

Weird Tales

January
1954

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"... all power is mine, the `demon is my power.'"



THE STORMCLIFF PAPERS

BY W. J. SUPRENTANT

I

IF I NEVER sleep again as long as I live, it will be a just retribution for keeping silent

when I should have spoken; for concealing a truth that cried for admission. And I haven't slept—God knows what would happen should I close my eyes and drift

into the black helplessness of sleep. No, I cannot sleep until I have put many comforting miles between myself and Stormcliff, and the sea.

When young Anders brought the papers to my rooms—then was the time for truth. Why did I hesitate? Was it because, after twenty-four years, I had come to believe that the nightmare of terror I had experienced as a boy of twelve was merely a bad case of imagination? None of us likes to be thought a fool. And the truth, if told, would have stamped my story as a madman's delusion.

I was fond of young Anders, as one would be fond of a playful, good-natured puppy. His elder brother Peter had gone through medical school with me. We graduated together and set up separate practices in town. Peter stuck to straight G.P., whereas I tended to branch out into the psychosomatic field. We were the closest of friends, and occasionally John Anders shared our quiet get-togethers. Only occasionally, though. I think young Anders felt that we were rather elderly and dull to suit his taste. He seemed to enjoy our company best when deep in a discussion of abnormal psychology or the metaphysical. An hour or two spent in dissecting matters supernatural would hold him spellbound, but once start a post-

operative analysis of Mrs. So and So's gall bladder and John would be off like a shot. Not that he was at all ghoulish upon such subjects; he simply had a deep interest in matters of that sort. A recompense, I thought, for a wonderfully healthy mind and body: the touch of darkness that we all hold somewhere within us.

So I was pleased rather than surprised when young Anders brought the papers to my rooms.

"This should be right up your alley," he said, and tossed a sheaf of papers onto my desk. "Talk about old wives' tales! See what you make of this."

I flipped open the paper cover, noting the ancient but legible script, the startling opening sentence: *Nothing upon the earth or above the earth or beneath the earth may harm me. All power is mine. The demon is my power.*

I glanced up and met his smile. "It takes all kinds. . . ." I murmured. "Where did you find this?"

"At Stormcliff, and by happy chance. You knew that I've been remodelling the old library? It was inconvenient as it was; dark; bookshelves a mile high. Knocking out the partition between the two east windows, the workmen found an old journal walled up there. These were in it."

Stormcliff, I thought uneasily. That ancient, looming pile above the sea; young Anders had

bought it for next to nothing because no one else would have taken it as a gift. It was too old; too large, too full of darkness and decay; but John was delighted with its brooding antiquity.

"I'll be glad to read them," I assured him. "They look as old as Stormcliff itself."

"I believe they are. From all I could discover, old Adam Widdemer, the author of this remarkable fantasy, founded Stormcliff over two hundred years ago. The papers are dated, as you see, about fifteen years after the house was built."

My curiosity aroused, I pressed him for details concerning Stormcliff and its founder, hoping—or dreading?—that he might throw light upon my own dark store of information.

"There is very little I can tell you, Gordon. Widdemer built the house in a spot that at that time must have been pretty desolate. He brought a bride from England; she was very beautiful, according to his journal. I gather that he built Stormcliff as a sort of glass tower to keep her from the rest of the world—or, to be more particular, a certain handsome young lord. She was unhappy, but managed to assist him in founding a line of Widdemers that has died out only recently. One stolid son she gave him. She died in that childbirth."

"And Widdemer?" I prompted.

Anders frowned. "No one seems to know. He disappeared, finally, without a trace. The journal ends abruptly with a rather curious reference to the papers I've brought you. I remember the words: 'They think me mad. Tonight they shall be proved wrong. The record is finished. *The demon is impatient.*'" Anders drew the phrase out in mock malignity. "With that, my friend, I must leave you. May your dreams be troubled tonight!" He glanced at his watch, refused my offer of a drink. "Sleep well," he said, and with a hearty, humorous laugh he closed the door behind him, leaving me with the papers that were to make me wish I have never heard of Stormcliff, or been fool enough to read beyond the first page of that infamous record.

Surely I had warning. Else, why should a certain childhood memory hover so persistently between my eyes and those yellowed pages—a memory that I had succeeded in banishing from my mind only after years of mental effort?

I am a doctor, a supposedly rational man. Delving into the unknown is, for me, merely a relaxation: Why then should my first reaction to those time faded words be a sharp irritation, and then—an unreasoning fear?

Those papers, leprous fruit of

an abnormal mind, should have been destroyed at discovery. Twenty-odd mouldering sheets—a recorded history of the evil that came to Stormcliff, the house by the sea, and a shuddering blasphemy in this prosaic, unsuspecting world.

Yet it was blind fear that I knew when I had laid aside the last of those foul papers. I was trembling, and a nauseous churning in the pit of my stomach led me to grope for the whiskey decanter at my elbow. How long I sat there striving for reason, I do not know. I felt that everything I believed in, everything I had been taught as a Christian, was powerless against the onslaught of evil that Adam Widdemer had loosed on the night of his disappearance.

And I knew that John Anders stood in grave peril of losing his very soul.

I reached for my desk phone with shaking hands and dialled a number. A drowsy voice answered my ring.

"This is Gordon, Peter. I've got to see you. Shall I meet you there, or—"

"What's wrong?" he demanded, then "Never mind. Wait for me. I'll be there in five minutes."

I did not have long to wait. From my study window I saw him striding up the walk. I went down to let him in.

HE THREW his coat across a chair and looked hard at my face. His keen and steady stare brought back a measure of peace, I poured two whiskeys and motioned him to a chair. He sat quietly, waiting for me to begin. "We've been friends for a good many years, Peter," I said. "I want you to hear me out, remembering that. I need your help, and I feel that you may need mine. Also, I want you to keep an open mind regarding what I am about to say."

He nodded. I knew that I could count on him. "Read this—" I said, handing him the Stormcliff papers. He took them, looked them over curiously, and read them rapidly. I studied his face while he read. Curiosity, scepticism, distaste, yes—but not fear. He returned them to me when he had finished.

"What an abhorrent mind that man must have had," he said quietly.

"You see nothing in the papers to warrant belief?"

"Belief! My dear Gordon—you're an intelligent man. How can you ask? What hideous rot!"

"That is what I wanted to know," I replied. "I called you, Peter, with hardly a second thought. I've always admired your direct, caustic mind. And Peter—I have grave reason to believe in the truth of these papers."

He did not smile, but waited.

"It's because I believe at least a part of what these papers contain that I feel your brother John is in grave danger of losing his life—and possibly more than his life." I said it bluntly, saw Peter start with shock. "I believe that unless we can persuade him to abandon Stormcliff, he will disappear one night—as Adam Widdemer disappeared."

"You mean that you actually believe old Adam was speaking from experience? Where is that page—" He ran through the papers and selected the one he wanted. He read aloud: "*I find that the Book, though all but illegible at this place . . . has given me the true key. The symbols: (here followed a careful design within a pentagram) have brought it up out of the sea. At first. I was affrighted by its hideous mien. It is well that I could not see its visage. It strove wildly, but could not pass the barrier effected by the symbol: (there followed a triangle holding a different design, and drawn even more painstakingly than the pentagram.)*"

"I have reason to believe it," I repeated. "And for once in my life, at least, I am beginning to doubt my own sanity. I need your impartial viewpoint of this—this madness," I said, indicating the Stormcliff papers.

"You feel that John may be in

danger of this 'being' Adam Widdemer called up out of the sea. Is that it?"

"That is it. That is why I'm asking you to persuade him to leave Stormcliff—before his remodelling goes too far. He may stumble onto something decidedly unpleasant."

"He's read the papers, of course?" I nodded, and Peter continued: "I can understand why he would bring them to you, rather than to me. You know, Gordon, I advised him against purchasing Stormcliff. It's too old, too run down. A huge house that's left to dampness and rot for forty years. . . . well, he wouldn't listen. I can hardly agree with you that there is more to this than meets the eye; and I'll confess I'm surprised that you take any stock in Widdemer's ravings. The man must have been mad."

"Would you care to take the chance of his running-across anything of the sort?" I persisted. "He's young, incautious. . . . and I'm sure there was something; not at all certain that there isn't something still."

He was silent for some moments, as if waiting for me to go on, but I couldn't—not just yet.

"I'll look into it, Gordon," he said slowly. "I have no reason to doubt your word. But to take any stock in such a thing—it's too incredible. It couldn't happen.

Why, the world would go mad if there were such beings as Adam described let loose upon it. Don't take offense, old man, but wouldn't it be a good idea to see a specialist? You *have* been overworking lately, you know."

I had expected that, of course. "I'll do anything you say, if it will convince you. Only I hope to God we are not too late. I hope that I am wrong!"

II

I HAD been badly shaken, it is true. But as the days went drifting on into October and nothing out of the ordinary occurred, the horror of that childhood memory faded once more into oblivion. I was just a bit uneasy when young Anders stopped by to reclaim the Stormcliff papers; I felt a strange reluctance to hand them over to one so young and vital. But John was in excellent spirits and insisted that the papers belonged with the house, along with its ghosts. I inquired about the progress he was making with the remodelling of Stormcliff into a more livable dwelling. There was little more to be done, he said. He did not want to lose the original charm of the place by making too many changes. The men were nearly finished working on the lower corridor, tearing out the thick-massed stone of the

east wall to make possible a large window overlooking the sea. We said good-bye, and I promised him that I would take a run out one day soon, for dinner.

It was to be sooner than I thought.

PETER called on me three days later. He came at once to the study and stood frowning, tamping the tobacco in a particularly foul-smelling relic of a pipe.

"Has it occurred to you, Gordon," he said after a pause, "how much trouble may be caused by the tampering of fools in affairs of which they would best remain in ignorance?"

It was rather an unnecessary question. We all learn that, sooner or later.

"I am referring to John, he said briefly. "Young idiot! He came for the Stormcliff papers, did he not?"

"Why, yes," I said. "He'd only loaned them to me."

"I'm sorry you returned them to him." He turned abruptly and flung himself into the chair before my desk. "I can't help feeling responsible for the kid."

"John is thirty," I reminded him.

"Yes, but he has such high-flown ideas he needs a firm hand still. Had dinner with me three nights ago. I suggested what you asked me to—about his leaving Stormcliff, at least for a while.

I'll confess you had me a bit bothered, Gordon. He ridiculed the idea. In fact, he was highly excited about something he had found out about the place. He was coming here to get the papers then. Said he needed them. I haven't seen him since. And—I've tried."

The words ended so dryly, so quietly, I felt cold.

"He's missing then."

"His workmen haven't seen him. I've been out there. He hasn't stopped at the club, and I'll admit I'm worried. Mind you, I'm not thinking of the talk you and I had some time ago. At least, not in the same way. I still say it's utter nonsense. But I can't think what damnfool notion he might have dreamed up. . . ."

"Have you tried locating him through the usual channels?"

"I'd look a great fool, wouldn't I, should it turn out he's off on a three day jaunt?"

"But good Lord!" I burst out, appalled by the possibilities of the situation. "Whether you believe me or not, Peter—those damned papers may be the cause of John's disappearance—or worse. We've got to go out there—to Stormcliff. I'm afraid, Peter, that I know where John is—or was. We shall have to find the papers, and the journal. They will show us the way."

He turned to me, alert. "Why do you insist that there is truth

in those beastly papers? I remember you said you had reason to believe in them. What is the reason?"

I HESITATED, knowing how the truth would sound to Peter. Yet, fantastic as it was, and incredible, shouldn't I have spoken out at once when John first brought the papers to me? Better to have been thought eccentric or even mad than to have this weight of guilt hanging over me now.

"I'd hoped to avoid speaking of it at all, Peter," I said at last. "It was something that happened to me when I was a boy, nearly twelve. Since then, I've made every effort to forget the horror of it as it struck me then. I had to. The nightmares, well, no matter. I don't know whether you remember my grandfather. He must have been over sixty years old at that time, but he was still a remarkably active man. His favorite pastime was sailing in the bay; very few days passed that did not find him there, often as not with me along. He went out alone on this particular day. Perhaps I'd been ill, I don't remember, but I'd stayed at home. It was midsummer and the air was very close, promising a storm. Before he could get back, the storm broke. I remember its violence; I don't suppose I shall ever forget it. Gramps had the

skiff, and I was worried about him because it was rather hard to handle in rough weather. We waited for him while it grew, blacker and blacker outside.

"I remember my father going out with the men to see if they could find him; remember too that that night, for the first time in my lifetime, the lighthouse beacon failed. It was odd, you know. They didn't find grandfather. He came home—alone. It was I who heard him at the door. I thought that it was a dog, at first. . . . the whimpering. God! I had nightmares for years after. I opened the door. He was on his knees, and when the support of the door gave way, he crumpled against me. I couldn't move. I stood there, paralyzed until someone came and led me away. Even then, I could see the blood, and the way he'd been torn. I could hear the things he screamed. He died during the night; no one so mangled could have lived. They said his mind was gone from the shock of his injuries, but they hadn't seen what I had. How can I describe it, the horror of it? It turned away when I opened the door, as if it had been—*interrupted at feeding*. It filled the night outside, then seemed to melt behind the rain that was sweeping through the doorway. And the smell. . . ."

I raised my head from my

hands and met Peter's gaze. He seemed pale, but there was puzzlement behind his eyes.

"A horrible experience for a child," he said gravely, "Yet I don't see the connection between this—and Stormcliff."

"He screamed until he died," I said. "I couldn't help but hear. He'd been fond of me, did I say? Over and over he repeated to my father: "Go away from this accursed place. . . . take the boy away. . . . you are in danger. keep him away from Stormcliff. . . ." until I stopped up my ears with my fists and cried myself to sleep. I knew where he'd been, you see. We'd often explored the crags beneath Stormcliff. And we'd shared a secret together, grandfather and I. . . . the entrance to Stormcliff—from the sea."

"Very well," Peter said quietly, "We shall start for Stormcliff at once. You've won."

III

STORMCLIFF crouched malignant in the dusk, brooding over the sea that had raged against its foundations for untold centuries. Gnawed by time, the cliffs were stark and jagged, sweeping away to the north to wilderness and heavy forest, away from the sea. The grounds were a tangle of underbrush and briary growth, hemmed in on all

but the eastern side by dark massed pine and spruce. The narrow road in was all but swallowed by the crowding forest. The wind from the sea was cold and keen and I hunched deeper into my coat as I followed Peter's unfaltering lead. The jingling of keys brought me up against an unsheltered door, like a mouth closed grimly upon the secrets that lay within. I shivered involuntarily as it swung open at the touch of Peter's hand. All was still, suddenly, when the door had closed behind us. . . . too still, I thought uneasily.

In spite of the clamour of the sea, read the papers, the vaults of Stormcliff are as silent as the tomb. . . .

"And as cold as a tomb," Peter muttered. I knew that he too recalled the passage.

In the dim twilight, the cavernous rooms stretched out on either side of us down the length of a shadow hung corridor. From its eastern end the dying light of day filtered in through a ragged opening: the unfinished window, so boarded as to do little to dispel the gloom.

"We want the library," Peter said, too loudly. I listened to the echoes of his voice careening off into the darkness, *awakening what guardian of the night?* The thought came unbidden. I could not shake myself free of it. At that moment, I wanted nothing

so much as the security of my own four walls. But I plodded on behind Peter.

Stormcliff, since young Anders' purchase of it, had been beautifully kept. The satiny gleam of panelling, the wine-like glow of polished floors attested to the conscientious care of his housekeeper. I reflected, too, that for reasons of her own she would not stay in the house after dark, save when John needed her help with one of his infrequent dinner parties. The old legends, handed down and down by word of mouth — who knows what truth they contain?

PETER went directly to the windows and drew the heavy curtains tightly closed, then touched a wall switch. The light, flooding over the darkness of the room, helped to calm my unease. Surely, in an age such as this, there could be no such bestiality as was gloated over in that damp-rotted handful of papers? I joined Peter before the empty grate. He stood surveying the room quickly, efficiently.

"Suppose you try the desk drawers, Gordon. I'll have a look round the rest of the room. We'll have to find those papers, or I suppose we'll be running on blind chance."

I searched the desk from top to bottom, even tapping and prying for a possible hidden section.

Except for the faint sounds Peter made riffling through the pages of books, searching through cabinets, there was no other sound. Once, I went to the window and looked out over the sea. It was crashing and foaming against the crags below, driven to fury by the storm blowing out of the north, yet only two hundred feet above it, I could hear no sound of that mighty violence. The dreadful quiet of the place was like a weight upon me. I found myself keeping in tune with that silence, making no noise at all as I searched. Peter, too, was moving as noiselessly as a cat. He caught my glance and laughed, nervously.

"Gets you, rather!"

I agreed.

There was nothing to be found. We both admitted failure.

"Pour us a drink from that cabinet, Gordon," Peter said. "I'll get the makings of a fire for the grate. At least we shall be comfortable while we plan our next move."

A little later, seated before a crackling fire, Peter said: "It's possible, of course, that John has the papers with him, wherever he may be. In that case, what do you suggest?"

"That's fairly obvious, isn't it? Find out what it was that excited his interest, and act accordingly."

"But it could have been almost anything from cellar to garret.

I've been over all of it. Still, we can go over it again. You might spot something I overlooked." He paused a moment. "I want you to understand that I can't believe in this thing, as far as those papers are concerned. What you experienced, Gordon —how can you be certain there's any connection?" He looked at me. His face was far more haggard than his words would warrant. "Let's stick to sanity. He's probably discovered some hidden stair and got himself locked in. Teach him a good lesson, I suppose, but it's rather hard on us, meanwhile."

"Maybe," I said. I hoped I was wrong. *I've got to be*, I thought, as I followed him from the room, *for Peter's sake, as well as John's—and my own*.

But there was no reassurance in the clustering shadows of the stairwell, or the dampness of the upper halls, nor in the faint, mold-bourne odor that emanated from the old walls.

Together, we went over the old house from garret to cellar, walking in semi-darkness part of the time, constantly aware of the silence and gloom that surged forward as if to meet our advance upon each room, each corridor. There was no trace of young Anders; no trace of a struggle; no trace of any discovery that he might have made, until we paused for a moment near the

ragged masonry of the lower corridor's east wall. Even then, in my disturbed state, I should not have connected the torn wall with young Anders' discovery, had it not been for an almost tangible emanation of cold at that spot. It was thick, suddenly, and pressing. It was evil with such a force of malignancy that I struggled backward, away from the touch of it. I suppose I must have gone white, because Peter looked at me sharply before he said: "What is it—are you ill?"

"It's that cold—the same as when I—"

"Only a draught. The wind from the sea is like a knife. I think we'd best go home, Gordon. We can do little in this wretched darkness. John will probably show up in the morning, fresh from some jaunt or other. If not, well—we'll come back by daylight."

I COULD not go. I could not tear from my mind the thought that only a moment before but the flimsiest bit of boarding had separated the two of us from a hideousness impossible to bear. I was as sure of it, as certain, as if I had seen as well as felt the presence that had stood somewhere near, in darkness, in silence. As noiselessly as it had come, it had gone, carrying with it its burden of icy horror.

I have always assumed that I

am neither more nor less courageous than most men; but at that moment my mouth went dry. I laid my hands on the boarding and said: "This is it, of course," in so unnatural a voice that it did not sound like mine at all. "Help me tear this loose, Peter."

Peter, of course, had seen or heard nothing to cause alarm. He had not felt the seeping, icy cold as I had. But he must have known from my voice or my expression that something was wrong. He wrenched at one end of the temporary boarding; the section that I had in my hands fell loosely away at once. It had simply been propped into place securely enough to hold it against the wind. The wall was very thick at this point. Before us gaped the yawning opening that John had intended for a window. It looked out upon fast falling darkness and the sea that writhed far below. On the right of us, perhaps three feet in between the solid stone of the walls, was set a narrow, rough plank door. It looked inward upon blackness, still swaying slightly from the passage of—what dreadful listener? I drew back, feeling sick with apprehension. I was a child of twelve again, enmeshed in nightmare, terrified of surrendering myself into those waiting, hungry arms.

Beside me, Peter fumbled in his pocket and brought out a

flashlight. The narrow beam spilled sickly light down a damply glistening stone stair, very narrow, hollowed in the rock of the massive wall. Far down they went, into absolute blackness. Peter started forward, and though everything in me cried out against it, I followed, ashamed of my terror.

"It smells like the source of all foulness in here," Peter said quietly, in disgust. It was an odor that was all too reminiscent to me. I told Peter so, but he had seen something that excited him. He bent forward. "Here's a footprint, Gordon. It looks like you were right. Look here. . ." He focussed the light on the step below him and I stretched around him, trying to see.

"It's a footprint, all right," I said, "but look at the shape of it—no human foot ever. . ." The light had lifted for just a second, attracting my attention to a movement far below, as if a grayness had paused, and turned. Peter's voice rumbled on in the narrow, stone-bound darkness. I grasped his arm and tried to pull him backward, up the stair.

"Hurry," I gasped, "we've got to get out of here."

But Peter paused long enough to flash the light below, to see the reason for my panic. I don't know what he saw, but he turned and stumbled after me, dropping the flashlight and clawing at my

legs in his haste. At that same moment, the darkness was pierced by the most dreadful volume of sound, rising so loud and shrill I thought my eardrums would burst. It was like laughter, but no human laughter ever held such a burden of madness. Peter was gasping behind me when I flung myself upon the door and slammed it to, bolting it behind us with fingers that had suddenly gone stiff with nervelessness. At once the door was struck a thunderous blow that echoed and re-echoed hollowly through the vast corridor. Peter had sagged limply against one wall. His eyes were sick with shock and a fine perspiration filmed his white face. He was sobbing for breath. Oddly, at that moment it was I who was calm. I took his arm and led him into the library, against his protestations.

"Oh, God, Gordon—" he whispered, "why didn't you tell me?"

I let that go unanswered. I had told, to the best of my ability, even if a bit late. I listened carefully for any sound of pursuit. There was none, and I did not think that we would be troubled in the stark brightness of the library. I went to a cabinet and poured straight whiskey for both of us. It helped bring Peter to himself, though he shuddered at intervals. It would be a long time before he would forget. We

did not talk. It would have been almost impossible to discuss such matters in the terrible silence of Stormcliff. Instead, we went out and locked the door behind us and drove away from the troubled darkness, to my rooms.

IV

THAT we must go back—and soon—was clear to both of us. John was somewhere in the black depths of that evil place. Whether dead or alive, we could not know, but there was little hope for him in my mind.

"There is just a chance," Peter said, "if part of the story is true—and God knows I don't doubt it now—then perhaps the rest was true, also. John may have been able to protect himself. He had the symbols with him; I think we can be sure of that. And the triangle was supposed to have had some power over the monster."

"We'll need help," I said.

"If we can get it," Peter amended. "Can you think how it would sound if we take this story to—say—the police? You had trouble convincing me, Gordon. Likely as not, they'd just shake their heads over the pity of it all... no; they'd think we were mad."

"We do have some standing in town," I argued. Peter only smiled very tiredly. "You'll

admit we've acquired, quite honestly, a reputation for our share, at least, of rationality. There must be someone, somewhere, willing to lend a hand."

"Any number, willing to go along with a practical joke. Don't you see that's the only possible way it would appear to them?"

I thought, despairing, of young Anders.

"Then we'll have to fight it out, just the two of us. You have a gun, I suppose?"

Peter stopped pacing long enough to regard me fixedly.

"Do you think an ordinary weapon will be of any use against something as old and evil as that? I doubt it, Gordon. It must have been living there under Stormcliff and in the bay, for hundreds of years. Think of the legends you've heard—sea-serpents, horrors of the deep," he came to stand facing me, his eyes unnaturally dark with excitement. "Think of the sheep, the cattle that have been killed. It was blamed on dogs, poison, anything but what it very well might have been. How often did they find killer dogs?" His voice dropped, then. "I haven't mentioned the disappearances that have taken place over a period of years. The devilish part of it is, all this can be explained quite readily, and sanely. Doesn't it stand to reason that someone, in

all this time, has tried to kill this horror? That any variety of weapons must have been used against it, all to no avail?"

"We've got to try," I said. "If John is down there, and alive, it's obvious he's been unable to escape. He needs help."

"It's been three days now. I need a little time to think," Peter said. I knew he was wretched, but my mind was devoid of any really practical suggestion. There was one help remaining.

"Exorcism has been tried before, with surprising results," I said. "We could hunt up a priest."

Peter considered it only briefly. "If it were simply a matter of a haunted house, I'd agree. Spirits—I can see their yielding to a stronger power. But this thing, Gordon, is no spirit. It has weight—substance. It left that footprint, remember? And that was no tenuous wisp of ectoplasm that crashed against that door." He shook his head almost violently. "Dear God I can still hear it—!"

"And I," I said dryly, "would rather be shot dead than give the thing a chance to feed on my bones. But there's no other way. We've got to get out there and do what we can, instead of packing this room discussing it."

"If it could be trapped in some way—" Peter said slowly.

"That's it. We must trap it somehow, permanently."

"Dynamite?" I suggested.

"It might work, if we could get it bottled up somehow, cornered."

"Do you want to corner it?" I asked incredulously. "Remember, it was not so long ago it had us cornered, almost; it was none too pleasant an experience."

"If there are fissures, or pits in the thing's lair—do you know, Gordon?" He grasped my shoulder impatiently. "You did say you knew of an entrance to Stormcliff, from the sea. You must remember."

I THOUGHT of a small boy enthusiastically exploring the caverns and passages beneath Stormcliff, a youngster with no inkling of the horror that dwelt therein.

"Yes," I said at last, "There were fissures, cracks in the stone where the sea must have boiled in at high tide; there were barnacles and things, shells. . . . I never really discovered the stair, though."

"Were there any deep pits?" Peter asked as if exasperated.

"I don't really. . . . wait a minute! Yes, there was; one—a deep, black thing. I threw a stone into it, once. I never heard it strike bottom. There was no sound, not even a splash."

Peter's eyes were alive with

excitement. "That's it. That's what we need!"

"You mean to persuade it to lower itself in?" I asked, but then I was a little giddy with nervousness.

"It feeds on flesh—and blood," Peter said. The pit would mean nothing to it. It's never before been hampered by stone or water, that's certain. If we slaughter a sheep, it may lure it."

"Then there's no need of dynamite, if you can get it into that pit," I said, confidently. "It could never get out."

"You didn't see it coming up the stairs," Peter said, shuddering at the memory. "It wasn't walking... and its speed was incredible."

"Not walking? It left footprints on the stair."

"Just thank your God," Peter said fervently, "that you failed to see it—as I did. And now—besides a freshly slaughtered sheep, we'll need some dependable light, strong rope, a few sticks of dynamite—take your gun along if you like, but do be careful."

"You forgot to mention the most important thing of all," I said as I followed him from the room, in search of the items Peter required.

"What was that?"

"A strong faith in God, who made it as well as us."

V

I HAD rummaged around in my laboratory-workshop until I finally located a good length of strong rope and a gasoline lantern, as well as a powerful flashlight, items that I sometimes used on fishing trips, when Peter suggested that he get in touch with old McPherson. I saw his object, but I was rather doubtful. The old man operated a boating club for well-to-do summer visitors.

"We can't possibly use the stairs," Peter explained. "It would only defeat our purpose. They're so narrow we'd stand a good chance of being trapped ourselves. There's a motor launch we can use, if you can remember the entrance from the bay."

I agreed, then. I remembered the entrance well enough. And though the wind was still blowing up dirty weather, I preferred to take my chances from the sea entrance, rather than bottled up again on that perilous stair.

"I'll phone, then, and have it made ready," Peter said, "Meantime, you'll have to get hold of a good sized sheep. Truss it. We'll want to keep it alive until we are ready for it. I'll get the dynamite, myself. And get back here as quickly as you can. I'll call you when I'm ready. You can meet me at the old pier—that way we'll both save time."

Then he was off, leaving me to

my thoughts and the few odd jobs delegated to me.

I was at the pier some time before Peter arrived. The bound and bewildered sheep lay blattting at my feet. I pitied the creature, and was thankful that it would not know or fully understand the reason for its sacrifice. I suppose I rather pitied myself too during the length of that lonely vigil. It had turned much colder and the wind from the sea was like a knife. There was very little light, but the pilings beneath the pier groaned with the force of the wind and I could see the rising swells of the breakers boiling and sucking beneath my feet. It was a cold, bitter night, but the most bitter part of all lay just ahead. If young Anders was still alive, if he had not broken against what seemed to me an insuperable horror, then it would be a night well spent on my part. Yet in the back of my mind doubt nagged. Three days of it—could any mind withstand it?

PETER arrived in a cutter instead of the launch. Much better, I thought, in these heavy seas. Old McPherson stood crouched over the tiller. I could hear him grumbling to himself as Peter helped me aboard with our various needs. "He seems to have an idea of our mission," Peter said, low, "but we'll get no help from him. He's sworn he'll

not set foot on the rocks beneath Stormcliff. I had trouble enough getting his consent to take us at all."

"I'll not blame him for that," I said. "Did you manage the dynamite?"

Peter motioned to a small box beside him. "All set. The sticks are tempered for our immediate use." He paused a moment as if wrestling with some troubled thought before he added, "Are you sure you want to go through with it, Gordon? It's a great deal to ask—"

"I'm sure," I said, and meant it. I turned away to inspect, with some curiosity, the box containing the dynamite. It seemed to be filled with sawdust; precautionary, I supposed. Peter had worked on construction jobs many a summer before we graduated. I put my faith in his ability to handle that end of the operation. Certainly I did not know the first thing about it.

There was little talk between us during the half hour it took before the cliffs beneath Stormcliff loomed blackly out of the night. I know Peter was as absorbed in his dark thoughts as I was in my own. As soon as McPherson cut the power, we prepared to lower the dinghy over the side. When we were afloat in that all too fragile shell, then I prayed in earnest. It would take more than the mem-

ory of a certain peculiarly shaped cleft in the rock to keep us from mangling ourselves on the dangerous crags. Just as I said to Peter, "We'll have to chance a light—" the sound of old McPherson's voice reached us. "May God be wi' ye," he called, a bit belatedly. I could picture him, all ready to send the cutter speeding away from there at the first sign of danger from the dweller beneath Stormcliff.

After what seemed an eternity of time spent in wind, wet and darkness, we beached the dinghy on a familiar, sandy stretch of cove out of reach of the clamoring breakers and gathered our paraphernalia. I was cold as I had never been before, and I remember touching the sagging weight of the revolver in my jacket pocket. If it came to my choice of exits, this one was infinitely preferable to me.

I led the way toward the cleft, an intensified darkness in the gloom of the night. In a better light it would look like the standing figure of a woman, brooding, head bowed. That was how it had impressed me, long ago. We approached it, leaving the sandy floor of the cove for the tumbled mass of boulders on our right, picking our way with care because of the sensitive dynamite. A fall while carrying that innocent looking burden might end our troubles sooner

than expected. The rocks were slippery from the stinging salt spray, and though the sheep which I had slung upon my back was quiet enough, every little while it made sudden, frantic movements with its hoofs, throwing me clumsily off-balance. It was a relief to leave the creature at the mouth of the cavern while we set about our business of grim discovery.

The cleft narrowed considerably after we had progressed perhaps twenty feet within. The floor was broken by a jagged, deep fissure in which sea water hissed and flowed, in and out, noisily. We entered the cavern then and Peter swept the beam of his flashlight in an arc before us. There was nothing to be seen except a tumbled mass of boulders to our left. He dropped to one knee and adjusted the gasoline lantern, then struck a match. In a moment the entire cavern leaped into focus. To my eyes, accustomed to the darkness, the light was brilliant, momentarily blinding. I found that I had been holding my breath, but there was no sound, no sudden rush of horror approaching. The cavern was exceptionally still, except for the muted booming of the wind past the mouth of the cleft.

"The pit—" Peter said quietly, "where is it?"

— I led the way beyond the high massed boulders on our left.

It was there, as I remembered it; a yawning gulf perhaps eight feet across but unimaginably deep.

Peter set to work at once with what he had to do, after first considering intently the pit, the rocks and, apparently, the formation of the cleft wall. He nodded as if satisfied, then busied himself with detonator and fuses. His hands were steady and sure. I marvelled at his calm, feeling myself that all the demons of night were fast upon my heels.

"Bring the sheep," Peter said. "We'll make as ready as we can, now."

I turned away and started toward the entrance, then paused. An almost imperceptible vibration touched upon my nerves—I suppose I was tautly strung at that moment—and at the same time I heard, faintly, what sounded like the tremendous slamming of a door. Then I laughed at myself. No door in Stormcliff, no matter how loudly slammed, could be heard at the depth of this cavern. I went on and found the sheep where I had left it, and carried it back to Peter. He had nearly finished his work. The fuses were just long enough to extend out of sight on the far side of the pile of boulders. It would be but a matter of seconds, Peter said, between ignition and explosion.

I hoped he hadn't cut it too fine. . . .

As soon as he had finished to his satisfaction, he took the coil of rope and rigged up a sling for the sheep. "This is your end of it," he explained. "At the first sign of—anything, you'll have to sever an artery in this poor beast's neck; let the blood fall around the mouth of the pit on this side—it's the only practical approach—and then lower it in. It should hang about ten feet down, perhaps a little more. And then start running—fast."

I considered this, not without qualms; but if Peter could tinker around with those short fuses—well. The only thing I could do now was to close my mind to any possible goings-on while I led the sheep to a slow but painless death. From now on, anything might happen—and probably would. We had been fortunate in being uninterrupted 'up to this point.

I think that neither of us entertained much hope of finding young Anders alive, but after Peter had moved the lantern so the boulders around the pit were thrown into deeper shadow, we moved by tacit consent toward the rear of the cavern. Our flash-lights picked out a wide, natural opening leading into still another rock-bound room, larger than the first and smelling rankly

of death and decay. I felt the flesh creep along my bones, but when my eyes had fully estimated the contents of the cavern, I turned away, sickened. Peter's exclamation: "The dining room, no less!" was apt. There was a vast and tangled mass of bones heaped carelessly along one wall. A lot of them were human bones. There were the partially gnawed carcasses of dogs, sheep, even a heifer whose underside was completely eaten away. The fresher bones, with shreds of flesh still clinging to them, had been cracked and sucked free of marrow. I turned back toward the opening for a breath of fresh air, but Peter's hand on my arm stopped me in my tracks. His head was cocked in a listening attitude. His face was as pale as I knew my own must be. Faintly, but coming closer, I heard a peculiar shuffling sound, interspersed with small clicking scrapings, such as nails might make against stone. I felt every nerve in my body tauten.

Hastily, Peter ran the beam of his flashlight completely around the cavern. Then I saw what we had missed before: the inert figure of young Anders propped brokenly near the end of the hill of bones. And beside him, perhaps three feet distant, the narrow, black opening through which the stairs ascended. I watched, fascinated, awaiting the

appearance of—what I knew must come.

That moment of unwitting immobility was broken when Peter leaped past me toward young Anders. I hurried after him, making a hideous clatter among the ancient bones. We did not wait to find out if John was alive or dead, or whether the perambulating horror drawing steadily nearer had been attracted by the sounds we made. Between us we supported young Anders' limp form and hurried from the cavern toward the blessed, black night and the muted booming of the sea. I noticed with rising hope that John Anders' flesh, though cold, was not clammy as in one dead. I noticed, too, that he held gripped in his left hand the paper bearing the symbol of the triangle. Whether that had saved him, I hoped to find out.

We carried him to the sandy cove and eased him into the dinghy. I considered taking the symbol back to the cavern with us, if indeed it offered protection, but we were conscious as John was not. We had at least a fighting chance. Then too, the paper was held in so convulsive a grip that I doubted if we could loosen it. Peter agreed that it should be left where it was.

The trip back to the cavern was the hardest journey I shall ever make. I know well that fear is the most basic of instincts. The

threshold will vary with the individual, as well as being dependent upon individual reaction to varied stimuli. But one thing I think we have in common: a fear that touches the spiritual is the most subtle, insidious of all. That this was no mere bodily fear we were both agreed, though we did not discuss it at all. I know that Peter was as taut as a fiddle string. I was cold, gripped at intervals by a spasmodic trembling that was uncontrollable. But there was no question of leaving the job unfinished. Not only for our own sakes had we that to do.

VI

THE cavern was starkly empty except for the tethered sheep standing forlornly in the garish light of the gasoline lantern. It was empty, but not devoid of sound. From the farther cavern came the sounds of a furious activity, a crashing of what I knew must be disjointed bones hurled with appalling strength against the silent walls of stone. We did not hesitate. Peter went at once to the pile of boulders and disappeared from my view. The carnage went on unabated, and I hurried toward the sheep. Swiftly my hands sought the great artery in the animal's neck; a twist of the scalpel-sharp little blade in my hand did the rest,

but at once the bewildered beast set up such a frenzied bawling that I froze momentarily with dread. The innocent blood went spurting over my shoe tops, staining the lip of the pit with a glistening crimson film. And immediately with the bawling of the sheep, all sound from the inner cavern ceased. I couldn't look behind, though every instinct cried out for me to do so. I grasped for the rope, slippery now with blood, and nudged the staggering sheep. The rope sped through my hands, strained hard against the sudden checked weight, then caught and held fast to a restraining boulder.

I turned then, and looked into the bloated face of horror.

' Not ten feet behind me it stood; gray, misshapen, blocking my path to freedom. Slitted eyes, pupilled like a cat's, looked down on me from an uncomfortable height. It was hideous from sole to crown, with its great splayed feet taloned like its hands, the sinews and knotted muscles of its long arms running powerfully into the broad drum of its chest, and over all its body covered with a bristle-like hair that glinted like gray metal in the light. But its eyes were the worst of all: long and slanted in a putty-textured face, and flickering with a feral light behind those longitudinal pupils; cold,

deadly. It was not a human intelligence that looked at me.

I dared not make a sudden move. I knew too well the strength of those sinewy hands, their rending power. Slowly, with infinite care, my hand edged closer to my sagging pocket. The creature had not moved, nor taken its eyes from me. My hand found the pocket opening, touched the cold metal of my revolver, just as the monster lifted its head, animal-like, and sniffed the air. It looked toward the pit and I saw its mouth open, stretch, revealing a shallow cavity, terribly equipped with incurving fangs. It sniffed once again, then turned toward me with purpose. I lifted my gun and put four bullets in that massive chest before an arm lashed out and sent me sprawling twenty feet away. I lay still, numb. The bullets made a neat row in the center of its chest, but the monster, after one outraged, savage bellow, merely stood for a moment looking down at their point of entry. It had not even staggered. I closed my eyes, convinced that it was the end for me; my skull felt as if it had been irreparably cracked, but I was still numb from the force of that mighty blow. When my vision cleared I saw the beast crouched at the rim of the pit. I held my breath. The blood scent had been stronger than its rage toward me. Quietly, I

flexed my muscles, got my feet under me and inched my way up the wall. The dizziness passed after a moment, and I waited. Like a dog, the monster had lapped up the blood spilled over the edge of the pit, and now was attracted by the sheep hanging out of reach, still warm and odorous. If it had intelligence enough to use the rope to pull the carcass out of the pit— But no. It vanished quickly, silently over the edge and out of sight.

"Now, Peter—" I said as steadily as I could, and moved toward the cleft in the wall. Peter was right behind me. Together, we ran out of that place of nightmare, stumbling over the rocks toward the cove. Even before we had reached it, the cleft was illumined by a wild red glow, and a stunning force hurled me flat on the rocky shore. I thought I heard again that terrible volume of sound emitted by the monster on the stairs, but I was not sure. I was on my feet in an instant and making for the dinghy.

Not until old McPherson was helping us aboard the cutter did I feel free of pursuing horror. Peter was busy with John. I supposed his face would never be entirely free of the white, drawn look that was etched upon it now. I went to help him. Young Anders was alive. It did not take too long to bring him around,

but I knew as soon as he opened his eyes what sorrow my friend must bear. John would never recognize us again. He would smile, as a small child smiles, but he would not speak and he would not *know* . . . anything. But perhaps it is as well.

IF IT all went for nothing—
I there must be a reason, somewhere, beyond my futile grasp. I think of it; my brain won't let me rest. Peter is well out of it, I hope. He is somewhere in the

midwest, making a home for the shell that was once his brother. I have not written to tell him of the thing that prowls about my house of nights. I try to believe that it is not necessary to tell him, that it is all imagination; but last night the basement door was tried, and it rang from a thunderous blow.

No, I have not slept.

I know what will happen should I close my eyes and drift into the black helplessness of sleep.