

# FANTASTIC

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Ziff-Davis Publishing Company  
Editorial and Executive Offices  
One Park Avenue  
New York 16, New York  
ORegoo 9-7200  
Advertising Manager,  
Martin Gluckman

Midwestern and Circulation Office  
434 South Wabash Avenue  
Chicago 5, Illinois  
WAbash 2-4911

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*The hold that H. P. Lovecraft exerts from beyond the grave on followers of fantasy seems to grow stronger through the years. This story, by a New Orleans newspaperman, grew out of his admiration for Lovecraft, and his determination to keep alive the HPL style by using it in fanciful letters to his friends. This was the only letter written. But it weaves a spell worthy of the master.*

Dear Jim,

I am sending this by special delivery so it should get to you by the day after tomorrow. I shall follow it by no more than a day. You must take me in for a time until I get my bearings, and can determine on which side of the balance my mind lies.

I know you would receive me without so much as a preparing letter. I am writing this, rather, to keep my own sanity, which has been pushed to the brink by the final horror that has just befallen me. You are the only person I know who would even listen to such a story as I have to tell. You must believe it and help me escape. You can, if anyone or anything can. But I doubt whether I can get away, ultimately.

You remember Tessier, the fat old furniture dealer. It all began with him. He drank a lot, you know, and talked pretty wildly;

you seemed rather interested in him, although it seemed to me that his queer hints and insinuations were only the product of an oversensitive imagination nurtured in New Orleans. Well, Tessier remarked that he knew a lot about things you were interested in—your folklore and mythology, of course—after you left last summer. He never would say just what, but kept telling me to wait. I must say that he got me pretty interested.

Two days ago he called me. He was drunk, worse than usual. It was the last night of Mardi Gras, but I hadn't made any plans, and he insisted that I come to his store. He said that he was finally ready to show me the secret he had been talking about, and kept apologizing and bemoaning the fact that you weren't here. Thank God you weren't.

Well, since I really hadn't

anything to do, and it would give me a chance to get rid of Tessier and his dark mutterings, I conceded. I left the apartment and started fighting my way through the wild carnival crowds. It was not more than five blocks from my apartment to Tessier's on Royal, but it took me more than half an hour to get there.

You've never seen the French Quarter on a carnival night, Jim. It's mad; the streets are roped off, crowds so thick you can hardly move. Drunks lurch into you and women tug your sleeve—it's really rather unpleasant unless you're in the mood, and I wasn't. The din was deafening, and the old wrought galleries were sagging beneath the weight of the celebrants dancing on them. The streets are so narrow that the people on the galleries could nearly join hands across the packed street. It was terribly hot and muggy, and a rather unpleasant smell was coming off the Mississippi. It's only a few blocks from Royal, you know, and when the Quarter isn't so noisy you can hear the cow-like lowing of the ships' horns.

**I** WAS in a decidedly foul mood when I finally got to Tessier's pretentious antique furniture store. You were never there, were you? It's the usual thing for the Rue Royal—lots of glass with all those polished gold buckets and

vulgar stone statues piled in careless disarray. The old fool was waiting inside under a little porcelain lamp and when he saw me at the door, he waddled to unlock it.

He was almost overpoweringly drunk, and had the air of a man about to uncover the secrets of the universe. I was suddenly beset by an overwhelming urge to turn around and go home; but before I could act he had bolted the door and was leading me to the rear of his shop.

Tessier looked even worse under the lamp, surrounded by all those ominous big stone nymphs and birds and ancient chairs. A gross, revolting soapstone Buddha two feet high peered down from a filing cabinet at us with a vapidly inscrutable expression. The old antique seller was in really bad shape. He hadn't even attempted to shave for a couple of days and there was a yellow tinge under the normal sickly grayish cast of his hog-jowled face. He acted alternately frightened and excited as he pulled me into a dimly lit back room, like a child hugging itself in some pleasureable yet dreaded anticipation.

"This is the night—the night, you know," he tittered, and began fumbling into some sort of closet. I didn't think this sort of statement was worth an answer, so after a moment he went on.

"You'll find a lot of things to startle you about New Orleans tonight, Paul. You'd never believe it if I told you, and you'd probably have babbled it, so that's why I didn't tell you until tonight, so you can see for yourself.

"But you must never speak to anyone of what you will see down there tonight. Never. You'll see what I mean. God, if they should ever learn I brought you. . . ."

I was growing impatient. "What's all this about, Tessier? And what's that?" He had brought two strange, musty-looking dun-colored robes with loose cowls from the closet.

"Put it on," he said, handing one of the mildewed things to me.

"Paul, you won't believe this until you see it, but I'll tell you now, because we can't talk, not even whisper, once we get there. Remember that. They might notice you.

**T**HE French Quarter is two centuries or more old, you know. There's a hundred blocks of it now but you only know half of it. The rest of it's down there he said, almost shouting, and pointing at his feet. "Only about fifty people know this, and you'll be surprised who they are.

"Yes, there's something down there, under these crumbling buildings and banquettes that

have been here since white men were here. But it's been down there long before that, long before there was a Vieux Carre, and probably even before there were Indians. It's probably been there forever.

"You didn't think the old town was built here, in the middle of a God-forsaken swamp, for nothing, did you? Not when it's a lot better for a townsite a little farther up the river.

"We all go down there, once a year, the last night of carnival. Our fathers did, and their fathers before them, and theirs, and God knows who else before that. I don't know why we go down there now, really, but we do, and when you see who else goes down, maybe you'll think it's gotten us results. You'll see some pretty rough things, Paul, and I hope you won't give yourself away."

"For God's sake, man, what are you talking about?" I demanded, thoroughly disgusted now. "What's down there?"

"Catacombs," he croaked. "Miles of them. Nobody's been through them all, that we know of, and we don't know how far or how deep they go, but they seem to cover all the Quarter—underneath."

Well, Jim, this was the first concrete statement of the night, and you'll understand that it was enough to make me pull on the

evil-smelling old robe and pull the cowl over my head, as Tessier did.

"It's nearly time now. We must go, and remember, whatever you do, don't say a word once we step out this door. Keep absolutely quiet and don't stare. If anybody notices you aren't one of us, God help me . . . and you."

WITH that, he doused the lights and opened a rear door. The blackness of the night made it seem nearly light within the store. Tessier looked up at me and in the dimness at the door his disgusting face was almost pitiful with a fearfulness that was beginning to pervade it. I think he was starting to wish he hadn't brought me, and I was about to offer to leave, when an overpowering stench of whiskey floated into my nostrils, gagging me, and I pushed him out the door.

We were in a small, rundown courtyard, piled around with boxes and crates and old packing and stuffing. Tessier tugged at the flowing sleeve of my cassock and I started after him through the blackness.

We passed out through the little courtyard and into a long, high-walled passageway. The din of the celebration burst afresh into my ears, and above the walls and the rooftops of the old town we were creeping through,

the lights offered an eerie glow. Raucous, obscene and wildly incongruous music shrieked at us from the nearby Bourbon Street dives as we walked silently through the deserted, musty outdoor corridor. The walk led to an old wooden door, and through that we went into another courtyard. It was pitch black at eye-level but I could hear the bubbling of a fountain nearby over the roar of the crowds in the streets outside.

Tessier opened a protesting door and we were on a side street, Conti, I think it was. It is the last place-memory I have of that night. Nobody took notice of us, with more strangely costumed figures to be seen anywhere during Mardi Gras, and we slipped across the street and into another doorway.

We didn't, I don't think, cross another street. But it seems that Tessier, growing surprisingly steadier in that oppressively hot, dank air, led me through an endless series of courtyards, passages, plank doors and private alleys until I was perfectly lost. I guess we must have crossed a street somewhere. I remember I never lost sight of the dim glow above the crumbling rooftops, and I could always hear the laughing, milling crowds in the streets.

It seemed we had been threading our way through those an-

cient galleried courtyards for more than half an hour when Tessier suddenly pushed open a door and only blackness looked out. We went in and he shut the door and for long moments I couldn't see a thing. Then, just as I was growing accustomed to the utter darkness, the door opened again and three more hooded and cowed figures slunk in.

As best I could tell, Jim, the place was an old slave-quarters; it had only one big room, and another small floor above; but we were there only long enough for Tessier to light a soaked rag on the end of a club-like piece of wood and he was bearing one of those torches so beloved of the pulp magazine artists.

Then he walked to the middle of the room and began tugging at a ring on the floor. One of the three strangers went to help him. I glanced around enough to see that the place was falling apart, the two windows boarded up.

**T**HEN Tessier was tugging at my sleeve. The other three had already gone down the hole that their efforts had opened. Now Tessier was ready to descend into the square-shaped hole in the brick floor. There wasn't a ladder there. Rather, there were steps, hewn and placed into the immemorially soggy ground. Tessier went down and motioned for me

to pull the door shut above me as I followed. And I was groping for the lid to the trap when I noticed that I could no longer hear the carnival revelers. Then I pulled the trap door shut above me and it clanged into place with a startling boom that was answered by an echo from the bowels of the earth.

I had never known it before, but apparently I suffer from claustrophobia. No doubt it was enhanced by the utter weirdness of everything I had been doing and everything I had seen for the past hour; but when the door shut over my head and I looked down at the fire-lit, endless steps running into the worm-riddled earth, an icy chill settled behind my forehead and I had to fight off the advance guard of panic.

The three persons that had descended before us were already out of sight, but I fancied I could hear footsteps echoing back through that terrible mouldy tunnel. The slightest noise produced unerringly somber results in that nether world.

Tessier was pulling at me again, and we began the descent. His torch cast shadows about us. I could see that the walls of the sharply declining hole were earthen; it was not shorn up in any manner that I could discern. The steps were of stone, worn unaccountably



smooth at the edges, since Tessier told me this eerie pilgrimage was made only once a year, on the last day of carnival. I wondered how this seemingly small amount of stone could produce such perfect echoes.

Down and down we went, Jim, until my legs were about to give out. Tessier was clutching at the earth, and now we had gone so far down that it was fairly oozing with slime and wetness, and revolting green slime on the steps made the descent treacherous. Every so often we passed holes nearly a foot large in the walls, and they reminded me of the little worm passages in a spadeful of upturned earth.

The indescribably foul odor that seemed almost to ooze visibly from the black earthen walls was becoming unbearable and I feared I would fall on the slippery steps and retch when the steps suddenly halted and Tessier's torch flared out in a large, high ceilinged earth chamber.

THE chamber was like an overturned bowl, and must have been twenty feet high at its peak, and probably twenty feet across. It was like an eldritch fearsome vestibule, for six black openings had been cut into the circular walls. Tessier walked to the center of the earthen room and looked about, a puzzled expression on his fat features, while

great drops of moisture oozed from the blackish-yellow ceiling and dripped on his mouldering cassock. Then he nodded to himself and started into one of the six openings, beckoning me to follow with a jerk of his flaming torch.

We entered the slightly round door and I found myself peering down an almost—as far as I could tell from Tessier's torch—illimitable catacomb. The old fool had been speaking the truth. The French Quarter was undermined with these sinister dank tunnels, although I have no idea how far below the gay carnival crowds we were.

Tessier, apparently sober now and growing increasingly agitated, waddled as briskly as he could down the slightly concave floor of the round catacomb. I found it hardly high enough to stand erect, and began walking with a stoop, but even so something wet and wholly loathsome seeped through the cowl into my hair and down my face occasionally.

The catacomb wasn't as long as I must have thought, for we hadn't walked long before some sort of noise seemed to float to our ears over the drum-like beats of our footsteps. The stone had stopped with the steps, and all about us was bloated earth now, but still those perfect reproductions of every sound struck our

ears like mocking laughter. Strange growths tugged at my cowl and my head was soggy with clinging lumps of swollen dirt as we forged on; soon the cowl was pushed back and my hair was growing matted with that unnameable excretion of the earth that dripped on it.

All the time the buzzing grew louder, and soon I seemed to detect a glow of light far down the catacomb we were following, far beyond the feeble reach of Tessier's faggot. Still we kept on that soggy path in the tunnel, although at intervals of about twenty paces new catacombs yawned blackly at us from either side; it is a wonder we were not lost forever in that murky awfulness below New Orleans. Better perhaps for me that we had been.

The noise grew louder, and the glow brighter, and my fear, thrust back by ever-present conscious effort, surged back in a great wave when from a side-catacomb belched a soggy thump as I passed; a thump almost inaudible, giving the impression of fathomless distance. I nearly cried out, but Tessier did not falter; apparently the growing growl from ahead had drowned that awful flopping sound from his ears.

I was staggering, nearly sick with a fear that I could hardly hold in my stomach, when the

end of the catacomb appeared and I saw a milling crowd of the cowed figures. Thirty more paces to the blazingly-lighted door and I almost fainted when I saw black hands bigger than a man reaching down for the hooded forms.

A PARALYZING, sickening horror gripped me when I saw those two great ebony hands cupping down as if to reach under the crowd of tan-robed men, but in another instant I realized that those gruesome claws were part of a terrible titan statue that hovered like a monstrous demon of death over the illimitable chamber and its occupants. As the terrible fright poured from me like an outgoing tide, leaving me weak and queasy, I gazed awestruck at that chamber, at the great black figure that dominated it—that was it, almost, and the sinister group gathered under the fearful shadow of the giant.

The chamber was so vast that the torches held on poles not far from the mouth of the catacomb in which we stood, and ranging far back until they were only little evil stars, seemed to illuminate only fractions of it. Jim, it seemed to me to cover more than a square mile; of course I can't be sure since I couldn't see the far reaches of the dome-shaped, although oblong, earthen grotto,

and my mental state then was admittedly wretched.

In the center, under that breathtaking, all-encompassing figure, stood about fifty persons, dressed like Tessier and me. When I saw some of their faces, I could hardly believe it, just as Tessier had warned. The very contemporary fathers of the city of New Orleans stood there, looking rather ridiculous, their uncomfortably smiling faces peering from the shadows of their cowls.

I will not name the men I saw; great politicians, whose reputations were not of the highest but certainly spoke of nothing like this; financial and shipping barons; university heads—you'd really be shocked there, Jim—mingling with sinister-visaged, ill-reputed but vaguely affluent dwellers of the French Quarter, about whose lives a strange aura of mystery had been attached in that sane world somewhere above us.

They were talking among one another, somewhat self-consciously it seemed, and their faces bore rather embarrassed grins, as if they didn't want to be there, saw no reason for it, and felt silly. Apparently, Jim, they had no conception of what that eyeless thing was that stooped high above them.

The titan stone statue had its feet somewhere in the black re-

cesses of the vast chamber, an egg-shaped auditorium about two hundred feet high at its apex, which was almost directly above us. There at the crown was that bloated head, yet the knee of that great black figure was dimly visible in the shadows, far, far away, slightly bent. The other knee was invisible in the blackness. Its arms were bowed and outstretched downward, bent at the elbows, and appeared about to scoop up us all. The whole great figure gave the impression of a vast black demon hunter, running in city-spanning strides, snatching up its victims in its black, slime-dripping paws.

There above us, Jim, bore down that head for which you have searched the world over; I recognized it from your talks, although neither your words nor mine could describe its blank awfulness. You hunted for years to no avail, but I God help me, found it.

**H**IGH above us, yet it must have been a hundred yards across, was a head without a face; a great, ebony head with no features save long, pointed ears almost like wings.

Hurtling over us in his slime-dripping foulness was the Mighty Messenger, the Crawling Chaos from the blackness below the nighted pyramids. Forgotten for centuries upon centuries,

buried with civilizations older than man, here he was below the heart of New Orleans, and these great men were vapid fools beneath him, they who would have fled screaming had they known what that magnificently wrought stone colossus represented.

It was set into the bowels of the earth, only a giant bas relief, and it seemed to nearly cover all of the great chamber's ceiling and part of its sides.

My eyes caught, over the heads of the milling crowd beneath the statue, stone steps rising out of the foul earth and leading to a slimy altar between the outstretched hands of the black god.

My senses still reel when I think of that sight—the flickering torches lighting the end of the vast egglike chamber with its sloping walls hewn from the dirt, and that hideous black giant loping bestially out of the black reaches of the chamber, faceless, reaching impersonally out for us.

Tessier nudged me back to what remained of my senses. I looked down at him and he bore an abjectly fearful, pleading expression. His fat little face conveyed to me perfectly the idea that if it should be discovered that an outsider was in this great dank chamber of horrors, neither of us would ever see the daylight world again.

We joined the group of men moving about the wet stone al-

tar, men who should have been leading the gay Mardi Gras revels somewhere above us instead of lurking furtively under flickering torches in this huge subterranean chamber.

AS far as the eye could follow the walls of the chamber, more catacombs opened, so many I could not begin to count them. In a moment of startling lucidity, I wondered whether I should ever feel safe again in the French Quarter, or all of New Orleans for that matter, knowing the vast emptiness that lay beneath its crust. The remembrance of this thought now makes me want to scream.

The voices of the crowd, gathered round the altar, seemed by the strange acoustics of that accursed nether world to come from everywhere, from even the very unseen feet of the thing that hovered above. Drops of moisture, falling as if from the sky, plopped with revolting little thuds upon us. I stood among the hooded visitors to the depths, and tried to make myself inconspicuous. They seemed to be waiting for something, and the babble swelled when a lone hooded figure came out of the entryway catacomb with a bulky package beneath his arm, wrapped in coarse brown paper.

The man was one of New Orleans' leading morticians. Ap-

parently, whatever he had brought in the package was what had been awaited, for the voices died and perfect silence filled the chamber, except for the plops falling from the great ceiling above. Gathering his robes about him, he started up the wide slippery flight of stairs to the altar, and in the dancing light of the torches the fingers of the black thing seemed to twitch.

He placed the package on the altar and began a high, wailing sort of song-chant. I could make out nothing of what he said, and it seemed to be repeated almost simultaneously everywhere in the vast sunken room. I watched with a sick dread as his hands began to fumble with the knots in the shop cord that held the package together.

The paper fell open and as I strained morbidly to see what was between those titanic black hands, the horror descended upon me.

A muffled roar welled up from the far reaches of the blasted cavern, from the feet of the Mighty Messenger, and grew louder and louder like a vast bowling ball rumbling down a giant's alley toward cowering ten-pins. The faces of the crowd whitened and the last thing I saw was the mortician with his hands wildly outstretched; then a colossal blast of wind blew me from my feet and plunged the

great cavern into the blackness of bottomless hell.

I seemed to fall into the very abyss of terror, terror so great that saliva choked me and I clutched myself into a quivering, mindless ball there on the foul dank floor. The coldness of death gripped my brain and I know not how long I lay there trembling and drooling like a stricken idiot.

WHEN thought returned to me the great cave was soundless. I dared not open my eyes for a wild fear of what might be before them. Slowly I relaxed my aching muscles and listened for some sound, something. But there was nothing—nothing at all where there had been fifty people. Even the incessant drip from the ceiling far above me was no more. Then panic came surging back—where was I? Was I still in the cavern? How long had abject terror held me senseless.

Timidly I made an effort to open my eyes. I couldn't at first—the very muscles seemed locked. But then, slowly, they seemed to part; it felt like an infinity. Then they must have been open, but I saw nothing. Only blackness.

My first thought was blindness. I moved my hand until it was before my face, but I could see nothing. I could see no more with my eyes open than I could with them closed.

The noise of rising from that miserable floor sounded like the clash of doom in the utter silence, but nothing touched me. I took a step. Nothing happened—only the sound of the footfall. It seemed like one step was taken everywhere in that great cave. I looked up where I had last seen that faceless evil, but here was only blackness, the blackness of the pit.

I began stepping forward into the blackness, gingerly, my hands in front of me like a blind man. Maybe I was blind. I had no matches, no way to make a light to try to see. But then my hands touched slimy stone and I knew at least that I was still in the great chamber, at the foot of the altar between the hands of the giant. I recoiled from that thing and remembrance of the package on the altar.

I turned, gropingly. I could not even think of what had happened to the others—to Tessier, who had brought a stranger into their midst. I began walking toward the wall upon which the entry catacomb opened—or toward where I thought it was. Then I remembered dismally that the catacomb to the slave quarters in the old town was only one of seemingly hundreds that opened into the chamber, and that I should probably die of hunger before I could even explore part of the first one I found.

But I kept walking, growing more bold in my steps as I grew used to utter blackness, keeping one hand before me. The hand gouged into the pulpy wall, and I sidled to my right, feeling all the while for an opening. Then my hand hit an empty spot—I felt gingerly around for the roof of the catacomb and jerked my hand away in disgust when I realized it was in one of those evil foot-wide holes.

**I** KEPT going, and the next pocket my hand found proved to be a catacomb. Whether it was the one to the surface, or whether there were others which also led to the surface I could not know. I entered.

After I had gone a few steps, I noticed that the sounds of my footsteps were more normal in the close confines of the tunnel than they had been in that time-eroded chamber. Then my head, the cowl fallen from it, slid into the roof of the catacomb and furrowed into that repulsive slimy mud. I began to walk with a slight stoop.

The catacomb seemed to take no curves, or at least they were very gradual ones, for only occasionally did I seem to stagger into the wall and recoil from its shocking pulpiness. I do not know how long I must have walked—all thoughts of time were far from my grasp—before

it seemed that sight was dimly returning, faintly and blueishly.

A pale blue gas seemed to escape weakly from the moss-ridden walls of that infernal passageway, and I could see very dimly, not close at hand, but at a distance of many paces. The sight was limited to a faint recognition of the slightly tubular outlines of the benighted subterranean pathway.

On and on I went, and in the mouldy coolness I grew calmer, and it seemed that the drippings from the ceiling that plagued our entry were not to be found in this tunnel. But the abysmal stench of the first one, a smell of things eon-dead and decaying, like the river of time suddenly run dry, clung all about me, and breathing was a laborious thing.

As I walked, I seemed to become aware of a sense of tension, of cosmic apprehension, as though the catacombs were holding their breath. So strongly did this feeling grip me that I almost unconsciously began to hold my breath, even more than the foul odor made necessary. I held my breath as I walked, then expended it and drew a new lungful like a child playing at hide-and-go-seek. And then I caught myself walking along with catlike steps, almost on my toes. I found myself listening with all my senses, joining the catacombs in their brooding alertness.

I tiptoed drunkenly down that ghastly tunnel, straining my ears as if I were trying to hear the expectancy of the walls. I jumped and rammed my head into the slimy soft roof when I trod on something that crunched under my foot. I didn't shout, but I stared to run, and then the noise of my running frightened me worse than ever, so I gripped myself and resumed walking. I looked over my shoulder, timidly, apprehensively, into the blue light, now glimmering about where I had been when I walked on that thing that crunched. But all I could see was something small which reflected the blue light a fraction brighter than the floor.

AND as I walked, my heart pumping loudly, I could almost hear it too. I listened. I listened because the walls and the ceiling and the floor of that earthen catacomb were listening with a malign expectancy. They were waiting and listening for something; the very air about me seemed alive.

Then it came.

I felt it first. The earth was trembling around me—above me, at my side, but mainly under my feet. It was trembling like the skin of a slowly-beaten drum. As I stood rooted with the now familiar sick fear caressing me, I expected the walls to begin crum-

bling. It began slightly, ever so slightly, but even then it seemed hideous because the very catacomb itself seemed to tense and draw up. The booming rhythmic vibrations increased, and increased, and then I heard it and screamed.

It sounded at first like the distant throbbing of a drum, but when it grew a little louder I knew what it was, and it was worse than what I had feared. A wave of cosmic terror shot through my body at the sound of those obscene loping footsteps, the footsteps of a hunting beast.

I fought the terror that was clutching at my brain and stiffened and felt the cool sucking mud at the top of my head. The mud carried the vibrations of those awful padding footfalls that grew louder and the vibrations grew stronger.

I know only this, Jim, and I knew it as I stood there trembling with an ague of terror. No sane, living man ever saw the thing that was hurrying down that catacomb after me. There weren't two feet, there were four. And they didn't run in the greyhound gallop of two and two.

No, each of those unnameable paws came down in turn—one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four, and the space between the shock of the footsteps as they grew near was too dam-

nably far apart. And as it came closer, that mind-blasting, space eating loping, like that of some fiend-wrought wolf of hell, the very catacomb around me bounced and trembled and squished, and the noise of that hunting creature's pads was like muffled cannon's roar. And then came the thought that sent me reeling, screaming like a stricken animal into a panicked flight.

What manner of thing, star-sent or earth-begotten, could make such dreadfully loud footsteps and cause the very earth to tremble, and still be small enough to course through a tunnel in which I could not stand erect?

I remember no more of that catacomb clearly. I remember only a wild, careening run, bouncing and staggering through that fiend-cursed catacomb, screaming in terror as the footsteps of my monstrous pursuer grew into my ears until I thought I was being buffeted by thunder; running, running forever, falling, crawling, staggering up, whimpering like a lost child and smelling a charnel smell of long sealed tombs freshly opened like a hot searing blast and then suddenly I fell, fell and sank into murky tepid water that blanketed my brain.

**I** RECOVERED in a waterfront doctor's office where my stomach was being pumped of the



things I had swallowed. The doctor said I was otherwise fit and when he had finished wrenching my intestines, I staggered home.

I had been pulled out of the Mississippi River at the Barrack Street wharf at dawn, nearly drowned. Apparently I had fallen into some underground reach or pool of the mother of rivers, and had floated into the channel which sane men see. I tried to sleep when I got home, but I couldn't and still haven't. The thought of what lay beneath me was too awful.

The morning paper was at my door, and I fetched it when I realized sleep would not come, and may never come again. I opened the door and looked out at the sweaty dawn, at the last staggering remnants of the last night of carnival, at the streamers and confetti and torn masks and glass trinkets scattered over Chartres Street, the leftovers of revelry, and I seemed to feel better.

But then I glanced at the paper and choked with shock. There, on the front page, was a photograph of a high city offi-

cial reviewing a Mardi Gras krewe parade, a parade held well after the time I had seen him gazing up at the gruesome altar somewhere below me now.

My loathing for the French Quarter became so great then that within a few hours I had packed my suitcase and had taken a room uptown in the Garden District, the staid, oak-lined old Garden District. It seemed to refresh me. But last night, the first night in that little room in the great old mansion, as I almost began to doze, it seemed that I felt the ground trembling below me with great shuddering footsteps. . . .

I snapped to attention and the sensation was gone. My nerves were wrecked. It was then that I began to toy with the idea of visiting you.

I made up my mind in a flash an hour ago when the landlady came and told me she was sorry, but that I should have to move.

I asked her why, and she told me that her house was suddenly and unaccountably sinking into the earth.

**THE END**

