

The Nameless Offspring

Clark Ashton Smith

Many and multiform are the dim horrors of Earth, infesting her ways from the prime. They sleep beneath the unturned stone; they rise with the tree from its roots; they move beneath the sea and in subterranean places; they dwell in the inmost adyta; they emerge betimes from the shutten sepulcher of haughty bronze and the low grave that is sealed with clay. There be some that are long known to man, and others as yet unknown that abide the terrible latter days of their revealing. Those which are the most dreadful and the loathliest of all are haply still to be declared. But among those that have revealed themselves aforetime and have made manifest their veritable presence, there is one which may not openly be named for its exceeding foulness. It is that spawn which the hidden dweller in the vaults has begotten upon mortality.

From the Necronomicon of Abdul Alhazred

In a sense, it is fortunate that the story I must now relate should be so largely a thing of undetermined shadows, of halfshaped hints and forbidden inferences. Otherwise, it could never be written by human hand or read by human eye. My own slight part in the hideous drama was limited to its last act; and to me its earlier scenes were merely a remote and ghastly legend. Yet, even so, the broken reflex of its unnatural horrors has crowded out in perspective the main events of normal life; has made them seem no more than frail gossamers, woven on the dark, windy verge of some unsealed abyss, some deep, half-open charnel, wherein Earth's nethermost corruptions lurk and fester. The legend of which I speak was familiar to me from childhood, as a theme of family whispers and head shakings, for Sir John Tremoth had been a schoolmate of my father. But I had never met Sir John, had never visited Tremoth Hall, till the time of those happenings which formed the final tragedy. My father had taken me from England to Canada when I was a small infant; he had prospered in Manitoba as an apiarist; and after his death the bee ranch had kept me too busy for years to execute a long-cherished dream of visiting my natal land and exploring its rural by-ways.

When, finally, I set sail, the story was pretty dim in my memory; and Tremoth Hall was no conscious part of my itinerary when I began a motorcycle tour of the English counties. In any case, I should never have been drawn to the neighborhood out of morbid curiosity, such as the frightful tale might possibly have evoked in others. My visit, as it happened, was purely accidental. I had forgotten the exact location of the place, and did not even dream that I was in its vicinity. If I had known, it seems to me that I should have turned aside, in spite of the circumstances that impelled me to seek shelter, rather than intrude upon the almost demoniacal misery of its owner.

When I came to Tremoth Hall, I had ridden all day, in early autumn, through a rolling countryside with leisurely, winding thoroughfares and lanes. The day had been fair, with skies of pale azure above noble parks that were tinged with the first amber and crimson of the following year. But toward the middle of the afternoon, a mist had come in from the hidden ocean across low hills and had closed me about with its moving phantom circle. Somehow, in that deceptive fog, I managed to lose my way, to miss the mile-post that would have given me my direction to the town where I had planned to spend the ensuing night.

I went on for a while, at random, thinking that I should soon reach another crossroad. The way that I followed was little more than a rough lane and was singularly deserted. The fog had darkened and drawn closer, obliterating all horizons; but from what I could see of it, the country was one of heath and boulders, with no sign of cultivation. I topped a level ridge and went down a long, monotonous slope as the mist continued to thicken with twilight. I thought that I was riding toward the west; but before me, in the wan dusk, there was no faintest gleaming or flare of color to betoken the drowned sunset. A dank odor that was touched with salt, like the smell of sea marshes, came to meet me.

The road turned at a sharp angle, and I seemed to be riding between downs and marshland. The night gathered with an almost unnatural quickness, as if in haste to overtake me; and I began to feel a sort of dim concern and alarm, as if I had gone astray in regions that were more dubious than an English county. The fog and twilight seemed to withhold a silent landscape of chill, deathly, disquieting mystery.

Then, to the left of my road and a little before me, I saw a light that somehow suggested a mournful and tear-dimmed eye. It shone among blurred, uncertain masses that were like trees from a ghostland wood. A nearer mass, as I approached it, was resolved into a small lodge-building, such as would guard the entrance of some estate. It was dark and apparently unoccupied. Pausing and peering, I saw the outlines of a wrought-iron gate in a hedge of untrimmed yew.

It all had a desolate and forbidding air; and I felt in my very marrow the brooding chillness that had come in from the unseen marsh in that dismal, ever-coiling fog. But the light was promise of human nearness on the lonely downs; and I might obtain shelter for the night, or at least find someone who could direct me to a town or inn.

Somewhat to my surprise, the gate was unlocked. It swung inward with a rusty grating sound, as if it had not been opened for a long time; and pushing my motorcycle before me, I followed a weed-grown drive toward the light. The rambling mass of a large manor-house disclosed itself, among trees and shrubs whose artificial forms, like the hedge of ragged yew, were assuming a wilder grotesquery than they had received from the hand of the topiary.

The fog had turned into a bleak drizzle. Almost groping in the gloom, I found a dark door, at some distance from the window that gave forth the solitary light. In response to my thrice-repeated knock, I heard at length the muffled sound of slow, dragging footfalls. The door was opened with a gradualness that seemed to indicate caution or reluctance, and I saw before me an old man, bearing a lighted taper in his hand. His fingers trembled with palsy or decrepitude, and monstrous shadows flickered behind him in a dim hallway, and touched his wrinkled features as with the flitting of ominous, batlike wings.

‘What do you wish, sir?’ he asked. The voice, though quavering and hesitant, was far from churlish and did not suggest the attitude of suspicion and downright inhospitality which I had begun to apprehend. However, I sensed a sort of irresolution or dubiety; and as the old man listened to my account of the circumstances that had led me to knock at that lonely door, I saw that he was scrutinizing me with a keenness that belied my first impression of extreme senility.

‘I knew you were a stranger in these parts,’ he commented, when I had finished. ‘But might I inquire your name, sir?’

‘I am Henry Chaldane.’

‘Are you not the son of Mr. Arthur Chaldane?’

Somewhat mystified, I admitted the ascribed paternity.

‘You resemble your father, sir. Mr. Chaldane and Sir John Tremoth were great friends, in the days before your father went to Canada. Will you not come in, sir? This is Tremoth Hall. Sir John has not been in the habit of receiving guests for a long time; but I shall tell him that you are here; and it may be that he will wish to see you.’

Startled, and not altogether agreeably surprised at the discovery of my whereabouts, I followed the old man to a booklined study whose furnishings bore evidence of luxury and neglect. Here he lit an oil lamp of antique fashion, with a dusty, painted shade, and left me alone with the dustier volumes and furniture.

I felt a queer embarrassment, a sense of actual intrusion, as I waited in the wan yellow lamplight. There came back to me the details of the strange, horrific, half-forgotten story I had overheard from my father in childhood years.

Lady Agatha Tremoth, Sir John’s wife, in the first year of their marriage, had become the victim of cataleptic seizures. The third seizure had apparently terminated in death, for she did not revive after the usual interval, and displayed all the familiar marks of the rigor mortis. Lady Agatha’s body was placed in the family vaults, which were of almost fabulous

age and extent, and had been excavated in the hill behind the manor-house. On the day following the interment, Sir John, troubled by a queer, insistent doubt as to the finality of the medical verdict, had reentered the vaults in time to hear a wild cry, and had found Lady Agatha sitting up in her coffin. The nailed lid was lying on the stone floor, and it seemed impossible that it could have been removed by the struggles of the frail woman. However, there was no other plausible explanation, though Lady Agatha herself could throw little light on the circumstances of her strange resurrection.

Half dazed, and almost delirious, in a state of dire terror that was easily understandable, she told an incoherent tale of her experience. She did not seem to remember struggling to free herself from the coffin, but was troubled mainly by recollections of a pale, hideous, unhuman face which she had seen in the gloom on awakening from her prolonged and deathlike sleep. It was the sight of this face, stooping over her as she lay in the open coffin, that had caused her to cry out so wildly. The thing had vanished before Sir John's approach, fleeing swiftly to the inner vaults; and she had formed only a vague idea of its bodily appearance. She thought, however, that it was large and white, and ran like an animal on all fours, though its limbs were semihuman.

Of course, her tale was regarded as a sort of dream, or a figment of delirium induced by the awful shock of her experience, which had blotted out all recollection of its true terror. But the memory of the horrible face and figure had seemed to obsess her permanently, and was plainly fraught with associations of mind-unhinging fear. She did not recover from her illness, but lived on in a shattered condition of brain, and body; and nine months later she died, after giving birth to her first child.

Her death was a merciful thing; for the child, it seemed, was one of those appalling monsters that sometimes appear in human families. The exact nature of its abnormality was not known, though frightful and divergent rumors had purported to emanate from the doctor, nurses and servants who had seen it. Some of the latter had left Tremoth Hall and had refused to return, after a single glimpse of the monstrosity.

After Lady Agatha's death, Sir John had withdrawn from society; and little or nothing was divulged in regard to his doings or the fate of the horrible infant. People said, however, that the child was kept in a locked room with iron-barred windows, which no one but Sir John himself ever entered. The tragedy had blighted his whole life, and he had become a recluse, living alone with one or two faithful servants, and allowing his estate to decline grievously through neglect. Doubtless, I thought, the old man who had admitted me was one of the remaining servitors. I was still reviewing the dreadful legend, still striving to recollect certain particulars that had almost passed from memory, when I heard the sound of footsteps which, from their slowness and feebleness, I took to be those of the returning manservant.

However, I was mistaken; for the person who entered was plainly Sir John Tremoth himself. The tall, slightly bent figure, the face that was lined as if by the trickling of some corrosive acid, were marked with a dignity that seemed to triumph over the double ravages of mortal sorrow and illness. Somehow — though I could have calculated his real age — I had expected an old man; but he was scarcely beyond middle life. His cadaverous pallor and feeble tottering walk were those of a man who is stricken with some fatal malady. His manner, as he addressed me, was impeccably courteous and even gracious. But the voice was that of one to whom the ordinary relations and actions of life had long since become meaningless and perfunctory.

“Harper tells me that you are the son of my old school friend, Arthur Chaldane,” he said. ‘I bid you welcome to such poor hospitality as I am able to offer. I have not received guests for many years, and I fear you will find the Hall pretty dull and dismal and will think me an indifferent host. Nevertheless, you must remain, at least for the night. Harper has gone to prepare dinner for us.’

‘You are very kind,’ I replied. ‘I fear, however, that I am intruding. If — ’

‘Not at all,’ he countered firmly. ‘You must be my guest. It is miles to the nearest inn, and the fog is changing into a heavy rain. Indeed, I am glad to have you. You must tell me all about your father and yourself at dinner. In the meanwhile, I’ll try to find a room for you, if you’ll come with me.’ He led me to the second floor of the manor-house and down a long hall with beams and panels of ancient oak. We passed several doors which were doubtless those of bed-chambers. All were closed, and one of the doors was re-enforced with iron bars, heavy and sinister as those of a dungeon cell. Inevitably I surmised that this was the chamber in which the monstrous child had been confined, and also I wondered if the abnormality still lived, after a lapse of time that must have been nearly thirty years. How abysmal, how abhorrent, must have been its departure from the human type, to necessitate an immediate removal from the sight of others! And what characteristics of its further development could have rendered necessary the massive bars on an oaken door which, by itself, was strong enough to have resisted the assaults of any common man or beast?

Without even glancing at the door, my host went on, carrying a taper that scarcely shook in his feeble fingers. My curious reflections, as I followed him, were interrupted with nerve-shattering suddenness by a loud cry that seemed to issue from the barred room. The sound was a long, ever-mounting ululation, infra-bass at first like the tomb-muffled voice of a demon, and rising through abominable degrees to a shrill, ravenous fury, as if the demon had emerged by a series of underground steps to the open air. It was neither human nor bestial, it was wholly preternatural, hellish, macabre; and I shuddered with an insupportable eeriness, that still persisted when the demon voice, after reaching its culmination, had returned by reverse degrees to a profound sepulchral silence.

Sir John had given no apparent heed to the awful sound, but had gone on with no more than his usual faltering. He had reached the end of the hall, and was pausing before the second chamber from the one with the sealed door.

‘I’ll let you have this room,’ he said. ‘It’s just beyond the one that I occupy.’ He did not turn his face toward me as he spoke; and his voice was unnaturally toneless and restrained. I realized with another shudder that the chamber he had indicated as his own was adjacent to the room from which the frightful ululation had appeared to issue.

The chamber to which he now admitted me had manifestly not been used for years. The air was chill, stagnant, unwholesome, with an all-pervading mustiness; and the antique furniture had gathered the inevitable increment of dust and cobwebs. Sir John began to apologize.

‘I didn’t realize the condition of the room,’ he said. ‘I’ll send Harper after dinner, to do a little dusting and clearing, and put fresh linen on the bed.’

I protested, rather vaguely, that there was no need for him to apologize. The unhuman loneliness and decay of the old manor-house, its lustrums and decades of neglect, and the corresponding desolation of its owner, had impressed me more painfully than ever. And I dared not speculate overmuch concerning the ghastly secret of the barred chamber, and the hellish howling that still echoed in my shaken nerves. Already I regretted the singular fortuity that had drawn me to that place of evil and festering shadows. I felt an urgent desire to leave, to continue my journey even in the face of the bleak autumnal rain and wind-blown darkness. But I could think of no excuse that would be sufficiently tangible and valid. Manifestly, there was nothing to do but remain.

Our dinner was served in a dismal but stately room, by the old man whom Sir John had referred to as Harper. The meal was plain but substantial and well-cooked; and the service was impeccable. I had begun to infer that Harper was the only servant — a combination of valet, butler, housekeeper and chef.

In spite of my hunger, and the pains taken by my host to make me feel at ease, the meal was a solemn and almost funereal ceremony. I could not forget my father’s story; and still less could I forget the sealed door and the baleful ululation. Whatever it was, the monstrosity still lived; and I felt a complex mingling of admiration, pity and horror as I looked at the gaunt and gallant face of Sir John Tremoth, and reflected upon the lifelong hell to which he had been condemned, and the apparent fortitude with which he had borne its unthinkable ordeals. A bottle of excellent sherry was brought in. Over this, we sat for an hour or more. Sir John spoke at some length concerning my father, of whose death he had not previously heard; and he drew me out in regard to my own affairs with the subtle adroitness of a polished man of the world. He said little about himself, and not even by hint or implication

did he refer to the tragic history which I have outlined.

Since I am rather abstemious, and did not empty my glass with much frequency, the major part of the heavy wine was consumed by my host. Toward the end, it seemed to bring out in him a curious vein of confidentiality; and he spoke for the first time of the ill health that was all too patent in his appearance. I learned that he was subject to that most painful form: of heart disease, angina pectoris, and had recently recovered from an attack of unusual severity.

‘The next one will finish me,’ he said. ‘And it may come at any time—perhaps tonight.’ He made the announcement very simply, as if he were voicing a commonplace or venturing a prediction about the weather. Then, after a slight pause, he went on, with more emphasis and weightiness of tone:

‘Maybe you’ll think me queer, but I have a fixed prejudice against burial or vault interment. I want my remains to be thoroughly cremated, and have left careful directions to that end. Harper will see to it that they are fulfilled. Fire is the cleanest and purest of the elements, and it cuts short all the damnable processes between death and ultimate disintegration. I can’t bear the idea of some moldy, worm-infested tomb.’

He continued to discourse on the subject for some time, with a singular elaboration and tenseness of manner that showed it to be a familiar theme of thought, if not an actual obsession. It seemed to possess a morbid fascination for him; and there was a painful light in his hollow, haunted eyes, and a touch of rigidly subdued hysteria in his voice, as he spoke. I remembered the interment of Lady Agatha, and her tragic resurrection, and the dim, delirious horror of the vaults that had formed an inexplicable and vaguely disturbing part of her story. It was not hard to understand Sir John’s aversion to burial; but I was far from suspecting the full terror and ghastliness on which his repugnance had been founded.

Harper had disappeared after bringing the sherry; and I surmised that he had been given orders for the renovation of my room. We had now drained our last glasses; and my host had ended his peroration. The wind, which had animated him briefly, seemed to die out, and he looked more ill and haggard than ever. Pleading my own fatigue, I expressed a wish to retire; and he, with his invariable courtliness, insisted on seeing me to my chamber and making sure of my comfort, before seeking his own bed.

In the hall above, we met Harper, who was just descending from a flight of stairs that must have led to an attic or third floor. He was carrying a heavy iron pan, in which a few scraps of meat remained; and I caught an odor of pronounced gaminess, almost virtual putrescence, from the pan as he went by. I wondered if he had been feeding the unknown monstrosity, and if perhaps its food were supplied to it through a trap in the ceiling of the barred room.

The surmise was reasonable enough, but the odor of the scraps, by a train of remote, half-literary association, had begun to suggest other surmises which, it would seem, were beyond the realm of possibility and reason. Certain evasive, incoherent hints appeared to point themselves suddenly to an atrocious and abhorrent whole. With imperfect success, I assured myself that the thing I had fancied was incredible to science; was a mere creation of superstitious diablerie. No, it could not be... here in England, of all places... that corpse-devouring demon of Oriental tales and legends, ... the ghoul.

Contrary to my fears, there was no repetition of the fiendish howling as we passed the secret room. But I thought that I heard a measured crunching, such as a large animal would make in devouring its food.

My room, though still drear and dismal enough, had been cleared of its accumulated dust and matted gossamers. After a personal inspection, Sir John left me and retired to his own chamber. I was struck by his deathly pallor and weakness, as he said good night to me, and felt guiltily apprehensive that the strain of receiving and entertaining a guest might have aggravated the dire disease from which he suffered. I seemed to detect actual pain and torment beneath his careful armor of urbanity, and wondered if the urbanity had not been maintained at an excessive cost.

The fatigue of my day-long journey, together with the heavy wine I had drunk, should have conduced to early slumber. But though I lay with tightly closed lids in the darkness, I could not dismiss those evil shadows, those black and charnel larvae, that swarmed upon me from the ancient house. Insufferable and forbidden things besieged me with filthy talons, brushed me with noisome coils, as I tossed through eternal hours and lay staring at the gray square of the storm-darkened window. The dripping of the rain, the sough and moan of the wind, resolved themselves to a dread mutter of half-articulate voices that plotted against my peace and whispered loathfully of nameless secrets in demonian language.

At length, after the seeming lapse of nocturnal centuries, the tempest died away, and I no longer heard the equivocal voices. The window lightened a little in the black wall; and the terrors of my night-long insomnia seemed to withdraw partially, but without bringing the surcease of slumber. I became aware of utter silence; and then, in the silence, of a queer, faint, disquieting sound whose cause and location baffled me for many minutes.

The sound was muffled and far off at times; then it seemed to draw near, as if it were in the next room. I began to identify it as a sort of scratching, such as would be made by the claws of an animal on solid woodwork. Sitting up in bed, and listening attentively, I realized with a fresh start of horror that it came from the direction of the barred chamber. It took on a strange resonance; then it became almost inaudible; and suddenly, for awhile, it ceased. In the interim, I heard a groan, like that of a man in great agony or terror. I could not mistake the source of the groan, which had issued from Sir John Tremoth's room; nor was I doubtful

any longer as to the causation of the scratching.

The groan was not repeated; but the damnable clawing sound began again and was continued till day-break. Then, as if the creature that had caused the noise were wholly nocturnal in its habits, the faint, vibrant rasping ceased and was not resumed. In a state of dull, nightmarish apprehension, drugged with weariness and want of sleep, I had listened to it with intolerably straining ears. With its cessation, in the hueless, livid dawn, I slid into a deep slumber, from which the muffled and amorphous specters of the old Hall were unable to detain me any longer.

I was awakened by a loud knocking on my door — a knocking in which even my sleep-confused senses could recognize the imperative and urgent. It must have been close upon midday; and feeling guilty at having overslept so egregiously, I ran to the door and opened it. The old manservant, Harper, was standing without, and his tremulous, grief-broken manner told me before he spoke that something of dire import had occurred.

‘I regret to tell you, Mr. Chaldane,’ he quavered, ‘that Sir John is dead. He did not answer my knock as usual; so I made bold to enter his room. He must have died early this morning.’

Inexpressibly shocked by his announcement, I recalled the single groan I had heard in the gray beginning of dawn. My host, perhaps, had been dying at that very moment. I recalled, too, the detestable nightmare scratching. Unavoidably, I wondered if the groan had been occasioned by fear as well as by physical pain. Had the strain and suspense of listening to that hideous sound brought on the final paroxysm of Sir John’s malady? I could not be sure of the truth; but my brain seethed with awful and ghastly conjectures.

With the futile formalities that one employs on such occasions, I tried to condole with the aged servant, and offered him such assistance as I could in making the necessary arrangements for the disposition of his master’s remains. Since there was no telephone in the house, I volunteered to find a doctor who would examine the body and sign the death certificate. The old man seemed to feel a singular relief and gratitude.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said fervently. Then, as if in explanation: ‘I don’t want to leave Sir John — I promised him that I’d keep a close watch over his body.’ He went on to speak of Sir John’s desire for cremation. It seemed that the baronet had left explicit directions for the building of a pyre of driftwood on the hill behind the Hall, the burning of his remains on this pyre, and the sowing of his ashes on the fields of the estate. These directions he had enjoined and empowered the servant to carry out as soon after death as possible. No one was to be present at the ceremony, except Harper and the hired pall bearers; and Sir John’s nearer relatives—none of whom lived in the vicinity—were not to be informed of his demise till all was over.

I refused Harper's offer to prepare my breakfast, telling him that I could obtain a meal in the neighboring village. There was a strange uneasiness in his manner; and I realized, with thoughts and emotions not to be specified in this narrative, that he was anxious to begin his promised vigil beside Sir John's corpse.

It would be tedious and unnecessary to detail the funereal afternoon that followed. The heavy sea fog had returned; and I seemed to grope my way through a sodden but unreal world as I sought the nearby town. I succeeded in locating a doctor and also in securing several men to build the pyre and act as pall bearers. I was met everywhere with an odd taciturnity, and no one seemed willing to comment on Sir John's death or to speak of the dark legendry that was attached to Tremoth Hall.

Harper, to my amazement, had proposed that the cremation should take place at once. This, however, proved to be impracticable. When all the formalities and arrangements had been completed, the fog turned into a steady, everlasting downpour which rendered impossible the lighting of the pyre; and we were compelled to defer the ceremony. I had promised Harper that I should remain at the Hall till all was done; and so it was that I spent a second night beneath that roof of accursed and abominable secrets.

The darkness came on betimes. After a last visit to the village, in which I procured some sandwiches for Harper and myself in lieu of dinner, I returned to the lonely Hall. I was met by Harper on the stairs, as I ascended to the deathchamber. There was an increased agitation in his manner, as if something had happened to frighten him.

'I wonder if you'd keep me company tonight, Mr. Chaldane,' he said. 'It's a gruesome watch that I'm asking you to share, and it may be a dangerous one. But Sir John would thank you, I am sure. If you have a weapon of any sort, it will be well to bring it with you.'

It was impossible to refuse his request, and I assented at once. I was unarmed; so Harper insisted on equipping me with an antique revolver, of which he himself carried the mate.

'Look here, Harper,' I said bluntly, as we followed the hall to Sir John's chamber, 'what are you afraid of?'

He flinched visibly at the question and seemed unwilling to answer. Then, after a moment, he appeared to realize that frankness was necessary.

'It's the thing in the barred room,' he explained. 'You must have heard it, sir. We've had the care of it, Sir John and I, these eight and twenty years; and we've always feared that it might break out. It never gave us much trouble — as long as we kept it well-fed. But for the last three nights, it has been scratching at the thick oaken wall of Sir John's chamber, which is

something it never did before. Sir John thought it knew that he was going to die, and that it wanted to reach his body — being hungry for other food than we had given it. That's why we must guard him closely tonight, Mr. Chaldane. I pray to God that the wall will hold; but the thing keeps on clawing and clawing, like a demon; and I don't like the hollowness of the sound — as if the wall were getting pretty thin.'

Appalled by this confirmation of my own most repugnant surmise, I could offer no rejoinder, since all comment would have been futile. With Harper's open avowal, the abnormality took on a darker and more encroaching shadow, a more potent and tyrannic menace. Willingly would I have foregone the promised vigil — but this, of course, it was impossible to do.

The bestial, diabolic scratching, louder and more frantic than before, assailed my ears as we passed the barred room. All too readily, I understood the nameless fear that had impelled the old man to request my company. The sound was inexpressibly alarming and nerve-sapping, with its grim, macabre insistence, its intimation of ghoulish hunger. It became even plainer, with a hideous, tearing vibrancy, when we entered the room of death.

During the whole course of that funereal day, I had refrained from visiting this chamber, since I am lacking in the morbid curiosity which impels many to gaze upon the dead. So it was that I beheld my host for the second and last time. Fully dressed and prepared for the pyre, he lay on the chill white bed whose heavily figured, arraslike curtains had been drawn back. The room was lit by several tall tapers, arranged on a little table in curious brazen candelabras that were greened with antiquity; but the light seemed to afford only a doubtful, dolorous glimmering in the drear spaciousness and mortuary shadows.

Somewhat against my will, I gazed on the dead features, and averted my eyes very hastily. I was prepared for the stony pallor and rigor, but not for the full betrayal of that hideous revulsion, that inhuman terror and horror, which must have corroded the man's heart through infernal years; and which, with almost superhuman control, he had masked from the casual beholder in life. The revelation was too painful, and I could not look at him again. In a sense, it seemed that he was not dead; that he was still listening with agonized attention to the dreadful sounds that might well have served to precipitate the final attack of his malady.

There were several chairs, dating, I think, like the bed itself, from the seventeenth century. Harper and I seated ourselves near the small table and between the deathbed and the paneled wall of blackish wood from which the ceaseless clawing sound appeared to issue. In tacit silence, with drawn and cocked revolvers, we began our ghastly vigil.

As we sat and waited, I was driven to picture the unnamed monstrosity; and formless or half-formed images of charnel nightmare pursued each other in chaotic succession through

my mind. An atrocious curiosity, to which I should normally have been a stranger, prompted me to question Harper; but I was restrained by an even more powerful inhibition. On his part, the old man volunteered no information or comment whatever, but watched the wall with fear-bright eyes that did not seem to waver in his palsy-nodding head.

It would be impossible to convey the unnatural tension, the macabre suspense and baleful expectation of the hours that followed. The woodwork must have been of great thickness and hardness, such as would have defied the assaults of any normal creature equipped only with talons or teeth; but in spite of such obvious arguments as these, I thought momentarily to see it crumble inward. The scratching noise went on eternally; and to my febrile fancy, it grew sharper and nearer every instant. At recurrent intervals, I seemed to hear a low, eager, dog-like whining, such as a ravenous animal would make when it neared the goal of its burrowing.

Neither of us had spoken of what we should do, in case the monster should attain its objective; but there seemed to be an unvoiced agreement. However, with a superstitiousness of which I should not have believed myself capable, I began to wonder if the monster possessed enough of humanity in its composition to be vulnerable to mere revolver bullets. To what extent would it display the traits of its unknown and fabulous paternity? I tried to convince myself that such questions and wonderings were patently absurd; but was drawn to them again and again, as if by the allurements of some forbidden gulf.

The night wore on, like the flowing of a dark, sluggish stream; and the tall, funeral tapers had burned to within an inch of their verdigris-eaten sockets. It was this circumstance alone that gave me an idea of the passage of time; for I seemed to be drowning in a black eternity, motionless beneath the crawling and seething of blind horrors. I had grown so accustomed to the clawing noise in the woodwork, and the sound had gone on so long, that I deemed its evergrowing sharpness and hollowness a mere hallucination; and so it was that the end of our vigil came without apparent warning.

Suddenly, as I stared at the wall and listened with frozen fixity, I heard a harsh, splintering sound, and saw that a narrow strip had broken loose and was hanging from the panel. Then, before I could collect myself or credit the awful witness of my senses, a large semicircular portion of the wall collapsed in many splinters beneath the impact of some ponderous body.

Mercifully, perhaps, I have never been able to recall with any degree of distinctness the hellish thing that issued from the panel. The visual shock, by its own excess of horror, has almost blotted the details from memory. I have, however, the blurred impression of a huge, whitish, hairless and semi-quadruped body, of canine teeth in a half-human face, and long hyena nails at the end of forelimbs that were both arms and legs. A charnel stench preceded

the apparition, like a breath from the den of some carrion-eating animal; and then, with a single nightmare leap, the thing was upon us.

I heard the staccato crack of Harper's revolver, sharp and vengeful in the closed room; but there was only a rusty click from my own weapon. Perhaps the cartridge was too old; any rate, it had misfired. Before I could press the trigger again, I was hurled to the floor with terrific violence, striking my head against the heavy base of the little table. A black curtain, spangled with countless fires, appeared to fall upon me and to blot the room from sight. Then all the fires went out, and there was only darkness.

Again, slowly, I became conscious of flame and shadow; but the flame was bright and quivering, and seemed to grow ever more brilliant. Then my dull, doubtful senses were sharply revived and clarified by the acrid odor of burning cloth. The features of the room returned to vision, and I found that I was lying huddled against the overthrown table, gazing toward the death-bed. The guttering candles had been hurled to the floor. One of them was eating a slow circle of fire in the carpet beside me; and another, spreading, had ignited the bed curtains, which were flaring swiftly upward to the great canopy. Even as I lay staring, huge, ruddy tatters of the burning fabric fell upon the bed in a dozen places, and the body of Sir John Tremoth was ringed about with starting flames.

I staggered heavily to my feet, dazed and giddy with the fall that had hurled me into oblivion. The room was empty, except for the old manservant, who lay near the door, moaning indistinctly. The door itself stood open, as if someone — or something had gone out during my period of unconsciousness. I turned again to the bed, with some instinctive, half-formed intention of trying to extinguish the blaze. The flames were spreading rapidly, were leaping higher, but they were not swift enough to veil from my sickened eyes the hands and features — if one could any longer call them such — of that which had been Sir John Tremoth. Of the last horror that had overtaken him, I must forbear explicit mention; and I would that I could likewise avoid the remembrance. All too tardily had the monster been frightened away by the fire...

There is little more to tell. Looking back once more, as I reeled from the smoke-laden room with Harper in my arms, I saw that the bed and its canopy had become a mass of mounting flames. The unhappy baronet had found in his own deathchamber the funeral pyre for which he had longed.

It was nearly dawn when we emerged from the doomed manor-house. The rain had ceased, leaving a heaven lined with high and dead-gray clouds. The chill air appeared to revive the aged manservant, and he stood feebly beside me, uttering not a word, as we watched an ever-climbing spire of flame that broke from the somber-roof of Tremoth Hall and began to cast a sullen glare on the unkempt hedges.

In the combined light of the fireless dawn and the lurid conflagration, we both saw at our feet the semihuman, monstrous footprints, with their mark of long and canine nails, that had been trodden freshly and deeply in the rain-wet soil. They came from the direction of the manor-house, and ran toward the heath-clad hill that rose behind it.

Still without speaking, we followed the steps. Almost without interruption, they led to the entrance of the ancient family vaults, to the heavy iron door in the hillside that had been closed for a full generation by Sir John Tremoth's order. The door itself swung open, and we saw that its rusty chain and lock had been shattered by a strength that was more than the strength of man or beast. Then, peering within, we saw the clay-touched outline of the unreturning footprints that went downward into mausolean darkness on the stairs.

We were both weaponless, having left our revolvers behind us in the death-chamber; but we did not hesitate long. Harper possessed a liberal supply of matches; and looking about, I found a heavy billet of water-soaked wood, which might serve in lieu of a cudgel. In grim silence, with tacit determination, and forgetful of any danger, we conducted a thorough search of the well-nigh interminable vaults, striking match after match as we went on in the musty shadows.

The traces of ghoulish footsteps grew fainter as we followed them into those black recesses; and we found nothing anywhere but noisome dampness and undisturbed cobwebs and the countless coffins of the dead. The thing that we sought had vanished utterly, as if swallowed up by the subterranean walls.

At last we returned to the entrance. There, as we stood blinking in the full daylight, with gray and haggard faces, Harper spoke for the first time, saying in his slow, tremulous voice:

'Many years ago — soon after Lady Agatha's death — Sir John and I searched the vaults from end to end; but we could find no trace of the thing we suspected. Now, as then, it is useless to seek. There are mysteries which, God helping, will never be fathomed. We know only that the offspring of the vaults has gone back to the vaults. There may it remain.'

Silently, in my shaken heart, I echoed his last words and his wish.

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