

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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# Unholy Night!

By  
Hugh B. Cave

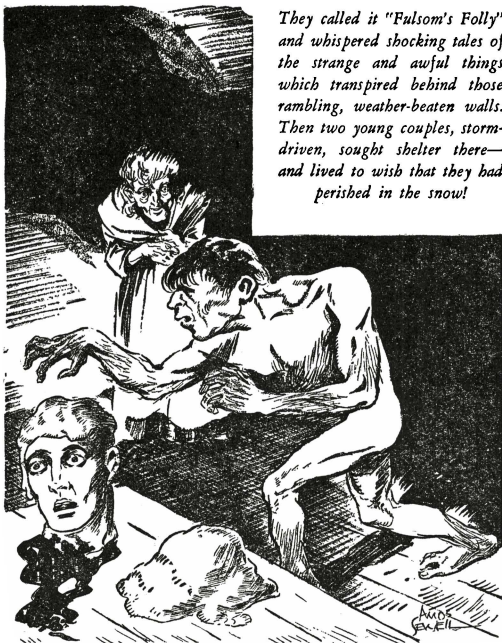
*Author of "Devils in the Dark," etc.*

Complete  
Mystery-Terror  
Novel



**T**HE parchment-faced old woman worked her thin lips into a crooked smile, rocked back and forth on her small feet, and said leeringly in a sing-song voice:

"Well, ain't we lucky now? Here it is a terrible stormy night, and the wind brings us a handsome young man and his



*They called it "Fulsom's Folly" and whispered shocking tales of the strange and awful things which transpired behind those rambling, weather-beaten walls. Then two young couples, storm-driven, sought shelter there—and lived to wish that they had perished in the snow!*

pretty wife. You ain't afraid of us, are you, dearie?"

Carol Lane retreated step by step from the old woman's gaze, seeking the security of her husband's arms. Alan Lane stood rigid, glaring first at the woman, then at the woman's husband—the middle-aged, gray-haired man who called himself Malcolm Converse.

Two hours ago, in a second-rate hotel in a small town fifty miles south, a hawk-faced, shrewd proprietor had leaned over the desk and said significantly, in an undertone:

"Fulsom's Folly, they calls that place, sir. And it's more'n that, I'm a-tellin' you. It's the only house on the road, and it's a queer, broodin' kind of place

with queer people livin' in it. On a night like this there ain't a soul hereabouts as would go near it. More'n one person has traveled that road on wicked nights like this, with the wind a-howlin' and the sea ragin', and never come out t'other end! You two people be a-honeymoonin', I can see that; and if I was you—"

The wind was howling now, moaning through the upper recesses of this strange structure like a voice in torment. A roar of not-too-distant surf beat a muttering accompaniment, as gale-whipped water foamed over jagged rocks, somewhere outside. Alan Lane wished that he had taken the hotel proprietor's advice and spent the night in town. But there had seemed no good reason why they should not press on—and they had had no intention of stopping at "Fulsom's Folly." Only for the rising fury of the storm and a stalled engine, half a mile down the road, they would now have been safely at their destination in the next town. Lane frowned. A strange house, indeed! And it nurtured stranger people—Alfred, the butler, whose tongue, Malcolm Converse had told them, was forever silent; Peter Vine, the caretaker, whose face was a floating, expressionless mask beneath tangled black hair; Malcolm Converse, himself, whose studied politeness was somehow suggestive of things evil and abnormal; and Nora, his wife, so small, so shriveled that she seemed a child, yet in reality was old, very old.

A strange house, and strange people. Yet only half an hour ago, when Alan Lane had stumbled blindly through the vicious storm outside, with his wife sobbing incoherently beside him, half frozen and nearly blinded by swirling snow, the huge, gaunt structure had seemed a haven of retreat.

Now he and Carol were destined to spend the night here. The storm had risen to even greater heights; its sinister

voice was a whining howl of triumph outside.

Lane shrugged and turned to his wife, trying to hide his growing uneasiness behind a cheerful grin. He and she were not the only ones who had sought shelter in this sinister old house tonight! According to Malcolm Converse and the old woman, two others had been driven here by the storm—a young six-footer, Jerry Cassidy by name, and his girl companion, both suffering from cold and exposure. Their car, too, had yielded to the howling sweep of the storm, had in fact careened off the road and cracked up, so that Cassidy had come stumbling to the house, seeking shelter, with a terrified girl in his arms . . . . The girl, Myra Carver, was now sleeping somewhere upstairs, with Cassidy occupying the adjoining room.

"Well, why don't you two go to bed?" Nora Converse demanded evilly. "Your wife needs her beauty sleep, young man! *Don't* you, dearie? You want your handsome young husband all to yourself, so he can tell you how pretty you are." Her thin lips curled bitterly. "Come along then! I'll show you to your room!"

Malcolm Converse said nothing. The woman paced rapidly to the door, motioning Alan Lane and Carol to follow her.

With short quick steps the strange old woman marched down the central corridor, ascended a wide, winding staircase. At the top of the stairs she halted, held a glowing match to a gas-jet in the wall, said curtly:

"This place is so old, you'd think we'd have electricity up here now! But we ain't, so you'll have to make the best of it."

She paced on again, stopped suddenly as a door opened ahead of her. A tall, straight figure, garbed in gray flannels,

a long smock, leather slippers, stepped over the threshold.

"This is no time to be working," the woman frowned. "You should be in bed."

The man shrugged his shoulders, glanced casually at Carol and Lane. He was obviously Malcolm Converse's son, possessing the same even features, the same large build.

"This is Russell," the woman said curtly. "My boy."

Russell smiled, extended his hand. "How do you do?" His smile changed to a pleasant grin. "Devil of a night out, isn't it? We're right over the water, you know." He laughed good-naturedly. "This old house is full of creaks and groans, and on a night like this we hear every last one of them."

Nora Converse snorted, dragged her guests away. She stopped before a closed door, opened it, and made a light in the room beyond. Stepping back, she smiled evilly, glared at Carol and Lane as if she hated them.

"Well, you can be alone together now, and make love all you want to, and no one'll bother you. That is, I *hope* no one will!"

THE door clicked shut. Alan Lane and his wife, standing close together, studied the room in which they were to spend the remainder of the night. It was a small room, low-ceilinged, poorly furnished, with faded rose-paper on the wall and a worn carpet covering three-fourths of the unpainted floor.

Lane walked slowly to the single window, raised the shade, and peered out. The drooling glass rattled to the impact of a sweeping wind outside. Another sound, the thunder of storm surf roaring over unseen rocks far below, beat its way into the chamber.

"Fulsom's Folly," Lane muttered. "Strange, queer place."

He groped in his coat pocket, produced a folded travel-leaflet which he had taken from the hotel desk that morning. Scuffing the pages, he read the printed words aloud.

"Fulsom's Folly. This most interesting house is situated midway between the towns of Thornton and Gorham, on Route 17-C. The structure was erected in 1870 by one Asa Fulsom, and was dubbed 'Fulsom's Folly' because the builder apparently allowed his imagination full play, with fantastic results.

"The huge house contains eighteen legitimate rooms, nine on the first floor, seven on the second, two in the attic or loft. The loft, contrary to all accepted rules of architectural design, extends twenty feet or more beyond the base of the building and actually overhangs the sixty-foot cliff upon which the house is built.

"The building itself is a veritable maze of corridors, stairways, and so-called secret chambers. The cellar alone contains many strange rooms and extends deep into the cliff upon which the house is built. Other oddly designed 'secret rooms' are scattered throughout the upper part of the structure.

"Fulsom's Folly is at present owned by Mrs. Nora Converse, a direct descendant of the builder, and is occupied by the Converse family. Unfortunately, during recent years it has not been open to inspection by the public, but—"

Lane stopped reading, stood suddenly motionless, his head uplifted. A soft scratching sound had invaded the room, as if someone in the corridor outside, or in an adjoining chamber, were dragging sharp fingernails along the wall.

Lane turned abruptly to face his wife, saw that she too had turned and was staring intently, fearfully, at the wall near the bed.

Then suddenly Lane stiffened, gave

voice to a low exclamation. He took a step backward. Carol, stumbling against him, clung to him with nerveless hands, trembling in every muscle.

With startled, unbelieving eyes, Lane stared unblinkingly at a section of the wall above the bed. That section was slowly moving outward leaving a widening black aperture.

Then there appeared something else, something that came forward with tantalizing slowness to fill the gaping space. In the aperture leered a face, a ghastly white face which hung like a floating death's head, suspended in emptiness with nothing to support it. Like a hideous three-dimensional oil painting it hung there, framed in blackness.

The mouth was open, displaying crooked, gleaming teeth. The eyes were twin tubes of immeasurable hate, boring straight into Lane's own. The face itself was a thin, gaunt gargoyle of evil incarnate.

Lane stood rigid, returning the thing's evil glare. His hands doubled into fists, and he took a slow step forward, freeing himself from the clutching fingers of the girl beside him.

Then, abruptly, he was staring at nothing. The face was no longer there; the wall was once more a solid surface, unbroken by any black aperture.

For a full moment Lane stood utterly without motion, fists clenched, lips curled in a snarl. But there was nothing to snarl at. Slowly he advanced, reached out a lean hand to explore the wall with probing fingers. Behind him, Carol said in a low voice:

"Be careful, Alan! Oh God—don't!"

He hesitated, then turned, and took her in his arms. He said savagely: "All right, we're getting out of here. Out of this room, out of the house. Storm or no storm—"

He stopped talking. From somewhere

nearby came a sound that stifled the words on his lips and sent a sort of tingling, apprehensive tension through all his muscles. The sound came again—a shrill, jangling cacophony of hideous laughter, full of menace and triumph. It sucked the breath from Lane's throat, left him staring with wide eyes at the wall.

Somewhere in the maze of corridors and chambers which networked the surrounding darkness, a woman was laughing shrilly. The sound rose to a hoarse cackle, then ceased abruptly, leaving grim significant silence in its wake.

With a low growl rumbling in his throat, Lane strode to the door, clamped one hand on the knob. Then, very slowly, the color ebbed from his face. He took a step backward, and another, and stood rigid, staring at the wooden panels.

*The door was locked.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Darkness and Terror*

IN THE living-room downstairs, the clock on the mantel struck once, with a hollow, resonant whine. Malcolm Converse, sitting before the fire, glanced up and scowled. From the servants' quarters in the rear came a short, stumpy shape, pacing along the central corridor.

The man's feet were encased in heavy woolen socks in lieu of slippers; and he wore a ragged red bathrobe over dirty pajamas. Muttering to himself, he stood in the living-room doorway, stared at Malcolm Converse, and said thickly:

"You want me to lock up now? Huh?"

Converse nodded heavily. "Yes. Yes, Peter."

Peter Vine, the caretaker, made a grumbling noise in his throat as he turned away. Later, returning past the living-room door, he again glared sullenly at the master of the house; but Converse neither looked up nor spoke. Still mum-

bling, Vine waddled slowly back to the servants' quarters.

In the living-room, the clock on the mantel said one-ten. Malcolm Converse stood erect, sighed and paced slowly from the room. The soft thud of his footsteps died into silence.

No human sound disturbed the stillness of the house. Outside, the wind whined fretfully, sullenly. The hands of the antique clock moved sluggishly onward. . . .

At the far end of the upstairs corridor, a door inched open. A flashlight gleamed dully. Behind the light loomed the thick-shouldered, six-foot frame of the man who called himself Jerry Cassidy—the man whose girl companion lay ill in a nearby chamber.

Fully clothed, Cassidy tiptoed forward and leaned against the closed door of the girl's room. His fingertips beat a soft tattoo. Inside, a bed creaked softly. The door was drawn open from within.

Cassidy entered, closed the door, leaned against it, said quietly: "You look scared."

"I need a drink," the girl said. She, too, was fully dressed. She took a long drink from the pint bottle Cassidy handed her. Licking her lips, she said stiffly: "You—you're not going through with it?"

Cassidy patted her hand, grinned fondly down at her. "Why not?"

"I don't like this place," the girl declared. "It gives me the living creeps. If they find you prowling around in the dark—"

"Don't tell me you're letting an old house get your nerve, partner?" Cassidy ruffled her hair. "We got in here all right, didn't we? And if that yellow piece of drift paper didn't lie—if there's really some poor devil being kept here in need of outside help, well—" Cassidy grinned again. "Since when have you been a scare-cat!"

The girl stared at him with wide eyes,

stified a further protest as he opened the door and paced slowly down the darkened hallway. At the end of the passage he hesitated, advanced warily into a second corridor, toward the rear of the house. The flashlight showed him the way, revealed a flight of narrow stairs winding up into blackness.

He ascended cautiously, reached the top, stood motionless again. The whine of the wind, here in the upper part of the house, was a shrill wailing voice, as of some tormented creature clamoring for admittance. The flashlight's glowing eye was a macabre intruder in a limitless vault of whispering gloom.

"Fulson's Folly," Cassidy mumbled. "Damned good name for a place like this."

He prowled forward, reached the end of a tunnel-like passage, leaned against the wall and breathed slowly, heavily, staring about him as if lost. The flashlight swept a slow circle, came to rest on a stained-glass window. He paced toward it, pressed his face against the glass, endeavored to see out. From far below came the monotonous roar of storm surf.

Cassidy scowled. He thrust a hand into his trousers pocket and brought out a folded square of yellow paper. Holding the light on it, he studied it intently, then studied the maze of corridors extending away before him. The walls of the central tunnel trembled under the impact of the wind as he paced between them.

The tunnel ended in a blank. The flashlight's glare swept to the left, revealed a short flight of uncarpeted steps. The steps, seven in number, terminated in a stumpy door.

CASSIDY stared at the barrier, licked his lips nervously. Uneasiness caught at him and left him trembling. The incessant scream of the storm smothered the sibilant whisper of his breath. The

storm, up here, possessed an evil voice, sinister and triumphant.

That voice smothered all other sounds. Smothered the ominous creak of a loose board in the narrow passage through which Cassidy had just prowled.

Slowly he ascended the stairs. Flat against the door at the top he crouched, listening. His knuckles rapped the barrier softly, came away again. In a voice low and guarded, yet loud enough to carry through to the chamber beyond, he called out nervously:

"Brian! Artel Brian!"

No answer.

"Artel Brian!" Cold sweat gleamed on Cassidy's forehead. "Are you in there?"

He stiffened abruptly, his eyes wide, his tongue pressed tight against his teeth. A strange scratching sound had come from beyond the door, as though some ponderous creature were crawling laboriously over the floor within. The sound came nearer, very slowly. Fascinated by it, Cassidy failed to hear the sinister whisper of light footsteps on the stairs behind him.

A sharp whining voice, plaintive enough to be the voice of a child, came to him through the door.

"Yes? Yes? Who is it?"

Cassidy hesitated, suddenly terrified. He formed an answer with his lips, abandoned it and took an involuntary step backward. He stood staring, then scowled and moved forward again.

"Listen. You don't know who I am. But I'm here to—"

The words died on his lips. From the shadows of the staircase behind him a pair of lean, powerful hands whipped out, made sickening impact against the flesh of his throat. The hands were hot, moist, strong as iron claws. Cassidy tried to scream. The sound gurgled in his throat like bubbling water in a clogged drain.

Reeling drunkenly, he stumbled back-

ward, dragged down by his unseen assailant. His big body crashed to the stairs, rolled grotesquely down the wooden steps to the corridor below. The murderous fingers retained their hellish grip on his neck.

Just once those hands relaxed, as Cassidy thudded against the wall of the passage. A single lurid shriek welled from the young man's throat, shrilled through the entire upper portion of the house, to be swallowed by the whine of the wind outside. Then the powerful fingers clamped down again, buried themselves in writhing flesh.

Cassidy stared with horrified eyes into the face of his assailant. Darkness masked those snarling features, accentuated a pair of glowing, unblinking orbs which seemed hideously detached, as if hanging suspended in space. Darkness made a massive monster of the shape which half-crouched, half-lay above Cassidy's heaving bulk.

The fingers dug deeper. Cassidy's mouth gaped open; his swollen tongue protruded. His struggling body twisted in a convulsive agony, then went limp.

With cold-blooded deliberation the monster leaned back, ran a probing hand over Cassidy's body. A triumphant hiss of breath came from the thing's lips as the exploring fingers discovered the folded square of yellow paper.

Rising swiftly, the menacing shape gathered Cassidy in its arms, swayed unsteadily a moment, then turned abruptly and strode down the long corridor, its loose garments flapping like the wings of a monstrous bat.

Behind it, near the heavy door which had been Cassidy's destination, lay the flashlight which had fallen from the victim's nerveless fingers. Still glowing, the metal tube lay midway up the short flight of stairs and cast a white glare over the surface of the door above.



From behind that door came the same sinister scratching sound which had attracted Cassidy's attention—as if the room's occupant were clawing frantically, desperately with hooked fingers at the unyielding barrier.

With the scratching sounds came unintelligible words in that same plaintive, high-pitched childish voice.

**D**OWNSTAIRS, the girl who called herself Myra Carver sat wearily on the bed in her room. Sat staring at the closed door, waiting for it to open. Twenty minutes had passed since Jerry Cassidy had left her.

Her eyes were ringed now with dark circles, were bloodshot from staring so long. Mechanically she wielded a small nail-file, tried in vain to concentrate her attention on it. Already she had filed one nail until the finger was bleeding.

Anxiety was evident in the constant twitching of her slim body, in the nervous trembling of her lips. She looked at the watch on her wrist, stood up, and paced to the door. She opened it, stepped into the dark corridor. No sound was audible in the entire house—no sound except the ever-present, nerve-wracking whine of storm wind in the upper levels.

The girl stared both ways along the corridor, returned impulsively to the bed and picked up a small flashlight that lay there. A thin ray of light preceded her as she closed the door behind her and tiptoed along the passage.

Her face was pale, her eyes beginning to widen with fear. At the end of the passage she stopped and stood trembling, called out in a low voice:

"Jerry! Jerry, where are you?"

Her own voice came back to her, mocking her.

"Jerry! Oh God, Jerry, I'm afraid of this house! Where are you?"

Her terror increased as she wandered

deeper into the maze. A winding staircase, the same which had lured Jerry Cassidy to the upper reaches of the house, loomed before her. She groped up it, clawing the smooth bannister.

"Jerry! Oh God—"

The darkness leered back at her, beckoned her forward. Her stumbling feet carried her on, through passage after passage, farther and farther into the labyrinth. Then suddenly she stiffened, stared ahead to where a faint glow stabbed the gloom.

A sob left her lips, and she stumbled forward, running. The glow came from a flashlight, lying midway up a narrow flight of steps. At the top of the steps loomed a closed door.

The girl's face went white as chalk. She stooped, picked up the metal tube, stared at it with eyes full of increasing dread. Her gaze fastened on the closed door. She took a step toward it, said in a liquid whisper:

"Jerry—"

Then terror took full possession of her. She screamed, and the sound lost itself in the maze of corridors through which she had prowled. She turned, ran headlong.

Half way through the labyrinth she stopped, exhausted from her wild flight. Swaying, she turned in her tracks, made fists of her hands.

"You little fool!" she told herself. "Afraid of shadows. You damned little fool!"

Deliberately she forced herself to retrace her steps, slowly, stiffly. She had dropped the flashlight which had belonged to Jerry Cassidy. But her nerveless fingers still gripped the other one, and its light cast a trail of pale silver ahead of her.

Behind her, in the gloom of the passage, the uncarpeted floor creaked under the weight of slow-moving feet which were not her own. She stiffened, stood utterly

rigid, turned slowly. A dark shape, darker than the corridor itself, moved toward her.

A sob of relief welled from the girl's lips. She took an eager step forward, cried out in a pathetically joyous voice:

"Jerry! Oh, thank God! I thought—"

The flashlight jerked up in her out-thrust hand, directing its beam full upon the approaching figure. For a split second the light remained rigid. Its pale glow revealed a stooped, menacing shape, flung the shadow of that shape grotesquely against the wall. The girl stared into a shriveled, twisted face—the face of Nora Converse.

A transformation had taken place in those features since Myra Carver had last looked into them. Stark white in the glare of the flashlight, the withered face returned her stare. The thin lips were twisted evilly, revealing broken teeth; the eyes were pits of menace.

Myra Carver's fingers opened convulsively. She stepped back. The flashlight thudded to the floor at her feet, and the terrifying face of the old woman was once more in darkness.

Only the sound of her footfalls remained. Slowly, menacingly they advanced.

Myra Carver's eyes widened, continued to widen until they showed stark staring white. She thrust out a hand to protect herself. Her mouth released a lurid scream of terror.

Then she ran headlong, and as she ran, her parted lips hurled out screams of horror which came from the very depths of her throat—came with such shrill force that they seemed to tear the tongue from her mouth in their struggle for utterance. The girl's nerves gave way completely. Blindly and without reason, she raced back through the maze of midnight corridors, filling the entire upper portion of the house with her fearful cries.

Even when she found the staircase leading to the lower level, and clawed her way down it, she did not cease screaming. Utterly unnerved, she ran through passage after passage, back into that section of the house which was occupied by human beings of her own kind, where she might find protection from the horrors of her own over-wrought mind.

There, almost opposite the door of her own room, she stumbled, fell to the floor and lay moaning. Low words came from her lips, whispered through the silence which seemed thicker, heavier than ever after being disrupted by her own hysterical screaming.

"Jerry—Oh my God, Jerry, we never should have come here! We never should have believed that yellow paper—"

At the end of the corridor a light gleamed dully, came jerkily forward. Behind it loomed the scowling face of the old woman, Nora Converse. How the woman had come so quickly from the upper portion of the house was a question; yet she was here, and muttering viciously as she advanced.

At the same time, a lock clicked raspily, and a nearby door shuddered open. Alan Lane stepped into the corridor.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Thing on the Table

IT WAS Nora Converse who reached the moaning girl first. Bending above her, the old woman glared down, said irritably:

"Well, what are you scared of? What's got into you anyway? Are you crazy?"

The girl did not answer. Alan Lane, pacing forward, looked first at the old woman, then at the sobbing shape on the floor. His mouth tightened abruptly. Turning, he glanced back to where Carol, his wife, stood watching fearfully from the doorway of their room.

Lane's eyes were narrowed, bloodshot, his face gleaming with sweat. An open-bladed jack-knife, clutched in his cramped fingers, gave mute evidence of how he had labored to get out of the prison-chamber in which he and Carol had been confined.

He stared, made fists of his hands. This girl who called herself Myra Carver had been ill, yes—but ill from shock and exposure. Now there was utter terror in the girl's eyes. And that terror was linked somehow with the series of hysterical screams which had shrilled through the silence of the big house.

Those screams had roused the entire household. Voices were audible now in the lower corridor; lights had been turned on downstairs.

Lane pushed the old woman aside, lifted the terrified girl in his arms. With a quick sideways glance at Carol to follow him, he strode down the corridor with his sobbing burden, aware that Nora Converse was glaring at him resentfully, like a vulture cheated of its prey. . . .

Downstairs in the living-room, Lane lowered the girl to the divan and stepped back, peering at the people around him. Like scurrying rats they had crept from their retreats, aroused by the girl's lurid screaming. Now they stood gaping, apparently waiting for him to assume leadership.

He scowled, turned his attention to the girl, said quietly: "Tell us what happened. What frightened you?"

She opened her eyes, peered up at him fearfully. Her answer came with an effort. "Jerry—Jerry is gone! He went out of his room and upstairs. Then—" The girl's eyes showed white. "Oh God, something horrible has happened to him!"

Lane turned, said evenly to Malcolm Converse: "Hadn't you better go up to Cassidy's room and see if he's there?"

Then he shoved both hands in his pock-

ets and stared again at the strange gathering. They were all here: Alfred, the mute butler, Nora Converse, Russell Converse, Carol, and Peter Vine, the caretaker.

Russell Converse, in smock and leather slippers, came forward quietly, said in a sincere voice: "I'm afraid I don't know just what happened. I was working in my studio when the girl began screaming. If you don't mind—"

Lane nodded, felt grateful for the man's quiet assistance. Of the entire household, Russell Converse seemed the only normal member, the only one not possessed of that queer, brooding distrust which in itself was so sinister.

"So far as I know," Lane said, "Miss Carver went upstairs—"

Malcolm Converse, entering the room, said wearily: "Jerry Cassidy is not in his room. I'm afraid we shall have to search the entire house." His face was pale, strained, his shoulders bent forward as if bowed by a weight of despair. "Alfred, you go downstairs; you, Peter, search the upstairs, with Russell. Nora and I will attend to the rest."

He paced slowly back to the door. The others followed him. A moment later, Lane and Carol and the unfortunate girl on the divan were the room's only occupants.

Myra Carver had again closed her eyes, was breathing slowly, heavily, as if exhausted by her terror. Lane scowled, shook his head sideways. A hand touched his arm. Carol said anxiously, in a low voice:

"I'm afraid, Alan. Afraid of this whole house!"

Lane lit a cigarette, dragged deeply on the white cylinder. Now that the other members of the household had departed, the room was abnormally still; the ticking of the antique clock on the mantel was like the rhythmic beating of a mechanical

heart. Peering into Carol's face, Lane felt a sudden sensation of utter helplessness. No matter what happened, he and she were powerless to leave this macabre manse of gloom. The storm outside had not abated—

Lane's thoughts died abruptly. From the upper reaches of the house came a sound that ate into him, left him standing rigid by the table, his lips clamped tight on the cigarette protruding between them.

Once before, that sound had shrilled through the silence of the big house. Once before, that hideously mocking peal of Satanic laughter had jangled from the bowels of the building, threatening its hearers with some vile menace. Now the sound came again, bringing memories of the ghoul-face which had glared through the aperture in the wall of the prison-room upstairs.

Lane's fists clenched. Savagely he strode across the room, flung open the door leading to the corridor.

Nora Converse, strangely grotesque in her dark gray dress and colored shawl, stumped jerkily into the room and stood staring.

LANE peered into Peter Vine's twisted features, realized that the man was cunning, shrewd—a close-lipped fellow who knew more than appeared on the surface, but would talk only when he wanted to.

Nora Converse said triumphantly: "Well, I found him!"

"You found Cassidy?"

"Of course I did. I ain't lived in this house all these years for nothin'!" The woman's words were vicious, packed with malice. "Are you comin'?"

Lane glanced at Carol, saw a negative reply in the girl's eyes. The old woman was already half way to the door. Peter

Vine stood staring. The girl on the divan was asleep.

With short, jerky steps Nora Converse crossed the threshold, marched down the dimly lighted corridor toward the rear of the house. Trailing her, Lane thought of Myra Carver and scowled at the thought of leaving the girl alone with Vine. Carol, beside him, said almost inaudibly:

"I don't like it, Alan. She—she's such a strange old woman!"

The woman entered a second corridor, then a third, jerking her head around at abrupt intervals to make sure she was being followed. She was using a flashlight, and the weird circle of white light danced ahead of her, eating into the gloom. A flight of wooden steps angled downward into darkness, and the woman descended slowly, clinging to the banister.

The central portion of the house lay far behind. From far below came a sinister muttering, as of storm surf rumbling on unseen rocks. Lane remembered what he had read in the tourists' guide—how the labyrinthine cellars of the house were built deep into the very cliff upon which the building stood.

Carol's hand found his arm, clung there. "Alan, we never should have left that girl alone upstairs. If anything happens to her—"

Ahead, the flashlight's glow ceased its forward motion. Nora Converse turned, waited for Lane and Carol to come closer.

Lane hesitated, made fists of his hands. They had entered a misty maze of passages far below the house proper. Something in the old woman's eyes stabbed into him, put him on guard. He followed slowly as she thrust open a door and paced jerkily over a narrow threshold.

The flashlight revealed a small, low-ceilinged room with bare floor, wooden walls. A table loomed in the center of

the chamber. Something round and fat squatted on the table-top.

Nora Converse swung about, aimed the light at Lane's face. Her own face, half masked by shadow, was an evil gargoyle, eyes glowing, mouth hooked in a crooked grin.

"Well, what are you waitin' for? I said I'd take you to where he was, didn't I? Why don't you look at him!"

She stepped forward, put the flashlight on the table and moved away from it. Hands hipped, she stood motionless, peered triumphantly at Lane and Carol as they advanced.

Lane felt his eyes growing wide, felt as if they would never close, despite his desire to shut them. Carol, beside him, made a low gasping sound in her throat, caught his arm and clung to it, trembling violently. The thing on the table stared at both of them, as if amused by their horror.

The thing squatted on the far end of the table-top, in a pool of congealed blood which gleamed dark red in the flashlight's glare. Its face was a leering gargoyle, dragging Lane forward. Step by step he advanced, put both hands on the table, stood rigid, gaping.

Thickly, almost inaudibly, he said: "My—God!"

The thing on the table was a severed human head. *The head of the man who had called himself Jerry Cassidy!*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Myra Meets the Killer*

STIFFLY, mechanically, Lane picked up the flashlight, groped around the heavy table. The death's-head was a load-stone, luring him nearer. The flashlight's glow, wavering unsteadily, disclosed a door in the room's far wall, and a huddled lifeless shape lying in the corner.

The shape had arms and legs—but no head!

Lane shuddered, licked his lips, aware of the harsh breathing of the girl beside him. Her fingers were like claws on his arm, numbing the flesh. She was controlling herself with an effort. In another moment her emotions would burst the stopper and—

The sound of stealthy footsteps ate into Lane's consciousness. He whirled, his muscles tense, his eyes wide and staring. The flashlight's glare swung in a half circle, then stopped.

At the opposite end of the room the door was closing. It had been open before, wide open. Now a shrivelled hand gleamed on the knob; the crouching form of Nora Converse filled the narrowing aperture.

Like a cat, the old woman had tiptoed noiselessly to the threshold. Her face, corpse-white in the glare of the light, was a leering mask of evil.

Too late, Lane leaped forward, realizing the woman's intent. The door clicked shut before he reached it. A key rasped in the lock. From the far side of the barrier came a shrill peal of laughter.

Lane stopped, stood rigid as the mocking cackle wailed its way into the room. He felt the sound eat into him, felt the color ebb from his face. Then footsteps were audible beyond the barrier. Slow, reluctant footsteps, receding along the corridor. And silence.

Slowly Lane turned, stared into the white, frightened face of his wife. He and she were alone, alone with the leering, mocking death's-head which sat on the table. Alone in the bowels of the house, deep amid the sub-cellar vaults and corridors, in a prison-room where death stalked in sinister silence.

He put an arm around Carol's shoulders, stared about him, fighting the men-

ace of his own over-wrought nerves. He said harshly, deliberately:

"Easy, pal. Take it easy. It will take more than a locked door to keep us here."

Grimly he paced toward the door on the far side of the room, tried it, found that it, too, locked. He licked his lips, fumbled in his pocket for his pen-knife, passed the flashlight to Carol and motioned her to hold it on the lock.

"We did it before, pal. We can do it again, damn them!"

Crouching, he poked the thin blade of the knife into the rusty slot, went to work impatiently. When he straightened and took the flashlight from Carol's hand, the door was open.

Beyond lay a narrow corridor, extending into darkness.

The flashlight's gleam invaded the passage, disclosed a flight of stairs spiraling upward. Prowling forward, holding tight-hold of Carol's hand, Lane ascended the staircase, using the flashlight to break the darkness ahead. The stairs ended in a tunnelway between high walls, a kind of ramp sloping upward into a central passage.

Lane stopped, realized that the flashlight in his outthrust hand was burning yellow instead of white. He fumbled with it, made it worse. Carol, beside him, said anxiously:

"What—what's wrong?"

"Battery gone."

She shuddered, as if realizing how helpless they would be without any light to guide them. Lane quickened his pace, turned the light on and off at brief intervals to save it. The glow became a feeble yellow circle, then died.

Lane's fingers tightened on the metal cylinder. Feeling his way along the wall, he continued forward, every nerve alert. An unceasing mutter of storm surf was

audible from far below. Then he became conscious of another sound.

He stood rigid, gripped Carol's arm to silence her. Slow footsteps whispered along the corridor toward them. A dark shape, darker than the passage itself, was approaching with sinister slowness, creaking the floor under its weight.

Lane flattened against the wall, stared fixedly. Carol's breath was hot on the flesh of his neck; she put a hand on his belt, and the hand was trembling violently.

Slowly the approaching shape drew near. Lane heard the rustle of the thing's loose garments, thought that he glimpsed a pair of glowing animal-eyes in the dark. He tensed himself, realized that the thing would have to pass within arm's length of them.

Then, abruptly, the whispering footsteps receded into a side-passage and died to silence.

Carol said fearfully: "What—what was it? Oh God, this house!"

Lane relaxed his grip on the flashlight, knew that they had come horribly close to a face-to-face encounter with the specter of the house. He moved forward again, past the mouth of the narrow passage where the unnamed prowler had vanished. Reaching the end of the ramp, he fumbled for a match, held the sputtering stick at face level.

A network of small corridors angled away from him like spokes of a wheel. Grimly he pushed into the nearest one, gripping Carol's hand firmly lest she lose him in the dark.

This house, Fulsom's Folly, had been correctly named. Only a madman with a mania for fantastic creation could have conceived—

He stopped abruptly, stepped once more against the wall, dragged his wife with him. Ahead, a circular eye of light swayed in the dark, moving from side to side as

if endowed with life. Like the burning eye of a Cyclops, the thing pierced the gloom, illuminating floor, walls and ceiling, as it swung in slow semicircles.

There was no escaping it. Lane tensed himself, breathed a word to the girl beside him. The thing was a flashlight, held in the swaying outthrust hand of some sinister prowler. In another instant—

Lane stiffened, opened his eyes wide in amazement as the Cyclops' eye came closer. A voice, a girl's voice, moaned its way along the corridor toward him.

"Jerry! Oh God, Jerry, where are you? I'm afraid to be alone in this awful house! Jerry—"

A stark white face was visible in the flashlight's glow. Staring into it, Lane uttered a low exclamation, strode abruptly forward. The girl saw him, stepped back with a sharp cry of fear. She was Myra Carver.

**L**ANE put a hand on the girl's trembling arm, steadied her. Her colorless face was a mask of terror, tear-stained and haggard. Her hair was a dark brown mop invading her eyes, adding years to her age. If she had been ill before, her condition now was pitiful. Fear had left an indelible mark upon her.

She stared at him, seemed to be struggling to recognize him. Mechanically she shifted her gaze at Carol.

"I—I'm looking for Jerry. Where is he?"

Lane shuddered, had a mental vision of the death-room—that room, somewhere in the labyrinth far below, where Jerry Cassidy's body lay in a bloody heap on the floor and the severed head sat in a lake of carmine on the table. He glanced meaningfully at his wife, afraid that she might blurt out the truth. But Carol said nothing. Her face was nearly as white as the face of Cassidy's girl.

Lane took the flashlight from the fright-

ened girl's hand, forced her gently back against the wall, said deliberately:

"Jerry's all right. There's nothing to worry about."

"But why doesn't he come back. He—he left so long ago—"

"Why did he leave you?"

"To—to find the room upstairs where—" The girl began sobbing again. Lane took hold of her, put a comforting arm around her shoulders. Handing the light to Carol, he said impatiently:

"We've got to get her out of here. Got to find a room somewhere, where she can rest, where we can talk to her."

Carol nodded, paced slowly down the corridor. Doors frowned in the walls on both sides of her. She opened one of them, played the light over the chamber inside. The glow revealed chairs, a table, a worn-out divan with chunks of gray filler swelling from its ripped sides. Lane led the girl forward, lowered her gently, sat in a chair facing her. Carol closed the door, came and stood beside him.

"She's ill, Alan. She ought to be in bed."

Lane nodded curtly, leaned forward and peered into the girl's white face. There would be time for a bed later. Meanwhile, Myra Carver knew something. Her own safety might depend on a revelation of that knowledge.

"When Jerry left you, where was he going?" Lane demanded.

"He—" The girl gazed at him with half-open eyes, rocked her body slowly from side to side. "He was looking for a room upstairs where—where—"

"Yes?"

"Oh, you don't understand! We never should have come. We were mad, both of us!"—

"Tell me about it," Lane suggested softly.

The girl hesitated, stared fearfully. "We—Jerry and I—you see, there was a

house-party at Bob Foster's place, and we were there for the week-end. Bob's place is the big white house about four miles from here, on the Cliff Road. Maybe—maybe you know it." She looked at Carol, and Carol nodded quietly to encourage her.

"Well, there was quite a lot of drinking, and the crowd began talking about this place. Then somebody—I think it was Bob, himself—showed us a piece of paper with the strangest message written on it. He said he found the paper sealed up in a bottle, and the bottle was floating in the surf down on South Beach. It was a medicine bottle of some sort, and—" Again the girl paused, this time as if she had heard something. For a moment she sat motionless, staring straight at the closed door, her eyes wide and unblinking. Then she relaxed.

"The message was—was written in pencil on yellow paper. It said there was a man being held prisoner in a room on the top floor of this house, and it offered a reward to anyone who would come here and help him. Artel Brian, his name was. Well, we all laughed about it and thought it was a hoax, but Bob said it wasn't. He swore he really found it.

"Most all of us by then were beginning to feel our liquor, so we drew lots to see who—who'd be elected to come here—and Jerry and I won. Then we cooked up the story about the accident and—"

This time the girl did hear something. So did Lane and Carol. The sound invaded the room shrilly, stifling the words on Myra Carver's lips. It was a low, mocking laugh, vibrant with evil.

Lane stiffened, sat utterly rigid. Then he lunged erect, snatched the flashlight from Carol's hand and strode savagely to the door. The girl on the divan sat staring. Carol stumbled forward, caught at Lane's arm, tried to drag him back.

"Don't, Alan! Don't!"

He jerked the door open, aimed the flashlight's beam into the corridor. That hellish laugh had been so close that he had heard the sibilant suck of breath which terminated it. But the passage was empty; the shaft of white light ate into a lane of deserted darkness.

Scowling, Lane pushed forward, blind to the need for caution. Carol followed him, kept close to him as he paced half the length of the corridor. Then he stopped, turned a slow circle, made a growling sound in his throat. With a shrug of defeat he slowly retraced his steps, the lowered flash creating a pool of light at his feet.

Not until he reached the door of the room he had just left did he raise the light. Then, still scowling bitterly, he aimed the white beam at the girl on the divan and strode toward her.

He stopped abruptly. His eyes widened. Next moment he was stumbling forward, groaning, and Carol behind him was staring in horror.

Myra Carver was still sitting there, sitting erect as if rigid with terror. But there was something else now. There was a blunt black thing protruding from the girl's breast, and a significant dark stain glowing against the paleness of her white skin. Lane's hand reached out, came away with its fingertips red and wet. He stared into the girl's gaping face, peered fearfully at the protruding black thing.

The thing was a knife handle, with the blade buried in the girl's heart. Myra Carver was dead.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Carol Joins the Missing

FOR an eternity Lane stood without motion, staring fixedly at the bubbling death-wound in the girl's breast. When he turned away at last, his own face was



colorless and his hands twitching violently. He leaned against the wall, peered helpless about the room.

At the far end of the chamber a door hung suggestively open. That door, before, had been shut. Sluggishly Lane paced toward it, stepped over the threshold. The flashlight's exploring eye disclosed a narrow passage extending away into darkness. No sound disturbed the corridor.

Lane turned again, gazed dully at his wife. "That laugh—it was just a ruse to get us out of the room, that's all. Whoever killed the girl came in by this other doorway and—" He shook his head, fighting the uncombatable sense of oppression which had taken hold of him.

"But why?" Carol faltered. "Why should anyone want to kill her?"

"To keep her from talking."

Mechanically Lane walked to the divan, lifted the dead girl in his arms. An odor of hot blood assailed his nostrils, sickened him. Carol reached out, took the flashlight from his hand, and led the way to the door.

Once more, silence had taken possession of the house; the only audible sound was the never-ending mutter of the sea, from far below. Slowly Carol paced along the passage, lighting the way for Lane to follow. The Carver girl was a dead weight in Lane's arms, her head lolling grotesquely toward the floor, thumping against his thighs as he walked.

He thought of the old woman who was somehow so very much like a small child. Thought of Peter Vine, the scowling caretaker, and of Alfred, the mute butler, and of Malcolm Converse, the patient, toopolite master of this house of growing horror. Then he realized the futility of such thoughts, and forced his attention to the problem of the moment—the problem of leaving these whispering vaults of

gloom and returning to the comparative security of the house proper.

How long he followed the slender figure ahead of him, he was not sure. The girl in his arms became a leaden weight, filling his shoulders with a dull, persistent ache. The muffled rumble of the sea, from below, merged with a distant whine of storm wind from the upper reaches of the big structure. Every corridor was like the last one, like the next. The whisper of Carol's slow-moving feet became a sibilant hiss, tormenting his over-wrought nerves.

Then, finally, he recognized his surroundings, realized that Carol had led him into that portion of the house where the old woman had begun her strangely triumphant journey to the death-room. Lights glowed at the end of the passage, where the corridor entered the main section of the house. Someone was slowly approaching.

Carol stopped, stepped back to Lane's side, raised the flashlight in her hand. A sigh of relief left her lips as the light fell upon the approaching shape, identifying it. The shape was Russell Converse, the old woman's son.

Converse was staring. Staring at the limp form in Lane's arms. He peered into Lane's face, said hesitantly:

"Is she—hurt?"

Then he saw the knife-handle protruding from the girl's breast, saw the congealing blood on white flesh. His eyes widened; he stiffened abruptly.

"Good God! What—"

"She's dead," Lane said grimly. "Murdered."

Russell Converse's face lost color. For an instant he stood rigid, one hand half outstretched toward the thing in Lane's arms. Then he regained control of himself, said in a low voice:

"We'd better take her to the living-room. I've been looking for her, wonder-

ing where she went to. This—this is horrible."

He led the way, and Lane followed slowly, grateful for the lights which burned along the corridor's length and made the gloomy vaults and subterranean passage a torment of the past. In the living-room doorway Alfred, the mute butler, stood gaping with wide eyes. Inside, Malcolm Converse rose wearily from the divan, stared, and came forward with rapid strides.

Lane lowered the murdered girl and stepped back, rubbing his shoulders. Quietly he looked into the staring faces around him. Russell Converse said anxiously:

"How did it happen? Good God, this poor girl—"

Lane scowled, wiped bloody hands on his trousers. Deliberately he returned the man's fixed stare.

"Your mother took us downstairs. Jerry Cassidy is down there, murdered. For reasons of her own, your mother locked us in the death-room and left us there."

"My—mother?"

"Your mother," Lane gritted.

**R**USSELL CONVERSE put a trembling hand to his perspiring forehead, rocked heavily on braced legs. He said thickly:

"And this girl? She followed you downstairs."

"She was looking for Cassidy."

"But how—how was she—who is responsible for—"

"The girl was about to tell us something which we evidently weren't supposed to find out," Lane growled. "She was murdered before she could talk."

Russell's face was chalk white, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on the dead girl. He stroked his throat with stiff fingers, made a low moaning sound through tight lips.

"Where—where is my mother now?"

"You know as much about that as I do," Lane said curtly.

Russell nodded, lowered himself into a chair. He stared dully at his father, then again at the limp form on the divan. He seemed unable to think, to act. Seemed exhausted in mind and body, overwhelmed by Lane's grim recital of facts. Then he stood up, said almost inaudibly to Malcolm Converse:

"We must find her."

The father said nothing, merely stood motionless, breathing heavily. He, too, seemed stunned, yet resigned to the inevitable. He looked at the door, took a slow step forward.

He stopped abruptly. From the upper part of the house came a sound, vague and indefinite, which invaded the room and hung for a moment like a living entity in the strained silence. Somewhere upstairs, a woman was laughing shrilly, mockingly, as if hurling forth a childish challenge.

For a ten-second interlude the sound continued, then died abruptly. Russell Converse looked straight at his father; the older man stared back at him. Apparently both knew the meaning of that weird cacophony. For a moment both stood motionless, and the father closed his eyes as if to blot out a hideous mental vision created by the old woman's laughter.

Then, very quietly, Malcolm Converse paced to the door, left the room. His son followed him; and Alfred, the butler, scuffed over the threshold also, as if fearful of being left behind.

Once more, Carol and Lane were alone with Myra Carver.

Lane walked to the door and closed it, returned and leaned wearily against the table. The antique clock on the mantel said three-fifteen; the ticking of the clock was abnormally loud in the

room's silence. Lane lit a cigarette, walked to a window and stood there. The voice of the storm outside seemed less sinister, less vicious.

"It's breaking up," he said grimly. "By daylight we'll be able to leave this damned place."

Carol sat on the arm of a chair, stared at him. "You think the car will start?"

"Not a chance. After we get out of here, we'll find the house this girl was telling us about. Find any house; it doesn't matter, so long as there's a phone. What matters is getting out of here—" He looked at the girl on the divan and shuddered—"and staying out."

Carol said nothing, lowered herself into the chair and sat very still. Weariness had claimed her; she was suffering a reaction from the recent parade of horrors. She closed her eyes, then opened them again as if afraid of falling asleep. Lane, walking away from the window, lit a second cigarette from the butt of his first, and paced the room fretfully.

The hands of the antique clock moved to three-thirty; the clock struck once with a dull whine. Lane ceased his relentless pacing, turned abruptly, stood glaring at the door. Carol said in a low voice:

"What is it? What's wrong, Alan?"

He took a step forward, made fists of his hands. From beyond the barrier came a furtive, scraping sound, as of someone moving slowly along the corridor. Lane turned, said almost inaudibly:

"Stay here. Don't leave this room."

She stared with wide eyes as he moved silently to the door. His hand snaked out, closed over the knob. Abruptly he jerked the barrier open, stepped over the threshold. A crouching figure lunged away from him, stumbled against the opposite wall of the corridor.

LANE made a snarling sound, leaped forward. The crouching figure darted away from him, ran jerkily down the passage like a huge rat scurrying to safety. Lane recognized it, hurled himself after it. The fleeing shape was Alfred, the mute butler.

The man was fast, abnormally so. His short legs carried him rapidly down the corridor to the foot of the winding staircase. Frantically he clawed his way up the stairs, gripping the bannister with an outflung hand. Lane took the stairs three at a time, overhauled the man in the darkness of the upper hall. His hooked fingers dragged the butler back, spun him around. Savagely he flung the man against the wall, pinned him there.

"Well, what's the idea?"

Alfred gaped at him with big eyes, said nothing.

"So you won't talk. You can't, eh? Well, you'll come back downstairs, mister, and if that dumbness of yours is faked—"

Lane stiffened, choked on his own words. From the living-room below came a sound of terror which struck fear to his heart, brought cold sweat to his forehead. The sound was his own name, flung from terrified lips. Again and again it shrilled through the house, wailing its way to where he stood. His own name, flung from the agonized lips of his wife.

Desperately he lunged backward, releasing the butler, forgetting the man completely. The upper hall seemed endless as he raced along it. His feet beat a wild tattoo on the stairs. Long before he reached the doorway of the downstairs room, the shrill screams were silenced, leaving a hellish emptiness in their wake.

Lane's face was a mask of sweat as he stumbled over the threshold. Then he stood rigid, staring. A liquid sob welled from his lips, moaned its way through the room.

The chamber was empty. Carol was gone.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Lane Meets the Killer

LANE took three steps forward, stopped again and stood swaying while the blood ebbed slowly from his face. His eyes widened until they were rimmed with stark, staring white. His whole body began trembling, refused to be still.

Carol was gone. The grim reality of that fact ate into him, numbed him, stifled his power to think. The emptiness of the room was a mockery, leering at him, taunting him. A full minute passed before he regained control of himself. Then, blindly and bitterly, he cursed himself for having left his wife alone.

No sound disturbed the silence of the big house as he turned and strode back to the door. His own thoughts revolved endlessly in his brain, seeking something to fasten to. He groaned aloud with a realization of his own helplessness.

Carol was gone. Gone where? Below, in the gloomy vaults and passages which networked the sunken cellars of the huge house, lay innumerable hiding-places where her unnamed captor might have taken her. Above, in the upper reaches of the building, lay similar rooms, similar chambers of torment. And with every passing moment, every instant wasted in indecision, the chances of finding her were lessened.

Lane stood stricken, strove desperately to think clearly, to decide on a course of action. Then a sound reached him from the top of the winding staircase. He strode forward, saw Alfred, the butler, standing motionless at the head of the curved bannister, staring down at him. And another sound, that same peal of hellishly triumphant laughter, came from

somewhere beyond, somewhere in the upper part of the house, jangling its way down through rooms and corridors to stab into him, spike his heart with renewed fear.

Blindly, Lane stormed up the stairs, toward the man who stood there. The butler recoiled from him, stepped backward with a quick, jerky movement, staring with wide eyes. Lane's lips curled viciously; his hand clamped down on the man's shoulder.

"Where's my wife? What happened to her?"

Alfred said nothing, merely shook his head sideways, worked his lips soundlessly. Lane's hands whipped up, curled around the man's thin neck.

"Damn you, talk to me! Where's my wife?"

The butler shook his head violently, clawed feebly at the fingers that held him. No man with a voice could have refrained from crying out under such pressure. The fact that Alfred was silent, despite his terror, was proof enough that his affliction was genuine. Lane released him, said desperately:

"Listen. Can you take me to where she is? Can you?"

Alfred shook his head, stepped slowly backward, gaping with wide eyes. The man was afraid, too afraid to be of any assistance. Lane groaned, turned away, stiffened suddenly with the memory of the mocking laughter which had come from above.

That laughter might have meant anything, nothing. But there was no other lead to follow, nothing else to cling to. Fists clenched, Lane strode down the corridor, broke into a run as he realized the value of every passing instant.

The corridor ended in darkness, in a series of smaller passages which angled away like threads of a spider-web. Lane fumbled for a flashlight, found none,

again cursed himself for being careless. Blindly he stumbled into the maze, felt his way forward with outstretched hands. Alternately running and walking, he continued into the very heart of the black labyrinth, came to a flight of stairs. The stairs had no end, carried him endlessly upward.

He was aware, then, that the house was no longer silent—that he had penetrated to an upper part of the building where the whine of the wind outside was like a human voice. The sound whispered its way through the walls on all sides of him, seemed like a detached entity, parading with him through the dark. He stopped, formed his wife's name with his lips, then abandoned it, realizing that silence was safer.

What was it that the dead girl, Myra Carver, had said about this part of the house? There was a room up here, somewhere, where a man was held prisoner? A room where—

He caught himself, dragged his stumbling feet to an abrupt halt. Ahead of him, far down the narrow corridor along which he was prowling, a light glowed in the dark. A chuckling sound, vibrant with malice and triumph, came like a ghost-voice through the souging whine of the storm outside.

**T**HE light advanced as he stared at it. It was a flashlight, held crookedly in the hand of someone short, stumpy of stature. Lane took a step forward, narrowed his eyes as he guessed the identity of the bearer. Then his eyes widened again, continued to widen, as the approaching shape took form. Abruptly he flattened against the wall, stared unblinkingly, amazed by the thing that met his gaze.

The advancing shape was Nora Converse, and the old woman's child-like body was bent almost double under the weight

of another shape which lay limp across her stooped shoulders. In the pale backglare of the flashlight, that combination of shapes loomed like a grotesque, inhuman monster as it moved slowly along the passage toward Lane's rigid body.

The old woman—the woman whose shrivelled form had seemed so impotent, so empty of strength, so childishly inadequate—was pacing forward, without staggering, under the dead weight of an unconscious shape almost twice her own size. Her hooked arm clutched a pair of slender, dangling legs. Over her shoulder hung the limp body of Lane's wife!

For a moment Lane's amazement numbed him; he did nothing but stare as the flashlight's glowing eye came toward him. Then he realized that his search was over, that he had found the thing he was looking for. Abruptly he stepped from the shadows of the wall, lunged forward with a guttural exclamation growling from his lips.

The woman stopped, stood rigid. Her face stiffened in the dull glare of the light. She made a hissing sound with her lips, glared at Lane with smouldering eyes as he strode into the flashlight's livid beam.

The limp thing in the old woman's arms stirred, then, as Lane strode forward, the girl's eyes twitched open, focused on Lane's lunging body. For an instant they were full of bewilderment, then their expression changed to fear and they stared not at Lane, but at something behind him.

At the same moment, the flashlight's glare died an abrupt death, plunging the corridor into darkness. A scream of warning shrilled from Carol's lips. A low snarl of triumph came from Nora Converse as she jerked backward.

Behind Lane, the floor of the passage creaked ominously under the weight of heavy feet. Absolute darkness, made doubly intense by the former glare of

the flashlight, hung like a winding-sheet over the corridor. Lane stood rigid, aware that he was in danger. Blindly he thrust out both hands to protect himself.

Steel fingers came out of nowhere, claving at him. He stumbled backward, lashed out with a clenched fist, felt the fist strike home against heaving flesh. Next instant the thing was upon him, grinding him into the wall, dragging him into its murderous embrace. Hot breath seared his face, choking him. Powerful arms snaked about him, sent a cruel agony through his chest as he strove desperately to writhe clear.

In the dark, he could see no single part of the vicious thing which sought to drag him down. The thing was a specter, doubly hellish because it lacked shape, lacked features. Yet it possessed the strength of a giant, had arms that were like steel cables, fought with the savage, silent fury of a hungry animal.

For a sudden short interval, terror caught at Lane's heart; cold dread took possession of him. He was facing death, knew it. His assailant was the same murdering monster which had exterminated Cassidy, killed Cassidy's girl. He cursed the darkness which blinded him to the thing's identity, cursed his own eyes because they lacked the power to penetrate that damnable pall of pitch.

Then a cold, sudden desperation drove the terror from his heart, gave him a new lease on life. He dragged air into his lungs, used his entire hundred-eighty pounds of bone and muscle in a lunging charge which drove the monster back. Farther down the corridor, Carol was screaming in the dark; the old woman was mumbling guttural words of triumph.

Lane fought blindly, battered down the arms which sought to encircle him. His knotted fist buried itself in hot flesh; a grunt of satisfaction left his lips as the nameless monster released a shrill cry of

agony. Then the thing was upon him again, snarling viciously. The thing's flowing garments made a swishing sound in the dark, slapped against Lane's up-thrust hands. A leg shot between Lane's knees. A sweeping arm crashed against him, hurling him off balance. He stumbled, went down.

Even before the floor stopped his fall, the monster leaped headlong, grinding him down. Hooked fingers sank into Lane's corded neck, inflicting pain so intense that his mouth jerked open, releasing a groan. He strove desperately to reach up, tear the strangling hands aside; and the effort rocked him off balance, left him open to further attack.

One more he knew the meaning of terror, realized that he had no defense against the hellish strength of his assailant. Cruel hands stopped the breath in his throat; a great weight bore him down, crushed him into the floor. Above his up-turned face hung the snarling face of the fiend who was intent on murdering him—and that snarling countenance was no face at all, merely a pair of glowing eyes burning in a black void.

The eyes came nearer, seemed alive in themselves, like twin lanterns smouldering in the dark. Hot breath, sickly sweet as if tainted with cheap perfume, hissed into Lane's mouth and nostrils, gagging him. He had a sudden horrible dread of death, felt himself on the verge of annihilation. Instinct alone made him strike out in a last desperate effort to break the monster's grip.

The effort was half successful. Writhing clear of the fiend's weight, Lane rocked to his knees, tried frantically to grope erect. He was vaguely aware of the sound of his wife's voice, sobbing hysterically, in the nearby darkness. Vaguely aware that the old woman was still mumbling eagerly, as if giving instructions to the devil of darkness who

sought to commit murder. Half erect, Lane swung on bent legs, aimed a weary fist at the snarling thing which leaped toward him.

The fist missed its mark. Powerful hands closed over Lane's stumbling body, dragging him into the monster's embrace. He sucked a deep breath, beat a frantic tattoo against the thing's face and chest, felt himself being lifted clear of the floor. Next moment he was swung into space, raised in a sickening arc above the monster's crouching bulk. A scream jangled from his lips. The powerful arms flung him with hellish force through the dark. The wall of the corridor crashed into him.

Even before his broken body fell to the floor, he was unconscious.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Another Head

FOR an interlude of twenty seconds, absolute silence reigned in the passage, as the nameless monster bent above Lane's motionless body, peering down with twin orbs of triumph which burned like cat-eyes in the dark. Then, straightening abruptly, the thing moved rapidly down the corridor, its loose garments flapping grotesquely with each gliding stride.

An instant later, when a sudden streamer of white light split the darkness, the corridor was empty except for the limp, lifeless shape which lay against the wall.

It was Nora Converse who paced forward, holding the flashlight in an out-thrust hand. Behind her, in the shadows of the passage, lay the inert form of Carol Lane; and the old woman, abandoning it, advanced with perky steps and peered down at the work done by the murderous fiend who had vanished in darkness.

Triumph blazed in the woman's narrowed eyes. Stooping, she ran a probing hand over Lane's body, curled her lips

in a crooked smile. In a sing-song voice she said mockingly:

"Well, ain't that lovely now? The nice young man won't never do any more lovin' of his pretty darlin'. And him so young, too—and so handsome!"

Quietly she straightened again, stepped back. Leaving Lane where he lay, she returned to Carol's unconscious form, stooped, and lifted the girl from the floor. Still smiling crookedly, she turned her head for a last look at the lifeless form near the wall, then paced slowly down the corridor in the direction taken by the fleeing monster.

The muffled scream of the storm, and the sibilant whisper of her own shoes on the uncarpeted floor, accompanied the old woman as she prowled down the passage. With no display of haste, she paced deeper and deeper into the maze of narrow corridors mumbling to herself in a low voice as she stumbled occasionally under the dead weight of her burden. Carol Lane had fainted, was still unconscious.

The flashlight's glare swept the darkness ahead, lighting the way for the old woman as she advanced. Once, entering a narrow passage which ended far ahead in a blank wall, she stood motionless a moment and aimed the light at a flight of steep steps which terminated in a closed door. On those same steps, Jerry Cassidy had met death; and as Nora Converse stared at the barrier, she made a mumbling sound in her throat and wrinkled her parchment face in a scowl of bitterness. Then she turned away, paced down a side-passage, descended a winding staircase, and thrust open a door on the lower level.

The flashlight's eye, penetrating the gloom of the chamber beyond, revealed a carpeted floor, rose-papered wall, table, chairs and bed. Scuffing forward, the woman lowered her burden to the bed,

then paced to the table and held a sputtering match to the wick of the oil-lamp which stood there. A warm yellow glow filled the room, cast out the sinister pits of shadow. Nora Converse returned to the door, closed it quietly, walked eagerly to the bed and sat there, peering down into the upturned, colorless face of Carol Lane.

For a long while the girl's eyes remained closed. Leaning closer, the old woman stared into her features, reached out a thin hand to caress the smooth flesh. Soft, whispering sounds came from the woman's lips, murmured gently through the room. As if fascinated by the girl's loveliness, she allowed her hands to move over Carol's limp body, touching face, throat, hair. Aloud she said plaintively:

"You're so pretty. So sweet and pretty—"

**H**ER wandering hands caressed the girl's shoulders, tore the thin fabric of Carol's dress, baring the white flesh beneath. The very whiteness of that flesh put hunger in the old woman's eyes, made her bend even closer. A transformation took place in her. A snarl of envy curled her lips; hate smouldered in her narrowed eyes. She said sibilantly, harshly:

"And why can't I be like you? Answer me that! Why do I have to be so homely and—"

Carol's eyes twitched open, stared up into the woman's hovering countenance. For an instant the girl seemed bewildered, confused; then, with a sudden cry of fear, attempted to sit up.

Lean hands pushed her down again, held her on the bed. Glaring at her, the old woman snarled viciously: "So you don't want me near you, hey? I'm not good enough for you, maybe. I'm too ugly for you. Well, you're here and you'll stay here! See?"

Terrified, the girl looked into those

angry features, cringed from them. With trembling fingers she covered the nakedness of her shoulders, only to have the woman reach out and uncover them again. A low, liquid moan welled from Carol's lips; she closed her eyes, rolled sideways. The woman's powerful hands dragged her back, held her in a vise-like grip.

"Well, what are you afraid of? I'm not goin' to hurt you! Can't I look at you if I want to?"

"Oh God," Carol moaned, "let me go! Let me go back to Alan!"

"And what for? He's dead, ain't he? He—"

The woman stopped talking, turned with a quick, revolving movement which crumpled the bedclothes beneath her. The door of the room was open; the woman's gaze fixed itself unblinkingly on the tall, straight figure which stood there on the threshold. How long he had been standing there, she did not know. But he paced forward now with slow steps, peering at her as if unable to understand what was going on.

The old woman stiffened defiantly. "Well, what do you want?"

The intruder stopped, stood on wide-spread legs, shoved both hands into the pockets of his smock. He was Russell Converse, the woman's son. He peered at the girl on the bed, at his mother, scowled and said curtly:

"What are you doing?"

"I'm keepin' the young lady company. Is there anythin' wrong with that?"

"I think there is, mother."

"Well, there ain't, so you don't need to worry!" Nora Converse thrust her head forward, made a face at him. "We were gettin' along perfectly all right until you busted in."

Russell strode forward, looked down into the terrified face of Carol Lane. A silent message lay in the girl's eyes—a message of supplication, begging him to



take her from the old woman's clutches. He scowled knowingly, stared at the girl's bare shoulders.

"Where is your husband?"

Carol shuddered, shook her head heavily. The old woman said in a shrill voice: "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Where is he?"

"He ain't here."

"Very well—". Russell put both hands on the woman's shoulders and drew her aside, ignoring her furious efforts to resist. "I'll take this girl downstairs, where she will be more comfortable."

"She's comfortable enough here!" the woman screamed. "You leave her alone!"

Russell leaned forward, gathered Carol in his arms. Like an infuriated child the woman clawed at him, beat at him with clenched fists, hammering a wild tattoo on his arms and back. There was strength in those blows, strength enough to make the son clench his teeth against the pain.

Step by step the woman followed him to the door, heaping abuses upon him, clutching at the girl in his arms. Her parchment face was livid, her shrivelled body a leaping, lunging, animal-like thing which sought to block the doorway. Long after he had thrust her aside and paraded over the threshold, she stood clutching the sides of the door-frame, screaming lurid threats after him.

"You'll pay for this, Russell Converse! I'll show you! I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do! I'll go upstairs and—"

Without looking back, Russell strode rapidly down the unlighted corridor, licking his lips as the woman's shrill threats rang in his ears. The girl in his arms said nothing; once more her over-wrought nerves had yielded to the shock of the ordeal. Her eyes were closed, her head lolling. Only the soft sigh of her breath gave indication that she was still living.

WHEN the girl opened her eyes again, the man who carried her was pacing quietly along a dark passage somewhere in the bowels of the big house. She moved wearily in his arms, uttered a low sob which caused him to peer down at her. Almost inaudibly she said:

"Where—where are you taking me?"

"To my own room," he said gently, "where my mother will not annoy you."

"But I want to go to Alan! Oh God—"

"Please don't worry. I'll find Alan and bring him to you."

He turned into a side-passage, strode forward at the same even pace, as if he knew every turn, every twist of the maze, and had no dread of the Stygian darkness. A moment later he stopped, thrust open a door at the end of the corridor, paced quietly over the threshold into the chamber beyond. His groping fingers found a light-switch. A dull click echoed in the dark, and the room was suddenly warm with a diffused glow.

It was a well furnished room, large but intimate, with low-hanging ceiling, carpeted floor, dark-toned walls. Heavy curtains masked the twin windows, and a hanging portiere concealed what was apparently a doorway leading to an adjoining chamber. Russell Converse strode forward, past the square mahogany table in the center, and lowered his burden to the divan which stood beyond. Quietly he stepped back, said in a low voice:

"I must apologize for my mother's conduct. She is not herself. She doesn't realize—"

Carol stared at him, stared wearily around the room.

"You—you said you would find Alan—"

He nodded, stepped quietly backward. "You don't mind being left alone?"

"No. Oh God, no—if only you'll find him and bring him here!"

Russell paced quickly across the room,

put a hand on the door-knob, said reassuringly: "I sha'n't be long." The door closed behind him. There was a dull click, as of a key turning in the lock. Then a sound of footsteps receding along the corridor outside.

Carol sat up slowly, put her feet on the floor, stared with wide eyes at the closed barrier. Her pale face became even whiter, seemed drained of every trace of color, as she groped erect and moved forward. It was an effort to stand up, to walk. The parade of horrors of the past half hour had sapped the strength from her slender body, thinned the blood in her veins. Dizziness caught at her as she paced across the carpet. She clutched the table to steady herself, then stifled the terror in her heart and stepped forward again.

Timidly she put a hand on the door-knob, turned it slowly, afraid to convince herself that her suspicions were correct. They were. The door was locked.

She stepped away from it, stood motionless, stared fearfully at the threatening wall of wood. For a moment she was a victim of unreasoning terror, blind dread; then the power to think returned to her.

The door was locked. Russell Converse had locked it. But not to keep her here, not to make a prisoner of her. He had locked it to protect her, to keep out the vicious old woman who might discover her whereabouts and seek to do her harm. That was the only plausible explanation. There could be no other reason!

But suspicion still clawed at the girl's mind as she turned away and surveyed the room. Anxiously she looked around her, stared at the room's furnishings, at the glowing chandelier which hung above the table. A muffled wail of storm wind was audible beyond the walls, beyond the windows; and from far below came a distant mutter of surf pounding against

the base of the cliff. Fearfully, Carol walked to one of the windows, drew aside the heavy curtains, looked out.

The darkness out there seemed less intense now, less oppressive. In a little while the night would be over, a murky gray of dawn-light would invade the big house, dispelling some of its terrors. Then, unless she and Alan were actually prisoners in this manse of gloom, they could go out into a normal world again, leave the horrors of the night behind them.

She and Alan. She stiffened, put a clutching hand to her breast as she remembered. She took a step forward, said aloud in a thick voice:

"Oh God— Alan—"

She would have fallen if the wall had not held her erect. Leaning there, she sobbed convulsively, tried in vain to fight the feeling of awful loneliness which swept over her. Salt tears coursed down her face, dampened her lips. Her staring eyes remained wide open, as if gazing again at the hideous thing which had happened in the upstairs corridor. A long while passed before she found strength enough to move away from the wall.

**S**LOWLY, then, she paced toward the heavy portières on the opposite side of the room. Curiosity was not the force which spurred her forward; rather it was a vague desire to do something, to drive out of her mind the awful despair which lurked there. Mechanically she pushed the portières aside, stepped through the narrow doorway into the adjoining chamber.

The room was small, square, softly illuminated by light from the doorway. A narrow table, apparently a work-bench, occupied one end; other tables stood in the shadowed corners. Advancing slowly, Carol studied the chamber's contents

indifferently, realized that the place was obviously a studio.

Then she stood motionless, took a genuine interest in her surroundings. Staring at her from the smaller tables about the room were faces, strangely lifelike faces which sent a shudder through her. Cautiously she approached one of them, reached out a timid hand to touch it. Her fingers encountered cold clay.

Dead clay . . . yet the artist who had designed those features was a master craftsman! They seemed endowed with life. The uncanny realism of them sent an icy shock through Carol's hand. She drew the hand away abruptly, as if it had touched human flesh.

Trembling, she peered at the other tables, at the clay busts which sat upon them. Those faces, too, were terribly lifelike, seemed to be furtively watching her, gloating at her uneasiness. One of them was somehow familiar, strangely like something she had seen before. It glared at her with sightless eyes, deep, leering eyes sunk in a leprous white mask, hideously real and violently hideous—as if its maker had taken pride in creating the essence of horror.

That face, that same gruesome countenance, had glared at her once before, through a black aperture in the wall of the room where she and Alan had been imprisoned, a very long time ago. Someone—someone with a twisted sense of humor—had held the hideous clay thing in the dark aperture. Gaslight and wavering shadows had done the rest.

Fascinated, Carol turned a slow circle, studied each of the shadowed shapes, realized vaguely that there were many of them. Mechanically she moved toward the long table at the far end of the room.

The strangely human lumps of clay, surrounding her, had a strange power over her, made her forget her own mental

agony and the menace of the locked door in the other room. Her gaze roved about the chamber, seeking out every detail. Then, with a sudden low exclamation she shrank back, put a trembling hand to her mouth to stifle a cry of fear.

On the long table confronting her sat two heads which were *not* fashioned of clay—two leering gargoyles which were hellishly familiar. For a moment she closed her eyes, swayed blindly on unsteady legs. But fascination dragged her forward to examine the hideous things more closely.

Like living heads in a sideshow of freaks, the two heads sat on the table-top, returning her stare. Dark red stains marred the smooth boards beneath them. Beside them loomed a significant pile of unmodelled clay, obviously placed there in preparation for a task not yet begun.

But the work *had* been begun! Already the upper portion of one of the severed heads was covered with a thin layer of gray clay—soft, pliable clay which had been modelled with expert fingers to fit the contour of the dead flesh beneath! Like a living head wearing a skull-cap, the thing sat there, its dead eyes wide open, its features twisted in a mocking leer.

Once before, Carol Lane had looked into those dead features, had cringed in horror at sight of them. On that occasion, the severed head had squatted on a table in a death-room deep in the cellar of the house. Now it was here, in Russell Converse's "studio," undergoing a fiendish transformation which would conceal its identity under applied layers of cold clay.

It was the head of Jerry Cassidy. And the second death-head, squatting beside it on the table-top, was that of Cassidy's girl—the girl who, less than an hour ago, had been lying dead in the living-room, downstairs.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Monster

TREMBLING violently, Carol stared into the dead faces and uttered a low cry of terror. Her eyes remained wide open, refused to close. She put a groping hand to her throat, fought against the numbing sense of fear which sought to overwhelm her. Mechanically she stepped backward, retreated slowly, stiffly from the table.

Behind her, the threshold of the room creaked under the weight of a silent intruder. Carol stiffened, felt the muscles of her slender body go taut. Like an automaton she turned. In the doorway, facing her, stood the broad-shouldered form of Russell Converse.

A sob of relief left Carol's lips. She took a step forward, stopped again, realized that something about the old woman's son was not the same as it had been. He was scowling, glaring at her with unblinking eyes. His lips were curled back over exposed teeth.

She cringed from him, wanted suddenly to whirl and run. The man's eyes were twin tubes of malice, boring into her. A harsh growling sound came from his throat as he paced slowly forward.

"So you have discovered my secret. You are just a woman after all, with a woman's fatal curiosity!"

The words were acid, snarled through trembling lips. Stumbling backward, Carol collided with the table, shuddered as one of the propped-up heads rocked on its pedestal of flesh. Grimly, deliberately, the old woman's son advanced upon her.

"Just a woman, prying into affairs that don't concern you. You are all the same, all of you! Cassidy came here to find out what lives in the room up there in the loft. His curiosity resulted in his death, and in the death of the girl who came

here with him. Both of them knew too much. And now—you know too much!"

The man's eyes blazed, burned like pits of red flame in the half-light of the room. Staring into those eyes, Carol knew that she had been mistaken. She had trusted him, believed him to be the only normal person in this hell-house of strange human beings. Now she knew that he was like the others, worse than the others. Gazing fearfully into those smouldering orbs, she saw madness in them, realized that they were the eyes of a maniac.

Cold fingers clutched at her, froze the blood in her veins. Frantically she staggered back, sought to escape. With awful slowness he strode toward her, his curled hands extended to drag her into his embrace.

A lurid scream shrilled from her lips, ticsinned wildly through the death-chamber. Terror alone gave her the strength to lunge away from him, to run. Like a frightened deer she avoided him, clawed her way to the opposite side of the table. Still he advanced, keeping his big body between her and the door.

With strength born of desperation, she upended the heavy table into his legs, raced around it as he stumbled back with a vicious curse. The two death-heads thudded to the floor, rolled grotesquely over the carpet, tangled themselves in the madman's feet as he leaped toward her. He tripped, sprawled sideways into the outstuck legs of the table, caught himself with an outflung hand. Sobbing thickly, Carol stumbled toward the door.

He was almost upon her as she fled across the threshold. The hiss of his breathing was like the spitting of an enraged animal behind her. Blindly she raced into the adjoining room, careened into the big table, pitched headlong with the impact. Her flying feet beat a tattoo across the floor, toward the door which led to the corridor.

The door was closed. Even before she reached it, Carol knew that it spelled death. Locked or not, it would resist her efforts long enough for the snarling beast behind her to fall upon her, drag her back into the room. Abruptly she turned, leaped in another direction. Her slender body crashed into the wall, rebounded. Her groping hand came in contact with something small, hard.

The thing was a light-switch, and she pressed it instinctively, at the very moment when the madman's contorted bulk came hurtling toward her. Savage hands clutched at her dress, tore the fabric as she wrenched free. In the dark she staggered blindly along the wall, turned on stiff legs, ran back to the table.

**F**OR a moment the darkness saved her, gave her time to fight back the terror which had commanded her every action. Motionless against the table, she stood staring, realized that the monster could not locate her. Furious snarling sounds came from the black void near the door, as Converse thrashed about in the dark, endeavoring to lay hands on her. Then the sounds ceased, the room was utterly silent. A vague, ill-defined shape, which was the madman's menacing body, stood rigid near the wall, its smouldering eyes hanging like bloody lanterns in the dark.

At that moment, Carol knew the identity of the prowling monster who had terrorized Malcolm Converse's house of macabre mystery. Those burning eyes, the bulging black shape beneath them, were hellishly familiar. She had seen them before, had cringed from them in horror. Now she knew the truth, knew that Russell Converse himself was the nameless fiend who had murdered Cassidy and Cassidy's girl. The vile thing before her, searching the darkness in a vicious attempt to discover her whereabouts, was the same hideous monster who had over-

powered Alan, in the corridor upstairs.

Even as the truth drove home to her, the madman moved. Slowly, cunningly he paced forward, between her and the door. Those burning eyes fastened on her with an evil hunger.

But they did not reach her. Before the menacing shape had covered half the intervening distance, a sound from the corridor outside invaded the room, caused the monster to stand motionless. Behind him, the door opened with a dismal creak. A shaft of white light, emanating from the eye of a flashlight, swept the room, came to rest on Converse's looming body.

Behind the flashlight stood the child-like form of the mistress of the house—the thin, shrivelled shape of Nora Converse.

Carol stared at that shrivelled shape, and shuddered. The old woman's face was a mask of vile triumph, eyes narrowed, mouth curled in a hideous grin. She advanced slowly, glared at Converse, said in a cracked voice:

"Well, why don't you turn on a light? Afraid of me, are you?"

Converse said nothing, merely gaped at her. His madness seemed to have fallen from him like a discarded cloak. He cringed as the woman strode to the light-switch in the wall. A burst of shrill laughter jangled from her lips as she turned the lights on and whirled again to confront him.

"If you're not afraid, you'd better be!" she cackled, waving the flashlight as if it were a bludgeon. "I told you not to cross me, Russell Converse! I told you what would happen if you took that girl away from me! Well—it's happened!"

The man's face went white; his eyes bulged in their sockets. He took a step backward, said fearfully:

"What—what have you done?"

"What have I done? I've let your lovely brother loose, that's what! He's loose

—do you hear? And he's coming down here to pay you a visit!" Again the woman laughed with savage mirth, hugely enjoying her triumph. "Well, why don't you say something? Can't you talk?"

"You devil!" Converse rasped. "You black-souled devil! I'll—" His hands opened and closed convulsively. He moved toward her, snarling in his throat. But his fear was greater than his rage. He stopped again as the old woman retreated to the doorway.

Standing there, she taunted him with a leering grin, hurled words of denunciation at him, labelled him with vicious epithets which sapped the color from the face of the girl who was listening. Then, jerking her head around, the woman peered into the darkness of the corridor, said shrilly:

"Why don't you run away? He's coming for you! Can't you hear him? Do you think he's coming here to make *love* to you, after you've tormented him all these years? Run, you fool! *Run!*"

Converse stood rooted to the floor, seemed unable to put his big body in motion. With enormous eyes he watched the doorway, oblivious to everything except the sounds which were audible in the corridor outside. Hearing those sounds, the woman stepped away from the aperture, flattened against the wall. Neither she nor her son seemed aware of Carol's presence in the room.

**T**HE sounds in the corridor came nearer, grew louder with each passing moment. They were strange sounds, as of some ponderous body slithering slowly along the dark passage, clawing its way forward with great effort. Icy hands clutched at Carol's heart as she heard them. Terrified, she stared at Russell Converse, realized that he was more afraid than she.

Then with a gurgling cry Carol stumbled backward, staring at the doorway.

Across the threshold came a thing that spiked her soul with horror, left her utterly rigid, paralyzed with fear.

The thing was stark naked, leprous white, gleaming with sweat. Short stumpy legs carried it forward, supported its malformed body. Not more than four feet high, it swayed heavily with every step, rolled its tremendous shoulders as if in danger of falling. Those shoulders, growing out of a thin, twisted torso, were hideously out of proportion, horribly massive and powerful. Long, hairy arms dangled from them, terminating in gaunt hands which curled forward as if alive in themselves.

The thing stopped, stood swaying, glared at Russell Converse. Gaping at it, Carol realized that it was human—a son of the old woman who crouched near the wall. Its huge head stabbed forward; its features were malformed and shapeless, yet somehow similar to the features of the old woman. Little wonder this deformed beast had been kept prisoner in the room upstairs!

The gargoyle face was full of hate, hunger. Gazing into it, Russell Converse retreated step by step, his groping hands clawing the table as he fell back. The thing followed him in grim silence, uttering no sound, paying no attention at all to Carol or the old woman. Cunningly, viciously it advanced, lumbering forward on its blunt mockeries of legs.

The far wall of the room ended Russell's retreat. Wide-eyed, he flattened against it, stood rigid. Escape was impossible; between him and the door loomed the menacing bulk of his strange adversary. A bubbling sob came from the terrified man's lips. He mumbled words of supplication, jerked his arms up in front of him to keep the killer at bay.

"Go back, Artel! Back! My God, I've never done anything to you! I've never harmed you! Go back!"

The thing paid no attention. Its huge head rolled from side to side; its hairy hands reached out. Step by step it closed the gap, stalking its victim as a monstrous cat might stalk a helpless rodent. Russell cringed into the wall, moaned thickly through dry lips. The terror in his face increased, reached the bursting point.

With a mad cry of fear he lunged sideways, made a desperate attempt to escape the hairy hands that reached out for him. The effort failed. One of those hideous arms lashed out with snake-like quickness, dragged him into the killer's embrace. Next moment Russell Converse was fighting frantically for his life.

He had no chance. Strong as he was, that obscenely shaped body was stronger. The long arms lashed around him, encircled him as the legs of a bloated spider might have encircled the squirming body of a captured fly. Hurling him to the floor, the monstrous thing fell upon him, tore at him with hooked fingers. Under the weight of that half-human pile of flesh, the doomed man writhed in helpless agony.

Lurid screams jangled from his tortured throat, filling the room with their clamor. Incoherent words whined from his lips, begging mercy. But if the thing heard, it paid no attention. Its mind, if it had a mind, was centered on one purpose only: to mutilate the heaving body of its victim, to tear that writhing flesh, beat that screaming face to bloody pulp.

Near the door, the old woman looked on with hungry eyes, made muttering sounds in her throat. She, the woman who was responsible for the very existence of the blood-mad monster, was glorying in its hellish triumph, revelling in the awful sounds which filled the room. Near the wall, Carol Lane looked on in horror, unable to close her eyes against the thing that was happening.

Then it ended. The deformed monster

flung itself squarely upon the helpless form beneath it. Hairy hands found Russell's throat, imbedded themselves in torn flesh. The hooked fingers dug deep, wrenched sideways. Red blood bubbled from the dying man's mutilated neck, stained the murderer's hands carmine, formed a gleaming pool on the carpet. The victim's last scream ended in a gurgling whisper.

THE killer rocked backward, glared down into Russell's face. Slowly it groped erect, stood swaying on its abbreviated legs, uttered a snarl of triumph. Then it turned, glared momentarily at Carol and the old woman, and lumbered along the wall to the nearest of the two windows.

The hairy hands reached out, dragged aside the heavy curtains which masked the aperture. Outside, the darkness of night had yielded to a gray murk of dawn; the muffled scream of the storm was no longer a voice of fury.

Leaning forward, the killer thrust the ancient window up in its grooves, then leaned far out over the sill and peered down. Swirling snow invaded the room, driven by a whining wind. From below came the roar of the sea, beating sullenly against the base of the cliff.

Turning, the creature named Artel waddled quickly back to the mutilated shape which lay on the carpet. The long arms reached down, gathered that bloody form in a cruel embrace, swung it aloft. With the same lumbering gait, the killer returned to the window, flung the dead body upon the sill, heaved it over. Then, for a long while, the creature leaned there in the aperture, staring triumphantly down at the sea below. A full minute passed before the naked shape straightened, before the huge hands clawed the window back into place.

Once more the sound of the storm was

muffled, the room was silent. Slowly, cunningly, Artel turned to stare at the two women.

There was no malice in the monster's attitude as he peered from Carol to the old woman and back again. Like a curious animal he studied the girl a moment, then turned and lumbered slowly toward the door. But he did not reach it. Nora Converse, stepping forward from the wall, pointed a crooked finger at Carol and said in a shrill voice:

"Wait a minute! Before you go upstairs, I want the girl. Bring her to my room, Artel."

The monstrosity stopped, stared at the woman intently, as if bewildered by her command. Again he turned to look at Carol, and again the woman said shrilly: "Bring her to my room, I told you!"

The creature shrugged his huge shoulders, waddled sluggishly toward his intended victim. With a low cry of terror, Carol retreated from his advancing bulk, screamed at him to stop.

He did stop, and glared at her sullenly, as if angered by her fear of him. The old woman's curt command spurred him forward again. A snarl twisted his gargoyle countenance as he lumbered across the floor, past the table.

There was no escape. Just as Russell Converse had done before her, Carol flattened against the far wall, stood utterly rigid, paralyzed by the cold dread which swept over her. She was aware vaguely that someone was approaching along the corridor outside, that the old woman was peering into the passage. But those things were nothing. The hairy, outstretched hands of the monster were the focal point of her attention.

Then, suddenly, she looked beyond the menacing shape which threatened her. Her eyes went wide. She uttered an incoherent cry, stumbled sideways as the groping paws curled toward her. There,

in the doorway, stood a battered, dishevelled figure whose presence filled her with hope, caused her to stare with amazement.

That figure, framed against the darkness of the corridor beyond, was lean and tall, with blocked shoulders, a mop of tangled hair, a face smeared with congealed blood.

The intruder was Alan Lane.

A shrill cry leaped from the girl's lips as she stumbled forward. In her eagerness, she forgot the hideous shape in front of her, forgot what the murderous monster had already done to Russell Converse. She had eyes for one thing only—for the man who had come back to her from the dead.

Lane stood staring at her as she groped toward him. Nora Converse, crouching near the doorway, gaped at him as if seeing a ghost. Incoherent words mumbled from the old woman's mouth. Fearfully she stepped backward, as Lane paced into the room.

Then Lane stopped, flung out a hoarse cry of warning. Hairy hands clutched at Carol's slender body as the monster lunged toward her with uncanny quickness. The girl screamed, made a desperate attempt to wrench herself free. Staring into the gargoyle face of her assailant, she beat frantically at the leprosy flesh of his malformed chest.

Over the thing's shoulder, she saw Lane hurtling toward her, realized that he intended to drag the monster away from her. Cold terror stifled the scream of warning in her throat. Then she saw something else.

Behind Lane, a second shape loomed in the doorway. It was the squat, thick-shouldered form of Peter Vine, the caretaker, and Vine's outthrust hand gripped a gleaming revolver. Even as the murdering monster released her and swung savagely upon Lane, the caretaker strode forward.



The hairy arms encircled Lane's middle, caught him in a crushing embrace. Savagely he fought to free himself, drove a pile-driver fist into the killer's vile face, hammered at the thing's obscene body. Then Peter Vine stopped, took deliberate aim. The room trembled to the sudden deafening roar of the revolver. The monster stiffened, uttered a lurid scream of agony.

For ten seconds, the deformed son of Nora Converse swayed drunkenly, clawed with hooked fingers at his shattered chest. Then he rocked backward, crashed into the wall, fell in a grotesque heap to the floor.

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Storm Passes

CAROL LANE knew nothing after that. Her over-wrought nerves gave way, mercifully relieved her of watching the monster's death agonies. She would have fallen, had not Alan put a protecting arm around her, holding her erect.

She was not aware that Malcolm Converse entered the room a moment later, stared first at the dead thing on the floor, then at his wife, and said slowly, heavily, to Lane:

"I was afraid this would happen. Thank God you and your wife were not harmed."

Long later, when Carol regained consciousness, she was lying on the divan in the living-room, downstairs. The room was pale with daylight; the sinister darkness of the night was a thing of the past. Beside the divan stood Lane; and facing him, in one of the big overstuffed chairs, sat Malcolm Converse, slumped in the chair's depths as if utterly exhausted, sick in mind and body.

"Now it is finished," Converse was saying. "And God help me, I am glad of

it. For years, this has been a house of evil. Now it can be closed up."

He stared at Lane out of bloodshot eyes. The events of the night had added ten years to his age, put a note of dead despair in his voice, transformed his face to a colorless mask.

"It has been a house of madness," he said wearily. "The man who built it was mad, and from the very beginning this house has possessed a soul of its own—a wicked soul, full of malice. My wife is a direct descendant of the builder; insanity is in her blood. She possessed the mind of a wicked, scheming child."

"I suspected her," Lane said grimly, "of being the murderer."

Converse shook his head. "You were wrong. She is malicious, yes, and terribly strong despite her apparent frailty, but she is mentally only a child. It was she who attempted to frighten you and your wife when you first retired. She meant no harm—then. After she obtained the— the gargoyle from Russell's studio, and terrorized you with it, she came to me and told me about it, with childish pride in her ingenuity.

"This house is hers. She ruled it. She took immense delight in terrorizing the occasional strangers who came here. Only when those strangers were lovely women, as in the case of your wife, did she become insanely jealous."

Lane glanced down at his wife, saw that she was awake. Quietly he sat beside her, took one of her hands in his. Converse, paying no attention, continued in that same lifeless voice, as if talking to himself.

"Alfred, the butler, knows very little of what has been going on. Lately he has been suspicious. I have seen it in his eyes. He has watched our every movement. Peter Vine knows everything, but until tonight he kept his knowledge to himself. He owes me a debt of gratitude—"

"And I owe him one," Lane nodded. "When your lovely son, Russell, left me for dead in the corridor upstairs, it was Vine who found me, lugged me to a place of safety, and patched me up. Then I talked to him, convinced him that he had to help me. He took me to Russell's room. Got me there just in time."

"And he killed Artel." Converse leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, breathing slowly, heavily. "God forgive me, but I am glad he did it. Artel was not my son; he was my wife's son by a former marriage. Since the day of his birth he has been kept in that small room at the top of the house. Only once before has he escaped, and then he nearly killed me before I succeeded in locking him up again. Day after day, Russell went to that room and tormented him. They hated each other."

Lane scowled, said in a low voice: "When I first met Russell, I thought him the only normal person in the house."

"At times he was. When there were no strangers in the house, he was as normal as you or I. But the presence of strangers excited him, made him return to that vile studio of his. You have seen the horrible things in that room. Some of them are clay, some are—" Converse shuddered, put a trembling hand to his perspiring forehead. "I knew about it, but what could I do? He was my own son. If only Cassidy had remained in his room last night, instead of prowling about the house in the dark, the night might have passed in peace and quiet. Oh God, *why* did he go to that part of the house? *Why?*"

"He and his girl," Lane scowled, "had a note, written by the deformed creature in the prison room. At least, that's what Myra Carver claimed. She said the note was found sealed in a medicine bottle, floating on a beach near here. Evidently it was written by Artel, describing the

location of his prison room, and begging the finder to come here and release him."

CONVERSE shook his head wearily. "Artel could never have written such a note. He could not write. The girl was lying." He turned in his chair, stared at the doorway behind him, as heavy footsteps were audible in the corridor outside. A sigh of relief left his lips as the intruder proved to be Peter Vine. "No, Artel could not have written any such note. Cassidy and the girl must have come here for some other reason."

Peter Vine paced forward, said quietly: "You're mistaken." Fumbling in his pocket, he produced a folded sheet of yellow paper, dropped it in the older man's lap. "I found that in Russell's studio. It's your wife's handwriting."

Converse unfolded the paper, stared at it with wide eyes.

"But why—"

"Just another one of your wife's childish schemes," Vine growled. "I've just come from her room. She's up there, crying like a baby because things didn't work out just the way she wanted them to. She admits writing this thing. Says she was tired of having nothing happen in this damned house, and she wanted some excitement. I've locked her in her room now, and after she's through bawling, she'll probably fall asleep."

Converse crumpled the paper in his fingers, let it fall to the floor. In a heavy, lifeless voice he said:

"It is over now. All over. You and Alfred had better go, before the police come here. There is no need for you to be implicated; you have done nothing. It is enough for my wife and me to be here when the police arrive."

He turned wearily to Lane. "You, too, must leave before the police come, otherwise you and your wife will be dragged into a recital of horror of which you are

entirely innocent. The storm is over; you can get back to your car in safety, or reach some house where there will be a telephone. I wish to be alone."

Lane looked at his wife, realized that the older man's advice was good. Already. Peter Vine had paced silently from the room, disappeared down the corridor in the direction of the servants' quarters. Lane stood up, stared into the pale face of the unhappy man before him.

"There is nothing we can do before we go?"

"Nothing," Converse said. "I wish to be alone."

Lane nodded, paced silently into the hall to the antique clothes-tree which loomed there. Returning, he helped Carol into her coat, hunched himself into his own. When he turned again to look at Malcolm Converse, the man was slumped deep in the overstuffed chair, his eyes closed, his hands folded in his lap.

Quietly, Lane put a hand on his wife's arm, drew her to the door. Together they walked down the long corridor, opened the heavy door which led to the outside. A moment later the barrier thudded shut behind them; they began the long tramp back to the stranded car.

Behind them as they walked away, the door of the house opened again, closed noisily. They turned, stood motionless a moment, staring. Peter Vine, the caretaker, and Alfred, the butler, descended the steps and ploughed across the snow-covered lawn in the opposite direction. Vine carrying a battered suitcase.

Lane gazed silently at the huge structure, held his wife close as she trembled against him. Bleak and desolate, the strange house loomed above a dreary expanse of shadowed snow, its owl windows staring out over the surrounding wilderness.

Somewhere in the upper portion of that massive structure, in a room with a locked door, sat the little old woman whose shrill laughter had so often wailed through the sinister maze of black rooms and corridors—the little old woman whose childish scheming had plunged the dwellers of the house into a nightmare of horror from which they had never risen.

In the living-room downstairs, silently awaiting the arrival of the police, sat the unfortunate man who had tried in vain to keep those fearful horrors from the knowledge of outsiders.

Dark and forbidding, the huge house loomed there in its pall of gloom, with but two living persons left in its grim labyrinth of rooms.

The horror was ended. The old house was a grim, silent mausoleum, and would soon be closed, abandoned, left to its fate.

A shudder shook Lane's tired body as he turned away. Once more he took Carol's arm, led her along the deserted road. When he spoke at last, it was to say with forced indifference:

"Well, I hope your new husband is enough of a mechanic to get the old bus started."

**THE END**