

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



The Triangle
of Terror

By
William F. Temple

I HAD written nearly three thousand words that day, and in the after-glow of self-satisfaction I decided that there was certainly something in his life of rural seclusion after all.

In Bloomsbury far too many people were acquainted with me and my address. They were "just dropping in" on me at all hours of the night and day with complete disregard for my work. In their assumption a writer was a person who never worked anyway; his stories were things he just dashed off in odd moments now and again, with no particular thought, as one dashes off letters.

After a string of nights on short rations of sleep, trying to recover some of the time thus stolen from me during the day, I dashed off myself, away from London and these vampires of my attention—my friends. I took care that none of them—none but Spencer, that is—should know my address until I was good and ready for them. And that meant when I had finished my novel.

It was safe to tell Spencer. He never saw any of my other friends. They avoided him because he was—odd. Eccentric. In his musty bed-sitting-room in Mecklenburgh Square he lived in a world of his own. You sensed the strangeness as soon as you stepped into the room, and it was certainly enhanced by his presence.

He was fattish—why, I don't know, for I never saw him eat anything—and, I believe, older than he looked. He looked in his early sixties. Trying to maintain a conversation with him was indeed trying. You felt that quite two-thirds of his attention was somewhere else all the time, and he only intermittently remembered that you were there.

And most of what he said to you he deliberately made cryptic. He had a tortuous mind that loved to puzzle and mystify. Many times I had remonstrated with him: "For God's sake, Spencer, speak straight-

forwardly and sensibly, will you! I can make more sense out of my income tax correspondence than I can out of you."

When you did make sense out of him, it was invariably worth the trouble. He had more odd knowledge tucked away inside his head than Ripley ever dreamed upon, and he was full of surprising little tit-bits that made me exclaim, "That gives me an idea for a story! . . ."

I made quite a lot of money out of Spencer in this way. Maybe that was why I looked upon him as my best friend.

In fact, the main reason that I elected to keep in touch with him from my lonely cottage among the gorse and pines of Surrey was because my novel dealt with medieval witchcraft and I anticipated difficulty over one or two chapters. I might need to dig in Spencer's fund of knowledge about such things. Also, he had the best library of books on the occult that I had ever come across. It was through a previous search for out-of-the-way information that I originally encountered him.

But about that evening when I was wandering alone across the Surrey heath so comfortably satisfied with the day's work—

IT WAS an evening in midsummer when the atmosphere was close and still, and the going of the sun had seemed to leave it more warm and oppressive than noon-day.

The air was a thick, almost liquid substance, from which your lungs were hard pressed to draw oxygen, almost as thick as the blood which pumped at your temples and made your head throb heavily. Head-ache weather, and you longed for a storm to come and break it up.

Somewhere this night there was a storm, for along the horizon the sheet lightning flickered and jumped and revealed silently weird-lit glimpses of an unsuspected cloud-land that lay out there in the darkness.

I don't know whether it is peculiar to me, but these strange tense evenings of summer always set my imagination working more actively than the chilly autumn and winter nights beloved of the gothically romantic poets.

Keats would begin "*In a drear-nighted December . . .*," and Poe's *Ulalume* would be carried to her tomb in "*the ghoul-baunted woodland of Weir*" on a "*night in the lonesome October*," and as for the same gentleman's Raven who quoth "Nevermore!"—"Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December" . . .

No, the winter was merely physically uncomfortable. A hot thundery night like this made me mentally uncomfortable. Uneasily, I sensed the imminence of—something. I felt the electric charge slowly but unrelentingly building itself up in the air about me, forming something unknown but black and inimical, growing both in power and in consciousness of its power, awaiting with evil excitement the hour of its unleashing.

Damn it, I thought, I have been thinking too much upon these things. This was the last novel I would write about the occult. The trouble with such an occupation was that the story becomes real to you as you write it, and you are disposed to picture warlocks and werewolves as things you might find in a dark corner of the coal-cellar at some unlucky moment. Especially when you have deliberately retired to solitude to "get into" your book.

The glow of my self-esteem had now died somewhere among these unhealthy thoughts. I had walked too far and become over-tired. The haven of my cottage seemed suddenly desirable, and I forced my heavy feet to quicken their lagging pace.

Here now was the pinewood, like a blot of India ink on the lesser darkness of the night. One hundred yards within it lay the cottage, but despite my impatience they were the slowest hundred yards I traversed that night. Charon himself would have tripped over something in the pitch-blackness of the wood. Nothing of the distant flickering of the lightning penetrated here.

I had literally to feel my way along the path.

THEN all of a sudden I stopped in surprise, my hand on the bole of a pine. Somewhere ahead of me glimmered a faint patch of light—green light.

As I watched it, it moved back and forth with a sort of dreadful deliberate slowness. Then it stood still, and as I peered at it I discovered a black cross, as it were, intersecting it. Abruptly the light disappeared, and left me with the realization that the black cross had been the silhouette of the center of the cottage window's frame.

Somebody—or something—was in the cottage. My heart started going like a two-stroke engine.

Then the human habit of rationalizing unaccountable things came to the fore. It had been a firefly or a jack-o'-lantern of marsh gas from the stagnant pond not far beyond the cottage. Or again—this was the sort of weather that generated those globes of ball lightning which sometimes pop down chimneys and float around inside rooms. Or maybe a tramp was searching either for a bed for the night or for the money for one. But—with a green light?

I waited a while, but there was no return of the phenomenon. I hoped that, whatever it was, it had gone away. Then I fumbled my way through the last few yards to the door and let myself in.

In the darkness within I lit a match and by its feeble light surveyed the room. The words "Is anybody there?" died in my mouth, for it was manifest that there was nobody.

I conveyed the flame to the oil lamp, and the room became bright and cheerful; the shelves of books still in their original colored dust jackets gladdened my eye, as the sight of them always did, and the model galleon, the vase of marigolds, the shining pewter tankards were all familiar and reassuring things.

Nevertheless, I poured myself a scotch and soda before I settled down in the arm-chair by the fireless hearth to read over and polish the thousands of words I had scribbled that day.

In the midst of my immersion in my own story of the burning of a particularly malignant witch, I suddenly noticed that the scalp muscles at the back of my head were taut and contracted and that my hair must be bristling. And I felt in my mind what my body must have been aware of for some time—that there was some creature behind me and watching me with no friendly regard.

Without seeming to divert my attention from my manuscript, I gazed up from under my brows at the mirror hanging above the fireplace. It showed the wall behind me empty, save for a framed water color of the Devil's Punchbowl at Hindhead, which was just as it should be.

With a relaxing of tenseness I returned to my work. But only for a few moments.

Some words I had written earlier in the story recurred to me: "*Vampires cast no reflection in mirrors.*"

A little cold tremor passed over me. Then a spasm of fear-inspired anger at my childish timidity. Good Lord, to give a moment's credence to that Dracula clap-trap! I swung round and positively glared behind me.

There were no fearful fiends treading close behind me. There was nothing that had not been there before.

"Fool!" I addressed myself bitterly, and began to turn slowly back. En route, as it were, my eye flickered past a brass warming pan hanging on the side wall, and then abruptly flicked back to it. For I had the impression of a dim and shapeless sort of face staring from its bright round surface. I sat and regarded it.

Yes, there was certainly the effect of a face. An immobile, dead sort of face like that of the Man in the Moon and scarcely better defined.

I GOT up to examine it, and it faded as I approached it, and quite disappeared when I got my nose within a yard of it, leaving just the empty surface of the pan. Yet when I sat back again in my chair, there it was once more: two round black holes of eyes, a beaky nose, a twisted gash of a mouth.

Along the top of the sideboard on the

opposite side of the room to it was an assemblage of objects of ornament and utility. Prominent among them were two ebony candlesticks, top-heavy things with round, bulbous sockets for the candles. It was plain to me that the eyes of the face were simply the reflection of these two black balls, the nose a partial and distorted reflection of a vase, and the mouth—probably a dent in the pan which caught and held a content of shadow at this particular angle.

I dismissed the matter, and returned again to my scribbled pages.

In a little while I came to a passage that I judged needed wholly re-writing, and I stared thoughtfully before me while I endeavored to cast it afresh in my mind.

Subconsciously at first, and then with a start of realization, I became cognizant that I was gazing straight at another face!

It was in the carving of one of the pillars of the fireplace. From the coils of raised stone ostensibly representing climbing vines, a demoniac little visage regarded me with sharp, slanting, spiteful eyes, a vulpine face, like that of a fox cornered and snarling. So alive and venomous did it seem that I instinctively moved back a little with confused ideas of defensive measures.

That slight movement was enough to make the illusion vanish. For it was an illusion, another trick of light. Yet though I experimented by changing my attitude in my chair, I could not get the effect to repeat itself. Indeed, I even became uncertain of the spot amid the intricacies of the carvings where it had seemed to appear.

Not very surely, I returned to my business. But it was a long while before I could put those two faces from my mind.

I HAD almost finished when that sickening feeling of being watched came over me again. For a little while I dared not raise my eyes from the papers that trembled in my hands. In my imagination it seemed to me that I was surrounded by a host of evil and silently threatening faces—that they leered and glowered not only from the dark corners but also from the bright surfaces of the things I had thought so homely

and reassuring when I had come in from the outer darkness.

With a sudden resolution to face them all and be damned to them, I looked up. I caught a fleeting impression of a huge face filling the whole wall of the empty alcove beside the fireplace, but the patches of discoloration from dampness that had apparently formed it seemed almost to shift apart in that instant and become wholly innocent and of no significance.

I threw my papers down and jumped up with an oath.

"What *is* this?" I demanded of myself. "Am I going mad? Or is something trying to drive me mad?"

I went determinedly round the room, gazing straightly at all its contents in turn, but I saw nothing in the least out of the ordinary. Then I stood in the middle of the hearthrug and debated upon my state of affairs.

Firstly, I had no further inclination to do any more work on my book tonight. I had had enough of pondering upon the sinister.

Secondly, I wished either that I had company or was in some less lonely spot in the countryside than I was. But outside the cottage was the wood, and outside the wood stretched the wide heath under the night sky—miles of black mystery between me and the nearest glow of humanity.

Thirdly, despite my day's unusual mental and physical effort, I no longer felt tired. Nor did the thought of bed lure me—I felt that if I did sleep now, bad dreams, if nothing worse, would come.

I decided that I would write some letters. Just to hold, as I wrote them, the mental image of some of those exuberant friends of mine in London (from whom I had fled!) would provide something of a sense of company. It would give me a link with that pleasant world of everyday from which I was so utterly cut off on this stifling, electrically ominous night.

The thought of letters caused me to wonder whether any had been delivered in the evening post while I had been out. I was already opening the little door of the letter cage when it occurred to me that I

had deliberately withheld my address from all but Spencer.

Nevertheless, I groped irrationally in the dark interior and felt a little thrill of pleasure when my fingers encountered a letter, the only one. I felt something else, too—a mild shock which made those fingers tingle a bit. It was almost as if the letter had contained an electrical charge. I put it down to the atmosphere.

The letter was from Spencer, as I might have guessed. It wasn't very helpful looked at from any point of view. He was in his most cryptic mood.

It was in neat type-script and began without any preamble. It was signed ("Yours faithfully") by Spencer, and that seemed to me almost the only comprehensible part of it. As for the rest—well, here it is, word for word, as I remember it.

"*ACLE.*

The composer, Robert Schumann, long heard voices and saw things that were not there. He went mad.

ANGLE.

As did, in like manner, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift.

AGRAM.

The poet, Shelley, was tormented all his life with dreams and visions. Once, in a waking vision, he encountered a figure shrouded in a dark cloak. It was—himself. On another occasion he heard a noise outside the country cottage where he was staying. He opened the door, and was struck unconscious by—something invisible.

AGERON.

When young, John Bunyan had 'fearful dreams and visions.' Pestilent spirits and devils appeared to him until he reached the age of seventeen. Then they disappeared for two years, during which time he gave himself up to every evil passion and led a corrupt life.

In 1651 his visions came again, and he said that he was hounded by the devil. He

swore that he sometimes 'felt the tempter pull my clothes' and sometimes the devil 'took the form of a bull, bush, or besom.'

All the demons in the *Pilgrim's Progress* came out of his memories of these experiences.

ALPHA.

William Blake, the poet and artist, had dreams and visions all his life. He left a record of not only how he saw the devil but also how he drew him. He wrote: 'I was going downstairs in the dark, when suddenly a light came streaming at my feet. I turned around, and there he was, looking fiercely at me through the iron grating of my staircase window. As he appeared, so I drew him.'

Blake's sketch showed a horrible phantom glaring through a grated window—with burning eyes, long teeth, and claws like talons.

William Blake went mad.

SO, my friend, remember while you are Pent up in your little cottage, to BEWARE of 'dreams and visions.'

NO, DECIDEDLY not a cheering communication. I cursed the man for his perverted sense of humor—if this was supposed to be humor—and his maddening obscurantism.

But it struck me as strange that the arrival of such an effort as this should coincide with a time at which I was seeing things.

I sat down and studied the typed sheet with a frown.

"ACLE, AGRAM, AGERON . . ." What gibberish words were these? What connection was there between them?

If I guessed Spencer's twisted mind right, there was some link. Quite possibly he had put a clue in the wording. He was always searching for some such crazy but deliberate clues in the writings of Shakespeare to indicate that the plays were actually written by Francis Bacon.

I went slowly through the wordage again. Why, I pondered, a capital "P" for "Pent"?

Wait a moment—Pent-ACLE, Pent-AGRAM . . . ?

I seized upon a volume of my encyclopedia, and sought what I soon found—this entry:

"PENTACLE, PENTANGLE, PENTAGRAM, PENTAGERON, or PENT-ALPHA.

"These various names all belong to the design of a 5-pointed star, composed of 5 straight lines, which may be formed complete without severance of the tracing medium from the recording medium, i.e., it may be drawn without the pen being lifted from the paper, for the tip of the pen returns to its starting point. Possibly for some such oddity as this the sign has long been used as a mystic symbol, first by the Pythagoreans and later by the astrologers and necromancers of the Middle Ages. It is found frequently in early ornamental art, and is still sometimes used, in superstitious regions of the world, on doorways to keep away witches and evil spirits."

There followed representations of the Pentacle, etc., and "The Hexagram—two interlaced equilateral triangles—with which it is often confused."

While I had the "P" volume in my hand, I thought I might as well look up Pythagoras, of whom I knew nothing except that he had been a Greek philosopher with a theorem.

His time, it appeared, was the sixth century B.C., and he travelled around quite a lot, passing through Egypt among other places, and went to Italy in 529 B.C. and founded there a religious brotherhood for the reformation of mankind, through practising certain rites. Reaction against him began in his life-time and reached a head in the middle of the fifth century B.C. His movement was violently trampled out, meeting houses of Pythagoreans were everywhere sacked and burned and Pythagoreans persecuted and slain.

Well, all that was fairly interesting, I supposed, but I still didn't see any point to the letter. Yet there was still the coincidence of its arrival and my fit of the willies.

I lay back in my chair with half-closed eyes, pondering on the dreams and visions of the illustrious people Spencer had listed. I was a writer of sorts—an artist in my own particular line, I prided myself—but I had no illusions about my name living any longer than I did. A hundred years hence no one would be the slightest bit interested to learn that I had died in a mad-house or had regular bouts of *delirium tremens*.

For some time my mind dwelt upon the ephemerality of the second-rate writer's little fame, and then began to work in its usual way of putting two ideas together and fashioning from them something fresh. The slow shaping of a new story about a brilliant writer who went mad at the height of his fame went on in my imagination. I was lost in it.

Detachedly I became aware that the illumination of the room appeared to be slowly changing in its quality. The normal yellowy-white light of the oil lamp was taking on a faint tinge of green. I was still deep in abstraction, and paid little heed to it at first, but presently it became so pronounced that I took an absent-minded look at the lamp. It was very low. I remembered in a vague sort of way that I had forgotten to get any more paraffin. The greenish light was coming from somewhere on my left, where the window was, and I thought it was some queer effect of the moonlight shining in. I glanced over at the window, and my heart gave a bound that I thought had displaced it. A sort of silent screaming horror held me paralyzed.

The window was a square of greenly translucent light, as though it were the side of an artificially illuminated aquarium, and glaring through it at me was William Blake's nightmare vision of the devil.

The eyes burned into mine, the fangs were revealed in a tiger's grin—the whole effect was that of a monster aflame with sadistic appetite measuring its distance for a pounce at my throat.

I'm afraid I fainted. It's a weakness no man likes to admit to, but it does happen. It happened to me, and I'm very thankful it did.

When I came to, the oil lamp was but

a mere glimmer, reflected like a star in the black opacity of the window before me. For there was no trace left of my frightful visitant. The night outside was as dark as a cavern deep in the earth, and no shape of anything, not even the adjacent pines, could be discerned.

I got up, shaking like an ancient car, and had to lean on the table for a few moments while I cured my knees of their curious tendency to give. Then in a trembling but swift manner I became urgent with action.

First, I slammed home the bolts of the door. I didn't now why the thing hadn't come in after me that way, but I wasn't going to give it the advantage of any second thoughts.

THEN I pulled the thick curtain over the window, I was afraid to go near the window to do this; I might suddenly find myself literally face to face with the thing, and I didn't think my heart would stand it. So I hooked the curtain over with the end of a broomstick, and I was holding myself well away from the other end of it.

Then I laid the poker on the table ready for emergencies. It was a comfortably heavy length of iron.

And then I had a couple of neat whiskies.

There was nothing I could do about the lamp. There wasn't any more oil and I wasn't going out to search for any at this time of night. The very thought of feeling about among the unseen trees out there again made me shudder. I found a stub of candle and lit it, but it wasn't going to last long.

So I built a huge fire. On that sultry summer night I had a blaze going that near melted me. But I didn't mind feeling warm so long as I could feel more secure. And bright firelight was a sight better than absolute darkness.

I sat close by the fire, streaming with sweat, my poker at hand, and I resolved not to let that light fail nor myself sleep until dawn and the blessed daylight came.

My eye fell on Spencer's letter on the table. I had had enough of that sort of thing. I reached over and grabbed it, and was about to drop it into the fire when I

noticed for the first time a diagram traced on the back of it.

It was a pentagram, executed with extremely neat draughtmanship in very thin lines of what appeared to be green ink.

As I studied it, it seemed to stand out from the paper as though it were embossed. And then the paper appeared to fade away from around it, leaving the pentagram like a green wire frame. And the wire began to glow until the center of my vision was nothing but a blankness in which the pentagram glowed like a green neon sign, which grew bigger and bigger.

The friendly firelight was being blotted out. And now there were faces, *faces*, grinning and leering faces pressing all about me, an increasing crowd, and a green light brightening and glowing over everything.

The last dwindling remnant of my will just managed to snap the spell, like the wrench with which one sometimes breaks out of the hypnosis of a nightmare. And in that snap, the horrors vanished, and there I was sitting in the firelight with just an ordinary piece of paper in my hand.

But not for long. In a spasm of fear and rage I screwed it into a ball and threw it into the heart of the fire. There was a brief spurt of green flame. It might have been a pinch of some chemical in one of the logs.

I stayed awake all night, but I was not troubled further by visions.

IN THE morning, I packed my things and fled back to London. Dear old dirty—but safe—Bloomsbury, with the shabby temple of the British Museum, and the little streets full of foreign dining-rooms and bookshops, and the captive trees in the grimy squares!

As soon as I had got resettled in my apartment, I marched round to Mecklenburgh Square to demand of Spencer what the hell?

Though callers for him were few and far between, he had fitted a Yale lock to the door of his big bed-sitting-room at the top of the gray house, and he kept the door shut and himself on the other side of it. But he had long trusted me with a key.

I got no answer when I knocked, so I let myself in.

There was his desk in the far corner, littered with books and papers as usual, and there was his old-fashioned wing armchair, in which he spent more time asleep than in his bed, but there was no sign of him.

Of course, he might be doing some research in the Museum Reading Room. On the other hand he might be out eating in one of the neighboring cafés. I presumed he did eat sometimes, though I had never seen him at it. But those were the only reasons that I could imagine would ever take him out of this room.

He took no exercise and had no use for fresh air. How he managed to find the oxygen to breathe in this place I could never understand. The door and window were always shut. I walked over to and had a struggle with the window, but it was quite immovable; through years of neglect, window and frame had amalgamated.

I sat myself in his armchair glancing idly about the room. Every available wall space, from floor to ceiling, was taken up with laden bookshelves—the famous library on the black art, demonology, spiritualism, and every aspect of the supernatural. There was his large double bed in the corner, unmade as always, its tangled clothes draping down on the carpet. The stained old coffee pot stood on the hearth, and there were cigarette stubs thrown anywhere about the floor.

Standing like a rock in the sea of documents, letters, files, clippings, pamphlets and allied paper matter which flowed over the desk was Spencer's typewriter. There was a sheet of paper in it half filled with typescript. Curious to learn what Spencer was working on now, I got up and had a look at it.

I found it was page four of a letter obviously addressed to me, so I looked on the desk for the previous sheets and found them. As far as the letter went, I read it with absorption:

"Dear Bill,

"I suppose when this reaches you, you will be cursing me for a sleepless night. Probably you will have found the immediate

cause of it. If not, this letter will enlighten you, so that you can destroy the said cause and sleep the sleep of the innocent.

"Consider the humble pentagram. It's become a jolly little figure of fun now—good luck, and all that sort of thing. You might get it in the form of a lucky charm from a Christmas cracker or see a dozen of it representing stars in the illustrations to children's fairy story books.

"Business men who like playing at secret societies (which are also good for business) use it for a secret recognition symbol between one member and another. They copied that trick from the Pythagoreans. But the Pythagoreans were alive to the dread secret they shared, and which they kept from the ordinary people. Yet even these philosopher-geometricians were a bit astray upon one point.

"Because they traced manifestations to the presence of a pentagram of a certain size and shape, they thought that the secret lay in that certain size and shape. And certainly the same effects were brought about through using exact duplicates of that original pentagram.

"But the whole secret really lies in just one triangle of that figure. The surface size is irrelevant, and the rest of the pentagram frame redundant. It's the *angles* of that one triangle which are important. Fashion a triangle with its three angles of sizes I could give you (though an error amounting to a second will suffice to make it impotent) and you will have a triangle of terror indeed.

"I'll tell you that one angle is $36^{\circ} 47' 29''$ if you want to play games with trial and error. When you hit upon the right one and leave it about, you'll start seeing things sooner or later. But your chances are small. It is not an isosceles triangle, but a scalene. The original pentagram was a very rough effort, far from symmetrical, and only by a fluke did it contain this dangerous triangle.

"How did I discover all this? It began with my investigation of the haunting of a cottage in Norfolk. I connected the phenomena with a small glass prism which had been lying about the place (the former

occupant was a spectroscopist—until he went mad and was put away). On a couple of occasions when the spooks were about to appear, I noticed that this prism took on a palely translucent quality of green. Proceeding according to scientific method, I found that the cottage was not haunted if the prism was taken away from it. But the vicinity of the prism was, wherever one took it. I had a rather unpleasant time discovering that—I must tell you about it sometime.

"UNFORTUNATELY, I dropped the prism one day and broke a corner off. And it was never the same again. It became just another piece of glass. But I had taken exact measurements of it, and I kept them.

"Years later, I traced, by exhaustive trial and error, the cause of another haunting—in a residential house on Putney Common—to the presence of (of all things!) a paper-fastener. A triangular one. I took careful measurements of this, and compared them with the dimensions of that remembered prism. I knew I had hit upon something when I found that its angles—though not the area enclosed by them—corresponded absolutely exactly with the angles of one of the (naturally) triangular ends of the prism, the end I had broken.

"I'm afraid I didn't keep my evidence long. I was so troubled by 'dreams and visions' as long as it was in my possession that I was finally driven to bending it out of shape. That made it harmless. A simple little action like that.

"But I found plenty of confirmatory evidence. That haunted riverside bungalow at Teddington: I removed and destroyed one of those common triangular shelf brackets, and got the credit for exorcising the spirits! Do you know why Burlham Rectory is still known as 'the most haunted house in Britain'? Because I couldn't get permission to attack a beam completing a triangle of one of the gables!

"I tell you, you've only got to look around any of these 'haunted' houses, and know what you're looking for, and you'll find the cause of the trouble sooner or later. It may be a fortuitous triangle of scratches on the

wall, a coat-hanger, or even the side of a pepper-pot! But it's always there.

"When I was making researches into the history of the Pythagoreans, I found the secret was known to them centuries before the time of Christ, only they mistook the pentagram for the cause and not just the triangle contained therein. They used to practice the rites of raising these unpleasant apparitions, and then conquering them by destroying the sign. They felt purified by the struggle with evil and uplifted by the symbolic victory over it. I'm not sure, though, that they always had the victory . . .

"Naturally, they kept these dark secrets from common men, but the people gradually got wind of it, feared and hated them as sorcerers and tried to expunge them. The persecution reached its height in the middle of the 5th century B.C.; everywhere the meeting houses of the Pythagoreans were burned down and any Pythagoreans found there slain.

"You're probably wondering why a particular kind of triangle should cause such phenomena, anyway. So am I. I'm still investigating.

"My own theory at the moment goes like this: Firstly, these devils and demons which appear have no material existence, and, in fact, no existence at all—*outside your own mind!* They exist in our unconscious mind, memories we are born with, handed down from our most primitive ancestors.

"Do you remember when you were a child, alone in your own bedroom, trying to sleep, those uneasy times when you imagined you saw faces—nasty, glare-eyed, frightening faces—in the darkness of your room? And when you shut your eyes to escape them, there they were behind your eyelids, clearer than ever? They are the things our terror dreams are built upon.

"Children see them more than we do, for the imagination is so much more active in childhood. In adults it gradually grows moribund and we become creatures of habit. But very sensitive and imaginative people, who live more in their unconscious mind than their conscious one, the introverts, still see them.

"Very sensitive and imaginative people,

I repeat—like artists, poets, composers . . . like Blake, Shelley, Schumann. You begin to get the idea? *'The music-makers—and the dreamers of dreams.'*

"Far more strongly than extroverted, materialistic people—I can't imagine those business men having much trouble with their pentagrams, even if by a remote chance they hit upon a Pythagorean one—they react to this touchstone of a triangle. It acts as a sort of gateway through which seep ever more strongly the images and thought-waves of the unconscious, until they flood over and submerge the conscious mind altogether. And when that happens to a man we say he is mad. The conscious mind weighs and judges, it is our critical faculty, it keeps us in balanced relation to the material world. But when it is gone, we are helpless. We will believe in anything that our unconscious mind believes in, for that wholly possesses us now.

"Why haven't all great men, like Beethoven, Shakespeare, da Vinci, gone mad? Why only a small proportion? I anticipate your questions. Well, simply because they never happened to come into juxtaposition with one of these triangles. But the ones I have listed, and many others that I have not, must have had that triangle somewhere about their houses. Or, quite conceivably, within their own physical body—a bone structure or vein formation or some such freak effect.

"It seems that physical vision of the triangle is not necessary. Extra-sensory perception is pretty firmly established, and I am inclined to believe that the design is perceived extra-sensorily if it is close at hand. It seems to exert an hypnotic effect on the subject's mind, but in just what manner is yet to be discovered. What are thought-waves, anyway, and may not they react only against certain designs, as a certain design of antennæ is needed to catch television waves? Come to that, what is imagination?

"It is because you are a writer and therefore have some amount of imagination that I sent you my little puzzle—and pentagram. It should have had some amusing results. However, I don't think they will have been

harmful—I had read your books and assessed the quality of your imagination, and I don't think you need fear the fate of the writers I have mentioned.

"After all, once you fully realize that these phantoms only emerge from your own mind, it should—"

THE letter ended there, in mid-sentence, which I thought a little odd.

This was the first I had heard of Spencer carrying out practical investigation of hauntings—any sort of action seemed so unlike him. Had he been called away to one now, I wondered?

If Spencer had judged the quality of my imagination solely from my books, he was at fault. I'm not nearly so matter-of-fact as the style of those books suggests. That style is a pose to cover up an almost morbid sensitivity. I may not be as highly-strung as were any of the writers Spencer had listed, but I certainly didn't think last night's results "amusing," and I shouldn't have liked to predict the outcome if I hadn't destroyed the pentagram in time.

No, when Spencer returned, he was going to find that in me he had reaped a whirlwind.

Meanwhile, I would give him another half-hour before I went and had lunch.

I sat down pondering upon the incredible revelations of the letter. Yet from my independent experience, I could not doubt the truth of them.

I wondered whether it was possible to cure cases of madness caused that way. There was a chance of—

At that moment I caught sight of something that sent an electric shock through me. The sole of a shoe, just under Spencer's large bed, partially hidden by the carelessly flung bedclothes. And this sole was balancing upright on its toe, a position impossible unless that shoe contained a human foot. There was somebody lying face-downwards under the bed.

I had to force myself to go over and investigate. It was Spencer, as I had feared, and he was dead. He had forced himself under the bed as far as his bulk would allow, and I had a strenuous time getting

him out—there was a sort of horrible ludicrousness about those efforts.

But when I saw his face I didn't think there was anything in the least funny about it. Both mouth and eyes were wide open. (Something about the countenance reminded me of the cast in the Pompeii Museum of the poor unfortunate who was suffocated in terror beneath the ashes of the eruption which buried his city.) And the irises of the eyes were turned slightly in and upwards like those of a man in an apoplectic fit. It was a ghastly effect.

And I knew he had been seeking refuge in a blinding animal fear from something which had literally scared the life out of him. Poor Spencer—what an impossible and ridiculous refuge he had flown to! What awful presence had unbalanced such a scholarly mind, broken such a firm character, made a tragic clown out of such a mature and wise man?

Of course, according to his own theory he would be very susceptible to these frightening visions from the unconscious, because he lived so largely in the recesses of his own mind and was usually more than semi-oblivious to his surroundings and his company.

Yes, his own discovery must have destroyed him.

And then I was struck by an appalling realization. This couldn't have happened without the imminent presence of that terrible triangle. It must still be somewhere about, in all probability somewhere in this room.

If I weren't careful . . . ! Panic thoughts chased about in my brain. I attempted to get a grip upon myself. I stood up. It was quite obvious what I must do—I must go straight away and inform the police.

Was that something moving over there by the door?

WHETHER it was or not, fear suddenly closed in upon my soul. I felt sick in the stomach, and my whole body began to tremble. A secondary reaction from last night's horror now joined forces with the shocks of these fresh discoveries. Images of the triangle I feared kept trying to shape

in my too lively imagination. I fought to keep it out of my mind.

"I must get out of here, I must get out of here," I was muttering to myself. I essayed a rather shaky step towards the door, and then stopped with an indrawn gasp as though a bucket of very cold water had been thrown over me.

Between the door and myself stood a tall, yet slightly hunched, creature out of the worst of my childhood nightmares. A mad drooling thing, with a face rotten with corruption, with dead blinkless eyes that seemed to be gazing past me and yet I knew that they were not: in reality, the thing's whole attention was upon me. But it was not an intelligent attention. It was the unthinking, unreflecting, but blindly eager attention of the slaving and snuffling village idiot who slowly and deliberately pulls the legs off a spider or takes a knife to a captive sparrow and works unimaginable cruelties upon it.

And this thing was after me.

Cold sweat broke out upon me.

My conscious mind was hammering away: "It isn't real. It isn't real. It won't hurt you. It's just your own imagination. You're becoming hypnotized. Break the spell. Look away."

I dragged my eyes from it, and my gaze fell full upon Spencer lying dead at my feet, on his back, his queer eyes seeming to strive to see his own forehead. With a sob, I stumbled across him, and gained the fireplace. I clung to the mantel-shelf, still keeping my gaze averted from the direction of the door.

The stained coffee pot on the hearth was—looking up at me. It had become a face, with a grotesque spout of a nose—it was one of the leering faces I had seen last night.

With a quite uncalculated action, like a reflex kick, I lifted it violently with the toe of my shoe and it went smashing into fragments against the farther wall.

That was an unexpected relief. In sudden hope I dared a glance towards the door.

But the slobbering, staring thing was as real and as potentially murderous as ever. It had advanced considerably towards me,

and now I could see details of it that I wished I could not. Its dead-white hands were reaching out ready to clutch and grip. It seemed inexorably sure of itself. And, adding to my terror, it moved with absolute soundlessness. If it breathed, I could not hear it. It approached me like an image from an old silent film, a moving shadow.

"It is a shadow," said one part of my mind. "Only a shadow that you are throwing."

And another voice was shouting, "The window! Escape by the window!"

And another voice was saying, "The window is jammed. You can't open it."

My mind was a roaring confusion of divided impulses, all overridden by the dominating rush of fear.

I knew that it was disintegrating. That my conscious mind was going to pieces under the strain, and when that salivating horror got me I should go screaming mad. As others had gone mad.

I made one last desperate effort to clear a space in that chaos in which to think connectedly.

The triangle. This was all happening through the medium of the triangle. I must find it. There was not a moment to lose. I must destroy it.

Quick, where—*what*—could it be?

Was it a bracket of that pipe rack? I tore it down and smashed it. But without looking, I knew that I was still pursued.

God, there were a thousand things in this room that might contain it!

I went through a brief fury of breaking every suspicious thing I could lay my hands upon, within my limited radius. But still I was forced to retreat, until I was pressing against the desk in the far corner from the door and, shaking like a paralytic, I could retreat no further.

I think I was beginning to scream voicelessly as I scabbled in mad desperation among the books and papers on the desk, my eyes literally bulging with anxiety in their baffled search for something triangular.

In one convulsive sweep I shot a whole heap of the clutter from the desk. It revealed the blotting pad that pile had cov-

ered. In the center of the blotting pad was a familiar outline in green ink. The pentagram.

I knew it was what I sought. I pounced on it like a wild animal and ripped it across. And ripped again. Then I turned around weakly with the pieces in my hand.

The thing which had almost had its fingers on my throat was gone.

I began to chuckle feebly, and kept tearing the blotting pad across and across again, tossing the small pieces in the air; they fluttered to the floor like a miniature stage snowstorm.

Like Wellington after Waterloo, I kept saying to myself: "A near run thing! A near run thing!"

And all because of the fact that when

old Spencer had drawn so carefully that representation of the pentagram he sent me, he had blotted it on his pad, and never noticed that he had left a perfect reproduction of those dangerous angles among his papers.

That was his undoing. I suppose. I suppose he *was* frightened to death.

The doctor diagnosed coronary thrombosis, and the coroner saw fit to agree with him. Sometimes these days I catch myself trying to agree with him, too. It is human to rationalize.

But I do know that I am never under any conditions, going to play about with any triangles that include one angle of $36^{\circ} 47' 29''$. In fact, I am allergic to triangles of any kind.