

Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XII

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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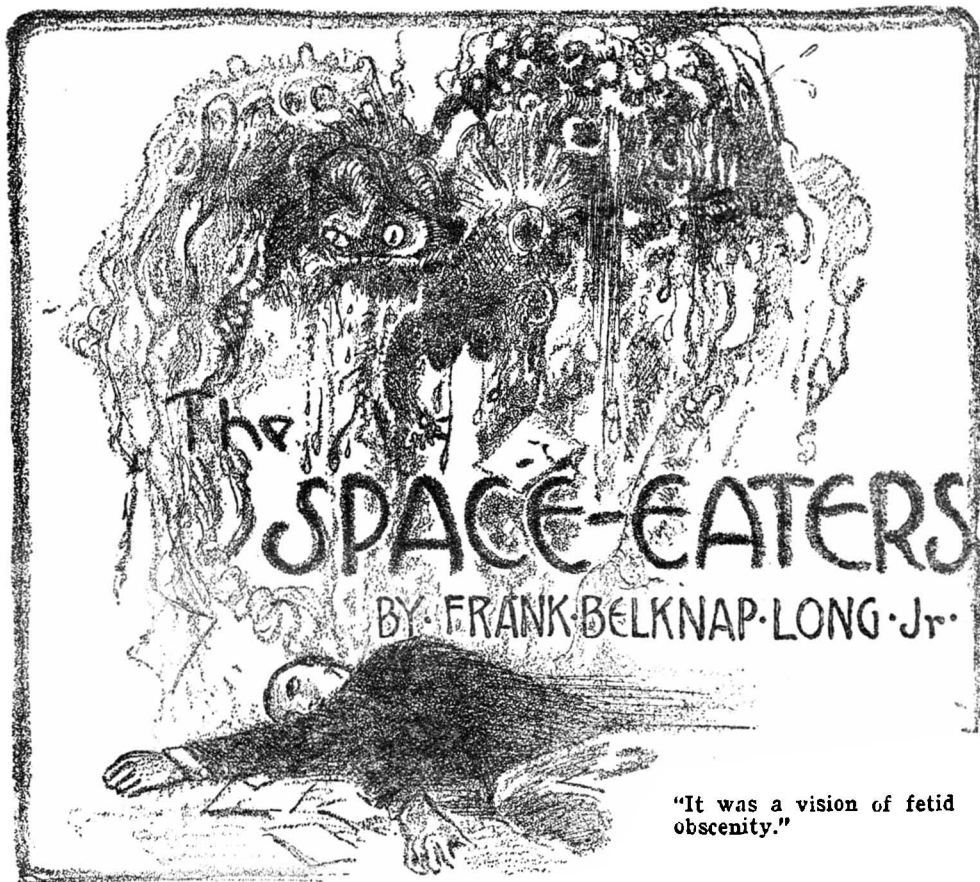
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"The cross is not a passive agent. It protects the pure of heart, and it has often appeared in the air above our sabbats, confusing and dispersing the powers of Darkness."

—John Dee's *Necronomicon*.

THE horror came to Partridgeville in a blind fog.

All that afternoon thick vapors from the sea had swirled and eddied about the farm, and the room in which we sat swam with moisture. The fog ascended in spirals from beneath the door, and its long, moist fingers caressed my hair until it dripped. The square-paned windows were coated with a thick, dewlike moisture; the air was heavy and dank and unbelievably cold.

I stared gloomily at my friend. He had turned his back to the window

W. T.—2

and was writing furiously. He was a tall, slim man with a slight stoop and abnormally broad shoulders. In profile his face was impressive. He had an extremely broad forehead, long nose and slightly protuberant chin—a strong, sensitive face which suggested a wildly imaginative nature held in restraint by a skeptical and Brobdingnagian intellect.

My friend wrote short-stories. He wrote to please himself, in defiance of contemporary taste, and his tales were unusual. They would have delighted Poe; they would have delighted Hawthorne, or Ambrose Bierce, or Villiers de l'Isle Adam. They were terrible and somber studies of abnormal men, abnormal beasts, abnormal plants. He wrote of remote and unholy realms of imagination and hor-

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ror, and the colors, sounds and odors which he dared to evoke were never seen, heard or smelt on the familiar side of the moon. He projected his shameless creations against wormy and obscene backgrounds. They stalked loathsomely through tall and lonely forests, over ragged mountains, and slithered evilly down the stairs of ancient houses, and between the piles of rotting black wharves.

One of his tales, *The House of the Worm*, had induced a young student at a Midwestern University to seek refuge in an enormous red-black building where everyone approved of his sitting on the floor and shouting at the top of his voice: "Lo, my beloved is fairer than all the lilies among the lilies in the lily garden." Another, *The Deflers*, had brought him precisely three hundred and ten letters of indignation from local readers when it appeared in the *Partridgeville Gazette*.

As I continued to stare at him he suddenly stopped writing and shook his head. "I can't do it," he said. "I should have to invent a new language. And yet I can comprehend the thing emotionally, intuitively, if you will. If I could only convey it in a sentence somehow—the strange crawling of its fleshless spirit!"

"Is it some new horror?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It is not new to me. I have known and felt it for years—a horror utterly beyond anything your prosaic brain can conceive."

"Thank you," I said.

"All human brains are prosaic," he elaborated. "I meant no offense. It is the shadowy terrors that lurk behind and above them that are mysterious and awful. Our little brains—what do they know of the loathly, crawling things that come down from outer space and suck us dry? I think sometimes they lodge in our heads, and our brains feel them, but when they stretch out horrid tentacles to claw and absorb us we go

screaming mad; and of what use are brains then?"

"But you can't honestly believe in such nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"Of course not!" He shook his head and laughed. "You know damn well I'm too profoundly skeptical to believe in anything. I have merely outlined a poet's reactions to the universe. If a man wishes to write ghostly stories and actually convey a sensation of horror to his miserable and unworthy readers he must believe in everything—and *anything*. By *anything* I mean the horror that transcends *everything*, that is more terrible and impossible than *everything*. He must believe that there are things from outer space that can reach down and suck us dry."

"But this thing from outer space—how can he describe it if he doesn't know its shape or size or color?"

"It is virtually impossible to describe it. That is what I have sought to do—and failed. Perhaps some day—but then, I doubt if it can ever be accomplished. But your artist can hint, suggest——"

"Suggest what?" I asked, a little puzzled.

"Suggest a horror that is utterly unearthly; that makes itself felt in terms that have no counterparts on this earth."

I was still puzzled. He smiled wearily and elaborated his theory.

"There is something prosaic," he said, "about even the best of the classic tales of mystery and terror. Old Mrs. Radcliffe with her hidden vaults and bleeding ghosts, Maturin with his allegorical, Faustlike hero-villains, and his fiery flames from the mouth of hell, Edgar Poe with his blood-clotted corpses, and black cats, his telltale hearts and disintegrating Valdemars, Hawthorne with his amusing preoccupation with the problems and horrors arising from mere human sin (as though human sins were of any significance to the things that suck at our brains), and

the modern masters, Algernon Blackwood who invites us to a feast of the high gods and shows us an old woman with a harelip sitting before a ouija board fingering soiled cards, or an absurd nimbus of ectoplasm emanating from some clairvoyant ninny, Bram Stoker with his vampires and werewolves, mere conventional myths, the tag-ends of medieval folklore, Wells with his pseudo-scientific bogies, fish-men at the bottom of the sea, ladies in the moon, and the hundred and one idiots who are constantly writing ghost stories for the magazines—what have they contributed to the literature of the unholy?

“Are we not made of flesh and blood? It is but natural that we should be revolted and horrified when we are shown that flesh and blood in a state of corruption and decay, with the worms passing over and under it. It is but natural that a story about a corpse should thrill us, fill us with fear and horror and loathing. Any fool can awake these emotions in us—Poe really accomplished very little with his *Lady Ushers*, and liquescent *Valdemars*. He appealed to simple, natural, understandable emotions, and it was inevitable that his readers should respond.

“Are we not the descendants of barbarians? Did we not once dwell in tall and sinister forests, at the mercy of beasts that rend and tear? It is but inevitable that we should shiver and cringe when we meet in literature dark shadows from our own past. Harpies and vampires and werewolves—what are they but magnifications, distortions of the great birds and bats and ferocious dogs that harassed and tortured our ancestors? It is easy enough to arouse fear by such means. It is easy enough to frighten men with the flames at the mouth of hell, because they are hot and shrivel and burn the flesh—and who does not understand and dread a fire? Blows that kill, fires that burn, shadows that

horrify because their substances lurk evilly in the black corridors of our inherited memories—I am weary of the writers who would terrify us by such pathetically obvious and trite unpleasantnesses.”

Real indignation blazed in his eyes.

“Suppose there were a greater horror? Suppose evil things from some other universe should decide to invade this one? Suppose we couldn’t see them? Suppose we couldn’t feel them? Suppose they were of a color unknown on the earth, or rather, of an *appearance* that was without color?

“Suppose they had a shape unknown on the earth? Suppose they were four-dimensional, five-dimensional, six-dimensional? Suppose they were a hundred-dimensional? Suppose they had no dimensions at all and yet existed? What could we do?

“They would not exist for us? They would exist for us if they gave us pain. Suppose it was not the pain of heat or cold or any of the pains we know, but a new pain? Suppose they touched something besides our nerves—reached our brains in a new and terrible way? Suppose they made themselves felt in a new and strange and unspeakable way? What could we do? Our hands would be tied. You can not oppose what you can not see or feel. You can not oppose the thousand-dimensional. *Suppose they should eat their way to us through space!*”

He was rapidly talking himself into a frenzy.

“That is what I have tried to write about. I wanted to put into a story the crawling, formless thing that sucks at our brains. I wanted to make my readers, absurd and unworthy fools, feel and see that thing from another universe, from beyond space. I could easily enough hint at it, or suggest it—any fool can do that—but I wanted to actually describe it. To describe a color that is not a color! a form that is formless!

"A mathematician could perhaps slightly more than suggest it. There would be strange curves and angles that an inspired mathematician in a wild frenzy of calculation might glimpse vaguely. It is absurd to say that mathematicians have not discovered the fourth dimension. They have often glimpsed it, often approached it, often apprehended it, but they are unable to demonstrate it. I know a mathematician who swears that he once saw the sixth dimension in a wild flight into the sublime skies of the differential calculus.

"Unfortunately I am not a mathematician. I am only a poor fool of a creative artist, and the thing from outer space utterly eludes me."

SOMEONE was pounding loudly on the door. I crossed the room and drew back the latch. "What do you want?" I asked. "What is the matter?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Frank," said a familiar voice. "but I've got to talk to someone."

I recognized the lean, white face of my nearest neighbor, and stepped instantly to one side. "Come in," I said. "Come in, by all means. Howard and I have been discussing ghosts, and the things we've conjured up aren't pleasant company. Perhaps you can argue them away."

I called Howard's horrors ghosts because I didn't want to shock my commonplace neighbor. Henry Wells was immensely big and tall, and as he strode into the room he seemed to bring a part of the night with him.

He collapsed on a sofa and surveyed us with frightened eyes. Howard laid down the story he had been reading, removed and wiped his glasses, and frowned. He was more or less intolerant of my bucolic visitors. We waited for perhaps a minute, and then the three of us spoke almost simultaneously. "A horrible

night!" "Beastly, isn't it?" "Wretched."

Henry Wells frowned. "Tonight," he said, "I—I met with a funny accident. I was driving Hortense through Mulligan Wood——"

"Hortense?" Howard interrupted.

"His horse," I explained impatiently. "You were returning from Brewster, weren't you, Harry?"

"From Brewster, yes," he replied. "I was driving between the trees watching the fog curling in and out of Hortense's cars and listening to the fog-horns in the bay wheezing and moaning, when something wet landed on my head. 'Rain,' I thought. 'I hope the supplies keep dry.'

"I turned round to make sure that the butter and flour were covered up, and something soft like a sponge rose up from the bottom of the wagon and hit me in the face. I snatched at it and caught it between my fingers.

"In my hands it felt like jelly. I squeezed it, and moisture ran out of it down my wrists. It wasn't so dark that I couldn't see it, either. Funny how you can see in fogs—they seem to make the night lighter. There was a sort of brightness in the air. I dunno, maybe it wasn't the fog, either. The trees seemed to stand out. You could see them sharp and clear. As I was saying, I looked at the thing, and what do you think it looked like? Like a piece of raw liver. Or like a calf's brain. Now that I come to think of it, it was more like a calf's brain. There were grooves in it, and you don't find many grooves in liver. Liver's usually as smooth as glass.

"It was an awful moment for me. 'There's someone up in one of those trees,' I thought. 'He's some tramp or crazy man or fool and he's been eating liver. My wagon frightened him and he dropped it—a piece of it. I can't be wrong. There was no liver in my wagon when I left Brewster.'

"I looked up. You know how tall all of the trees are in Mulligan Wood. You can't see the tops of some of them from the wagon-road on a clear day. And you know how crooked and queer-looking some of the trees are.

"It's funny, but I've always thought of them as old men—tall old men, you understand, tall and crooked and very evil. I've always thought of them as wanting to work mischief. There's something unwholesome about trees that grow very close together and grow crooked.

"I looked up.

"At first I didn't see anything but the tall trees, all white and glistening with the fog, and above them a thick, white mist that hid the stars of heaven. And then something long and white ran quickly down the trunk of one of the trees.

"It ran so quickly down the tree that I couldn't see it clearly. And it was so thin anyway that there wasn't much to see. But it was like an arm. It was like a long, white and very thin arm. But of course it wasn't an arm. Who ever heard of an arm as tall as a tree? I don't know what made me compare it to an arm, because it was really nothing but a thin line—like a wire, a string. I'm not sure that I saw it at all. Maybe I imagined it. I'm not even sure that it was as wide as a string. But it had a hand. Or didn't it? When I think of it my brain gets dizzy. You see, it moved so quickly I couldn't see it clearly at all.

"But it gave me the impression that it was looking for something that it had dropped. For a minute the hand seemed to spread out over the road, and then it left the tree and came toward the wagon. It was like a huge white hand walking on its fingers with a terribly long arm fastened to it that went up and up until it touched the fog, or perhaps until it touched the stars of heaven.

"I screamed and slashed Hortense

with the reins, but the horse didn't need any urging. She was up and off before I could throw the liver, or calf's brain or whatever it was, into the road. She raced so fast she almost upset the wagon, but I didn't draw in the reins. I'd rather lie in a ditch with a broken rib than have a long, white hand squeezing the breath out of my throat.

"**W**E HAD almost cleared the wood and I was just beginning to breathe again when my brain went cold. I can't describe what happened in any other way. My brain got as cold as ice inside my head. I can tell you I was frightened.

"Don't imagine I couldn't think clearly. I was conscious of everything that was going on about me, but my brain was so cold I screamed with the pain. Have you ever held a piece of ice in the palm of your hand for as long as two or three minutes? It burnt, didn't it? Ice burns worse than fire. Well, my brain felt as though it had lain on ice for hours and hours. There was a furnace inside my head, but it was a cold furnace. It was roaring with raging cold.

"Perhaps I should have been thankful that the pain didn't last. It wore off in about ten minutes, and when I got home I didn't seem to be any the worse for my experience. I'm sure I didn't think I was any the worse until I looked at myself in the glass. Then I saw the hole in my head."

Henry Wells leaned forward and brushed back the hair from his right temple.

"Here is the wound," he said. "What do you make of it?" He tapped with his fingers beneath a small round opening in the side of his head. "It's like a bullet-wound," he elaborated, "but there was no blood and you can look in pretty far. It seems to go right in to the center of my head. I shouldn't be alive."

Howard had risen and was staring at my neighbor with flaming eyes.

"Why have you lied to us?" he shouted. "Why have you told us this absurd story? A long hand, forsooth! You were drunk, man. Drunk—and yet you've succeeded in doing what I'd have sweated blood to accomplish. If I could have made my idiotic readers feel that horror, know it for a moment, that horror that you described in the woods, I should be with the immortals—I should be greater than Poe, greater than Hawthorne. And you—a clumsy clown, a lying yokel——"

I was on my feet with a furious protest.

"He's not lying," I said. "The man's insane with fever. He's been shot—someone has shot him in the head. Look at this wound. My God, man, you have no call to insult him!"

Howard's wrath died and the fire went out of his eyes. "Forgive me," he said. "You can't imagine how badly I've wanted to capture that ultimate horror, to put it on paper, and he did it so easily. If he had warned me that he was going to describe something like that I would have taken notes. But of course he doesn't know he's an artist. It was an accidental *tour de force* that he accomplished; he couldn't do it again, I'm sure. I'm sorry I went up in the air—I apologize. Do you want me to go for a doctor? That is a bad wound."

My neighbor shook his head. "I don't want a doctor," he said. "I've seen a doctor. There's no bullet in my head—that hole was not made by a bullet. When the doctor couldn't explain it I laughed at him. I hate doctors. And I haven't much use for fools that think I'm in the habit of lying. I haven't much use for people who won't believe me when I tell 'em I saw the long, white thing come sliding down the tree as clear as day."

But Howard was examining the

wound in defiance of my neighbor's indignation. "It was made by something round and sharp," he said. "It's curious, but the flesh isn't torn. A knife or bullet would have torn the flesh, left a ragged edge."

I nodded, and was bending to study the wound when Wells shrieked, and clapped his hands to his head. "Ah-h-h!" he choked. "It's come back—the terrible, terrible cold."

Howard stared. "Don't expect me to believe such nonsense!" he exclaimed disgustedly.

But Wells was holding on to his head and dancing about the room in a delirium of agony. "I can't stand it!" he shrieked. "It's freezing up my brain. It's not like ordinary cold. It isn't. Oh God! It's like nothing you've ever felt. It bites, it scorches, it tears. It's like acid."

I laid my hand upon his shoulder and tried to quiet him, but he pushed me aside and made for the door.

"I've got to get out of here," he screamed. "The thing wants room. My head won't hold it. It wants the night—the vast night. It wants to wallow in the night."

He threw back the door and disappeared into the fog. Howard wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat and collapsed into a chair.

"Mad," he muttered. "A tragic case of manic-depressive insanity. Who would have suspected it? The story he told us wasn't conscious art at all. It was simply a nightmare-fungus conceived by the brain of a lunatic."

"Yes," I said, "but how do you account for the hole in his head?"

"Oh, that!" Howard shrugged. "He probably always had it—probably was born with it."

"Nonsense," I said. "The man never had a hole in his head before. Personally, I think he's been shot. Something ought to be done. He needs medical attention. I think I'll 'phone Dr. Smith."

"It is useless to interfere," said Howard. "That hole was *not* made by a bullet. I advise you to forget him until tomorrow. His insanity may be temporary; it may wear off; and then he'd blame us for interfering. It doesn't pay to meddle with lunatics. If he's still crazy tomorrow, if he comes here again and tries to make trouble, you can notify the proper authorities. Has he ever acted queerly before?"

"No," I said. "He was always quite sane. I think I'll take your advice and wait. But I wish I could explain the hole in his head."

"The story he told interests me more," said Howard. "I'm going to write it out before I forget it. Of course I shan't be able to make the horror as real as he did, but perhaps I can catch a bit of the strangeness and glamor."

He unscrewed his fountain pen and began to cover a harmless sheet of paper with curious jeweled phrases—unearthly phrases. I knew that in a moment the paper would become unholy. I knew that it would glow with an unhallowed light; that witch-fires would flicker over it; strange shadows deepen all about it. From his brain strange and monstrous ideas would flow in a continuous stream to the smooth, white paper.

I shivered and closed the door.

FOR several minutes there was no sound in the room save the scratching of his pen as it moved across the paper. For several minutes there was silence—and then the shrieks commenced. Or were they wails?

We heard them through the closed door, heard them above the moaning of the fog-horns and the wash of the waves on Mulligan's Beach. We heard them above the million sounds of night that had horrified and depressed us as we sat and talked in that fog-enshrouded and lonely house. We heard them so clearly that for a moment we thought they came from

just outside the house. It was not until they came again and again—long, piercing wails—that we discovered in them a quality of remoteness. Slowly we became aware that the wails came from far away, as far away, perhaps, as Mulligan Wood.

"A soul in torture," muttered Howard. "A poor, damned soul in the grip of the crawling chaos."

He rose unsteadily to his feet. His eyes were shining and he was breathing heavily.

I seized his shoulders and shook him. "You shouldn't project yourself into your stories that way," I exclaimed. "Some poor chap is in distress. I don't know what's happened. Perhaps a ship has foundered. I'm going to put on a slicker and find out what it's all about. I have an idea we may be needed."

"We *may* be needed," repeated Howard slowly. "We may be needed indeed. It will not be satisfied with a single victim. Think of that great journey through space, the thirst and dreadful hungers it must have known! It is preposterous to imagine that it will be content with a single victim!"

Then, suddenly, a change came over him. The light went out of his eyes and his voice lost its quaver. He shivered.

"Forgive me," he said. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm as mad as the yokel who was here a few minutes ago. But I can't help identifying myself with my characters when I write. I'd described something very evil, and those yells—well, they are exactly like the yells a man would make if—if——"

"I understand," I interrupted, "but we've no time to discuss that now. There's a poor chap out there"—I pointed vaguely toward the door—"with his back against the wall. He's fighting off something—I don't know what. We've got to help him."

"Of course, of course," he agreed, and followed me into the kitchen.

Without a word I took down a slicker and handed it to him. I also handed him an enormous rubber hat.

"Get into these as quickly as you can," I said. "The chap's desperately in need of us."

I had gotten my own slicker down from the rack and was forcing my arms through its sticky sleeves. In a moment we were both pushing our way through the fog.

The fog was like a living thing. Its long fingers reached up and slapped us relentlessly on the face. It curled about our bodies and ascended in great, grayish spirals from the tops of our heads. It retreated before us, and as suddenly closed in and enveloped us.

Dimly ahead of us we saw the lights of a few lonely farms. Behind us the sea drummed, and the fog-horns sent out a continuous, mournful ululation. The collar of Howard's slicker was turned up over his ears, and from his long nose moisture dripped. There was grim decision in his eyes, and his jaw was set.

FOR many minutes we plodded on in silence, and it was not until we approached Mulligan Wood that he spoke.

"If necessary," he said, "we shall enter the wood."

I nodded. "There is no reason why we should not enter the wood," I said. "It isn't a large wood."

"One could get out quickly?"

"One could get out very quickly indeed. My God, did you hear that?"

The shrieks had grown horribly loud.

"He is suffering," said Howard. "He is suffering terribly. Do you suppose—do you suppose it's your crazy friend?"

He had voiced a question which I had been asking myself for some time.

"It's conceivable," I said. "But we'll have to interfere if he's as mad as that. I wish I'd brought some of the neighbors with me."

"Why in heaven's name didn't you?" Howard shouted. "It may take a dozen men to handle him." He was staring at the tall trees that towered before us, and I don't think he really gave Henry Wells so much as a thought.

"That's Mulligan Wood," I said. I swallowed to keep my heart from rising to the top of my mouth. "It isn't a big wood," I added idiotically.

"Oh my God!" Out of the fog there came the sound of a voice in the last extremity of unutterable pain. "They're eating up my brain. Oh my God!"

I was at that moment in deadly fear that I might become as mad as the man in the woods. I clutched Howard's arm.

"Let's go back," I shouted. "Let's go back at once. We were fools to come. There is nothing here but madness and suffering and perhaps death."

"That may be," said Howard, "but we're going on."

His face was ashen beneath his dripping hat, and his eyes were thin blue slits. Before the tremendous challenge of his courage I was abashed.

"Very well," I said grimly. "We'll go on."

Slowly we moved among the trees. They towered above us, and the thick fog so distorted them and merged them together that they seemed to move forward with us. From their twisted branches the fog hung in ribbons. Ribbons, did I say? Rather were they snakes of fog—writhing snakes with venomous tongues and leering, evil eyes. Through swirling clouds of fog we saw the scaly, gnarled boles of the trees, and every bole resembled the twisted body of an evil old man.

Only the small oblong of light cast by my electric torch protected us against their malevolence.

Through great banks of fog we moved, and every moment the screams grew louder. Soon we were catching fragments of sentences, hysterical shoutings that merged into prolonged wails. "Colder and colder and colder . . . they are eating up my brain. Colder! Ah-h-h!"

Howard gripped my arm. "We'll find him," he said. "We can't turn back now."

When we found him he was lying on his side. His hands were clasped about his head, and his body was bent double, the knees drawn up so tightly that they almost touched his chest. He was silent. We bent and shook him, but he made no sound.

"Is he dead?" I choked out the question hysterically. I wanted desperately to turn and run. The trees were very close to us.

"I don't know," said Howard. "I don't know. I hope that he is dead."

I saw him kneel and slide his hand under the poor devil's shirt. For a moment his face was a mask. Then he got up quickly and shook his head.

"He is alive," he said. "We must get him into some dry clothes as quickly as possible."

I helped him. Together we lifted the bent figure from the ground and carried it forward between the trees. Twice we stumbled and nearly fell, and the creepers tore at our clothes. The creepers were little malicious hands grasping and tearing under the malevolent guidance of the great trees. Without a star to guide us, without a light except the little pocket lamp which was growing dim, we fought our way out of Mulligan Wood.

THE droning did not commence until we had left the wood. At first we scarcely heard it, it was so low, like the purring of gigantic en-

gines far down in the earth. But slowly, as we stumbled forward with our burden, it grew so loud that we could not ignore it.

"What is that?" muttered Howard, and through the wraiths of fog I saw that his face had a greenish tinge.

"I don't know," I mumbled. "It's something horrible. I never heard anything like it. Can't you walk faster?"

So far we had been fighting familiar horrors, but the droning and humming that rose behind us was like nothing that I had ever heard on earth. In excruciating fright, I shrieked aloud. "Faster, Howard, faster! For God's sake, let's get out of this!"

As I spoke, the body that we were carrying squirmed, and from its cracked lips issued a torrent of gibberish: "I was walking between the trees and looking up. I couldn't see their tops. I was looking up, and then suddenly I looked down and the thing landed on my shoulders. It was all legs—all long, crawling legs. It went right into my head. I wanted to get away from the trees, but I couldn't. I was alone in the forest with the thing on my back, in my head, and when I tried to run, the trees reached out and tripped me. It made a hole so it could get in. It's my brain it wants. Today it made a hole, and now it's crawled in and it's sucking and sucking and sucking. It's as cold as ice and it makes a noise like a great big fly. But it isn't a fly. And it isn't a hand. I was wrong when I called it a hand. You can't see it. I wouldn't have seen or felt it if it hadn't made a hole and got in. You almost see it, you almost feel it, and that means that it's getting ready to go in."

"Can you walk, Wells? Can you walk?"

Howard had dropped Wells' legs and I could hear the harsh intake of

his breath as he struggled to rid himself of his slicker.

"I think so," Wells sobbed. "But it doesn't matter. It's got me now. Put me down and save yourselves."

"We've got to run!" I yelled.

"It's our one chance," cried Howard. "Wells, you follow us. Follow us, do you understand? They'll burn up your brain if they catch you. We're going to run, lad. Follow us!"

He was off through the fog. Wells shook himself free, and followed with hoarse shrieks. I tasted a horror more terrible than death. The noise was dreadfully loud; it was right in my ears, and yet for a moment I couldn't move. I stared at the blank wall of fog, and gibbered.

"Christ, Frank will be lost!" It was the voice of Wells, my poor, lost friend.

"We'll go back!" It was Howard shouting now. "It's death, or worse, but we can't leave him."

"Keep on," I shouted. "They won't get me. Save yourselves!"

In my anxiety to prevent them from sacrificing themselves I plunged wildly forward. In a moment I had joined Howard and was clutching at his arm.

"What is it?" I cried. "What have we to fear?"

The droning was all about us now, but no louder.

"Come quickly or we'll be lost!" he urged frantically. "They've broken down all barriers. That buzzing is a warning. We're sensitives—we've been warned, but if it gets louder we're lost. They're strong near Mulligan Wood, and it's here they've made themselves felt. They're experimenting now—feeling their way. Later, when they've learned, they'll spread out. If we can only reach the farm——"

"We'll reach the farm!" I shouted encouragement as I clawed my way through the fog.

"Heaven help us if we don't!" moaned Howard.

He had thrown off his slicker, and his seeping wet shirt clung tragically to his lean body. He moved through the blackness with long, furious strides. Far ahead we heard the maniacal shrieks of Henry Wells. Ceaselessly the fog-horns moaned; ceaselessly the fog swirled and eddied about us.

And the droning continued. It seemed incredible that we should ever have found a way to the farm in the blackness. But find the farm we did, and into it we stumbled with glad cries.

"Shut the door!" shouted Howard.

I shut the door.

"We are safe here, I think," he said. "They haven't reached the farm yet."

"What has happened to Wells?" I gasped, and then I saw the wet tracks leading into the kitchen.

Howard saw them too. His eyes flashed with momentary relief.

"I'm glad he's safe," he muttered. "I feared for him."

Then his face darkened. The kitchen was unlighted and no sound came from it.

Without a word Howard walked across the room and into the darkness beyond. I sank into a chair, flicked the moisture from my eyes and brushed back my hair, which had fallen in soggy strands across my face. For a moment I sat, breathing heavily, and when the door creaked, I shivered. But I remembered Howard's assurance: "They haven't reached the farm yet. We're safe here."

Somehow, I had confidence in Howard. He realized that we were threatened by a new and unknown horror, and in some occult way he had grasped its limitations.

I confess, though, that when I heard the screams that came from the kitchen, my faith in my friend was

slightly shaken. There were low growls, such as I could not believe came from any human throat, and the voice of Howard raised in wild expostulation. "Let go, I say! Are you quite mad? Man, man, we have saved you! Don't, I say—leggo my leg. Ah-hh!"

As Howard staggered into the room I sprang forward and caught him in my arms. He was covered with blood from head to foot and his face was ashen.

"He's gone raving mad," he moaned. "He was running about on his hands and knees like a dog. He sprang at me, and almost killed me. I fought him off, but I'm badly bitten. I hit him in the face—knocked him unconscious. I may have killed him. He's an animal—I had to protect myself."

I laid Howard on the sofa and knelt beside him, but he scorned my aid.

"Don't bother with me!" he commanded. "Get a rope, quickly, and tie him up. If he comes to, we'll have to fight for our lives."

WHAT followed was a nightmare. I remember vaguely that I went into the kitchen with a rope and tied poor Wells to a chair; then I bathed and dressed Howard's wounds, and lit a fire in the grate. I remember also that I telephoned for a doctor. But the incidents are confused in my memory, and I have no clear recollection of anything until the arrival of a tall, grave man with kindly and sympathetic eyes and a presence that was as soothing as an opiate.

He examined Howard, nodded and explained that the wounds were not serious. He examined Wells, and did not nod. He explained slowly that Wells was desperately ill. "Brain fever," he said. "An immediate operation will be necessary. I tell you frankly, I don't think we can save him."

"That wound in his head, Doctor," I said. "Was it made by a bullet?"

The doctor frowned. "It puzzles me," he said. "Of course it was made by a bullet, but it should have partially closed up. It goes right into the brain. You say you know nothing about it. I believe you, but I think the authorities should be notified at once. Someone will be wanted for manslaughter, unless"—he paused—"unless the wound was self-inflicted. What you tell me is curious. That he should have been able to walk about for hours seems incredible. The wound has obviously been dressed, too. There is no clotted blood at all."

He paced slowly back and forth. "We must operate here—at once. There is a slight chance. Luckily, I brought some instruments. We must clear this table and—do you think you could hold a lamp for me?"

I nodded. "I'll try," I said.

"Good!"

The doctor busied himself with preparations while I debated whether or not I should 'phone for the police.

"I'm convinced," I said at last, "that the wound was self-inflicted. Wells acted very strangely. If you are willing, Doctor——"

"Yes?"

"We will remain silent about this matter until after the operation. If Wells lives, there would be no need of involving the poor chap in a police investigation."

The doctor nodded. "Very well," he said. "We will operate first and decide afterward."

Howard was laughing silently from his couch. "The police," he snickered. "Of what use would they be against the things in Mulligan Wood?"

There was an ironic and ominous quality about his mirth that disturbed me. The horrors that we had known in the fog seemed absurd and impossible in the cool, scientific pres-

ence of Dr. Smith, and I didn't want to be reminded of them.

The doctor turned from his instruments and whispered into my ear. "Your friend has a slight fever, and apparently it has made him delirious. If you will bring me a glass of water I will mix him an opiate."

I raced to secure a glass, and in a moment we had Howard sleeping soundly.

"Now then," said the doctor as he handed me the lamp. "You must hold this steady and move it about as I direct."

The white, unconscious form of Henry Wells lay upon the table that the doctor and I had cleared, and I trembled all over when I thought of what lay before me.

I should be obliged to stand and gaze into the living brain of my poor friend as the doctor relentlessly laid it bare. I should be obliged to stand and stare as the doctor cut and probed, and perhaps I should witness unmentionable things.

With swift, experienced fingers the doctor administered an anesthetic. I was oppressed by a dreadful feeling that we were committing a crime, that Henry Wells would have violently disapproved, that he would have preferred to die. It is a dreadful thing to mutilate a man's brain. And yet I knew that the doctor's conduct was above reproach, and that the ethics of his profession demanded that he operate.

"We are ready," said Dr. Smith. "Lower the lamp. Carefully now!"

I saw the knife moving in his competent, swift fingers. For a moment I stared, and then I turned my head away. What I had seen in that brief glance made me sick and faint. It may have been fancy, but as I stared hysterically at the wall I had the impression that the doctor was on the verge of collapse. He made no sound, but I was almost certain that he had made some horrible, unspeakable discovery.

"Lower the lamp," he said. His voice was hoarse and seemed to come from far down within his throat.

His voice horrified me so that I was guilty of a great treachery. I lowered the lamp an inch without turning my head. I waited for him to reproach me, to swear at me perhaps, but he was as silent as the man on the table. I knew, though, that his fingers were still at work, for I could hear them as they moved about. I could hear his swift, agile fingers moving about the head of Henry Wells.

I suddenly became conscious that my hand was trembling. I wanted to lay down the lamp; I felt that I could no longer hold it.

"Are you nearly through?" I gasped in desperation.

"Hold that lamp steady!" The doctor screamed the command. "If you move that lamp again—I—I won't sew him up. I'll walk out of this room and leave his obscene brain to rot. I don't care if they hang me! I'm not a healer of devils!"

I knew not what to do. I could scarcely hold the lamp, and the doctor's threat horrified me. In desperation I pleaded with him.

"Do everything you can," I urged, hysterically. "Give him a chance to fight his way back. He was kind and good—once!"

For a moment there was silence, and I feared that he would not heed me. I momentarily expected him to throw down his scalpel and sponge, and dash across the room and out into the fog. It was not until I heard his fingers moving about again that I knew he had decided to give even the damned a chance.

IT WAS after midnight when the doctor told me that I could lay down the lamp. I turned with a cry of relief and encountered a face that I shall never forget. In three quarters of an hour the doctor had aged ten years. There were purple caverns

beneath his eyes, and his mouth twitched convulsively. There were wrinkles upon his high yellow forehead that I had not seen there before, and when he spoke, his voice was cracked and feeble.

"He'll not live," he said. "He'll be dead in an hour. I did not touch his brain. I could do nothing. When I saw—how things were—I—I sewed him up immediately."

"What did you see?" I half whispered.

A look of unutterable fear came into the doctor's eyes. "I saw—I saw"—his voice broke and his whole body quivered—"I saw—oh, the burning shame of it! Because I have seen a—what man should not look upon—I bear the mark of the beast upon me. I am contaminated forever. I am unclean. I can not stay in this house. I must leave at once."

He broke down and covered his face with his hands. Great sobs convulsed his body.

"Unclean," he moaned. "The old, hideous secret that man has forgotten—a horror to look upon. Evil that is without shape: evil that is formless."

Suddenly he raised his head and looked wildly about him.

"They will come here and claim him!" he shrieked. "They have laid their mark upon him and they will come for him. You must not stay here. This house is marked for destruction!"

I watched him helplessly as he seized his hat and bag and crossed to the door. With white, shaking fingers he drew back the latch, and in a moment his lean figure was silhouetted against a square of swirling vapor.

"Remember that I warned you!" he shouted back; and then the fog swallowed him.

Howard was sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"A malicious trick, that!" he was muttering. "To deliberately drug

me! Had I known that glass of water——"

"How do you feel?" I asked as I shook him violently by the shoulders. "Do you think you can walk?"

"You drug me, and then ask me to walk! Frank, you're as unreasonable as an artist. What is the matter now?"

I pointed to the silent figure on the table. "Mulligan Wood is safer," I said. "He belongs to them now!"

Howard sprang to his feet and shook me by the arm.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "How do you know?"

"The doctor saw his brain," I explained. "And he also saw something that he would not—could not describe. But he told me that they would come for him, and I believe him."

"We must leave here at once!" cried Howard. "Your doctor was right. We are in deadly danger. Even Mulligan Wood—but we need not return to the wood. There is your launch!"

"There is the launch!" I echoed, faint hope rising in my mind.

"The fog will be a most deadly menace," said Howard grimly. "But even death at sea is preferable to *this* horror."

IT WAS not far from the house to the dock, and in less than a minute Howard was seated in the stern of the launch and I was working furiously on the engine. The fog-horns still moaned, but there were no lights visible anywhere in the harbor. We could not see two feet before our faces. The white wraiths of the fog were dimly visible in the darkness, but beyond them stretched endless night, lightless and full of terror.

Howard was speaking. "Somehow I feel that there is death out there," he said.

"There is more death here," I said as I churned at the engine. "I think

I can avoid the rocks. There is very little wind and I know the harbor."

"And of course we shall have the fog-horns to guide us," muttered Howard. "I think we had better make for the open sea."

I agreed.

"The launch wouldn't survive a storm," I said, "but I've no desire to remain in the harbor. If we reach the sea we'll probably be picked up by some ship. It would be sheer folly to remain where they can reach us."

"How do we know how far they can reach?" groaned Howard. "What are the distances of earth to things that have traveled through space? They will overrun the earth. They will destroy us all utterly."

"We'll discuss that later," I cried as the engine roared into life. "We're going to get as far away from them as possible. Perhaps they haven't *learned* yet! While they've still limitations we may be able to escape."

We moved slowly into the channel, and the sound of the water splashing against the sides of the launch soothed us strangely. At a suggestion from me Howard had taken the wheel and was slowly bringing her about.

"Keep her steady," I shouted. "There isn't any danger until we get into the Narrows!"

For several minutes I crouched above the engine while Howard steered in silence. Then, suddenly, he turned to me with a gesture of elation.

"I think the fog's lifting," he said.

I stared into the darkness before me. Certainly it seemed less oppressive, and the white spirals of mist that had been continually ascending through it were fading into insubstantial wisps. "Keep her head on," I shouted. "We're in luck. If the fog clears we'll be able to see the Narrows. Keep a sharp lookout for Mulligan Light."

There is no describing the joy that filled us when we saw the light. Yellow and bright it streamed over the water and illuminated sharply the outlines of the great rocks that rose on both sides of the Narrows.

"Let me have the wheel," I shouted as I stepped quickly forward. "This is a ticklish passage, but we'll come through now with colors flying."

In our excitement and elation we almost forgot the horror that we had left behind us. I stood at the wheel and smiled confidently as we raced over the dark water. Quickly the rocks drew nearer until their vast bulk towered above us.

"We shall certainly make it!" I cried.

But no response came from Howard. I heard him choke and gasp.

"What is the matter?" I asked suddenly, and turning, saw that he was crouching in terror above the engine. His back was turned toward me, but I knew instinctively in which direction he was gazing.

The dim shore that we had left shone like a flaming sunset. Mulligan Wood was burning. Great flames shot up from the highest of the tall trees, and a thick curtain of black smoke rolled slowly eastward, blotting out the few remaining lights in the harbor.

But it was not the flames that caused me to cry out in a frenzy of fear and horror. It was the shape that towered above the trees, the vast, formless shape that moved slowly to and fro across the sky.

GOD knows I tried to believe that I saw nothing. I tried to believe that the shape was a mere shadow cast by the flames. I even managed to laugh, and I remember that I patted Howard's arm reassuringly.

"The wood will be destroyed utterly," I cried. "I know that they will not escape. They will all perish."

But when Howard turned in his fright and screamed, I knew that the dim, formless thing that towered above the trees was more than a shadow.

"If we see it clearly we are lost!" he shrieked. "Pray that it remains without form!"

"I see nothing!" I groaned. "There is blackness above the trees."

"It has no form," gibbered Howard. "We should not—we must not see it! It is our little brains that give it a form. When it enters our brains it becomes clothed in a form. If it enters our brains we are lost."

"The woods are burning!" I shouted. "There is nothing above the trees. All is blackness and emptiness above the trees."

But even as I stared at the shape with loathing, with furious disbelief, it grew more distinct. Above the burning trees it hovered awfully, and I slowly became aware that it had wings.

"It is like a bat!" I groaned. "It is a great bat with yellow wings brooding over the fire."

"It is a bat!" sobbed Howard. "It is dark and very large and almost formless, but it is a bat!"

"No, no!" I shrieked. "It is not a bat. We see nothing. There is a great, vague form that moves back and forth above the trees, but it is not a bat."

Howard buried his head in his hands and sobbed aloud in an agony of fear. "Our brains will grow cold," he moaned. "They will enter and suck at our brains."

"Oh, not that!" I cried. "I will die first. I will throw myself into the water. That terror is more terrible than drowning."

We stood trembling in the darkness, a prey to the most awful horror. The shape above Mulligan Wood was slowly growing clearer and I did not think anything could save us. And then, suddenly, I re-

membered that there was one thing that might save us.

"It is older than the world," I thought, "older than all religion. Before the dawn of civilization men knelt in adoration before it. It is present in all mythologies. It is the primal symbol. Perhaps, in the dim past, thousands and thousands of years ago, it was used to—repel the invaders. I shall so use it. I shall fight the shape with a high and terrible mystery."

I became suddenly curiously calm. I knew that I had hardly a minute to act, that more than our lives were threatened, but I did not tremble. I reached calmly beneath the engine and drew out a quantity of cotton waste.

"Howard," I said, "I want you to light me a match. It is our only hope. You must strike a match at once."

For what seemed eternities Howard stared at me incomprehensibly. Then the night was clamorous with his laughter.

"A match!" he shrieked. "A match to warm our little brains! Yes, we shall need a match."

"Trust me!" I entreated. "You must—it is our one hope. Strike a match quickly."

"I do not understand!" Howard was sober now, but his voice quivered hysterically.

"I have thought of something that may save us," I said. "Please light this waste for me."

Slowly he nodded. I had told him nothing, but I knew he guessed what I intended to do. Often his insight was uncanny. With fumbling fingers he drew out a match and struck it.

"Be bold," he said. "Show them that you are unafraid. Make the sign boldly."

As the waste caught fire, the form above the trees stood out with a frightful clarity.

"There is nothing there," I cried. "We see nothing. We are protected. We are invincible."

I raised the flaming cotton and passed it quickly before my body in a straight line from my left to my right shoulder. Then I raised it to my forehead and lowered it to my knees.

In an instant Howard had snatched the brand and was repeating the sign. He made two crosses, one against his body and one against the darkness with the torch held at arm's length. "*Sanctus . . . sanctus . . . sanctus,*" he muttered.

For a moment I shut my eyes, but I could still see the shape above the trees. Then slowly it ceased to resemble a bat, its form became less distinct, became vast and chaotic—and when I opened my eyes it had vanished. I saw nothing but the flaming forest and the shadows cast by the tall trees.

The horror had passed, but I did not move. I stood like an image of stone staring over the black water. Then something seemed to burst in my head. My brain spun dizzily, and I tottered against the rail.

I would have fallen, but Howard caught me about the shoulders. "We're saved!" he shouted. "We've won through."

"I'm glad," I said. But I was too utterly exhausted to really rejoice. My legs gave way beneath me and my head fell forward. All the sights and sounds of earth were swallowed up in a merciful blackness.

2

HOWARD was writing when I entered the room.

"How is the story going?" I asked.

For a moment he ignored my question. Then he slowly turned and faced me. His lips opened but no sound came from between them. I noticed that he had aged horribly. He was much thinner (I don't think

he weighed more than one hundred and ten pounds) and there were myriads of tiny wrinkles about his eyes.

"It's not going well," he said at last. "It doesn't satisfy me. There are problems that still elude me. I haven't been able to capture *all* of the crawling horror of the thing in Mulligan Wood."

I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I want you to explain that horror to me," I said. "For three weeks I have waited for you to speak. I know that you have some knowledge which you are concealing from me. What was the damp, spongy thing that landed on Wells' head in the woods? Why did we hear a droning as we fled in the fog? What was the meaning of the shape that we saw above the trees? And why, in heaven's name, didn't the horror spread as we feared it might? What stopped it? Howard, what do you think really happened to Wells' brain? Did his body burn with the farm, or did they *claim* it? And the other body that was found in Mulligan Wood—that lean, blackened horror with riddled head—how do you explain that?" [Two days after the fire a skeleton had been found in Mulligan Wood. A few fragments of burnt flesh still adhered to the bones, and the skull-cap was missing.]

It was a long time before Howard spoke again. He sat with bowed head, fingering his notebook, and his body trembled horribly, trembled all over. At last he raised his eyes. They shone with a wild light and his lips were ashen.

"Yes," he said. "We will discuss the horror together. Last week I did not want to speak of it. It seemed too awful to put into words. But I shall never rest in peace until I have woven it into a story, until I have made my readers feel and see that dreadful, unspeakable thing. And I can not write of it until I am convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt

that I understand it myself. It may help me to talk about it.

"You have asked me what the damp thing was that fell on Wells' head. I believe that it was a human brain—the essence of a human brain drawn out through a hole, or holes, in a human head. I believe the brain was drawn out by imperceptible degrees, and reconstructed again by the horror. I believe that for some purpose of its own it used human brains—perhaps to learn from them. Or perhaps it merely played with them. The blackened, riddled body in Mulligan Wood? That was the body of the first victim, some poor fool who got lost between the tall trees. I rather suspect the trees helped. I think the horror endowed them with a strange life. Anyhow, the poor chap lost his brain. The horror took it, and played with it, and then accidentally dropped it. It dropped it on Wells' head. Wells said that the long, thin and very white arm he saw was looking for something that it had dropped. Of course Wells didn't really see the arm objectively, but the horror that is without form or color had already entered his brain and clothed itself in human thought.

"As for the droning that we heard and the shape we thought we saw above the burning forest—that was the horror seeking to make itself felt, seeking to break down barriers, seeking to enter our brains and clothe itself with our thoughts. It almost got us. If we had seen the shape as clearly as Wells saw the white arm we should have been lost."

Howard walked to the window. He drew back the curtains and gazed for a moment at the crowded harbor and the colossal buildings that towered against the moon. He was staring at the skyline of lower Manhattan. Sheer beneath him the cliffs of Brooklyn Heights loomed darkly.

"Why didn't they conquer?" he

cried. "They could have destroyed it utterly. They could have wiped it from the earth—all its incredible wealth and power would have gone down before them. The great buildings would have toppled into the sea, and millions of brains would have fed their lust—their terrible, unearthly lust."

I shivered. "But why didn't the horror spread?" I cried.

Howard shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. Perhaps they discovered that human brains were too trivial and absurd to bother with. Perhaps we ceased to amuse them. Perhaps they grew tired of us. But it is conceivable that the *sign* destroyed them—or sent them back through space. I think they came once before. I think they came millions of years ago, and were frightened away by the sign. When they discovered that we had not forgotten the use of the sign they may have fled in terror. Certainly there has been no manifestation for three weeks. I think that they are gone." "Then I have saved the world!" I shouted exultantly.

"Perhaps." He eyed me disapprovingly. "I think I can forgive you for that," he said, "but it is nothing to gloat over."

"And Henry Wells?" I asked.

"Well, his body was not found. I imagine they came for him."

"And you honestly intend to put this—this ultimate obscenity into a story? Oh, my God! The whole thing is so incredible, so unheard of, that I can't believe it. I can't! My friend, my friend, did we not dream it all? Were we ever really in Partidgeville? Did we sit in an ancient house and discuss unmentionable things while the fog curled about us? Did we walk through that unholy wood? Were the trees really alive, and did Henry Wells run about on his hands and knees like a wolf?"

Howard sat down quietly and rolled up his sleeve. He thrust his thin arm toward me.

"Can you argue away that scar?" he said. "There are the marks of the beast that attacked me—the man-beast that was Henry Wells. A dream? My friend, I would cut off this arm immediately at the elbow if you could convince me that it was a dream."

I walked to the window and remained for a long time staring at the stupendous galaxies of Manhattan. "There," I thought, "is something substantial. It is absurd to imagine that anything could destroy it. It is absurd to imagine that the horror was really as terrible as it seemed to us in Partridgeville. I must persuade Howard not to write about it. We must both try to forget it."

I returned to where he sat and laid my hand on his shoulder.

"You'll give up the idea of putting it into a story?" I urged gently.

"Never!" He was on his feet, and his eyes were blazing. "Do you think I would give up now when I've almost captured it? I shall write the most terrible story that the world has ever seen. My readers shall crouch and whimper in awful fear. I shall surpass Poe—I shall surpass all of the Masters."

"Surpass them and be damned then," I said angrily. "That way madness lies, but it is useless to argue with you. Your egoism is too colossal."

I turned and walked swiftly out of the room. It occurred to me as I descended the stairs that I had made an idiot of myself with my fears, but even as I went down I looked fearfully back over my shoulder, as though I expected a great stone weight to descend from above and crush me to the earth. "He should forget the horror," I thought. "He should wipe it from his mind. He will go mad if he writes about it."

THREE days passed before I saw Howard again.

"Come in," he said in a curiously hoarse voice when I knocked on his door.

I found him in dressing-gown and slippers, and I knew as soon as I saw him that he was terribly exultant. His eyes shone and he greeted me with a feverish intensity.

"I have triumphed, Frank!" he cried. "I have reproduced the form that is formless, the burning shame that man has not looked upon, the crawling, fleshless obscenity that sucks at our brains!"

Before I could so much as gasp he had placed the bulky manuscript in my hands.

"Read it, Frank," he commanded. "Sit down at once and read it!"

I crossed to the window and sat down on the lounge. I sat there oblivious to everything but the type-written sheets before me. I confess that I was consumed with an unholy curiosity. I had never questioned Howard's power. With words he wrought miracles; breaths from the unknown blew always over his pages, and things that had passed beyond earth returned at his bidding. But could he even suggest the horror that we had known?—could he even so much as hint at the loathsome, crawling thing that had claimed the brain of Henry Wells?

I read the story through. I read it slowly, and clutched at the pillows beside me in a frenzy of loathing. As soon as I had finished it Howard snatched it from me. He evidently suspected that I desired to tear it to shreds.

"What do you think of it?" he cried exultantly.

"It is indescribably foul!" I exclaimed. "It is terribly, unspeakably obscene!"

"But you will concede that I have made the horror convincing?"

I nodded, and reached for my hat. "You have made it so convincing

that I can not remain and discuss it with you. I intend to walk until morning. I intend to walk until I am too weary to care, or think, or remember."

"It is deathless art!" he shouted at me, but I passed down the stairs and out of the house without replying.

3

IT WAS past midnight when the telephone rang. I laid down the book I was reading and lowered the receiver.

"Hello. Who is there?" I asked.

"Frank, this is Howard!" The voice was strangely high-pitched. "Come as quickly as you can. *They've come back!* And Frank, the sign is powerless. I've tried the sign, but the droning is getting louder, and a dim shape——" Howard's voice trailed off disastrously.

I fairly screamed into the receiver. "Courage, man! Do not let them suspect that you are afraid. Make the sign again and again. I will come at once."

Howard's voice came again, more hoarsely this time. "The shape is growing clearer and clearer. And there is nothing I can do! Frank, I have lost the power to make the sign. I have forfeited all right to the protection of the sign. My soul is corrupt. I've become a priest of the Devil. That story—I should not have written that story."

"Show them that you are unafraid!" I cried.

"I'll try! I'll try! Ah, my God! The shape is——"

I did not wait to hear more. Frantically seizing my hat and coat I dashed down the stairs and out into the street. As I reached the curb a dizziness seized me. I clung to a lamp-post to keep from falling, and waved my hand madly at a fleeing taxi. Luckily the driver saw me. The car stopped and I staggered out into

the street and climbed into it. "Quick!" I shouted. "Take me to 10 Brooklyn Heights!"

"Yes, sir. Cold night, ain't it?"

"Cold!" I shouted. "It will be cold indeed when they get in. It will be cold indeed when they start to——"

The driver stared at me in amazement. "That's all right, sir," he said. "We'll get you home all right, sir. Brooklyn Heights, did you say, sir?"

"Brooklyn Heights," I groaned, and collapsed against the cushions.

As the car raced forward I tried not to think of the horror that awaited me. I clutched desperately at straws. "It is conceivable," I thought, "that Howard has gone temporarily insane. How could the horror have found him among so many millions of people? It can not be that *they* have deliberately sought him out. It can not be that they would deliberately choose him from among such multitudes. He is too insignificant—all human beings are too insignificant. They would never deliberately angle for human beings. They would never deliberately trawl for human beings—but they did seek Henry Wells. And what did Howard say? 'I have become a priest of the Devil.' Why not *their* priest? What if Howard has become their priest on earth? What if his obscene, loathly story has made him their priest?"

The thought was a nightmare to me, and I put it furiously from me. "He will have courage to resist them," I thought. "He will show them that he is not afraid."

"Here we are, sir. Shall I help you in, sir?"

The car had stopped, and I groaned as I realized that I was about to enter what might prove to be my tomb. I descended to the sidewalk and handed the driver all the change

that I possessed. He stared at me in amazement.

"You've given me too much," he cried. "Here, sir——"

But I waved him aside and dashed up the stoop of the house before me. As I fitted a key into the door I could hear him muttering: "Craziest drunk I ever seen! He gives me four bucks to drive him ten blocks, and doesn't want no thanks or nothin'——"

The lower hall was unlighted. I stood at the foot of the stairs and shouted. "I'm here, Howard! Can you come down?"

There was no answer. I waited for perhaps ten seconds, but not a sound came from the room above.

"I'm coming up!" I shouted in desperation, and started to climb the stairs. I was trembling all over. "They've got him," I thought. "I'm too late. Perhaps I had better not—great God, what was that?"

I was unbelievably terrified. There was no mistaking the sounds. In the room above, someone was volubly pleading and crying aloud in agony. Was it Howard's voice that I heard? I caught a few words indistinctly. "Crawling—ugh! Crawling—ugh! Oh, have pity! Cold and clee-ar. Crawling—ugh! God in heaven!"

I had reached the landing, and when the pleadings rose to hoarse shrieks I fell to my knees, and made against my body, and upon the wall beside me, and in the air—the sign. I made the primal sign that had saved us in Mulligan Wood, but this time I made it crudely, not with fire, but with fingers that trembled and caught at my clothes, and I made it without courage or hope, made it darkly, with a conviction that nothing could save me.

And then I got up quickly and went on up the stairs. My prayer was that they would take me quickly, that my sufferings should be brief under the stars.

THE door of Howard's room was ajar. By a tremendous effort I stretched out my hand and grasped the knob. Slowly I swung it inward.

For a moment I saw nothing but the motionless form of Howard lying upon the floor. He was lying upon his back. His knees were drawn up and he had raised his hands before his face, palms outward, as if to blot out a vision unspeakable.

Upon entering the room I had deliberately, by lowering my eyes, narrowed my range of vision. I saw only the floor and the lower section of the room. I did not want to raise my eyes. I had lowered them in self-protection because I dreaded what the room held.

I did not want to raise my eyes, but there were forces, hideous and obscene powers at work in the room which I could not resist. I knew that if I looked up, the horror might destroy me, but I had no choice.

Slowly, painfully, I raised my eyes and stared across the room. It would have been better, I think, if I had rushed forward immediately and surrendered to the thing that towered there. It would have consumed me in a moment, consumed me utterly, but what does life hold for me now? The vision of that fetid obscenity will come between me and the pleasures of the world as long as I remain in the world.

From the ceiling to the floor it towered, and it threw off drooling shafts of light. The light was slimy and unspeakable—a liquid light that dripped and dripped and dripped, like spittle, like the fetid mucous of loathsome slugs. And pierced by the shafts, whirling around and around, were the pages of Howard's story.

In the center of the room, between the ceiling and the floor, the pages whirled about, and the loathsome light burned through the sheets, and descending in dripping shafts entered—the brain of my poor friend! Into his head the light was pouring in a

continuous stream, and above, the Master of the Light moved slowly back and forth in awful glee. I screamed and screamed and covered my eyes with my hands, but still the Master moved—back and forth, back and forth. And still the foul light drooled and oozed and ran and poured into the brain of my friend.

And then there came from the mouth of the Master a most awful sound. . . . I had forgotten the sign that I had made three times below in the darkness. I had forgotten the high and terrible mystery before

which all of the invaders were powerless. But when I saw it forming itself in the room, forming itself immaculately, with a terrible integrity above the drooling yellow light, I knew that I was saved.

I sobbed and fell upon my knees. The fetid light dwindled, and the Master shriveled before my eyes.

And then from the walls, from the ceiling, from the floor, there leapt flame—a white and cleansing flame that consumed, that devoured and destroyed forever.

But my friend was dead.