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Contents for September, 1928

Cover Design	C. C. Senf
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Devil-Plant"</i>	
The Eyrie	292
<i>A chat with the readers</i>	
The Harp of Alfred	Robert E. Howard 294
<i>Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin</i>	
The Devil-Plant	John Murray Reynolds 295
<i>In the jungles of the Amazon a great botanist created a nightmare horror, more animal than plant</i>	
Invisible Threads (Part 1)	Arthur J. Burks 303
<i>A two-part story of occult vengeance, and the use of psychic power to bring retribution upon evil-doers</i>	
Body and Soul	Seabury Quinn 315
<i>Jules de Grandin, the little French ghost-breaker, runs into frightful danger while unraveling a hideous mystery</i>	
The Owl on the Moor	Marc R. Schorer & A. W. Derleth 330
<i>Strange deaths occurred on the lonely moor, and terrible was the experience of him who investigated them</i>	

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

THE OWL ON THE MOOR

By MARC R. SCHORER and AUGUST W. DERLETH

[*The following letter, crumpled and yellow with age, was found among the personal effects of the late M. R. Bentley, Barrister.*]

Brandon,
Egdon Heath,
17th May, 1908.

MY DEAR Morris:
I am all excited! Do you remember the controversy we had about witchcraft a summer ago? I'm sure you can recall it. It is about an unusual development which hinges directly upon this controversy that I am excited.

On May first I arrived here in this small hamlet bordering the famous Egdon heath, the setting of Thomas Hardy's noted *Return of the Native*, for my annual month's vacation. Of course, the furze and bracken attracted me the very first day, and I began to wander about alone on the heath. I often walked far out; sometimes, even, I was perplexed as to my direction. One day I chanced to wander farther than usual and I came upon the lowlands of the heath—a dank, miry moor far in the heart of it.

I was startled that I had wandered so far, and, as twilight was not far distant, I hastily began to return when my eyes caught sight of a solitary cottage, or possibly I should call it a shack, for, indeed, it resembled the latter much more than the former. I stared in bewilderment, thinking that perhaps my eyes had deceived me, and that I had conjured up a hal-

lucination. But no; the shack didn't vanish as I half expected it to when I closed my eyes. Not that the appearance of a shack in this lone place surprized me to that extent, but there was smoke curling up from the crumbling chimney. I hesitated for some little time, and then turned and proceeded moodily homeward, determined to question the villagers about the dweller in the shack.

And question them I did. A woman lives there. Don't laugh, for that's all they told me. Who she is, where she came from, what is her business, how does she subsist—of that they know nothing; they do not even hint at the answers to these questions. The people here are peace-loving folk, and it takes much to stir them, but it was clear to see that they hated that woman with all their hearts. This fact perplexed me sorely, but after incessant prying I found the reason.

She had been out there on the moor living her life of solitude for two years. She never came to the village, or if she did come she was never seen. Shortly after her coming a mysterious death came to one of the villagers: he was found out on the moor, his face a marble carving of fear and fascination. An examination revealed several minute scratches on the head and face of the dead man, which the doctor failed to diagnose. This, in itself, was extraordinary. And several months later another man was found dead on the heath, a good distance from the moor, with the same peculiar scratches

about the head, and with that same expression of awful horror. The next death bore the same distinctive marks, but this time it was a woman that suffered. And other deaths occurred, and because the dead were always found out upon the lonely heath where only the woman walked, the villagers came to regard her with loathing and suspicion. Even the furze-cutters ceased their work, and people seldom rambled on the heath, for they did not know in what form this malignant death might approach and overcome them.

You can well imagine my astonishment at learning these things. However, this tale of sudden deaths did not deter me from my daily rambles on the heath. But I will admit that I was constantly on the alert for any hidden danger that might descend upon me.

For the first few days I gave the shack a wide berth, and wended my way within sight of the village. But I soon reflected what childish folly this was, and I became bolder and bolder.

One day I ventured within sight of the shack. I crouched half-hidden in the gorse for an appreciable length of time, but I observed no signs of life. This surprized me, perhaps unduly, and I moved cautiously nearer. Again I halted, breathless. I wondered what would happen, should the woman discern me, and I kept my eyes fastened upon the door of the shack, which swung loosely open on one hinge that creaked loudly in the silence as a fanciful breeze came against the door. But nothing happened. There was no indication of life; all was an oppressive, deathlike stillness, broken only at intervals by the eery call of a bird, which came to me across the bracken, and, sweeping past me, died lingeringly away in the distance.

I halted there for some time, half expecting some fearful apparition to emerge from the darkness of the doorway and pounce upon me and devour

me before I could so much as move. But finally, annoyed at this apparently over-cautious attitude, I rose and strode boldly forward, fully determined to enter the evidently forsaken shack. Then suddenly I stopped short; for to my ears came the low, almost imperceptible sound of moaning.

That the moaning proceeded from the shack I could not doubt. Indubitably the mysterious inhabitant was ill. With this conviction in mind I proceeded forward, hesitating only at the threshold. The moaning was very distinct now, and I entered almost at once.

Picture, if you can, my astonishment at finding the one-room structure totally devoid of all human habitation. My eyes swept the room in a vain endeavor to pierce the shadows and discover the source of the sound which dinned in my ears. But I could perceive nothing. I then gave my attention to the squalid interior. The furniture in the room consisted of a table, upon which some broken dishes were standing, and three chairs, one broken and sadly in need of repair. The odd feature of this assembly of furniture was the fact that there was no bed. Surely this woman did not sleep upon the floor! I ridiculed the idea, but the fact remained that there was no bed.

It was soon impressed upon me that the room lacked the essentialities of a living-room. There was no evidence of a container of food of any sort, nor were there signs of the remains of any recently eaten meal. My eyes swept in these things at a glance, and meanwhile the low moaning continued in the same monotonous tone.

This hidden moaning irritated me, and I began to peer intently on all sides. I glanced under the table and moved the chairs about. Quite suddenly I saw the source of the mysterious moaning sound. Looking up in the rafters I saw two great, round

eyes turned upon me in an unblinking stare. It was a huge owl!

This incident seemed very odd to me at first. I had not seen an owl in the vicinity during my stay, and the sudden appearance of this bird startled me. It showed no inclination to leave its perch, nor did I endeavor to excite it. To be sure, I lost no time in beating a retreat, whether or not I was justified in doing so. I ran swiftly through the gorse toward the village. On a little knoll some distance from the shack I turned about and looked back. The woman, who had been nowhere about, was standing in the open door staring after me!

I was astounded; I readily confess it. A thousand questions perplexed me. How could she have gotten there? Where could she have been hiding, if indeed she was hiding? Could she have been in the gorse watching my every move? When she saw me gazing at her, she turned and went into the shack.

For some time I stood looking at the doorway where she had been. Then I went swiftly home, wondering about her untimely appearance.

Two nights later, while I was reading a treatise on witchcraft, I was seized with a horrible suspicion. I was, so to speak, as if a spell or charm had been cast over me. The suspicion rapidly became a conviction, and, acting upon it, I procured my pistol and without delay I ventured out upon the moor.

It was a beautiful night. The moon was out, and it lighted the moor as far as the eye could reach. But the waving of the bracken and gorse beneath the moon was not beautiful to me, for I thought of nothing but the terrible suspicion that had lodged in my mind.

Just as I reached the knoll upon which I had stood two days before, I saw a scene which I shall never forget. A man, who had evidently come from some point on the other side of the moor, was struggling with a huge owl! He was fending off the clutching talons as best he could, and the moonlight clearly showed the agony on his features.

The sight almost paralyzed me. But luckily for both of us, I retained my presence of mind, and, with the conviction of my suspicion in mind, I drew my pistol and fired pointblank at the monstrous bird, murmuring a prayer for the safety of the stranger. Both the man and the bird fell to the ground. I made the best of time to the spot to reckon what injuries the man had received.

The man was not severely injured; he was, however, unconscious. But the worst detail of the incident was the final confirmation of my awful suspicions.

Upon the ground near the man lay the body of a woman, a bullet hole through her breast!

Yours,

HARCOURT.

