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*It seemed to be human...
but it was inside out, all
its organs exposed...the
heart beating, the lungs
breathing, the stomach
digesting...and now, the
Thing began to come
towards him... its mouth
Working hideously*

By **ALEX MERRIMAN**

[Robert Silverberg]

THE ROOM was small and obviously hadn't seen a fresh coat of paint in the last decade, but Robert Harris decided it wasn't bad for the price. And he needed a place to stay. A place where he could study without being disturbed.

The landlady stood behind him, a withered crone who, like the room, had a faintly musty odor. She grinned, showing the puckered redness of her toothless gums. Her teeth, Robert thought sourly, were probably in a glass of water.

"Like it?" she asked in her hoarse croak of a voice, eagerly.

"It's—very nice," Robert said without enthusiasm. At twelve-by-fourteen room, a rickety bed, a dirty window whose glass was so warped he could hardly see through it, a single tiny closet—it wasn't much of a room at all. But he couldn't

argue with a price of six bucks a week. Until he found work here in San Francisco, he was going to have to practice economies. Cheap cheap eating-places, cheap movies, cheap hotel rooms.

The landlady-Mrs. Garvey, that was her name—walked to the window. Dust was thick enough to draw pictures in on the pane. "Lovely view you have from here," she gabbled, indicating the fog-bound street with her twisted forefinger. Robert smiled and nodded. The view was of the other side of the street, a dozen close-packed old ramshackle houses just like this one, here in San Francisco's North Beach district. Some view. Robert shrugged. For six bucks a week, what did the view matter?

"Are you new to San Francisco?" she asked.

Robert nodded. "I'm an Easterner. From Chicago, to be exact. I came out here to find work."

"What sort of work do you do?"

The old hag was in an inquisitive mood, Robert thought wearily. "Any sort of work," he said. "I was a bus driver in Chicago for a while. Also a shoe clerk. And I worked in a liquor store for a while in St. Louis. I'd like to work in a bookshop here. I like being around books. Very much. As soon as I get settled, I'll look around for a bookshop that can take on a clerk."

The old woman favored him with a toothless smile. "I'm sure you'll have good luck here. You'll like San Francisco. There are lots of bookstores here."

"Yes. I know."

"How do you like the room?"

"It's fine. I'll take it," he blurted out, anxious to get rid of her. It had been a long train-ride from St. Louis, with some fat old bore of a salesman sitting next to him all the way and unloading his troubles to him. Now Robert just wanted to be alone, to stretch out and relax in solitude.

"The rent is payable every Wednesday," she informed him. "One week in advance."

Robert drew out his billfold, fumbled through its pitifully skimpy supply of banknotes, and didn't even want me to rent the room to anybody, but he couldn't afford to pay the rent himself, so of course I couldn't let the room stand empty. But you mustn't open it up."

finally took out a single and a worn and crumpled five dollar bill and handed them to the old lady.

"Thank you, young man. I'll bring you a receipt right away."

THE DOOR closed. For a moment, at least, Robert was alone. He looked around the room. Six dollars a week. He sat down on the bed and it creaked complainingly. The room had only one closet, cramped and inadequate. There was another door at the opposite-side of the room which might have been a closet door, except that a board had been nailed across it to keep it shut. He wondered about that.

Mrs. Garvey returned without knocking. "Here you are," she said, handing him a scrawled-on bit of paper. He pocketed the receipt. "I hope you enjoy your stay in San Francisco," she said. "We don't object to your bringing friends into the room, but I'll have to ask you not to make any loud noise after eleven o'clock at night. Some of the other guests get up early to go to work,

"Of course. Ah—"

She turned to leave "Mrs. Garvey," he said.

"Yes?"

"Ah—that closet over there. It's a little on the small side, you know. I was wondering if that other closet there, the one that seems to be boarded up, could be—"

"Oh! No, you musn't!"

"It's a closet, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harris. That door isn't supposed to be opened. The last tenant boarded it up and gave orders that it wasn't to be disturbed."

Robert scowled, irritated. "But he isn't here any more. Paying rent, I mean. *I'm* the tenant in this room now. And I'm afraid I need the extra closet space to take care of my things."

She shook her head. "He left very definite instructions, Mr. Harris, about that closet. Said it wasn't to be opened on any circumstances. He

With that she was gone. Robert shook his head in annoyance. Here he was with two suitcases full of clothes and books and other belongings, and only one tiny closet and one spavined, rickety

three-drawer dresser to keep them in. Well, he would see.

HE UNPACKED his suitcases and did the best he could with the facilities he had. But he was short of space. The closet in the room was really sort of a broom-closet; his overcoat alone took up almost all the available space in it.

And there was another perfectly good closet, barred to him by the whim of some former tenant. Who wasn't even paying rent for the room now! Here I am forking over six dollars a week, Robert thought angrily, and I can't use all the closets because someone else barred one of them up before he left!

Robert scowled. Most likely the former tenant had left something of value in the closet. Well, too bad. The room was his, now. The landlady wouldn't go prowling in the rooms, surely. Nobody would be the wiser if he unbarred the extra closet.

He pushed shut the bolt on his door. Mrs. Garvey seemed to have a habit of entering her guests' rooms without knocking, and Robert wasn't anxious to have her find him breaking into the forbidden closet. With the door locked, he turned to the closet.

A single plank of wood was nailed across the door. He tried the door-handle experimentally; the closet door opened less than a quarter of an inch, then hit the restraining wooden plank. So there was no question of a lock. All he had to do was remove the plank.

There was a little room for him to get his hands in, between the plank and that door. A crowbar would have made things simpler, but he had no crowbars handy. He clapped his foot against the wall and started to tug. Muscles that he hadn't used in years suddenly strained and knotted; his back bent tight.

The nails started to give.

There were four of them, two on each side, driven into the dry and not very solid plaster of the wall. Robert could see tiny stress-lines beginning to form in the plaster near the place where the plank was nailed down. A little more

pressure-he arched his back and intensified the effort of pulling—

Dark cracks spread over the plaster on one side of the door. He shifted his aching hands and concentrated on that side. In a moment, he felt the nail giving; then they erupted from the wall abruptly, sending Robert flying backward onto the bed.

Rising, he ripped the board away with ease.

He opened the closet door.

HE STARED into blackness. Not the ordinary blackness of a dark closet, but a strange, unsettling *total* blackness of a kind Robert had never experienced before. It 'Was a curious sensation, standing there looking into this utterly dark closet. He extended a hand, reaching into the closet to find out what, if anything, might be stored inside it. His hand was strangely chilled by the darkness. He felt nothing.

He moved toward the blackness, putting one foot over the threshold into the closet. 'The foot did not encounter anything solid on which to rest. It stepped out onto nothing at all. Robert tried to check himself, reached for the doorframe and missed, and went stumbling forward, into the closet.

There was nothing in the closet. Nothing at all. He started to fall. He dropped, arms and legs pinwheeling crazily, his mind so numbed by the shock that he hardly felt fear.

Not yet. The fear came a moment later.

He landed. He realized he had fallen some twenty or thirty feet, coming to rest on a soft, yielding, floor that felt like beach sand. He began to tremble. Around him all was darkness. Where was he? He started to reason things out. He had stepped through a closet door, but no closet was there, and he had fallen. His room had been on the second floor of Mrs. Garvey's, boarding house. He had dropped perhaps twenty feet. So he had landed in the basement, on a pile of sand that was kept down there for some reason. Robert shuddered. What if he had landed on a coalpile, or on solid

concrete? He might have fractured every bone in his body.

Well, he thought, it was my own damned fault for snooping. He couldn't go very well accusing Mrs. Garvey of carelessness when she had warned him strongly not to meddle with the boarded-up closet. Evidently it was no closet at all, but the door to some kind of airshaft that ran through the building and he had clumsily stepped right into it and fallen.

He turned, looking up. There, some twenty or twenty-five feet above his head, he saw the open door through which he had fallen. Light from his room was streaming through, into the blackness surrounding him. He moved carefully, trying to find some way to get out of the cellar he was in.

But the sandpile seemed bigger than was probable. He counted his steps in the dark. He had taken at least fifteen before he realized that the cellar couldn't possibly be as big as this. And there was still sand underfoot. A tiny worm of panic began to sprout in Robert's mind. He still did not suspect anything unusual or out of the ordinary in any respect. But this was a lot of sand to have in one's basement. And, although he had walked a goodly distance, he had not come upon any indication of walls or of any of the equipment normally found in basements.

His eyes were slowly becoming accustomed to the darkness now. He could not see well, but he could make out the general surroundings.

He was not in a basement.

That was the first stunned realization. The second was that he was outdoors.

Where?

It might have been the Sahara Desert. Robert saw sand dunes undulating off toward the distant horizon. His mind refused to accept the fact. He had fallen

down an airshaft and landed in a night-dark desert—no, that was impossible, that was beyond all rational belief. Yet it had happened.

And, twenty feet above his head, opening like a hole in the sky, he saw the doorway through which he had come tumbling, and the faint rays of the electric light still shining, in his room at Mrs. Garvey's boarding-house.

Where the hell am I? he wondered. Something like a half sob escaped his lips. Old fantasies that he read came to mind. Maybe it was some kind of dimensional [dimensional] escape, his troubled mind suggested. The previous inhabitant of his room had opened the pathway, left it boarded up to prevent some other occupant of the room from doing precisely what Robert had done.

He shook his head. This was no fantasy. This was reality. And the real world, he told himself stiffly, did not have such things as dimensional pathways. He had fallen down an airshaft, that was all.

But in that case, he was having an hallucination. Because he could see by the dim light that the sand dunes extended for miles all around. Which was better, he wondered? To have dropped through a dimensional trap door or to be having hallucinations?

He couldn't decide. Except that he knew it might be easier to find his way back out of an hallucination than out of some warp in time or space.

Robert stood quietly without moving, looking upward at the bright window of light that was the doorway through which he had fallen. If he only had some way of back up there, he thought, of scrambling back over the threshold—

Suddenly he had the uneasy notion that he was not alone. That he was being watched. That unseen eyes stared at him.

Carefully, he turned in a full circle, seeing nothing. But the feeling persisted that someone was observing him. His shoulderblades itched. He craned his neck, peered over his shoulder.

Looked. Saw.

Gasped.

SOME TWENTY feet away from him a— thing stood quietly studying him. Robert felt his

stomach heave in rebellion at the sight of the creature. It was all he could do to keep his meager breakfast from coming up [up]. His eyes widened in disbelief.

The being was grotesquely hideous. Robert saw a bizarre coil of what looked like rope, pink, shiny, pulsing, with inner life, twisted into incredibly complex patterns. He saw things-like organs, distorted beyond recognition, floating in the air. A great distended stomach, quivering and kneading its contents. A heart, radiating a host of blood vessels. Gray lungs.

Visible organs. The nightmare creature seemed to be exploded outward, all its hidden plumbing exposed, its insides turned out.

And yet it lived.

The heart beat. The stomach seemed in the very process of digesting a hearty meal. The lungs rose. Filled, dropped again. Robert saw a brain. Gray, hideously wrinkled. A spinal cord. Teeth.

All visible. It was a numbing, mind-freezing sight to see the weird creature standing there turned inside-out. With every revolting inner organ exposed to view. There was no vestige of humanity about the creature.

Where am I? Robert asked himself desperately. He had no answer.

As he stood frozen, the thing near him raised an arm. Arm? A string of bare muscles and nerves and bones. Raised it and pointed.

And came forward.

Robert backed up as the thing oozed toward him. Liver and stomach and heart jiggling obscenely with each step it took.

"Keep away from me!" he shouted. "Get back! Don't come near me!"

But still the being advanced. Robert backed away hurriedly.

He looked around. He saw another of the creatures behind him. And another advancing over the dunes to his left. And another. And another.

He was surrounded.

No use trying to flee, he realized. There must have been fifty or a hundred of them. Incredible, nauseous, disgusting things! He sank

whimpering to his knees in their midst, and they formed a large circle around him like so many ocean bathers who have gathered on the beach to examine some particularly strange creature that has been just washed up from the sea.

After the first moments of panic, Robert regained a measure of control over himself. He heard their voices. They were talking to each other about him. Their voices were harsh, unpleasant. Naturally, no words of what they said were intelligible but he knew that they were discussing him.

Sweat pasted his clothes to his body. He had become almost completely accustomed to the darkness by now, and he could see the creatures clearly. They seemed to be human beings — human beings who had been, by some twist of nature, turned inside out. And they surrounded him, discussing him with some curiosity.

As if, he thought, as if he were the freak, and the inside-out people perfectly normal.

HE DIDN'T know how long the discussion lasted. Minutes, maybe, or maybe it went on for hours. But he sat perfectly still, listening to their buzzing voices. And looking at them. Closing, his eyes did no good. He tried to pull his lids down and blot out the sight of them but — but sitting sightless in the midst of them was far worse, Robert discovered, than looking at them. So he looked.

Medicine was one of the few subjects he had never studied, but he knew enough about the inside of a human body to recognize human organs when he saw them. And these were human organs. That was the most hellish part of it all. If these creatures were non-human, it might not be so frightening. But he saw human hearts and human intestines, human brains and human livers. All attached to living beings.

Inside-out.

It had to be a dimensional twist, he told himself. His mind, amazingly calm, tried to reason the situation out. The sealed door had been the gateway to some other dimension. A dimension, it seemed, that was the reverse of the normal world Robert knew. Here the inhabitants appeared to be

turned inside-out to him, because he had not made the proper kind of entry. And no doubt he looked just as strange to them.

The discussion was reaching some sort of peak now. He saw them gesticulating, heard them shouting. They were arguing about what to do with him, he realized. And from the way they were waving their limbs around and shouting, it would seem that there were several schools of thought on the subject.

He was not a religious man. But now he prayed, praying to nobody in particular, and simply that he be asked to go back through the doorway that glittered so unattainably in the air above him, back where people wore their innards under their skins instead of walking about so disgustingly quiet and with nerves and blood vessels and all the rest exposed to sight.

Just let me go back, be begged. I'll nail up that board again and never think of going near it any more. I'll mind my own business.

The conference was breaking up, he saw. And his companions in the desert were walking toward him now, once again.

"No!" he babbled. "No, no, keep away from me! Don't touch me!"

The ring had tightened until they were no more than a dozen feet from him. He could see every loathsome detail of their bodies clearly, at that distance. It was not as if they were human beings from whom the skin had been removed. It was far worse than that. They were literally turned inside-out, grotesquely distorted, as if they had been revolved one full turn through some other dimension. No two of them looked alike. Their bodies were riotous nightmares of misplaced organs.

And they were reaching out for him.

Someone stepped from the group. He was a tall and commanding figure with leering eyes like giant grapes set in the air in front of his skull. He pointed majestically to Robert and began to speak. His voice was deep and sonorous, but the words that came out were just so much unintelligible gibberish.

When he was through speaking, he paused expectantly as if waiting for Robert to reply.

Robert stared at the hideous man-high conglomeration of living organs that faced him.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand you," he said, knowing it was hopeless.

Again the being spoke. This time he pointed upward, toward the brightness of the doorway.

"Yes, yes!" Robert said gratefully "I came through there! And I want to go back. Can you help me get up there?"

He didn't know whether or not his words had registered. But the being replied in great excitement, pointing many times first to Robert, then to the gateway, while Robert nodded and chorused his agreement. He wondered if they were getting the idea. He pointed at himself, then up at the gateway, many times.

Then the being who was the spokesman nodded and gestured to the others. They began to move, shuffling over the sand toward Robert. All of them. They closed in.

He was practically suffocated by the nearness of the horde of inside-out monsters. He wriggled desperately, trying to avoid them. But they did not let him escape.

Cold, clammy hands—were they hands?—grasped his arms. Robert retched. All around him, packed tight, were these inside-out creatures. It was sickening, disgusting beyond disgust.

They seized him making harsh clicking sounds with their inverted mouths. They sounded like giant insects now. They milled around, holding. Robert tight, while their leader shouted instructions.

"Let go of me!" Robert cried.

They ignored him. He clawed and kicked, and writhed without breaking, their hold on him. His eyes bulged and he thought his sanity would give way. What, he wondered, were they going to do to him? Turn him inside-out like themselves to make him fit to live in this dimension? The thought sent cold blades of horror twisting into his spine.

From somewhere, a towering machine had been produced, and more of the inside-out creatures came running from all directions. Robert felt himself being thrust forward, toward the machine. One of the beings had seated himself at a keyboard at the machine and was performing complex operations; the machine hummed ominously and gave off beams of light. They pushed Robert forward, onto a platform.

In a moment of clarity he realized that the machine was almost big enough to reach upward to the beckoning doorway. If he climbed it, leaped across the intervening few feet back into his own world—

WITH AN extreme effort he broke loose from his captors and began to scale the machine. Frantic cries burst from the inside-out esophagi of the creatures below him. Robert climbed desperately. Once he looked back and saw the people below him busily wheeling the cone of the machine upward to point at him.

He kept climbing. The gateway was only a few feet above him. A short leap and he would land in his own room at Mrs. Garvey's.

Suddenly a beam of light transfixed him from below. He felt an agonizing inner wrench, as if the molecules of his body were being ripped one from the other. He had to leap now, he thought.

Now!

As he poised for the leap he heard a voice cry from below; "You fool! Don't go through the doorway *now!*"

Robert had no time to wonder about the sudden appearance of an English-speaking being down below. Gathering his strength, he plunged forward into the darkness, heading for the doorway—

He made it. Just barely. He caught the threshold, pulled himself over with quivering, overstrained arms!, and landed sprawling in his own room. He heard distant shouts from far below, but he ignored them. With one brisk motion he slammed shut the closet door. With another, he grabbed up the board he had pried loose, and

clapped it against the door, fitting the nails back into their holes. Later, when he had rested, he would borrow a hammer and some nails and seal the doorway up more tightly.

He collapsed on his bed, drenched with sweat, every muscle in his body tingling and shaking from nervous exhaustion. He started to fit things together. There had been a scientist of some kind living here before him, and he had opened a gateway to an inverted world. But it was necessary to be inverted yourself before you could make contact with the people of this world, and Robert had neglected that step when going through. So the people on the other side had kindly provided an inverter to complete the dimensional transfer for him.

Nightmare, he thought. But it was over now. He was back, safe and sound, in the world of Mrs. Garvey and cheap hotels. But he would never forget his brief stay in that hellish other place. It was the sort of experience that could turn a man's hair white in a moment, he thought.

Had it turned his hair white? He was very vain about his fine head of hair.

Curious, he rose and walked to the mirror to see if his experience had left any marks on him. He peered at the cracked, dingy mirror. He emitted a small whimpering sound. He realized now why he had been able to understand the final warning shouted at him as he plunged through the gateway. They had succeeded in inverting him before he left.

Robert stared now at the hideous pulsing organs and veins and nerves in the mirror. Stared at the nightmare thing that was his own reflection. Looked down at his body, at the thing out of space and time that he had become. He screamed once, a thin, droning inside-out scream. Then, quietly and rapidly, Robert Harris began to go mad.