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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The THOUGHT-MONSTER

by Amelia Reynolds Long



"The mayor's grave had been opened and his body dragged half out of the coffin."

THE first of the series of outrages was the case of Welton Grimm. Grimm was a retired farmer with a little place about three miles from town, who apparently had not an enemy in the world; yet one morning he was discovered dead in a patch of woods near his home with a look of horror on his face that made the flesh creep on those who found him. There were no marks of violence upon the body; only that expression of horrified revulsion at unspeakable things. Two doctors, a coroner, and a jury puzzled over it, and at last gave out the statement that he had been the victim of a heart attack—which no-body believed.

For a while the case was discussed,

as all such things are in small towns. Then, just as it was about to drop into oblivion, the second blow fell: another man, a stranger this time, was found dead under identical circumstances in the same spot. Before the town could digest this, two half-grown boys were added to the list of victims, and the very next night a woman was found dead under similar conditions about a mile distant.

The police scoured the countryside for the culprit—for it was now admitted that the deaths were the result of foul play—but to no avail. They could find nothing: there seemed to be nothing to find. But when again the Terror struck, this time claiming for its victim the

mayor himself, the townspeople decided that something drastic must be done at once; and they sent to New York for a detective.

He came—a keen-witted, intelligent man named Gibson, with a long list of brilliant exploits behind him. After going over the case with the chief of police, he pointed out a fact that was so obvious it was a wonder we had not seen it ourselves.

"Those people have died of fright," he said. "There is someone, probably an escaped lunatic, hiding in the woods who is so hideous that the very sight of him frightens the beholder to death. Since all the deaths occurred within a mile of each other, you will find him hiding somewhere within that comparatively small area."

"But we searched the woods," objected the chief. "We searched them thoroughly. There wasn't the sign of a thing."

"Did you ever search at night?" asked Gibson.

"Well, no," the chief admitted.

"Whatever your Terror is," went on the detective, "he is too clever to come out in daylight. But at night he is sure of himself; so that is when we must lie in wait for him."

Everyone saw the sense of this plan, but few were willing to try it. At last, however, Gibson collected some half-dozen men, and they stationed themselves, armed to the teeth, throughout the patch of woods to wait for the thing. They had a series of prearranged whistle signals by which they could communicate with one another should occasion arise.

The night passed quietly; but in the morning it was found that the outrages had taken a new turn: Gibson had completely disappeared! The woods were searched for him and a pond was drained for his body, but without result. Then, about a week later, he wandered into town—a moulthing, gibbering idiot!

The morale of the people began to

break under this new horror. And to add to their consternation, the grave of the mayor was opened the night before Gibson's return, and his body dragged half out of the coffin. A great mass meeting, for the purpose of taking counsel against the Terror, was now called. The hall was jammed to capacity, for all came who could come.

One of the town councilmen was addressing the assembly. He was in the most earnest part of his address when suddenly he stopped. No one had been conscious of any of the doors opening, yet we all knew that another presence had entered the room! There was an apprehensive shuffling of feet and craning of necks as uneasiness among the crowd grew. The speaker took a sip of water, and tried to go on, but without success. And then it was as if a thin veil began to form between us and the electric chandelier overhead.

With that, hysteria broke loose. There was a stampede for the exits, in which three people were trampled to death. Later, the body of the speaker was found upon the platform. The face was twisted into a mask of overwhelming horror.

The people were stunned. They crept into their churches to pray. And, as if in answer to their prayers, came Michael Cummings, psychic investigator.

CUMMINGS first presented himself before the town council. "I have been reading about your trouble down here," he said, "and I would like to try my hand at solving the mystery."

He was welcomed with open arms.

He did not consider the possibility of an escaped lunatic in the neighborhood, as Gibson had done. "No madman could be responsible for all this," he said when someone mentioned the subject. "It takes more than the sight of a poor, deranged mind to kill a strong man. I believe

that there is a supernatural force at work; possibly one of the little-understood elementals that are sometimes aroused or liberated by a disturbance of the laws of nature. I shall go out to the woods around dusk this evening and look the ground over."

"But, man," gasped the town treasurer, "that's suicide! No man comes out of there alive who enters after nightfall."

"There is little danger until after night has actually fallen," smiled Cummings. "Besides, even should I meet the Terror, I am armed against it in a way that none of the others were."

He went, but learned nothing. The next morning a farmer, who lived about half a mile away, was found dead in his barn.

That afternoon Cummings called upon Dr. Bradley, who was the coroner. "I am going to make a strange request, Doctor," he began. "I am going to ask that you permit me to photograph the eyes of this poor man."

The doctor, greatly mystified, gave his consent.

"In a case of violent death," Cummings explained as he set up his apparatus, "an image of the last thing seen is usually photographed upon the retina of the eye. I want to see whether a carefully developed enlargement won't show us that image."

At Bradley's interested request, he promised to let him know the results of the experiment. Two or three hours later, therefore, he returned to the doctor's office.

"I have drawn a blank," he confessed. "The eye shows absolutely nothing."

"Your theory didn't work, then?" asked Bradley sympathetically.

"No," Cummings answered. "And yet I don't see how it could have failed in a case of this kind. There is

one alternative: perhaps there was nothing for the dying man to see."

"But," objected the doctor, "I thought it was what he saw that killed him."

"Fear," said Cummings, "can enter a man's soul through other senses than sight. Anyway, I shall work on that hypothesis for a while, and see where it leads me." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Who lives in that rambling old place half a mile out from town?" he asked.

"A scientist named Walgate," answered the doctor. "I'll admit," he went on quickly, "that the location of his house and his being something of a recluse make it look as if he might be concerned with the mystery, but we have proof that he isn't. For one thing, he was here in town in the company of the most reputable people the nights that the first three outrages took place."

"Could he have any sort of creature concealed about the place on which he might be experimenting?" asked Cummings.

"No," answered Bradley. "He isn't that kind of a scientist. Psychology in its most abstract form is his line. In fact, I was around to see him myself, thinking he might possibly have something like that."

"I wonder," said Cummings, "if you would mind going again."

The next day they called upon Dr. Walgate. They found a courteous, scholarly man plainly as much concerned over the mysterious deaths as they were.

"Doctor," asked Cummings presently, "have you ever considered the possibility of the Terror's being nothing physical at all, but a kind of psychical entity?"

The doctor shot him a keen, swift glance. "Yes," he said. "I have considered that."

"And you have come to the conclusion——?"

"It is difficult to come to a conclusion in matters like this unless one

has some definite point to start from."

To Bradley's surprise, Cummings did not follow up this very evident lead, but soon brought the visit to a close. "Why didn't you press the psychical entity opening?" he asked a little reproachfully as they walked back to town. "It was plain that Walgate either suspects or knows something in that direction."

"Suspects, may even know, but can not prove," corrected Cummings. "But he is the type of man who will not speak until he *can* prove. Meanwhile to attempt to force his confidence would defeat our own purpose."

At Cummings' suggestion, the people in the outlying districts kept violet-shaded lights burning outside their houses after nightfall.

"The thing which we are fighting," he said, "is supernatural, and our best weapon against it is the violet ray, which is highly inimical, and sometimes even fatal, to it."

"Look here," said Bradley, "aren't you introducing a little too much legerdemain into this? I can accept a primitive natural force run amuck, but when you begin to fight it with colored lights, I grow skeptical. Is this an attempt to give the people a mental sedative?"

Cummings only smiled, and the people went on burning their lights. The outrages ceased.

"It looks as if you had razed the ghost after all," admitted Bradley when a month had passed unmarred by any fresh tragedy.

But Cummings shook his head. "No," he said, "I have only staved him off temporarily. As soon as we should cease to use the lights, he would return. More, he may even grow strong enough to resist them. I think that in a day or two I shall visit Walgate. Perhaps I can induce him to talk."

But that time never came. That night a car drove into town with a

dead man in the driver's seat, his hands gripped to the wheel in convulsions. In the tonneau sat two more corpses whose faces, like that of the driver, were contorted with stark terror. Only the ruler-like straightness of the road and the visc-like grip of those dead hands upon the wheel had kept the car from overturning. It was like a challenge from the Terror to the town.

For the first time, Cummings was discouraged. "We can protect ourselves," he said, "but we can not protect those who come here from the outside. Something must be done at once, and yet there is nothing that can be done. The situation is even more appalling than the tragedies themselves."

And then, in the gray of early morning something *was* done.

CUMMINGS and Bradley were sitting in the doctor's office when the telephone rang. Bradley answered it.

"Is that Dr. Bradley?" The voice at the other end was hoarse and strained. "This is Dr. Walgate. I want you and Mr. Cummings to come up to my house in half an hour. Walk straight in without ringing, and go into the living-room. There you will find a manuscript lying on the table. I want you to read it. But do not come until half an hour from now."

"But why—what——?" stuttered Bradley in his excitement.

"Do as I tell you," interrupted Walgate's voice. "That is all." A metallic click told that he had hung up.

"What do you make of it?" asked Bradley when he had repeated the message to Cummings. "Is it a trap?"

"No, it is not," answered Cummings promptly, "it is not a trap. Walgate is no fool, and he accordingly will not take us for any. We had better do as he tells us."

"Including waiting the specified half-hour before going out?"

"Yes. We don't know what he intends to do. An attempt to improve upon his directions might ruin his plans."

Watches in hand, they sat counting off the minutes. At last Cummings rose. "We can start now," he said. "Come."

They drove out to Walgate's house, and entered as he had directed. Bradley noticed that in the near-by woods no birds sang, and that in the house itself an unearthly stillness brooded. He experienced an unnerving intuition of new horrors about to be laid bare.

They proceeded into the living-room, and Cummings pressed the electric light button, for the daylight was still dim and uncertain. Placed conspicuously on the table was a small bundle of manuscript.

"We may as well read these now," said Bradley. "There's no use stopping to look for Walgate; he undoubtedly used that half-hour to make his getaway."

CUMMINGS picked up the manuscript and began to glance through it. "It seems to be part of a diary," he said. "It is made up of entries beginning about a year ago. It looks——" He broke off to read several sentences under his breath. "I think I had better read this aloud from the beginning," he said.

He began to read:

"*Aug. 4.* Have been studying the material existence of thought. A fascinating subject. If thoughts have material existence, why could not the thought essence be concentrated to—— Off on that wild theory again! I am too old for this nonsense.

"*Aug. 7.* I wonder if many of the so-called psychic phenomena, such as table-tipping and the like, are not in some way connected with the materiality of thought. I am tempted to try a few simple experiments.

"*Aug. 11.* I have been wasting time on these silly experiments. I must re-

turn to my respectable psychological studies.

"*Aug. 13.* Success! Today I moved a small object by the power of thought alone! Since this can be done, what will not be possible once the power is properly developed?

"*Aug. 25.* I have complete mental control! And now my old theory returns. Shall I consider it seriously? It seems too silly even to write down here; and yet——

"*Aug. 27.* I shall do it! I shall create a mental being by the concentrated power of pure thought! I am making arrangements with an architect to build in my house a room lined with lead, since lead is least conductive to thought waves, and so will not permit the precious thought essence to escape.

"*Sept. 16.* The room is finished. I have been spending five hours a day in it, concentrating upon my thought-creature.

"*Oct. 18.* Today I thought I detected a kind of gathering tension in the atmosphere, but probably it was my imagination. It is too early to look for results.

"*Nov. 24.* The strain of my experiment is beginning to take my strength.

"*Dec. 12.* I fainted today in the lead room.

"*Dec. 29.* Have been forced to give up my experiment temporarily because of my health. Have locked the lead room in order that the thought essence may be preserved until I can return to complete my work.

"*Jan. 5.* Am recovering rapidly.

"*Jan. 18.* All my work has gone for nothing, and through the carelessness of a servant! Mrs. Jensen, in a fervor of house-cleaning, unlocked and left open the door of the lead room! If I am to go on with my experiment, I must begin again at the beginning, for all the precious thought-essence has escaped. And just when success was so near! I have discharged Mrs. Jensen. I shall keep no more servants.

"*May 1.* We have had a sad accident here. Welton Grimm, a neighbor of mine, was found dead this morning on the road which runs by the patch of woods between his farm and my house. A pity. Grimm was barely past the prime of life. Dr. Bradley says it was heart failure.

"*May 15.* A strange coincidence; a stranger who was stopping in town was found dead in almost the same place that they found poor Grimm. Oddly enough, the cause of death was the same, too. Some of our more superstitious citizens are alarmed.

"*May 17.* Something is wrong here. Two boys, who, fired by the talk of their elders, had gone exploring after dark in the region where the deaths occurred, were found dead there early this morning. Someone is responsible for these tragedies; coincidence does not go so far.

"*May 18.* Another! A woman this time. On the face of each of the victims is a look of acutest terror. What can it mean?

"*May 20.* Had a most peculiar experience today. I was sitting in my study at dusk. Suddenly I felt that I was not alone; that there was another intelligence in the room with me. I looked up. There was no one there. I switched on the lights, and the illusion vanished. Am I becoming the victim of nerves?

"*May 25.* Another victim; this time our mayor. What is this Terror that is stalking among us? The people have sent to New York for a detective.

"*June 1.* I am being haunted. Three times this week I have felt distinctly that someone was following me, but when I turned to look, there was no one. Dr. Bradley called. Discussed series of tragedies.

"*June 2.* I am not alone in the house. Something is living here with me. I enter a room, and know that it has just been occupied by another; I go down a dark hall, and feel something lurking in the shadows. Yet I

search, and find nothing. Only brilliant lights can hold the thing at bay.

"*June 3.* Gibson, the New York detective, has disappeared. Is he, too, a victim of the Terror?

"A thought has come to me: Is there any connection between the Terror and the Thing that occupies my house with me?

"*June 5.* I have solved the mystery of the Terror, and the solution is more awful than was the mystery itself. I had gone into the lead room for some books that were stored there. Presently I became aware that something was in the room with me. This time I did not look up, but stood perfectly still, waiting and listening. And then the air was filled with something that had being, yet was not made of matter. Great, waving tentacles were groping for my mind, trying to suck it into themselves! With a scream, I rushed from the room. The experiment which I began last fall had succeeded without my knowing it, and I have let a thought-monster loose upon the community!

"*June 7.* Even a thought-monster can not live without food. On what does this demon subsist? Can it be that—

"*June 9.* Last night I committed an atrocious crime against society, but it had to be. I entered the cemetery, and opened the grave of the mayor. One glance at his blackening face showed me that he had died an imbecile. My suspicions were right; the thought-monster is a mental vampire, feeding upon the minds of its victims!

"*June 10.* Gibson has returned, but his mind is gone. The intelligence that was James Gibson has been swallowed up in the maw of my detestable invention! I am responsible for his state, and for the deaths of those other poor wretches; but what can I do? If I tell the people the nature of this force that is terrorizing the community, they will not believe me. What ordinary man could accept a creature created entirely of thought?

"June 12. The Thing is growing bolder. Last night it entered the town hall, where nearly a thousand people were assembled, and caused a panic. Three people were killed, not including one of our councilmen, who fell a victim to the Thing. I am four more times a murderer! Can not heaven show me a way to put an end to this?

"June 14. Michael Cummings, a psychical investigator, is here to run down the Terror. Will he succeed? I doubt it.

"June 16. Another man has died.

"June 18. Cummings and Dr. Bradley were here today. Do they suspect me of being concerned with this series of deaths? They are right; and yet how far from the truth! No human mind could ever conceive the awfulness of that. I was tempted to tell Cummings my whole story, but held back. What proof could I offer him? How convince him that I was not mad? Even the relief of confession is denied me, for I would not be believed.

"June 30. Cummings is checkmating the Terror by means of the violet ray. Cummings' work is only temporary, but it has given me an idea. The violet ray, sufficiently intensified, can destroy a psychic force. I shall have the lead room fitted with violet lights; then lure the Thing there and destroy it.

"July 3. Have begun work wiring the lead room. I must do the work myself, since I dare not bring an electrician here for fear of the Terror. So far it has not tried to attack me.

"July 10. I have completed my task. But the Thing suspects something, and will not go near the room. I can feel its tentacles groping for my mind, trying to read my thoughts. I think it would attack me if it dared, but for some reason it fears me; perhaps because I am its creator.

"July 22. The Thing is becoming desperate through lack of food. I can feel that it is planning some bold

move. Is it marking me for its next victim?

"July 24. This is the last entry I shall ever make in this diary, and it is addressed to you, Dr. Bradley and Mr. Cummings. Tonight I was in town when the death-car arrived. I knew then that the thought-monster must be destroyed at once.

"Nature always meets a vital emergency, and so she met this one. As I looked upon those four poor beings whose minds had gone to feed the thing I had created and whose lives had flickered out in the horror of what was happening to them, I saw clearly the one way to stop the havoc for which I was responsible.

"When I telephoned you, I bade you wait half an hour before coming here in order that I might arrive ahead of you and put the first part of my plan into execution; for I feared that should I take you into my confidence beforehand, one of you, through distorted humanitarian motives, might attempt to stop my going through with my design.

"This, then, is my plan. I shall go into the lead room with all mental guards down. The Thing has been particularly inimical to me lately, and, finding me in that state, will follow me in. Then I will close the door on both of us. I do not think that the Thing will suspect; a hungry beast is seldom wary of traps. When the door is safely closed, I will turn on the violet lamps. By the time you arrive and reach the end of these papers, those lamps will have done the work for which they were designed.

"You will find the lead room at the end of the hall on the first floor. Open the door carefully (it is not locked), and, if you receive the faintest intimation of an Intelligence beyond, slam it shut again and wait for the lights to complete their task. Mr. Cummings had better attend to this. If you receive no such intimation, you

will know that the monster is dead and that the curse so unintentionally laid upon you all is lifted forever. In your charity, do what to you seems best with the other thing you will find there; the thing that will have been

“JULIAN WALGATE.”

AS CUMMINGS read the last sentence, Bradley made a dash for the door.

“Not so fast,” Cummings called after him. “Where are you going?”

“Going!” Bradley paused momentarily in the hall. “To that lead room, of course. The man is killing himself! Don’t you see it?”

Deliberately Cummings placed the diary on the table. “If any harm was to come to Walgate,” he said, “the damage is already done. If not, a few minutes more in there can do him no harm, while our too hurried

and careless entry may undo the work for which he was ready to pay the highest price in man’s power.”

He passed the doctor and led the way down the hall, stopping before the last door. Slowly he turned the knob, and pushed the door open a few inches. A bar of vivid purple light fell across his face.

“Is it all right?” Bradley whispered, close behind him.

“I think so.” Cummings opened the door a bit further. In the room beyond was an atmosphere of snapped tension; of climax that had passed.

They stepped across the threshold. And then they became aware that the room still held a living occupant. From the far corner, his clothing wrinkled and torn, his hair and trim Vandyke beard in disarray, there shambled toward them a helpless, mindless idiot!
