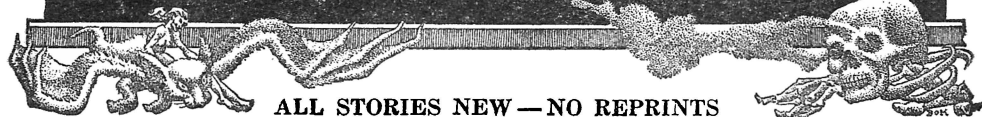


# Weird Tales



MARCH, 1945

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

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# The Peripatetic Corpse



By HAROLD LAWLOR

*A corpse walks into a morgue, likes the place, decides to stay. Well, of course!*

I HAD it bad.

My friends accuse me of enjoying these periodic black Irish moods, and that may be, but when I have 'em, I suffer. Noisily. I admit it makes it better when there's somebody around to watch me in

these Hibernian death throes—which was why I was in fine form the night Great-uncle Judson again came into my life.

For Jim Murray was sitting opposite me on the sofa, and I, slumped despondently in my red leather lounge chair, yet had spirit

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

enough left to be giving a fine performance.

"You see before you," I groaned oratorically, "One-Shot Eddie Walsh, the boy Maugham. I'm gonna knock myself off."

"What, again?" said Jim, making the ice clink against his glass.

Try to get sympathy out of a doctor. Just try. Especially when he's young and still serving his internship at the County Hospital, as Jim was.

I ignored him. I moaned, "What good is a writer who can't write?"

Jim sighed. "In fact, what good is a writer period."

"Oh, you can laugh," I said darkly. "But I'm through, finished, washed-up. Or I will be if I don't write another story soon, before editors forget me. If I could only think of an opening, will you? Doesn't anything weird ever happen down at that charnel house you work in?"

And that was what started it.

For Jim began grandly, "If you're referring to the County—" And then he broke off, a strange expression on his face, and set his glass down very carefully on the coffee table (where it would leave a ring.) He started again.

"As a matter of fact," he said thoughtfully, "something peculiar did happen down there last night. What could you do with this? A corpse walks into our morgue, evidently likes the looks of the place, lays himself down in Drawer Eight, pushes the drawer shut, and apparently prepares to spend the rest of his life—I mean, death—right there."

I looked at Jim out of the corner of my eye. "Again?"

"I'm not clowning," Jim said. "That's just what happened, evidently. We have a corpse down there that must have walked in by itself. Because it wasn't there at five yesterday afternoon, but it was in Drawer Eight this morning at nine. And nobody knows how it got there. Nobody signed the body in. There's no record of it at all."

"Have your fun," I said generously.

"It's the truth," Jim said earnestly. "I swear it."

**A**ND I believed him. At least to the extent that there actually was an unknown corpse found down in the morgue.

But the incident didn't seem so terribly weird to me.

"Well," I said, "it's simple. A couple internes with what they think is a sense of humor got hold of a stiff some place and planted it there for a joke."

Jim shook his blond head stubbornly. "Show me the internes who'd do that, and keep their mouths shut afterward. The story would leak out somehow, and I'd have heard it. No, that corpse got in there through some other agency—granting that it didn't walk in by itself. And, of course, it couldn't have walked in by itself."

I was beginning to be interested. "Was it a man's body or a woman's?"

"A man's," Jim said. "About seventy years old, I'd say. Funny thing, he'd been embalmed, too. Rouge on his cheeks, lipstick on his mouth. You know the way undertakers duke 'em out."

"What are they going to do about him down there?"

Jim shrugged. "Try to trace him, I suppose. If they once get a line on him, he oughtn't to be hard to identify. Not with those birthmarks."

"Birthmarks?"

"M-h'm. Three V-shaped red ones, like birds in flight."

"Well, for God's sake!" I shouted crab-bily. "I bit nicely that time, didn't I? Though how you ever learned about Great-uncle Judson's—"

But Jim was standing on his feet shouting crab-bily at *me*. "You mean to tell me you know who he *is!*"

I wasn't getting this at all. Jim seemed to be deadly serious. I went on more quietly, "Listen, are you nuts, or am I? I'm talking about my Great-uncle Judson Worthen."

"I didn't even know you had a Great-uncle Judson Worthen." Jim was still crabby.

"Well, I did. And he had birthmarks—a good-sized V-shaped red one just above his left nipple, a smaller one above that, and a yet smaller one on his left shoulder. They looked just like three redbirds flying in formation."

Jim sank onto the sofa. "Then the body in the morgue is your great-uncle." He delivered his decision with an air of great authority.

But I was shaking my head. "No."

"You mean he's still living?" Jim asked.

"Nh-nh. But he's been under six feet of earth, out in Sleepmount Cemetery, since a year ago last September. I know, because I was at his funeral."

"Look," Jim said irritably. "Sure, we have a corpse at the morgue. But it couldn't be a year-and-a-half old corpse, for God's sake!"

"Well, you brought the subject up!" I was waxing peevish myself. "Of course, the corpse in the morgue can't be Great-uncle Judson. It's ridiculous!" My voice trailed away. Then I added tentatively, "Just the same—"

"Just the same—" Jim agreed.

There is such a thing as consuming curiosity. So, although it was eleven o'clock of a sweltering July night, Jim and I started for the morgue.

YOU know, it's all very well to be light-hearted and flippant and Irish—when you're sitting in the safety of your own living room, surrounded by all the accustomed familiar things of daily living.

*But there's something about a morgue—*

We didn't have any trouble getting in, even at that somewhat unusual hour, because they knew Jim, of course. There was a circular steel staircase winding down into dimness. On the left was a brick wall—painted once—scabrous now; on the right, a steel handrail. Both felt wet and slimy to the hand.

After that first touch, I jerked my hands away and folded my arms, and walked directly down the middle of the stairway behind Jim's broad shoulders. Better to risk breaking a leg, I thought, than touch that chill dampness again—so suggestive of death and the grave.

The farther down we descended the colder it grew. After the sultry heat upstairs, the clamminess here was enough to lay me out. The place was air-conditioned of necessity for the preservation of bodies.

I shivered. I remember I was wondering sourly what my curiosity would get me into next, when we reached the bottom of the steps. I slipped there, and would have fallen, but Jim's hand steadied me in the dim light. Then we went across the concrete

floor and through a heavy steel door that clanged shut behind us with a decidedly unpleasant sound of finality.

"Are you sure we can get out again?" I asked. Not that I was nervous, but my heart seemed to be playing hopscotch in my chest.

"Sure. It doesn't lock." Jim grinned. "You superstitious Irish!"

"I'm not superstitious," I denied, not very convincingly. "I just don't believe in going around, slapping the face of Fate."

Big Jim wasn't listening. He was introducing me to the morgue attendant, Pete. If the old codger had ever had a last name, it was lost in the mists of antiquity. He looked as if he'd been down there since Lincoln freed the slaves. At any minute, you felt, he might crawl over and lay himself down on one of the marble slabs forever.

"Geez, what a cheerful place," I breathed, looking it over.

"You get used to it," Pete assured me. He went on chewing his gum, making a soft thucking sound in the awful stillness.

Jim and I stood there a minute, looking around. It was an old story to Jim, of course, but I was goggle-eyed.

Here in the morgue itself it was brightly lighted from a row of unshaded bulbs overhead. The plaster walls were painted white, where they weren't taken up with the square black numbered faces of the vaults. The place reminded you of the locker room in an athletic club. Only not for one little minute did you think you were in the locker room of an athletic club. You knew darned well where you were.

"How do you stand the smell?" I asked Pete, sniffing. The heavy odor of decomposition was cut through by the sharper one of disinfectants.

"Smells all right to me," Pete said defensively. Evidently I'd hurt the old boy's pride.

"Where's the smoke who got his neck carved?" Jim asked at a tangent.

"Three," Pete said succinctly.

Jim went over and pulled out drawer three. I guess I must have shut my eyes for a minute. If there was anything I didn't want to see just then, it was a man, black or white, with a cut throat. But when I opened my eyes again I saw that Jim was only horsing around. Drawer three was empty, and

Jim was eyeing me. And he and Pete were purple with suppressed mirth. I suppose I'd turned white as a sheet.

"For gosh sake, Jim!" I protested weakly. "Let's see this unknown corpse you were talking about, and then let me out of here."

"Say, Doc," Pete put in. "Will you hang around for a while, so's I can go up and get a beer?"

Before I could stop either of them, Jim nodded and Pete was gone. We'd have to wait until he came back. I gave Jim a dirty look, but he didn't see it. He was walking over to Drawer 8, and reluctantly I followed him.

I even managed to keep my eyes open when he pulled out the drawer.

WELL, it was Great-uncle Judson Worthen, all right. But it was anybody's guess as to how he'd pushed up six feet of heavy clay and hid himself eight miles across town from Sleepymount Cemetery to take up his abode in the County Morgue. Personally, if I were Uncle Judson I'd have stayed where I was. There was nothing about the County Morgue, that I could see, to give anyone a sentimental attachment to the place.

I was thinking nonsense, of course. The fact is, though I was trying to bear up nobly under Jim's gaze, I was scared stiff. And my feelings were harrowed, my sense of the fitness of things outraged. I remembered that interment, so many months before—the slow descent of the casket, the desolate thuds of those first handfuls of earth tossed into the yawning grave. Burial should be the final end, and the grave itself held inviolate.

But now, inexplicably, here was the body of Great-uncle Judson once more!

I didn't like any of this. I didn't want any part of it. My hair felt as if it were trying to stand up vertically, and icy chills were leaping up my spine and seemed to be spraying out fan-like over my head. I was surprised Jim couldn't see them.

I looked down at the cadaver. It was nude where we'd pulled down the sheet to see the three redbirds flying across the withered chest.

"He was wearing a black suit when he was buried," I said.

Jim nodded. "He had it on when we

found him this morning. They took it off and covered him with the sheet."

There was something pathetic about that defenseless body. I felt a growing anger inside. I said, "It's ridiculous to think he got over here by himself. Some ghouls must have dug him up, the—" I choked. "They might have let him rest in peace."

Jim nodded again, but absently. "What's that rope in his hands? We left it there, but it puzzled us."

I knew what he meant. "It's a Chinese prayer string. Something like a rosary, you know, only with knots instead of beads. I put it in his hands myself at—at the time he was laid out."

We left the drawer open, and walked over toward the steel door by which we'd entered. We were both trying to think, and I suppose the idea of walking was automatic and natural. We stood there, with our backs to Uncle Judson Worthen's corpse.

"Strange the body's in such a perfect state of preservation," Jim muttered. "It's unnatural."

"The thing is," I said helplessly, "what's to be done now?"

Jim rubbed his forehead. "You've identified him. I suppose in the morning you'll have to get a burial permit and rebury him. Though how we're going to explain all this—"

I didn't know myself. It was the strangest set-up I'd ever encountered. But the worst was not yet. The worst happened immediately.

Some movement behind me, perhaps, caused me to turn my head. And I think the only reason I didn't start screaming like a siren was because the breath was completely knocked out of me by what I saw. My hand clawed at Jim's shoulder and he, too, turned. We both turned stiff as any body in one of those lockers.

For the corpse of Judson Worthen had somehow got itself up from the marble slab upon which it had been lying, and was standing now beside the open drawer!

What's more—it started walking!

Walking—if you could call such horrible progress that.

A semi-circular sway backward; a lurch as the right leg described another half-circle, back to the front; a thud as the naked right

foot finally landed on the cement floor.

Each movement took long seconds. Then the left leg began its dreadful mechanical stagger.

Sway, lurch, thud! Sway, lurch—

The cadaver had taken three of these terrible strides while Jim and I stood, shoulder to shoulder, frozen to the cement floor. Sheer panic terror gripped us then, and we both turned on one impulse to flee blindly from the horror that was coming at us.

But before we could yank the heavy metal door open, reason re-asserted itself. We stopped, and looked in each other's eyes. And behind us the awful footsteps thudded on.

We said it together. "We've got to stop him."

**I**T WASN'T easy to put that resolve into execution. But we didn't even wait for the corpse to approach us. We walked slowly toward it, our hearts banging like trench mortars. Jim's breath was sobbing wheezily through his nostrils; I could hardly see for the cold sweat that was pouring down from my forehead.

We didn't know what would happen. Great-uncle Judson's eyes were open now, staring fixedly at a point above our heads. As if, before his blank gaze, were held up the alluring picture of the destination he was trying to reach. And he kept on walking toward us as though his legs were obeying the injunction of some fearsome, detached intelligence.

He paid no attention to us, seemed not to see us at all. Perhaps it was this that gave us courage.

Gingerly approaching him on each side, Jim and I each took hold of one of his arms. It wasn't that Uncle Judson tried to resist; it was, rather, that he kept on walking irresistibly. Or attempted to. But we were too much for him. Though we could feel the body exerting a steady pressure against our restraining hands, we half-carried, half-led it back to Drawer 8. We lifted it to place it on the marble slab it had so recently vacated, drew up the sheet again, and closed the drawer.

We stood there for minutes, half-expecting, I think, to see it open again. But it didn't. Not then.

"Come on," Jim said finally. "Let's get out of here."

He sounded as exhausted as I felt. As we opened the heavy steel door, we heard Pete clattering down the steps.

"Better not tell Pete what we've seen," Jim warned.

But he needn't have said it. I wasn't sticking my neck out by telling Pete what we'd witnessed. "Not," as I pointed out reasonably, "when the Psychopathic Hospital is only a stone's throw away."

Jim nodded solemnly.

"Whew!" I said, after I'd gratefully gulped the third double-brandy. We'd driven to a tavern Jim knew of, a few blocks away. "Now what was that all about? Do you suppose Uncle Judson isn't—isn't dead?"

"The hell," Jim said, injured. "What kind of doctor do you think I am? I know a corpse when I see one."

I knew I was raving. Hadn't I, myself, attended the burial of Uncle Judson, a year ago last September? Of course, he was dead.

"Maybe we didn't see it. Him walking, I mean." I was gibbering and I knew it. "Could those bright lights have hypnotized us, kind of, so that we dreamed it all?"

"Maybe you were dreaming," Jim said. "I was wide awake."

Well, there it was. I remember thinking dazedly that it was no wonder writers steered away from something that happened in real life when they tried to plot a story. Fiction, straight, was believable. Actual events were often incredible. Here was something which, if I tried to write it, no one would believe. I wouldn't believe it myself. Only it *happened* to me!

"What kind of man was this great-uncle of yours?" Jim broke into my harried pre-occupation with my thoughts.

"I hardly know myself." I circled my glass on the bar nervously. "We weren't very close, even though I was his only heir. He was very wealthy when he was young. Traveled all over the world. Had his own yacht in those days. He was hard, selfish, uncompromising. Very introverted. I doubt if anyone ever knew him well—not even his wife. Although he was her brother, my grandmother used to say the only decent thing about him was that he never broke a

promise. If he made one he kept it religiously, at no matter what cost or effort to himself."

"What happened to his wife?" Jim asked. "She died?"

I shrugged. "My grandmother told me only a little. But she was supposed to have run off with Uncle Judson's secretary. They say she was very beautiful. Her name was—Yasmini."

"*Yasmini!*" Jim was owl-eyed.

"I know." I nodded. "It all sounds impossibly romantic. He was on his third cruise around the world, and picked her up some place in Asia Minor. They'd only been home three months or so when she ran away. After that he never spoke of her, or permitted anybody else even to mention her name.

He just went on living alone in that house he finally left to me. You may have seen it—that place that looks like a Chinese tenement, sprawling all over the hill north of town?"

"You mean that's yours now? I've seen it. I thought it was an abandoned asylum of some sort."

"It's a rabbit warren," I admitted. "I wouldn't live in it myself, and nobody in his right mind would buy it. There must be fifty rooms in it. Before he went broke, Uncle Judson was always adding new wings and additions to it."

"But why—if he lived there by himself?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe because it gave him something to do—after Yasmini ran away."

I stood up. I felt as if I hadn't slept in a month. We separated, with a promise to meet in the morning. Then I'd have to do something about Great-uncle Judson's body, unpleasant as the whole thing might be.

I must have lain awake till four or five o'clock that morning, my mind going in crazy circles.

Why was Uncle Judson wandering around? Where was he going? The cemetery was south of town, the morgue in the middle, and Uncle Judson's former home outside the city limits on the north. Had he been heading for there, for some unexplained reason? And if so, why should he stop over at the morgue? Unless, at night-fall, he had to be with his own kind—like a

vampire in reverse. (They slept days, or so I'd been told.)

But the more I thought of this theory, the more reasonable it seemed. And if the house was his ultimate goal, there was nothing to prevent me from going out there myself in search of any possible clue I might find as to what was drawing him there so irresistibly.

I turned over on my side then, determined to wait for what the morning would bring.

The morning brought murder.

THE sound of a bell woke me at nine. I reached sleepily for the alarm, but it was the phone. Jim's voice—sharp, unlike his normal tones—shocked me into complete wakefulness.

"Get down here right away! I'm at the hospital." And he hung up before I could ask him what was the matter.

I found him in the lobby of the County Hospital, pacing impatiently, but he steered me out again almost before I'd got through the door.

"We can't talk here," he said. "Come on."

We went to a place, half-restaurant, half-tavern, deserted except for ourselves at this hour of the morning. We sat in a torn leather booth at the rear, and ordered coffee, before Jim said anything. Then his face haggard, his eyes bloodshot, he said, "Pete was murdered some time last night."

"Pete?"

"The morgue attendant," Jim said. "He was strangled."

My spoon hit the linoleum table-top, bounced to the floor. "Go on," I said. I knew that wasn't all. There was something in Jim's face.

"Drawer Eight was found open," he said slowly. "And your uncle's body is gone."

"Who'd steal a body from the morgue?" I said irritably. "Or strangle Pete to do it?"

But Jim was eyeing me carefully. "I don't think anyone did."

I got it, then. What he was driving at. "You think Uncle Judson—"

Jim nodded. "From the marks on Pete's throat, it looks as if he was strangled with that Chinese prayer string. The pressure was so great that the skin was broken and blood was drawn. The prayer string is gone.

And there's something else—the black suit your uncle was wearing originally is missing.”

“I see.” I moistened my dry lips. “You think Uncle Judson started walking, and—Pete tried to stop him. And Pete was old and little and no match for—”

Jim nodded. “But that isn't what's bothering me most. Wait till the police learn, as they surely will, that we were the last ones down there with Pete.”

I thought about that for a while. We could never explain or make anybody believe what we'd seen. Then something else occurred to me, and I drew in my breath sharply. “Jim, where is Uncle Judson now? And what if somebody else tries to stop him from walking?”

So there it was. We couldn't very well tell the police such a preposterous yarn. But we certainly couldn't sit idly by while a murderous corpse ran amok. Yet what were we to do about it?

I told Jim of the theory I'd evolved during my sleepless night, but if he was enthusiastic about it he hid it well. Still, since there seemed nothing better to do and he had the day off from the hospital, he agreed to go out to Uncle Judson's place with me.

**T**HE house must have covered acres, and was the craziest mixture of unrelated architectural styles you ever saw. The main facade was red brick, and went on from there—stucco, half-timber, fieldstone, frame, or what have you? Wherever Uncle Judson had felt the urge to make an addition he made it, using whatever materials the contractor of the moment had at hand.

I'd never been entirely through the place myself, and Jim, having his first close-up view, was frankly flabbergasted.

“Looking for a clue in that,” he jerked his head at the sprawling mass, “is going to take months.”

Secretly I agreed with him, but the thing was to prove simpler than we'd feared.

For Uncle Judson had left a wide trail.

We left the car under the portè-cochere and entered the hall. The furniture had not been removed—only covered with dust sheets. The furnishings were as fantastic as the house itself, and the first thing we saw as we entered was the bronze statue of a

nymph. I remembered her from an earlier visit. She had stood at the foot of the stairs, holding a string of electric bulbs aloft. But now she was fallen from her marble pedestal and lying prone on the dusty floor.

Jim pointed to the door and I nodded. Long parentheses in the dust showed where Uncle Judson's lurching feet had passed. The statue must have stood in the way of his swaying progress and been knocked down. Or so we reasoned, from the signs before us.

We went into the drawing room. Here a delicate gilt chair was on its side, its dust cover awry. Smaller pieces of furniture lay toppled over. A huge terra cotta jardiniere and the teakwood table which had held it were smashed beyond repair. At the far end of the room, a portiere was half-dragged from its rod.

We followed the trail, through room after amazing room, bringing up at last in the barn-like kitchen. Here a door—leading to the cellars, evidently, from the dank air that blew upward—stood open.

While Jim waited, I went back to the car for a flashlight. Then, slowly, we descended the steps leading to the cellars.

And here we drew a blank. For the floor of hard-packed earth betrayed no footsteps, and the vast reaches of the place itself were discouraging. But we didn't give up. We'd gone this far and we'd seen what we both believed to be definite proof of Uncle Judson's recent presence.

Doggedly, we searched for hours. The cellars, like the house above, were divided into rooms—some small, some so huge that the far walls of the room evaded the rays of the flashlight and remained in inky gloom.

But, except for the usual debris of such places, the cellars contained nothing that seemed significant.

Where was Uncle Judson? And what had led him here?

It was Jim, at last, who all unknowingly solved the problem.

Pausing in the search long enough to light a cigarette, Jim leaned back wearily against an empty tier of shelves lining the wall of the main room. And the shelves swung inward on a pivot.

Jim fell flat on his back. I think he was stunned for a minute by the suddenness



of it all—I know—I was—but he scrambled quickly to his feet. Together we propped the door open with a heavy case, passed through, and entered what seemed to be a long tunnel carved out of solid white limestone.

I remember we stood there just inside the tunnel, while I played the flashlight around on the walls, ceiling, and floor. All seemed to be dripping with moisture, but the air was fairly fresh, indicating shafts some place leading to the outer air.

Somehow, I felt that this tunnel was going to lead to something unpleasant. But Jim and I exchanged glances, and there was in both our faces a grim determination to see this thing through to the end.

We started down the tunnel, slowly, because the rough limestone floor made our footing precarious. I don't know at just what point the conviction seized me, but it wasn't long before I knew we were no longer under the house.

"I hope the flashlight doesn't go out," Jim whispered once.

The same thought had just been occurring to me. But neither of us suggested turning back. We kept on.

Until at last we came to the end of the tunnel, came to where it broadened out, but not very much, into a chamber hewn from the solid rock. Two huge steel doors that, when closed, could shut the chamber off from the rest of the tunnel were folded back now against either wall. And there, facing us, was yet another segment of what seemed to be a patternless puzzle.

But, though the scene was macabre in the flashlight's yellow glow, I knew no feeling of terror. Only a sick pity.

Two skeletons—obviously, from their size, those of a man and woman—sat together on a stone ledge jutting out from the far wall facing us. Rusty chains ran from their handcuffed wrists through iron rings in the wall behind them. From the ceiling of the chamber depended a naked electric light with a pointed bulb of the old-fashioned variety, long since burned out.

I swung the flashlight around. It was only then that I noticed the doors. Those doors, I reasoned, that up until a few short hours before, had been sealed and locked for many, many years. On their inner surfaces

—the sides that would face the skeletons when they were closed—were painted in red letters the words:

*"When I am dead, Yasmini, then you shall be free."*

Jim saw the words, too. "Yasmini!" he whispered. "But—the other?"

I knew. It took no great wit to know. I said slowly, "I'm afraid Yasmini didn't run away with Uncle Judson's secretary. Or, at least, not very far. Uncle Judson must have grown suspicious, and he took his own revenge."

For surely this was his doing, these were his words here on the doors—a cruel answer, perhaps to Yasmini's frantic plea for freedom?

By the flashlight's rays, I saw that the upper half of the man's skeleton was bent over the other, as if he'd tried to shut out from her eyes with his own body the horror of the fate that was slowly to overtake them, there in the lighted tomb. Perhaps to shut out, too, the promise of Uncle Judson's mocking there in its letters of fire:

*"When I am dead, Yasmini, then you shall be free."*

A taunting promise. But a promise. And Uncle Judson had never been known to break a promise.

Jim and I stared at the tiny, once-lovely hand of Yasmini still clasped in the man's larger one. And I was hoping desperately that she had died before him, that she had not lived on, perhaps for hours or days, alone with the body of her dead lover, and—terror.

Jim and I turned away to examine the doors. The huge lock that had been used to fasten them on the outer side was covered with mold of a brilliant emerald-green color. And there was no key. But the doors were open now. Yasmini was free.

One last glance into the death chamber, subdued and a little sickened, then we retraced our steps back through the cellars, the house, to the car.

"I DON'T understand," Jim said numbly, in the car. "I don't understand."

Neither did I. But then who could? Who does know anything of the mystery that lies beyond life? Of the forces that operate there?

"It seems obvious enough," I said, "that Great-uncle Judson made a promise. And came back to keep it."

"But why wait till now?" Jim added. "He died nearly two years ago. Why did he wait until now?"

I could only guess, of course. But so deep was my conviction that I was right, that I wouldn't have called it guesswork at all.

"Perhaps, ordinarily, no one could come back from the grave to unlock that door. Perhaps, though, the desire to do so was so strong in Uncle Judson that it became a live thing, an animus, a living spirit strong enough to re-animate the body and sent it here to fulfill its promise."

But Jim was less haggard now. He was the hard-headed realistic doctor once more. He stared at me, disgusted. "And then again, perhaps we didn't see that corpse walking. Perhaps it wasn't the body of your Uncle Judson. If it was, where is he now?"

I didn't know. But I thought I could guess.

"Perhaps," Jim finished. "Perhaps we're crazy—suffering from an hallucination more real than life itself."

The police, as we were so soon to learn, agreed with him.

**F**OR, as Jim had feared, the police learned of our last night's visit to the morgue. And when they were unable to find us that day, because we'd gone to Uncle Judson's house, warrants for our arrest were sworn out. They thought we'd committed murder, then fled.

And here, they reasoned now at our reappearance, were the fugitives returned to give themselves up.

Questioning, then. Endless hours of it, led by a lieutenant from the Homicide Bureau, Fitzjames. They questioned us separately and together, but they couldn't shake our story. Nor could we convince them we were speaking the truth.

A corpse murdered Pete? A walking corpse? You wouldn't try to kid us, would you?

A detail went out with us to Uncle Judson's house, and found that part of our story true as we'd described it—the tunnel, the chamber, the skeletons.

And so what? What did that prove?

It was then—**w**ear**y**, **d**efeated—that I finally made my request. A request I firmly believed would be denied, but surprisingly was not.

"You want us to exhume the body of your great-uncle?" Lieutenant Fitzjames asked softly. After what appeared to be a moment of startled thought he smiled thinly, and stopped tapping his pencil against the thumb of his left hand. "Okay, we'll get in touch with the coroner's office."

I was incredulous. "You mean—you're really beginning to believe me at last?"

Lieutenant Fitzjames continued to smile unpleasantly. "I'm giving you rope enough to hang yourself, buddy. You and your pal. Either we're going to find your uncle's grave disturbed and indications that you recently planted some incriminating evidence there, or else—"

"Or else?" Jim and I said it together.

"Or else we're going to find your uncle's body in a normal state of decomposition—which will knock your nutty story into a cocked hat."

But by that time I was too dull and numb to be alarmed. God knows what I expected Uncle Judson's grave to reveal when I made my request for an exhumation. But the thing had started there, and if it was to have any ending—any hope of salvation for us—it seemed reasonable, even in my present state of despair, to believe it was there that we would find it.

And I remember on that ride to Sleepy-mount Cemetery, all I could think of was the steel doors of Yasmini's living tomb, and the relentless lock that had held them closed, covered with mold of a venomous brilliant green. A color that would be to me always the color of death.

**L**IEUTENANT FITZJAMES smiled a little as we stood under the granite shaft marking the grave of my Great-uncle Judson Worthen. Smiled, for the ground quite evidently had never been disturbed since the interment, nearly two years before.

"Well," Fitzjames said grimly, "it won't be a question of planted evidence. Nor grave-robbers."

One of the men examined the sod carefully. Cemetery workers thrust a spade into the solid earth,

"No digging here for months," was the verdict. The grave had never been disturbed since the burial. They'd swear to it—in any court.

FITZJAMES was satisfied. "Dig!" he ordered.

I couldn't watch those busy spades. Once I looked at the stars. Another time I stole a glance at Jim's haggard face, and read in his hopeless eyes what I knew must be in mine.

The fear that all this would lead to nothing that could help us, that whatever we'd seen last night in the morgue had not been the body of Uncle Judson.

And then at last the cement burial vault was raised. And there was a grim look of satisfaction on Fitzjames' face as the seal was broken. It had not been tampered with, until now. The casket lid, next. The crowding forward of witnesses.

Lieutenant Fitzjames was fumbling for

his handkerchief, then, wiping the sweat jerkily from his forehead.

Great-uncle Judson's face, serene and quite unblemished, was revealed in the light of the dark lantern. He was decently clad once more in his black suit. And did I imagine it, or was there a smile of contentment on those thin lips?

I remember Fitzjames removing the Chinese prayer string from the stiff fingers. Remember him muttering, "We'll check the bloodstains at the laboratory."

I knew it would prove to be Pete's blood (as later, in fact, it did.) And I knew that Jim and I were free, for no earthly power could have insinuated that recently used prayer string into an untouched grave.

But now none of this mattered.

For Jim and I were staring at that other thing in Uncle Judson's hand—that great key covered with mold of a brilliant venomous green—a color that would always remind me of death.

