Scream at midnight

Brennan, Joseph Payne, 1918-1990

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THE HORROR AT CHILTON CASTLE

I had decided to spend a leisurely summer in Europe, concentrating, if at all, on genealogical research. I went first to Ireland, journeying to Kilkenny where I unearthed a mine of legend and authentic lore concerning my remote Irish ancestors, the O'Braonains, chiefs of Ui Duach in the ancient kingdom of Ossory. The Brennans (as the name was later spelled) lost their estates in the British confiscation under Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford. The thieving Earl, I am happy to report, was subsequently beheaded in the Tower.

From Kilkenny I traveled to London and then to Chesterfield in search of maternal ancestors, the Holborns, Wilkersons,

Searles, etc. Incomplete and fragmentary records left many great gaps, but my efforts were moderately successful and at length I decided to go further north and visit the vicinity of Chilton Castle, seat of Robert Chilton-Payne, the twelfth Earl of Chilton. My relationship to the Chilton-Paynes was a most distant one, and yet there existed a tenuous thread of past connection and I thought it would amuse me to glimpse the castle.

Arriving in Wexwold, the tiny village near the castle, late in the afternoon, I engaged a room at the Inn of the Red Goose—the only one there was—unpacked and went down for a simple meal consisting of a small loaf, cheese and ale.

By the time I finished this stark and yet satisfying repast, darkness had set in, and with it came wind and rain.

I resigned myself to an evening at the inn. There was ale enough and I was in no hurry to go anywhere.

After writing a few letters, I went down and ordered a pint of ale. The taproom was almost deserted; the bartender, a stout gentleman who seemed forever on the point of falling asleep, was pleasant but taciturn, and at length I fell to musing on the strange and frightening legend of Chilton Castle.

There were variations of the legend, and without doubt the original tale had been embroidered down through the centuries, but the essential outline of the story concerned a secret room somewhere in the castle. It was said that this room contained a terrifying spectacle which the Chilton-Paynes were obliged to keep hidden from the world.

Only three persons were ever permitted to enter the room: the presiding Earl of Chilton, the Earl's male heir and one other person designated by the Earl. Ordinarily this person was the Factor of Chilton Castle. The room was entered only once in a generation; within three days after the male heir came of age, he was conducted to the secret room by the Earl and the Factor. The room was then sealed and never opened again until the heir conducted his own son to the grisly chamber.

According to the legend, the heir was never the same person again after entering the room. Invariably he would become somber and withdrawn; his countenance would acquire a brooding, apprehensive expression which nothing could long dispell. One of the earlier earls of Chilton had gone completely mad and hurled himself from the turrets of the castle.

Speculation about the contents of the secret room had continued for centuries. One version of the tale described the panic-stricken flight of the Gowers, with armed enemies hot on their flagging heels. Although there had been bad blood between the Chilton-Paynes and the Gowers, in their desperation the Gowers begged for refuge at Chilton Castle. The Earl gave them entry, conducted them to a hidden room and left with a promise that they would be shielded from their pursuers. The Earl kept his promise; the Gowers' enemies were turned away from the Castle, their murderous plans unconsummated. The Earl, however, simply left the Gowers in the locked room to starve to death. The chamber was not opened until thirty years later when the Earl's son finally broke the seal. A fearful sight met his eyes. The Gowers had starved to death slowly, and at the last, judging by the appearance of the mingled skeletons, had turned to cannibalism.

Another version of the legend indicated that the secret room had been used by medieval earls as a torture chamber. It was said that the ingenious instruments of pain were yet in the room and that these lethal apparatuses still clutched the pitiful remains of their final victims, twisted fearfully in their last agonies.

A third version mentioned one of the female ancestors of the Chilton-Paynes, Lady Susan Glanville, who had reputedly made a pact with the Devil. She had been condemned as a witch but had somehow managed to escape the stake. The date and even the manner of her death were unknown, but in some vague way the secret room was supposed to be connected with it.

As I speculated on these different versions of the gruesome legend, the storm increased in intensity. Rain drummed steadily against the leaded windows of the inn and now I could occasionally hear the distant mutter of thunder.

Glancing at the rain-streaked panes, I shrugged and ordered another pint of ale.

I had the fresh tankard halfway to my lips when the taproom door burst open, letting in a blast of wind and rain. The door was shut and a tall figure muffled to the ears in a dripping greatcoat moved to the bar. Removing his cap, he ordered brandy.

Having nothing better to do, I observed him closely. He looked about seventy, grizzled and weather-worn, but wiry, with an appearance of toughness and determination. He was frowning, as if absorbed in thinking through some unpleasant problem, yet his cold blue eyes inspected me keenly for a brief but deliberate interval.

I could not place him in a tidy niche. He might be a local farmer, and yet I did not think that he was. He had a vague aura of authority and though his clothes were certainly plain, they were, I thought, somewhat better in cut and quality than those of the area countrymen whom I had observed.

A trivial incident opened a conversation between us. An unusually sharp crack of thunder made him turn toward the window. As he did so, he accidentally brushed his wet cap onto the floor. I retrieved it for him; he thanked me; and then we exchanged commonplace remarks about the weather.

I had an intuitive feeling that although he was a normally reticent individual, he was presently wrestling with some severe problem which made him want to hear a human voice. Realizing there was always the possibility that my intuition might have for once failed me, I nevertheless babbled on about my trip, about my genealogical researches in Kilkenny, London and Chesterfield, and finally about my distant relationship to the Chilton-Paynes and my desire to get a good look at Chilton Castle.

Suddenly I found that he was gazing at me with an expression which, if not fierce, was disturbingly intense. An awkward silence ensued. I coughed, wondering uneasily what I had said to make those cold blue eyes stare at me so fixedly.

At length he became aware of my growing embarrassment. "You must excuse me for staring," he apologized, "but something you said...." He hesitated. "Could we perhaps take that table?" He nodded toward a small table which sat half in shadow in the far corner of the room.

I agreed, mystified but curious, and we took our drinks to the secluded table.

He sat frowning for a minute, as if uncertain how to begin. Finally he introduced himself as William Cowath. I gave him my name and still he hesitated. At length he took a swallow of brandy and then looked straight at me. "I am," he stated, "the Factor at Chilton Castle."

I surveyed him with surprise and renewed interest. "What an agreeable coincidence!" I exclaimed. "Then perhaps tomorrow you could arrange for me to have a look at the castle?"

He seemed scarcely to hear me. "Yes, yes, of course," he replied absently.

Puzzled and a bit irritated by his air of detachment, I remained silent.

He took a deep breath and then spoke rapidly, running some of his words together. "Robert Chilton-Payne, the Twelfth Earl of Chilton, was buried in the family vaults one week ago. Frederick, the young heir and now Thirteenth Earl, came of age just three days ago. Tonight it is imperative that he be conducted to the secret chamber!"

I gaped at him in incredulous amazement. For a moment I had an idea that he had somehow heard of my interest in Chilton Castle and was merely "pulling my leg" for amusement in the belief that I was the greenest of gullible tourists.

But there could be no mistaking his deadly seriousness. There was not the faintest suspicion of humor in his eyes.

I groped for words. "It seems so strange—so unbelievable! Just before you arrived, I had been thinking about the various legends connected with the secret room."

His cold eyes held my own. "It is not legend that confronts us; it is fact."

A thrill of fear and excitement ran through me. "You are going there—tonight?"

He nodded. "Tonight. Myself, the young Earl—and one other."

I stared at him.

"Ordinarily," he continued, "the Earl himself would accompany us. That is the custom. But he is dead. Shortly before he passed away, he instructed me to select someone to go with the young Earl and myself. That person must be male—and preferably of the blood."

I took a deep drink of ale and said not a word.

He continued. "Besides the young Earl, there is no one at the Castle save his elderly mother, Lady Beatrice Chilton, and

an ailing aunt."

"Who could the Earl have had in mind?" I inquired cautiously.

The Factor frowned. "There are some distant male cousins residing in the country. I have an idea he thought at least one of them might appear for the obsequies. But not one of them did."

"That was most unfortunate!" I observed.

"Extremely unfortunate. And I am therefore asking you, as one of the blood, to accompany the young Earl and myself to the secret room tonight!"

I gulped like a bumpkin. Lightning flashed against the windows and I could hear rain swishing along the stones outside. When feathers of ice stopped fluttering in my stomach, I managed a reply.

"But I—that is—my relationship is so very remote! I am "of the blood" only by courtesy, you might say! The strain in me is so very diluted!"

He shrugged. "You bear the name. And you possess at least a few drops of the Payne blood. Under the present urgent circumstances, no more is necessary. I am sure that Earl Robert would agree with me, could he still speak. You will come?"

There was no escaping the intensity, the pressure, of those cold blue eyes. They seemed to follow my mind about as it groped for further excuses.

Finally, inevitably it seemed, I agreed. A feeling grew in me that the meeting had been preordained, that, somehow, I had always been destined to visit the secret chamber in Chilton Castle.

We finished our drinks and I went up to my room for rain ware. When I descended, suitably attired for the storm, the obese bartender was snoring on his stool in spite of savage crashes of thunder which had now become almost incessant. I envied him as I left the cozy room with William Cowath.

Once outside, my guide informed me that we would have to go afoot to the castle. He had purposely walked down to the inn, he explained, in order that he might have time and solitude to straighten out in his own mind the things which he would have to do.

The sheets of heavy rain, the strong wind and the roar of thunder made conversation difficult. I walked Indian-fashion behind the Factor who took enormous strides and appeared to know every inch of the way in spite of the darkness.

We walked only a short distance down the village street and then struck into a side road which very soon dwindled to a foot path made slippery and treacherous by the driving rain.

Abruptly the path began to ascend; the footing became more precarious. It was at once necessary to concentrate all one's attention on one's feet. Fortunately, the flashes of lightning were frequent.

It seemed to me that we had been walking for an hour—actually, I suppose, it was only a few minutes—when the Factor finally stopped.

I found myself standing beside him on a flat rocky plateau. He pointed up an incline which rose before us. "Chilton Castle," he said.

For a moment I saw nothing in the unrelieved darkness. Then the lightning flashed.

Beyond high battlemented walls, fissured with age, I glimpsed a great square Norman castle with four rectangular corner towers pierced by narrow window apertures which looked like evil slitted eyes. The huge weathered pile was half covered by a mantle of ivy which appeared more black than green.

"It looks incredibly old!" I commented.

William Cowath nodded. "It was begun in 1122 by Henry de Montargis." Without another word he started up the incline.

As we approached the castle wall, the storm grew worse. The slanting rain and powerful wind now made speech all but impossible. We bent our heads and staggered upward.

When the wall finally loomed in front of us, I was amazed at its height and thickness. It had been constructed, obviously, to withstand the best siege guns and battering rams which its early enemies could bring to bear on it.

As we crossed a massive timbered drawbridge, I peered down into the black ditch of a moat but I could not be sure whether there was water in it. A low arched gateway gave access through the wall to an inner cobblestoned courtyard. This courtyard was entirely empty, save for rivulets of rushing water.

Crossing the cobblestones with swift strides, the Factor led me to another arched gateway in yet another wall. Inside was a second smaller yard and beyond spread the ivy-clutched base of the ancient keep itself.

Traversing a darkened stone-flagged passage, we found ourselves facing a ponderous door, age-blackened oak reinforced with pitted bands of iron. The Factor flung open this door and there before us was the great hall of the castle.

Four long hand-hewn tables with their accompanying benches stretched almost the entire length of the hall. Metal torch brackets, stained with age, were affixed to sculptured stone columns which supported the roof. Ranged around the walls were suits of armor, heraldic shields, halberds, pikes and banners, the accumulated trophies and prizes of bloody centuries when each castle was almost a kingdom unto itself. In flickering candlelight, which appeared to be the only illumination, the grim array was eerily impressive.

William Cowath waved a hand. "The holders of Chilton lived by the sword for many centuries."

Walking the length of the great hall, he entered another dim passageway. I followed silently.

As we strode along, he spoke in a subdued voice. "Frederick, the young heir, does not enjoy robust health. The shock of his father's death was severe—and he dreads tonight's ordeal, which he knows must come."

Stopping before a wooden door embellished with carved fleurs-de-lis and metal scrollwork, he gave me a shadowed, enigmatic glance and then knocked.

Someone inquired who was there and he identified himself. Presently a heavy bolt was lifted and the door opened.

If the Chilton-Paynes had been stubborn fighters in their day, the warrior blood appeared to have become considerably diluted in the veins of Frederick, the young heir and now Thirteenth Earl. I saw before me a thin, pale-complexioned young man whose dark sunken eyes looked haunted and fearful. His dress was both theatrical and anachronistic: a dark green velvet coat and trousers, a green satin waist-band, flounces of white lace at neck and wrists.

He beckoned us in, as if with reluctance, and closed the door. The walls of the small room were entirely covered with tapestries depicting the hunt or medieval battle scenes. A draft of air from a window or other aperture made them undulate constantly; they seemed to have a disturbing life of their own. In one corner of the room there was an antique canopy bed; in another a large writing table with an agate lamp.

After a brief introduction, which included an explanation of how I came to be accompanying them, the Factor inquired if his Lordship was ready to visit the chamber.

Although he was wan in any case, Earl Frederick's face now lost every last trace of color. He nodded, however, and preceded us into the passage.

William Cowath led the way; the Earl followed him; and I brought up the rear.

At the far end of the passage, the Factor opened the door of a cobwebbed supply room. Here he secured candles, chisels, a pick and a sledgehammer. After packing these into a leather bag which he slung over one shoulder, he picked up a faggot torch which lay on one of the shelves in the room. He lit this, waited while it flared into a steady flame. Satisfied with this illumination, he closed the room and beckoned for us to continue after him.

Nearby was a descending spiral of stone steps. Lifting his torch, the Factor started down. We trailed after him wordlessly.

There must have been fifty steps in that long downward spiral. As we descended, the stones became wet and cold; the air, too, grew colder, but the cold was not of the type that refreshes. It was too laden with the smell of mould and

dampness.

At the bottom of the steps we faced a tunnel, pitch-black and silent.

The Factor raised his torch. "Chilton Castle is Norman but is said to have been reared over a Saxon ruin. It is believed that the passageways in these depths were constructed by the Saxons." He peered, frowning, into the tunnel. "Or by some still earlier folk."

He hesitated briefly, and I thought he was listening. Then, glancing round at us, he proceeded down the passage.

I walked after the Earl, shivering. The dead, icy air seemed to pierce to the pith of my bones. The stones underfoot grew slick with a film of slime. I longed for more light, but there was none save that cast by the flickering, bobbing torch of the Factor.

Partway down the passage he paused and again I sensed that he was listening. The silence seemed absolute however, and we went on.

The end of the passage brought us to more descending steps. We went down some fifteen and entered another tunnel which appeared to have been cut out of the solid rock on which the castle had been reared. White-crusted nitre clung to the walls. The reek of mould was intense. The icy air was fetid with some other odor which I found peculiarly repellent, though I could not name it.

At last the Factor stopped, lifted his torch and slid the leather bag from his shoulder.

I saw that we stood before a wall made of some kind of building stone. Though damp and stained with nitre, it was obviously of much more recent construction than anything we had previously encountered.

Glancing round at us, William Cowath handed me the torch. "Keep a good hold on it, if you please. I have candles, but —"

Leaving the sentence unfinished, he drew the pick from his sling bag and began an assault on the wall. The barrier was solid enough, but after he had worked a hole in it, he took up the sledgehammer and quicker progress was made. Once I offered to take up the sledge while he held the torch but he only shook his head and went on with his work of demolition.

All this time the young Earl had not spoken a word. As I looked at his tense white face, I felt sorry for him, in spite of my own mounting trepidation.

Abruptly there was silence as the Factor lowered the sledgehammer. I saw that a good two feet of the lower wall remained.

William Cowath bent to inspect it. "Strong enough," he commented cryptically. "I will leave that to build on. We can step over it."

For a full minute he stood looking silently into the blackness beyond. Finally, shouldering his bag, he took the torch from my hand and stepped over the ragged base of the wall. We followed suit.

As I entered that chamber, the fetid odor which I had noticed in the passage seemed to overwhelm us. It washed around us in a nauseating wave and we all gasped for breath.

The Factor spoke between coughs. "It will subside in a minute or two. Stand near the aperture."

Although the reek remained repellently strong, we could at length breathe more freely.

William Cowath lifted his torch and peered into the black depths of the chamber. Fearfully, I gazed around his shoulder.

There was no sound and at first I could see nothing but nitre-encrusted walls and wet stone floor. Presently, however, in a far corner, just beyond the flickering halo of the faggot torch, I saw two tiny fiery spots of red. I tried to convince myself that they were two red jewels, two rubies, shining in the torchlight.

But I knew at once—I *felt* at once—what they were. They were two red eyes and they were watching us with a fierce unwavering stare.

The Factor spoke softly. "Wait here."

He crossed toward the corner, stopped halfway and held out his torch at arm's length. For a moment he was silent. Finally he emitted a long shuddering sigh.

When he spoke again, his voice had changed. It was only a sepulchral whisper. "Come forward," he told us in that strange hollow voice.

I followed Earl Frederick until we stood at either side of the Factor.

When I saw what crouched on a stone bench in that far corner, I felt sure that I would faint. My heart literally stopped beating for perceptible seconds. The blood left my extremities; I reeled with dizziness. I might have cried out, but my throat would not open.

The entity which rested on that stone bench was like something that had crawled up out of hell. Piercing malignant red eyes proclaimed that it had a terrible life, and yet that life sustained itself in a black, shrunken half-mummified body which resembled a disinterred corpse. A few mouldy rags clung to the cadaver-like frame. Wisps of white hair sprouted out of its ghastly grey-white skull. A red smear or blotch of some sort covered the wizened slit which served it as a mouth.

It surveyed us with a malignancy which was beyond anything merely human. It was impossible to stare back into those monstrous red eyes. They were so inexpressibly evil, one felt that one's soul would be consumed in the fires of their malevolence.

Glancing aside, I saw that the Factor was now supporting Earl Frederick. The young heir had sagged against him. The Earl stared fixedly at the fearful apparition with terror-glazed eyes. In spite of my own sense of horror, I pitied him.

The Factor sighed again and then he spoke once more in that low sepulchral voice.

"You see before you," he told us, "Lady Susan Glanville. She was carried into this chamber and fettered to the wall in 1473."

A thrill of horror coursed through me; I felt that we were in the presence of malign forces from the Pit itself.

To me the hideous thing had appeared sexless, but at the sound of its name, the ghastly mockery of a grin contorted the puckered red-smeared mouth.

I noticed now for the first time that monster actually was secured to the wall. The great double shackles were so blackened with age, I had not noticed them before.

The Factor went on, as if he spoke by rote. "Lady Glanville was a maternal ancestor of the Chilton-Paynes. She had commerce with the Devil. She was condemned as a witch but escaped the stake. Finally her own people forcibly overcame her. She was brought in here, fettered and left to die."

He was silent a moment and then continued. "It was too late. She had already made a pact with the Powers of Darkness. It was an unspeakably evil thing and it has condemned her issue to a life of torment and nightmare, a lifetime of terror and dread."

He swung his torch toward the blackened red-eyed thing. "She was a beauty once. She hated death. She feared death. And so she finally bartered her own immortal soul—and the bodies of her issue—for eternal earthly life."

I heard his voice as in a nightmare; it seemed to be coming from an infinite distance.

He went on. "The consequences of breaking the pact are too terrible to describe. No descendant of hers has ever dared do so, once the forfeit is known. And so she had bided here for these nearly five hundred years."

I had thought he was finished, but he resumed. Glancing upward, he lifted his torch toward the roof of that accursed chamber. "This room," he said, "lies directly underneath the family vaults. Upon the death of the male Earl, the body is ostensibly left in the vaults. When the mourners have gone, however, the false bottom of the vault is thrust aside and the body of the Earl is lowered into this room."

Looking up, I saw the square rectangle of a trap door above.

The Factor's voice now became barely audible. "Once every generation Lady Glanville feeds—on the corpse of the deceased Earl. It is a provision of that unspeakable pact which cannot be broken."

I knew now—with a sense of horror utterly beyond description—whence came that red smear on the repulsive mouth of the creature before us.

As if to confirm his words, the Factor lowered his torch until its flame illuminated the floor at the foot of the stone bench where the vampiric monster was fettered.

Strewn about the floor were the scattered bones and skull of an adult male, red with fresh blood. And at some distance were other human bones, brown and crumbling with age.

At this point young Earl Frederick began to scream. His shrill hysterical cries filled the chamber. Although the Factor shook him roughly, his terrible shrieks continued, terror-filled, nerve-shaking.

For moments the corpse-like thing on the bench watched him with its frightful red eyes. It uttered sound finally, a kind of animal squeal which might have been intended as laughter.

Abruptly then, and without any warning, it slid from the bench and lunged toward the young Earl. The blackened shackles which fettered it to the wall permitted it to advance only a yard or two. It was pulled back sharply; yet it lunged again and again, squealing with a kind of hellish glee which stirred the hair on my head.

William Cowath thrust his torch toward the monster, but it continued to lunge at the end of its fetters. The nightmare room resounded with the Earl's screams and the creature's horrible squeals of bestial laughter. I felt that my own mind would give way unless I escaped from that anteroom of hell.

For the first time during an ordeal which would have sent any lesser man fleeing for his life and sanity, the iron control of the Factor appeared to be shaken. He looked beyond the wild lunging thing toward the wall where the fetters were fastened.

I sensed what was in his mind. Would those fastenings hold, after all these centuries of rust and dampness?

On a sudden resolve he reached into an inner pocket and drew out something which glittered in the torchlight. It was a silver crucifix. Striding forward, he thrust it almost into the twisted face of the leaping monstrosity which had once been the ravishing Lady Susan Glanville.

The creature reeled back with an agonized scream which drowned out the cries of the Earl. It cowered on the bench, abruptly silent and motionless, only the pulsating of its wizened mouth and the fires of hatred in its red eyes giving evidence that it still lived.

William Cowath addressed it grimly. "Creature of hell! If ye leave that bench 'ere we quit this room and seal it once again, I swear that I shall hold this cross against ye!"

The thing's red eyes watched the Factor with an expression of abysmal hatred which no combination of mere letters could convey. They actually appeared to glow with fire. And yet I read in them something else—fear.

I suddenly became aware that silence had descended on that room of the damned. It lasted only a few moments. The Earl had finally stopped screaming, but now came something worse. He began to laugh.

It was only a low chuckle, but it was somehow worse than all his screams. It went on and on, softly, mindlessly.

The Factor turned, beckoning me toward the partially demolished wall. Crossing the room, I climbed out. Behind me the Factor led the young Earl, who shuffled like an old man, chuckling to himself.

There was then what seemed an interminable interval, during which the Factor carried back a sack of mortar and a keg of water which he had previously left somewhere in the tunnel. Working by torchlight, he prepared the cement and proceeded to seal up the chamber, using the same stones which he had displaced.

While the Factor labored, the young Earl sat motionless in the tunnel, chuckling softly.

There was silence from within. Once, only, I heard the thing's fetters clank against the stone.

At last the Factor finished and led us back through those nitre-stained passageways and up the icy stairs. The Earl could scarcely ascend; with difficulty the Factor supported him from step to step.

Back in his tapestry-panelled chamber, Earl Frederick sat on his canopy bed and stared at the floor, laughing quietly. Pompous medical tomes to the contrary, I noticed that his black hair had actually turned grey. After persuading him to drink a glass of liquid which I had no doubt contained a heavy dose of sedation, the Factor managed to get him stretched out on the bed.

William Cowath then led me to a nearby bed chamber. My impulse was to rush from that hellish pile without delay, but the storm still raged and I was by no means sure I could find my way back to the village without a guide.

The Factor shook his head sadly. "I fear his Lordship is doomed to an early death. He was never strong and tonight's events may have deranged his mind—may have weakened him beyond hope of recovery."

I expressed my sympathy and horror. The Factor's cold blue eyes held my own. "It may be," he said, "that in the event of the young Earl's death, you yourself might be considered...." He hesitated. "Might be considered," he finally concluded, "as one somewhat in the line of succession."

I wanted to hear no more. I gave him a curt goodnight, bolted the door after him and tried—quite unsuccessfully—to salvage a few minutes' sleep.

But sleep would not come. I had feverish visions of that red-eyed thing in the sealed chamber escaping its fetters, breaking through the wall and crawling up those icy, slime-covered stairs.

Even before dawn I softly unbolted my door and like a marauding thief crept shivering through the cold passageways and the great deserted hall of the castle. Crossing the cobbled courtyards and the black moat, I scrambled down the incline toward the village.

Long before noon I was well on my way to London. Luck was with me; the next day I was on a liner bound for the Atlantic run.

I shall never return to England. I intend always to keep Chilton Castle and its permanent occupant at least an ocean away.

THE MIDNIGHT BUS

Old Mrs. Twining was telling a story about imported marmalade for the third time that evening when Martha glanced at her watch.

"O my goodness!" she exclaimed, "I really must be off! If I don't hurry, I'll miss the last bus!"

Assuring her elderly hostess that she had had a most enjoyable evening, she wriggled into her coat, scurried into the vestibule and was soon off the veranda steps and down the garden walk.

Mrs. Twining was an old dear—but she *was* tedious at times, Martha thought as she swung open the gate and stepped onto the sidewalk. Goodness! Here it was almost midnight and Mrs. Twining was going on about marmalade for the third time! Lucky she'd looked at her watch.

She had rushed out in such a hurry, she was well down the walk before she noticed the fog. Rising from the nearby river, it was thickening in the empty streets. The lights looked dim and faraway; the whole suburb seemed muffled and silent.

Shivering a little, Martha reached the bus stop and sat down on the cold bench. Glancing along the street, she saw that it was quite empty. The river fog was swirling in rapidly and now even the trunks of trees were becoming blurred and half-shadowy.

It was too bad, Martha thought, that people had to become old. Old and lonely and hungry for talk. Leading such dreary, uneventful lives that a little thing like imported marmalade assumed vast importance.

She hadn't been out to see old Mrs. Twining for over a year and the poor dear would have kept on talking till morning if

Martha hadn't broken away to catch the midnight bus back to town.

Martha sighed, drawing her coat a little closer. She *did* wish the bus would hurry along. The bench began to feel like a carved slab of ice and the fog was getting so thick she could scarcely see across the street.

It was just after twelve by her watch when she saw a faint light flicker through the fog. It was a very feeble light and it approached with maddening deliberation. It appeared to just creep along, as if the driver of the vehicle were groping his way down a totally unfamiliar route.

When the bus stopped in front of the bench, she saw that one of its headlights was quite dead. And the other did not look very bright.

As she stepped up into the bus and dropped her coin, she intended telling the driver about the single headlight. But she didn't. The driver thrust a ticket at her without turning his head and for some reason which she didn't at the moment grasp, her impulse to speak vanished.

She walked back to the middle of the bus and sat down. The bus rolled forward again. Glancing out, she could see nothing but fog. It pressed against the windows like a white wall; it even seemed to be seeping into the bus. The seat felt as cold as the bench back at the curb stop.

For some reason she kept looking at the driver. Perhaps because there wasn't much else to look at. About all she could see of him was his back. He sat slumped in the seat, hunched over the wheel, looking to neither left nor right, his total attention focussed on the fog-blurred ribbon of road immediately ahead.

Martha wished there were some other passengers on the bus. The driver was no company at all and the smothering fog outside made everything seem so desolate. The interior of the bus itself looked dingy and soiled, as if it hadn't been swept out or polished for months on end.

Frowning toward the window, Martha realized that she would never be able to tell when they were approaching her destination, Barley Street. The fog had become an impenetrable blanket, swirling close on all sides.

"Driver," Martha called out, "will you please stop at Barley Street?"

He didn't answer, didn't turn, didn't so much as nod his head. He stared forward into the fog and Martha imagined that he hadn't even heard her.

But of course he must have. It was simply that the fog made driving hazardous and his entire attention was concentrated on the street ahead.

Trying to stifle her irritation, Martha leaned her head back against the seat and attempted to relax. But the top of the seat was hard and cold and she soon sat up straight again.

She suddenly realized that she was shivering. What a bore! She must be catching cold! But the bus *did* seem frigid. She could scarcely keep her teeth from chattering.

And now a new vexation caught her attention. In spite of the almost opaque wall of fog, the bus driver was steadily increasing the speed of his vehicle. The bus careened along at a constantly accelerated rate, bumping and lurching and swaying from side to side.

Martha felt a funny little knot of fear and apprehension begin to tighten in her breast. For a block or two she held tight to her seat, stifling an urge to shout at the driver, but finally she could stand it no longer.

"Driver," she called out in a strained voice which didn't sound at all like her own, "you're going much too fast! Won't you please slow down?"

As if in response, and without paying her any other heed, the driver managed a new and positively fearful burst of speed. The bus thundered ahead until the fog seemed to be going by in white streamers of light.

Fighting back rising hysteria, Martha stood up. "Driver! Please! We'll be killed!"

For the first time the driver turned. In the poor light, his face under the visor of his driver's cap looked as blurred and white as the fog outside.

"We're late on the run! We'll never make it!"

He turned back to the wheel. Martha felt deadly fear coil up within her. The man was either drunk or mad and she sensed at once that any further attempt to reason with him would be futile.

Clutching the seat handles, she began stumbling toward the front of the bus. At least she would be near the door, she decided, when—if—something happened.

Once a sudden lurch of the bus almost threw her off her feet. Clutching the back of a seat, she regained her balance and staggered ahead.

She could no longer force back the panic which was welling within her. She felt—she *knew*—that her life was in imminent and deadly danger.

And when she finally reached the front of the bus and stared ahead into the fog, it was impossible to retain any lingering doubts about the lethal jeopardy of her position.

The vehicle's single headlight had gone out. The bus was racing through the midnight fog in total darkness!

With a scream, Martha turned toward the driver. He sat with a fixed stare, grimly intent, entirely oblivious to everything except the white wall of fog looming up immediately ahead.

With the scream still on her lips, Martha whirled toward the door. It opened. Or perhaps it had been open. She was too terrified to know. But in any case there was the cold white fog streaming past outside.

She hesitated momentarily. It took courage to hurl yourself into that rushing white wall, never knowing exactly what lay beyond it, beneath it—within it.

But some sure instinct warned her that there was no choice. This fearful icy bus racing ahead into the foggy darkness without any lights could come to only one end.

With another wild scream she plunged through the open door into the streamers of fog.

For a second she was snatched through space in the wake of the midnight bus. Then she struck earth with a thud which seemed to loosen every bone in her body and went bouncing and rolling along the ground like a rag doll hurled aside by an angry child.

She came to rest against a hedge and lay motionless, the taste of wet moldy earth in her mouth. She was still lying there, wondering how many bones she had broken, when a rending crash sounded somewhere ahead in the foggy darkness. She heard the tinkle of falling splinters of glass and then there was silence. Sudden, terrifying silence.

The silence endured, pregnant and somehow horrifying, and she wanted to scream again, but her mouth was full of dirt and screaming was difficult.

A light appeared; someone shouted; and she managed a groan.

A face materialized out of the fog, a kindly, anxious face.

The man bent over her. He spoke soothingly for a moment; he straightened up and called into the fog. "It's a girl, Alica! She's hurt! Bring a blanket! Quickly!"

In less than a minute a sturdy woman appeared. The two of them, the man and the woman, slid the blanket under Martha and lifted her up.

In another minute she was carried out of the fog into a cozy lighted house and tenderly laid on a couch.

While the man telephoned for a doctor, the woman Alica asked Martha where she was hurt the most.

Martha wasn't sure. She hurt all over, but not in any special place.

The woman brought a wet cloth, a glass and a pitcher of water. After Martha had rinsed out her mouth, the woman gently washed her face.

The man came into the room. "The doctor's coming right over! Now don't you worry!"

Martha sat up and carefully moved her legs. They felt bruised but assuredly not broken. And she could move her arms without any concentrated pain.

The man nodded. "Good! No bones broken, by the looks. You were lucky, child. You struck the turf outside and not the hard cobbles!"

The woman peered at her intently. "What happened, dear—if you want to tell."

Martha suddenly remembered that splintering crash which had followed shortly after her frenzied leap from the speeding bus.

"Oh, that poor man!" she said. "Has anybody gone to help him?"

They both looked at her. "What man, dear?" the woman asked.

"The bus driver," Martha said. "That was such a horrible crash!"

They went on looking at her without saying anything. A queer uneasiness overcame her. "Didn't you—hear it?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "We heard you scream. But we didn't hear any—crash."

"But—there was," Martha explained frowning. "The bus I jumped out of didn't have any lights and it was speeding and—I heard it crash!"

They were looking at her strangely now. As if they didn't believe a word she was saying. As if, Martha thought, they were patiently hearing out the imaginary story of a feverish child.

"What bus did you jump out of?" the woman asked, laying a cool hand against Martha's forehead.

"The midnight bus," Martha replied. "I was visiting a friend on Coverton Street. I got the last bus—the midnight bus—just after twelve."

The woman smiled gently. "The last bus on Coverton Street runs through at eleven. The midnight bus was discontinued a year ago. Nobody used it much and then after the crash—"

"What crash?" interrupted Martha with an eerie feeling that she knew what the answer would be.

"A year ago," the woman explained, "the driver of the Coverton Street midnight bus ran off the road into a wall and was instantly killed. Luckily, no passengers were on the bus. It happened not far from here. There were no witnesses to the crash, but someone claimed later that the bus had been seen speeding along Coverton Street through the fog without any lights—"

Suddenly the woman turned pale. She stared at Martha. "And you were saying—your bus—no lights—"

Remembering the cold, grim interior of the bus, the white face of the driver and the one feeble headlight which had finally gone out, Martha felt an icy thrill of fear.

She saw her bag lying on the couch, and she pointed to it.

"My bus ticket," she told the woman, "is in there."

When the woman drew out the bus ticket and held it up to the light, her pale face seemed drained of every drop of blood.

She stared at her husband and then at Martha with round frightened eyes.

"I had forgotten," she said softly. "The date on your ticket reminds me. That crash was just a year ago tonight!"

THE VAMPIRE BAT

I was in the Amazon collecting background material for a projected series of stories and travel articles and I was to join a government exploring party at a small native settlement two hundred miles north of Cuyaba.

When I arrived at the settlement I was very much surprised to see a white man sitting on the screened-in veranda of a shack some distance from the huddle of native huts. The government party was not due to arrive until the next day, and I had no idea that a white man was living at the settlement.

He walked out to meet me and introduced himself as Cecil Hubbers. He said that he had been staying at the settlement for nearly six months and that he represented a South American pharmaceutical firm which was endeavoring to establish a permanent base in that area.

He was middle-aged, gaunt and faded-looking, with an expression of chronic weariness etched on his wan face. A huge, high-crowned straw hat accentuated the strained lines of his pinched countenance. He acted jumpy and nervous.

He was certainly a pathetic figure, and I felt sorry for him, but he seemed sincerely glad to see me and he was hospitable enough.

After I had washed and taken some food, I sat on his screened porch and he talked. He said that except for the natives he was alone for months at a time. The company he worked for had parties further in the interior but they remained in the jungles for long periods, collecting roots and herbs and bark which were used to concoct precious drugs.

He had come down from Panama some years before with a fair grubstake, he said, but he had lost his money in a mining venture and since then he had drifted from one poor-paying job to another. When the pharmaceutical company offered him work at the settlement, he was flat broke and he had accepted it.

His job was easy enough. He had to store and check supplies, list and pack outgoing raw materials and recruit and pay the native guides. But it was obvious to me that there was some aspect of the job, or of the locale, which he detested.

After he had talked for nearly an hour, I finally learned what was preying on his mind. He lived in constant fear of a vampire bat which he said was systematically draining him of blood and life. I say bat, not bats, because he had a weird conviction that a single bat was to blame.

When he first mentioned the bat, he made some effort to describe his predicament in a detached and objective manner, but it was impossible for him to do so. He became emotional. His voice grew shrill and I thought that he was about to leap out of his chair.

"If I don't find out how it's getting to me, that bat will bleed me to death!" he cried. "I've already lost half my blood! *Half of it* I tell you!"

He became so agitated at one point, I thought I might actually have to restrain him from some violent action. Finally he calmed down a little and I managed to change the subject.

He certainly looked anemic, but I found it hard to believe that he was not exaggerating about the bat.

Contrary to much popular superstition, vampire bats are not immense flapping horrors which rob their victims of quarts of blood in a single night. The vampire bat is a small creature, scarcely two inches long. Its capacity is obviously determined by its own dimensions.

This is not to say that the vampire should be considered a gruesome but harmless pest. Although the vampire's capacity is limited, this little light-hating bat makes a circular incision in its slumbering victim's flesh with such precision and stealthy finesse that the sleeper rarely awakens. After the vampire laps up its fill of blood and flies away, blood usually continues to flow from the wound. It is this continuing flow of blood which ordinarily awakens the victim. By the time the victim becomes fully alert, however, he may have lost much more blood than the bat itself has actually absorbed.

Although I knew of well authenticated instances in which both animals and men had been seriously weakened by attacks of the vampire bat, I decided that my host's fear of being bled to death was largely groundless. I felt that he actually had been attacked by a vampire bat some time in the past and that the experience had proved so revolting and even terrifying he had suffered a kind of traumatic shock. Now the vampire bat had become an obsession which was never out of his mind. Loss of sleep and morbid nagging fear had turned him into a physical and mental wreck.

I accepted his invitation to set up my cot and mosquito net in his shack that night. Before he blew out the kerosene lantern, I witnessed a prolonged performance which was both ludicrous and disturbing. For the space of two hours my host inspected the floors, walls and ceiling of the screened shack. Inch by inch his eyes searched every plank and every screen. He had apparently done this many times before and although at the end of his inspection he had not found a single crack or aperture of any kind, he did not appear to be particularly relieved.

Certainly if any means of ingress originally existed, it must have long since been sealed up. I did not see how a fair-sized insect could squirm inside.

But when my host finally—for the first time I believe—removed his huge straw hat, placed it on a shelf, and crawled under his mosquito net, he still wore a worried frown.

I had had a tiring day and I fell asleep soon afterwards. About three hours later I was awakened by a hair-raising scream. I sat up and stared around in the blackness. My heart was pounding. I thought that a bushmaster or some other deadly kind of snake had gotten into the shack.

Cecil Hubbers moaned in the nearby darkness. "The vampire!" he cried. "It's been at me again!" He began to whimper like a sick child.

I felt sure that he had merely experienced a recurrent nightmare, but nevertheless I got up and lit the kerosene lantern. When I brought it to his cot, I gasped. He was staring down at a tiny circular incision on the top of his foot where the blood was still flowing.

I was more shaken by the sight of blood trickling out of that little hole than I have been at the sight of gory accidents.

I suggested that we both undertake an immediate search of the shack. If the bat was still inside, we would find it and kill it.

He shook his head and moaned again. "It's no use. They can't stand light. As soon as you lit the lantern, it got out."

He finally arose, bathed and bandaged the puncture on his foot and sank back on his cot. He left the lantern lit and he lay there with his eyes wide open. He looked so haunted and unhappy I wished I could say something to cheer him up, but for the life of me I couldn't think of anything that made sense.

I stayed awake for a while trying to figure out how the bat had gotten in. But I had watched Hubbers inspect the interior of the closely-screened building inch by inch a few hours before and I couldn't think of a single corner or chink that he might have missed. Finally sleep overcame me again.

When I got up the next morning, my host was sitting on the veranda. He looked even worse than he had the night before. His face was ghastly, really grey and drawn, and his eyes appeared feverish. I knew without asking that he hadn't slept again after the vampire's attack.

After breakfast I suggested that he ask the pharmaceutical company to transfer him to some other locality.

"I haven't enough strength left to go out in the jungle with the gathering parties," he said. "And there isn't anything else."

He said nothing more. His tense agitation of the previous day appeared to be changing into a sort of fatalistic apathy. I felt seriously concerned about him and I wished I might help, but I didn't know what I could do.

The party I was to accompany arrived by mid-morning and soon afterwards I bid Cecil Hubbers goodbye. He wished me good luck and shook hands in a perfunctory manner.

At the edge of the jungle I turned around. He was slumped down in his chair on the veranda. All I could see of him was his pinched white face under the brim of his immense cone-shaped hat. He didn't bother to wave.

Nearly two months passed before I returned to the settlement on my way back to Cuyaba. I had separated from the government party several days before and I arrived with my own Indian guides.

I immediately crossed to Cecil Hubbers' shack. He was not on the veranda. I went up the three steps and rapped on the screen door. A short swarthy man who looked part Indian and part Portuguese got up from a cot inside and came to the screen. I asked for Mr. Hubbers.

"He's dead," the dark man said in good English.

Somehow I had expected it, but still I was startled.

"What happened?" I inquired bluntly.

The man rolled his thick shoulders as if explanations were distasteful to him. "The little bat took too much blood," he said. "One morning they found him dead on his bed."

"How horrible! I'm very sorry," I said. And I meant it.

There was something more I wanted to know. "Did they ever find out how the bat got in?" I asked.

The man rolled his shoulders again. "It didn't get in," he said. "It *was* in—all the time. It was living in his hat."

I stared at him and I suspect my mouth fell open.

He nodded. "The bat clung by day in the top of Mr. Hubbers' funny big hat. He never took his hat off except at bedtime; it was always dark inside. At night the vampire came out and fed on him. After he was dead, we found the bat asleep in the top of his hat, on the shelf. It was a very fat bat and we killed it."

I stood there on the porch remembering Cecil Hubbers' huge high-crowned, cone-shaped straw hat—the hat that left his head only just before he crawled under his mosquito net at night.

In spite of the close moist warmth of that clearing, I felt myself enveloped by an eerie chill.

"It's—unbelievable!" I murmured, half to myself.

The dark man turned from the door with a shrug. "He's dead!" he grumbled.

THE SEVENTH INCANTATION

"Of these black prayers or incantations there be seven, three for ordinarie charmes and aides, and the like numbere for the unholie and compleat destruction of alle enemie. But of the seventh the curious in alle these partes are warned. Let not the last incantation be recited, unlesse ye desire the sight of moste aweful deamon. Although it be said the deamon shews not unlesse the wordes be spake by the bloodie altar of the Olde Ones, yet it were well to beware. For it be knowne that the Saracen sorcerer, Mal Lazal, dide wantonlie chante the dire wordes and the deamon dide come—and not finding a bloodie offering did rage at the wizard and rende him exceedinglie. The life bloode of a childe or chaste maid be best, yet a beaste, a goode ox or sheep, is said sufficient. But beware lest the beaste be dead when the bloode be taken, for then shall the deamon's rage be dire. If the offering be well, the deamon shall give unholie power, so that the servant grow riche and reache above alle his neighbors."

For the third time, and with growing excitement, Emmet Telquist read the faded words. They were contained in a crumbling and curious and probably unique bound manuscript book which he had discovered quite by accident some days before while shuffling through the dust-laden packing crates which held his deceased uncle's library.

The book was entitled simply "True Magik", and the writer signed himself "Theophilis Wenn." Quite possibly the name was a pseudonym; certainly, judging by the contents, the rash author must have had reason to keep secret his real identity.

The book was a veritable encyclopedia of devils' lore. There was everywhere manifest a genuine and erudite scholarship which had been lavished on a vast variety of esoteric and forbidden subjects. There were detailed discussions on enchantments and possession, paragraphs on vampirism and ghoul legend, pages devoted to demonology, witch worship, and eldrich idols, notes on holocaust rites, unspeakable maculations and fearsome full-moon sacrifices to the powers of pristine darkness.

Evidently the writer had been a necromancer of note. The style in general was arbitrary and assured, betraying egoism and not a little arrogance. There was no faint note of humor. Theophilis Wenn—or whoever it was that disguised his true identity under that name—had written in dire earnest. Of that there could be no doubt.

Emmet Telquist, the village outcast, the bitter misanthropic issue of an infamous father and a mother who had died insane, regarded the book as a sudden treasure, a secret storehouse of knowledge and power which would enable him to compete with his more successful neighbors.

He had always been an outsider, a misfit, the subject of vindictive local gossip and criticism. He had always felt himself more or less allied to inhuman laws and agencies.

His uncle, the only relative he ever remembered, had been a sour, black-hearted brooding old man who tolerated him only because of the chores and errands which he performed. He never had had the slightest doubt that his uncle would have disowned him utterly had he not been a useful drudge. The bond of blood would have been meaningless to the old man.

As a matter of fact, had it not been for his sudden and somewhat mysterious death, the scoundrel probably would have seen to it that his nephew inherited only black memories. But since no will had been located, Emmet Telquist had gained possession of his uncle's rambling farm house and such meager chattels as it contained.

But as he squinted eagerly at the quaint faded hand-writing of the necromancer, Theophilis Wenn, Telquist began to believe that the manuscript book was by far the most valuable item which his evil relative had unintentionally put into his hands.

Furthermore, a number of matters which had always puzzled him in the past became less baffling. He had often wondered about the peculiar behavior of his uncle—his long absences from the house, especially at night, the muttering and mumbling which frequently came from his room, his unexplained sources of income.

With a sense of mounting suspense and expectation, he turned the pages whereon the seventh incantation was inscribed. It was written in a peculiar bluish-grey ink which seemed faintly phosphorescent. He did not dare to read the words; he merely glanced at them, ascertaining that they were what appeared to be merely a jumble of meaningless vowel sounds frequently interspersed with the name "Nyogtha."

Grinning slyly to himself, he turned back the pages and reread the paragraph which served as an introduction and explanation of the incantations. Well he knew what Theophilis Wenn had in mind when he referred to the "bloodie altar of the Old Ones"! He, Emmet Telquist, had seen such an altar.

Although that had been years before when the swamp was not as nearly impassable as it had since become, he had no doubt that he could locate the accursed sacrificial cromlech. How well he remembered crawling along the faint raised pathway which wound through the swamp! The sudden, unexpected knoll, dark, somehow, even in the mid-day sunlight, the circle of huge monoliths, the mound in the center, the enormous flat slab on its top, rusty red with an unspeakable eldrich stain which even the rains and winds of centuries could not blot out!

He had never spoken of his discovery to anyone. The swamp was a forbidden place—ostensibly because of rumored quicksands and poisonous serpents. But on more than one occasion he had seen old-time villagers cross themselves when mention was made of the area. And it was said that even hunting dogs would abandon the pursuit of game which fled into its fastnesses.

Already anticipating the power which would ultimately be his, Emmet Telquist began to formulate plans. He would not make the mistake of the unfortunate Saracen sorcerer, Mal Lazal. Although he did not quite dare to take the necessary steps to secure a human sacrifice, "a childe or chaste maid", a sheep should be relatively easy to obtain. He could steal one at night from any of the several village flocks. He knew all the woods and lanes and would be safely away with his prize long before the loss was discovered.

The night before the advent of the full moon, he slipped into a nearby pasture where sheep were grazed and made away with a fine fat ewe, shoving and dragging it over a stone wall and then leading it off along circuitous back roads and grass-grown lanes.

The next day he paid a stealthy visit to the environs of the forbidden swamp, exploring the rank underbrush until he discovered the start of the faint trail down which he had stolen years before. Although it was partially obliterated by a thick growth of sedges, vines and lush swamp grass, there were indications that deer used it occasionally. Probably patience would be required to force a way through, but at least the path should not be impassable.

Carefully noting its location, he returned home and completed his preparations for the evening.

Shortly before eleven o'clock he crept into the shed where he had tethered the ewe and led it forth into the moonlight.

The countryside was steeped in a bewitching silver light. He experienced no difficulties in reaching the swamp and after some little searching located the narrow trail.

But as he plunged into the shoulder-high grass, the tether tightened in his hand. The ewe strained against the rope, its eyes suddenly wild with fright.

Cursing, he scrambled around and kicked it brutally. It bolted forward a few yards and stopped. Grimly determined, he tightened the tether until it cut through the ewe's wool into its hide.

He made progress by the foot and by the inch. The ewe had to be dragged and shoved at regular intervals. And as he penetrated toward the heart of the swamp, the increasing height and thickness of the lush undergrowth made passage more difficult.

Moonlight filtered down eerily among the trees and on all sides treacherous pools gleamed silver-black in the shadowy darkness. Occasionally hidden watchers stared at him out of the depths and quite often enormous toads hopped into the path and regarded him with their amber eyes. They seemed to be devoid of fear, almost as if they considered the swamp their special domain and deemed him incapable of harming them. He began to imagine there was something vaguely malignant about them. He had never seen them so large before, nor in such numbers. But probably that was merely because they were left unmolested in the swamp to breed and develop without encountering the artificial obstacles which would inevitably prevail in any less shunned area.

As he pushed into the heart of the swamp, the gathering silence became oppressive. The ordinary night sounds ceased altogether and only his own strained breathing broke the silence. The ewe became more obstinate than ever; all his strength was required to drag it along. It appeared, he imagined, to sense the fate which awaited it.

Suddenly, so suddenly that he nearly cried aloud in astonishment, the underbrush ended and he was standing at the base of the unhallowed knoll.

It was just as he had remembered it—huge menhirs standing in a rough circle about a central mound upon which lay a large flat slab of a dark hue which did not match the color of the surrounding monoliths. Over all a shadow seemed to fall, and yet when he glanced upward he saw that the full moon stood directly overhead.

Shaking off the sense of dread which closed upon him, he started up the lichen-covered slope. But now the ewe sank upon its forelegs and he was obliged to drag it inch by inch toward the circle of megaliths. He rather welcomed the exertion however, for it freed his mind of the nameless fear which the cromlech aroused in him.

By the time he had dragged the sheep alongside the ring of boulders, he was nearly exhausted, but he dared not pause to rest, for he knew that delay would be his undoing. He already had a wild desire to leave the ewe and rush back through the toad-infested swamp to the familiar outer world.

Quickly slipping off the sheep's tether, he bound its legs firmly together and with a tremendous heave shoved it onto the rust-colored sacrificial slab.

Rejecting an almost uncontrollable impulse to flee, he unsheathed the hunting knife which he carried and drew from his pocket the curious bound manuscript book, "True Magik" by Theophilis Wenn.

He had no difficulty in locating the strangely sinister seventh incantation, for in the bright moonlight the unusual bluish-grey ink in which the characters were inscribed seemed actually luminous.

Holding the book in one hand and the knife ready in the other, he began to repeat the jumble of unintelligible sounds.

As he read, the syllables appeared to exert some unearthly influence upon him, so that his voice rose to a savage howl, a high-pitched inhuman ululation which penetrated to the farthest depths of the swamp. At intervals his voice sank to low gutturals or a thin sibilant hiss.

And then, at the last enunciation of the oft-repeated word, "Nyogtha", there reached his ears as from a vast distance a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, although not even a leaf stirred on the surrounding trees.

The book suddenly darkened in his hand and he saw that a shadow had fallen across the page.

He glanced up—and madness reeled in his brain.

Squatting on the edge of the slab was a shape which lived in nightmare, a squamous taloned thing like a monstrous gargoyle or a malformed toad which stared at him out of questing red eyes.

He froze in horror and a sudden rage flamed in the thing's eyes. It thrust out its neck and an angry hiss issued from its mottled beak.

Emmet Telquist was galvanized into action. He knew what the thing wanted—life blood.

Raising the knife, he advanced and was about to plunge it downward into the sheep when a new horror seized him.

The ewe was already dead. The unspeakable presence which squatted beside it had already claimed it. It had died of fright. Its eyes were glazed and there was no indication that it still breathed.

Remembering Theophilis Wenn's warning, "beware lest the beaste be dead", Emmet Telquist stood like a stone statue with the knife still upraised in his hand.

Then he dropped it and ran.

Darting between two menhirs, he plunged down the knoll and raced toward the swamp trail.

Lifting its scaly neck, the presence on the slab looked after him and finally, hissing in fury, bounded off the stone and leaped in pursuit.

One terrible shriek rang out and presently the thing hopped back onto the slab, holding in its bloody beak a dangling lifeless form, a fitting sacrifice.

KILLER CAT

It had occurred to him quite suddenly and he had acted on the impulse before there was time to ponder the matter.

He had the little paper open and was slipping the barbital powder into a glass when the idea first came to him. For a half minute he just stood there while his heart beat faster. Then he dumped in three more of the powders and walked to the bedroom where his Aunt Martha lay softly moaning. She swallowed the drug without even opening her eyes and one hour later she was dead. It was as simple as that.

Dr. Myerbron assured him that her heart had given out, showed no surprise and even hinted that he had expected her demise long before.

Dennis Stonegate was no calloused murderer. Far from it. After the funeral when he had finally moved into his aunt's house for good, he assured himself on that point.

He had, he told himself, acted through mercy. His aunt was suffering; Dr. Myerbron had tacitly admitted more than once that she would not recover; and certainly a few weeks or even months could make little difference to the semi-conscious invalid. Better to relieve her of suffering rather than permit her to linger and perhaps undergo worse tortures later on when her last powers of resistance were spent.

He repeated this to himself so often he finally came to believe it. But secretly he knew otherwise. Some small insistent chamber in his brain kept whispering the truth. The truth was he had grown tired of waiting.

At first all seemed to go well. Now that he was relieved of a certain measure of responsibility, he began to enjoy life. Of course, for a time, he had to put on a sober countenance when he left the house in the morning. And he had to act properly subdued on certain occasions. But that was easy enough. He even prided himself a little on his acting ability. Sometimes he played the part so well he could feel himself becoming melancholy. And then he would laugh, struck by the irony of the situation. His Aunt Martha had never meant very much to him. She had merely been an obstacle to be removed.

The first time the cat annoyed him he dismissed the incident without further thought. It was a big black Persian with a silky plume of a tail and luminous yellow eyes and it had been his aunt's favorite pet for years.

One night after he had mashed some sardines in its dish, he became irritated when, instead of running up to eat, it drew back and spit at him. But he merely shrugged and went back to the paper.

The next day it again refused to eat. He speculated, idly, assumed that it was undergoing a disorder, or distemper, or whatever it was that cats undergo, and forgot the matter.

A week or so later however, the cat's actions began to annoy him. He remembered then that so far as he could recall it had eaten almost nothing he had set out for it since his aunt's death.

Even then, the affair did not really bother him much. It was just an irritant in the back of his mind.

Nevertheless, some time later he had an experience which definitely upset him. There was certainly nothing very unusual about it—and he felt a little like a fool at times when he realized how he permitted the incident to prey on him.

He had gone to bed late and had had a vague but unpleasant dream. It seemed that he was lying somewhere in the darkness unable to move, pinned down by a deadly paralysis, a smothering weight. He awoke suddenly drenched with sweat and saw two yellow eyes staring into his own. For just a moment he was on the verge of a scream; then he remembered the cat and felt at once relieved and rather angry. The beast was lying flat on his chest and made no move until he swung his arms and swept it roughly to the floor. It sprang toward the door, turned once and scurried down the hall.

The next morning he laughed at himself. The cat had often slept on his aunt's bed and had happened to climb up on his for a cozy place to spend the night.

He felt uneasy though, when he recalled how wide-awake the cat had been when he opened his eyes.

For well over a week nothing further happened to upset him. The cat skulked out of sight most of the time.

Then he had an experience which thoroughly frightened him and he determined to get rid of his aunt's old pet.

Again he had a dream. Again he was in darkness. And this time he was being smothered. He was rigid, unable to stir, struggling to breathe, and there was no air to be had. He awoke as before, suddenly, cold with sweat, and felt his spine tingle when he realized that something soft and black was pressed firmly against his face. He sat up violently and groped wildly for the switch. Something plopped on the floor just as light flooded the room and then the cat paused at the door as before, turned its yellow eyes on him and disappeared.

He sat still for some minutes, while his head whirled. He was frightened and shocked at the things which he dared not admit to himself and now a determined rage took possession of him.

The next day did not shake his determination. He brooded about the cat and purposely planned his work so that he could leave early.

He let himself in quietly, entered the kitchen and picked up the iron poker, and then softly started down the cellar stairs. It was here the cat usually hid itself when it sensed his approach.

Pressing the light switch at the bottom, he quickly crossed toward the coal bins. He had left some wooden crates piled near a window in one of the bins and now in the light he saw the cat's yellow eyes shining behind the bottom slats.

Springing toward the crates, he swung the poker viciously. The bottom crate collapsed with a rending of brittle wood and the whole pile lurched off balance. As he stepped back to avoid being struck, the cat shot past.

Cursing, he started after it, but his foot caught on a crate and he fell headlong. He jumped up, white with rage, and rushed into the open cellar. Dust billowed out from the bin and he could not see the cat. He stood back, glaring around the cellar, and waited for the dust to settle. His foot felt hot however, and glancing down he was shocked to see his shoe wet with blood. A nail must have penetrated his ankle and cut a vein. Thoroughly unnerved now, he dropped the poker and hurried upstairs.

He bathed his foot, dressed it and at length sat back, weak with nervous exhaustion. But now he was more determined than ever. Before another day had passed he would kill the cat.

Although his foot grew sore, his wound was not really serious, and the next day he went to work as usual. A black mood seemed to settle on him however, and finally he found it impossible to concentrate on the various details which

required his attention. He felt that until the cat was destroyed, his peace of mind would never be regained.

Towards mid-day he complained of a violent headache, excused himself, and hurried homeward.

Making sure that all the windows were closed and all the doors locked, he began a slow and systematic search of the house. He started in the garret and worked downward.

By the time he descended to the cellar a half hour had passed and his patience was nearly exhausted. He poked through the coal bins, inwardly cursing the elusive beast, and then smashed each crate in turn to eliminate every possible hiding place.

As he mounted to the garret a second time some portion of his anger gave way to a feeling of faint but persistent dread. He was positive that the cat had been locked in the day before.

He began the search again, ferreting in every conceivable corner, overturning baskets, scouring the closets, even jabbing the poker in amongst his aunt's clothing hung in a dusty hall store room.

Another hour passed before he gave up. He slumped in a chair, weary and possessed by a nameless fear, and tried to think. One moment he told himself he was a superstitious fool, and the next he pictured the cat as an incarnation of calculated evil and malice. He had heard stories of the dead entering the bodies of animals in order to wreak their unholy revenge. Tales of werewolves and vampires had haunted the race since the misty beginnings of recorded time. Why not a cat? especially one that had been so closely allied to the dead? one that had, perhaps, with that strange insight sometimes possessed by high-bred animals, read his very thoughts?

He sprang up, cursing himself for a childish fool, and determined to put the entire matter out of his mind. He prepared a warm bath, soaked at leisure, refreshed himself with a highball and sat down to read the paper.

By evening his spirits had improved. He ate a light but well-selected dinner—since the death of his aunt he no longer denied himself expensive articles of food—left a note for the woman who would come to clean in the morning, and settled down to an evening of relaxation with his books.

As he read however, he again found his mind wandering. He glanced up sharply on a number of occasions, sure that he had seen a shadow move against the wall. Once he heard, or imagined he heard, a cry just outside the window. It sounded like the wail of a cat, but there was an unearthly note mixed in it which lifted the hairs on the nape of his neck. He sat rigid, bathed with perspiration, and waited for the cry to be repeated, but the silence flowed on and at last he lay back in his chair, weak with the strain of expectation. He told himself that his nerves were on edge; certainly there was no reason to become upset about a cat prowling outside. Cats prowled, especially at night. Why, what a fool he had become!

He stirred from his chair, mixed himself a stiff drink, and resumed his book, riveting his attention on every page. He was congratulating himself on his success when chancing to glance up to momentarily rest his eyes, he was terrified to see a shape of darkness dart quickly away from the window.

For a second he sat frozen in his chair; then he hurled down the book, rushed to the door and literally flung himself outside.

The long lawn in front of the house lay bathed in soft moonlight and not even a wind rustled the maple leaves. The lawn and the stone walk and the garden space against the house were entirely empty. Not a shadow was out of place.

He stood a long time, pondering, listening, peering into the misty veil of moonlight. Once a moth swooped into the light, causing him an inordinate fright. At last he closed the door.

He assured himself again that his nerves were on edge; he did not feel too well. He was beginning to imagine things. There was really nothing to be afraid of—certainly not of a mere cat! Perhaps he needed a vacation, a trip to the mountains, a change of scenery.

He continued to reason with himself, meanwhile occupying himself with various tasks about the house. At length, after a careful scrutiny of every dark corner, he retreated to his room, bolted the door, looked under the bed and made a detailed inspection of the mesh screen on his window. It appeared quite substantial—certainly no cat could ever penetrate it.

Soothed by weariness and the elaborate precautions which he had observed, he at last slid into bed and switched off the light.

He was asleep within a half hour and for some time slept soundly. Then he began to dream. It appeared that he was hiding somewhere when a shadowy shape of evil, an indefinable manifestation of overpowering hate, appeared suddenly on the scene and immediately sought out his hiding place, glaring down at him with baleful yellow eyes. He awoke with a scream, sat up in bed, half turned toward the window—and found himself staring straight into the luminous yellow eyes of the cat.

The beast did not offer to move. It squatted on the window ledge and fixed its eyes on his own with unmoving intensity. For a long moment he sat paralyzed with horror. The beast hated him; it had waited until he was asleep, helpless, and only the wire screen had kept it from the room. He shuddered when he thought what might have happened.

At length he managed to switch on the light, but the cat did not move an inch. It crouched motionless on the sill outside, watching him with cold hate in its tawny eyes.

He began to dress, slowly, keeping one eye on the cat. Further sleep would be impossible.

When he had dressed, slipped on a warm jacket and regained full possession of his faculties, his courage began to assert itself. He searched the room for a weapon, finally selecting a knotty laurel-wood cane.

The cat remained on the window ledge, watching his every move.

Taking a firm grip on the cane, he slid the bolt and stepped into the outer hall. It did not appear at all fantastic to him that he should dress in the middle of the night, arm himself, and creep outside to destroy a cat.

He unlatched the rear door, slipped quickly outside, and made a run for his bedroom window.

The cat leaped off the sill an instant ahead of his arrival, dodged the downward sweep of the cane and ran toward the open field in the rear of the house.

He cursed, regained his balance and whirled after it.

A low mist had risen over the meadow; it was like a curtain of grey-white shadow in the moonlight. Momentarily he lost sight of the beast; then he glimpsed it again, bellying its way slowly through the wet grass. It crawled with a queer dragging of its hindquarters, as if it had been injured, and frequently it looked back.

He took a firmer grip on the cane and rushed forward with a feeling of exultation. His first swing of the cane must have struck it after all! He would catch it now! He would be upon it in an instant! The sneaking, murderous black devil—he'd pound it to a pulp! Ah, now he had it!

He swung the heavy cane with all his strength. The cat leaped nimbly aside, ran a few yards, then stopped and turned its head, fixing its eerie yellow eyes on him.

The sweep of his arm had caused him to lose his balance and now as he lunged in pursuit again he lost his footing entirely; his feet shot sideways on the slippery grass and he crashed to the ground.

He was up in an instant, cursing, frantic with rage, and sprang toward the motionless cat.

The animal waited until he was almost upon it, then quickly dodged aside and ran in another direction.

He was out of breath now, but it never occurred to him to abandon the chase. He rushed after the hated black beast which ran ever ahead of him in the swirling mist, now scarcely crawling, now darting out of reach with the suddenness of a whiplash, now pausing and turning its flat head to make sure he was following behind.

He leaped forward like a madman, striking out savagely with the cane, sliding to his hands and knees, a wild frenzied figure in the moonlight. He was possessed by the one idea; he had lost all sense of proportion, of direction; he did not even know into which part of the meadow he had ventured.

Suddenly the cat made a long leap. It landed heavily and appeared to go limp. It looked back but did not move as he lunged forward.

Without warning the ground vanished beneath his feet and he plunged downward like a stone. Even as he fell he understood the trap to which he had been led. With demoniac cunning, the cat had caused him to run directly over the shaft of a deep abandoned well which was located in the rear unused portion of the meadow.

He screamed once before the black water closed over his head, sending him straight down a pool of freezing darkness. He kicked and clawed and at last came to the surface, but already the icy water was working its paralysis in him.

He stared up and screamed again, but the steep walls of the well smothered his cry; it was little more than a weak moan above the surface of the ground.

As his wildly clutching fingers scraped in vain against the smooth moss-slick sides of the well, he looked up with a last desperate hope and there silhouetted above him, like a fiend from hell, was the remorseless shape of the cat, gazing steadily downward with a glow of triumph in its yellow eyes.

He started to scream again, but his fingers lost their frail grip on the mossy stones and he sank out of sight beneath the surface of green scum.

THE DUMP

Pulling aside the dingy kitchen curtain, she looked out. "It's starting again," she said tensely.

To the north, a scant mile from the house, a great greasy billow of black smoke rolled skyward. Squealing sea gulls flapped over huge mounds of smouldering trash. Although she couldn't see them from the window, the woman knew that the reeking wasteland literally crawled with an army of voracious rats.

Somehow, the omniscient, all-encompassing State had overlooked the dump. In its dynamic zeal to provide prefabs, food capsules and carefully edited newstapes for all citizens, the State may have bypassed the dump temporarily.

There was a rumor to the effect, however, that the wasteland had been deliberately preserved as a sort of monstrous museum area, a "See-how-things-used-to-be" tourist attraction.

In any event, in the very midst of marvels of efficiency, exactitude and unending impersonal energy, there it remained, a sour, rat-sluiced tract carefully shunned by the average State citizen.

If people still existed in the dump itself, or even in its immediate environs, it was generally conceded that it was their own fault. The State always stood ready to house and feed the indigent.

Broken springs groaned as the man arose from a cot. He shook his head. "Wish you'd relax, Lucy. Little smoke ain't hurtin' you none."

She turned, eyes bright with anger. "*Little smoke!*" she repeated. "Smoke that seeps right through the shingles into the house! Smoke that gets in your lungs, in your hair, in your food, in your clothes—even in your skin! I tell you I've had enough of smoke and cinders and rats—and sea gulls! Sea gulls! Hah! Those dirty birds screeching like hungry cats all the time. They're dump gulls. Garbage gulls! I'd like to wring their filthy necks!"

Slipping into a threadbare jacket, the man started toward the kitchen door. "You sure get worked up over nothin'. Sea gulls got to live, like everything else."

The woman's voice rose in fury. "I suppose you'd say the rats have got to live too! You'd even defend the rats!"

The man paused, his hand on the door knob. He looked aggrieved. "Why that ain't fair, Lucy. We fight the rats. You know that."

"You fight them!" she mocked. "Well, let me tell you something! You're losing the fight! The rats are winning! They're taking over! There must be a million out there!"

The man rubbed his chin reflectively. He looked thoughtful. "They're tough, all right. But they're under control. We club a couple hundred to death, most every night." He opened the kitchen door.

As he stepped out, the woman's fury seemed suddenly to vanish. Her voice was no longer shrill; it was flat, listless.

"When will you be back, Ralph?"

He shrugged. "Can't say, exactly. We might go on a rat kill. Take a couple hours. Maybe we'll poke around for stuff till dark. Maybe just gab over a can of mulligan." He closed the door.

From the window, she watched him cross the littered back yard and disappear in the adjacent cattails.

Supper time came and went and he had not returned. She had a cup of tea and a biscuit and then sat up, trying to read, but found herself unable to concentrate. Finally she crossed to the kitchen window.

Darkness had fallen, but the Enemy was still visible, revealed in the lurid flickering light of towering trash fires. At night the dump seemed even more forbidding. You never knew what that flame-riven darkness might conceal.

As she stood at the window, she imagined that the approaches to Hell itself might resemble the scene before her—fires circling the night and beyond in the deeper darkness terrors and frights unspeakable.

At last, wearily, she undressed for bed. But she did not sleep peacefully. This evening the nightmare came swiftly. There were variations, but the essential outline was nearly always the same.

From the outside darkness, from above and below and from all sides, came subdued but ominous whispers of sound—gnawing, scraping, squeaking, scuttling. And then the house began to settle, literally to sink, like a ship in the sea. The busy rats had eaten away its foundations and now it was being engulfed in great tides of trash. The dump was closing in on it, like a monstrous growth. Soon it would disappear out of sight in the slimy darkness. As it slipped into the sour earth, the rats broke through. They poured through the windows, the doors, down the chimney—huge, hairy creatures with red eyes and yellow flashing fangs. They leaped upon the bed, lunged for her throat.

She was sitting up in bed, screaming, bathed in sweat, when she finally awoke.

Ralph had not yet returned. She got up, drank tea, and went back to bed for a few minutes' fitful sleep in the hour or two before dawn.

She was sitting in the kitchen when Ralph returned. Grey light was filtering over the cattails. In the distance a sea gull squealed.

Ralph yawned, stretched, sat down. "Quite a night. We musta clubbed a hundred rats. Maybe more. Jim Tavey got nipped, but not bad. When we got back, Fred Morgee's woman had a pail of the best damned mulligan I ever ate. Hot and spicy! Jeepers, that was good!"

She glared at him. "That filthy woman! Living in the dump! Bad enough to live next to it."

He spread his hands. "Why Lucy, it ain't bad. Morgee's rigged up a shack with a real tin roof. Got a floor and a potbelly. Got bunks. Sheila Morgee's the happiest female I ever did see."

She slammed her fist on the table top. "Well she can have her filthy shack in the dump! *I'm* through! Living here right on the edge is getting just as bad as being inside. Cinders, smoke, smells, sea gulls—and rats, rats, rats!" Her voice rose hysterically.

He spoke soothingly. "What can we do, Lucy? Twenty years ago we paid ten thousand for this place. Now the State wouldn't give us over three. How long would that last? In a year or so we'd be wards. Broke. The State would take us."

"What's so bad about that?" she countered. "We'd have two rooms in a plastic prefab. Plenty of food capsules. An entertaintime screen. Now they even give you the choice of a permajade juniper bush or a simulated maple tree for the lawn."

He snorted. "Lawn! Artificial grass you spray green in the spring and brown in the autumn!"

Her voice rose again. "That's better than looking out at those dingy cattails all day long—watching them shake as the rats swim around the roots!"

He was silent.

She continued, her voice weary but resolute. "I'm through, Ralph. I can't stand those nightmares no more. If you won't

sell to the State, I'll bring suit for my share and I'll leave anyway. I'm not going on living like this."

He shook his head, frowning. "I won't fight, Lucy, if you really want to go. You can keep what the State gives for the house. But I'm telling you, it's a mistake. We ain't got much here, but at least we're alive."

Her voice was bitter. "I've had enough. I'm selling. If you won't come, go and live with the rats in the dump!"

He went to bed. He knew that further argument would be futile. A few weeks later the man from the State came. Ralph had already signed the papers, waiving his share of the proceeds from the sale of the house. The State had agreed to pay twenty-seven hundred.

Sitting down in the one stable armchair remaining in the living room, the State man—a Mr. Feckwith—opened his document case. "All that remains," he explained to Mrs. Leeson, "is for you to sign these papers." He passed them over to her.

As she read, a look of consternation spread on her careworn face. "What does this mean? Don't I get the twenty-seven hundred?"

Mr. Feckwith coughed politely. "Well, you see, Mrs. Leeson, before you can become a State ward and qualify for a prefab, plus furnishings and food, you have to turn all assets over to the State. Otherwise you are not considered, ah, dependent."

She hesitated. "But I—I won't have a penny!"

Mr. Feckwith smiled reassuringly. His chubby face beamed. "You won't *require* a penny, Mrs. Leeson! All needs are taken care of. Shelter, food, clothes, medicine. And you'll have all the extras—an entertaintime screen, the news tape delivered every day, the monthly excursion. Think of it!"

She thought of it. She thought of it while black soot drifted past the windows, while the sea gulls squealed and the dump fires flared. She thought of it and she signed.

Three days later the State sent a tronicar to pick her up. She was glad that Ralph was away. It made things easier.

As the car sped off, she turned for a last sight of the dump. A huge pall of thick smoke hung over the area. Tireless sea gulls flapped above the refuse heaps, screeching raucously. Sighing with relief, she looked away, concentrating on the tronicar's gleaming interior. Within seconds the dump was far behind her.

Her new life was like a dream. She had two private rooms in a plastic prefab, complete with entertaintime screen, newstape projector and remote music disc. Food, mostly in capsule form, was delivered daily. The trugrass lawn, freshly sprayed, boasted a simulated maple tree over eight feet high.

If she felt ill, all she needed to do was press the button marked "Dispensary." A State doctor would arrive in three minutes.

Sitting in her foamease chair, in front of the entertaintime screen, she reveled in her new luxury. No dump smoke seeped into these rooms. No soot drifted past the windows. When she looked out, instead of dingy cattails she saw the bright green simulated maple tree and the sparkling trugrass lawn. No more rats scampering across her back yard. No noisy sea gulls circling overhead.

She felt sorry for Ralph. He would probably die in the dump. He'd end his days in some dirty shack, slurping up mulligan stew. He'd die alone, some dismal night, while the dump fires flickered and the filthy rats squealed and scuttled in the darkness.

After the first week she got to know some of her new neighbors. There were twenty-nine other units on her block, each with its own trugrass lawn. Some, like hers, boasted a simulated maple tree. Others were graced with one of the permajade juniper bushes. She was welcomed warmly. They were all very friendly, all very polite. She never mentioned the dump. They talked about the past as if it were life on another planet. They talked about their favorite programs on the entertaintime screen, about where they had gone on the monthly tronicar excursions sponsored by the State. They talked about their illnesses.

And yet, it seemed to Lucy Leeson, they did not actually talk very much. Perhaps it was too much effort. Mostly they

just sat in front of their entertaintime screens and watched. Most of their meals they could swallow in capsule form without even moving from their foamease chairs.

The weeks came and went and finally a man appeared one morning and sprayed the trugrass lawn a uniform brown. A week or so later he came back, worked a mechanism at the base of the simulated maple tree and all the bright green leaves curled up tight and invisible against the limbs. It was autumn.

The man told her they had tried leaving everything green all year round, but in the long run the people didn't approve of it. They liked to look out, some fine spring morning, and see the trugrass lawn and the maple trees unexpectedly green again. The service men came just before dawn to spray the lawns and unfold the maple leaves.

It was a landscaping marvel. The grass never had to be cut and Lucy knew that the simulated maple tree would never be over eight feet tall. No pruning, no troublesome roots, no falling leaves to rake.

Her only criticism was that the birds seemed to avoid both lawn and tree. She looked out, rather wistfully, in hopes of seeing a bird. But she rarely saw one. She remembered with a pang of nostalgia the red-winged blackbirds which descended on the cattails bordering the dump every spring. They were such bright, frolicsome, saucy creatures! But they never flew over the trugrass lawns.

After a while, Lucy stopped visiting her neighbors. For some reason which she could not specifically name, they depressed her. They were old and listless and often ill, but it was more than that.

At length she knew the reason. They were dead; they were corpses waiting for interment. They would be transferred from the plastic prefabs to State permaplastic coffins with scarcely a groan of protest. They were just waiting for death, day after day. Consciously, they swallowed their capsules, read their daily newstapes and sat with their eyes riveted on the screens. But subconsciously they had stopped living. Subconsciously they longed for death to release them from the bondage of State security, State brainwashing, the bland and eternal aura of State assurance and reassurance.

She began to feel that she was being smothered to death in the plastic prefab. She grew to loathe the food capsules. The endless entertaintime programs finally filled her with boredom. The newstapes were some diversion but she resented them because she sensed that all the news had been too carefully sifted and predigested beforehand.

She stared out at the meek leafless tree and hated it. Sometimes she sat on the floor because she was so tired of the foamease chair. Once she pressed the "Dispensary" button just to see what would happen, but she never tried it again because she was subjected to a tedious two-hour examination which left her exhausted and taut with irritation. The examination was thorough but so impersonal she was left feeling like an inanimate object.

She no longer had nightmares about the dump rats but now a new and even more terrifying dream haunted her sleep. She dreamed that the State, unable to supply prefabs fast enough to meet the thousands of new applicants, secretly filled some of the food capsules with sleeping powders. The sleeping victims, chosen at random, were then carried out of their quarters, slipped into State permaplastic coffins and quietly buried. In her dream the plastic prefab became a permaplastic coffin. Doped with sleeping powder, she was buried alive. She would wake up, night after night, screaming, throwing her arms in the air to claw her way out.

At length she began to sit up most of the night; during the day she would sleep at frequent intervals in the foamease chair. This routine effectively ended the dream of being buried alive, but she still dreaded the nights.

She would sit for hours thinking about the dump—the sea gulls squealing, the trash fires flaring, soot flying past the windows and finally Ralph tramping in with his crazy stories about the rats or the mulligan stew or the fortune someone had found in a discarded fruit jar.

She had hated it all before but now she wasn't sure she hated it very much. Maybe she no longer hated it at all. What was it Ralph had said? How did it go? Oh yes: "We ain't got much here, *but at least we're alive*."

The words echoed in her mind. She thought of them a hundred times a day.

It was a small thing that decided her. One morning she was standing at the window, looking out across the trugrass lawn, when a State dispensary ambucar drove up. Two hospital men entered the prefab across the road. In a few minutes they came out carrying old Miss Quinsonby in a plastic bag.

Lucy Leeson felt sick. Although she was perfectly aware that Miss Quinsonby had been ailing for months, the memory

of her nightmare came back to torment her. Was it possible that the State actually did "dispose" of the very old and infirm in order to make room for new applicants? The thought was fantastic, and yet the State people were so deadly, impersonally efficient in so many ways....

That very afternoon she signed up for the next monthly tronicar excursion. She had nearly two weeks to wait and she counted the days. One afternoon when she was sleeping in the foamease chair she had a new nightmare. She dreamed that she became ill and pressed the Dispensary button. In the prescribed three minutes two State hospital men appeared. One of them winked at the other and they both smiled slyly at her. Then she noticed that the one who had winked held something behind his back. It was a big folded plastic bag. She awoke with a scream.

On the morning set for the tronicar excursion, she stuffed some personal items in a small kit and went outside to wait. The tronicar driver was supposed to stop and touch her signal chime, but she was taking no chances. She waited nearly an hour, afraid the car might come early. When it finally swung into view down the street, she hurried to the ramp.

After the tronicar had picked up its cargo of State wards and left the immediate prefab area, the driver began an oral travelogue, describing new buildings, sites and developments as the car sped past. She scarcely heard his monotonous speel droning over the speaker system.

Her plans were made. When the car stopped in Newbridge, she would get off on some pretext and simply keep on going. She knew the tronicar excursions were tied to a rigid schedule. The driver would not wait for her very long.

Assuring him that she would return in five minutes, she got out in Newbridge and scurried away in the crowds. Once out of sight, she signaled for a cruisecab.

As the cab slid smoothly through city traffic toward the highway which skirted the dump, horrible doubts assailed her. Suppose Ralph had left? Suppose all of them had left? What would she do? Where could she go? The State owned the house. She did not possess any money. She would have to go back to the prefab, back to the trugrass lawn and the simulated maple tree, back to—*Death*. Once she had spoken it in her mind, she kept on repeating it. Death, death, death. She would have to go back to death. She would have to go back to death.

It became a refrain, ringing in her head. The crisp voice of the driver came through the partition tube, startling her. "This is the refuse area, lady. Where did you want to go?"

Her heart began to pound. She looked out the window, searching for landmarks. "About a mile yet. There's an old empty warehouse and then some catalpa trees. Right after that."

In a minute or two the cruisecab glided to a stop. She paid the driver and got out. Her heart was pounding so hard she could scarcely breathe.

"You want me to wait, lady?" The driver regarded her quizzically.

She shook her head. "No—no thanks. I—I'm meeting someone here."

The driver glanced at the smoky pall of the dump and shrugged. Seconds later the cruisecab was disappearing down the highway.

She walked past the clump of catalpa trees bordering the highway. There were bushes and then set back a bit would be the house. She stopped, staring, motionless. The house was gone. The State had torn it down and filled in the cellar hole.

As she looked across the littered back yard toward the clump of cattails, she experienced a strange sense of unreality. Sea gulls cried overhead and the sun filtered down through a pall of smoke, but the familiar scene seemed eerily unfamiliar.

Scowling, she closed her eyes momentarily and forced down the panic crowding within her. The house was gone; that was what made everything seem so strange, so unreal. Now she would take the little path that led across the back yard into the cattails. She would find Ralph and the others. Surely they were here somewhere. They would have shelter, at least a substitute for a house. She was acting like a fool. She should have expected the house to be gone; even if it hadn't been, it was no longer hers. She would have no right to enter it, if it were still standing.

Crossing the yard, she hesitated at the edge of the cattails. She imagined she could hear rats squeaking somewhere in

the tangle ahead. Finally she picked up a heavy stick, took a deep breath and stepped into the narrow path which twisted through the cattail marsh.

She had thought the marsh covered only a small area; now she became appalled at its size. The path twisted on and on, like some kind of maze laid out to confuse the unwary. Every few yards her feet got wet. At length she had to stop and sit down. There were squeaks and twitterings around her. The eternal sea gulls flapped overhead. Smoke drifted sluggishly skyward. She arose and went on.

Noon found her sitting at the base of a great mound of ashes and trash. The sea gulls still squawked and the sun glared down. The cattail marsh lay far away. She was tired, confused and fearful. The dump area seemed enormous and she had not met a single human being. She had believed, previously, that the dump was mostly a level plateau; now she found to her dismay that it actually consisted of a great many mounds, gullies, ridges and pits. Unless she climbed to the top of a mound, she could not see very far. And even then she could not see down into distant holes and depressions.

She had called out until her voice broke. Now she sat silently. A huge grey-brown rat scurried into sight. Her hand tightened on the stick which she carried. The rat pretended it was nibbling on a paper shred but she knew it was watching her. It did not dart away.

She had a sudden horrible thought of night closing in, of rats by the dozen, by the hundreds, watching her, waiting....

She arose so abruptly the rat took alarm and disappeared. She would have to get out, she told herself. She would return to the marsh, take the little path and go back to the highway. Once there, she would be relatively safe.

But she soon found that she was hopelessly lost. The cattail marsh had vanished. She trudged on with growing apprehension, encountering bigger mounds and deeper gullies. The blazing sun seemed reflected back from every inch of the scorched sour earth. Her head began to ache; she developed a raging, tormenting thirst.

Rats watched her warily. Once a sea gull swung down, surveyed her with its cruel eyes and flapped off silently.

Finally her legs simply gave out. She collapsed weeping. Ralph had gone; they had all gone. She was now convinced that she was alone in the dump. Surely, by now, someone would have seen her, heard her. They had all left; perhaps the State had driven them out.

Shadows were beginning to slant across the gullies by the time she got up. She was dry-eyed, but her legs ached, her eyes smarted and her throat was so parched she could scarcely swallow. When she tried to call out, her voice was only a whisper. Her first terror had passed. Now she felt a kind of calm despair.

Rounding a huge bank of calcified waste, she stopped, frozen. She was feverish, she concluded, dying maybe, for there scant yards away was a group of people, a shack of some sort, a cleared area which was like a little island of orderliness in an ocean of congealed chaos. She stared, unbelieving.

Someone saw her, exclaimed, and the whole group turned to stare at her.

"*Lucy!*"

It was Ralph. He broke from the group, bolted toward her. "Lucy! Lucy! How did you—What on earth—" She was in his arms then and he was laughing and she was crying. She was too exhausted and too thirsty to talk. She simply fell into his arms and he carried her toward the shack. The others crowded around, murmuring sympathetically.

Ralph settled her into a big broken-down armchair under the tin roof. Someone else held out a dipper of cool water, the sweetest water she had ever tasted in her life. Mrs. Morgee appeared with a wet cloth and began bathing her forehead and face. Someone took off her shoes.

In a few minutes she felt so much better, she sat up and looked around at them. Ralph hovered at her side, grinning idiotically. The rest of them only smiled at her, understanding that she did not yet wish to answer questions.

As darkness closed in, someone lit a fire. In a few minutes the aroma of mulligan stew spiced the air. Lucy's mouth watered; she was ravenous, she now realized.

After she had finished a huge bowl of stew, she could scarcely keep her eyes open. Mrs. Morgee led her inside to a cot, helped her undress and got her into bed. Ralph remained outside with the others, around the fire. Explanations could

wait until morning.

She had the sensation of melting without effort into a deep, dreamless sleep. She had made up her mind. She would never return to the plastic prefab, the trugrass lawn, the simulated maple tree and the food capsules. She wouldn't be carried away, all alone some morning, in a plastic bag.

She'd never get used to the rats and she didn't like the smoke and the sea gulls, but now she knew there were worse things.

At least she felt alive.

THE TENANTS

That January Madge and I were in desperate need of a rent. Two days before we were due to be evicted—for owner occupancy—we heard about the house in suburban Clarisville.

We got out there as fast as we could, made inquiries and located the woman who owned the house, a Mrs. Dallis, who agreed to show us the property.

The house was an ordinary-looking, white frame, two-story structure located at the far end of a rather sparsely settled street. It needed paint, new wallpaper and several new window panes. A porch step was dangerously cracked and the entire grounds surrounding the house needed a thorough going-over. Also, we would have to sign a two-year lease.

But of course we took it. It was much better than a tent in somebody's back lot.

When we mentioned the eviction hanging over our heads, Mrs. Dallis permitted us to move in immediately. And so it happened that our furniture was already in the house before we actually signed the lease.

A few days later we drove over to Mrs. Dallis' place in Clarisville Center to affix our signatures. She invited us in and was most cordial, but after some preliminary pleasantries there came a slight pause and Mrs. Dallis said, "There is just one thing—"

Our hearts skipped a beat. All along, while rejoicing at our good luck, we had both wondered if there might be some hidden "catch" to the business.

After mentioning the "one thing", Mrs. Dallis sat rather nervously twiddling her fingers. To Madge and I, already on edge, this was anything but reassuring.

Finally our new landlady found her tongue.

"Well," she said, "I won't conceal anything. Some years ago a certain Mrs. Molleman lived in the house you've taken. She was, ah—eccentric. There were conflicting reports concerning her. Some people said she was merely a harmless old lady grown a little bit queer in solitude. Others pictured her as a vindictive, even a cruel, woman. For instance, she kept as pets over a dozen assorted cats and dogs. There were rumors that she did not treat them well. So far as I know those rumors were founded on hearsay."

Mrs. Dallis inspected us closely to see what effect her revelations were having and went on.

"Well, one night, neighbors living at the other end of the street heard a terrific commotion proceeding from Mrs. Molleman's house. The dogs were barking and howling furiously and the cats were screeching. The neighbors were of a mind to investigate, but finally the racket died down, and so they went to sleep instead.

"Two days later however, after no further sound had emanated from the house, the police broke in and discovered a ghastly spectacle. The dozen or so cats and dogs, their throats cut, were found lying dead in pools of their own blood. There was at least one of them in every room in the house. Mrs. Molleman herself was found hanging in the garret. The entire house was a shambles. It looked as if the remaining cats and dogs had gone berserk with the smell of blood after Mrs. Molleman had cut the throats of one or two of them. Apparently she had had to chase them all over the house. Blood was splattered everywhere."

Mrs. Dallis sighed deeply.

"Mrs. Molleman, it was said, killed herself because she learned that she was in the advanced stages of an incurable disease. Certain of the neighbors said she destroyed her pets out of vindictiveness and an evil heart, but the more charitable view is that she did away with them in order that they would not suffer abuse and neglect after she was gone."

Her gruesome revelations apparently at an end, Mrs. Dallis sat back and surveyed us.

Madge, surprisingly, was the first to speak. "It's certainly a terrible little story," she admitted, frowning, "but I don't quite see what it has to do with signing the lease. Neither Jim nor I are superstitious."

Mrs. Dallis nodded. "Good," she said. "Neither am I. But nevertheless it is pertinent to the lease. There has been some strong evidence that on October 20th of each year—the anniversary of that horrible night—certain, ah, manifestations have been observed. Therefore the lease you will sign specifies that from six p.m. to six a.m. on each October 20th, you will remove yourselves from the premises, lock the house securely and remain away."

Madge and I glanced at each other. It was certainly a bizarre requirement, yet I think we were both relieved to learn the details. To remain away from home one night a year was actually no great inconvenience.

We agreed to obey the weird clause and signed the lease at once. After we left, we made light of the matter. We concluded that the "manifestations" existed only in Mrs. Dallis' mind. October was a long way off—and we did have a rent.

That year was a hectic albeit prosperous and happy one and the months flew past. Madge and I were too busy to worry about ghosts of old ladies. We never encountered any in the house and although we occasionally remembered the October 20th clause and joked about it, we were so occupied with other matters we very nearly forgot about the date when it finally did arrive. Mrs. Dallis, however, had foreseen the possibility of that and made provision for it. At five o'clock on the afternoon of October 20th she telephoned to make sure that we were planning to vacate the house by six. We assured her that we would be out in an hour.

Actually, we just did make it. We had neglected to pack an overnight bag till the last minute and, as always, several minor but essential items had to be searched for. After we had checked the locks on the back door and all the windows, we stepped out onto the front porch. I think it was about one-half minute before six p.m. when I turned the key in the front door and we walked down the porch steps.

We made a lark of the affair. We had dinner at a fine restaurant, attended a play, drank cocktails and finally turned in at the hotel room which we had engaged for the occasion.

The next morning Madge sleepily assured me that she had no qualms whatsoever about returning to our house and that she'd consider me a fussbucket if I insisted on leaving early so that I could stop at the place before I left for the office.

I told her I'd go directly from the hotel to work and leave her to contend with any old ghosts that happened to be nursing a hangover on our premises.

Madge is always vague about time early in the morning however, and I did leave the hotel earlier than was necessary. I started driving toward the office, thinking I'd get a head start on some papers which had piled up. But some obscure impulse persuaded me to turn the car and drive toward the suburbs. I felt a bit foolish, but I couldn't argue myself out of stopping at our house for a quick checkup. I have always been grateful that I heeded the dim prompting which caused me to change directions that morning.

When I unlocked the door and walked into the house, everything seemed in order. The windows and rear door were still securely bolted and nothing was amiss. I searched the house from cellar to garret and found nothing disturbed.

Finally, feeling rather sheepish at this point, I sat down in one of the living room chairs to rest a minute before I drove to work.

As I sat there, I noticed some small object protruding from behind the divan on the opposite side of the room. I couldn't distinguish what it was; mild curiosity prompted me to get up and peer behind the divan.

As I bent down, I froze. Huddled against the back of the divan was a pitiful little heap of fur lying in a pool of blood—our cat, Jinko, with his throat slashed wide open. It was the tip of his tail which I had seen protruding.

In our haste to leave the previous evening, we had forgotten about him. We hadn't noticed him in the house and I think we both subconsciously assumed that he was outside when we locked up.

I cleaned up the blood, buried the little creature in a corner of the backyard, poured myself a stiff drink and went to work. Several times during the day I called up to make sure that Madge was all right. She called me a ninny and said she couldn't even find an old shroud dropped around the house.

Of course she got somewhat suspicious in a day or so when Jinko failed to show up. But he had disappeared for days at a time before, and I finally persuaded her that he must have wandered away or met with an accident.

The following summer I saved some of my vacation time; Madge and I spent the entire week of October 20th in Maine. In December I put a down payment on a new house. We moved into it just before the holidays—and one of Madge's Christmas presents was a cuddly little Persian kitten.

She had been teasing me to buy one for months, but somehow I just hadn't got around to it till then.

THE MAN WHO FEARED MASKS

Mr. Apondee was terrified by masks or false faces of any type. Halloween to him was an idiot's festival of unmitigated horror. He would sooner enter a tiger's lair than attend a masked ball. If he saw a false face harmlessly dangling in the window of a novelty shop, he would shudder and turn away. The memory of it would haunt him all evening long—even intrude in his dreams and torment him until he awoke, limp with nightmare panic.

The detailed circumstances surrounding the inception of Mr. Apondee's mask fear were somewhat hazy, since he was scarcely three years old at the time. But the particular moments of terror he remembered vividly, as if they had transpired within his recent adult life.

He was sitting in a huge circus tent with his father. It was his first circus; he was enormously excited, tense, somewhat fearful. He held tight to his father's hand. Suddenly all the lights went out. There were screams, frightened cries, roars, howls and monstrous bellowings. People began pushing and shoving, trying to force passage toward the entrances of the pitch-black tent.

In the whirlwind commotion he lost his grip on his father's hand. He was swept away in a trampling, cursing tide of sweating humanity. He fell down between the seats, screaming, and suddenly out of the darkness appeared a nightmare face, luminous with a green-silvery shine, huge of nose, gashed by great white rubbery lips which writhed with insane merriment. The face bent over him, with its tiny glittering eyes, its fearful pink mouth and its greasy shine.

His screams of a few moments before turned to delirious shrieks of ultimate terror. He remembered nothing more.

Eventually of course the lights went back on and the masked circus clown returned a screaming and hysterical child to its father.

The child screamed all the way out of the circus tent, screamed all the way home and screamed and sobbed half the night, until exhaustion brought hypnotic sleep.

The distressed parents finally forgot the unfortunate incident, but the child never did. In the recesses of his memory a grotesque and hideous mask wavered always just out of sight, awaiting its chance to loom out of the darkness, awaiting the sudden unexpected moment when it would leap into light and petrify him with pure terror.

The show window of a toy store might bring it lunging out at him. He might be swept with acute panic upon glancing up at a billboard advertising a traveling sideshow. Once he nearly fainted on the street when a weirdly masked "Man from Mars"—advertising a local movie—strode around a corner in front of him.

The fear remained with him through his childhood, through his adolescence and on into full maturity. It seemed impervious to the rationalizing of his adult years. It would not be argued away. Its roots had pierced the psychic marrow of his being and resisted all his efforts to wrench them out.

The obsessive fear haunted him to such an extent that he finally consulted a reputable psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist patiently heard him out and then painstakingly explained in simple layman language that his early

childhood experience had made an impact on his impressionable, too-vulnerable young mind all out of proportion to its actual importance. He pointed out that the mask fear was far more than a physical one. True, the child had been buffeted by the circus crowd, had been shoved and pushed down between the seats—painfully and perhaps severely bruised. But the fear went deeper than that. When the lights in the circus tent went out, the child had been holding tight to his father's hand. The father represented security, comfort, protection, home. Suddenly the child was hurled into milling blackness and then out of the darkness appeared a hideous leering face which bore down on him with apparent evil intent. So—the psychiatrist explained—in Mr. Apondee's subconscious mind the mask—or any mask—had come to symbolize the loss of security, of stability and protection. It symbolized all of the inherited and acquired fears which lurked in Mr. Apondee's own psychic depths.

Mr. Apondee listened and he was impressed. He felt better. He believed that he now thoroughly understood the origin of the mask terror, and in understanding, he judged, was exorcism.

But this was only partially true. Although the explanation tended to alleviate Mr. Apondee's mask fear, it by no means entirely dispelled the fixation. The fear remained, buried deep in Mr. Apondee's psychic being, and even though it no longer flickered into furious life at the smallest draft of provocation, still it went on smouldering.

In his early thirties Mr. Apondee got married, and if his marriage had its occasional "ups and downs", it was probably no better and no worse than the average. All considered, it might be termed reasonably successful.

Probably Mr. Apondee believed it far more successful than did his spouse. Mrs. Apondee was frequently exasperated by her husband's lack of enterprise, by his timidity and by his tendency to accept rather than alter his lot.

But after the first few years she seldom complained. It did no good, and in any case Mr. Apondee had plenty of laudable qualities. Although his job was a modest one, he worked steadily at it. He didn't drink, nor stay out at night, nor grumble about the meals.

Mr. Apondee himself was quite satisfied with his circumstances. He had a faithful wife, a small but neat apartment home and a job which was probably his as long as he wanted it, providing he was willing to forego any prospect of raises within the foreseeable future. All in all, he felt that he possessed a measure of security.

He never mentioned his mask fear to his wife. He had an uncomfortable feeling that she would consider it silly, that she might even ridicule him. It was, after all, an awkward thing to explain to anyone and Mr. Apondee could see no point in broaching it.

If Mrs. Apondee had known about it, the chances are the surprise birthday party for Mr. Apondee would have been staged in a far less fanciful manner.

Actually, the introduction of the masks was an afterthought.

The five couples and Mrs. Apondee were crowded into the Apondee's small apartment late one October afternoon. A big birthday cake covered with pink icing and candles rested on a table in the living room. It was Mr. Apondee's birthday and they meant to surprise him when he came home from work at five-thirty.

Suddenly young Mrs. Tyler had an idea. She was giving a Halloween masquerade party later in the month, she said, and that very afternoon she had been out shopping for masks. She had them with her now. Why didn't they each put on a mask before Mr. Apondee came in? It would be great fun; for a minute he wouldn't know who any of them were and that would add to the element of surprise.

They all—including Mrs. Apondee—agreed with enthusiasm. Then a further eerie touch was added when fertile Mr. Fentonby suggested that they put out all the lights in the apartment, except in the vestibule, pull down the shades, and hold lighted birthday candles near their masked faces. When Mr. Apondee first came in, they would remain silent and he would be confronted by nothing but an assemblage of weird glowing masks, hovering, as it were, in mid-air.

Mr. Fentonby's suggestion was adopted with shouts of delight. At five-fifteen they slipped on their grotesque false faces, snapped out all the lights and got their little candles ready. Ten minutes later they drew the shades, lit their candles and waited breathlessly like mischievous children.

The minutes dragged, but presently they heard the click of the self-service elevator down the hall. And then Mr. Apondee's light but steady tread.

He was, as a matter of fact, slightly late. Work had piled up at the office and he was more tired than usual.

Opening the door into the tiny vestibule of his apartment, he sighed with contentment and relief. After hanging up his hat and coat, he strolled into the living room.

In that impossibly black place eleven luminous, nightmare masks floated suddenly out at him. They gleamed and flickered with an unearthly light all their own. The masks were different, but they were all hideous, all malevolent. Some had huge drooping noses; some, great white rubbery lips, grinning with insane merriment; some had tiny glittering eyes and fearful pink mouths.

For one terrible moment Mr. Apondee stood frozen and speechless. Then he began to scream. He screamed and kept on screaming and shouts of "Surprise!" died in eleven throats which were in turn suddenly stricken silent.

Candles were dropped, and some of the masks, but too late. Mr. Apondee plunged like a maddened thing through the darkened room. He headed for the only glimmer of natural light which was visible—a window.

He hurled himself through it, shade and all, and he was still screaming when he struck the cement walk, seven stories below.

THE VISITOR IN THE VAULT

Newling hated the vault. Hated its shadows, its silence, its cold stale air.

But this morning there could be no escape. Preston Haver's books had been sorted and classified, and Mr. Twais, the head librarian, had given instructions that some of the most valuable of the lot were to be stored in the locked basement vault.

Running his hand through his thinning hair, Newling pushed the book truck into the staff elevator. Mrs. Joy, the desk attendant, watched him with an abstracted expression. There was no one else in sight. Mr. Twais was in his private office, reading the morning mail.

The elevator glided to a smooth stop and Newling rolled out the truck. Fretting with irritation, he started down the long, dimly-lighted corridor which led to the locked vault.

Preston Haver always had been a nuisance. Always poking and prying around the library, looking for some outlandish book which no one had ever heard of. He had given Newling many a start as he shuffled suddenly into sight around a book shelf, grinning and nodding like an overgrown gnome.

Some weeks before he had donated and shipped his entire private book collection to the library. Mr. Twais had been ecstatic, but Newling considered the whole business a bother.

Reaching the far end of the corridor, he stopped before the massive locked door of the vault, twirled the shiny dials until he heard the familiar faint click, and then pushed ajar the heavy metal door.

Frowning, he rolled the truck inside. The atmosphere of the vault this morning seemed even more oppressive than usual. It seemed far colder than it ordinarily was. Newling shivered as he brought the truck to a stop and scanned the shelves for a suitable spot for the books.

Most of them were vellum-bound incunabula, written in Latin and embellished with archaic designs. Remembering Preston Haver's yellow-toothed smile and bony hands, Newling lifted the books with distaste.

He began placing them on shelves as rapidly as he could, occasionally glancing behind him into the deeper shadows of the vault. The lighting was far from adequate, and although Mr. Twais had promised that something would be done, somehow nothing ever was.

Newling filled one shelf and started another. He was cold in spite of his hurried movements. He glanced toward the vault door, to make sure that it was still open. More than once he had had nightmares about being shut up in the vault.

The book truck was nearly empty, and he was beginning to feel somewhat relieved, when he suddenly froze with his arm half outstretched toward a shelf.

He had heard nothing and seen nothing, but he knew, even before he turned, that he was no longer alone in the vault.

His heart was hammering and he could feel the cold sweat break out on his forehead. Mustering his last shred of will power, he forced himself to turn around.

Weakly, he leaned back against the book shelves. Preston Haver stood inside the vault door, half in shadow. He looked yellower and bonier than ever and his gaunt mirthless grin seemed more grotesque.

Nodding and still grinning, he shuffled forward. "I see you're shelving my books!" His voice was cracked and thin. It sounded to Newling as if it came from the far end of the corridor.

Newling stammered. "You, you have a fine collection, Mr. Haver. We're putting the—the best ones—here in the vault."

Preston Haver's ghastly grin widened. His long yellow eye-teeth looked like fangs, Newling thought.

He peered at the librarian with his reddish eyes. "There's just one"—his eyes roved the shelves—"one that I sent by mistake. I want it back."

Newling nodded. "Of course. Could you—ah—describe it, sir?"

The visitor stared at him, with a kind of enigmatic smirk. "A small book, with a soft cover. I'm sure you'd have it here. It's rare—oh, very rare!"

He threw back his head and laughed, while Newling listened in horrified fascination. He had never heard Preston Haver laugh before. He hoped he never did again.

Regaining some measure of composure, Newling turned to the shelves and began a systematic scrutiny. He felt thoroughly chilled, chilled to the very marrow. Of course it was imagination, but Preston Haver's presence seemed to have immeasurably intensified the oppressive clammy atmosphere of the vault.

Newling sighed with relief when he spotted the book.

His unwelcome visitor literally snatched it out of his hand, a quick gleam of triumph in his glowing eyes. He chuckled with glee. Newling recoiled from his evil grin.

Preston Haver peered up at him with an air of confidence which he found utterly repellent.

"This cover," he said, stroking it fondly with his bony hand. "Human skin!"

Newling stared at it, horrified. It was a pale, grey-yellow, mottled looking.

"Human skin!" his visitor hissed again.

Newling wiped the perspiration from his face. He felt weak and he suddenly realized that he was actually trembling.

"I'm sure it's—quite a treasure," he managed.

Preston Haver nodded. "Quite a treasure! You see," he went on, again with that odd air of confidence which Newling found revolting, "I'm starting on a trip—a long trip—and I couldn't leave without this book!"

Newling's voice was scarcely a whisper. "I'm glad you, we, found it."

His visitor moved toward the vault door. Just before reaching it, he turned, and his red eyes sought out the librarian's. His face contorted into one last, lingering malignant grin and then he was gone.

Newling leaned against the shelves for a full five minutes before he summoned up enough strength to finish emptying the book truck.

Still shaking, he rolled it out of the vault, slammed the great door, automatically twirled the dials and started back down the corridor.

He was cold and weak. He had scarcely strength enough to slide open the elevator doors.

He stepped out of the elevator into the large open-shelf room of the library with a feeling of indescribable relief. He felt as if he had ascended from a tomb.

Mr. Twais, the head librarian, was coming down the aisle. He stopped when he came abreast of Newling. He was about to say something, but at the sight of Newling's face, his mouth fell open.

"What is it, man?" he exclaimed. "You look positively shaken!"

"Oh—nothing," Newling whispered. "I'll be all right. Just—the air—in the vault. I guess I felt a trifle faint."

Mr. Twais seemed satisfied. He nodded. "You'd better go in the lounge and rest for a few minutes. Oh, by the way, have you heard the news?"

Newling shook his head.

Mr. Twais' expression became properly sober. "Preston Haver, our generous benefactor, died during the night."

IN THE VERY STONES

"It is inconceivable to me," wrote my psychic-investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, "that any person of reasonable perception and sensitivity could pass a long period of his life in a specific habitation without leaving something of himself, impregnated as it were, in the very stones, wood and mortar of the place."

How vividly I recalled this statement later on! But let me start at the beginning.

I had been away from New Haven for many years and I returned in a rather weary mood of reminiscence and regret. My health was not good. The rheumatic fever of my childhood had finally damaged my heart. In addition, I was having eye trouble. The optic nerves were unaccountably inflamed; strong light was painful to me. In dim or subdued light, however, I could see remarkably well, so well in fact that I began to feel that my vision was becoming abnormal.

After engaging a room in one of the few remaining residential areas of the city which had not been engulfed in the spreading contagion of human and social degeneration, I began to take long, rambling walks about the town. I usually waited for a day when the sun was hidden; when the sky was overcast and the light was grey rather than gold, my eyes stopped throbbing and I could stroll in relative peace.

The city had changed remarkably. At times I scarcely knew where I was. Acres of familiar buildings had been swept away. Remembered streets had vanished. Great new structures, efficient but ugly, rose on every side. New highways looped and slashed in every direction. In bewilderment I frequently retreated to the still unseized central Common, or Green as it is called. (I understood, however, that even this last leafy refuge was under siege; various interests were agitating to cover the grass with cement in order to create a gigantic pay-toll parking lot.)

One afternoon in late October when a threat of rain hung in the air, I started out on a walk. The lack of sun rested my eyes; the chill air somehow soothed me. For an hour or so I strolled aimlessly. On a sudden whim I decided to visit a city area which I had so far neglected. I had lived in this section as a very young child—over forty years ago. Although I was scarcely more than three when the family moved, I retained vivid memories of the neighborhood and of the specific house itself.

The house was a two-story, red-brick structure, solidly built, located at 1248 State Street. When I lived there, a big elm tree stood in front of the house. In the rear, a large empty lot which stretched to the adjacent street, Cedar Hill Avenue, made an ideal playground. Subsequently the elm tree was cut down, the lot was nearly filled by a cheap tenement-type building and the entire neighborhood declined.

As I approached the old area, I was appalled at the appearance of things. Some houses had been torn down; others stood vacant, displaying smashed windows, broken doors and collapsed verandas. On one block every house was empty and partially wrecked. I was amazed and disconcerted. I had not seen such desolation since war days.

Under those grey October skies, with a thin mist already starting to fall, it was the bleakest scene imaginable. I experienced an intense oppression of spirits, and as I continued to walk along those strangely deserted streets, my mood of dejection only deepened.

I finally met a pedestrian, muffled already in a winter overcoat. He squinted at me suspiciously when I asked him why so many of the houses stood smashed and empty. "Route 91," he muttered, hurrying away.

Although I had learned there was indeed a rational explanation for the devastation, I felt no better. I was firmly convinced that a slight alteration on the highway blueprints could have carried the new road across empty marsh flats, only a few miles away. The cost of fill would have been a fraction of that expended on extensive condemnation proceedings.

I fully expected that the brick house of my early childhood lay already in ruins. I felt a thin exultation at finding it still standing. I say "thin" because of course I knew it was doomed. Already its windows were broken, its door sagged in and part of its front hedge had been ground away by truck or bulldozer.

As I stood regarding it, remembering clearly episodes of over forty years past, I reflected on the rootlessness which marks the average city denizen. By choice, or more likely necessity, he moves from one house to another. He has no anchor, nothing of continuity. When he visits his old neighborhood, he may find that his former house has vanished. The site of it may be occupied by a city-supported "project" for permanent welfare cases, or by a cinder-block garage, or by a barren parking lot. The house, the trees, the back yard, the very curbstones and sidewalks may be gone.

The returner will experience a haunting sense of loss, a sense of bewilderment, of chaos. He may finally begin to feel that he is even losing his own identity, that, in fact, he has no identity. He will feel lost in time, without either a future or a past. There will be nothing he can go back to and nothing of permanence that he can foresee in an uncertain future.

Isolated, fugacious, essentially a drifter, he will experience a loneliness of spirit which nothing can assuage. Thousands of his kind inhabit the modern city, gnawed by a sense of their own rootlessness, hungering in vain for a home, a habitation which partakes of the flavor of time, a continuing and cherished spot of earth which links their own past with some kind of hopeful future.

With these depressing thoughts in mind, I stood before the lost red brick house of my childhood. I had an impulse to enter, but I supposed it was unsafe and very probably forbidden.

Dusk fell; the mist grew heavier; and still I lingered in that area. Moving away from the doomed house I had known, I wandered along those desolate streets, peering through cracked windows, through sagging doors which never again would open to a friendly hand.

In some windows, frayed, blackened curtains, left hanging in the confusion of forced removal, fluttered in the cold October wind. Odd bits of broken furniture, dishes and ornaments lay scattered about. Entire lifetimes had been passed in some of these houses; now they stood as empty shells, awaiting absolute and final destruction.

The entire area seemed deserted, silent, drained of all life. Even the usual city noises were strangely muffled and distant.

I roamed restlessly, numbed by the desolation which surrounded me, yet perversely unwilling to leave. The mist thickened and full darkness fell and I remained.

In spite of the darkness I could see remarkably well. I linked this abnormal ability with my eyes' unusual sensitivity to strong light; I felt that both conditions stemmed from the inflamed state of the optic nerves, an affliction I have already mentioned.

I passed an alley, glittering strangely with bits of scattered window glass, and stood surveying an adjacent house which leaned crazily with a collapsed roof. It was a small white frame house, inexpensively built, and yet I saw that someone had once tended it carefully. The paint was bright; the little mailbox looked as if it had been scrubbed; and the trampled remains of a once-neat garden surrounded the place.

As, musing, I stared at this wrecked house through the growing mist, I saw a face at one of the two front ground-floor windows. It was the face of an old man, white, mournful, filled with an ineffable desolation.

I gazed at it in astonishment. My first thought was that an elderly vagrant had crept into the wreckage of the white house in order to pass the night. The dampness, probably, made his old bones ache.

The face continued to look out at me; I walked away with some uneasiness. I shivered, blaming it on the cold mist.

I had gone less than a half block when I saw the woman. Enormously fat, she sat in a wicker chair on the half-

demolished veranda of a two-story house. She wore very thick-lensed glasses which seemed to reflect light from some hidden source. There was no moon, certainly, and I saw no artificial lights nearby.

I was startled, but I supposed that a few people must still be clinging illegally to old homes in the area, pending final arrangements for the occupancy of a new residence.

Some impulse urged me to hurry past, to move straight ahead without looking aside. Stubbornly, however, and against my own best judgement, I refused.

Instead, I paused, cleared my throat and spoke. "Good evening," I said.

The fat woman did not reply; she did not seem to have heard me. Possibly, I reasoned, in addition to having weak eyes, she was also hard of hearing.

I moved a few steps up the front walk and nodded. "Good evening," I repeated, loudly.

Then I blinked in astonishment. The wicker chair was empty! I stopped dead and stared at it. Momentarily I had glanced down at the walk to make sure that I would not stumble over debris; in those scant seconds the fat woman must have vacated her chair and slipped inside.

I marveled. For one of her bulk, she moved with amazing agility. Turning, I went back to the sidewalk and started on. I supposed that the woman was self-conscious about her continued occupancy in the condemned house and had gone inside to avoid any necessity of discussing it with a stranger.

As I walked away, I glanced back. Once again I saw light glitter on those thick-lensed glasses; the fat woman was back in her wicker chair.

Something more than the swirling mist made me shudder. Frowning, I hurried on. It was late, I told myself, and I had better leave these ruined, mist-shrouded streets and go home to a good cup of hot tea.

I walked rapidly, but I could not resist looking at the vacant houses I passed.

Suddenly I stopped. My heart began pounding. An icy gush of fear made my scalp tingle. Wide-eyed, mouth agape, I gazed through that tenuous wall of mist and felt that reason and sanity were leaving me.

Nearly half of those smashed and deserted houses all at once were occupied. I saw pale sad faces peering from a dozen different windows. Dim, mist-circled figures sat on some of the porches. An old man, twisted with some arthritic malady, worked feebly in a tiny front garden. A middle-aged woman, white as death, but with a kind of hopeless fury stamped on her face, stood glaring near a broken gate.

Worse than these were other sights. I saw a rocker moving to-and-fro on a porch, although there was no one in it. I saw a claw-like hand, tapering to a vague sleeve which in turn raveled away to nothingness, clutching the brick side of a building. In the rear garden of a half-destroyed house I glimpsed what appeared to be the disembodied head of a woman in a big straw hat drifting slowly above the matted tangle of a neglected flower plot.

I felt the clutch of near madness. I no longer had any faint desire to linger and look. Flight, immediate and imperative, became my only object.

I rushed wildly through those forsaken, yet-not-forsaken streets with fear like a hound at my heels. I ran till my heart thumped and dizziness overcame me. At last, away from that accursed area of peering white faces, of clinging mist and strange pregnant silence, I collapsed in a doorway.

Hours afterward I reached home and fell into bed. For days I was ill. My heart had been strained anew and in addition I manifested pleuritic symptoms. As I lay in bed, I brooded over my weird experience on that street of silent houses. I told myself that my eyes, inflamed and super-sensitive, had played tricks on me, that the drifting fog plus my own imagination had been at fault.

But weeks later when I related my adventure to my psychic-investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, he shook his head at my explanations.

"I am firmly convinced," he told me, "that neither your inflamed eyes nor your imagination conjured up the phantoms which you describe.

"As I wrote you recently, it is inconceivable to me that any person of reasonable perception and sensitivity could pass a long period of his life in a specific habitation without leaving something of himself, impregnated as it were, in the very stones, wood and mortar of the place.

"What you saw were the psychic residues of the poor vanished souls who, in the aggregate, had spent hundreds of years in those condemned houses. Their psychic remnants were still clinging to the only earthly anchors that remained, and already, as you relate, some of them had dwindled and faded to mere detached fragments."

He shook his head. "Poor souls!"