

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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Number Four

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## A FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL

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# THE TOWN THE DEAD

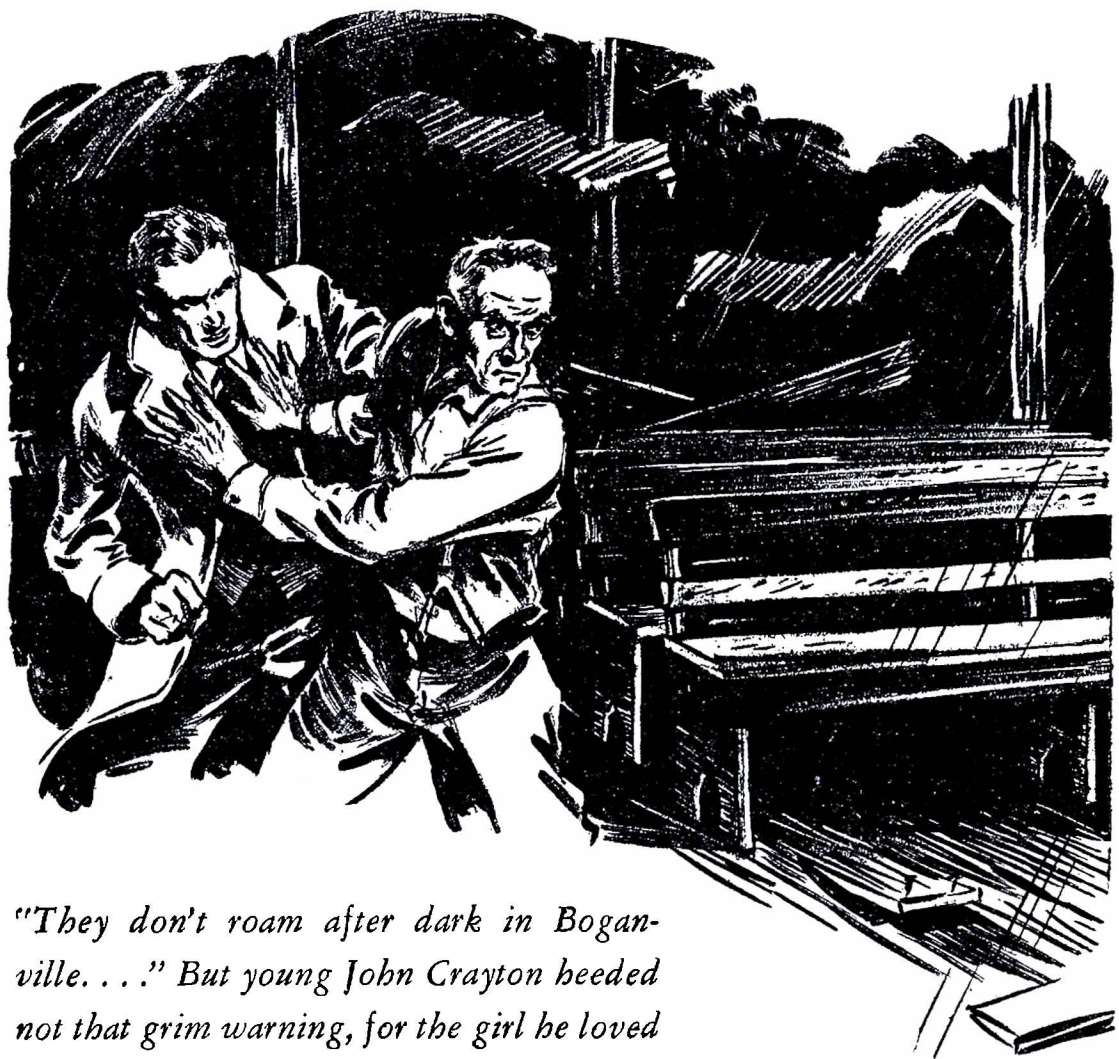
## CHAPTER ONE

### Death's White Wings

THE rain lashed down, seeming to claw at me as I stood under the dripping station eaves. Lightning split the midnight blackness. But I paid little attention to either. I stared at the

two things the flash revealed—the station sign that said Boganville, and the black bulk of the big house far up on the cliff overlooking the village—and I cursed through set teeth.

I looked around for somebody to take me to the damnable place, but saw no one. Naturally! I had come unannounced, so that no one could have been sent for me.



*"They don't roam after dark in Boganville. . . ." But young John Crayton heeded not that grim warning, for the girl he loved had inexplicably married a man who revelled in unholy communion with the dead—and John had seen the figment of her spirit go forth to join the floating white things that cast a plague of grisly death in Boganville.*

# THINGS CLAIMED

By PAUL  
ERNST

And the residents of Boganville, according to the train conductor, were hiding behind locked doors, these nights.

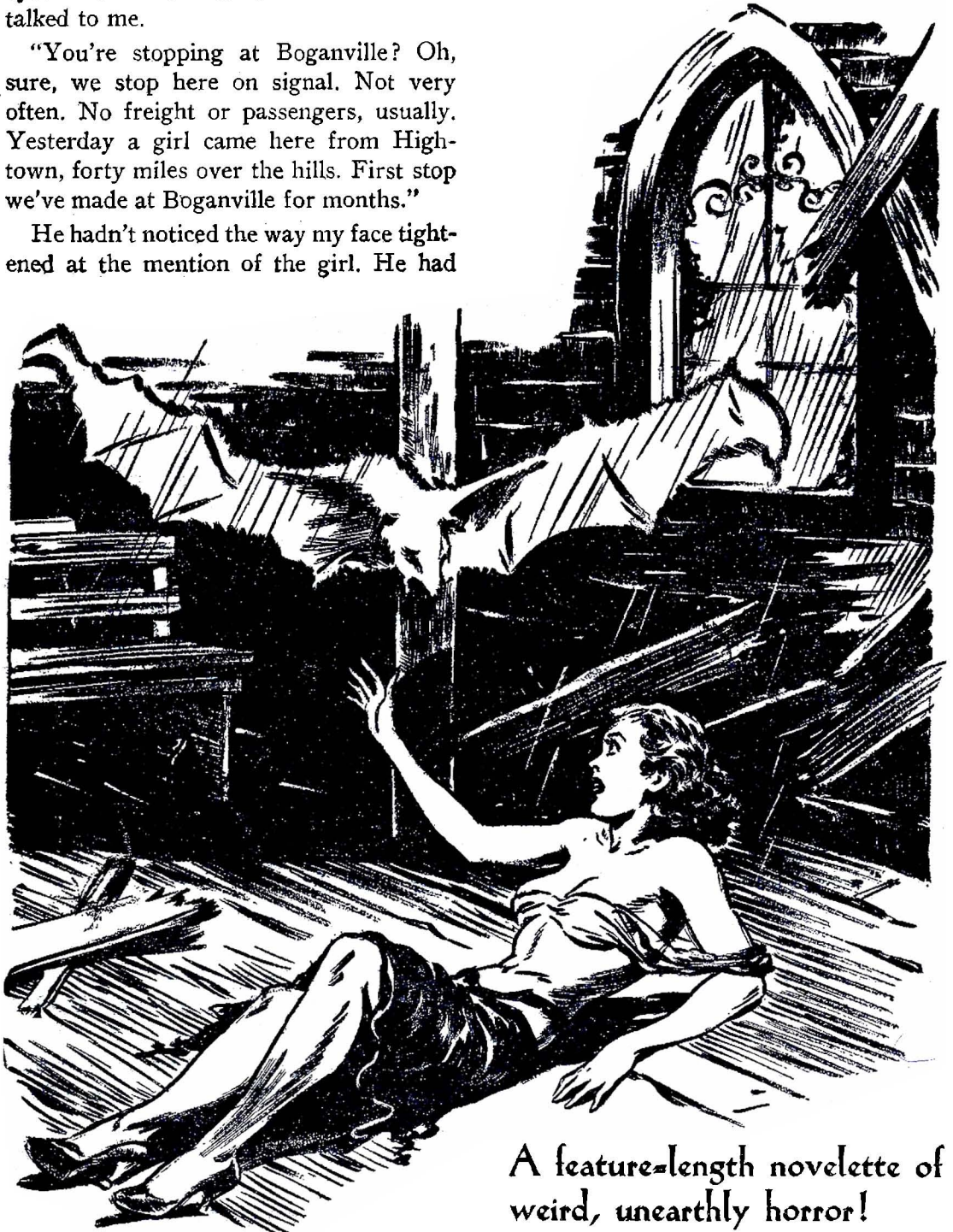
A funny sort of guy, that conductor. His eyes had seemed to avoid mine as he talked to me.

"You're stopping at Boganville? Oh, sure, we stop here on signal. Not very often. No freight or passengers, usually. Yesterday a girl came here from Hightown, forty miles over the hills. First stop we've made at Boganville for months."

He hadn't noticed the way my face tightened at the mention of the girl. He had

gone on talking, the queer look growing in his eyes:

"The people of Boganville are queer—unfriendly. I think maybe they're afraid



A feature-length novelette of  
weird, unearthly horror!

of something. All of 'em! I don't know what. But they don't roam around in that town much after dark. Maybe you'd better not roam, either!"

The look of my surroundings bore out the conductor's vague warning.

The station itself was dilapidated and dark. Across the single railroad track from it was the little village. Not one light showed in any house. It looked like a ghost city in the lightning flashes. Far beyond, perched on the cliff edge like a buzzard about to strike, was the big Corse home which dominated the village at its feet as for generations the Corse family had dominated the lives of the villagers.

The Corse home! Stella was in there now, unaware of my arrival . . . .

I could feel her telegram in my pocket like a stabbing blade. I'd gotten it in the city that noon.

"Married Fred Corse this morning. Forgive me, Stella."

Married to Fred Corse! But Stella and I had lived for each other for over a year. We were to have been married in less than a month. She could not have done this thing to me of her own free will. Something must be wrong. Terribly wrong!

Corse had been the one who introduced me to Stella. Her family had once lived near here, in the Kentucky hills. But there had seemed to be nothing but friendship between them. Now, a week ago, she had come down to visit her aunt in Hightown. And next thing I heard from her was the shattering telegram.

"Married Fred Corse this morning . . ."

Now I had come to this flag-stop at midnight to go to the Corse home and demand to hear from Stella's own lips why she had done this thing to me.

I pulled my coat collar up around my throat and stepped off the station platform into the mud. It was spring, and the rain was warm. Besides, the turmoil in my heart would have kept me from paying

much attention to even a worse night than this black, stormy one.

I started down the village's one street, past house after house—and not one light showed. And that was odd. Even in a small town there are usually a *few* people who are up at midnight.

"I think the people in Boganville are afraid of something." The conductor's words came back to me. "They don't roam around in that town after dark."

Afraid of the name of Corse, perhaps, I thought bleakly.

**F**RED, last of the Corses, was an aristocratic looking young man. Probably generations of almost feudal power over the ignorant, backward residents of Boganville had given the family that aspect. But there was something subtly disturbing about his slender elegance that had finally stopped my acquaintanceship with him, though I had let it drop with no open break.

There was a sort of serpentine grace about his body; a kind of veiled deadliness about his dark eyes and triangular face. Added to that, in college, had been the queerness of his library: one of the most extensive collections of books on after-life, spirit-visitations, and ghost-lore that I had ever seen.

A curious person was Fred Corse, full of contradictions; a dark mystic. When I'd come to know Stella better I had asked her what she really thought of him, and she had confessed to a suppressed fear and dislike of him.

And now—she was married to him!

"He forced her, some way," I swore, as I slogged through the rain and mud toward the cliff. "He must have drugged her—hurt her. I'll break his neck. I'll—"

I stopped. If Stella were indeed married to him, there was nothing I could do. I was all washed up.

If she were married to him. In that small word lay slight hope. Anybody can

send a telegram. Could Corse have sent that, signing Stella's name to it, for some crazy reason? He was arrogant enough to do it.

Oh, yes, Fred was arrogant enough to dare anything. The Corse family owned most of the land surrounding Boganville. The inbred, moronic villagers all worked for Fred. That feudal arrangement had made him insufferably arrogant.

But would he have dared to hurt Stella, or to send off that telegram if it were a fake?

Suddenly my thoughts were cut off as though by a knife. And the knife that cut them was a scream. A girl's scream! Once, twice, it split the eerie darkness, making the hair on my scalp prickle with the terror it contained. Then it stopped—and I was running toward the source of it.

The scream had come from the muddy road beyond me. I couldn't see any one there, but obviously a woman, ahead of me somewhere, was in danger of some kind and urgently needed help.

*"They don't roam around in that town much after dark."*

The lightning ripped a jagged splash in the black veil of the night, and I saw the person who had screamed, directly ahead of me in the road. I got to her quickly.

A girl of nineteen or so, she stood in the middle of the mud, with the rain plastering her brown hair to her cheeks and dripping unheeded from long lashes over wide, haunted eyes. She had on a white dress—but the garment was in rags over her shapely body, exposing her soft breast and graceful shoulders. Her eyes, beautiful eyes, glared at me with a haunted, stunned look in them.

She was staring straight at me as I grasped her bare wet shoulder, but she didn't seem to see me. It was very queer. I felt a cold sensation touch my spine. She was like a person in a hypnotic trance. No more sound came from her lips.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Are you

hurt? You called for help, didn't you?"

She said nothing. Not one thing. She just kept on looking at me—or, rather, *through* me—as if I didn't exist.

It was then that I felt moisture on the fingers that clasped the silky skin of her shoulder which was not the cold moisture of the rain. It was warm, sticky.

"After me . . ." she mumbled wildly. "The Dead Ones . . . *They're after me . . .*"

**S**UDDENLY she was running crazily from me in the rain, with her body looking like that of a naked woman because of the way the rain plastered her white dress to her. It was then, when the lightning flared, that I saw the thing on her back: a long thin stripe of ragged red, where blood had come from a kind of gash, or cut.

She didn't run far. At the end of the street was an old church. It was a hulking ruin with half its roof long gone, and with its steeple long since caved in. The girl ran toward that, and the lightning flared just in time for me to see her white, nude-looking figure dart within the sagging doors.

I followed her. The urgency of my own business was shelved for a moment in remembrance of the horror I had seen in the girl's streaming face. I heard her voice sounding ever more loudly as I neared the ruined church.

"Save me! Save me from the Dead Ones! Merciless spirits . . . I have done no wrong . . ."

The words broke once more into that keening, terrible scream that I had heard before. It stopped just before I got to the door and hurried inside.

It was as dark as the grave in the ruined church—till the brittle lightning streamed down from a drenched heaven.

I saw the girl, then. She lay down at the end of the aisle that led between broken, long unused pews. She lay before the overturned thing that had been a pulpit, all white and streaming, like a naked woman.

But the lightning revealed other red stripes on her white back now, besides the one I had seen as she ran from me outside. Other gashes down her snowy flesh. And it revealed for one brief instant something else which left me utterly bewildered as I ran down the aisle toward her.

Three vague white forms seemed to hover in mid-air near the body. At least I thought they were hovering there, like patches of mist in the blackness. I couldn't be sure that they weren't simply hanging strips of paper, or white blotches of plaster, on the wall behind the upset pulpit.

"They're after me . . . the Dead Ones . . ." the girl was babbling. "Souls of the dead . . ."

I bent over her, started to gather her up in my arms, to take her away from there. Then, in the lightning's incessant flaring, I saw a figure at the door. It was the figure of an elderly man, straight, spare, with lank grey hair and a fanatic's blazing eyes. He strode toward me, and I straightened up from the girl.

He, too, seemed to stare straight at me without seeing me at all. It was as if I were a ghost on that black night. He came to the girl and dropped on his knees beside her. I saw a resemblance of feature between them. He must be her father.

"The souls," he whispered—not to me. He was still paying no attention to me. "The souls of the dead, scourging those who sin . . ."

He whirled toward me with a strange madness shining in his eyes. He crooked his fingers toward me, like horns.

"Go! Get back to where you came from, and take your hell's scourge with you!"

I stood in hesitation as he glared at me. Then the fire died from his eyes, and he bent to pick up the body of the girl. He strode toward the door with her, and I slowly followed. I made no move to help; he was easily able to carry her. I simply left the ruin of the church, going into the lashing rain again.

What lunatic talk was this of Dead Ones? Of scourging souls? What had made those lone gashes on the girl's white back? I couldn't answer. Something prosaic and ordinary was at the bottom, of course; some natural thing distorted by the ignorant villagers into talk of the souls of the dead.

I shrugged it aside, telling myself that probably the girl was subject to seizures of some kind, and that in one of them she had inflicted those wounds herself, by convulsive clawing of her own nails. I started on toward the house atop the cliff—then stopped in my tracks. The lightning's flash was silvering the world again and in it, far ahead, I thought I saw three floating, wraithlike shapes. Like patches of mist drifting up the cliff path ahead of me.

Three things like great slow birds, yet unlike any birds ever seen before! Three things floating in an unhurried and soundless way toward the great house of Corse on the edge of the high cliff!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Can the Dead Scream?

**I** FELT stark evil pressing down on this black hill section in the black night storm. My fingers were trembling a little as I pressed Corse's bell.

I heard the peal clang hollowly inside, and started a bit as the door was opened sooner than I expected. I shrank back with a vision of the girl's streaming wounds before me. But there was nothing fearful or fantastic at the door.

A woman had opened it. She was about thirty, dark of hair and eyes, very attractive in a mature, voluptuous way. She stepped aside, with her dark eyes running questioningly over me.

"I want to see Fred Corse," I said bluntly, with anger winning again over the sense of nameless dread that had dogged me to the house. All that counted now was that I

was in the home of the man who had somehow taken away from me the girl I loved.

The woman shut the door after me, shutting out at the same time most of the uproar of the storm. I looked more closely at her face. Was that pallor natural to her brunette complexion? Were her eye-pupils dilated because the light in this big front room was dim—or because of fear?

"Mr. Corse can't possibly see anybody," she said.

"He's got to see me! Where is he?"

She repeated firmly: "He can't see any one tonight. He wants to be alone, in his grief."

"I'm going to see him before I leave this house," I declared. "Also, I'm going to see Mrs. Corse."

It hurt to say those words. *Mrs. Corse!*

The woman's eyes widened, and her face grew paler.

"But that is the reason you can't see him. Mrs. Corse, I mean. She is dead. It happened just a few hours ago. Mr. Corse has shut himself up since then, and refuses to talk to any one."

She shrank back, startled, as I grasped her arm. I guess I must have looked frightening. I don't know. I only know that my mind was reeling at the shock of those words.

"Mrs. Corse . . . Stella . . ." I mouthed, sure that I had heard wrong—praying that I had heard wrong.

"She died a few hours ago, just as the storm was beginning. She fell over a low part of the cliff. It was not a long fall, but she . . . her neck was broken."

There was a big, stiff-looking chair in the hall. I got to it and sat down. The woman started toward me, hesitated, plainly didn't know what to do or say next.

I heard a man call, "Mary, who is out there?"

The voice was followed, before the woman could reply, by the speaker. I looked up dazedly to see a big man of about forty, with tanned face and strong jaw,

walking questioningly toward my chair.

"This is Doctor Jeanne," the woman said to me. "You—"

"My name is Crayton," I said vacantly. "John Crayton."

The man nodded. "Of course. I should have guessed. You came because of that telegram. Nasty shock. I wanted Mrs. Corse to break the news a little more gently, but she seemed to think a clean cut was best."

"This woman says she is dead," I said. I started to struggle to my feet.

"Easy, now. Easy," the doctor said, with a hand on my shoulder. "Yes, she is dead." He turned to the woman. "Fred will see this man, I think. We'll find out, anyway. Tell him that Mr. Crayton is here."

**T**HE woman nodded, and started down the hall toward a wide door at its rear. She must be a superior servant, housekeeper, perhaps. A very good looking one. Ordinarily, I'd have smiled at the thought of such a housekeeper in a bachelor's lonely home. But not now. I was still numb from the shock of the news. Stella dead! I couldn't take it in . . .

The housekeeper came back. "Mr. Corse will see you," she said. There was sympathy in her dark eyes.

I started down the hall. Doctor Jeanne caught my arm for a moment.

"I'm here," he said, "as physician to Fred Corse as well as friend. He hasn't been well lately, and this thing has hit him pretty hard. Please be careful what you say to him. Don't upset him."

I wrenched loose. To hell with Corse and his tender feelings! How did Jeanne think the news hit *me?*

I opened the wide door I'd seen the housekeeper enter, and stepped into the library of the house. I saw a man's bowed figure in a big chair next to a dark fireplace.

The man lifted his head and I saw, with a little shock, the change in it. It was Fred

Corse, unmistakably, yet the man was a stranger to me.

It is hard to say what that change was. He seemed an exaggeration, a refinement, of his former self, that was all. His dark eyes had always been intense; now they were glittering like the eyes of a man who is very ill. His face had always been thin; now it was emaciated. He had always been nervous; now he quivered all over, like an old, old man. In spite of my grievance against him, I felt a momentary pity.

"John!" he said. "I didn't expect to see you after the telegram Stella sent. But I suppose you got the second one, announcing her death . . . No, you couldn't have. You must have left the city before it could be delivered."

"I got only one telegram," I said, unsteadily. "I didn't hear of the other till a minute ago. It's . . . true? It isn't a horrible joke?"

"It's true. At half-past seven this evening, scarcely ten hours after the marriage ceremony, Stella slipped and fell over the edge of the cliff outside." His hands clenched, and he paused till he could control his voice. Then, with his eyes glittering more wildly, he almost smiled. "She won't be gone from me, though," he crooned. "Her spirit will be with me. Her soul, robed in white, staying with me always . . ."

I could only stand there, speechless, before the man who looked ill almost unto death. And he stared up at me suddenly with the shrewd gleam in his eyes that comes to the eyes of one whose mind is on the thin borderline of sanity.

"You're surprised to hear me say that? Souls! Spirits! You used to sneer at my preoccupation with such things at college. I knew. And I knew that the reason you dropped our friendship was because you thought I wasn't quite sane. Well, you may get a chance to discover for yourself, tonight. Though I am not sure they will show themselves to you."

HE LOOKED into the fireplace, eyes glowing like dark, sinister jewels.

"For a long time I've been convinced that the souls of the dead—their spirits—can take a strange material envelope beyond the grave and return to us. They can protect us if we deserve it—and scourge us if we sin . . . Oh, yes, you stand there staring at me as if I were a madman! But I tell you such a thing is possible. *I know!*"

I brushed aside his crazy fantasies.

"All right," I said harshly, "there are materialized spirits. I'm not interested in such things now. What I want to know is how you induced Stella to marry you. *We* were to have been married. Why did she suddenly choose you?"

"Does it matter? She's dead now—"

"It matters to me," I rasped. "I want to know how you tricked her into marrying you. Or *did* you? Was that first telegram a lie, sent by you?"

Fred looked at me for a full minute. Then he reached into his coat pocket and drew out a crackling paper which he handed to me. I read it. It was a marriage certificate, announcing the union of Fred Corse and Stella Leigh in this, the hill county of Crile. It was dated this very day, and signed and sealed.

Somehow, the hope that the marriage story was a lie, had helped me bear up under the shock of Stella's death. I was left without that prop, now. The double pronouncement smashed me.

Fred was staring at me with something like contempt in his eyes.

"Now, for once," he said, "you can envy me instead of sneering at me. I'll have comfort and you won't. She'll appear to me, but not to you. Yes, appear to me! At last, in recent months, I have seen them—the white souls of the dead. In this house."

I retreated a step. His voice had risen. He was getting to his feet, waveringly, as an old man moves. And his eyes were



hideous. Glittering eyes of a madman. . . .

*"In this very house—"*

As I staggered back from him, with horror and sickness eating at my heart, there was a high scream of terror from somewhere below us. The scream of a woman in deadly terror.

I stared at Corse. His shaking hand had gone to his trembling lips. He started for the door, but I beat him to it. I leaped into the dimly lit hall. Steps pounded on stairs at the back of the house. The steps of a man. Doctor Jeanne, probably. I ran toward them and saw a rear stairway leading down. I started down them, then stopped. A sound at the back door had caught my straining ears.

The upper half of the rear door of the house had a glass pane in it. Framed there, I saw a face that I can still see in nightmares.

It was the face of an old man, maddened by rage. The lips were twisting under a long, curving nose. Heavy, grizzled eyebrows formed ragged lines over gleaming eyes. Eyes which glared balefully at me.

Then the face was gone.

I started toward the door, saw a wilderness of trees and shrubbery in a flash of the lightning, and turned back toward the stairs. The scream from the basement seemed more important than the face.

A woman's scream. The shriek of a human being in horror. Stella's wild cry? But Stella was dead. Dead!

I raced downstairs into the cavern of the basement.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Locked Room

**T**HE Corse home was very large. I came into a basement room that was at least thirty by forty, with doors at the end telling of still more basement space. But I didn't pay much attention to the door—then. My gaze was riveted to a sight in the center of the big room.

A woman lay there. Fred's housekeeper. The doctor was bending over her, holding a spoonful of some sort of dark liquid to her lips. Her face was as white as a sheet. Her breasts stirred with her gasping for breath. Beautiful breasts, completely exposed, for her dark dress had been ripped down the front almost to her waist.

There was a long gash between the white mounds.

"One of Them," I heard her pant to the doctor. "One of the Dead Ones. I have sinned! The scourge—"

"Drink this," the doctor was saying quietly. "It will help."

She forced the liquid down. I saw her throat move with the effort. Then she stared at Doctor Jeanne vacantly, started to say something, and relaxed in a dead faint in his arms.

Corse had come down the stairs and passed me. Jeanne looked at him for a moment. I thought I saw something like grim accusation in the doctor's level eyes. Then he nodded toward the unconscious woman.

"Help me carry her upstairs, Fred."

Fred, lips ashen with something that seemed to be more than fear, bent down. Together the two men carried the lovely body to the stairs.

I came after, apparently unnoticed by both men in that crowded moment. But in the first floor hall, while they carried the housekeeper to the library, I lagged behind. In a portion of the wall beyond the library door, I saw a curtain hanging as though it covered a niche.

I went to the curtain, glanced around. I was alone in the hall. I drew the shroud back . . .

A gasp came to my lips. There was a little statuette on a pedestal in the niche behind the curtain. It was a bizarre and lovely thing, of a woman all swathed in tenuous, misty drapes, with hands held forward as though in kindly benefaction.

Then I saw two things that sent a cold wave up my back.

Tipping those beautiful, outstretched hands, were long curved nails like the talons of a bird of prey.

The face of the misty apparition so cunningly chiselled in stone was the face of a beautiful demon—and was the face of Stella Leigh!

I HEARD my own rasping breathing as I stared at that thing of subtle horror. A statuette of Stella with a she-devil's face and with curving, clawing talons outstretched! The fact that at first glance the little statuette seemed to depict a kindly, benign being—and only at second glance was revealed as a thing of pure frightfulness—emphasized the shock its appearance gave.

So this was the kind of "spirit," of "white soul" Fred Corse saw in his sickly dreams! This was the way he had pictured Stella as she would look beyond the grave! Must have pictured her, indeed, before she died—for he could not have molded this thing, or had it done, in the short space of time *after* her actual death.

I heard steps then, and started rapidly toward the library door, letting the curtain fall into place again over the niche and its hellish contents.

Jeanne came from the library. He glanced absently at me.

"Is she all right?" I asked, nodding toward the library.

He nodded. "Yes. The wound was not bad. There must have been only one of Them—" He stopped abruptly.

"Only one of what?" I demanded sharply. "What's the mystery in this damned place? What happened to her down there?"

He looked at me strangely, then shrugged.

"There are . . . rats . . . in the cellar. One must have bitten her."

He left, and Fred came from the library. His eyes rested on me with a little start, as though he had forgotten my presence here till the sight of me recalled it.

"John, I—let me show you to a room. You'd better get some rest. You probably need it. I know *I* do."

He started toward the front stairs. I thought of protesting, of refusing his hospitality, but closed my lips before words came. For into my mind had come a plan, born of the shock of seeing that little statuette, with Stella's face so subtly and horribly altered, and which had somehow caught in hard stone, the feel of an almost-disembodied wraith, or spirit.

"All right," I said, following him docilely.

We got to the stairs and started up.

What jerked my gaze in that direction, I do not know. But suddenly I found myself looking over the bannister toward the back door of the house. And there, once again, I saw the thing I had seen before.

The face of an old man, icily enraged, peering in at the streaming window. Then it was gone. But this time a lightning flash showed me a bent and gnomelike body running crabwise over the lawn outside for the shelter of a clump of trees.

HALF-PAST two in the morning.

I sat on the edge of the bed in the old-fashioned but comfortable bedroom to which Fred had shown me, and listened intently. There were still storm-noises to be heard in the night, though wind and rain were dying down. But it was not for those noises that I was listening.

I was straining to hear if any one was still up in the big house. Particularly any one in the hall outside my door. For it was time now to go through with the plan that had determined my staying in the house that night.

It wasn't much of a plan. It was simply a resolve to search methodically through this whole house, room by room, and see if I could find out the secret of the nameless horror that spread its wings over it.

Strangely materialized spirits! White souls of the dead, comforting those who de-

served it—"scourging" those who did not! What was the real answer to those *impossible* things?

Also I wanted to discover anything I could about Stella. They'd said she was dead. But no one had offered to show me her body. What was the reason for that?

I tiptoed to the door, out into the hall and to the stairs, cursing the ancient floorboards that creaked under my weight. I went up to the third floor first.

What insanity had Fred Corse been babbling of? What had attacked the girl in the ruined church—and the housekeeper in the basement? What were the three misty, wraithlike things I had seen floating ahead of me up the path—to this house?

Spirits of the dead—white souls from beyond the tomb?

Nonsense! Utter idiocy, I told myself. And as I was saying it, I felt sweat start out on the palms of my hands.

There was nothing on the third floor. I went into room after room and all were empty save one, where I heard the steady breathing of some one asleep.

Back on the second floor, I repeated the performance save for three of the six rooms there. Two were the rooms in which, I cautiously discovered, Jeanne and Fred slept. The third was my own, which of course I didn't bother to search.

The first floor . . .

There were kitchen, dining room, library, and two big living rooms with a double door between. All empty. But there was one more room off the main hall, and that, I found with a quick intake of breath, was locked.

I took out a knife to see if I could force the lock, then plunged it back into my pocket and turned.

Coming down the stairs was the housekeeper.

For a moment I was rigid with alarm. I had no right to search the house this way. I felt that there were dark secrets here for which some one might murder to

keep hidden. If the woman screamed . . .

But she didn't. She gasped with relief and said, "Oh, it's you. I heard a sound and was afraid . . ."

She didn't finish the sentence. She had a thin robe over her comely shoulders. As far as I could see, there was nothing under it. She was too agitated to realize that it hung open loosely in front.

"What's the matter? Why are you down here?"

I shrugged. "No important reason. I can't get to sleep. I wanted a cigarette, and found I was out of them. I came down to look for some."

"There are cigarettes in the library."

She turned and went toward the library door. I saw a gauze strip, a thin bandage, between her breasts, where I'd seen the thin gash as she lay in the basement. She snapped on a dim light and wordlessly pointed to a silver cigarette casket.

**S**HE took one too. I lit it for her, and sat down beside her on a broad divan. Here, perhaps, was a chance to get some information.

"You're pretty brave," I said, "to come downstairs alone to investigate a noise after what—happened to you."

Her hand went to the bandage, and her face whitened. She shivered in the thin robe.

"I thought the noise was made by a human being. And it is not human beings that I fear in this house."

I watched her sharply and said, "You thought the noise was made, perhaps, by—Stella Corse?"

She only looked surprised. "Made by a dead person? Oh, no."

It was hard to get out any words about it, but I forced myself to say: "It's odd that Stella died so soon after marrying Mr. Corse. Tell me—why do you think she married him? He isn't a well man."

"I think maybe that's the reason. She may have pitied him. Many marriages are

made for that reason. You must know that."

"Did she seem contented here?"

"Oh, yes."

That hurt. I said brusquely, "She wasn't bothered by the—whatever it was—that attacked you in the basement?"

Her fingers touched the bandage again. Her dark eyes peered fearfully into mine.

"I . . . I can't answer that," she gasped. "Oh, you must leave here! Get out the first thing in the morning. There is nothing for you here—with *her* gone. Nothing but death. Death on silent white wings."

"What's all this talk of the dead scourging the living who have sinned?" I persisted.

In answer, she got up and put out her cigarette.

"I can't say any more. You had better go to your room at once. And lock the door—tight!"

She stepped into the dark hall. I heard her soft footsteps as she went up the stairs. I stayed in the library for five minutes, and then went into the hall myself. But not to the stairs. I went back to that locked door.

I managed to shoot the simple catch with the blade of my knife, and stepped into blackness. I stood inside the doorway a few minutes and then began to see, a little.

I saw, dimly, many glistening cases standing around the walls, a table in the center, the vague oblongs of two shaded windows. Then I tensed suddenly as I saw a shadowy white shape standing between the windows.

I stood there with perspiration standing in clammy drops on my forehead, for the misty, wraithlike patch against the dark wall was all too much like the three shapes I had seen slowly drifting up the cliff path ahead of me. But it didn't move, and summoning all my courage I stepped slowly toward it to investigate.

I stopped. From behind me had sounded

a small noise. I stood with beating heart. The noise sounded a little like the faint swish of flowing draperies. At the same time, I seemed to feel a slight coldness behind me.

For a long moment I stood there. Then I turned—and a hoarse yell came from my lips. Behind me was another tall, dim white shape. But this one was *not* still. It was moving. It was coming, *floating*, toward me, with misty things like arms outstretched.

I tried to move, and couldn't. I got my head around enough to see a white shape looming slowly behind me, from the direction of the windows. I heard my breath rasp from terror-tortured lungs. Then the *thing* I had first heard was near enough for me to feel a sort of clammy cold mist touching my flesh.

I tried to crouch, tried to leap. But something crashed down on my skull and I sank into blackness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Cleansing Flame

I CAME back to consciousness knowing, somehow, that I was in the basement of the house. Perhaps it was the feel of dampness, the sensation of the cold concrete on which I lay. It was very dark.

I could barely see my hand as a dim blotch when I held it before my face. I touched my head, which was throbbing unendurably. What had struck me in the upstairs room where I had seen the ghostly white shapes?

Now, sound began to penetrate my consciousness. It was a soft murmuring, unlike anything I had ever heard before. It kept on, varying, now in one note, now in two or three, for all the world like an eerie conversation heard from afar.

The noise stopped. I got unsteadily to my feet. At first I could see nothing but the blackness around me. Then I saw one relieving spot of light, and started for it. The light came from a keyhole. I sank to

my knees and looked through the tiny space.

I was looking into another basement room. I saw bare stone wall, illuminated faintly by a bluish light. I saw the end of a table, or slab of some kind. I saw two dainty bare feet at the end of the slab, like things carved in snowy marble. I gasped at that, and the last shreds of fog fled from my dazed brain.

The shock of what I saw on the slab when my vision had cleared is with me yet.

On the black-draped slab as on a funeral bier, was a lovely white body. It was the form of a nude woman, with hands crossed on the breasts. So beautiful she seemed, and so peaceful, that you would think she was only sleeping there. But then I saw the throat and face, and knew differently.

The face was that of Stella Leigh! And the throat was almost covered over by one great bruise. It had been heavily powdered, but the bruise showed through it: the bruise of a broken neck. I closed my eyes for one shattered moment, then opened them again as I heard movement in the room.

Two figures came into my range of vision. One was Fred Corse, with his feverish eyes glittering like black diamonds. The other figure was robed all in black; veiled by a garment like a priest's cape. Over the face was a black hood, like that of an executioner.

Watching impotently through the keyhole, I saw Fred kneel beside the nude, alabaster body. His attitude was worshipful, but there was avid hell in his dark eyes.

Words came from under the black hood of the figure robed like a priest of Satan.

"Death, beautiful death! Death is not ugly. It is lovely, as this corpse is lovely. And it is not the end. From it springs life—the life of the soul."

I saw Fred's pallid lips move in answer.

"Prove to me just once more. I must be sure."

"It shall be proved once more, with this girl," the black-robed figure replied. The words, musical, liquid, were almost in a whisper; but they carried plainly to me.

"The soul is ever-living. Freed of its flesh, it becomes immortal, taking on pure substance and going where it pleases. It becomes heaven's scourge for wrong-doers. Each becomes a winged thing, as you have seen before, as you shall see again . . . Stroke the dead flesh, that it may release its spirit."

Corse rose from his knees. I could barely see him in the ghastly blue light. But I could see his eyes plainly enough, glittering, hard. His hands went out.

Slowly, lingeringly, they passed over the white, white body of the girl I had loved, halting on the graceful fulnesses, dipping to the soft hollows.

It was more than I could stand. I jumped to my feet, raving at Corse. I shook the door, bruising and gashing my knuckles as I pounded against the massive panels.

I HEARD all words cease abruptly in the next room. Then I heard something that even in that moment could stop my wild raving.

A renewal of the eerie, soft murmuring like the talk of strange beings far away. With this was a sound as of many soft forms moving, with gently swishing draperies, in the blackness around me. And in that blackness I barely saw looming white shapes slowly appearing and nearing me.

I screamed and tried to run, blindly, anywhere. As if it had been a signal, they were on me. The air was filled with the wraithlike whiteness, like mist patches floating around me. I felt as if a hundred whiplashes tore at me in the darkness, and the soft, hideous pressure of the white shapes crowding in almost suffocated me.

God, the feel of those things! Cold, dank, with floating garments that were like the touch of hideous membranes!

Again and again I screamed as I lashed out at the floating shapes. And sometimes

my screams were muffled, as one of the *things* smothered my face, and sometimes they ripped clear like the screams of a damned soul as I clawed the wraithlike shapes off of me.

I was on my knees, now, fainting, gashed in a hundred places as if by talonlike claws. I wavered on the threshold of death in the subterranean room. I knew that with a terrible certainty. I could feel the hot blood dripping from my face, as it had dripped from the rain-soaked body of the girl in the ruined church.

The Dead Ones, returning . . . Spirits of the dead, scourging those who sinned . . .

Reason returned to me for one brief instant. There was only one way out of this pit of white death. That was through the bolted door into the next room where Corse and the black-robed figure were. Just that one way out.

I was still near the door. I lay on my side, with my arms over my face to shield it from the horrible, softly murmuring white shades that pressed upon me.

"They've got me!" I yelled toward the door. "*They've—got—me—*"

I scratched at the door with bleeding fingernails, then was utterly still.

Over me, the white wraiths floated, and the agonizing torture of razorlike gashes continued. Every nerve in my body was writhing in pain and revulsion, but I managed to lie as motionless as a dead man.

And the ruse worked.

I heard bolts shoot back, heard the door open. Under my right arm I could see the doorway. Corse stood there, dimly to be seen in the weird light that trickled in from the other room. His eyes were stark mad, his body rigid with weird ecstasy.

"The scourging spirits have him—sinner that he is! The white souls are flaying him. I shall watch him die!"

The black-clad figure appeared behind him, and tugged at his arm.

"No, no! Come out of there!" it said. And the voice was not quite so musical

now. It was harsh and filled with fear.

"The spirits will not harm *me*," Corse said. "See how they rend him—"

I sprang then. I saw the unholy lust in his eyes turn to amazement and then to fear. I saw the black-robed figure try to shut the door in my face. Then I was on the threshold with Corse's throat between my slashed hands.

Horror and loss of blood had weakened me. But the weakness, for the moment, was more than compensated for by an insane rage. The figure in black clawed at me. Corse battered my face. But I held on.

**T**HEN I saw something over Corse's shoulder, something that slowly weakened my grip as nothing else had done.

I was staring unseeingly at the bier on which was the milk-white body of Stella. It just happened that my gaze rested there, unwittingly, as I tilted my head to escape Corse's desperate blows. And I saw something white stir . . .

Stella's body? For one crazy instant I thought that. But it was not. The thing that stirred was something else, something that turned my fingers into nerveless sticks from whose clutch Corse was tearing himself free unheeded.

It was one of the dreadful, wraithlike shapes. *And it was rising slowly from the body of the girl itself.*

"Death is lovely, as this corpse is lovely. And it is not the end. From it springs life—the life of the soul."

The black-robed figure had said that. My God, had the spirit of Stella Leigh materialized before my eyes, coming from the white, dead body as a butterfly comes from a cocoon? I was blind to the other white wraiths looming around me again; and was numbed to their slashing attacks. I could see only the one white *thing* which had come from the body of a dead woman. I heard a roaring in my ears, felt my knees give under me.

The white shape floated toward me with

misty arms outstretched. And the face was that of Stella, with a demon's smile on the full lips, and the outstretched hands were tipped with cruel, avid talons.

I went mad.

I know now what is meant by insanity. I have been insane myself. It is a state where you laugh when normally you'd scream with horror. It is a state in which you have a strength beyond bone and muscle, and a quickness that makes lightning seem sluggish.

Corse was staggering toward me with a club in his hands. The black-robed figure had a knife that was rising to sink into my flesh.

Laughing, I hit Corse before the club could descend in his unsteady hand. Laughing, I got the club and struck down with it, on his head, as hard as I could.

I felt the sting of a knife-graze on my side and then turned to grab at the black-robed figure.

Even in the midst of my lunacy, and in spite of the odd shock of feeling a woman's voluptuous breasts under the black priest's robe, I heard the roaring from above grow louder and knew that it was actual and not just within my own skull.

And then a man screamed, above: "The people from the village! Every mother's son of them! Axes . . . guns . . . *Corse!*

*Mary.* Get away through the tun—"

The voice was stilled with terrible suddenness. I whirled the black-robed body from me. It fell to the floor and the hood came off. The face of the housekeeper glared at me. It was the face of a she-devil, with murder in her black eyes.

I could hear the smashing of glass upstairs, and something else far more frightening: a roaring crackle that I knew was fire, well advanced.

I RAN through the basement and up the stairs. In the hall was Doctor Jeanne and another man, on the floor. Jeanne was dead, with glazing eyes open. The handle of a knife protruded from his chest. The other man, elderly, was writhing in blood on the floor.

I recognized the bushy eyebrows and down-curving nose. It was the man I had twice seen peering into the glass of the back door. Furthermore—it was the father of the girl who had been attacked in the old church.

He glared at me with a hatred that faded when he saw the streaming wounds on my face and throat.

"So . . ." he gasped. "You are not one of them. I thought . . ."

He coughed blood and lay back. I bent over him.



"Tunnel from basement," he panted. "Go out that . . . safe . . ."

Red was glaring through the dawn-blackness of the hall. I heard the flames roar more loudly from a dozen spots in which the old house had been set afire. At the smashed windows and the open doors I saw the faces of men whose eyes were wide with idiot hatred. The faces of the villagers, scourged beyond endurance by some inexplicable thing emanating from this house and now rebelling by burning the house and all in it. Impossible to escape through door or window. The men would not permit that.

"Tunnel . . ." the old man gasped again. "In the coal bin . . . Take the girl that way . . ."

"But the girl is dead!" I cried wildly.

"No . . . take her . . ." He choked, and was still.

There was a crash as the back door burst down and men ran in. I got to the basement stairs ahead of them, and raced down. They didn't follow. They must have been satisfied that I was running down only to death in the flames when the building collapsed over me.

I got to the room where the white wraiths wheeled, and where Corse lay with his head battered in. I got there just in time. The woman in black was on her feet. She was bending over Stella's body with her knife in her hand.

I caught her white wrist on the up stroke, as the blade was poised to plunge down into Stella's white breast. Then I hit her—hard. She wasn't a woman—she was simply an incarnation of evil.

I gathered Stella's body in my arms and raced for the coal bin.

So cleverly was it concealed that I'd never have found it if I hadn't been told where to look. But in a moment I did find it—a black hole in the floor uncovered by pushing aside a mound of coal and raising a trapdoor.

There was a staggering trip down a dark

passage with a white body in my arms that somehow, incredibly, seemed warm. Then I was out in the rain, with the blazing house a hundred yards behind me. Dancing, maniac figures showed black against the red glare. But none of them looked our way; probably could not have seen us in the night if they had.

On legs that felt dead under me, I tottered to the road. A car seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was filled with men. One of them, with a sheriff's badge on his coat, got out.

That was all I knew.

**I**T WAS the old man who had told me of the tunnel, who rounded out the dreadful story. He didn't die till hours later, in the operating room of the Bogenville Hospital, after being dragged by friends from the burning house.

He knew of the tunnel, built in Civil War days, that led into the Corse basement. Not as ignorant as the rest of the villagers, he pretended to be as frightened of the "scourging spirits of the Dead Ones" as the others; but all the while he was entering that house secretly and piecing together the chronicle of crime and horror it contained.

Doctor Jeanne was behind it. A biologist as well as a physician, he had developed, by selective breeding, albino vampire bats of the gigantic South American species. Things that had better than a five foot wing-spread and, seen in darkness, appeared to tower like white-draped wraiths as they floated near the ceiling of an unlit room.

Jeanne heard about Corse and his unbalanced belief in the occult and in embodied spirits of the dead returning. He got his great white bats into the house secretly and showed them to Corse in a dim room with suitable mumbo-jumbo. Corse saw "materialized spirits" and was almost in a state of mind to do anything Jeanne wanted. Almost—but not quite!



Jeanne wanted Corse to make a will leaving everything to him. And Corse demurred.

Stella Leigh dropped by to make a duty call. Jeanne recognized in her the inspiration for the little wraith in stone, in the hall niche. It looked like Jeanne's chance. If he could show Corse the materialized spirit of *this* girl, after death, the will was as good as drawn up. Then Corse could die and the family fortune would go to the doctor.

Jeanne drugged Stella while she went through a wedding ceremony with Fred. Then he doped her into unconsciousness, painted a deep bruise over her throat, and told Corse she'd died of a fall over the cliff. From the draped bier on which Stella lay, one of the great bats was to flutter up, convincing Corse that he had seen her soul take wing.

Then I got there. Corse's telegram had drawn me instead of keeping me away. Jeanne and the housekeeper—who was his sister—had tried to scare me off by faking an attack on her of the "scourging souls." Instead of leaving, I tried to investigate. Jeanne it was who knocked me on the head and left me in the room of the bats, to die there.

White souls—great white bats looming high in darkness with their tremendous wing-spread, their ghostlike fluttering. . . .

But sometimes the bats got loose. Unafraid of men because reared by one, they attacked the villagers—who saw in the wraithlike shapes whatever they wished to see, as I had thought to see talons and the face of Stella in the white form that had fluttered from under her bier. At last the people had risen and destroyed the place from which they knew terror came, even though they did not know the nature of that terror . . .

"There isn't much left for you to take over except fire-charred ruins, darling," I told Stella, when she had recovered from her fantastic experience.

"Much for *me* to take over?" she repeated, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"You were married to Corse for a few hours. You're his widow—you get his estate."

She shuddered. "I never want to touch anything associated with that name!"

"There are other properties beside the house," I said, not looking at her. "A quarry, farms, some timber lands, a fair coal mine.

She put her slim finger on my lips.

"We'll sell it all and give it to charity," she said. "I'd choke on a crust of bread from that place, and you know it."

I kissed her, with my heart in my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "I do know it. And—thank God for it!"

THE END