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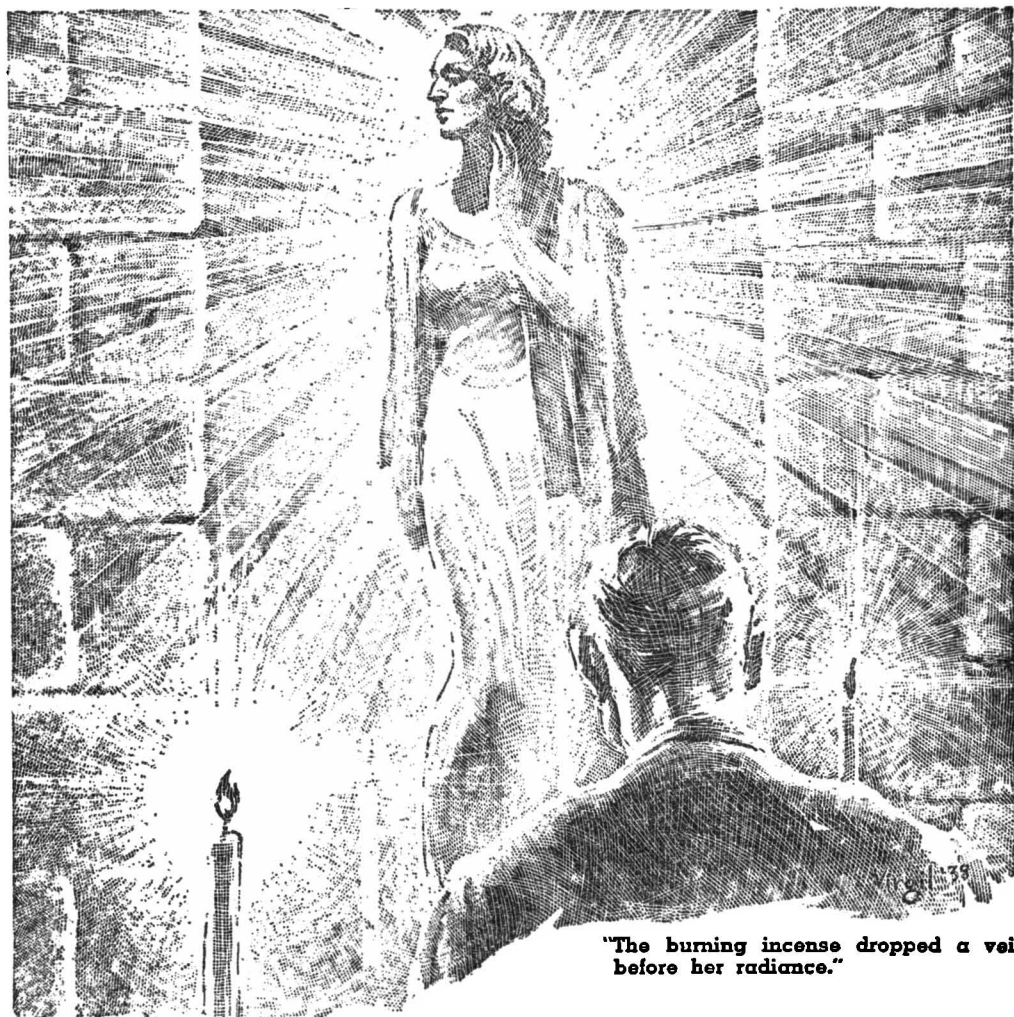
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"The burning incense dropped a veil
before her radiance."

The Secret of the Vault

By J. WESLEY ROSENQUEST

What dread mystery lurked in that charnel chamber beneath the cellars of the old house, and what impious rites of life and death were performed there?

I THINK it was in January that my suspicions first took form and grew. Prior to that, my uncle's visits to the family burial vault had only the appearance of actions natural to grief, and as on all occasions he carried with him into the

cold depths a candle and missal, I presumed his intentions to be only the most pious. In all his words to me concerning the matters of the deceased, he exhibited a tender reverence and profound respect for those he called "the immortal spirits,"

As he said, it was not until the recent death and burial of his wife, my Aunt Helena, that he became aware and fully conscious of another world and the need of the dead for prayer. This I believed. Even had I suspected earlier, I could not disprove his words, as out of a timid heart I had never ventured into the mortuary chambers deep below the cellar.

From childhood I had held in my mind an image of supreme gruesomeness, in which the antique burial vaults, in my childish imagination, yawned like some ravenous maw, into which all who vanished never returned. In fancy I constructed a bottomless pit in which nightmarish forms of darkness crept and grew, a pit filled with forms instilled with a grim life that was an insult flung in the face of God and nature. Death itself held no terrors for me, but only those things which I conceived to be the offspring of death, in the imagination-infested region of my childhood, which I associated inseparably with the vaults.

During many of my earlier years I dwelt morbidly on the subject of what happens to the deceased. Perversely, I gave no thought to Paradise or the place where flew the immortal spirit, but father reflected on the husk left behind, and the possibility of an abnormal awareness, a sluggish and impotent *life* clinging thereto, defying time and dissolution, impotent only in that it was static, and could not manifest itself. I filled my boyish mind with terrible subjects. I had read—I think in my twelfth year—of suspended animation, and wondered what was the difference between death from which there was return, and death from which there was no return, and if there was an awareness of surroundings in the poor, crumbling shell. . . .

I would stand at the head of the narrow, steep, stone stairway, holding the heavy oaken door wide open and ready to

flee in an instant, gazing fearsomely into a darkness that defied my penetrating stare. And I felt that my gaze was reciprocated. I was above all things conscious of a curious air of watchfulness that seemed to justify my intuition of an unnatural vitality residing in *those* who dwelt there. . . . I knew that there was not mere annihilation, but a transformation into something that was neither annihilation nor true life, a vitality that oozed from and through the dissolving shells, thriving amidst decay and darkness with sickening tenacity.

Then when some member of my once large family descended the narrow stairway, I stood with fixed and fascinated stare, straining to catch a glimpse of the nitrous interior, but seeing only the damp, gray-gleaming walls of a passageway that led still further down. And always the feeble reflections of the taper would yield once more to darkness as the visitant progressed into the vaults, so that it seemed that the ravening maw was indeed filled, satisfied. . . .

As I grew older I witnessed the fateful procession of my family into the vaults. So it came about finally that those who frequented the grim limbo that filled my early years with a superstitious terror failed to return from the black depths below the basement. The living who had descended so often to pray for the already departed themselves surrendered to the encroachment of death on the domain of the living. I personified the vaults as a creeping form, a restless entity burrowing beneath the big old house, waiting patiently for the stream of the living that passed as inevitably into the still chambers as the stars progressed in their courses.

I OFTEN wondered if we do not commit a terrible error by not cremating the dead. Instead, they are placed in vaults

and coffins as things no longer animate, without feeling or consciousness. They are put away whole and intact, as they died, and time wreaks its will upon them. Perhaps we are mistaken to think that life departs abruptly and completely from the mortal frame, and as greatly in error to attempt to draw a distinct line between organic and inorganic, sentient and insentient, living and dead. There are certainly degrees of life and vitality in human beings. In all cases, then, does this vitality depart sharply and cleanly, instead of ebbing away slowly after the abrupt slump called death? The fact that the bodies of saints so often remain intact for long years has led me to suspect that they do not enjoy their heavenly reward as soon as might be expected after death. . . .

There are many cases of suspended animation or catalepsy. At times the victims awake before they are interred, and are saved from live burial. Others are not so fortunate. Who can say where catalepsy tapers off into deeper shades or tones of death? And how deep may the deceased descend into the clouded abyss? If vitality is a fluid, how many drops cling to the interior of the vessel when it is emptied?

My Aunt Helena was a vigorous woman.

She was not very tall, or heavy, or muscular, and yet she possessed that strange force or essence called vitality in superabundance. How can we define this? Neither physiology nor chemistry could ever explain what it was that she, more than any one else I knew except my uncle, emanated continuously during her busy life. I have heard that the human organism emanates a fluid or force deadly to certain minute organisms and capable of affecting delicate instruments. I wonder if this fluid is identical with what is called the soul. Horrible thought! If this is so, the soul must be divisible. It

is then constantly radiating out into space, leaving its traces here and there, like the slimy trail left behind by the snail. Where is immortality then? For when the restraining vessel disintegrates, the fluid flows away in all directions and evaporates.

My aunt was a fair, light-haired, blue-eyed woman. Her features were fine and delicately proportioned and her form willowy. Therefore, when I speak of her abounding vitality, I think not of the crude strength of the peasant woman, but the subtle radiations of the full moon, the glow of subterranean fires, the concealed potency of the magnet and the incorporeal energy of the winds. She was the paragon of force and magnetism, of energy that was not born of bone or muscle. She emanated a persuasive magnetism that influenced all about her, a will that bent all before her like wind in the wheat-fields. Life seemed to flow from her high, white forehead and her slender finger-tips.

She was constantly in the best health, and never seemed subject to the maladies that sweep the frail human frame. Her day was filled with activity from dawn to sunset. I remember her today not as she appeared in the lily-glow about the bier, but as she used to move about through the house and in the gardens, leaving her impress on the very walls, her breath on the flowers and shrubs.

It was a great shock when she died suddenly, on a chill December night, without warning and without apparent cause.

The family physician ascribed her demise to heart failure, but I believed—I knew—that this verdict was a mockery. It was impossible that she had died from a heart ailment, as she had never shown symptoms of such a malady. Later I was to understand.

IF HER death was a shock to me, it was an even greater shock to my uncle—so it seemed, for she was the center of his universe.

Where formerly there were three of us in the great house, there were now only two. The house became suddenly and completely empty, cold, cheerless. Under my aunt's hands it had slowly acquired during the years after the death of my parents a warmth and vitality that it must certainly have absorbed from her. The furniture gleamed, ornaments sparkled, the fire burned with fierce joy in the great fireplace. After her death the gleam and the sparkle and the joy suddenly went out, like an extinguished candle, plunging the house into a gloom that weighed down on the roof. All the life and vitality that the place had absorbed under Aunt Helena's care departed with her, was imprisoned in the coffin—casting a last glow on the massed white lilies—and flowed away into the burial vaults like water seeking its lowest level, leaving its former level bleak and dry. Was it for this reason that after her death the vaults acquired a new—shall we call it?—life?

To me, the pitch-black mortuary chambers below the cellar took on a new atmosphere, a new significance. The darkness squirmed, thrived with life, seemed to course fluidly through the grimly tenanted, subterranean rooms. It was not the same pit of my childhood. Where formerly I felt only a sluggish, terrible awareness lurking in the abysmal obscurity of the vaults, there was now an abounding vitality, a burning flame of unexampled brightness, as the torch dims the fitful glow of the *ignis fatuus*. It was Aunt Helena who—I knew—was resisting somehow the sharp fang of the conqueror worm with the superhuman vital force that must have dwelt latent, not destroyed, in her still form, pushing outward against its concrete prison.

After her death I was again subjected to the morbid fascination of my childhood days. I stood in fright and awe at the head of the steep, narrow stone stairway, gazing into the well of darkness at the foot of the damp, mossy steps. I did this often, the strange spell holding me with a grip of iron, and still I did not dare to descend. I stood ready to flee in an instant, holding the ponderous oaken door wide on its massive copper hinges, powerless to descry anything in the gloomy recesses of the vaults and, indeed, not knowing what I should expect to see. And I felt undeniably the presence of Helena. As always, I felt where I could not see. . . .

Uncle Henry seemed grief-stricken, which was to be expected. Yet I say "seemed." I remember his iron composure at the funeral and at the placing of the coffin in the vault, I watching on and not daring to follow the slow procession of pall-bearers headed by my uncle, who carried candelabra to light the precipitous descent and the murky path. Then later I observed him in the library by the fireplace, his head unbowed; the heavy odor of lilies filled the air, the wind whispered drearily outside the windows, light and shadow writhed on the walls like a misty simulacrum of Tartarean vistas; still he sat there, surrounded by a subtle aura of confidence, of expectation. How was I to guess so soon? . . .

In the days that followed, in the weeks that grew out of them, I observed with growing curiosity my uncle's excessively frequent visits to the tomb, always with the missal and single candle. As often as once each day I saw his heavy, muscular form descending into the blackness with slow and steady steps.

In the weeks following the death of his wife, my uncle's bearing and demeanor became more and more confident and expectant, quite different from his earlier,

assumed air of resignation to the will of God. His vigils beside the tomb of Helena were frequent, as I have said; yet he returned each time from the vaults with the utmost composure, with ill-concealed confidence on his rugged face, although I did not perceive this immediately. In the latter days of January he was almost cheerful. He moved with a brisk step, yet with a great air of mystery. Still I suspected nothing, for whenever we spoke with each other, the restrained, sadness-tinged tones of his voice dispelled such perplexity as had grown from observation of his actions.

THE first intimation of horror that I received came to me one evening in the hushed atmosphere of his private library, to which no one but him and Aunt Helena had ever had access.

He had always spent a considerable part of each day in his room and in his library. On two occasions only had I ever caught a glimpse of the ceiling-high shelves; a glimpse and no more. Naturally, I had always felt curiosity about the book-lined room. One day my curiosity was to receive more satisfaction than I had bargained for. . . .

It was on a Sunday, and I had already seen my uncle disappear down the slippery steps into the strangely vibrant darkness. It was on my way to the study that I halted beside the door of Uncle Henry's private library. Who can say what it was that impelled me to try the door-knob? Perhaps it was the old curiosity; perhaps it was caprice; or perhaps I was prompted by something deeper. Then it was that I received the first intimation, in that heavily silent environment.

On the shelves was a staggering collection of books, which, I perceived immediately with growing apprehension, dealt with subjects I felt to be violently incompatible with his professed religious views.

Words cannot express my shock, my bewilderment, my doubt upon examining the numerous volumes. Many were inscribed in Latin and were of great antiquity. Those I could not read, however, usually contained remarkable and grotesque diagrams and drawings; interlaced triangles, squares and circles, and charts of the human anatomy covered with astrological and kabalistic symbols appeared frequently in these works. Then, too, there were those books that I could read, and I proceeded to do so at the cost of completely lost equilibrium.

Picking out a heavy, leather-bound volume, I opened it and began to read. My fright was great. Consider, for example, the following:

"It is said among the Greeks," said the paragraph (it was apparently translated from Latin), "that in an impenetrable mountain fastness in the northeast, where Rome's legions have not yet penetrated, dwells a scattered people whose priests and physicians are unexcelled in necromancy and the control of the elements. Frightened and starved travelers have returned from this mountain region with strangely similar tales. Accounts of the raising of the dead and of lightning and wind called out of the heavens are frequent. It has also been said that these people stand unclothed in bitter cold, and melt ice and snow around them with the breath of their bodies. It seems that these strange people, whoever they may be, are the custodians of a very great fund of superhuman wisdom, and hold the keys to many arcana. The tree-worshipping priests of Britannia and the black men of the Southern Continent hold no powers such as these. The soothsayers of the Greeks and the oracles of Delphi are acquainted with mere child's games when one considers the many-times confirmed accounts of the occult might of these people."

The above, however, was the least of the abominations that I found. It took on the appearance of a mere dissertation on the customs of foreign peoples in strange places, compared to that which next occupied my dazed brain, next absorbed my horror-filled intensity of concentration. Opening a large, leather-bound tome at random, I read:

"It is therefore apparent that each soul possesses inherent in itself to effect its own resurrection, a capacity for the special vital fluid possessed by the human organism, a thousandfold greater than the crude, earthy strength of the animal world. In the human being alone is the Solar Force specialized, differentiated, into what might be called mental or spiritual vital force, in contradistinction to the physical vitality of animals and the sluggish animation of vegetable life. In this respect, men are the vessels of power, the most exalted receptacles of the precious fluid that flows from the plenum, of the golden dew of Pleroma, otherwise known to men as *anima mundi*.

"Behold, then, how each man may resurrect his own body, according to the archetype of Christos, and triumph over the Destroyer of Forms. The secret lies in this, that he who aspires to unending length of days must invoke that Power known as the Preserver, and the secret is that each man is his own preserver. By knowledge of the proper means, therefore, one may overthrow the night-clothed and ravening Devourer which forces its way into the most secret tomb, the most cleverly concealed vault, to gnaw at the husk therein. The soul may wrench itself from the smothering embrace of night, from the detestable bosom of decay, from the cold and slimy suck of chaos . . . and radiant and triumphant, emerge from the gaping entrance of its shattered prison, invested with immortality of the body;

for, it is the terrifying truth, there is no other immortality. That which men call the immortality of the spirit is a dim dream, and the soul without a body flits like a will-o'-the-wisp from star to star. . . .

"Certain oriental peoples have a method of arousing the dead, wherein the veins of the body are opened and the corpse is cudged violently with sticks and flogged with whips, so that a frantic, convulsive and temporary revivification is brought about. This is hardly to be admired or, less yet, to be indulged in; for it is not true immortality, and is a cruel disappointment to the eager, re-awakened entity to which the body belongs.

"There is a more subtle, sure method, however, by which animation may be restored to the dead, provided that the period of latency in the tomb does not exceed seven days, or slightly more or less than that figure."

The blasphemous tract thereupon gave minute directions for the raising of the dead. It spoke confidently, in the utmost detail, about the necessary measures, the arrangement of censers and diagrams, of candles and emblems around and above the tomb, and the intricate, sonorous mantras to be intoned daily in the funereal environs, accompanied by slow-traced diagrams and signs in the air.

I CLOSED the book slowly, confusedly, my fingers trembling with a dawning fear. Then I placed the volume back in its proper place, extinguished the light, and fled from the library, closing the door swiftly, silently behind me. As I hurried to my room, I heard slow, heavy footsteps ascending the stairs from the cellar. I considered myself fortunate, indeed, to have escaped observation, as a terrible suspicion had crept into my mind con-

cerning the true purpose of my uncle's vigils in the vaults.

In the seemingly endless days that followed my intrusion into the locked library of my uncle, it was only with almost superhuman exertion of will that I concealed from him, in word or even general bearing, the fact that I had received the first intimation of abnormality in his daily actions, the fact that I had penetrated into the monstrous repository of occult knowledge into which he withdrew daily for study that did not pursue the conventional paths of learning. I would not have succeeded in this deception had I known the measure in which he was succeeding in necromancy . . . though it must be understood that my suspicions were still so unformed that I could not assign any definite purpose to his frequent descents into the funereal chambers deep below the house.

I observed my uncle's actions thereafter with such intensity that his failure to feel my gaze was miraculous. This concentration brought to my attention things I had failed to observe before, such as long bulges beneath his clothing betokening, as I was later to discover, a candle made for ceremonial purposes, and small packages that left in the air fragrant trails of sandalwood and frankincense. Always, however, he carried with him the single candle, the weighty missal, which repeated action became obnoxious to me, as I now knew that he had no need or use for a book of orthodox prayer. It seemed to me at times that I could also hear faint echoes of my uncle's voice in the depths below, a voice whose timbre had acquired a new significance.

What was it that caused him to become so negligent of his actions in those last few days? What inspired the carelessness that led to my ultimate discovery of the events that had been going on in the

vaults? Truly, it was merciful that the truth became known to me bit by bit, rather than in one moment that would have cost me my sanity.

First, there was his curiously confident, expectant air as he emerged daily from the vaults. Then followed the discovery of the library and of the packages that he carried with him into the depths. And finally, that last day, I found the diary, which led to the ultimate climax of revelation in the subterranean rooms into which I finally dared to descend.

ENTERING my uncle's room unbidden, while he was absorbed in his daily, subterrene vigil, I found the diary on his dresser. Without knowing what to expect, I opened and read:

"December 23—It is now seven days after the interment of Helena, and I have begun the rites of preservation, which are necessary to preserve the Temple from destruction . . . for it will be many days before the marble chrysalis yields up its precious secret, before the final and glorious resurrection of her who lies so pallid but adamant within. I doubt that the rites could recall her to me without her own innate power of resurrection. The force she had in life she now has in death, subdued and concealed, but flouting Conqueror Worm with sublime persistency.

"How can I express the deep humility I feel upon observing daily her imperishable form, white and spotless, unmarked by the tooth of time? In tender reverence and awe I am compelled to genuflect before her quiet immortality, her adamant but subdued and gentle will-to-life. Her hair seems to flow like a golden river in the darkness of the vault, and a faint nimbus clothes her resisting flesh in a secret and unearthly glamor. Her blue-gem eyes are now softly veiled by white-rose lids, but they shall soon open. I

tremble in passion like a leaf in a gale as I stand daily in the circle of glowing tapers, intoning magical syllables in the hushed atmosphere, swinging the censer rhythmically, while her still form is wreathed in plumes of pungent frankincense and sandalwood.

"What a strange passion I am filled with when I view her dormant beauty! It seems to me that now she is more desirable, being for the moment beyond my reach, and I, a humble votary, wreath the marble goddess with incense. What a strange feeling! I am sure she is aware of my presence, though she is truly dead. I feel some strange and supermundane breath of air flow from the sepulcher, as out of vast spaces.

"A foolish thought. It is as still as death down there, as still as death can be. There is only silence and darkness, and Helena waits patiently in the midst of her gruesome company until the day shall arrive when she strides forth from the tomb. The burning incense drops, for the moment, a veil before her radiance.

"December 27 — The past days have been filled with a sweet anxiety, an ecstatic impatience. Although I repeat the mantras precisely and trace the diagrams unfailingly, it seems to me that I am not the occult scientist I thought myself, but a bereaved spouse frantically imploring rather than demanding, the return of his loved one. At the end of the ceremony, I unfailingly kneel in adoration before the sepulcher, while my hot and quickened breath congeals on the gray stone. Gray, gray! Gray stone, covered with sweat and niter, the enclosing darkness—these I could not bear but for the presence of Helena. Her calm demeanor soothes and refreshes me immeasurably. How cosmic her thoughts must be, how superhuman and unearthly her mood as she lies there!

"January 2—The super-mundane wind again! I feel it flow from the shrouded recesses of the vault, and yet the candles do not flicker, the plumes of incense do not waver. But I think I understand now. It is the breath of *anima mundi*, it is the stirring of the breath of life. It is a psychic wind, and has its origin nowhere on earth, although it flows through Helena, who is a gate ajar to the interstellar forces and the thronging Multitudes beyond the veil of matter. Hasten!

"January 7—How long must I wait? How long must *we* wait? Oh cruel time! thy fangs are sharp, they bite deeply. And although thy strength is nothing against *her*, thy tooth has torn my heart. Helena . . . doubt . . . prayer . . . incantations . . . waiting . . . incense mingling with the musty effluvium of the tomb, pungent, aromatic . . . seven candles, tall and quietly burning . . . colored diagrams in chalk on dank, gray stone . . . silence, silence, then the sonorous chant of resurrection. When will it end? Perhaps . . . but God preserve me, *I dare not doubt*. Until now I have had nought but the utmost confidence in the revelations of Ibn Khanu in his work, *Death and Resurrection*. I must not now doubt the potency of the mantras and the symbols, nor Helena's own indomitable will. Long days and weeks have passed since her death, while I have spent every day, either beside her tomb or in my library, learning how to hasten the transformation of the human chrysalis, how to break the sooner the marble and mortar cocoon. Endless incantations, dozens of ceremonial candles, a fortune in rare frankincense, what are all these to the price Helena and I would pay if I failed?

"Her sacrifice was sublime. She was not informed as I was in the occult lore of ages, she knew nothing of the greater arcana; yet she consented so readily, so

willingly, with such sublime confidence in my ability to bring her forth again from the tomb! Not the slightest remonstrance, not the least doubt, and of fear there was none. I but explained to her my intention, my glorious purpose of immortality on earth, and though she did not understand fully, she bowed her head and gave her consent sweetly.

"She knew what she was to do that night at the table, and she did it without hesitation, faced death without fear. Two brownish drops in the wine I placed, at dinner, bitter. She drank it swiftly. Helena!"

HOURS later I stumbled up flights of stairs, raced in engulfing fear through the empty house, through long, silent corridors that seemed without end, through great hushed rooms wherein a strange animation seemed to have sprung up, past fireplaces leaping with fiery life and walls alive with writhing shadows, through portals that seemed to fly open before my approach in a terror of their own and out into the cold January air.

Snow was falling outside, thick and fast. I fled up the side of a hill and, reaching the summit, paused there, while my gaze rested on the huge, rambling house below, from which I had just flung myself in an overwhelming access of terror. Beneath me it lay like a slumbering behemoth, while the dull grayness of the walls and the roof was transformed into a living, gleaming white, and the light within blazed brazenly, triumphantly, out over the rime-blanketed earth. Lights sprang into fiery life in every window, lit by an unseen incendiary. The great, snow-bleached structure became suddenly vibrant with light, life. The howling night-wind shrieked triumphantly, and my mind projected itself once more inside. The pageant of past minutes rose up before me.

Gone now was all the old terror of my childhood, replaced by an overwhelming, torturing curiosity. Dazedly, hardly realizing what I was doing, I opened the ponderous, oaken door slowly, silently, on its well-oiled, copper hinges. With silent tread and with a pace of funereal slowness and deliberation, I descended the precipitous, gray, dank steps. Dark, wet walls loomed up on either side, and thick blackness lay before me at the bottom of the descent. A cold, clammy breath blew in my face from the rambling chambers and corridors into which I was venturing at last, heavily laden with the odor of freshly burned incense.

And as I reached the bottom of the stone stairway, and stood quivering in the frigid exhalation of the vault, there beat against my ears the strangely arousing syllables of a low-pitched, vibrant chant. It roamed through the obscurity of the chambers and smote my attentive ears with a peculiar, invigorating quality. Still hardly realizing that I had made the fearsome descent into this chill limbo, I proceeded through the twisting corridor unhesitatingly, as if my feet and legs were inspired with a volition and animation of their own.

Suddenly I came to a turn in the corridor, and there spread before me the first room. Within a circle of seven candles whose light beat in visible pulsations against the inclosing darkness, within a complex diagram made with chalk on the wet flagstones, wrapped in clouds and plumes of incense arising from three censers, knelt my uncle, gazing with a fearful concentration into the recessed vault immediately in front of him. The last syllables flowed from his lips, and then he uttered softly, reverently yet passionately: "Helena, Helena!"

I had halted there at the turn in the passageway, frozen in statuesque im-

mobility, while comprehension dawned luridly on my dazed mind, while the blood withdrew violently from my face, the strength from my limbs, the first courage from my sadly leaping heart. Myself unseen, I watched the mute unfolding of the ultimate climax. My extremities grew cold, my head flushed again with blood, then blanched once more; my pulse raced violently, swiftly. I seemed suddenly suspended in the outer depths of space, while the earth dwindled

beneath me like a punctured balloon. My consciousness reeled but, fortunately, did not leave me, so that I was able to *creep* from the corridor to the stairs and up them to the silent quarters above in abject fear. I heard my uncle's expectant cry and would have turned and fled. Too late!

Aunt Helena emerged from the vault slowly, quietly, with a queer delicacy.

I never returned to that house.