



# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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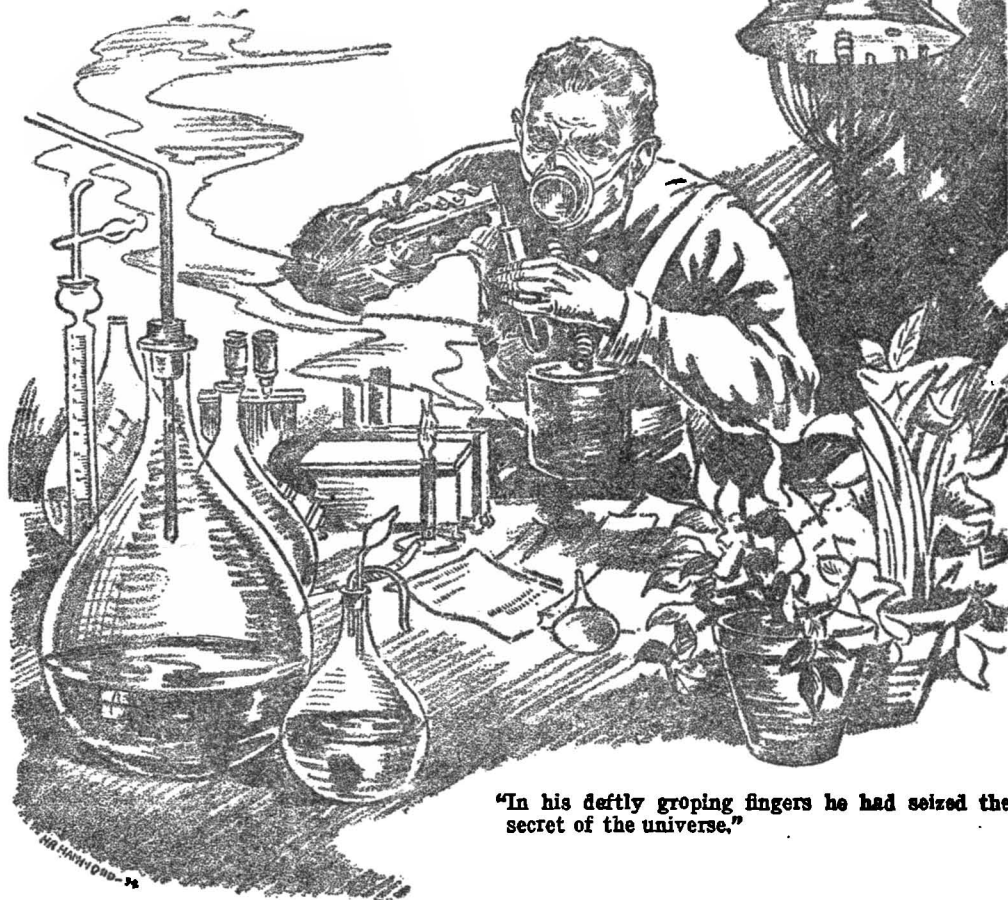
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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# They Called Him Ghost

By LAURENCE J. CAHILL



"In his deftly groping fingers he had seized the secret of the universe."

*An utterly different story—the tale of the most amazing scientific discovery ever made, and the strange being—or beings—that stormed into Goeste Hall every thirty years*

**W**HAT I discovered in the fading light of yesterday's sunset is keeping me stunned in nerve and muscle. Tamper with mysteries, ye who dare! and begrudge not what ye find. There is reason for the icy circulation running in my veins this morning.

"And what is there to be afraid of?" argued Hatch—I can hear his silky voice

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very much as if it were beside me now—"when night-time is the same as broad daylight, only the sun isn't shining?"

I confess I nearly took him at his word. And the Devil himself can witness how nearly fatal that was. I am alive, all that's necessary for the present, and Hatch can't prevent this being written. For the power is at last on *my* side,

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and I have more of the true facts now than Hatch or anyone else has. There is a lot of meat in that saying, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." But my conscience urges me to tell something of what I know.

What man since time began has looked on as strange a sight as I saw last night?

All matters proceed from cause and effect. Remember everything has an explanation as sensible as the 2 and 2 that make 4. What I know this morning numbs me with its reality, and I would be a liar to deny it. Yet I don't expect to surrender to fright, and I'm not intending to quit this house.

The secret of the attic is out, and the *thing* that sought to get into that attic lies up in that desolate place now on the unvarnished floor. For the sixth time I've gone up and looked at it lying there, and I'm wondering just what to do. That's a direct challenge, and I was ready enough for challenges when I came here.

I say "ready," but when I boast on that point I am inaccurate. The enemy was clever and without a word almost compelled me to hand him my full-loaded Colt. Had I let him have the gun I would have become another victim in the mystery of Goeste Hall.

I came here with a charred and crumpled scrap of paper for a guide, an unsigned document on which was written the address of this house and a number of unfinished sentences. In this house something of staggering value was hidden, said the document.

Where that curiously wordy document had been before it reached me I'll never learn. Fire and smoke had given it a black deckle-edge. Sufficient to say that it passed from hand to hand as a "joke" and finally ended its wanderings in my office, where nothing merely puzzling is called a joke until it is looked at twice.

The result of it was that I came here to find out where that treasure of staggering value was hidden and what it might be. And I found that the house was shunned because of a reputation for grisly danger. And the legend of the house was a riddle that no one guessed the answer of. The house "wasn't natural" and was about to be broken up and removed because it kept the land from being purchasable.

A house that "isn't natural" is a house steeped in a ghost story.

In the nick of time I bought the house before the wreckers arrived, and I settled down to live here until its mystery was solved. The danger would be mine alone. And so would be the victory.

Information which I manufactured and gave to newspapers spread all over three states the news that Goeste Hall had lately found a buyer not afraid of ghosts.

I was sniffing the flavor of this riddle and asking danger to pay a call if it cared to.

**I** WAITED for a week.

Then along came a stranger who introduced himself as Hatch, and said, "Interesting place." He paused. "Do you want to sell it?"

Whether upon the wrong track or right on the heels of a hunch, I took in every visible detail of Hatch's appearance before I spoke.

I said, "No."

The face of this fellow Hatch changed slightly at my retort.

"Your answer is 'No'?"

I said, "My answer is 'No'."

Things I had heard and things I had been told seemed very close then, and I could smell their warning closer every second. The riddle of this house as explained to me was a legend that stuck up its head every thirty years or so, and according to the signs it was due to repeat

soon. There were people who pretended to laugh at it, but they were well-meaning people who not only wouldn't live here on a bet but who would shudder at the idea itself. In the matter of the riddle, there was good indication that there was something real about it somewhere. Evidence doesn't have to be rounded off and complete to be convincing. I had that fire-curl'd document which had passed uncomprehended through so many hands — and I was holding it for that grim moment when peril ought to be followed by triumph. If I won, I hoped I would carry no grievous scars. If I died trying, I hoped I'd die quickly.

To untangle the rest of the riddle was my job.

In 1813 the man who owned this house was crippled for life by an unknown assailant who tried to break in and get up into the attic. In 1842 someone else owned this property, and in that year a stranger killed a watch-dog and nearly strangled a servant in undertaking to enter the house and reach the attic. The year 1875 saw the third attempt take place—a heedless and very bloody effort by someone never identified who fought to get into the attic. By that time the house was locked and barred and pretty well fortified to protect those who lived in it.

All the countryside knew the evidence. What did it mean? What was in the attic to attract dangerous strangers? The something of staggering value, so it looked. Yet nobody had ever found it. And although armed with a difficult key to the riddle, I had been unable to find that hidden something myself in the short time since I had bought the house—and I had looked well.

True to the legend, in 1907 a man never seen before in that generation called at the house and made a desperate

dash for the attic. A whirlwind battle ended in his running away and escaping just as police arrived.

The legend is exactly the same every time. One hundred and twenty-one years ago someone with the ferocity of a madman had sought to get into that region upstairs, by way of this door. The same thing had happened every thirty years or so since, and with the old typical touch and treatment. Were they different men each time? Thirty years is a long span apart. Most men well into their full-grown years drop off to the grave before another thirty years pass by. Nevertheless, the ghostly flavor of this riddle grows plain in the suspicion that some particular *one*, and not a train of men, wanted to get into the attic of this ancient house. The graybeards in the village believed that someone had clearly been trying over a century, making his eery attempts to force his way toward some secret no one else had discovered, then lying low for thirty years, and trying again, again and again. The same fellow every time. Not a human being; that's the point. Mortals don't live for a hundred and twenty-one years.

Nothing had occurred since 1907—but the usual thirty-year interval was almost gone by.

Hatch was the only visitor I had had, and I didn't know him from Adam. Why would he want to buy the place?

"Nope," I said to Hatch. "And I guess that's going to be final."

And I stretched my hand out behind the door, into the costumer, and picked up a pistol which I shoved without being seen into my pocket. Pistols and sometimes, so it was said, sawed-off shotguns had been kept in costumers behind this iron-bolted front door for other owners fearful of the thirty-year visitor.

Hatch muttered to himself my answer,

"All right, all right," he agreed, and he smiled. He stepped back a couple of paces and cast his glance over the house swiftly. His turned-up chin was like the business edge of a chisel, and I saw that his whole face was sharp. His age would have been around thirty-five, making him a year or two younger than myself.

"I walked all the way from town to see your place, Mr.—Mr.—er——"

I kept a cynical silence, said nothing.

"Mr. Carter," he succeeded at last. That he was here for a purpose I had already taken for granted, and in the course of events there was no question but that he had learned my name somehow.

"Would you object if I asked to look at the inside of this building called Goeste Hall?" He smiled more brightly than ever, but I felt there was a resolute earnestness beneath his features. "I'd be glad to look at an old house as handsome as this."

It's a long walk from town. "Come in," I said.

He thanked me dryly and stepped with an almost cautious tread through the door. It was a little after six in the evening.

Hand still in pocket, I noiselessly slid back the hammer on my pistol and let it down again.

"You have been told this is Goeste Hall?" I asked, calling it *Gest* as is the habit with people living near here.

He was sniffing deeply and excitedly. "Yes; it's kind of a show place in this part of the state, they tell me."

I nodded.

A STRANGE tingling gripped me. Was this fellow Hatch the newest sign of that extraordinary legend that went with the house? How much of it was really hidden from me? What did I

have yet to learn and what stuff was I gambling with?

"Start downstairs," I advised. "And you can look at the top floors later."

It might be to my advantage to see what this soft-spoken fellow named Hatch would do.

He obeyed my suggestion, and I got the notion that his interest in the lower floor was only half genuine, while I watched him closely. His talk was careful, as if he was mindful not to say something different or unusual. But one careless slip he made and I felt the hair on my neck slowly stir and rise. When crossing through this hall he turned toward that tall white door there, that leads to the attic, and then immediately corrected his direction.

For a moment he had been heading for the attic.

As I thought of it, I had to allow that in ninety-nine guesses out of a hundred it wouldn't have meant anything. Between that white door and the attic is part of the second floor. He might have only intended to inspect the first floor and the second floor with no thought in any way of the attic. A casual mistake, perhaps, his turning toward that door before seeing the rest of the ground floor—except that his conduct wasn't casual. He turned away from that door too quickly, determined not to let me guess what he really wanted.

Neither of us spoke in that silence. I kept my mouth shut, but my brain seemed to be yelling. My paragraph in the newspapers had worked, had hurried the thirty-year visitor to his task again. This certain party was trying to get into the attic, as he had tried in 1813, and in 1875, and 1842, and 1907. The mysterious and terrible stranger was here just as decidedly as the minute then dragging

out its sixty seconds, and he was forcing me, and I was facing him.

He had come for that something of staggering value hidden in the attic.

What did that dilapidated, carelessly scorched document which I possessed really tell me? Nothing but the location of this house and a jumble of fire-bitten sentences. Such writing as, "Truth lets itself be seen in one flash and then men forget. They name it the nightmare or a day-dream. If they recognized it as the great secret. . . . As certain as the circulation of the blood and the beat of the pulse, it comes despite birth and death, in its allotted time."

Cloudy, hazy sentences, meaning nothing, but hinting at something colossal.

This house of legends and riddles and secrets. A cheerless bargain. I now owned it. The mystery was mine to leave alone or grapple with.

Who was this Hatch?

Fast as the sun was setting, light remained to permit me to see his features well. "Calls himself Hatch; he's a man like myself," I thought without being immediately convinced. Even though I believed in a sane summing up of everything, I wasn't certain, wasn't too certain.

Never in my life had I had cause to be cold-sure there are matters that are supernatural. The voice of my soul kept saying, "There can not be anything supernatural about any of this." But my judgment was jarred and sickened. Common sense struggled hard. By force of reason, looking at Hatch, I couldn't stomach the idea that he was different from me.

A puzzle, but strictly a human puzzle. I was arguing against my own doubts. It helps to talk to yourself, but you've got to talk fast!

I must keep cool. No need was plainer than that. Having made a gesture in

the newspaper items about myself buying Goeste Hall, I was positive that some day the ageless baffling visitor would return. What he would look like I hadn't been able to imagine. In spite of all his knocking on this front door for intervals covering at least a century and a quarter, he must for ever hold on to his diabolical strength—for he never weakened with age and he was always likely to attack violently.

What was in the attic that he wanted?

Attack, violently. Pretending that he had not gone to the door at the foot of the attic staircase, Hatch stood in a quiet attitude with open hands at his sides. Violence, none. Self-controlled. Canny and crafty. In the four times he had been at this house he had learned something. Hatch-or-whatever-his-name-was was making haste more slowly, not making his bloody effort with the foolish clumsy impatience that ruined him four times before.

A FEW seconds went by. It must have been like a year to both of us. Tongue silent, I said in my own thoughts, "Hatch, here is one fool who is going to find out what you're after. But if anybody gets hurt it'll be we two fools together, not one."

Pocketed in my coat, the stock of the pistol was slippery with the sweat from my hand.

"Suppose you tell me, Mr. Hatch, why you are in this house?"

Delay I figured would only waste time, and on that assumption I made the first move.

His face gave a dull response to my question, as much as to say he didn't begin to understand me, and the hat he held clutched in the tips of his fingers loosened in that clutch and slid to the floor.

As he stooped to pick up his hat I bent forward myself to get every mood revealed in his expression. Papers sprayed out of his coat and at the same time the pistol plunged out of my pocket. They lay between us on the carpet, papers and pistol.

Quicker than I usually act, I recovered the gun and cased it again where it had been.

Hatch fumbled and lifted the stuff he had dropped at his feet. He saw me replace the gun, and an effect of some kind crossed his face. But he was smart. His eyes were dull and steady.

"Those papers of yours show diagrams of the plan of a house," I said. "And I've got a notion I saw the name of Goeste Hall, too, written upon them."

"Quite right, Mr. Carter," he replied. His voice was deliberate.

"What about it?" I challenged.

He swallowed. His eyes were still like stone and very steady. "Why are you carrying that gun, Carter?"

I was impressed by the artfulness of this caller Hatch in trying to put me on the defensive instead of answering my question. I didn't allow this strategy to trip me.

"What are you here for, Hatch?" I repeated.

In the middle of another swallow he changed expression and grinned suddenly. "Don't tell me, Mr. Carter, that the legend of this house is scaring you?"

Playing up to that cue, I grinned myself. "No part of it, Hatch. Nothing scares me. But I'm living here with the sole purpose of finding out what it is you want. And what you wanted over one hundred years ago."

Hatch chuckled quietly. "I understand." He looked leisurely around the ceilings and walls. "I don't blame you.

A place like this with a ghost tag on it would get anybody uneasy."

Possibly some fifty inches separated us as we stood here talking. And I decided that if Hatch came closer I'd do well to strike him down first and figure it out afterward.

"You know there is a legend of an eternal and inhuman visitor to this house," I said to him. "Are you willing to spill what you know?"

"Why would I refuse?" Hatch smiled indulgently. "I don't have to. There are no ghosts in this house. A misunderstanding, maybe."

"Thank heaven we're getting somewhere," I re-countered in the best of humor. "And what is the misunderstanding?"

"Anything I know about the mystery of this house is yours, gratis, Mr. Carter," he offered. "Mind if I sit down when I say it?"

I nodded to that chair on the other side of this hall. It was still fifty inches away.

"Carter," said Hatch, chuckling, and swinging one foot with an odd lightness, "do you think I'm a ghost?"

The temperature of the hall was forty degrees below blood heat and I shivered at that moment.

"You are going to tell me what you're here for," I replied.

Hatch's shoulders hunched casually.

"Charles Goeste, the man who built this place," he spoke with easy acquaintance, "was a pioneer in botany. He lived in 1783 and he was crazy about plants. Not much deviltry to that, eh? He knew more about plants than any other man in his day, and a lot more than any man has learned up to this time. He was selfish, close-mouthed. Except for an assistant of his, named Luke, no one else ever shared his work. Other botanists came to Charles Goeste for information, but

they never got any. They knew he made records of what he did in several notebooks, which he probably kept in the attic here where he worked. And when he died they sought to get at those notebooks—and because I'm a botanist myself, Mr. Carter, you see me here this evening hoping to find what they sought."

I didn't take my eyes off Hatch's face. "Simple, isn't it, Mr. Carter?"

Certainly. Too simple. Even if I had been a total stranger to the case, that kind of plausible story would have reeked with suspicion. What was I to do? Talk and with presence of mind keep on talking. Each of us was trying to throw the other off his guard.

"These men," I reviewed, "who called at the house and who wanted to rummage the attic in the years 1813, 1842 and 1907, were botanists? After nothing else but Charles Goeste's tame secrets about plant-growing?"

Hatch shrugged. "What else? Isn't that more sensible than a foolish ghost story, Mr. Carter?"

I let that go. "Nevertheless, Hatch," I remarked, "there was a murder committed here in the early days of this house."

"There was," he admitted quietly.

"How do you know?" I parried.

He changed his position and I saw that for the first time he was startled and unprepared. But his voice was bland.

"Nobody can be sure," he evaded with a prankish grin. "Charles Goeste was jealous of his discoveries. Perhaps he murdered his assistant, Luke. A visiting botanist might have been killed by Goeste in a professional argument. An accident might have looked like a murder. I don't believe any of it, myself. You'll have to agree that botanists aren't men of bloodthirsty traits."

HATCH was a liar. Of that I was sure. My right hand didn't shift from the gun warming in the pocket of my coat.

And suddenly Hatch made a light statement that gave me an unexpected jolt. "I have a notion, Mr. Carter, that the reason a legend has been created about this house is that Charles Goeste's name was pronounced differently when he was alive. Today they call this place *Gest* Hall, and when they speak of its builder they call him Charles *Gest*. But in 1783, when he was living, they called him *Ghost*. See?"

At just about that time upon my shoulders approaching evening settled clammy like the pressure of a million fingers.

I knew Hatch missed nothing as he saw me wince with irritation. "A man's name is spelled G-O-E-S-T-E, and it's pronounced, *Ghost*. For intelligent adults such as us, Mr. Carter, that's silly. We have no truck with the kind of people who fear the darkness and evil spirits. And what is there to be afraid of," he purred, "when night-time is the same as broad daylight, only the sun isn't shining?"

Sound, sensible logic, given with a laugh, is like throwing cold water on a foolishly glowing imagination. It was almost a relief to wriggle out of this with the conclusion that there was no mystery, no riddle, and no secret thing in the attic.

Very vague and useless seemed those sentences: "Truth lets itself be seen in one flash and then men forget. They name it the nightmare or a day-dream. If they recognize it as the great secret. . . . As certain as the circulation of the blood and the beat of the pulse, it comes despite birth and death, in its allotted time."

What was that battered document worth? It had been laid on my desk because others had knit their brows and then laughed at it. The ravings of an



untraceable and long-forgotten maniac, they had agreed. Were they right? Was Hatch's story true?

Vigilance slowly being undermined, I began to get disgusted with myself for the dramatic way I was elaborating this visit of a man interested only in plants.

It would have taken little enough time for me to lift the pistol from my pocket, hand it over to Hatch, and say, "I'm ashamed of my superstitious doubts. If you can do so, accept my apology for being a bad host. I'm glad you made it plain I've been an idiot. Go up to the attic if you would like, stay as long as you want and leave when you please. For the rest of this, let's forget it."

On the edge of making all these statements I suddenly noticed that Hatch was staring keenly at my coat where the pocket wrapped the pistol I would that minute have surrendered to him.

A chill new as frost swept through me. Deadly danger was no farther than those fifty inches from where I watched. My five senses got the flavor all at once.

Here was a ghost or a something that lived for ever and whom threats couldn't hurt. Its name was Hatch. It sat immovable, waiting for me to relax my defense.

How firm was my health, how solid were my nerves? Could I protect myself if some demon's prank happened that I never experienced before?

"Carter, you're no coward," I murmured to myself. "Get what information you need to get from this that calls himself Hatch, solve the riddle of this house, and then throw him out or die yourself, defeated."

Facing the attic staircase, my chair was nearer to that door than his. From some remote corner of my mind came an idea that was good because there was none other either worse or better.

"Mr. Hatch, I don't say you're wrong, and I'm not sure I'm right. There are questions about this house that aren't answered. But I have a kind of scientific nature myself. You're a botanist, you say. If Charles Goeste left scientific secrets I'm as willing to see them as you are. I'll take you to the attic if you'll tell me what those secrets are you expect to find."

Hatch stood eagerly. He, the thirty-year visitor, was attic-bound. Meanwhile, while forging up those stairs he figured he could content me with any line of talk. Talk was cheap. Talk would pull the wool over my eyes. I wouldn't be able to follow him, whatever he said. My scientific claims had been made in a blustering tone of voice. Evidently I was a fraud. Hatch's face plainly showed he had no objections to talking to a self-important bluff.

"All right, Mr. Carter," he agreed, "if you'll lead me up those stairs."

"No; you first," I directed politely, and I curled a finger around the trigger of the pocket-heated gun.

"Know anything about plants?" inquired Hatch. I could see that he beat down the temptation to leap to the attic in a wild dash.

"Well—well—that is——" I stammered, giving him further cause to smile at me for a fool.

"Charles Goeste stumbled upon one fact about plants," continued Hatch smoothly. "He found that in five generations of plant life a plant was reproduced exactly in every way. Do you get that? A plant dies, and returns among its own offshoots five generations farther along. It's the same plant."

I GAZED up at Hatch stupidly. A hint of what this was all about was beginning to dawn in me, but it wouldn't do to let Hatch know I followed him closely,

"You're a scientist, are you, Mr. Carter?" Hatch looked leering over his shoulder at me and laughed at my expression. "Well, scientific friend, that was Charles Goeste's secret and I intend to find it among his note-books tonight. He went farther than plants." Hatch chuckled. "Using that fact about plants being reborn in five generations, cell for cell, he tested it upon animals."

At that moment Hatch laughed again, and his laugh echoed stridently up the stair well.

But I didn't laugh. The hair on my neck had started to bristle a second time. Faster I gripped the pistol, for bit by bit the unholy riddle became as clear as ghastly white light.

Charles Goeste had indeed stumbled upon something. In his deftly groping fingers he had seized the secret of the universe. Nobody could ever know any more, either among the living or the dead. The whole and entire truth about life was revealed by a grubby plant—a plant that grew and died and left seeds that grew and died so rapidly that these deaths and births were like a moving picture to Goeste's canny eye. At the end of five generations of reproduction a plant, in the words of Hatch, was *the same identical* plant it had been those five generations back — *it was reincarnation!* Without doubt Goeste made good his astounding knowledge by observing insects that bred swiftly and lived and died in rapid cycles. Then small animals. The law of back-to-earth in five generations was as true as the law of gravity. Everything that lives, from the bacteria to the human being, obeyed this law!

A man returns to the human race in his natural flesh and blood about one hundred and fifty years after he dies. He keeps on returning, for thousands of years, millions of years. I was living

when the dinosaur and the saber-toothed tiger roamed the world. So were you. I'll live again until the earth crumbles and dissolves. You will also.

"So science is one of your hobbies, Mr. Carter," bubbled Hatch light-heartedly. He pushed open the attic door and I was close to his heels, trembling in my knees and aching with a fierce tension.

No wonder murder had been committed over Goeste's priceless note-books! Nothing remarkable now about Hatch or others like Hatch coming here ever since Goeste died, rabidly seeking his alleged written records.

If a man knew all that Goeste managed to find out he'd possess Aladdin's lamp of the past, present and future. He might be able to trace his own past lives. He might accumulate all the experience of his earlier existences. What is more important, he might be able to plan in advance what he should do when he lived again. He'd be the only superman ever born.

An upright fellow, with this knowledge at his use, could be an agent for immeasurable good; but if he were vicious he could plan horrible evils.

Where Hatch got the clues he brought with him I didn't yet know; but that he was a powerful and dangerous type to own such clues, I didn't doubt after reading the cunning meaning in his face.

The scrap of document that had led me to this house—its queer text began to take a definite shape and outline.

I couldn't be positive how much of a normal man or what part of a reincarnation Hatch was as each moment increased the risk of my problem. To make him divulge whatever he could was my stubborn intention. How far was it safe to go? Was Hatch's knowledge already so superior that he could outtrick me and my loaded Colt when he finally decided to do that? It was a bleak consolation to know

that in its very grim way time would settle this conundrum.

I still looked dumb and bewildered when Hatch took the drawn diagrams of the house—diagrams brittle and stained—from his coat and consulted them while standing in the middle of the attic. His bird-like features were sharpened abnormally by suspense. Silence in that place and at that time would have been unbearable but for Hatch's noisy breathing.

The under pitch of the roof engaged his attention, and from his pockets he produced a steel jimmy with which he pried out a false partition.

Into his hands fell Goeste's seven note-books, and a number of other odd documents.

Hatch nearly went crazy with delight.

And what I thought was the rotting vibrations of the floor was the rattling of my heels as nervous tremors went through my bones.

There might arrive no better moment than this for slashing those notes out of Hatch's fingers and driving him from the house. He had been of service and now he certainly should be halted before the advantage crept into his palm once and for all.

Impressed as I was at the significance of the things I had heard in his contemptuous voice, I hadn't been aware how paralyzing these things had grown. My hand felt cold and half dead as it drew the pistol from its place.

I never completed that move. For it became apparent that I wasn't looking at Hatch—I was looking at *Goeste*. Only Goeste, born again five generations later, could handle those papers so naturally. Hatch was Goeste!

My teeth were chattering.

The white flare of truth was more ghastly than ever. It was Goeste who had kept his jealous secrets to himself, who

murdered his assistant, Luke; Goeste who had plotted schemes for returning to his house and continuing his work when he was born again. Goeste had returned in 1813. Goeste had returned in 1842. And he had beat vainly on this front door in 1875 and 1907.

Charles Goeste, calling himself Hatch, had said to me at this front door half an hour ago, "Interesting place. Do you want to sell it?"

Hatch was his name now for the common and ordinary reason that names change as generations intermingle.

Clearer now was that document in my possession, probably written by no less than Goeste in person. He had left careful instructions to be passed down through the family and its different generations, so that *he* himself would see those instructions and recognize them when he was born again. He would recognize them as having been his own instructions, and he'd go and find those note-books he had cunningly packed away before he died. And yet how would he understand those mystifying instructions and recognize them as having been written by himself?

**B**IT by bit, the explanation naturally emerged into the light as I pondered it.

Only a scrap of Charles Goeste's instructions had I seen, and that scrap, carelessly treated, had been half destroyed by fire. He must have *left other copies*, more complete, of that document, so that in whatever branch of the family he cropped up again, reborn, there would be one or more of those documents near enough to compel his attention. And he'd read, and recognize. . . .

"Truth lets itself be seen in one flash, and men forget. They name it the night-

mare or a day-dream. If they recognize it as the great secret. . . ."

There was the key, explained more fully in some other family copy of that document, some copy not half burnt or half obliterated; some copy upon which Goeste had at last got his hungry hands. Goeste, getting around under the name of Hatch, had seized the key at last. For in sleep, "They name it the nightmare or a day-dream," and perhaps only once in a lifetime, a man remembers something of his past dead lives. He remembers, wakes and forgets. All of us, I who am writing and you who are reading, remember dreaming perhaps just once of curious events *we never saw in this life*. But Goeste with those precautions would not forget. He had so arranged matters that he *couldn't* forget. He'd be instantly reminded of the musty documents all different members of the family always read and puzzled over. And he'd recognize the absolute link between his dream and particular passages of those mystifying documents. He'd recognize *himself!* The *attic!* To the *attic!* . . .

Every thirty years or so? 1813, 1842, 1875, 1907? What explanation to that?

Another cryptic sentence in the smoke-blackened copy of that immortal document: "As certain as the circulation of the blood and the beat of the pulse, it comes despite birth and death, in its allotted time."

There was the proof of the thirty-year interval and how it worked. It mattered not that a man died early or late, thirty years from the time he last dreamt that magic glimpse of former lives he'd dream of the past again—even though he died and was reborn meanwhile. In thirty years, a little more, a little less, he'd dream again, and it might possibly be in the same lifetime if he lived to a great old age. But to a great old age Goeste

never lived. Four successive times he had died remarkably young. Had he hastened his own deaths to speed a course to the Fifth Generation when he would be Charles Goeste fully and completely again? You could only guess at that. Legend said he was always a grim *young man* knocking on this door. Every thirty years, a shade more or less—as often as he dreamed of his past lives and recognized the connection between the dream and the brittle old documents.

Every thirty years, a shade more or less, the dream aroused him to a realization that he was Charles Goeste *or a part of Charles Goeste* with strains of other ancestors in him, and he'd be drawn to this house as to a magnet—drawn here just "as certain as the circulation of the blood." It was a clockwork cycle which made one important blood corpuscle travel thirty years through all the cell-structure of the body, transmuted from father to son, before it reached the brain once more and caused the strange flashing dream again—a dream that was just a glimpse; it never stayed long. And for all his documents even Goeste couldn't keep his hold on that dream more than a brief while. For a short vivid space of time he'd remember the dream, recognize the documents, and understand what was waiting for him in the attic. He would storm at this door, fail, and then lose his grip on the past and forget.

Or perhaps it had not been Goeste at all! Perhaps it was but an atavistic memory. Goeste's great discovery may have so impressed him with its world-shaking significance, that it was imprinted upon the germ-plasm and transmitted to his descendants, one of whom in each generation gained a flash of this inherited memory and came storming into Goeste Hall—in 1813, in 1842, in 1875, and in 1907.

But the thirty-year impulse which had aroused him yesterday was the time of his highest opportunity, because, whatever his name now, he was soul and body the Charles Goeste he had been one hundred and fifty years ago. The canny Charles Goeste of 1783. For this was the Fifth Generation!

So I patterned and pieced it to myself as anybody would have done with the facts spilling like water through a broken dam.

**H**ATCH, in my mind Goeste, pawed over his papers. I watched him. Queer cries of satisfaction, of a whining kind more animal than human, escaped his throat.

There were no lights in the attic. The setting sun was slanting almost horizontally through a dormer window. Hatch had resourcefully taken a Colonial beveled mirror off the wall and stood it on a table so that its reflected red sunlight lit up the documents he devoured.

Strange words filed across the Goeste-written manuscripts. Unearthly pictures and unconventional designs. I bent over them myself and for a while—I lost track of how long—forgot the pistol in my pocket as I thumbed those dusty heaps of evidence with both hands.

Gone was my caution and any recollection of the peril I was in.

A steel-engraved portrait turned up in

that bundle of stuff, a nearly camera-fine drawing of a man labeled "Charles Goeste." By that time either Hatch's teeth or my own were chattering like knives. Hatch's supreme intake of breath might have fallen on my ear. It might have been a sidelong sight of his raising arms in the mirror that saved me in that sunset hour. I'm not sure. But he was inches from my throat when in a frenzy of action I drove him to the floor with a whipping left fist that split his ear at the base of his brain and knocked him senseless.

Yet I ignored him and with eyes that must have been red as fire stared at the portrait.

There was no sound, and yet thunder seemed to roll through the attic. For here was revelation and there was no mistake about it. What I saw in the mirror and what I saw in the portrait matched as one.

I was Charles Goeste!

Old memories and shadows stirred in my burning consciousness. I was Charles Goeste, and all I had once learned was as new worlds to me. At my feet lay Luke, the crafty assistant who had vainly sought that hidden partition and its note-books when I prepared them both, and who had to pillage the copies of my instructions from different generations of the family—Luke, who had killed me those one hundred and fifty years ago to intercept my secrets.

