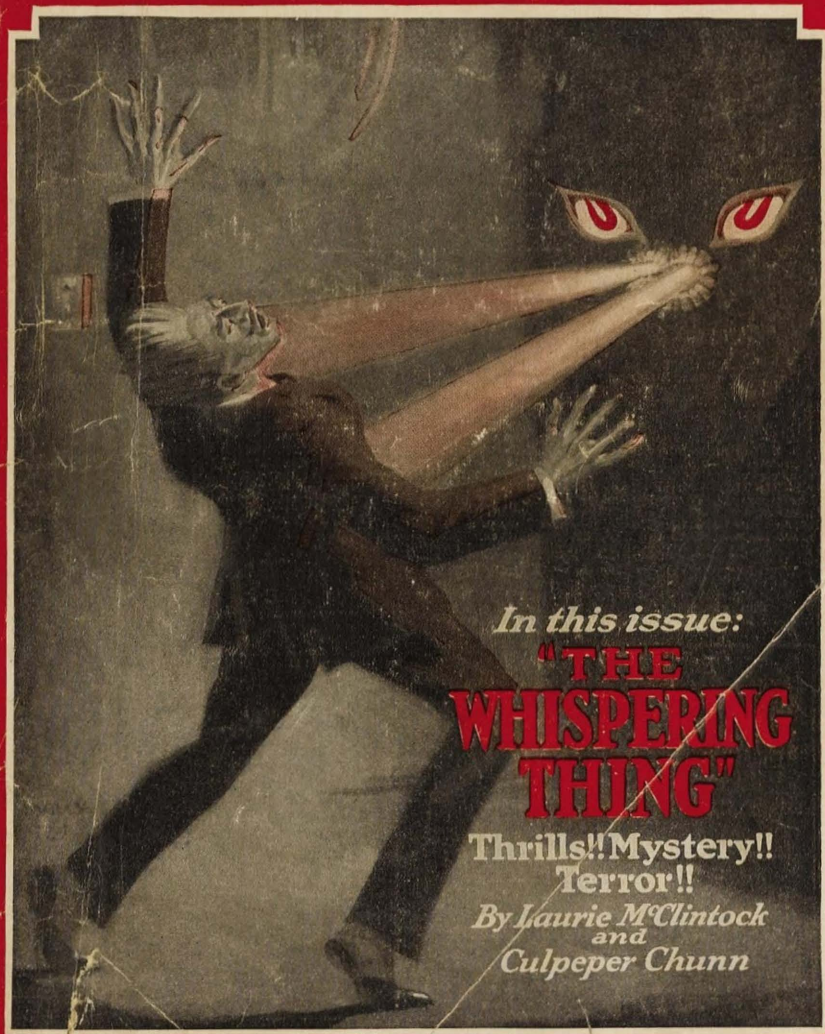


# WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1923 — 25c



*In this issue:*

## **"THE WHISPERING THING"**

**Thrills!! Mystery!!  
Terror!!**

*By Laurie McClintock  
and  
Culpeper Chunn*

# WEIRD TALES

## THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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# The WHISPERING THING

By Laurie McClintock and Culpeper Chunn

## CHAPTER I.

### THE THING STRIKES.

**J**ULES PERET, known to the underworld as The Terrible Frog, hated the foul air in crowded street cars and the "stiffness" of a taxicab, and, whenever possible, he avoided both.

Hence, having nothing in view that demanded haste, after leaving police headquarters, he had, in spite of the lateness of the hour, elected to make the journey home on foot. He had not gone very far, however, before he began to wish that he had chosen some other mode of traveling, for he had scarcely ever seen such a gloomy night. It was January, and the atmosphere was of that uncertain temperature that is best described as raw. The darkness was Stygian. A fine mist was falling from the starless skies, and a thick grayish-yellow fog enwrapped the city like a wet blanket.

The chimes in a church steeple, two blocks farther on, had just struck the hour of ten, and except for Peret and one other wayfarer, who had paused in the sickly glare of the corner lamp to light a cigarette, the street was deserted.

"A fine night for a murder!" muttered Peret to himself, as, with head lowered, he plowed his way through the fog. "*Diab!e!* I must find a taxi."

With this thought in mind, he was about to quicken his pace when, instead, he jerked himself to an abrupt halt and stood in an attitude of listening, as the tomblike silence was suddenly broken by a hoarse scream, and, almost immediately afterward, a cry of agony and terror:

"Help! help! I'm dying!"

The cry, though muffled, was loud enough to reach the alert ears of Peret. It appeared to come from a tall, gloomy-looking building on the right side of the street. By no means certain of this, however, Peret crouched behind a tree and strained his ears to catch the sound should it be repeated.

But no cry came. Instead, there was a terrific crash of breaking glass, and Peret twisted his head around just in time to see a man hurl himself through the leaded sash of one of the lower windows of the house and fall to the pavement with a thud and a groan.

A moment later Peret was by his side. Whipping out a small flashlight, he directed the little disc of light on the man's face.

"*Nom d'un nom!*" he cried. "It is M. Max Berjet. What is the matter, my friend? Are you drunk? Ill? *Sacre nom!* Speak quickly, while you can. What ails you?"

The man rolled from side to side, convulsively, and tore at the air with clawlike hands. To Peret, he seemed to be grappling with an invisible antagonist that was slowly crushing his life out. His face was blue and horribly distorted: his breath was coming in short, jerky gasps.

Suddenly his tensed muscles relaxed and he lay still. Unable to speak, he could only lift his eyes to Peret's in desperate appeal.

"*Dame!* You are a sick man, my friend," observed Peret, feeling the man's pulse. "I will run for a physician. But tell me quickly what happened to you, *Monsieur.*"

There was an almost imperceptible movement of the dying man's froth-rimmed lips, and Peret held his head nearer.

"Now, speak, my friend," he entreated. "I am Jules Peret. You know me, eh? Tell me what is the matter with you. Were you attacked?"

"*As-sas-sins,*" gasped the stricken man faintly.

"What?" cried Peret, excitedly. "Assassins?"

The look in Berjet's eyes was eloquent.

"Who are they?" pleaded the detective. "Tell me their names, *Monsieur,* before it is too late. I will avenge you. I promise you. I swear it. Quickly, *Monsieur,* their names—"

Berjet murmured something in a voice almost too faint to be audible.

"*Dix?*" questioned Peret, straining to catch the man's words. "You mean ten, eh?"

With his glazing eyes fixed on the detective, Berjet made a desperate effort to reply, but the effort was in vain. The ghost of a sigh escaped from his lips, a slight tremor shook his frame, and, with a gurgling sound in his throat, he died.

"*Peste!* What did he mean by that?" muttered Peret, getting to his feet. (*Dix* is the French word for "ten".) "Did he mean he was at-

tacked by ten assassins? The devil! It does not take an army to kill a single man."

"What's the matter, old chap?" It was the pedestrian whom Peret had observed lighting a cigarette near the corner lamp a few minutes previously. "The old boy looks as if he had had a shot of bootlegger's private stock."

"He has been murdered," returned Peret shortly, after giving the man a keen scrutiny. Then: "Be so kind as to run to the drug store across the street and ask the druggist to send for a physician. Also request him to notify police headquarters that a murder has been committed. Have the notification sent in the name of Jules Peret. Hurry, my friend!"

Without waiting to reply, the man spun on his heel and dashed across the street. Dropping to his knees again, Peret made a hasty but thorough search of the dead man's clothing, but beyond a few stray coins in the pockets of his trousers, found nothing. As he was finishing his examination, the stranger returned, accompanied by the druggist and a physician who had chanced to be in the drug store.

Peret rose to his feet and stopped back to make room for the doctor.

"What's the trouble?" asked Dr. Sprague, a large, swarthy-faced man with a gray Vandyke beard.

"Murder, I'm afraid," replied Peret, pointing at Berjet's motionless body.

Dr. Sprague bent over the inert form of the scientist and made a brief examination.

"Yes," he said gravely, "he is beyond human aid."

"He is dead?"

"Quite."

"Can you tell me what caused his death?"

"I cannot be positive," replied the physician, "but he bears all the outward symptoms of asphyxiation."

"Asphyxiation?" repeated Peret incredulously.

"Yes."

Peret's skepticism was written plainly on his face.

"But that is at variance with the dead man's last words. I was with M. Berjet when he died and there was certainly nothing in his actions to suggest asphyxiation. However—" He exhibited his card. "I am Jules Peret, a detective. The man that you have just pronounced dead is Max Berjet, the eminent French scientist. If he was murdered—and I have reason to believe that he was—the murderer has not yet had time to escape, as M. Berjet has been dead less than two minutes. It is possible, therefore, that I can apprehend the assassin if I act at once. Can you stay here with the body pending the arrival of the police?"

Dr. Sprague glanced at the detective's card and nodded, whereupon Peret, with a single bound, cleared the iron fence that inclosed the little yard in front of Berjet's house. As he lauded, feet first, on the lawn, he heard Dr. Sprague give a piercing scream.

So startled was he by the unexpectedness of it that he lost his footing and fell forward on his face. Leaping to his feet, he whirled around and directed the beam from his flashlight on the physician.

Dr. Sprague, with his hands clawing the air in front of him, appeared to be grappling with an invisible *something* that was rapidly getting the best of him. His lips were drawn back in a snarl; his eyes seemed as if they were about to pop from his head, and bloody froth had begun to ooze between his clenched teeth and run from the corners of his mouth.

As Peret was preparing to leap back over the fence, he heard a terrible scream issue from the throat of the unknown pedestrian, and saw him throw up his arms as if to ward off a blow. Then the man reeled back against the fence and began to struggle desperately with something that Peret could not see.

Whipping out his automatic, the detective again vaulted the fence, but before he could reach either of them, both Dr. Sprague and the pedestrian crashed to the pavement, the first dead, the second still fighting for his life.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

ALTHOUGH the moment was obviously one that demanded caution, Jules Peret was never the man to hesitate in the face of an unknown danger.

He realized that he was in the presence of some terrible invisible thing that might strike him down at any moment, but, as he had no idea what that thing was and could not hope to cope with it until it attacked him or in some manner made itself manifest, he dismissed it from his mind for the moment and turned his attention to the two men who had gone down before its onslaught.

Kneeling beside Dr. Sprague's prostrate form, he bent over and peered in the physician's face. One look at the horribly distorted features and the glassy eyes that stared into his own, told him that the man was dead.

Turning now from the dead to the living, Peret jumped to his feet and ran to help the pedestrian who, with the help of the terrified little druggist, was in the act of staggering to his feet. Although the druggist's teeth were chattering with fear, his first thought seemed to be for the sufferer, and he helped Peret support the man, too weak to stand unaided, when he reeled back against the fence.

Choking, gasping, spitting, the pedestrian fought manfully to regain his breath. His face was purple with congested blood, and his glazed eyes were bulging. Great beads of sweat poured from his forehead and mingling with the froth that oozed from between his lips, flecked his face as he

twisted his head from side to side in agony.

"What is the matter with you?" shouted Peret. "Speak! I want to help you."

The stricken man made a violent effort to throw off the invisible horror that had him in its clutches. Then the muscles of his body relaxed, and he ceased to struggle. Drawing in a deep breath of air, he expelled it with a sharp whistling sound. Then, exhausted, he shook off Peret's hand, and sank down on the pavement in a sitting posture.

"*Sacrebleu!*" yelled Peret. "Speak to me, my friend, so I can avenge you! One little word is all I ask. *What attacked you?*"

"I—I don't know," the man gasped. "It—It was something I could not see! It was a monster—an invisible monster. It whispered in my ear, and then it began to choke me. Oh, God—"

His head fell forward; he began to sob weakly.

"An invisible monster," repeated Peret, staring at the man curiously. "What do you mean by that?"

Before the man could reply, the police patrol-wagon swung around the corner and, with a clang of the bell, drew up to the curb. Detective Sergeant Strange of the homicide squad and two subordinates leaped to the sidewalk and approached the Frenchman.

"Well?" demanded Strange, with characteristic brevity.

"Murder," returned Peret, with equal conciseness, and nodded at the two bodies on the pavement.

"How!" Strange shot out.

"I don't know," replied Peret. "As I was passing the house ten minutes ago, Max Berjet, the man on your left, hurled himself through the window, cried out that he had been attacked by ten assassins, and died immediately afterward. After summoning a physician, I started to enter the house to investigate, and

heard the doctor scream. When I turned I saw Dr. Sprague and this man"—pointing to the pedestrian—"struggling in the grasp of something I could not see. Before I could reach them, the two men fell to the pavement. Dr. Sprague died almost instantly; this other man, as you see, is recovering. He has just informed me that he was attacked by an invisible monster."

Strange's bellicose features twisted into a grin.

"An invisible monster, eh? Well, it had better stay invisible if it's still sticking around." He whirled about, and to the patrolman: "I want all available men here on the jump, Bill. Call the coroner at the same time. O'Shane"—to one of the plainclothes men who accompanied him—"watch the front of that house and keep an eye on these bodies until the coroner comes. Mike, take care of the back of the house, and," he added with a grim humor, "keep your eye peeled for an 'invisible monster'."

Strange turned once more to the Frenchman.

"You're sure these two men are dead, Peret?"

"They will never be any deader," replied Peret shortly.

"All right—Who is that man?"—pointing over his shoulder at the druggist.

"I am the proprietor of the drug store across the street," spoke up the druggist. "I ran over with Dr. Sprague, who happened to be in the store when this gentleman summoned assistance."

Strange nodded.

"I may have to hold you as a witness," was his curt reply. "Stick around until I can find time to question you. Now Peret, before we enter the house, spill the details. What do you know about this 'invisible monster'?"

"Little more than I have already told you," answered Peret, and

launched into a detailed recital of his harrowing experience.

Although Detective Strange was a man difficult to surprise, he made no effort to conceal his astonishment when Peret brought his story to an end.

"You say Dr. Sprague and this other man were seized by the Thing when your back was turned?" he questioned.

"*Oui*; as I was leaping over the fence," nodded Peret, "I heard Dr. Sprague scream just as I landed on the ground. When I turned to see what was the matter, both he and the other man appeared to be struggling with some invisible antagonist. Before I could reach them, both men fell to the ground. Sprague was apparently dead before he fell. The other man, after a struggle, threw off the Thing—whatever it was or is."

"Didn't you see anything at all?" demanded Strange.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Hear anything?"

"No. But that man"—jerking his thumb at the pedestrian—"said he heard the Thing whisper."

"I also heard the Thing whisper," interposed the druggist, a small, bald-headed individual with a cataract over one of his eyes. Still in a state of nervous apprehension, he had edged up close to the two detectives as if seeking their protection. "I was talking to Dr. Sprague when he was attacked," he continued, darting furtive glances over his shoulder from time to time. "An instant before he screamed I heard a—a whispering sound."

Peret's eyes shone with interest.

"It's strange that I did not hear this sound," he muttered, half to himself. "Just what, exactly do you mean by a whispering sound. *Monsieur?*"

"I scarcely know," replied the druggist, after a moment's thought. "It was a whisper—nothing that I could understand. Just an inarticu-

late *whisper*. I had hardly heard it when Sprague screamed and began to struggle."

"Whence did the whisper emanate, *Monsieur?*" queried Peret eagerly.

"I do not know."

"You saw nothing?"

"Nothing."

"'S damn funny," growled Strange, scratching his ear. "An 'invisible monster' that whispers is a new one on me." He looked at the Frenchman perplexedly. "Queer business, Peret."

"It is," agreed Peret; then whirled around to confront the pedestrian. "Ah, *Monsieur*, perhaps you can help us a little, eh? How are you feeling now?"

"Considerably better," returned the other in a hoarse voice, and then added, "But I don't believe I'll ever recover from the shock. What, in God's name was it, anyway?"

He was a tall, heavy-set man with glittering black eyes, a close-cropped mustache and, though his features were irregular, had rather a handsome countenance. Although deathly pale and still a little shaken, he seemed to have himself pretty well in hand.

Strange looked at him shrewdly.

"What's your name?" he asked, taking out his notebook.

"Albert Deweese," replied the man. "I am an artist and have a studio in the next block. I was on my way home when I heard the crash of breaking glass as Mr. Berjet jumped through the window-sash. Naturally, I ran back to find out what the trouble was."

Strange made a note and nodded.

"What attacked you?" he suddenly shot out.

"I don't know," replied Deweese.

"The Thing, whatever it was, was invisible. I *felt* it. God knows, but did not *see* it."

"But you must have some idea of what the Thing was," Strange insisted. "Was it a man, or an animal, or—?"



Deweese shook his head slowly.

"I have said that I do not know," was his emphatic reply, "and I do not. How could I, when I did not see it? It was large, powerful and ferocious, but whether it was an animal of some kind, or a demon out of hell, I do not know."

"Perhaps your ears served you better than your eyes!" said Strange. "Did you hear the Thing when it leaped upon you?"

"I did," replied Deweese, with a shudder. "At almost the very instant that it attacked me I heard it whisper."

"*Eh, bien, Monsieur,*" cried Peret. "and what did it say to you?"

"It did not say anything intelligible," was Deweese's disappointing reply. "It just whispered."

Strange and Peret looked at each other in silence. The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders, and exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. Strange took a hitch in his trousers, and his face became stern.

"All right," he said curtly to Deweese. "Stick around till the coroner comes. I want to question you and this other man further, a little later on."

He gave an order to O'Shane, who was standing a little distance away with his eyes glued on the front of Berjet's house, then turned to Peret. "I'm going in," he growled, and drew his revolver.

The Frenchman threw his cigarette on the pavement, drew his own automatic, and, opening the front gate, ran across the little yard. Followed by Strange and Deweese, who asked and obtained permission to accompany them, Peret buttoned his coat around his frail body, got a firm grip on the window ledge and, with the agility of a monkey, climbed through the broken sash of the window through which Berjet had projected himself.

The room in which the detectives found themselves had evidently been

the scientist's sitting room. It was simply but comfortably furnished and was quite masculine in character. The walls were lined with well-filled bookshelves, and in the center of the room was a large table, littered with a miscellany of papers, pamphlets, pipes, burnt matches and tobacco ashes. On the carpeted floor near the table lay an open book, the leaves of which were crumpled and torn. Except for this, the room was in perfect order.

"No signs of gas anywhere," said Strange, audibly sniffing the air. "The asphyxiation theory of Dr. Sprague's is a dud, in my opinion."

Peret, who had begun to make an inspection of the room, did not reply. Strange continued his investigation, while Deweese stood near the window looking on.

The result of Peret's examination, which, while brief, was more or less thorough, annoyed and confounded him. The detective sergeant also appeared to be puzzled. The Frenchman was the first to give expression to his thoughts.

"The three doors and the four windows in this room, sergeant, are *locked on the inside,*" he remarked, as Strange paused for a moment to look at him with questioning eyes. "The key to that door on the far side of the room, and which I am sure is the door of a closet, is missing, but the other keys are in the locks. The windows, moreover, are, as you have no doubt observed, fastened with a form of mechanism that could not possibly have been sprung from the outside. Yet Berjet said he was attacked by ten assassins!"

"The point that you are trying to make, I take it," Strange grunted, "is that the broken window is the only means of egress from the room."

"Your penetration is remarkable," snapped Peret, who always became irritated when baffled.

"It's the devil's own work," commented Deweese, who had been watch-

ing the movements of the two detectives with keen interest. "Certainly there was nothing human about the Thing that attacked me, and I imagine that Berjet's death can be laid at the door of the same agency."

Peret flung himself into a chair and lit a cigarette.

"Any way you look at the thing, it seems preposterous," he said reflectively. "The 'invisible monster' theory is too absurd for serious consideration, and the other theories that have been advanced do not stand up in the presence of the facts. However, let us consider. We will assume that Berjet was, as he said, attacked by ten men. *Eh! bien!* How did they get out of the room? All of the exits are locked on the inside, as you see.

"There is a small transom over that door opening onto the hall, it is true, but it is not large enough for a child to crawl through, much less a man. Dr. Sprague seemed to think that Berjet was asphyxiated. Yet this room, as you yourself observed when we entered it, sergeant, contained not the slightest trace of any kind of gas. As a matter of fact, the room is lighted by electricity. What are we to conclude from these premises? That the poison fumes, assuming that poison fumes were the cause of Berjet's death, were administered by human hands? If so, oblige me, my friend, by telling me how the owner of those hands got out of the room?"

"Well, if the murderers were invisible, and they were, if the testimony of you and Dewese counts for anything," rejoined Strange, "they might have followed Berjet through the window without having been observed by you."

"Invisible murderers!" snorted Peret, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders. "You are growing feeble-minded, my friend. Didn't Berjet say he *saw* his murderers?"

"So you say," returned Strange rudely. "But *you* didn't see Sprague's murderer, although you claim to have

been looking at him when he was attacked. Maybe your eyesight is failing you," he added.

Peret glared at the detective sergeant, but said nothing.

"Perhaps Berjet was subject to a hallucination," ventured Strange, after a moment's thought. "He may just have imagined he saw the murderers."

"Perhaps he just imagined he was murdered, too," retorted the Frenchman, and returned to his examination of the room.

At this juncture someone rapped on the door opening into the hall. Strange crossed the room, turned the key in the lock and, opening the door, admitted Central Bureau Detectives Frank and O'Shane.

"Well?" demanded Strange.

"Major Dobson sent us four men from headquarters, and we've searched the house as you ordered," answered O'Shane. "We drew an absolute blank. The house is empty."

"Hasn't Berjet got a family?" inquired Strange.

"The people next door say that Berjet's wife and daughter are spending the winter at Palm Beach."

"Ain't they any servants?"

"All of the servants go home at night except Adolphe, the murdered man's valet."

"Did you find him?"

"No."

"Was the front door, and the rest of the doors and windows in the house, locked?"

"The front door was not only unlocked but slightly ajar. The rest of the house was secured."

"Do you not think it possible that the murderer might have slipped out of the front door while you were watching without being seen by you?"

"Absolutely not," said O'Shane, emphatically. "I didn't take my eye off the front of the house after you entered it until the men the major sent arrived. Mike watched the back of the house with equal care. Nobody

could a-got out without one of us knowin' it. If a murder's been committed the murderer's still in the house somewhere."

The burly sergeant nodded his satisfaction.

"Well, if he's here, we'll get him," he declared. As an after-thought: "Got the house surrounded?"

"I've thrown a cordon around the whole block," replied O'Shane. "A mouse couldn't get through it without getting its neck broke."

"Good." Strange drew his revolver, which he had returned to his pocket after entering the room, and tried the handle of the closet door. "Now, men, before we go any farther, let's get this closet open. It may contain a secret exit, for all we know. Take a chair and burst it in, one of you."

"Wait, my friend, I know an easier way," said Peret.

He drew a jimmy from his inside coat pocket, inserted the flattened end in the crack between the door and the jamb, and bore down on the handle. Yielding to the powerful leverage, the door creaked, splintered around the lock and flew open.

"Ten thousand devils!" cried Peret, leaping back.

The body of a dead man rolled out on the floor!

### CHAPTER III.

#### ALINGTON FINDS A CLUE.

**VIOLENT** death means nothing to the average police official; he comes in almost daily contact with the most brutal and horrible form of it.

Therefore, while the utter unexpectedness of the corpse's arrival in their midst had a very noticeable effect on the excitable French sleuth, and more especially on Deweese, with his wracked nerves, the others, though momentarily startled, seemed to consider it all in the day's work.

Strange flashed a brief glance at Peret, and then finding him glaring blankly at the cadaver, shifted his

gaze to encompass the gruesome object of the Frenchman's regard.

The dead man, like Peret, it was easy to see, was—or, rather had been—a native of France. The cast of his features was unmistakable. He was of medium height and build, was slightly bald, and his upper lip was adorned with a small, black, tightly-waxed mustache. The dagger that was buried to the hilt in his breast gave silent though ample testimony to the manner in which he had met his death.

His clothing was badly torn, and there was other evidence to show that he had put up a desperate fight with his murderer before the fatal blow was struck. In his present state he made a ghastly spectacle, for his face was badly discolored and smeared over with dried blood, and his eyes, one of which was nearly torn from its socket, were wide open and fixed on the ceiling in a glassy stare.

"Who is he?" asked O'Shane, after a brief silence.

"Adolphe," replied Peret, bending over the body. "Berjet's valet."

"You knew him," Strange stated rather than questioned.

"Yes, yes," said Peret. "I have seen him. He was *le bon valet*. See, sergeant, his limbs are cold and stiff. He was assassinated at least two hours before his master was. *Mon dieu!* What does it all mean?"

He rose to his feet, ran his fingers through his hair in a distracted manner and stared at the corpse as if he hoped to find an answer to the baffling mystery in the glassy eyes.

"Well, for one thing, it means that we got to get busy," was Strange's energetic response.

Whereupon O'Shane began to explore the closet. Strange, however, seemed to be in no hurry to follow the example set by his subordinate. He made several entries in his notebook, leisurely scratched his ear and looked at Peret from the corner of his eye. Though he would have died rather

than admit it, the detective sergeant was one of the little Frenchman's staunchest admirers.

He had been associated with Peret almost daily for several years, and had given up a good many hours to the study of the other's methods in the hope that some day he would be able to emulate his friend's success. He knew that, mentally at least, Peret was his superior, and he was ever ready to place himself under the other's guidance when he could veil his real intentions sufficiently to make it appear that he himself was the leader.

"This case, at first glance, is the cat's meow," he said, tentatively. "It's the most complicated murder mystery I ever had anything to do with. What do you make of it, Peret?"

As Peret was about to reply, the door opened and three men entered the room. The first of these, a tall, middle-aged man, with a gray mustache and a fine, upright carriage, was Major and Superintendent of Police Dobson. Immediately behind him came Coroner Rane, an elderly man with penetrating gray eyes, and Police Sergeant Alington, small, stoop-shouldered and addicted to big-rimmed spectacles.

"What's all the trouble about, sergeant?" was Dobson's greeting. He nodded to Peret, and continued: "I happened to be in my office when your call came, so I hurried over."

"I'm mighty glad you came," said Strange. "I'm afraid this case is going to prove troublesome. Did you view the bodies on the pavement?"

"Yes," said the major. "I helped Rane examine them."

"Well, here's another one for you to examine," said the detective grimly, and, stepping aside, he exposed to the view of the newcomers the body of the dead valet.

"This is not murder, it's a massacre!" exclaimed the coroner.

He knelt beside the body, and scrutinized the valet's face.

"This man has been dead for several hours, major," he continued. "Death was probably instantaneous, as this dagger is buried to the hilt in his heart." He tapped the hilt of the weapon with one of his fingers, and looked up at Strange. "Is this man supposed to have been murdered by the 'invisible monster' also?" he asked sarcastically.

"So you've heard about the 'invisible monster,'" returned Strange, non-committally.

"Detective Frank, who was guarding the bodies on the pavement, told us some wild tale about an invisible murderer," remarked Dobson, with a quizzical uplift of his brows. Then, failing to draw an explanation from the sergeant, he asked: "Have you made any arrests?"

"I have not," replied Strange, then gave a rapid account of the measures he had taken to prevent the murderer's escape.

Dobson nodded his approval.

"Now, tell me all you know about these mysterious deaths," he suggested, and Strange, nothing loath, gave a brief though vivid recital of all the known facts in the case.

"This third murder," he said in conclusion, "instead of complicating matters, seems to make the going a little easier. In the dagger, with which this man was killed, we have something tangible, anyway. But as for Max Berjet and Dr. Sprague—"

"Dr. Rane," interrupted Peret from the depths of a Morris chair into which he had dropped, "will you venture an opinion as to how Berjet and Sprague met their deaths?"

"It is impossible to reply with any degree of certainty until after the autopsy," answered the coroner: "but offhand I should say that they were either asphyxiated or poisoned."

Peret scowled at the coroner and relapsed into silence.

Strange, however, seemed to find comfort in the coroner's words. With a determined look on his hard-bitten face, he wheeled.

"Deweese," he rasped, in a tone calculated to impress on the hearer the absolute certainty of his words, "the coroner declares that you were poisoned." He shook a finger at the artist, as if daring him to deny it. "The poison was probably administered several hours before you felt the effects of it. Now think! Who gave it to you? Who had the opportunity to give it to you? Who had a motive?"

"I was *not* poisoned," rejoined Deweese, quietly but emphatically. "I was choked—choked by an unseen thing that whispered in my ear. Not only did I hear it whisper, but I felt it breathing in my face as well."

Peret half rose to his feet, opened his lips as if to speak, then grunted and sat down in his chair again. Nevertheless, this new bit of evidence, if such it might be called, seemed to impress him, and he continued to eye the artist eagerly.

"Who is this man," asked Dobson.

Strange, with a gesture of helplessness, explained.

"You see what we are up against, Chief," he said. "I know how to trace a flesh and blood murderer, but, if you'll pardon me for saying so, I'll be damned if I know how to run down a spook, with no more substantial clues than a breath and a whisper."

"Mr. Deweese, you are positive, are you, that you were not attacked by a human being?" questioned the major.

"I am as certain of it as I am that I am alive," answered the artist.

"Nor an animal?"

"Yes."

"Nor something *inside of you*?"

"If you mean poison, or something like that, yes."

"Do you not think you might have been overcome by poisonous fumes of some sort?"

"Absolutely not. It was not that sort of sensation that I experienced at all."

"Have you any idea what it was that attacked you?"

"Not the remotest idea."

"You did not see it?"

"I did not."

"Could you have seen it if it had had substantial form?"

"Yes, because it was between me and the street lamp."

"Have you ever had any similar experience in the past—any experience that resembles it in the slightest way?"

"Never!"

Dobson threw a puzzled look at the coroner.

"Well," he began, and was interrupted by a blinding flash of light that suddenly illuminated the room.

With a cry of terror, Deweese whirled and, darting across the room, was about to hurl himself through the window, when Strange caught him by the arm and dragged him back.

"S'nothing but a flash-light, he said reassuringly. "Sergeant Alington is photographing the finger-prints on the dagger. S'no wonder it scared you. Made me jump myself."

Deweese shook off the sergeant's hand and glared at the little fingerprint expert.

"For God's sake, let me know before you set that thing off again," he cried in a shaking voice. "I've come through an experience that has shot my nerves to pieces and I can't stand any more shocks tonight."

"Sorry," apologized Alington, and then, like the little human bloodhound he was, turned once more to the business of nosing out and developing the finger-prints on the dagger.

"Now," resumed the major, after ordering O'Shane to have the house and vicinity toothcombed, "let us take up these murders and this assault in logical order and see if we cannot get to the bottom of this mystery. Granted that the evidence may at first

appear to point that way, to contend that they were committed by a supernatural agency is absurd. Even if the murderers had some way of making it impossible for their victims to see them, we know that they were either human or animal, or, at least, directed or controlled by human intelligence.

"First of all, we have the death of Max Berjet. This man, it appears, died in the presence of our friend Peret. He hurled himself through that window, had a convulsion, and died. Before he died, however, he told Peret that he had been attacked by ten men. By the way, Peret, what were Berjet's last words?"

Peret sat hunched in his chair in an abstracted manner, staring into vacancy with knitted brow. He was evidently not pleased by the interruption, and showed his displeasure by scowling at the major.

"Just before Berjet hurled himself through the window," he explained, ungraciously, "I heard him cry, 'Help! help! I'm dying!' As he lay dying on the pavement he gasped, '*Assassins . . . die!*' just like that. *Die*, in the French language, means 'ten,' and Berjet was a Frenchman. Figure it out for yourself."

The major nodded, thoughtfully.

"The words scarcely need any figuring out," he observed drily. "They seem to figure themselves out. However, in view of the fact that all of the exits were fastened on the inside, and also because there is no evidence to show that any considerable number of men have recently been in this room, I think that we may leave the number of the scientist's murderers open to question."

"Turning now to the second death, Dr. Sprague appears to have been attacked in the sight of at least two men, our amiable friend Peret and the druggist. Mr. Deweese was attacked at or about the same time that Sprague was, and the attack was also witnessed by the two persons named. Sprague and Deweese struggled with

their antagonists, who, from all testimony, appear to have been of immense strength and ferocity.

"Sprague was killed almost instantly, and our friend the artist, after a desperate struggle, was fortunate enough to overcome, or at least to throw off the Thing that had him in its grasp. Deweese, the druggist and Peret declare that they did not see the Thing—that, in short, it was invisible; but both of the former gentlemen testify to the fact that they heard it whisper, and Deweese informs us further that he felt it breathing in his face.

"It seems safe to assume, therefore, that the Thing had substantial form, for even if we have to admit in the face of the facts that the Thing was invisible, we know that it could not have been a supernatural being, since supernatural beings are not supposed to whisper and breathe."

He paused, looked at the coroner as if inviting speech, and then, when only silence answered, continued:

"Let us turn now to the murder of the valet. There is certainly no doubt as to the manner in which he died. He was stabbed to death, and Dr. Rane has expressed the opinion that he has been dead for several hours. Yet, in spite of this, and in spite of the fact that the form of his murder is entirely different from that of Berjet and Sprague, it seems clear that the three murders, as well as the attack on the artist, are closely related to each other.

"Whether or not they are correlated is a matter which only the future can determine: but that they all bear some connection with each other and were committed by the same agency, there seems to be no doubt. The circumstances that surround the several murders speak for themselves. Therefore, in view of the fact that Berjet's valet was the first of the three men to meet his death, it is my opinion that if you find his murderer you will have found the man or Thing responsible

for the other two murders, and for the attack on our friend, Deweesc."

Strange heaved a sigh of profound satisfaction. He was now on familiar ground. Unseen and unknown forces that struck men down, forces that were apparently of some other world, were beyond his depth; but human knife-wielders were his meat. Given something tangible, a clue, or a motive, or even a theory that was not beyond his comprehension, there was no man on the force who could obtain quicker or more satisfactory results than he.

Therefore, while in his own mind, he had already settled on the dagger as the one key to the mystery in sight, it flattered him, in spite of the obviousness of the clue, to have the major's opinion coincide with his own.

"I agree with you, major," he cried heartily. "The man that we want most is the man that murdered the valet; and," he added with a tightening of his jaws, "I'm gonna get him!"

"Wait," said Sergeant Alington, who had been an interested listener to the major's summing up of the case. "I have some information to reveal which I think will be of interest to you."

He cleared his throat, set his glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose, and glanced at several slips of paper he held in his hand.

"Before the bodies of Sprague and Berjet were taken to the morgue, I secured the finger-prints of both of them. I have since photographed a number of prints found on various objects in this room. Among the latter are a set of well-defined prints on the handle of the dagger that killed the valet. The photographs of these prints will not be available for purposes of comparison, of course, until I develop them; but the impressions on the dagger-handle are so clean-cut that they stand out clearly under the developing powder, when a magnify-

ing glass is applied to them. While I cannot speak positively, therefore, I think that I have succeeded in identifying them."

"Well?" growled Strange, straining forward.

"Well," replied Alington, "instead of clearing up the mystery surrounding the murders of Sprague and Berjet, the finger-prints on the dagger tend to complicate it—that is, if we are to assume that the prints were made by the valet's murderer, and this, I am sure, all of you will agree with me in doing."

"Well?" repeated Strange, who saw his last glimmer of hope growing dimmer and dimmer. "Who murdered the valet?"

"If the prints were made by the man I think they were," said Alington slowly, as if to prolong the taste of his words, "the valet was murdered by Max Berjet."

#### CHAPTER IV

#### THE TERRIBLE FROG TAKES THE TRAIL.

STRANGE, at once perceiving the blank wall into which his inquiry had led him, sat down on the arm of a chair and sought to hide his discomfort by biting a liberal sized chew from the plug of tarlike tobacco that he fished out of his trousers pocket.

He had, very naturally, believed that the solution of the mystery was to be found in the finger-prints on the dagger, and his sudden disillusionment annoyed and angered him. He felt himself baffled and, having a profound dislike for the little finger-print expert anyway, it incensed him to have to admit even momentary defeat at the latter's hands, especially in the presence of his superior.

The major, however, accepted the exploding of his theory with equanimity.

"It is obviously impossible for the scientist to have had any direct hand in Sprague's murder," he observed,

"if he himself was murdered at least ten or fifteen minutes before the doctor was. And even if we assume that he had an indirect hand in it, and the circumstances surrounding the several murders would seem to disprove this, there is his own death still to be accounted for." He turned to the artist. "Mr. Deweese, did you know Max Berjet?"

Deweese shook his head.

"Never heard of him until tonight," he declared.

The major sighed.

"I thought as much," he asserted. "It seems a waste of time to try to fasten Sprague's murder and the attack on you on Berjet." He thought for a moment; then: "Sergeant Alington, you are sure, are you, that you have not been over-hasty in the conclusions you have drawn from your cursory examination of the prints? If there is any doubt in your mind, I suggest that you return to headquarters and develop the plates at once."

"You can judge for yourself, major," returned Alington, a little nettled. Like most experts, so-called and otherwise, it annoyed him to have a carefully-formed opinion of his disputed or even questioned. He could countenance such a thing in court, under the baleful eye of His Honor; but it was quite another thing at the scene of a crime, where he felt himself to be upon his own ground.

Strange, sensing his annoyance, paused long enough in his exploration of the table drawer to look at him and grin. Catching the latter's eye he winked, which exasperated the expert to such an extent that he dropped his magnifying glass. Strange, feeling fully repaid for any fancied injury, grinned again and dumped the contents of the drawer on the table.

With an injured air, Alington retrieved his magnifying glass and offered it to the major. He then held out for Dobson's inspection a set of

finger-prints on a regulation blank and the dagger that the coroner had withdrawn from the breast of the dead valet. The dagger was an ordinary white bone-handled hunting knife, with a six-inch, double-edged blade. Dobson held it gingerly by the blood-smearred blade, in order not to disturb the thin coating of black powder that had been sprinkled over the handle.

Like most efficient police officials. Dobson had some knowledge of dactyloscopy, and the detectives awaited his verdict with eagerness. Applying the magnifying glass to the handle of the knife, the major leisurely examined the series of whorls and ridges that showed through the black coating. He then compared them with the finger-prints of the dead scientist, and, when he had concluded his examination, slowly nodded his head.

"You are right, sergeant," he was forced to acknowledge. "The two sets of prints are undoubtedly identical." He handed the dagger and glass to the expert. "Your evidence can not be combated, sergeant," he added.

Alington inclined his head slightly and retired to his place beside the table.

"Well," grumbled Strange, disappointed by the expert's vindication, "that at least clears up the first murder. As for the murder of Berjet, as clues are wholly lacking, in my opinion the only way we will make any headway is to motivate the crime."

"Has the ownership of the dagger been established?" asked the coroner.

"It has," replied Strange, without enthusiasm.

He held up to view the sheath of the hunting-knife, which he had found in the table drawer. A large "N. B." had been cut on the front of the leather covering by an unskilled hand. The letters were crude and the edges worn, and they had evidently been cut in the leather a long while ago.



The coroner examined the letters closely and returned the sheath to Strange.

"There can scarcely be any doubt as to the ownership of the knife," he agreed.

"What progress are your men making with their search?" demanded the major.

"The men have gone over the house twice without success," declared Strange. "O'Brill and Muldoon are now on the roof and the other men are searching the adjoining houses."

"And have they found no evidence of any person having been in this house?"

"No one except Berjet and the valet."

"Dr. Rane, what do you think of this affair?" questioned Dobson impatiently. "We are progressing too slowly to please me. Have you any suggestions to offer?"

"I think it might help us if Mr. Deweese would describe in the most minute detail exactly what happened to him," returned Rane. "There is much of his story that has yet to be cleared up."

"Mr. Deweese," said Dobson, turning to the artist, "suppose you recount the details of your attack in your own way, and then, if necessary, we will question you."

Deweese had entirely recovered from his shock by this time and seemed eager to be of aid.

"On my way home from the theater," he began, "I stopped near the corner lamp, less than half a block away, to light a cigarette. As I was striking a match I heard a terrific crash of breaking glass behind me, and at once ran back to see what had happened. I found this gentleman"—nodding at Peret—"bending over the body of a man on the pavement. The body has since been identified as that of Max Berjet. Mr. Peret declared that the scientist had been murdered, and, at his bidding, I

went to the drug store on the other side of the street to summon aid.

"While a clerk was phoning for the police I returned to the scene of the tragedy accompanied by the druggist and Dr. Sprague, who happened to be in the store at the time. Dr. Sprague examined and pronounced Berjet dead. Mr. Peret then informed the doctor that he was a detective and requested him to remain with the body until the police arrived, so he could make a preliminary investigation in the house. This Dr. Sprague agreed to do, and Mr. Peret ran across the pavement and jumped the fence in front of Berjet's house.

"I was standing a few feet away, talking with the druggist, and saw everything that followed. At the very instant that Mr. Peret leaped over the fence, I heard Dr. Sprague scream and saw him throw out his hands as if to grapple with something. He was standing by Berjet's body at the time. He appeared to have been attacked by some powerful and ferocious Thing, which I could not see, and I sprang forward to go to his assistance. It was then that I heard the whispering sound and felt the Thing hurl itself upon me.

"I could see nothing, but I felt my throat caught in a viselike grip and my chest crushed between two opposing forces. I cried out once, and then my breath was shut off. I threw out my hands to grapple with the unseen Thing, but there appeared to be nothing to grapple with. My hands came in contact with nothing but air.

"Yet all of this while I could feel the monster crushing my life out. The terrible grip on my throat kept pressing my head back, inch by inch, and the pressure around my body seemed on the point of caving my ribs in. Everything went black before me, and I could feel myself losing consciousness. Calling to my aid every ounce of strength I possessed, I made a last desperate effort to free myself of the Thing, and just as I

felt life slipping from my grasp, the pressure on my throat and chest relaxed and, too exhausted to stand, I fell to the pavement."

"Unconscious?" asked the coroner.

"No, never for a single instant did I lose consciousness. Every terrible second of that eternity is indelibly stamped on my mind."

The recollection of his frightful experience made the artist tremble. Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped his face.

"Was Dr. Sprague still struggling with his—ah—antagonist when you were attacked?" questioned the major.

"I cannot say," replied Deweese. "After I was attacked I had little thought to give to anything but my own defense."

"The testimony of both Peret and the druggist show that Deweese and Sprague were attacked at practically the same time," observed Strange, shifting his quid from east to west. "Both men struggled for a few seconds—about half a minute, according to Peret—and fell to the pavement at the same instant."

"Then it appears that we have more than one thing to contend with," interposed the major a little grimly. "Mr. Deweese, you are positive, are you, that you did not see the Thing? Think before you reply."

"It is not necessary for me to think," retorted the artist, "God knows, if I had seen the Thing I should not have been able to forget it this quickly!"

"When did you hear the Thing whisper—before or after it attacked you?"

"Before. After it hurled itself upon me I heard nothing."

"But you felt it breathing in your face?"

"Not after the attack: no. It was immediately after I heard the whispering sound that I felt the Thing's breath on my face. After that terrible grip became fastened on

my throat, everything else became negligible."

"You mean that even if the Thing had been breathing in your face it is doubtful if you would have known it?"

"Yes."

"Did this breathing sound or feel like the breathing of a man?"

"No; the Thing's breath was quick and jerky and as cold as ice."

"Cold," cried Peret, leaping to his feet.

He had been sitting back in his chair in an attitude of dejection, staring at a blank space on the wall. He had, with one ear, however, been drinking in every word of the conversation, and now he rose from his chair with such suddenness that he all but upset the little finger-print expert standing in front of him.

"Yes, cold," repeated Deweese, the perspiration dripping from his brow, "cold and clammy."

"*Dame!*" cried the Frenchman, breathing on his hand as if to test the temperature of his breath. "Think well, my friend, of what you are saying. The breath of living things is warm. Perhaps it was not the breathing of a monster that you heard. It may have been—" He hesitated, and then, at a loss, stopped.

"There was no mistaking the—the thing I felt on my face," rejoined the artist grimly. "Except for the fact that it was cold and spasmodic it was like the breathing of a man."

"Like the breathing of a man choking on a piece of ice?" suggested the coroner.

"Exactly."

"*Eh, bien!*" called the Frenchman, and smote himself on the forehead with his clenched fist. "Why did you not tell us this before?"

The Frenchman was transformed. Heretofore, in appearance at least, he had been an insignificant little man with no special capacity for the intricacies of unsolved crime mysteries. But now that the germ of an

elusive idea had taken root in his mind he seemed to grow in stature as well as in intellect. His eyes became animated, his nostrils distended, his foolish little mustache took on an air of dignity, and his narrow shoulders seemed to grow straighter and to broaden.

Twisting the starboard point of his mustache fiercely between his fingers, he began to pace rapidly up and down the room. Dobson, who was acquainted with these symptoms, threw a significant look at the coroner. The look, however, failed to register, for Rane was staring at the floor, with knitted brow. He appeared to be thinking deeply.

Strange scratched his ear reflectively and stole a glance at the Frenchman. He, also was familiar with the latter's eccentricities and, like the major, was always a little awed by an outburst of his friend's temperament. Experience had taught him that this was a moment for silence, and he was determined to maintain it at all costs.

But even while he was rolling this thought around in his mind, and glaring threateningly at O'Shane, who was moistening his lips as if about to speak, the Frenchman put an end to it in a manner peculiarly his own.

"*Triomphe!*" he cried, with such suddenness and vigor that the iron-nerved detective sergeant jumped. "I've got it! At last I see the light!"

In his excitement he danced up and down in front of the major, to the secret amusement of the coroner and the astonishment of Dewese. Strange, however, knowing what this overflow of energy denoted, leaned forward eagerly and strained his ears to catch what would follow.

"Well, what have you got?" asked the major calmly, though the coroner thought he could detect a note of vast relief in his voice.

"The answer to the riddle, major," yelled Peret too excited to contain himself. "I've got it! I've found it!

The mystery is solved. *Nom de diable!* The Thing is—"

"Stop," said the major, truculently. "We must use some discretion here. Are you sure you know what you are talking about, Peret, or are you simply making a wild guess?"

"I know it," shouted Peret, making a heroic though futile effort to lower his voice. "Ah, it was too simple! Like taking the candy from the mouth of the little one! *Oui, m'sieu!* The mystery is solved! I stake my reputation on it. I will show you—Stay!"

To the horror of the central office men, he grasped the dignified major by the lapel of his coat and dragged him (not unwillingly) out of his chair and half across the room. When they were well out of earshot of the others, he drew the major's head down and poured a perfect torrent of whispers in his ear.

Dobson heard the Frenchman out without interruption, but, while evincing the deepest interest, he did not appear to be altogether convinced. However, Peret had once been under his command, and there was no one who had more respect for his ability. It was he himself who, a year or so previously, had characterized the Frenchman as "an accomplished linguist, a master of disguise and one of the most astute criminologists on this side of the Atlantic."

In his present extremity, moreover, he was like a drowning man clutching at a straw. He was not in a position to reject a possible solution of the mystery advanced by a man of Peret's ability, no matter how unsound it might appear to him.

"What you say seems plausible enough," he remarked, when Peret paused for want of breath; "but it is, after all, only a theory. There is not a shred of evidence to give weight to your words."

"Evidence is sometimes the biggest liar in the world," said Peret, a lit-

tle dashed by Dobson's lack of enthusiasm. "In this case, however, there is, as you say, no evidence of any kind—yet. We must therefore look for it, before it sneaks up on us and bites us. Ah, my dear friend. Think! Consider! Reflect! Why, the thing is as clear as a piece of crystal."

"What suggestions have you to make?" asked the major, visibly impressed. "I suppose you have in mind some plan—"

"*Oui!*" cried Peret, with fierce enthusiasm. "Except for one little thing, I ask that you give me a free hand. I will either prove or disprove my theory within twenty-four hours. Your men in the meantime, can make an independent investigation."

He made several hieroglyphics on a page torn from his memorandum book and handed it to the major. Dobson studied the characters for a moment, and then nodded.

"All right," he said briskly. "I give you a free hand. Call headquarters when you want, and in the meantime let me know at the earliest possible moment, if you learn anything of importance. *Allez—vous-en.*"

"Remember—no arrests!" hissed Peret, and, clapping his hat on the back of his head, he fled from the house as if pursued by the devil himself.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF.

**JULES PERET** was a man of parts. Born in the slums of Paris, he had migrated to America at an early age and, following the vicissitudes of a dissipated youth, had, by the sheer power of will and ability, forced himself to the top of the ladder of success in his chosen profession.

Eccentric, high-strung and affected, he was nevertheless something of a genius in his particular line. As a plainclothes man under the command

of Major Dobson, his success had been outstanding. This was largely due to his love of the dramatic, and his knack of making the most unpretentious case assume huge proportions in the eyes of the public.

His methods were simple, apparently infallible, always spectacular. For which reason the newspapers gave him much space on their front pages and delighted in referring to him as the Terrible Frog and the Devil's Sister—appellations, by the way, that had their origin in the dives of the underworld.

Three months ago Peret had severed his connections with police headquarters and established himself as a "consulting detective." And because of the enviable record he had made while serving his apprenticeship on the "force," he had at once found his services in great demand.

At this time Peret was about thirty-four years of age. A small effeminate man, with delicate features, small hands and feet, rosy cheeks and trick eye-brows, one would have taken him for almost anything in the world but a detective. In manner and dress, he was typical of the *boulevardiers* of Paris. He affected a slender black mustache about the same general size and shape of a pointed match-stick, and he had a weakness for pearl-striped trousers and lavender spats.

Exteriors, however, are sometimes deceiving, and this was true in the case of the little Frenchman. When aroused, Peret was like a tiger. It was not for nothing that he had earned his terrible *noms de guerre* in the world of crime.

Erratic in manner as in dress, his departure—or, rather, his flight—from the home of the murdered scientist, was as distinctive of the man as was his mustache. The mirth of the coroner and the astonishment of Dewees meant nothing to him. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts for the moment to consider

the effect of his behavior on the others. He had simply felt the impulse to action and had obeyed it with characteristic promptness, energy and enthusiasm.

On the sidewalk he paused for a moment.

The night was pitch-black. Not a star was visible. The fog still hung over the city in heavy folds and at a distance of fifteen or twenty feet almost obliterated the street lights. A little crowd of morbidly curious sensation-seekers had gathered in front of the house and, much to their dislike, were now being herded away from the immediate scene of the crime by two uniformed policemen.

Turning up the collar of his coat, Peret wiggled his way through the crowd and sped across the street to the drug store. Entering a telephone booth, he ordered a taxi. He then called up his office, and when the connection was made, poured a volley of instructions into the receiver in language that must have burnt the wires.

Replacing the receiver on the hook, he left the store and, when his taxi arrived a few minutes later, started out on a feverish round of inquiries.

His first call was at the Army and Navy Building. Evidently luck was against him, for after a moment's stay he emerged from the building, with a scowl on his face. Hopping into the taxi, he ordered the chauffeur to drive to the Treasury Department.

Owing to the lateness of the hour, he had, as expected, some difficulty in gaining admittance. A cabalistic message sent to some mysterious personage within, however, had a magical effect on the watchman, who swung wide the doors for him.

His stay within was brief, and after the portals had again been opened to let him out, he sped down the flight of steps in front of the building and crossed the street on a dead run. From the corner drug

store he fired a message over the wire to police headquarters, then, quitting the store, once more boarded the taxi and instructed the chauffeur to drive him to a certain street corner.

After a short run, the cab came to a stop at the corner of a dark street in one of the residential sections of the city. Instructing the chauffeur to wait for him, Peret left the car and, wrapping his coat around him, glided off in the darkness.

Half way down the block, at the intersection of an alley, the Frenchman paused. Though the fog had lifted somewhat, the mist had turned into a heavy sleet and, if such a thing were possible, it was even darker than it had been an hour previously. Except for the taxi waiting at the corner, the street, so far as Peret could see, was deserted.

Stepping behind a tree-box, Peret surveyed the row of houses on the opposite side of the street. A dim light burned in several of the vestibules; otherwise the houses were wrapped in darkness. Satisfied that he was not observed, Peret stepped from behind the tree-box and gave a peculiar, birdlike whistle.

In answer to the signal, the eye of a flash-light blinked near the front door of one of the houses in the middle of the block, and Peret, clinging to the shadows, crossed the street. Drawing his automatic, he traversed the lawn to the house.

"Bendlow!"

"H'tuva night to be abroad, Chief," came a hoarse whisper. "What's the row, anyway?"

Although it was too dark to distinguish the speaker's features, or, as a matter of fact, even to see the outline of his form, there was no mistaking the foghorn voice of Harvey Bendlow, former Secret Service agent and, at the present time, night manager of Peret's Detective Agency. Restoring his automatic to his pocket, the Frenchman gripped the other's hand.

"Haven't time to explain now," he said in an undertone. "We've got a big job ahead of us. How long have you been here?"

"'Bout an hour," croaked Bendlow. "I came on the jump just as soon as your message was received at the office. I've been prowling around taking a look-see."

"Seen anything of the occupant of the house?"

"Nope. I guess the Wolf is in the hay," was Bendlow's enigmatic reply.

"What's that?" asked Peret sharply. "Who is this that you call the 'Wolf'?"

"Say, don't you know whose house you sent me to watch?" demanded Bendlow in surprise.

"No; I have a suspicion that the man living in this house is a foreign agent, but I'm not sure that I know who he is."

"Well, your suspicion does you credit. This house at the present time is occupied by Count Vincent di Dalfonzo, better known to the Secret Service as the Wolf."

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Peret, with rising excitement. "You are sure?"

"None surer! Known him for a long time."

"Tell me what you know about him, quickly, my friend."

"Take too long now. He's got a record. Had a coupla run-ins with him when I was attached to the Secret Service. He's a clever and dangerous guy. International agent. Famous spy during the war. Plays only for big stakes, and the harder the game the better he likes it. Renegade Italian nobleman. His mother was an American. Takes after her in looks, I reckon. Never know he was a wop to look at him. He's been a thorn in the side of the foreign Secret Service for years. Too clever for them. They know he's the milk in the coconut, but they can't crack his shell, so to speak. He's bad medi-

cine, and no mistake. He kills at the drop of a hat."

"But how do you know he is living in this house, eh? Have you seen him?"

"Nope. You ordered me to watch the house, and, not knowing what your game is, I haven't made any effort to see him. He's here, though, and it's damn funny, too. Last time I heard of him, two months ago, he was in Petrograd."

"If you have not seen him, how do you know he is living in this house?" asked Peret impatiently.

In a subdued voice, Bendlow rapidly related all he knew about the man he called the Wolf, and gave his reasons for believing him to be the present occupant of the house. When he concluded, Peret could scarcely control his elation.

"*Voilà,*" he exclaimed softly. "You have done your work better than you know, my friend. Everything fits together beautifully. Now, let's to work. I wonder if there is any one in the house now?"

"Can't say for sure, but I doubt it."

"Well, we're going in, regardless. It's dangerous business, but necessary. I must clear up the mystery of the whispering thing."

"The Whispering Thing?" questioned Bendlow.

"*Oui,*" whispered Peret tersely. "I cannot tell you what it is, for I do not know. But it's a demon, my friend, be sure of that! Keep close to me and be prepared for any eventuality. Ready?"

"Yep," laconically. "Lead on."

Peret tried the door behind him and found it locked. After several unsuccessful attempts, he opened it with a master key and, followed by Bendlow, entered the cellar. Closing the door, Peret brought his flashlight into play, and then, like a phantom, he passed over the concrete floor and ascended a flight of steps in the rear.

Unlocking the door at the head of the steps, the two detectives stepped out into the carpeted hall and paused for a moment to listen.

No sound greeted their ears. The house was as dark and silent as a grave. Even the light in the vestibule had been extinguished.

"Where next?" whispered Bendlow.

"The first floor, then upstairs," breathed Peret in his ear.

Guided by frequent flashes from Peret's flashlight, the two detectives explored the parlor, dining-room and kitchen, and found them empty, cold and silent. When they returned to the hall, Peret leaned over and put his lips to his companion's ear.

"Wait at the bottom of the front stairs and watch," was his whispered order. "I'm going up. Warn me if any one enters the house, and if you hear me cry out, turn on the lights and come to my help as rapidly as you can. The Whispering Thing strikes quickly, and, having struck, moves on. *Comprenez-vous?*"

"Yep," croaked Bendlow, and took up his stand at the place designated.

Flashing his light around the hall once more, so as not to lose his sense of direction, Peret began his slow and cautious ascent to the second floor. Placing his feet carefully on that part of the steps nearest to the wall so they would not creak, he worked his way up to the top of the steps. There he paused to listen.

No one knew better than he how fatal it would prove to be caught prowling around the house of a man as desperate as the Wolf was reputed to be, in the dead of night. There was not only the man himself to be feared; there was the Whispering Thing, for if Dalfonzo was, as he suspected, implicated in the murders he was investigating, it was certain that the invigible assassin, be it man, beast or devil was in league with the renegade Italian.

Yet a search of the man's house during his absence, or at least without his knowledge, seemed necessary, since Peret not only had no evidence against the Count, but had as yet to learn the exact nature of the Thing; and it would be useless to make an arrest until he could fasten the crimes on their perpetrator.

Having assured himself that no one was stirring, therefore, Peret began to explore the second floor. The house was a small one, and it did not take him long to go through the four rooms that comprised the second floor, especially as two of them were unfurnished. The other two rooms, which contained only the necessary articles of bedroom furniture, bore signs of recent occupation, but Peret was unable to find in them anything of an incriminating or even of an enlightening character.

Rendered moody by his failure to find the evidence he sought, the Frenchman returned to the hall and was about to retrace his steps to the first floor when he felt a pressure on his arm and heard Bendlow's hoarse, low-pitched warning in his ear.

"Something's in the vestibule."

Peret's muscles grew tense.

"Somebody coming in?" he asked quickly.

"Nope," came the reply. "It's something in the vestibule between the two doors. It musta been there all the time we've been here, as the front door hasn't been opened since I've been on guard."

"How do you know something's there?" whispered Peret.

"Heard it moving around, and when I put my ear to the keyhole I heard it breathing," was Bendlow's startling reply.

Peret's jaws closed with a snap, and his grasp on his automatic tightened.

"*Eh, bien,*" he hissed. "Follow me down stairs. Keep hold of my coat so we won't get separated. If anything approaches you from the rear,

shoot first and ask questions afterwards. It begins to look as if we had tracked the Whispering Thing to its lair. *En avant!*"

Cautiously and noiselessly, the two men made their way down the dark steps to the first floor. Followed closely by Bendlow, who had an automatic in his hand, Peret tip-toed across the hall and applied his ear to the keyhole in the front door. He heard a slight movement on the other side of the door, and his spine stiffened.

Peret waited, with his ear glued to the keyhole. He could plainly hear something moving around restlessly in the vestibule, but, for the moment, he could not determine what it was. Suddenly, however, he heard a *thump* on the door and a scratching sound on the floor. This was followed by a loud whining yawn.

Peret caught Bendlow by the arm and drew him away from the door. "It's a dog," he whispered disgustedly. "Daltonzo doubtless placed him there to guard the entrance during his absence. Lucky for us we entered by way of the cellar, eh?"

"I thought it might be a dog when I first hear it," muttered Bendlow; "but after what you said about the Whispering Thing I thought I better not investigate alone. Maybe the dog'll convince you that the Wolf is a tough customer. He's a hard man to catch napping. Going back upstairs?"

"No. I am through. There is no one in the house, and I can find no trace of the Whispering Thing. *Sapristi!* what a blind trail it is that I follow. Are you sure, my friend, that you have not made a mistake in thinking that Daltonzo—"

"Not a chance," was Bendlow's emphatic reply. "This house, however, may be a blind. The Wolf may be laying low and working through his confederate. He may not even be in the city. However, as I am working in the dark, I will not hazard any

more guesses. But you can bet your bottom dollar that the Wolf—"

"*Hist!*"

But Peret's warning came too late. Engrossed as they were in their whispered conversation, neither of them had heard the outer front door open, or the whine with which the dog welcomed the man who entered the vestibule. Peret's alert ear had caught the sound made by a key being turned in the lock of the inner door, and he hissed his warning just as the door was opened to admit the man and the dog. At the same instant a match flared in the hand of the new-comer, and the two detectives, as if on pivots, whirled.

"The Wolf," croaked Bendlow hoarsely, and, with Peret following darted down the hall.

"Halt!" commanded the Wolf, and the dog, with an angry growl, shot between his legs and hurled itself after the detectives.

Reaching the door at the head of the cellar steps, Bendlow grasped the knob and wrenched it open. A streak of flame stabbed the darkness and a bullet *zipped* by Peret's ear and buried itself in the wall.

"Get him, Sultan," cried the Wolf, and fired another shot.

Sultan tore down the dark hall, his lower jaw hung low in readiness, but when he reached the end of the hall he found the two prowlers had disappeared and the cellar door was closed.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE WHISPERING THING.

**I**F SULTAN was doomed to disappointment, so, too, were Peret and his husky companion, for they were not to make their escape as easily as they had at first believed they would. As they climbed from the basement window a dark form loomed up in front of them and a harsh voice commanded

"Hands up!"



At the same instant the cold muzzle of a revolver came in violent contact with the Frenchman's nose.

"*Diable!*" swore Peret softly, and, realizing that he was at the other's mercy, elevated his hands with alacrity and, with a backward swing of his foot, kicked Bendlow on the shin.

Bendlow, however, needed no such urging. At the first spoken word, he had raised his automatic and taken deadly aim at the dark form in front of Peret. Something in the speaker's voice, however, made him hesitate to shoot.

"Climb out of there, you!" ordered the voice harshly. "No funny business if you're fond of life. C'mon out."

"Dick Cromwell!" spoke up Bendlow suddenly. "Drop your gat. It's Bendlow and Peret."

"Well, for the love Mike!" exclaimed the central bureau detective, and lowered his revolver. Then, to someone behind him. "It's the Terrible Frog, Sarge."

With a sigh of relief that was not unlike a snort, Peret scrambled out of the basement, and, without loss of time, tersely explained the situation to the three city detectives who crowded around him and his companion. His explanation, however, did not altogether satisfy Sergeant O'Brien, who was in charge of the party. Although he and the other two detectives had been set to watch the house at the Frenchman's suggestion, he had not been informed of this and had no knowledge of Peret's connection with the cause, and further, while the two private detectives were both well and favorably known to him, he had been ordered to arrest any one who attempted to leave the house, and orders were orders.

The only thing he could do, therefore, was to hold the two men until he could telephone for instructions. Having explained this to Peret, he went to the patrol box in the next block to get in communication with

headquarters, while the others retired to a safe distance from the house to await his return. When he rejoined them, a few minutes later, the two prisoners, after being subjected to much good-natured badinage, were released.

At the corner, where he found the taxi still waiting for him, Peret gave Bendlow his orders for the night, then climbed in the cab and left his lieutenant to shift for himself. His only desire now was to get home and crawl into bed. The past hour's work had disgusted and depressed him. The only thing he had accomplished had been to put Dalfonzo on his guard, and that was the last thing in the world he desired to do. Nevertheless, he felt that he had the case pretty well in hand and that within the next twenty-four hours he would be able to act decisively. And in this he found consolation.

Reaching his apartment house, he descended to the sidewalk, paid and dismissed the chauffeur without doing him bodily harm—which, considering the size of the fare, was little less than remarkable—and even wished the bandit good-night.

Peret entered the apartment house with a sprightly step. Had he been attending his own funeral he would have done no less. His vast supply of nervous energy had to have some outlet, and even in moments of depression he walked as if he had springs in his heels.

It was long after midnight, and the front hall was deserted. Rather than awaken the elevator boy, who was dozing in his cage, Peret mounted the stairs to the second floor. At the front end of the dimly-lighted hall, he came to a stop and tried the door of his sitting-room. As he expected, he found it locked.

Inserting the key in the lock, he opened the door and entered the dark room. As he replaced the key in his pocket with one hand, he pushed the door shut with the other.

He heard the spring of the night-latch close with a loud *click*. He was about to reach out his hand to find the push-button that operated the electric lights, when, suddenly, his head flew back with a snap and his body became tense.

The silence in the room was suddenly broken by a loud though inarticulate *whisper*—a loud, jerky, sibilant sound, that departed as abruptly as it had come.

The blood in the Frenchman's veins congealed. He could see nothing. The darkness was so intense that he could almost feel it press against his eye-balls.

Moistening his lips, he waited, with every sense alert, half believing that his ears had deceived him. But no. Almost immediately the silence was once more broken by a blood-curdling *hiss*, and, at the same instant *Peret felt an ice-cold breath on his cheek*.

He shuddered, too paralyzed with fear to move. The *hiss*, or *whisper*, seemed to come from in front of him, and in his mind's eye he could see the invisible Thing gathering itself for attack. He shuddered again as *It* moved around in back of him and, after chilling his fevered cheek with its icy breath, whispered in his ear.

There was nothing human about the *whisper*: it had an unnatural and ominous sound, and the breath of the unseen Thing, which now fanned his face, was as cold and clammy as the respirations of an animated corpse.

*Peret* was undoubtedly a brave man. He had the heart of a lion and

the strength of many men twice his size. But for once in his life he knew fear—real fear—a terrible, overpowering apprehension of impending danger.

The tragic happenings in the vicinity of *Berjet's* house were still so fresh in his mind that even his lively imagination could scarcely have lent color to the deadly peril in which he knew he stood. In a flash he recalled everything that *Deweese* had said about the *whispers* and the breathing that had preceded the attack of the monstrous Thing, and he remembered the death struggles of the scientist and *Dr. Sprague*, and their horribly distorted features as they lay stretched out on the pavement at his feet.

Again he heard the agonized scream of the physician and saw his bulging eyes as he battled for his life with the invisible monster.

He wanted to move, to scream, to strike out, to do anything but remain inactive, but, for the moment, he was helpless, for his soul was gripped by the icy fingers of terror. The hair of his head bristled and beads of cold perspiration burst from his brow.

That he stood in the presence of the *Whispering Thing*—the *whispering* and *respiring* supernatural horror that had, but a few short hours before, crushed the life out of the two men whose death he had sworn to avenge—he could not, and did not, for a moment doubt.

*This story will be concluded in the next issue of WEIRD TALES.  
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# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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*The Mystery of the Frightful  
Invisible Monster Is Solved  
in the Last Chapters of*

# The Whispering Thing<sup>\*</sup>

By LAURIE McCLINTOCK and CULPEPER CHUNN

## A RESUME OF THE EARLY CHAPTERS:

**S**TARK terror and mysterious death follow in the wake of an unseen demon, which lurks in the city streets and houses, whispering in the ears of its victims before killing them. Medical examination shows that they were, apparently, strangled to death. One of the victims, before dying, declares the breath of the Whispering Thing is icy cold. Nobody has seen it. Nobody can imagine what it is. Then Jules Peret, French detective who is in America, undertakes to fathom the terrible mystery. After his preliminary investigation, he goes home, and when he enters his darkened rooms he feels an ice-cold breath on his cheek, and he knows he is in the presence of the Whispering Thing.

## THE PRESENT INSTALLMENT STARTS HERE

### CHAPTER VI. (Continued)

#### THE WHISPERING THING

**W**ITH a stifled cry, Peret whirled round and made a frantic, though futile, effort to open the door. In his slapdash haste he struck his head against the jamb and dropped the key.

Cursing fluently under his breath in four languages, he fell to his knees and felt around on the carpet. Failing to find the key, he sprang to his feet and began to fumble on the wall for the push-button.

Before he could find it, however, the Thing again whispered its warning of death in his ear and scorched his face with its icy breath.

Almost mad with terror, Peret threw himself backward and crashed against a chair with such violence that he was almost knocked senseless. For a second he lay still, to gather his forces and to fill his bursting lungs with air. His clothes were wet with perspiration, and his body cold and numb.

Expecting each instant to feel the vise-like grip of the Thing on his throat, he staggered to his feet and made another frantic effort to find the push-button. Remembering the flashlight in his pocket, he was about to reach for it,

when he felt the ice-cold breath of the Thing on his face, and, in an effort to protect himself, he sprang against the wall. What he had been trying for an eternity to accomplish by strategy was now brought about by accident. His shoulder struck the push-button, and the lights flashed on.

Almost blinded by the sudden glare, blinking rapidly to clear his vision, he took a step back and swept the room with an all-embracing gaze.

Except for himself, the room was unoccupied!

It was, in fact, exactly as he had left it earlier in the day. The room bore not the slightest evidence of having been entered during his absence, nor was there anything large enough to afford a human being a place of concealment.

As he stood stupidly surveying the room, the whisper of the invisible menace once more sounded in his ear!

With a cry of terror, Peret whipped out his automatic and, blindly fanning the air in front of him, pulled the trigger until the magazine was empty. A picture fell to the floor with a crash and bits of plaster flew from the walls and ceiling. Scarcely waiting until the last shot was fired, Peret snatched the key off the floor and slipped it in the keyhole.

As he threw open the door, the Thing again whispered in his ear and brushed his face with its clammy breath. With a yell, the Frenchman precipitated himself into the hall with such vigor and rapidity of action that he fell sprawling.

Bounding to his feet, he grabbed the knob and violently slammed the door.

"Victory!" he shouted, and his joy was excessive. "Ah, monster! *cochon! boyeux!* Thing or devil! Whatever you are, I've got you now! *Oui!*"

He shook his fist at the door and hurled at the imprisoned horror a string of excited invective.

"Your hour is come. Your shot is bolt! Assassin! Ghoul! *Voilà!* how you frightened me—me, the Terrible Frog! *Dame!* I am trembling a little yet, I think."

A number of doors along the corridor opened, and men and women in night attire stuck their heads out cautiously.

"I say, old top, what's coming off?" asked one of the startled individuals, catching sight of Peret.

"Nothing," shouted Peret, and wiped the dew from his forehead.

"You are drunk," said another man, disgusted. "Go to bed. You are keeping everybody awake."

"You're a liar!" yelled Peret, and the other, fearing violence hastily closed the door.

Pinching his arm to assure himself that he was not the victim of a nightmare, Peret tried the doorknob to see if the night-latch had, by any ill chance, failed to spring. Having reassured himself on this point, he turned and, taking the steps four at a time, dashed down the stairs.

Scaring the now thoroughly-awake elevator boy nearly out of his senses with

<sup>\*</sup>The first half of "The Whispering Thing" was published in the March issue of *WEIRD TALES*. A copy will be mailed by the publishers for 25 cents.

his wild gestures and still wilder appearance, Peret careened into a telephone booth, and, after being connected with the police headquarters, barked into the receiver a few disjointed sentences that froze the blood of Central, who had been listening in, and made Detective Sergeant Strange, at the other end of the wire, drop the receiver and bellow an order that brought everybody within bearing distance to their feet.

Whereupon Peret, having heard the order as plainly as if he had been in Strange's office, reeled out into the lobby and collapsed in a chair to await the arrival of the homicide squad.

## CHAPTER VII.

### PERET EXPLAINS

AT 9 a. m. on the following morning Jules Peret presented himself at the front door of a small, unpretentious red-brick house on Fifteenth Street, one block from the home of the murdered scientist.

One would never have suspected from his manner or appearance that, eight hours previously, he had battled with an invisible menace in the narrow confines of a darkened room, and had felt stark terror grip his soul before he emerged triumphant from the most harrowing experience of his adventurous career. No one would ever have suspected that, because, to all outward appearance, Peret was at peace with the world and had no thought on his mind of greater weight than the aroma of the cigarette between his lips. Debonair as ever, and attired with the scrupulous neatness that was so characteristic of him, he made a picture that had caused more than one young lady to pay him the honor of a lingering glance when, a half-hour previously, he had issued from his apartment and pursued his way down the well populated thoroughfare.

In answer to the tinkle of the bell the door was opened three inches by the butler, a small, wrinkled, leathery-faced old Chinaman, whose head was as bald and shiny as a polished egg. In one hand he held a faded silk skull cap, which he had evidently just removed from his head or forgotten to put on.

"Whatchee want, huh?" he demanded, with a regrettable lack of civility.

"I want to see your master," returned Peret courteously, extending his card. "Please present my compliments to him, *Monsieur*, and tell him my business is pressing."

"Mlaster no see nobody," chattered Sing Tong Fat. "He sick. Allee samee

dlunk. No see nobody. Clome back nex' week."

"But it is necessary that I should see your master this morning," was Peret's polite but firm retort. "Your master will be glad enough to see me when you show him my card." He displayed his badge of special officer and added, "Get a wiggle on!"

"*Yak pozee!*" shrieked Sing Tong Fat indignantly, and opened the door. "You clazy. Allee samee tong man. Master have you asted." He contorted his face until it resembled a hyena's, and broke into a shrill laugh. "*Tchee, tchee*. (yes, yes.) Allee samee tam fool clazy man."

"You are an amiable old scamp, *Monsieur*," laughed Peret. "But we are losing time, and time is of importance. Where does your master hang out, eh? I will present my own card."

"I tellee him you see him first," chattered the Chinaman. "You wait here. He sleepee. Me wakee him up. He sick. Allee samee dlunk. You wait leddee time. *Tchon-dee-ti Fan-Fu* (it is the will of the master)."

A door on the right side of the hall opened and a man stepped out into the hall. In spite of his disheveled hair and the brilliantly-colored dressing robe that covered his heavy frame, there was no mistaking the handsome features of Albert Dewese.

"S all right, Sing," he said, when he saw who his visitor was. "I decided to get up for a while." Then to Peret: "Good-morning, Mr. Peret. I guess you think I am an inhospitable cuss, what? Fact is, I have been trying to sleep."

"No, I do not think you are inhospitable, *Monsieur*," replied Peret, as he shook hands. "After your experience last night, you need time to recuperate. The wonder of it is that you are able to be up at all."

"I agree with you there!" responded Dewese with feeling. "I told Sing last night when I retired to admit no one this morning until I rang, which accounts for his discourtesy in keeping you waiting. I felt the need of a round twelve hours' sleep to recover from the effects of my adventure, but I haven't been able to close my eyes. I feel as if I shall never be able to close them."

Dewese indeed showed the effects of his near-tragic battle with the Whispering Thing. His face was grayish-white and the heavy black circles under his bloodshot eyes accentuated his pallor and gave him an appearance that was almost ghastly. Had he been stretched out on a bed and his eyes closed, one could easily have mistaken him for a corpse.

Dismissing the garrulous and indignant old Chinaman, he crossed the hall and ushered Peret into a large, well-lighted room that was fitted out as a studio. The walls were hung with canvases of an indifferent quality in various stages of completion, and on an easel near a large double window reposed the half-completed picture of a semi-nude, which immediately caught and held the detective's gaze.

After a moment's critical inspection of the painting, Peret remarked: "You seem to be a busy man, my friend. But I don't suppose you find much interest in your paintings this morning, eh? In fact, you look on the verge of a collapse. Have you seen your physician yet?"

"That's the first thing I did after leaving Berjet's house last night," the artist replied. "He found nothing serious the matter with me, however. Shock more than anything else, I suppose. But to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Mr. Peret? Have you had any success in running down the Thing?"

"Yes and no," answered Peret, and then went on to explain: "We are hot on the trail, but haven't yet succeeded in entirely clearing up the mystery. It was in the hope that you would be able to help me a little that I called upon you this morning. I thought you might like to see the affair through to the end."

"Good!" cried the artist, his feverish eyes glittering with eagerness. "After I had gotten some sleep, I intended hunting you up, anyway. You are right when you say I want to see the thing through to the finish. You can count on me to help you in any way that lies in my power. God knows, there is no one more eager than myself to get to the bottom of this affair! With the Whispering Thing still at large—"

He shuddered involuntarily, laughed, and added, "It is difficult for you to understand my feelings, I guess."

"Perhaps it's not as difficult as you imagine, my friend," said Peret quietly, subsiding into a chair. He selected a cigarette from the case the artist proffered, and continued: "But let us get down to business. First, I will recount a few facts disclosed by my investigations and then explain how you can help me. In the meantime, let us be comfortable. You are as pale as a ghost. Be seated, my dear fellow, I beg of you," he added with solicitude.

"Oh, I am not as bad off as I may appear," declared Dewese confidently, dropping into a chair nevertheless. "I will be all right after a few hours' rest. Now, let me have your story. Naturally, I am consumed with curiosity to hear what you have discovered."

"Ah, you are a delightful companion, *Monsieur*," was Peret's genial response. "Me—I am a great talker, but a poor listener. I will tell you what I know with pleasure. But let me first congratulate you upon the excellence of these Persian cigarettes. *Secret*! But you have a delicate taste, *Monsieur*."

The artist bowed his acknowledgment to the compliment, but impatiently. It was evident that he was eager to hear what the Frenchman had on his mind, and Peret, remarking this, did not keep him longer in suspense.

"I will not take up your time by recounting all that has transpired since I saw you last night, *Monsieur*," began Peret, "and for the sake of convenience I will tell my story in a round-about sort of way. Let me begin with my first attempt to motivate Berjet's murder."

"M. Berjet was, as you are doubtless aware, a scientist of international repute. In scientific circles, in fact, he was a towering figure. I have the honor of having had a casual acquaintanceship with him for several years, and as I knelt beside his dead body on the sidewalk last night I recalled to mind many of the achievements that had brought him moderate wealth and fame. Among other things, I remembered having recently seen a newspaper account of a new invention of his—a poison gas of unparalleled destructive powers, the formula of which several warring nations have been trying to purchase."

"As clues were sadly lacking, and our investigation in his house failed to reveal any satisfactory explanation for Berjet's death, I at once assumed that the motive for the murder had been the theft of the formula. I knew that at least one of the nations that have been trying to acquire the formula would go to almost any length to gain possession of a new and really effective weapon of this kind. I therefore got in touch with the Secret Service, which usually has an intimate knowledge of such matters, and learned several facts that made me more certain than ever that I was on the right track."

"Berjet's poison gas, I learned, is indeed a terrible destructive agent. It is said to be even more deadly than Lewisite. A minute portion of a drop, if placed on the ground, will kill every living thing, vegetable and animal, within a radius of half a mile. Think, then, what a ton would do!"

"Berjet called his invention 'Q-gas.' The formula was first offered to our government for a moderate sum, and rejected, and at the time of his death the savant was negotiating for its sale to the French government."

"Surely, you are not going to try to make me believe that this Q-gas played a direct part in the death of Berjet and Sprague and the attack on me," interrupted Dewese. "Believe me, Mr. Peret—"

"I do believe you, my friend," was Peret's smiling response. "The gas itself played no part in the tragedy last night, but the formula is at the bottom of all of the trouble, as has been suggested. The murders were simply incidental to the robbery of the formula."

"Have you discovered who the robber was?" queried Dewese, with natural curiosity.

"Yes," replied Peret calmly. "Even without clues to work with, this would not have been very difficult. Of the several nations that have been trying to get possession of the Q-gas formula there are only one or two that would authorize their agents to go to such extremes as were employed last night to acquire it, and as virtually all of their agents are known to the Secret Service, our search would have been confined to a limited group of men and women. It would simply have been a matter of elimination."

Dewese nodded his understanding, and the sleuth continued:

"Almost from the very first, however, for reasons which I will explain later, I was led to suspect a man who has since turned out to be a notorious international agent, known in diplomatic circles as Count Vincent di Dalfonzo. During his absence, I made a somewhat hurried search of his rooms after my departure from the scientist's house, but could find nothing to incriminate him."

"One of my operatives, however, a former Secret Service agent, was able to identify him, if nothing more. According to this operative, Dalfonzo, who is one of the greatest scoundrels unhung, at the present time bears the secret credentials of a nation I will leave unnamed, but one which, I have reason to know, has made several unsuccessful attempts to buy the Q-gas formula from Berjet."

Dewese was leaning forward in his chair, an eager listener. As Peret paused to relight his cigarette, he remarked:

"If Dalfonzo is such a notorious character, one would have thought that the Secret Service would have kept him under its eye."

"One would have thought so, indeed," agreed Peret, expelling a cloud of smoke from his lungs. "When last heard of several months ago, Dalfonzo was in Petrograd and he probably entered this country in disguise and has since kept himself well under cover."

"Have you arrested him?"

"I have scarcely had time yet, *Monsieur*," answered Peret. "I feel safe in saying, however, that he will be in the custody of the police within the next twenty-four hours."

"Good! I will never feel safe while this scoundrel is at large, if indeed he really did have a hand in the murders of Berjet, Sprague and Adolphe, and the attack on me."

"Dalfonzo had nothing to do with Adolphe's murder, and only an indirect hand in the attack on you," said Peret. "*Sacre bleu!* Dalfonzo is not the kind of man that strikes down his victims with butcher knives and such; he is a man of delicate ideas and sensibilities, *Monsieur*."

"So it seems," said Dewese drily. "I know that the finger prints on the dagger tend to prove that Adolphe was murdered by his employer, but in the light of the other facts can this evidence be considered conclusive? The prints on the dagger may simply be a trick to confuse the police. The Whispering Thing—But stay! For the moment I had forgotten the Whispering Thing. It seems to me that we are getting away from the main issue."

"Patience, *Monsieur*," said Peret, with an enigmatical smile. "Everything will be explained in good time. But first, let me assure you that the finger prints on the dagger are genuine. Adolphe was undoubtedly murdered by the scientist, and as the penalty for this crime he gave his own life."

Dewese started. The Frenchman's indirect method of telling his story, and the complacency with which he stated apparently contradictory facts, confused and annoyed him.

"You mean—?" he began.

"I mean that Berjet was murdered because he stabbed his valet."

"Well," averred Dewese, unable to conceal his impatience, "all of this is about as clear as mud to me. First you say that the motive for Berjet's murder was the robbery of the formula, and now you declare that he was done away with because he killed his valet. What am I to believe?"

"What you will, *Monsieur*," replied Peret. "Everything I have stated is true, although I confess that as yet I have nothing to prove it. If the facts seem contradictory, it is because I have expressed myself badly."

"According to my theory, Count Dalfonzo (for a consideration of course), induced Adolphe to steal the formula of Q-gas from his benefactor. When poor Berjet learned that he had been betrayed he stabbed the betrayer in

a fit of insane rage and hid the body in the closet in his library until he would have time to dispose of it. Dalfonzo in some way learned of this, or suspected it, and as he already had the formula in his possession, decided that his safest plan would be to murder Berjet before he could communicate with French Secret Service agents operating in this country, who were about to consummate the purchase of the secret. *Eh, bien!* the murder was committed, and but for one little slip, one tiny slip—*Ha; ha!* It is amusing, is it not, *Monsieur?*

"Very!" rejoined Deweese sarcastically. "I think, however, that I have begun to get a glimmer of what you erroneously conceive to be the truth, and that is that Dalfonzo and the mysterious Thing are identical."

"Patience, *Monsieur*, patience," cried Peret. "The glimmer of light that you see is a little of the wisp. Dalfonzo is a man; the Thing is—the Thing. The murders were instigated by Dalfonzo, but were committed by the invisible terror."

Deweese, as had many a man before him, began to wonder if he had to deal with an imbecile or a man by no means as feeble-minded as he seemed. In his puzzlement he stared at Peret for a moment, with mouth agape, then he leaned forward in his chair until less than two feet separated his corpse-like face from Peret's.

"And what the devil is the Whispering Thing?" he asked sharply.

"All in good time," came the amiable reply. "Let us first consider the little slip that upset Dalfonzo's apple cart."

"Well, let us consider the little slip then," said Deweese, relaxing in his chair. "Where did our diplomatic free-lance slip?"

"Why, when he tried to murder me in the same way that he did that poor Berjet," quietly responded Peret.

The artist half rose from his chair and stared at the detective with astonishment written on his face.

"Do you mean to say that you have been attacked by the Whispering Thing?" he demanded.

"Just that, *Monsieur*. I was attacked by the whispering phantom in my rooms last night after I left the scene of the attack on you. You can realize, therefore, that I can appreciate all that you have gone through. It is true that my experience was, in some respects, not as terrible as your own, because I escaped the Thing before it could do me bodily harm. But I never expect entirely to recover from the fright it gave me. *Mon dieu*, what a monster this Dalfonzo is!"

"It was at his instigation that the Thing attacked you?" questioned Deweese.

"Who else?" asked Peret.

"Well," cried Deweese, impatiently, "why do you beat around the bush so much? Be definite. What the devil is the Whispering Thing? And who, exactly, is the man you call Dalfonzo?"

Peret lifted his eyes and gazed steadily at the artist.

"I will answer your second question first, *Monsieur*," he replied, with exasperating slowness. "My answer will explain why I have been beating around the bush, as you call it."

He leaned slightly forward, his right hand in his coat pocket, his eyes smiling, the muscles around his mouth tense.

"Count Vincent di Dalfonzo," he said, "is the man who at the present time calls himself Albert Deweese—*Don't move, Monsieur!* The revolver in my coat pocket is centered on your heart!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED.

IF PERET expected to catch Deweese off his guard, he was sadly disappointed. The artist met his gaze squarely, and without any apparent emotion.

Flicking the ashes from his cold cigarette, he applied a lighted match to it and tossed the charred splinter upon the floor. The corpse-like look of his face became a little accentuated, perhaps, and there was a slight narrowing of the eyes that had not been apparent before; but, except for that, there was no change in his manner or appearance.

For a moment neither of the men spoke. Their eyes clashed and held. The stillness became tense, electric, as they contemplated each other through the haze of smoke that curled from the ends of their cigarettes. Finally:

"You are quite mad, I think," remarked Deweese, unmoved. "Where the deuce did you ever get the idea that I was Dalfonzo?"

Peret was unable to conceal his admiration.

"You are a great actor, *Monsieur*, and a brave man," he declared in a tone that left no doubt of his sincerity. "I told part of my story to test you—a sort of indirect third degree—but so far not a muscle of your face has moved. What a pity it is you are such a damned scoundrel!"

Deweese laughed shortly.

"It is always safe to insult a man when you have him covered," he observed composedly. "Nevertheless, pray continue. You interest me exceedingly, and cause me no annoyance. Your wild

theories brand you a fool and an ass, and, strangely enough, it always gives me pleasure to hear an ass bray. Proceed, my dear chap."

"There are many others whose opinion of me is similar to your own," said Peret blandly; "but the fool is he who holds his enemy in contempt."

Deweese's eyes flashed.

"Well, dear enemy, what makes you think that I am the chap you call Dalfonzo?" he questioned, smiling with his lips.

"You will not admit your identity, then?" countered the detective.

"Certainly I will admit my identity," said Deweese, with a laugh. "I am Albert Deweese, very much at your service. What reason have you for believing me to be the man you call Dalfonzo—a man who, if one is to believe you, seems to be in league with an invisible demon that commits murders for him? The very fact that I almost met my death at the hands of the Whispering Thing is proof that I am not the man you seek. If I had anything to do with the Thing, does it seem reasonable to suppose that I would turn it loose on myself?"

"The attack on you was an accident, *Monsieur*—a bit of retributive justice, perhaps. Were it not for the fact that you still suffer from the effects of it, I would say that you only got part of what was coming to you. Not a full dose of your own medicine, *Monsieur*—just a taste of it. Ah, you are clever, my friend, clever as the fiends in hell; but, it appears, not clever enough. *Diablo, Monsieur*, you should have better trained that terrible monster before you turned it loose, eh?"

"You seem to like to talk in riddles," snapped Deweese. "What is the Whispering Thing, anyway? If you know, I shall be obliged if you will tell me."

Very well, my friend," acquiesced Peret. "I will do so with pleasure. The invisible monster, the terrible, whispering, breathing, fear-inspiring demon is—"

"Well!" demanded Deweese tersely.

"One little bat," concluded Peret— "or rather, two little bats."

Absurd as the detective's statement may have sounded, its effect on the artist was, nevertheless, pronounced. His gaze wavered and his face, if such a thing were possible, became a shade paler. His recovery, however, was almost immediate.

"I do not know what it was that attacked you last night," he sneered. "If may have been and probably was a bat. It is possible that an insect could strike terror in the heart of a delicate little flower like you. But if you think a bat

attacked me—" with one of his chilling laughs—"I can only say that I think you are a poor damned fool."

"There are times that I think the same thing," replied Peret, seriously; "but this is not one of them. I not only think that the Thing was a bat—I know it. And to prove to you how futile it is for you to pretend ignorance of the Thing, and of your own identity, let me reenact in words the tragedy that ended in the death of two good and innocent men."

"Do so," gritted Dewesse, his cold blue eyes glittering. "But if you think you can convince me that the Thing that attacked me was a bat—"

"As I have already stated," said Peret, fixing his gaze on the unwavering eyes of the artist, "the murder of M. Berjet was conceived after you learned that Adolphe had been killed. You deemed it necessary to your own safety. Having completed your diabolical plans, therefore, you lost no time in calling at the scientist's home. Upon reaching your destination, you entered the house by way of the front door, which you found unlocked. The door of the library or sitting-room, on the other hand, was secured."

"You therefore placed a chair in front of the door to stand on and opened the transom over the door. After tying a handkerchief over your mouth and nostrils, you raised the cover of a little box you had brought with you and released a bat in the room. Then you closed the transom and departed from the house as silently as you had entered it."

"The bat proved to be a faithful ally, *Monsieur*. On little rubber pads that you had glued on the upper side of its wings was a preparation used by the Dyaks to poison the tips of their arrows and spears. The preparation, which you used in powdered form, with a few added ingredients of your own, as employed by the Dyaks, consists of a paste made from the milky sap of the upas tree, dissolved in a juice extracted from the tuba root. With one possible exception, it is the most deadly poison known, a minute quantity, breathed in through the nostrils or absorbed into the system through an abrasion on the skin, causing almost instant death."

"When you released the bat in the library, it began to circle around the room and its fluttering wings scattered the powder and poisoned the air to such an extent that poor Berjet had only time, before he died, to realize the significance of the bat's presence in the room and to leap through the window in a vain effort to save himself."

"You, in the meantime, had walked slowly down the street, and when the scientist catapulted himself through the window-sash, you were calmly lighting a cigarette under the corner lamp post half a block away. The complication was one you doubtless had not anticipated; you had thought that Berjet would die an instant death when he got a whiff of the powder."

"Nevertheless, you had nothing to fear, you thought; you had laid your plans too carefully. Like any innocent pedestrian would be expected to do, therefore, you ran back down the street, determined to be in at the finish, to see your work well done."

"All this time the bat—whose mouth and nostrils, by the way, you had protected with a tiny gauze mask from which the creature could eventually free itself—was no doubt flying around and around, trying to find egress from the room. It was while you were standing on the pavement in front of the house, talking with Sprague and Greenleigh, that the bat discovered the broken window-sash and escaped into the open air."

"As it winged its way aimlessly over the sidewalk, it flew close enough to Sprague to scatter some of the powder in his face, and an instant later, continuing its flight, it passed in front of you."

"Dr. Sprague inhaled a fatal amount of the powder, but you breathed in only enough to throw you into a kind of convulsion. The struggles of both you and the physician to get your breath and otherwise to overcome the seizure made it appear that you were grappling with an invisible antagonist. Sprague succumbed almost instantly; but you, after a brief struggle, recovered, and in order to throw me off the track, as you believed, cleverly conceived the 'invisible monster.'"

"Nor did you have to draw much upon your imagination for the 'whispering sound' and the 'icy breathing' of the unholy creature of your mind. The whirr of the bat's wings as it flew past you made a sound not unlike that of a sibilant whisper, while the whiffs of air that the animal's wings fanned against your cheek, suggested the 'cold and clammy breathing' of the mythical monster."

"*Ma foi!* well do I know whereof I speak, *Monsieur*, for I heard the 'whisper' and felt the 'breath' of the Thing myself. The bat that was loosed in my room last night gave me the fright of my life. When its wings brushed against the wall it sounded like a whisper of the devil himself, and when its wings fanned the air against my face, I thought a corpse was breathing death

into my soul. No coward am I, *monsieur*, but the 'whispering' and 'breathing' were so terribly real—which only goes to show what suggestion will do to a vivid imagination. You had talked so earnestly and so picturesquely about the 'whisper' and the 'breath' of the Thing, that when I first heard the whirr of the little animal's wings in the ink-dark room—*Dame!* It makes me shiver yet!"

"Fortunately, however, the bat had been in my room long enough before I entered it to shake all the deadly powder from its wings. The powder had settled and the air was pure before I crossed the threshold of that room, else I would have died a quick and horrible death."

"The same thing is true of the bat that sprinkled death in the face of Berjet. When you and I, in company with the police, entered the scientist's house, the bat had been gone for several minutes, and the stray particles of pulverized death had settled. You realized this, of course, or you would not have entered the room. If Strange and I had entered the house five minutes earlier, you would have let us enter it alone."

Peret took a lavender handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and wiped from his brow some beads of perspiration. A slight moisture was also noticeable on the forehead of the artist, but it was due to another cause. Although he must have known that each world of the detective's was a strand in the rope that was being woven around his neck, he gave no signs of emotion. Inwardly, the strain had begun to tell on him, but outwardly he was calm, confident, almost indifferent."

Restoring the handkerchief to his pocket, Peret resumed: "I confess that at first the case baffled me. Through a mistake of my own, soon to be explained, I got started on the wrong track. Your story of the Whispering Thing did not impress me, although I did not at first suspect you of deliberately trying to deceive me. I laid the Thing to your imagination and wrought-up condition. My skepticism vanished, however, when I reached my rooms, as I have explained."

At first I scarcely knew what to believe. The asphyxiation theory of Sprague and, later on, of Coroner Rane set my mind in motion, but led me nowhere, because it did not fit in with my interpretation of Berjet's last words. As a matter of fact, nothing else seemed to fit in with anything. Clues ran counter to each other and the facts themselves clashed."

"I got my first inspiration when you declared that the breathing of the Thing was cold and clammy, for this made it seem likely that poison fumes had been



fanned in your face by some mechanical device. Had it not been for the horrible experience in my room, this is the theory upon which I should have based my investigation."

"Then you captured the bat?" said Dewese, in a tense voice.

"Oui, Monsieur," nodded Peret. "I tried to shoot the tiny thing, without even knowing what it was; but I ask you in all seriousness, my friend, could one hope to hit with a thirty-two bullet a *chauve-souris* that one could not see? Not I! So I telephoned for the police and they came and conquered it with a tear bomb!

"The bat, *Monsieur*, was then turned over to the city chemists, and they analyzed the traces of powder found adhering to the little pads on its wings. Their report gave me the name of the poison that opened the gates of eternity for Berjet and Sprague."

Peret twisted the needle-points of his slender black mustache and beamed upon his host.

"But why accuse me?" asked Dewese, smiling. "I have no bats in my menagerie—nothing, in fact, but a flea-bitten bulldog."

Peret's face became sober.

"You stand accused not by me," he said solemnly, "but by Berjet, the first of your victims."

"What's that?" asked Dewese sharply. For the first time, he seemed alarmed. He sat up suddenly in his chair, and as suddenly relaxed, but the hunted look that crept into his eyes continued to show how sharply the blow has struck home.

"You start, eh? Good! My reasoning is sound. Yes, my friend; Berjet is your accuser. Just before he died, he uttered two words. The first word was 'assassins;' and the other was a word that I at first believed to be '*dix*,' the French word for 'ten,' which is pronounced *dees*. I thought Berjet meant he had been attacked by ten assassins, incredible as it seemed. That is what got me all balled up, as the saying goes.

"But after I heard your name, and let it roll around in my mind for awhile, I realized my mistake. The dying man did not say *Dix*. He pronounced your name, or rather, your present *alias*, 'Dewese.'

"When realization of this burst upon me, I was so gratified that I decided to lay a little trap for you. I became very excited, you may recall, shouted that I knew what the Whispering Thing was, that the mystery was solved! I wanted you to show your hand, my friend. But I was not looking for you to act through a confederate, and as a result I very

obligingly walked into the little trap which you, in turn, laid for me.

"Who was it that put the *chauve-souris* in my room, eh? Was it Sing Tong Fat? It could not have been you, for you have been under surveillance every minute of the time since you left the murdered scientist's house last night. I think you gave Sing Tong Fat instructions to destroy me over the telephone, for the police report you as having called your house from Greenleigh's drug store after your departure from Berjet's. Ah, that devil of a Chinaman! I was watching him through the kitchen window for a little while this morning polishing silver, and he was singing to himself! *Pardieu!* he has an easy conscience for a would-be murderer, *monsieur!*"

"You have a very fertile imagination," remarked Dewese, when Peret paused to blow the ashes from his cigarette. "But your fairy tale amuses me, so pray continue. In view of the fact that I was near the scene of the crime when Berjet was murdered, it is not difficult to perceive how you might confuse my name with the scientist's last utterance. But how you ever came to identify me with Dalfonzo is past my comprehension."

"That is very easily explained," was Peret's affable reply. "After leaving the scene of the crime last night, I had your house placed under surveillance of the operative I have already mentioned. While he was waiting for me to join him, so we could search the house, he saw Sing Tong Fat through one of the windows and recognized him as your familiar.

"There are very few foreign agents unknown to the Secret Service, and my operative has the record of you and Sing Tong Fat at his finger-tips. He knows that you and the Chinaman have been associated for years, and that at the present time you are working in the interests of Soviet Russia. Sing Tong Fat is not the idiot he appears to be; he is an international agent that several countries would give a good deal to lay their hands on.

"When my operative saw Sing Tong Fat in your house, he did not have to tax his mind much to deduce the name of the 'master' he is serving. Before I joined the operative, some one called Sing Tong Fat on the 'phone and he left the house almost immediately afterward. As the time of the call coincides with the hour you are reported as having 'phoned from Greenleigh's drug store, I have no doubt that the message was from you. As the operative had instructions to wait for me, he did not shadow Sing

Tong Fat when he left the house, which is a pity, for he probably would have caught the old scoundrel in the act of putting the bat in my room. After I arrived on the scene, we amused ourselves by searching your house—this house—thoroughly."

"So it was you prowling around here last night, was it?" said Dewese savagely. "I wish I had known it; you should not have gotten away so easily."

"Then I am glad you did not know," laughed Peret. "Your bulldog and your bullet made it lively enough as it was."

"I hope that you found your search worth while," sneered Dewese.

"No," replied Peret regretfully; "my search gave you a clean bill of health. We did not find the formula or anything else that would incriminate you. Nevertheless, *Monsieur*, your little game has been played—played and lost.

"And you played the game badly, too, my friend. For a man of your intelligence, your blunders are inexcusable. Why did you not leave that blood-thirsty old Chinaman in Russia, *Monsieur!* You can never hope to remain incognito as long as you have Sing Tong Fat in tow. His hatchet face is too well known. Your other blunders were all just as glaring as this one. Why did you linger near the scene of your crime, eh? And introduced yourself to the human bloodhounds that were searching out your scent! Ah, *Monsieur*, I admire your self confidence, but you have an over abundance of it."

"Perhaps," said Dewese, with an ironic smile. "At any rate, it doesn't desert me now. For I know that you cannot convict me. You haven't a shred of real evidence against me, and the chain of circumstantial evidence you have woven around me would be laughed to scorn in a jury room."

"You are right," assented Peret, almost apologetically, "So far I have only been able to reconstruct the crime in my mind by piecing together inconsequential things that do not constitute legal evidence. Surmises, deductions, and a stray fact or two—I possess nothing more, my friend. But for the present they must suffice. Before I am through, however, I promise to tie you up in a knot of incontestable evidence."

"That you will never be able to do," declared Dewese, "for I am innocent of the murders of Berjet and Sprague. I deny any knowledge of the crimes, in fact, except what I saw in your presence last night. However, ever since you have been here, I have noticed your hand toying with the revolver in your pocket, so I presume that I am under arrest, what?"

"What the devil do I want to arrest you for!" asked Peret, with feigned astonishment. "You yourself have said that I have no real evidence against you."

The lids of Deweese's eyes narrowed and the lines around his mouth grew hard. The pupils of his eyes, contracted to half their usual size, looked like points of cold fire.

"If you are not here to arrest me, what's your game?" he demanded.

"Oh, I just wanted to see what effect my theories would have on you," replied Peret calmly, as he rose to his feet. "I am a close student of psychology, and I find much in you that interests me. Thanks for your hospitality, *Monsieur*," he continued, opening the door. "Perhaps I shall have an opportunity to return the courtesy some day, as I have no doubt we shall meet again."

"Rest assured of that," rejoined Deweese, with a sinister smile. "We shall certainly meet again."

"It is written," returned Peret.

He looked at Deweese for a moment, and then, with a bow, withdrew from the room.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE WORM TURNS

WHEN the door had closed behind the detective, Deweese walked across the room and put his ear to the keyhole.

He heard the shrill chatter of Sing Tong Fat as he let Peret out of the house, and the slam of the front door when he closed it behind him. Heaving a sigh of relief, Deweese threw himself into a chair. The strain through which he had just come had been terrific. Ordinarily, he would have found a battle of wits with the detective much to his liking, for it was for just such games as this that he lived. But his experience with the Whispering Thing had left his nerves in such a state that he felt he had been no match for the Frenchman.

Nevertheless, now that he was at least temporarily unembarrassed by the detective's presence, his brain began to function more normally and he set about evolving plans to extricate himself from his hazardous position. What a devil the Frenchman was! The man's powers of deduction smacked of the supernatural. And yet—

He knitted his brow. Recalling to his mind his own blundering, it was not so difficult, after all, to perceive how the detective had arrived at his conclusions. He, Deweese, had laid his plans so carefully, that he had believed detection impossible. But now, viewing the working out of his plan in retrospect, he could

see where he had erred, and cursed himself for his carelessness. His blunders, as Peret had implied, had been too obvious to escape notice. Should not the remarkable accuracy of Peret's reasoning, therefore, be attributed to chance rather than to genius? The accused dying speech of the scientist had given him the key to the mystery, and it was certainly only an ill chance that had led him to be on hand to hear it. With such a clue to work on, he reasoned, the solving of the case had simply been a matter of routine. Without this clue, the detective would have been lost. The fact that he himself had been attacked by the Whispering Thing would have shielded him from suspicion.

As he thought of his chance encounter with the bat, he shuddered. The accident in itself proved his carelessness. It had indeed almost proved his death. As Peret had said, he had been a fool to linger near the scene of his crime, but he had been so sure, so confident, that he had done his work too well to fear detection. As for Peret—well, his very frankness proved that he was something of a fool. Who but an idiot would have exposed his hand when he knew that his opponent held the strongest cards!

Of course, there was a possibility that the Frenchman was holding something back, but what if he was? Was he, Count Vincent di Dalfonzo, "mystery man" of a hundred aliases and acknowledged by the police to be the cleverest international crook outside of prison bars, to be deprived of his liberty and a fortune by an imbecile of a private detective?

He laughed, and his laugh did not sound pleasant. After all, he had the formula, and the game was not yet lost. His blunders had not been as bad as they might have been. He would have been arrested at once, he argued, had Peret believed that there was even the slightest chance of convicting him. It only remained for him to make one imperative move, and then sit tight. The Frenchman was bluffing, or perhaps he was laying another of his diabolical traps. Well, he should see!

After fortifying himself with a stiff drink of whisky from the flask in the table drawer, he tapped the hand-bell on the table, and Sing Tong Fat, as if he had been awaiting the summons, entered the room with noiseless tread.

"Did you let that blankety-blank Frenchman out?" demanded Deweese.

"*Tohèe, schèe*," chattered Sing Tong Fat. "He gone. Me watchee him glo down steeet. He allee samee tam fool clay man. He say he blowee topee head off. *Ho, ho!*" He drew one of the silken sleeves of his blouse across his

face and looked at his master anxiously. "He say polie allee lound house in steeet, *Fon-Fu*. He talkee allee samee Victrolée—"

"The house is still under surveillance, is it?" observed Deweese, wrinkling his brow. "Well, so much the better. We work best when we work cautiously, and we are not likely to be incautious when we know we are watched."

He lighted a fresh cigarette and gazed reflectively at the thread of smoke that curled upward from the lighted end. The drink of whisky had cleared his brain, and, alert, feverishly bright-eyed, every nerve in tune, he was now the man who for years had matched wits with the continental police and eluded them at every turn. Sing Tong Fat, well aware of the seriousness of the situation, shuffled his feet uneasily and waited, with an anxious look on his face, for his "master" to speak.

"Sing Tong Fat," said Deweese, finally, "you and I have been friends and co-workers for many years. We have associated in many dangerous enterprises and I have always been liberal when it came to a division of the spoils. As we have shared the pleasures of our adventures, so too have we shared their dangers. I feel it only fair to tell you, therefore, that our peril has never been so great as it is now. Unless we act quickly we are doomed. You follow me, do you not?"

Sing Tong Fat touched his forehead and gravely nodded.

"It seems as if Fate has been against us from the very beginning in the Q-games business," resumed Deweese in an unemotional tone. "The murder of Ber-jet, while necessary, was unfortunate, and since then we have had one stroke of bad luck after the other. We erred in trying to kill the French detective in the manner we did. He should have been knifed, swiftly, surely, silently. The bat that I instructed you to put in his room failed to accomplish his death and gave him a clue which, if we are not careful, may prove to be our undoing. Most important of all, both of us have been recognized. So you can realize how serious the situation is."

"I await thy command, O Illustrious Master," said the Chinaman gravely, in his native tongue.

Deweese, as if he took this for granted, nodded and proceeded:

"Of the two of us you have the most cunning, and you therefore stand the better chance of eluding the police. This is not flattery; it is wisdom I have acquired through the years of my association with you. You are as elusive as

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# The Whispering Thing

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a phantom when at large, and, when in the toils, as slippery as an eel. Execution of the plan I have formed, therefore, I am going to entrust to you. It is very doubtful if I could slip through the cordon of police around the house but I think that you may be able to do so, and it is very necessary that one of us should. Here, then, is what I want you to do:

"The soviet agent, No. 29, is waiting in New York for the Q-gas formula. He is stopping at the Alpin Hotel. The formula is locked in a safe-deposit box in the Exporter's Bank in this city. The box was rented by me under the name of John G. McGlynn. I want you to take the first train to New York and get No. 29 to return to Washington with you. It is too risky for you to try to telegraph him.

"I will give you a paper authorizing him to open the box and remove the formula. The formula is to be replaced with fifty thousand dollars in gold, the second and final installment of the price No. 29 agreed to pay for the secret.

"After the exchange, which must take place in your presence, you are to rejoin me here and we will settle our score with Peret, and then take steps to extricate ourselves from the net he has woven around us. The most important thing now is the formula. Once we have gotten rid of that, we can doubtless make our get-away. We have done so many times in the past under circumstances almost as trying as the present ones, and we can doubtless do so again.

"What do you think of the plan, Sing? It is filled with danger, but—if you can think of a better one, I should be glad to hear it."

"I agree with you as to the danger," rejoined the Chinaman in a strange voice, and then, very suddenly, he pressed the muzzle of an automatic against Dewesse's temple.

With his free hand he then swept the wax wrinkles from his face and grinned. Dewesse, in spite of the proximity of the automatic, recoiled. The man was not Sing Tong Fat. He was Jules Peret!

"Move at your peril, *Monsieur*," warned the detective. Then, raising his voice, "Hello, major!" he shouted.

The door swung open, and Major Dobson, accompanied by Detective Sergeant Strange and Harvey Bendlow, entered the room. Behind them came O'Shane and Frank, dragging between them Sing

Tong Fat, the latter bound and gagged and minus his skull cap and outer clothing which, needless to say, now adorned the head and body of the mirthful French detective.

"Did you hear the conversation, Major?" cried Peret gleefully.

"Every word of it," declared Dobson, much gratified at the success of Peret's stratagem. "Sergeant Strange and I were watching through a crack in the door and heard and saw all. The stenographer in the hall has it all down. The jig is up, Mr. *Alias* Dewesse," he added, turning to the international agent. "Your goose is cooked, and the mystery of the 'invisible monster' is a thing of the past."

"You devil!" shouted Dewesse hoarsely, glaring at the Frenchman; "you have trapped me!"

"So I have," agreed Peret, wiping the yellow stain from his face with a handkerchief. "But did I not promise you that I would do so? Ah, *Monsieur*, if you but knew what it cost me to keep my promise! Did I not have to sacrifice my hair and beautiful mustache this morning? Still, the wig and false mustache I wore before I donned Sing Tong Fat's regalia looked very natural, did they not? They must have, since they deceived you, my friend. But you should see my head without a covering! it looks like the egg of the ostrich."

He pressed Sing Tong Fat's skull-cap down more firmly on his head and laughed heartily.

"*Ma foi*," he continued, as he removed from his face the little pads of wax that had given his eyes an almond slant, "I almost feel tempted to make my present impersonation permanent. Sing is such a handsome and charming man—which doubtless explains why he fought so hard to retain his identity. When he was seized by my good friends in the vestibule, as he opened the door to let me out awhile ago, he was an astonished and infuriated man. He fought, hissed and scratched like the cat of the alley. And how he glared at them when they divested him of his clothing and helped me to make up my face to look like his own. Look at him glaring at me now!

"My colleagues say I am a mimic and make-up artist of the first order, and when I think how beautifully I deceived you, *M. le Comte di Dalfonso*, I am almost persuaded that they are right."

THE END.