power to move.

"There were two doctors in the town and they were both there, in the room. I knew Knowles, and he introduced me to Eberslee—in a whisper. Imagine a doctor, whispering over the dead! It shows what the thing had done to us—to all of us. The coroner hadn't yet been called.

" 'We can make nothing of it,' Dr. Knowles whispered, meaning, clearly, the cause of Morse's act. There was no mystery about the cause of his death, or rather, of the means of it. His lips were burned, and an empty glass on the writing desk smelled of acid.

" 'He seems much like the others,' Knowles went on; 'but——' He hesitated, looked at Eberslee, then back

at me. 'You probably wouldn't know of—'

" 'Yes, I know,' I interrupted. 'Morse told me, himself. He—we were—interested in the other cases.'

" 'We guessed that,' Eberslee interposed. 'That's why we telephoned you. That, and these. He left these written sheets for you.' He crossed the room to the writing machine stand and lifted a paperweight from a few pages of manuscript.

"I took up the sheets of paper, gingerly. There wasn't a reason under the blue sky why I should take these two doctors into my confidence in the matter of Morse's last words to me, but such was my immeasurable interest and theirs, no thought of any other course ever entered any of our heads, I think. We tiptoed from the study into the old parlor as cautiously as though we feared the contents of the precious sheets might be jeopardized by a heavy footfall. Grouped at a window for light, we read the dimly penned pages, handing them from one to another as we read."

CHAPMAN left off speaking and leaned over the writing desk before him. He unlocked a drawer and took out of it a Size 11 white envelope. I felt goofy—felt definitely on the verge of an ordeal. The taboo of the cerements was about the thing Chapman held in his hand. It was getting an ugly time of night, and the house was still as a crypt. From off somewhere, a pensive chorus of frogs reached us faintly, while nearer at hand, without the screened windows, the whine of baffled mosquitos haunted the night.

" 'Estelle doesn't know I kept this,' Chapman said, slipping the rubber band off the envelope. " 'She thinks I burned it. She has a horror of it, and with reason. It very nearly sent her after Morse.' "

I took the thing, when he held it

out. I had steeled myself to take it, while he was fussing with it. I suspect that he noticed my reluctance—my nervousness. At any rate, he took up a book, as I unfolded the manuscript and read:

"My dear Estey:

"I hope you will forgive my going alone on the search we had planned, when I tell you it resulted wholly from an accident, the turning up of an old, old book by the house-cleaners in their work. I came across it soon after you left, yesterday. It gave me a lead that was irresistible. I simply could not wait. You will believe that I deeply regret grieving Estelle and you; but the riddle drew me, as a magnet draws metal. I guess you know why.

"At the outset, I want to warn you against the tendency of the human mind to dismiss as incredible and unworthy of serious consideration the exceedingly strange or the unique. It is a grave fault, or limitation, rather, of our mentality. Since the mind itself is no more than a set of comparisons of known forms, it is at ease and satisfied only among the known and comparable. The unlike and the unfamiliar confuse and offend it. The series of mysterious cases which will—I have made sure of that—culminate with my own death, may be merely the result of phenomena as definite and, once we know them, as commonplace, as gravity or the electric current, once the laughing stock of incredulous minds.

"I have long had more than an inkling of the nature of the fell entity I set myself the task of bringing to light. When I left Sylmare this morning, I knew fairly well what I was looking for. My problem was chiefly one of where to look for it, and in that, I had one governing clue: that is, all the victims of this deadly enemy of our kind which I

was seeking had apparently reached it by means of boats. One of the victims, too, had also brought away, probably from the place I sought, a bag of fir tips. This fact seemed to me of some significance, since fir is not a universal growth hereabouts.

"Then, as if arranged by fate, came the finding of the old book. It was an odd volume of the Colonial period, containing a legend which assigned a haunted island to our bay, an island that the redmen who had lived here for centuries could in no wise be induced to visit. I assumed that the tradition had something to do with the present mystery.

"With these premises, I set out in a rowboat, before daybreak, reaching the island directly east of Sylmare soon after daylight. On it I found no fir; in fact, this island is very sparsely wooded, and I gave little time to it. Rowing southward, I came to the second island at 9:30 in the morning. It is more densely wooded, with a sprinkling of fir among its pines. But, though I spent upwards of an hour exploring it, I found nothing unusual about it.

"Leaving this island, I continued my course southward. The morning was now far spent, and I began to feel that perhaps I had embarked on a fool's errand, when suddenly I felt a strong presentiment come over me, and I immediately fell under the guidance of that ancient monitor of the race, intuition. As I approached the third island to the southward, I felt strangely assured that somewhere within its wooded depths I would find the lair of the unnamable object of my search.

"This island is not greatly different from the others I had visited, except that it is heavily wooded throughout its extent. It is not large, and has the general contour of an ellipse. At its southern extremity there is a rocky headland, the extreme point of the promontory being

occupied by a strangely sharp and slender pinnacle of rock, undermined by the beating sea until it seems to point to the sun at noonday. This singular formation, and the deep gloom beneath the woods of the island, lent it a distinctly weird and eery aspect.

"When I entered the dark wood after beaching the boat, I had to stoop and creep to avoid the thickets of dead branches that clothed the lower portions of all the trees. As I penetrated deeper and ever deeper into the deathlike stillness of the forest, the darkness became as dense as that of a dimly lit cave. A great loneliness depressed me as I stopped from time to time and stood in the vast dim silence, tensely listening to the beating of my own heart.

"The sense of guidance that had taken possession of me in the boat still had me in its keeping. My course through the wood was in no sense a search; rather, it was a toilsome passage to a definite point, which a strange assurance told me I would neither fail to find nor fail to know, when I came to it.

"I at last ran onto a small, circular rift in the forest, and stopped on its verge as suddenly as though it had been a precipice. The weird gloom that hung above the carpet of dead pine needles in the wood, here broke into a half-light that was like a thick mist in color and opaqueness. Though it was high noon, not a ray of sunlight penetrated either the forest or the rift by which I stood. Strangely moved, as if at some hellish shrine, I sank to the ground with my back against a tree.

"I glanced down at my hands. They were scratched and bleeding from tiny wounds made by the sharp points of dead branches with which they had come in contact. I could feel similar abrasions on my face. Already, I bore the uncanny sign with which the evil genius of this

baleful death spot marked its victims!

"My eyes fell on two slight indentations in the thick bed of pine needles under a double tree at my feet. Between the two depressions in the litter lay a little heap of fir boughs from which the tips had been removed. It was the discard from Alta Cline's pillow! I knew from that, if from nothing else, that I had found the thing I sought.

"The trees about the rift were very old, with knotted, gnarled, and misshapen trunks. Their dead lower branches, gleaming like whitened bones through the gray light of the place, and surmounted by their green tops, suggested life superimposed on death, ever growing, ever dying.

"While I was musing on this thought, I became conscious of a sound. It was like the self-made murmur one hears in the silence of a cavern, but seemed to come from the upper part of the rift, as though the sound of the sea, by some freak of acoustics, was caught and repeated by the mystic cleft in the forest. The soft, mill-like murmur had come creeping on my senses unawares; but, once I had taken note of it, I was never afterward able to disregard it.

"The sense of isolation was appalling. The gloom of the wood and the gray of the rift cast a deep depression on me, and in the pulseless monotone that filled the place there was all the haunting sadness of the night wind's moan.

"The voice of the forest, man's earliest lullaby, has ever affected him deeply, imbuing him with religious fervor, abasing him in awe and fear. The Druid's oak with its prayers and sacrifice, the African's hallowed fetish-wold, the sylvan shrine of the South Sea savage—all are remnants of an ancient kinship between man and tree that still appeals through the subtle and desuete avenues of the soul.

W. T.—3

"But I attribute the unique power this strange spot on the island possessed to a much older kinship, a brotherhood dating clear back to life's dim beginnings, when the animal and vegetable forms were identical in their common ancestry. To me this vengeful death-trap seems nothing less than the ruing, on the part of the trees that constitute it, of an old, old bargain, an ancient covenant tacitly made by first life, when the materials it found here required a division of method for their utilization, and the primitive forms drew apart into two classes, the plants remaining fixed and insentient, securing their sustenance in one spot, the animal forms developing mobility in their search for food, along with its parallel, consciousness.

"It is a sure thing that each of these divisions of life still retains, in suppressed form, the characteristics of the other—rather, of its own disused half: plants retain the sex character, while many animals are sexless; the fungus remains in one spot, yet feeds by alimentation; some animals have lost their power of movement, have vegetated, while others possess the leaf's power of direct fixation of carbon; man, highest of all animals, loses both sentiency and volition in catalepsy and kindred states, while insectivorous plants have clearly developed both mobility and consciousness.

"Thus I could go on at great length to convince you that the attributes of animal life merely slumber in the plant, and that they often are reawakened. No rational explanation of the wood's spell presents itself save that the old trees on the verge of the rift, during the centuries of arrested growth forced on them by a sterile soil, had devoted their idle eons to developing their sleeping consciousness; that they, though defeated in their efforts to attain mobility itself, had yet

achieved, preternaturally, some measure of mobility's parallel, mentality, or at least a weird power of suggestion which they were able to employ in a strange, telepathic way, on such as fell into their gray and terrible web.

"As a pitcher-plant lies in wait for its prey, these misshapen monsters of the vegetable world awaited their victims. The chief accessory by which they conveyed their deadly virus of depression to the minds of their prey was the gray rift in the forest. This was like a seer's crystal, in which floated dimly the entire flux of being, from incandescent world birth to dead orb whirling in darkness, the vast whole appearing in a condensed brevity that was like the fall of a yellowed leaf. It was a cinematograph of eternity itself, staggering—yes, fatal—to any mere mote of humanity whose eyes fell on the screen.

"The infinite perspective one got on gazing into the mistlike void was paralyzing, and its endless parade of living forms made consciousness and movement appear an unending punishment, an unfinishable task, like the doom of Sisyphus. The inert and somnolent vegetable, at rest and incapable of suffering, seemed to have fallen on a better lot than had its cousin, the animal. The latter, ever prodded with the impulse to do, to keep going, appeared to be playing the clown's part in the pageant of being.

"Such was the sophistry with which the enormity of the island poisoned the minds of its victims, the while it sapped them of their will and wish to live. And I am convinced that this gloom-girt Upas of the wood had learned through the centuries a cunning that guided it in the adaptation of its subtle propaganda to the mind of every being, savage or civilized, learned or illit-

erate, child or adult, who came within its deadly spell!

"How long I sat peering into the mistlike void of the rift I do not know. I was aroused from the torpor that lay on me by the fall of a dead branch from a tree at my side. I started up, shaking as with a palsy. The place had grown almost pitch-dark. The returning tide of animation and love of life flushed through me and sent me fleeing wildly from the spot.

"I ran through the wood, scarcely checking my half-mad course to feel my way among the dead branches that wounded me in the darkness. I crashed out of the tangle at some distance from the boat, and, as I walked along the beach toward it, I felt the spell of the rift, which I had momentarily thrown off, settle back on me. I heard again its inescapable monotone of sound. I then recognized the activity that had carried me away from the spot as the mere reaction of a wounded spirit, the reflex shrinking of sentiency from a blow.

"Deeply depressed, I approached the boat and stood beside it in thought. The lapping sea crooned a low accompaniment to the ceaseless sound that was in my ears. It was nightfall. An early star twinkled in the east, and as I gazed at it absently I found my imagination peopling its unseen satellites with the appalling infinity of living forms I had reviewed at the rift.

"I grew cold. A tremor like that of a chill shook me, and I reached for my coat, which I had left in the boat. As I was about to put it on, an idea was suggested to me by the sight of a match-case that fell from one of its pockets. Catching up the little silver box, I ran back to the wood and crept a little way into the underbrush.

"I struck a match and touched it

to the layer of pine needles on the ground. I was startled as the flames leaped up in the dark thicket, and plunging out of the wood and across the beach, I leaped into the boat as though pursued by an embodied spirit of the island, and pushed hastily away from the shore.

"The litter on the ground and the dry lower branches of the trees fed the fire like an inflammable oil, and soon the entire wood was a mass of flames beneath, above which the green treetops writhed like a tortured multitude. The upflare of the flames, lighting the level sea, fell on me with a glare like that of the blazing eyes of a monster dying in rage, as I rowed swiftly away from the accursed island."

"Two hours later, I landed at the old abandoned wharf south of town, made my way home unseen, and at once set about this task—which is to be my last.

"I apprehend that my theory in this matter will encounter unlimited skepticism, and I grant that certain of my predilections may have made me overcredulous. With such as take this view of it I will have no quarrel, but I suggest that they explore the fields of natural suggestion and impression. There is a much broader and more potent force in this quarter, I am sure, than has yet been uncovered. That definite and effective impression, whether elating or depressive, is a faculty of certain aspects of nature is well known, and I am quite sure that, whether or not the deadly spot on the island was conscious, was capable of volition, the element of suggestion was a potent factor in its fell spell."

SO THE amazing message ended. There were no farewell clauses, not even a signature, as though the burden of mere existence had suddenly become more than the writer could bear, and he had simply quit—

quit writing and quit living. Indeed, the last lines of the script had grown weak and indistinct, as though the writer's power to think had outlasted his power to move the pen across the page. The last of the writing trailed off into an illegible scrawl, a mere meaningless trail across the paper—like the track of a crawling worm!

Chapman looked up from his book, when I laid the sheets on the desk; but he remained silent, forcing me to speak first.

"Of all the——!" I stopped, for want of a fitting word with which to express my opinion.

"You think so?"

There was a tentativeness in his inflection, that might mask either defense or derision of Morse's madness.

"And I thought you stupidly sane, Estey!" I exclaimed.

He smiled. "Well, I'm not going to do anything about it, whether Morse was right or wrong. In fact, there's nothing to do about it. But there's more to his theory than you think. I've put the thing up to men who ought to know, and they all concede that Morse's premises have weight. But none of them, of course, would follow him to his conclusions. Even the great Sundberg was interested, though he finally labeled it a case of a man finding what he started out to find, whether it was there or not: that is, he felt that Morse's bias had led him to his conclusions. Oddly enough, Considine was the kindest one among them. You knew—or did you know?—Considine. He must have joined the staff about the time you went West."

"I knew him. I thought there was a sort of a feud—professional jealousy or the like—between him and Morse?"

"There was. But Considine's ill will stopped at the grave. He met Morse's theory more than half-way, went into Bergson farther than I

could follow him, and finished with that old saw about the poorhouse or the asylum being the only place for the man in advance of his times."

"But the other victims!" I exploded. "How do you—how does anyone—account for them? They hadn't Morse's predilections!"

"Oh, there's no mystery about them, except their number. Even their number is nearly or quite equaled by a few other famous death spots in this queer world. Why, man, one of the most ill-famed of them all is no more than blocks, I should say, from the headquarters of your own beloved Harvester Trust, in the rotunda of a skyscraper. What are its wire nettings, but a tangible acknowledgment of its deadly spell? And how many victims had it claimed before the wire was put up?

"Morse was right enough in his second guess. It is a form of suggestion that does it—depressive suggestion. It is exactly as though melancholia were a communicable disease, and this spot on the island a carrier of it; and a carrier able to give the malady to everyone who came near! There are a number of places in the world that are known to be fatal to certain people. The one at Sylmare differed from the others only in that it was fatal to all. It was one hundred per cent efficient.

"Great waterfalls, high cliffs, and even desert wastes, possess this depressing power, as do high bridges and lofty domes. It's the perspective that does it, as Morse suspected. It puts you under a reversed microscope—makes you little. You may be sure that I've gone to the bottom of this thing, and you can take it from me that any view which gives us that crushing realization of our infinite unimportance to the whole, is not good for us. We must remain unconscious of the whole, and especially must we be able to disregard duration. No man can live, merely

waiting for the next instant. And that was the peculiar doom of the island. It set its victims counting the spokes in eternity's wheel!"

"How did—Estelle take it all?" I asked, to break the uneasy silence that fell on us. My question sounded crass enough, but I wasn't quick enough to stop it, once I had set it going.

Chapman hesitated. "She hasn't got over it yet, entirely. But she will. The mistake was in letting her see this, at all." He tapped the folded message in his hand. "But what was I to do? Her father and her married sister had come on from Atlanta with her, and I put it up to them. They wanted she should see it. We none of us felt that we could withhold such a thing from her. What we failed to take into account was her knowledge of the other cases, and of Morse's work on them."

Chapman sat staring at the desktop. "Estelle came nearer believing Morse's theory than has anyone else. She was a nervous wreck, for awhile: afraid of her own shadow—and of all other shadows. Strangely or not, she clung to me. I had been through much of it with her. She had been away from her own people, except for brief visits, so long that I was really nearer to her than they were. The upshot of it all was that I married her, after a decent time. Her folks wanted that, too. They are a sensible lot.

"We spent a long time getting her out of it. Travel wouldn't do. We tried that. It led us into too many suggestive surroundings, too many gloom spots. You wouldn't think that just a flowing stream—or any steady movement or sound—would so upset anyone! The sea, too, is taboo. She can't bear the sight nor sound of it, nor the shade of trees, nor even the shade of a porch. That is why we have neither trees nor

porch here. The steady roar of wind in a grove would drive her to madness in twenty-four hours.

"So we at last found this spot and settled down. We are so far from the bay that you wouldn't know it was there, yet near enough to the city to avoid isolation . . . But if I have given you, in all this, an impression of being burdened——"

I stopped him short, with a reassuring gesture. I could honestly do that. Estelle, in any state of nerves, could never be a burden to any man. I recalled the thrill I had got from the pressure of her soft cool hand at our greetings, saw again her superb figure at the piano, its loveliness suggested, where it was not revealed, by the tight and loose set of the becoming house dress she wore. She was so eminently desirable, so full of warm, pulsing life, that I could not ward off the thought that, whatever Professor Morse might have done for Sylmare or for science, he had done Estey Chapman an immeasurably good turn.

I sat in silence, thinking, the deep stillness of the great dark rooms that opened upon the den pressing in on me like a physical presence. To get away from the eery feeling, I asked: "What kind of a stir did this thing kick up in Sylmare?"

"It kicked up none, if you mean this," Chapman replied, reaching for the envelope and putting the folded sheets back into it. "They know nothing of this, up there. The corner didn't get within rods of it. I saw to that. The whole affair would be almost forgotten, in the course of time, in Sylmare, if it hadn't left a reminder—a monument. The island is there yet. I rowed out and took a look at it, naturally. Eberslee went with me. We went at night, to avoid talk, and perhaps a following of the curious.

"The island lies black and desolate on the horizon of passing boatmen, its stony surface thick set with the blackened boles of the burned pines, still standing. There isn't a living beast, bird, or bush on it—the most deserted spot on earth! I wouldn't want to—it isn't a nice place to be, on a moonless night, with the dull faces of the rocks staring dimly at the stars, and the night breeze from off the lapping surf strumming the low, haunting voices of the standing dead."

Chapman seldom was eloquent, and I sat abashed at this peroration of his. In the deep silence that followed it, we heard again the lonely cry of frogs in the distance, the weird wail of mosquitos in the darkness without.

