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# USURP THE NIGHT

by Robert E. Howard

Marjory was crying over the loss of Bozo, her fat Maltese who had failed to appear after his usual nightly prowls. There had been a peculiar epidemic of feline disappearances in the neighborhood recently, and Marjory was disconsolate. And because I never could stand to see Marjory cry, I sallied forth in search of the missing pet, though I had little hope of finding him. Every so often some human pervert gratifies his sadistic mania by poisoning animals of which people are fond, and I was certain that Bozo and the score of more of his kind which had vanished in the past few months had fallen victims to some such degenerate.

Leaving the lawn of the Ash home, I crossed several vacant weed-grown lots and came to the last house on that side of the street - a run-down, rambling estate which had recently been occupied - though not rejuvenated - by a Mr. Stark, a lonely, retiring sort of a man from the East. Glancing at the rambling old house, rising among the great oak trees and set back a hundred yards or so from the street, it occurred to me that Mr. Stark might possibly be able to cast some light on the present mystery.

I turned into the sagging, rusty iron gate and went up the cracked walk, noting the general delapidation of the place. Little was known about the owner, and though he had been a neighbor of mine for some six months, I had never seen him at close range. It was rumored that he lived alone, even without servants, though he was a cripple. An eccentric scholar of taciturn nature and with money to indulge his whims, was the general opinion.

The wide porch, half covered with ivy, crossed the whole front of the house and flanked both sides. As I prepared to lift the old-fashioned door knocker, I heard a limping, dragging step and turned to face the owner of the house who came hobbling about the corner of the porch. He was a striking figure, despite his deformity. His face was that of an ascetic and a thinker, with a high magnificent forehead, heavy black brows that almost met, and shaded deep dark eyes, piercing and magnetic. His nose was thin and high-bridged, hooked like the beak of some bird of prey, his lips were thin and firmly set, his jaw massive and jutting, almost brutal in its lines of uncompromising resolution. He was

not a tall man, even had he stood erect, but his thick short neck and massive shoulders promised power denied by his posture. For he moved slowly and with apparent difficulty, leaning on a crutch, and I saw that one leg was drawn up in an abnormal way, and on the foot he wore a shoe such as is worn on a club-foot.

He looked at me inquiringly and I said, "Good morning, Mr. Stark, sorry to have troubled you. I'm Michael Strang. I live in the last house on the other side of the street. I just dropped in to learn if you'd seen anything of a big Maltese cat recently.

His eyes bored into me.

"What makes you think I might know anything about a cat?" he asked in a deep-timbred voice.

"Nothing," I confessed, feeling rather foolish. "It's my fiance's cat, though, and she's broken-hearted over losing it. As you're her closest neighbor on this side, I thought there was a bare chance that you might have seen the animal."

"I understand," he smiled pleasantly. "No, I'm very sorry I can't help you. I heard some cats caterwauling among my trees last night - in fact, I heard them too distinctly, for I had one of my spells of insomnia - but I've seen nothing of the cat you mention. I am sorry to hear of its loss. Won't you come in?"

Rather curious to know more of my neighbor, I accepted his invitation and he showed me into a study redolent of tobacco and book leather. I glanced curiously at the volumes which lined the walls to the ceiling, but had no opportunity to examine their titles, as my host proved surprisingly talkative. He seemed glad of my call and I knew that his visitors were very rare, if any at all. I found him a highly cultured man, a charming conversationalist, and a most courteous host. He produced whiskey-and-soda from an antique lacquered cabinet whose door seemed to consist of a highly-polished, solid silver plate, and as we sipped our drinks he talked of various subjects in a most interesting manner. Learning from a chance remark that I was deeply interested in the anthropological researches of Professor Hendryk Brooler, he discussed the subject at some length and clarified several points on which I was extremely hazy.

Fascinated by the man's evident erudition, it was nearly an hour before I could tear myself away, though I felt exceedingly guilty when I thought of poor Marjory waiting for news of the missing Bozo. I took my departure, promising to return soon, and as I went out the front door, it occurred to me that, after all, I had learned nothing about my host. He

had carefully kept the conversation in impersonal channels. I also decided that though he knew nothing about Bozo, the presence of a cat in the house might be an advantage. Several times as we talked, I had heard the scampering of something overhead, though on second thought the noise had not particularly resembled the movements of rodents. It had sounded more like a tiny kid or lamb, or some other small hoofed animal, walking across the floor.

A thorough search of the neighborhood revealing no trace of the missing Bozo, I reluctantly returned to Marjory, bearing, as a partial consolation, a waddling, bench-legged bulldog with a face like a gargoyle and as loyal a heart as ever beat in a canine breast. Marjory wept over the lost cat and christened her new vassal Bozo in memory of the departed, and I left her romping with him on the lawn as if she had been ten instead of twenty.

The memory of my conversation with Mr. Stark remained very vivid in my mind and I visited him again next week. Again I was impressed at the deep and varied knowledge which was his. I purposely led the conversation into many different channels, and in each he showed himself master of the subject, going a little deeper into each than I had ever heard anyone go. Science, the arts, economics, philosophy, he was equally versed in all of them. Charmed as I was by his flow of conversation, I nevertheless found myself listening for the curious noise I had heard before, and I was not disappointed. Only this time the tapping sound was louder than before and I decided that his unknown pet was growing. Perhaps, I thought, he kept it in the house fearing it would meet the same fate as the vanished cats, and as I knew the house had no basement or cellar, it was natural that he would keep it in some attic room. A lonely and friendless man, it was probable that he felt a great deal of affection for it, whatever it might be.

We talked late into the night, and indeed, it was nearing dawn before I forced myself to take my leave. As before, he urged me to repeat the visit soon. He apologized for his inability to return my call, as he said his infirmity prevented his doing more than limp about his estate for a little exercise early in the morning before the heat of the day set in.

I promised to call again soon, but in spite of my desire to do so, business prevented me for some weeks, during which time I became aware of one of those minor neighborhood mysteries which occasionally spring up in some restricted locality, usually to die

away unsolved. Dogs, hitherto unmolested by the unknown destroyer of the cats, now began to vanish likewise and their owners were in constant fury.

Marjory picked me up in her little roadster as I was walking up from town, and I knew something had occurred to upset her. Bozo, her constant companion, grinned dragonishly at me and jovially lapped my face with a long wet tongue.

"Somebody tried to kidnap Bozo last night, Michael," she said, her deep dark eyes shadowed with worry and indignation. "I just bet it was the horrid beast who's been doing away with peoples' pets - "

She gave me the details and it appeared that the mysterious prowler had found Bozo too much of a handful. The family had heard a sudden uproar late in the night, and the sound of a savage struggle, mingled with the maddened roaring of the big dog. The sallied forth and arrived at Bozo's kennel, just too late to apprehend the visitor whose sounds of flight they distinctly heard. The dog was straining his chain, his eyes blazing, every hair on his body standing on end, and his deep throat thundering his defiance. But of the attacker there was no trace; he had evidently broken away and escaped over the high garden wall.

I think the incident must have made Bozo suspicious toward strangers, for it was only the next morning that I was called on to rescue Mr. Stark from him.

As I have said, the Stark house was the last one on his side of the street, and mine was the last on my side. It was, in fact, the last house on the street, lying some three hundred yards from the lower corner of Stark's wide, tree-covered lawn. On the other corner that faced the street - the corner toward the Ash home - there stood a grove of small trees in one of the vacant lots which separated the Stark estate from the Ash place. As I was passing this grove on my way to the Ash home, I heard a sudden outcry - a man's voice shouting for help and the infuriated snarling of a dog.

Plunging through the clump I saw a huge dog leaping repeatedly up at a figure which clung to the lower branches of one of the trees. The dog was Bozo and the man was Mr. Stark, who, in spite of his crippled condition, had managed to scramble up into the tree just out of reach. Horrified and astounded, I sprang to the rescue and hauled Bozo away from his intended victim with some difficulty and sent him sulkily homeward. I sprang to assist Mr. Stark out of the tree, and hardly had he touched the earth when he collapsed completely.

However, I could find no sign of injury on him, and he breathlessly assured me - between

gasps - that he was quite all right except for the shock of fright and exhaustion. He said that he was resting in the shade of the grove, having tired himself by too long a walk about his estate, when the dog suddenly appeared and attacked him. I apologized profusely for Bozo, assured him it would not happen again, and helped him to his study where he reclined on a divan and sipped a whiskey-and-soda which I prepared for him from ingredients found in the lacquered cabinet. He was very reasonable about the matter, assured me that no harm had been done, and attributed the attack to the fact that he was a stranger to the dog.

Suddenly, as he talked, I again heard the tap-tap of hoofs upstairs, and I was startled; the sound was so much heavier than before, though somewhat muffled. It was such a sound as a yearling might make walking about over a rug-covered floor. My curiosity was so much aroused I could hardly keep from inquiring as to the source of the noise, but naturally refrained from such presumption, and feeling that Mr. Stark needed rest and quiet, I left as soon as he was comfortable.

It was about a week later that the first of the blood-chilling mysteries took place. Again it was an unexplained disappearance, but this time it was no cat or dog. It was a three-year-old tot who was seen playing in a lot near its own yard just before sun-down, and was seen no more by mortal eyes. No need to say that the town was up in alarm. Some people had thought to see a malevolent meaning behind the disappearance of the animals, and now this pointed indisputably to some sinister hand working out of sight.

The police scoured town and country, but no trace of the missing child was found, and before the fortnight was over, four more had vanished in various parts of the city. Their families received no letters demanding ransom, no sign of any hidden enemy taking this revenge. The silence simply yawned and swallowed the victims and remained unbroken. Frantic people appealed to the civil authorities in vain, since they had done all they could and were as helpless as the public.

There was talk of asking the governor to send soldiers to patrol the city, and men began to go armed and to hasten back to their families long before nightfall. Dark whispers of supernatural agencies began to make the rounds, and folk said forebodingly that no mortal man could so snatch away children and remain unsuspected and unknown. But there was no insurmountable mystery in their abducting. It was impossible to patrol every inch of a large city and to keep an eye always on every child. They played

in the lonely parks and stayed out until after dusk at work or play, despite warnings and commands, and ran home through the gathering darkness. It was no supernatural thing for the unknown kidnapper, skulking in the shadows, to reach an arm from among the trees or bushes of park or playground and snatch a child strayed from its playmates. Even on lonely streets and dim back-alleys the thing could be done. The horror lay, not so much in the method of stealing, but in the fact that they were stolen. No sane or normal motive seemed to lie behind it all. An aura of fear hung like a pall over the city, and through this pall shot an icy wave of shuddering horror.

In one of the more secluded parks near the outskirts of the city, a young couple, indulging in what is popularly known as a "petting party," were frozen by a terrible scream from a black clump of trees, and not daring to move, saw a stooped and shadowy figure emerge, bearing on its back the unmistakable body of a man. The horror vanished among the trees, and the couple, frenzied with terror, started their auto and raced wildly for the lights of town. They tremblingly gasped out their story to the chief of police and in a short time a cordon of patrolmen had been thrown about the park. But it was too late; the unknown murderer had made good his - or its - escape. In the grove from which the slayer had been seen to emerge, was found a disreputable old hat, crumpled and blood-stained, and one of the officers recognized it as one which had been worn by a vagabond picked up by him the day before and subsequently released. The wretch must have been sleeping in the park when doom fell upon him.

But no other clue was found. The hard springy soil and thick grass gave up no footprint, and the mystery was as much a mystery as ever. And now the fear that hung over the whole city grew almost unbearable in its intensity. I often thought of Mr. Stark, living alone and crippled in that sombre old house, practically isolated, and often feared for him. I made it a point to drop by his place almost every day to assure myself that he was safe. These visits were very brief. Mr. Stark seemed preoccupied, and though he was affable enough, I felt it better not to intrude myself upon him. I did not, indeed, enter his house at all during this period, as I invariably found him hobbling about the lawn or reclining in a hammock between two great oak trees. Either his infirmity was troubling him more than usual, or the horrid mystery which hung over the town had affected him likewise. He seemed tired most of the time, and his eyes were deeply shadowed as if from mental stress or physical weariness.

A few days after the disappearance of the tramp, the city authorities warned all citizens to be on their guard, as, calculating from past events, it was feared that the unknown killer would strike again soon, possibly that night. The police force had been increased to nearly twice its regular number, and a score of citizens were sworn in as special deputies. Grim-faced men patrolled the streets heavily armed, and as night fell, a suffocating tension settled over the whole city.

It was shortly after dark when my telephone rang. It was Stark.

"I wonder if you'd mind coming over," he said, and his voice sounded rather apologetic. "My cabinet door is jammed and I can't get it open. I wouldn't have bothered you, but it's too late to get a workman here to open it - all the shops are closed. My sleeping powders are in the cabinet, and if I can't get them, I'll spend a wretched night; I feel all the symptoms of an attack of insomnia."

"I'll be right over," I promised.

A brisk walk took me to his door, where he let me in with much apologies.

"I'm frightfully sorry to have caused you all this trouble," he said, "but I haven't the physical strength to pry the door open, and without my sleeping powders, I'd toss and tumble the whole night through."

There was no electric wiring in his house, but several large candles on the table shed sufficient light. I bent before the lacquered cabinet and began to wrestle with the door. I have mentioned the silver plate of which the door appeared to be made. As I worked my gaze fell on this plate which was so highly polished it reflected objects like a mirror. And suddenly my blood chilled. Over my shoulder I saw the reflected countenance of John Stark, unfamiliar and hideously distorted. He held a mallet in his hand which he lifted as he stealthily approached me. I rose suddenly, wheeling to face him. His face was as inscrutable as ever, except for an expression of faint surprise at my abruptness. He extended the mallet.

"Perhaps you might use this," he suggested.

I took it without a word, still keeping my eyes on him, and striking one terrific blow, literally burst the cabinet door open. His eyes widened in surprise, and for a moment we faced each other unspeaking. There was an electric tenseness in the air, then above my head I heard again the clumping of hoofs. And a strange chill, like a nameless fright, stole over me - for I could have sworn that it was nothing smaller than a horse which tramped about in the rooms overhead!

Throwing the mallet aside, I turned without a word and hastened out of the house, nor did

I breathe entirely easy until I had gained my own library. There I sat pondering, my mind a chaotic jumble. Had I made a fool of myself? Had not that look of fiendish craft on John Stark's face as he stole up behind me been merely a distortion of reflection? Had my imagination run away with me? Or - and here dark fears whispered at the back of my brain - had the reflection in that silver plate been all that saved my life? Was John Stark a madman? I shook with a ghastly thought. Was it he who was responsible for the recent detestable crimes? The theory was untenable. What possible reason could a refined, elderly scholar have in abducting children and murdering tramps? Again my fears whispered that there might be a motive - whispered shuddersomely of a ghastly laboratory where a crazed scientist carried out horrible experiments with human specimens.

Then I laughed at myself. Even supposing John Stark to be a madman, the recent crimes were physically beyond his power. Only a man of almost superhuman strength and agility could carry off strong young children soundlessly and bear the corpse of a murdered man on his shoulders. Certainly no cripple could do it, and it was up to me to go back to Mr. Stark's house and apologize for my foolish actions - and then a sudden thought struck me like a dash of ice-cold water - something which at the time had impressed itself on my subconscious mind, but which I had not consciously noticed - when I had turned to face John Stark before the lacquered cabinet, he had been standing upright, without his crutch.

With a bewildered shake of my head, I dismissed the matter from my mind and, picking up a book, settled myself to read. The volume, selected at random, was not one calculated to rid my mind of haunting shadows. It was the extremely rare Dusseldorf edition of Von Junzt's *Nameless Cults*, called the Black Book, not because of its iron-clasped leather bindings, but because of its dark contents. Opening the volume at random, I began idly to read the chapter on the summoning of daemons out of the Void. More than ever I sensed a deep and sinister wisdom behind the author's incredible assertions as I read of the unseen worlds of unholy dimensions which Von Junzt maintains press, horrific and dimly guessed, on our universe, and of the blasphemous inhabitants of those Outer Worlds, which he maintains at times burst terribly through the Veil at the bidding of evil sorcerers, to blast the brains and feast on the blood of men.

Reading, I drowsed, and from my doze awoke with a cold fear lying upon my soul like a cloud. I had dreamed fitfully and in my dream I had heard Marjory calling to me faintly, as

if from across misty and terrible abysses, and in her voice was a blood-freezing fear as if she were menaced by some horror beyond all human understanding. I found myself shaking as with ague and cold sweat stood upon my body as in a nightmare.

Taking up the telephone, I called up the Ash home. Mrs. Ash answered and I asked to speak to Marjory.

Her voice came back over the wire tinged with anxiety, "Why, Michael, Marjory has been gone for more than an hour! I heard her talking over the phone, and then she told me you wanted her to meet you by the grove on the corner of the Stark place, to take a ride. I thought it was funny that you didn't drive by the house as you always do, and I didn't like the idea of her going out alone, but I supposed you knew best - you know we always put so much faith in you, Michael - so I let her go. You don't think - you don't think - anything - anything -"

"Oh no!" I laughed, but my laughter was hollow, my throat dry. "Nothing's happened, Mrs. Ash. I'll bring her home, right away."

As I hung up the receiver and turned away, I heard a sound outside the door - a scratching sound accompanied by a low whimper. Such a small thing can be vested with unknown fear at times - my hair prickled and my tongue clove to my palate. Expecting to see I knew not what, I flung open the door. A cry broke from my lips as a dusty, blood-stained shape limped in and staggered against my legs. It was Marjory's dog, Bozo. He had evidently been brutally beaten. One ear was split open and his hide had been bruised and torn in half a dozen places.

He seized my trouser leg and pulled me toward the door, growling deep in his throat. My mind a seething hell, I prepared to follow him. The thought of a weapon entered my mind, and at the same instant I remembered I had loaned my revolver to a friend who feared to traverse the streets at night unarmed. My gaze fell upon a great broadsword hanging on the wall. The weapon had been in the family for eight centuries and had let blood on many a battlefield since it first hung at the girdle of a Crusading ancestor.

I tore it from the scabbard where it had rested undisturbed for a hundred years and the cold blue steel glimmered unstained in the light. Then I followed the growling dog into the night. He ran staggeringly but swiftly, and I was hard put to keep up with him. He went in the direction my inmost intuition had told me he would go - toward the house of John Stark.

We approached the corner of the Stark estate and I caught Bozo's collar and drew

him back, as he started across the crumbling wall. I knew enough. John Stark was the fiend incarnate who had laid the cloud of terror over the city. I recognized the technique - a telephone call which lured the victim forth. I had walked into his trap, but chance had intervened. So he had chosen the girl - it would not be difficult to imitate my voice. Homicidal maniac or crazy experimenter, whatever he might be, I knew that somewhere in that dark house Marjory lay, a captive or a corpse. And I did not intend that Stark should have the opportunity to shoot me down as I walked in upon him openly. A black fury gripped me, bringing with it the craft that extreme passion often brings. I was going into that dark house, and I was going to hew John Stark's head from his body with the blade that in old times had severed the necks of Saracens and pirates and traitors.

Ordering Bozo to keep behind me, I turned from the street and went swiftly and cautiously along the side wall until I was even with the back part of the house. A glow above the trees to the east warned me that the moon was coming up, and I wished to get into the house before the light might betray me to any watcher. I climbed the tumble-down wall, and with Bozo following me like a shadow, I crossed the lawn, keeping close under the shadows of the trees.

Silence gripped the dark house as I stole up upon the rear porch, my blade ready. Bozo sniffed at the door and whined deep in his throat. I crouched, waiting for anything. I knew not what peril lurked in that mysterious unlighted building, or whether I was daring one lone madman or a gang of murderers. I lay no claim to courage, but the black rage in my brain swept all thought of personal fear away. I tried the door cautiously. I was not very familiar with the house, but believed the door led into a store-room. It was locked on the inside. I drove my sword-point between the door and the jamb and pried, carefully but powerfully. There was no such thing as breaking the ancient blade, forged with forgotten craft, and as I exerted all my strength, which is not inconsiderable, something had to give. It was the old-fashioned lock. With a groan and crash that seemed horribly loud in the stillness, the door sagged open.

I strained my eyes into the utter blackness as I stole forward. Bozo passed me silently and vanished in the gloom. Utter silence reigned, then the clink of a chain sent a chill of nameless fear through me. I swung about, hair bristling, sword lifted - and then I heard the muffled sound of a woman sobbing.

I dared to strike a match. Its flare showed me the great dusty room, piled high with non-descript junk - and showed me a pitiful girlish

form crumpled in a corner. It was Marjory and Bozo was whining and licking her face. Stark was nowhere to be seen, and the one other door leading from the store-room was closed. I stepped to it quickly and slid the old-fashioned bolt. Then I lighted a stump of a candle which I found upon a table, and went quickly to Marjory. Stark might come in upon us unexpectedly through the outer door, but I trusted to Bozo to warn me of his coming. The dog showed no signs of nervousness or anger to indicate the near presence of a lurking enemy, but now and then he looked up toward the ceiling and growled deep and ominously.

Marjory was gagged and her hands tied behind her. A small chain about her slim waist shackled her to a heavy staple in the wall, but the key was in the lock. I freed her in an instant and she threw her arms convulsively about me, shaking as with an ague. Her wide dark eyes stared unseeingly into mine with a horror that shook my soul and froze my blood with a nameless grisly premonition.

"Marjory!" I panted, "What in God's name has happened? Don't be afraid. Nothing shall harm you. Don't look like that! In Heaven's name, girl -"

"Listen!" she whispered shuddering. "The tramp - the terrible tramp of the hoofs!"

My head jerked up, and Bozo, every bristle on end, cringed, sheer terror blazing in his eyes. Above our heads sounded the clomping of hoofs. But now the footfalls were gigantic - elephantine. The house trembled to their impact. A cold hand touched my spine.

"What is it, in God's name?" I whispered.

She clung closer to me.

"I don't know! I dare not try to guess! We must go! We must run away! *It* will come down for us - *it* will burst *its* prison. For hours I've listened to *it* -"

"Where is Stark?" I muttered.

"Up - up there!" she shuddered. "I'll tell you quickly - then we must run! I thought your voice sounded strange when you called me up, but I came to meet you, as I thought. I brought Bozo with me because I was afraid to go out in the dark alone. Then when I was in the shadow of the grove, something sprang upon me. Bozo roared and leaped, but he struck him down with a heavy club and struck him again and again as he lay writhing in the dust. All the time I was struggling and trying to scream, but the creature had gripped my throat with a great gorilla-like hand, and I was half-strangled. Then he flung me over his shoulder and carried me through the grove and across the wall into the Stark estate. I was only half-conscious and it was not until he had brought me into this room that I saw

it was John Stark. But he did not limp and he moved with the agility of a great ape. He was dressed in dark close-fitting garments which blended so well with the darkness as to render him almost invisible.

"He gagged me while I pleaded in vain for mercy, and bound my hands. Then he chained me to the wall, but left the key in the lock as if he intended taking me away soon. I believe he was mad - and afraid, too. There was an unearthly blaze in his eyes and his hands shook as with palsy. He said, 'You wonder why I have brought you here? I will tell you, because what you know will not matter anyhow, since within an hour you will be beyond all knowledge!'

"Tomorrow the papers will scream in headlines that the mysterious kidnapper has struck again, under the very noses of the police! Well, they'll soon have more to worry them than an occasional disappearance, I fear. A weaker personality than mine might well feel some vanity in outwitting the authorities as I have done - but it has been so easy to evade the stupid fools. My pride is fed on greater things. I planned well. When I brought the *thing* into being, I knew it would need food - much food. That is why I came out where I was not known and feigned lameness and weakness, I who have the strength of a giant in my thews. None has suspected me - unless it is Michael Strang. Tonight I read doubt in his eyes - I should have struck anyhow, when he turned to face me - should have taken the chance of mortal combat with him, powerful as he is -

"You do not understand. I see in your eyes that you do not understand. But I will try to make you understand. Men think I am deeply cultured; little do they guess how deep my knowledge is. I have gone further than any man in the arts and sciences. They were toys for paltry brains, I found. I went deeper. I experimented with the occult as some men experiment with science. I found that by certain grim and ancient arts a wise man could tear aside the Veil between the universes and bring unholy shapes into this terrestrial plane. I set to work to prove this thing. You might ask me, why? Why does any scientist make experiments? The proving of the theory is reason enough - the acquiring of knowledge is the end that justifies the means. Your brain would wither and crumble away were I to describe to you the incantations and spells and strange propitiations with which I drew a mewling, squalling, naked *thing* out of the Void.

"It was not easy. For months I toiled and studied, delving deep into the ungodly lores of blasphemous books and musty manuscripts. Groping in the blind dark Outer chasms into which I had projected my bodiless will, I first

*felt* the existence and presence of unhallowed beings, and I worked to establish contact with them - to draw one, at least, into this material universe. For long I could only feel *it* touching the dark borderlands of my own consciousness. Then with grim sacrifices and ancient rituals, I drew it across the gulfs. First it was but a vast anthropomorphic shadow cast upon a wall. I saw its progression from nothingness into the mold and being of this material sphere. I saw when its eyes burned in the shadow, and when the atoms of its non-terrestrial substance swirled and changed and clarified and shrank, and in shrinking, crystallized and became matter as we know it.

"And there on the floor before me lay the mewling, squalling, naked thing from out the Abyss, and when I saw its nature, even I blanched and my resolution almost failed me.

"At first it was no bigger than a toad. But I fed it carefully, knowing that it would thrive only on fresh blood. To begin with I fed it living flies and spiders, insects which draw blood from other things. At first it grew slowly - but it grew. I increased its food. I fed it mice - rats - rabbits; then cats. Finally a full-grown dog was none too large a meal for it.

"I saw where this was leading, but I was determined not to be balked. I stole and gave it a human infant, and after that it would touch no other food. Then for the first time, a thrill of fear touched my soul. The thing began to grow and expand appallingly on its feasts of human blood. I began to fear it. I no longer looked upon it with pride. No longer I delighted in watching it feed upon the prey I caught for it. But now I found I was caught in a trap of my own making. When even temporarily deprived of its food, the thing grew dangerous to me. It demanded its food oftener; I was forced to take desperate chances to obtain that food.

"Tonight by the barest chance, your lover escaped the fate which has befallen you. I hold Michael Strang no ill-will. Necessity is a cruel taskmaster. I will take no pleasure in laying you, alive and writhing, before the monster. But I have no other choice. To save myself, I must continue to gorge it on human blood, lest it take me for its prey. You might ask me, why do I not destroy that which I have created? It is a question I ask myself. I dare not try. I doubt if human hands can slay it. My mind is no longer my own. I who was once its master, am become no more than a slave to provide it food. Its terrible non-human intelligence has robbed me of my will-power and enslaved me. Come what may, I must continue to feed it!

"It may keep on growing until it bursts

its prison and stalks slaving and ravening forth into the world. Each time it has fed of late, it has grown spans in height and girth. There may be no limit to its growth. But I dare not refuse it the good it craves.'

"Here he started as the house trembled to the impact of a great lumbering tread somewhere upstairs. He turned pale. 'It has awakened and is hungry!' he hissed. 'I will go to it - tell it it is too soon to be fed!' He took the candle which was burning on the table and hurried away, and I heard him ascend the stairs - " she sunk her face in her hands and a shudder shook her slim frame.

"One terrible scream burst forth," she whimpered, "then silence, save for a hideous rending, crunching sound, and the tramp - tramp - tramp of the terrible hoofs! I lay here - it seemed for ages. Once I heard a dog whining and scratching at the outer door and knew that Bozo had recovered consciousness and followed me here, but I couldn't call to him, and soon he went away - and I lay here alone - listening - listening - "

I shuddered as if a cold wind were blowing upon me from outer space. And I rose, gripping the ancient sword. Marjory sprang up and seized me with convulsive strength.

"Oh, Michael, let us go!"

"Wait!" I was in the grip of an unconquerable depriving urge. "Before I go I must see what hides in those upstairs rooms."

She screamed and clung to me frantically.

"No, no, Michael! Oh, God, you don't know what you're saying! It is some terrible thing not of this earth - some ghastly being from *outside*! Human weapons cannot harm it. Don't - don't, for my sake, Michael, don't throw away your life!"

I shook my head.

"This is not heroism, Marjory, nor is it mere curiosity. I owe it to the children - to the helpless people of this city. Did not Stark say something about the thing breaking out of its prison? No - I must go against it now, while it is cornered in this house."

"But what can you do with your puny weapon?" she wailed, wringing her hands.

"I don't know," I answered, "but this I do know - that demoniac lust is no stronger than human hate, and that I will match this blade, which in old days slew witches and warlocks and vampires and werewolves, against the foul legions of Hell itself. Go! Take the dog and run home as fast as you can!"

And in spite of her protests and pleas, I disengaged her clinging arms and pushed her gently out the door, closing it in the face of her despairing wail. Then taking up the candle, I went swiftly into the hallway on which the store-room abutted. The stair showed dark



and forbidding, a black well of shadows, and suddenly a faint draught of wind blew out the candle in my hand, and groping in my pockets, I found I had no matches to relight it. But the moon shone faintly through the small high-set windows, and in its dim light I went grimly up the dark stairs, driven irresistably by some force stronger than fear, the sword of my warrior-ancestors gripped in my hands.

All the time overhead, those gargantuan hoofs blundered to and fro and their ponderous fall froze the very blood in my veins, and on my clammy flesh, cold sweat froze. I knew no earthly feet made those sounds. All the dim horror-ridden shadows beyond ancestral fears clawed and whispered at the back of my mind, all the vague phantasmal shapes that lurk in the subconsciousness rose titanic and terrible, all the dim racial memories of grisly prehistoric fears awoke to haunt me. Every reverberation of those lumbering foot-falls roused, in the slumbering deeps of my soul, horrific, mist-veiled shapes of near-memory. But on I went.

The door at the head of the stairs was furnished with a snap lock - evidently within as well as without, since after I had drawn back the outer catch, the massive portal still held firm. And within I heard that elephantine tread. In a frenzy, lest my resolution give way to screaming black panic, I heaved up my sword and splintered the panels with three mighty blows. Through the ruins I stepped.

The whole upstairs space consisted of one great room, now faintly illuminated by the moonlight which streamed in through the heavily barred windows. The place was vast and spectral, with bars of white moonlight and floating oceans of shadow. And an involuntary, unhuman cry broke from my dry lips.

Before me stood the Horror. The moonlight illumined vaguely a shape of nightmare and lunacy. Twice as tall as man, its general outline was not unlike that of a human; but its gigantic legs terminated in huge hoofs and instead of arms, a dozen tentacles writhed like snakes about its huge bloated torso. Its color was a leprous, mottled reptilian hue, and the crowning horror came when it turned its loose slavering blood-stained jowls toward me and fixed me with its sparkling million-faceted eyes which glittered like bits of fire. There was nothing of the human about that pointed, malformed head - and God help me, there was nothing of the bestial either, as human beings understand the beasts. Tearing my eyes from that grisly head for the sake of my sanity, I was aware of another horror, intolerable in its unmistakable implication. About those giant hoofs lay

the dismembered and fang-torn fragments of a human body, and a bar of moonlight fell upon the severed head which lay staring upward with glassy dead eyes of horror - the head of John Stark.

Fear can become so intense it defeats itself. Now as I stood frozen, and out of that shambles the ghastly fiend came lumbering toward me, my fear was swept away by a red blaze of berserker fury. Swinging up my sword I leaped to meet the horror and the whistling blade sheared off half its tentacles which fell to the floor, writhing like serpents.

With an abhorrent high-pitched squeal, the monster bounded high above my head and stamped terribly downward. The impact of those frightful hoofs shattered my upflung arm like matchwood and dashed me to the floor, and with a soul-shaking bellow of triumph the monster leaped ponderously upon me in a ghastly death-dance that made the whole building groan and sway. Somehow I twisted aside and escaped these thunderous hoofs, that else had hammered me into a red pulp, and rolling aside, gained my feet, one thought uppermost in my mind - drawn from the shapeless void and materialized into concrete substance, the fiend was vulnerable to material weapons. And with my one good hand I gripped the sword that a saint had blessed in old times against the powers of darkness, and the red wave of battle-lust surged over me.

The monster wheeled unwieldily toward me, and roaring a wordless warcry I leaped, whirling the great sword through the air with every ounce of my powerful frame behind it. And straight through the pulpy unstable bulk it sheared, so that the loathsome torso fell one way and the giant legs the other. Yet the creature was not dead, for it writhed toward me on its tentacles, rearing its ghastly head, its eyes blazing fearfully, its forked tongue spitting venom at me. I swung up my sword and struck again and again, hacking the monstrosity into bits, each of which squirmed and writhed as if endowed with separate life - until I had hewed the head into pieces, and then I saw the scattered bits changing in form and substance. There seemed to be no bones in the thing's body. Except for the huge hard hoofs and the crocodile-like fangs, all was disgustingly flabby and pulpy, like a toad or a spider.

And now as I watched, I saw the fragments *melt* into a viscous black stenching fluid which flowed over the fragments of what had been John Stark. And in that black tide those fragments of flesh and bone crumbled and dissolved, as salt melts in water, faded and vanished - became one with the black abhorrent pool which whirled and eddied in the center of

the room, showing a million facets and gleams of light, like the burning eyes of a myriad huge spiders. And I turned and fled downstairs.

At the foot of the stairs I stumbled over a soft heap, and a familiar whine woke me from the mazes of unutterable horror into which I had fallen. Marjory had not obeyed me; she had returned to that house of horror. She lay at my feet in a dead faint, and Bozo stood faithfully over her. Aye, I doubt not, if I had lost that grim battle, he would have given up his life to save his mistress when the monster came lurching down the stairs. With a sob of horror I caught up the girl, crushing her limp form to me; then Bozo cringed and snarled, gazing up the moon-flecked stairs. And down these stairs I saw a black glittering tide flowing sluggishly.

I ran from that house as I would flee from Hell, but I halted in the old store-room long enough to sweep a hasty hand over the table where I had found the candles. Several burnt matches littered the table, but I found one unstruck. And I struck it hurriedly and tossed it blazing into a heap of dusty papers near the wall. The wood was old and dry; it caught quickly and burned fiercely.

And as, with Marjory and Bozo, I watched it burn, I at least knew what the awakened townspeople did not guess; that the horror which had hovered over the city and the countryside was vanishing in those flames - I most devoutly hope, forever.