

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 28

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Nice

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

*What ghastly fate pursued the dweller in that vermin-infested old mansion in Louisiana? The story of a weird doom*

**T**HE gun glints on my table as I pen these lines. It will not lie there long. It is my passport from the Horror that is gathering for me now to a sanctuary that nothing earthly can ever profane.

That seething rustle in the walls about me now—too well I know that sound! And here in this modern apartment, amid a city's bustling, an ancient curse comes upon me, even as I saw it come upon another man in that ancient, rotting plantation-house by the river. But it shall never reach me! I have courage, as poor Arthur Marsden had not. I do not fear the death that slithers and gnaws in mad darkness; for I have here a death that is quick and clean. And I shall use it. . . .

Listen, while there is yet time, to the tale of what happened to Arthur Marsden.

Why is it, I wonder, that the word "schoolmate" always conjures up such images of intimacy and friendship? Certainly not all of my schoolmates were also my friends! I have shared classrooms with literally thousands of young men and women whose faces were always strange to me, whose very names I never knew.

And yet I have more than a casual recollection of Arthur Marsden as we sat together through the tedium of lectures, or met on the graveled paths and oak-shrouded campus of New Orleans' most famous university.

Just why this memory remains so vivid,

I cannot say. Certainly it was not because I liked the man. Few of the students did, as I recall. Poor Marsden walked alone, a vague and shrinking recluse. He had no intimates. He sought none. I have never seen a man who lived more utterly in books and studies, to whom undergraduates and undergraduate activity were more completely alien. Every college has its "grinds," but Arthur Marsden's absorption in study exceeded anything I ever knew. It seemed almost a deliberate self-withdrawal, the forced concentration of one who does not dare let himself think. He seemed to fear, more than dislike, any contact with his fellows at all. He might well have been isolated by some strange secret he dared not share, or by some strange malady that set him apart from everyone he knew.

I recall, indeed, that strange rumors seemed to follow him. There were whisperings in dark corners, and all manner of fantastic and horrible things were hinted at. Most of this can be set down to mere legendry and nonsense, such as always plagues any breaker of Youth's rigid taboos. The involuntary hostility of the adolescent toward anything strange is almost unbelievable. He tends to type with his fellows like so many peas in a pod, and anyone who dares to differ from him is cruelly detested.

And yet I seemed to sense an under-current in these rumors about young Arthur Marsden that defied dismissal as

mere malicious gossip. There *was* something definitely odd about him. His furtiveness, his silence, his fear of darkness and of shadows (I do not recall ever seeing him abroad after dusk!)—these things could not be lightly overlooked. Nor could the shadow of fear that was always on his face. It was a strange brooding terror, without rime or reason. A sort of expectant dread. . . .

And then, of course, there was the episode of the mouse.

**T**HE thing sounds almost silly, in retrospect. The mouse was just a mouse, one of those little, wriggling, pinkish-white rodents you see in pet-shop windows. One of our freshmen brought it to his gymnasium class in a pocket and it escaped to run squeaking about the locker-room, to the great amusement of those of us who dressed or undressed on the rude benches that lined the grimy walls. A friendly little mouse it was, and most inquisitive. It slithered gayly over our bare arms and shoulders and let



"I fled crazily before that slithering horde of ravening atomies."

us feed it crumbs; gnawing daintily at them while sitting erect, like a little white squirrel. We were all so engrossed with it that none of us saw Arthur Marsden as he wandered in and sat down before his locker.

What happened then no one seemed to know exactly; yet I dare say none of us ever forgot the utter strangeness of it. The shrieks still ring in my ears as I write. And when I close my eyes I seem to see poor Marsden as he sprawled on the cracked concrete floor, his limbs jerking and twitching in the agonies of his strange seizure. And I see the drawn, wild faces of his comrades ringed about him; my own face was doubtless as distorted and blank as the rest. It was only when a gymnasium coach came rushing into the room to see what had happened there, that the tension broke and let us lift the poor fellow to try to find what could be ailing him. And it was all over by then. He was still, and you might have thought him asleep were it not for the trickle of blood from bitten lips that smeared his face. . . .

We carried him, some six of us, into the rubbing-room and laid him on a table. The owner of the mouse was one of the six. He had captured his pet from where it was crouching on the fallen man's body, and slid it into a pocket. Later he told me his intention of chloroforming the little being.

"Can't take any chances," he muttered. "It must have hydrophobia! Did you see the way it rushed at Marsden as he fell, and tore at his throat? Rended and tore like a little fury! Of course its teeth aren't large enough to do much harm. But——"

I didn't answer him. I was too disturbed to speak, for I too had seen that inexplicable thing. And somehow the sight of that little pallid anomaly,

squeaking and rending at an unconscious man's body; had been unbelievably revolting and horrible to me. For I realized—indeed, I think that all of us realized—that Arthur Marsden had known the mouse would attack him. How else account for that delirium of terror, that utter collapse? It was no physical malady that had struck him down, as the college doctor found out immediately on examining him. It was the result of some shock that had almost stopped his heart from beating!

I left the gymnasium that day with my brain in a whirl. I was groping along nauseous and blasphemous paths of speculation I dared not put into words; for there in that familiar place had leered suddenly, dreadfully, the Unfamiliar. Men do not fear mice. Nor do mice attack men. And yet I had seen both these natural laws bewilderingly set aside. . . .

The whole thing left me deeply affected for days afterward. I had a weird feeling of instability, of distorted perspective. The harmlessness of harmless things seemed no longer quite so obvious as it had once seemed. It was long before I learned to know again that birds and insects and the very grass and trees were really not inimical. After what I had seen, I should not have been surprized at anything. I dare say that for a while I too, like Arthur Marsden, shrank from shadows. I am sure that I wore an expression of fear, like his, upon my face. . . .

As for Marsden himself, the fellow lay for hours on that gymnasium table, more dead than alive. It was almost dusk before the coaches would allow him to walk the short distance to his dormitory. But no amount of questioning on their part could elicit an explanation from the pale, trembling youth. At last they had to let him go.

I EXPECTED, of course, to question him myself about the episode, but I never got the chance; for less than a week later Arthur Marsden vanished from the university. He never returned.

The reason for this abrupt departure I learned later. New Orleans newspapers carried an item on the death of one Doctor John Marsden, M. D., Ph.D., at his ancestral home in upper Louisiana. The doctor had succumbed quite suddenly, I gathered, to a malady which had slain many of his line, through several generations. His body was interred on the day following his death, and his family (consisting of a wife, a maiden sister of his own age and one son, Arthur) left immediately for an extended European voyage. "During their absence," one account concluded, "the ancient Marsden home will be renovated in its entirety."

I was somewhat bewildered by these items. They seemed to hint at something far stranger than they told. Why, I wondered, did none of them name this hereditary malady which had stricken so many Marsdens? Why was the doctor's body interred with such bizarre haste? Why the hurried exodus of his family? And above all, since when does the renovation of a man's house find place in his obituary?

I got no answer to these questions from subsequent editions, and as time went on I lost interest in them. After all, Arthur Marsden and all that pertained to him had gone out of my life. I never expected that I would see him again.

Would to God that I never had!

\* \* \* \* \*

I AM no trained writer. Perhaps there are other ways of denoting lapse of time besides this row of asterisks. But I must somehow bridge a gap of ten years, a gap which has no bearing on this tale

at all; for when next I encountered the name Marsden my school days were long since forgotten. It was, indeed, but a few short months ago.

The name was crudely painted on a board, and that board was dangling from a small unpainted station-house at the junction where I had alighted from a north-bound express to await the local train to New Orleans. Nor did I at first connect the "Marsdenville" that was a mangy cluttering of old houses and negro-shanties along a single street—I say I failed to connect this sorry hamlet with anything familiar. But suddenly it came to me that these plantation-towns along our Mississippi usually bear the names of former masters. Nor is the name of Marsden one which is frequently met with in the Deep South.

Curious, I tried to question the ancient and bearded "cajun" who tended the station-house. I could get nothing out of him, of course. But while we were talking I felt a touch at my elbow and heard a man's voice say my name. . . .

Extraordinary, of course, the coincidence which had brought him to the station at that time. Yet such things do happen. He was, he told me, anxious about a shipment from some mail-order house which was long overdue. He had come down to ask about it—it was, he added, merely some rat-poisons for his estate—and had found me talking to the old man. He had known me instantly.

But certainly I should never have known Arthur Marsden. Ten years, of course, work some alteration in any man. But never before—and I pray God never again—have I beheld such a hideous change in mortal clay! Marsden's bowed and sagging shoulders, his seamed and wrinkled face, his whitened and thinning locks might have belonged to a man of sixty. His voice had become a thin and reedy piping that was cery to hear. His

clothing, though excellent in cut and tailoring, hung from his wasted frame as rags of flesh hang from a skeleton's ribs. And his spotless linen was no whiter than was his skin!

All this and more ten years had done to the young collegian I had known. He had become a creature to be regarded with pity and contempt even by the old station-master. There was covert sneering in the "cajun's" voice as he spoke of the missing consignment. And though he promised to make a search for it, still it was plain that his one desire was to be rid of Marsden.

Having thus been balked in his errand, Marsden turned his attention to me. And as time hung heavy on my hands in the hot, filthy little station, I was glad to accept his suggestion that I check my handbags and pay a visit to his house.

"I live there all alone," he said, pathetically. "I'm the last of the Marsdens, you know. And I—have few visitors!"

So at length we left the station to stroll along the single crooked street of Marsdenville. Our destination was the sprawling old white-pillared mansion I had glimpsed through the trees, beyond the "General Store" and the few scattered houses that made up the town in its entirety.

As we passed along the narrow, cracked sidewalks through the hamlet, I could not but wonder at the attitude toward us of the few inhabitants we met along the way. One would have expected deference, even servility, toward the leading citizen of the place. Instead, I more than once saw men cross the single street to avoid meeting us. Strange, almost hostile glances followed us. As for the negroes we met, those simple children of Africa turned and fled from our approach, their eyeballs bulging as they peered over black shoulders in almost comic terror!

POOR Marsden was pitifully anxious to conceal this universal avoidance of his presence from me. Nor could I in mere politeness fail to overlook it. And yet in my brain there stirred a great and growing perplexity.

Soon, however, we found the town and its inhabitants had been left behind. Our shoes scuffed the dust of a road that made no pretense of being paved or even traversed. It wound amid dense shrubbery, and ancient trees overhung it and grass grew freely in its ruts. Great trailing tendrils of Spanish moss touched ghostly fingers to our faces as we brushed past them. The hush of complete isolation brooded everywhere. Only the distant "lap-lapping" of the river broke it.

I realized, with a kind of shudder, that a sort of deadline must have been drawn between the village and the ancient mansion ahead of us. It had been literally years since vehicular traffic had stirred the dust in those ruts, and even visitors on foot must be a rarity.

I do not recall a word of our conversation along that endless, shadowed lane. I must have spoken brokenly and disconnectedly; for my thoughts were elsewhere. As for Marsden, I recall only that his voice ran on and on, in that piping weary monotone. I got the impression that he dared not stop talking, that he feared the very silence that would come when our voices died!

We had almost reached our destination when I stumbled over a little furry object and halted involuntarily. Limp and bloody, it sprawled there in the dust of the road. I am not normally fond of cats, yet I felt a throb of pity now.

There was, I realized as I bent over the creature, no hope of saving its life. It was, indeed, already dead, although the body was still warm. The throat and the belly had been ripped open, and viscera protruded like maggots from the gashes.

I could make nothing of those curiously jagged wounds, nor did the myriad tiny prints in the dust about the corpse convey anything to me. Yet I was conscious that they were very odd prints indeed. In the dim light, I almost took them for the marks of tiny human hands!

At length I stood up. "Weasels?" I queried. "The kitten is quite dead. I hope it wasn't a pet."

Marsden looked at me with haunted eyes. "Weasels, of course," he muttered. "Ah God! Why don't those poisons come? We're overrun——"

He let the sentence hang there. After a moment we walked on. We left the little corpse to its cloud of buzzing flies.

Yet, weasels do not make tracks like human hand-prints. That I knew. Nor do they hunt in packs. . . .

**T**HE lawns that fronted the great house were spacious but ill-tended. As we crossed them a surly thug in gardener's livery looked up to growl a greeting. Beyond the wide veranda a great mahogany door was opened for us by a second servant, a swarthy brute whose butler's frock-coat accorded ill with an unshaven chin. White servants in the Deep South! I marveled. Truly Marsden must be a man of eccentric tastes.

We followed the "butler" (for obviously both he and the other servants were mere tramps or gangsters pressed into domestic service) along a long, dark, paneled hall. It opened into a vast room where finely bound books covered every wall in tiers, where fine ancestral portraits and shaded lamps and great overstuffed leather chairs invited us. It had once been a most impressive place, this library of Marsden House. Now dust and decay and dirt befouled it everywhere. "Renovated in its entirety," the phrase sprang ironically into my mind. For cer-

tainly this room had not been cleaned, much less renovated, in many years.

Yet there was no scarcity of servants to clean it, I noticed. It was not the butler who brought us tinkling mint-juleps in frosted glasses. It was still a third hireling, in a soiled white drill jacket. He spilled a portion of my drink on my coat-sleeve, and I noted the bulge of a revolver against his ribs as he bent to swab futilely at the stain with a handkerchief.

I should have thought more about this fact had not my attention been distracted by the yapping and growling and barking that went on constantly about me. For Arthur Marsden had assembled a most bizarre menagerie in his house. There must have been a dozen mongrel terriers cooped up in this one long room. They fought and scratched fleas and scampered everywhere. Among them great battered tom-cats stalked, evil-eyed and snarling. And once I could have sworn I saw a dark, slim bulk that was neither cat nor dog gliding among the shadows. Either it was a mongoose or else my eyes played tricks.

Manners would hardly permit my questioning my host on this strange collection. After all, the poor devil was plainly a sort of social pariah in this town. It was only natural that he should seek companionship in animals. To live all alone in this great barn of a house would not be pleasant. Pets would at least lighten the monotony.

Yet though I did not care to mention the animals, they greatly disturbed me. So did the dull and persistent hammering that was constantly going on in some distant part of the mansion. It made the futile conversation of my host rather hard to follow. "I'm having some repairs made," he had explained that hammering not once but a score of times. And

somehow his very insistence on the prosaic explanation was odd.

And yet it seemed absurd to doubt him. There was visible evidence of renovation in this very room; for strips of heavy sheet-iron flashing had been nailed along the juncture of walls and ceiling and floor, forming a gleaming metallic frame for every door and window. I could not see the exact utility of these iron strips, but supposed that they formed some sort of support for the ancient walls. And I knew well that the nailing of such metal supports elsewhere in the house would produce exactly such a sound as now disturbed me; yet I remained oddly upset by that distant metallic pounding, like the beat of some gigantic, evil metal heart.

I must admit, however, that the repeated liquid refreshment that Marsden pressed on me soon overcame my vexation. In time I came to ignore the distractions altogether; for, sitting here in the cool room and listening to the monotonous droning of my host's voice, I seemed most strangely to lose track of the passage of time. It was pleasant, after all, to sit there with the coolness of fine Bourbon and crushed mint in my throat; pleasant to loll in the great leather chair; pleasant to chat lightly, vaguely, my mind more than half on other matters the while; pleasant to look up at those ceiling-mounting tiers of books about me, to speculate on the forgotten wisdom their pages must hold; pleasant just to sit and rest there in the quiet dusk. . . .

Then suddenly I became aware, with a feeling almost of panic at the realization, that I had long overstayed my time here. Those juleps! They must have drugged me. I could barely see Marsden's white face across the room, and the window behind his chair was only a gray blur against the black walls. I had passed

hours in this room, I realized. It was now almost night.

Marsden sprang up when I did. The fellow was profuse in apologies and explanations. He had, he said, been so interested in my talk that he had forgotten all about my train. It must have gone through the junction at least an hour ago, he explained. Nor would there be another until the following afternoon. I could, of course, motor some thirty miles to Ferriday, where a local train would go through shortly before dawn. But, Marsden lamented, he had no car to lend me for the journey. And he did not know whether one could be obtained in the village.

It was plain that he was anxious to have me spend the night with him. And indeed, I was inclined to agree with him, once my first chagrin had faded. The strangeness of this old house and its occupants had filled me with a desperate curiosity. I wanted to see more of it. And I had no stomach for a jolting cross-country race to board a long-past-midnight train. Here, Marsden assured me, I might have a comfortable bed and a dinner that would include quails and a crayfish bouillabaisse and a bottle—oh yes, several bottles—of a most excellent wine.

And so I found myself, an hour later, donning fresh linen after a refreshing shower-bath.

I HAD been snugly established in an upper bedroom of the mansion and was very pleased to be there. The tramp-like butler had hurried down to the village for my luggage, and had then doubled as valet in a manner surprizingly deft and efficient. And the big room, with its rich rugs and fine old furniture, was a revelation. I relaxed in the mellow glow of lamplight and decided that life at Marsden House was pleasant, after all. The contents of a crystal-glass decanter I



found beside my bed did not fail to confirm this decision. I even recall whistling merrily as I dressed.

Absently I noted, moving about the room with a guest's curiosity, that the inevitable metal flashings reinforced every corner of it. The great Colonial bedstead, too, was strengthened by heavy bands welded about its legs. This was natural enough, I decided. Centuries of river mists would have rotted every bit of wood in the house. Yet I did rather wonder at the whimsy of design these supports displayed. They were inexplicably funnel-shaped, with wide flaring bottoms like skirts. They looked like nothing so much as the shields that are placed on ship hawsers to keep rats from climbing aboard.

I was still puzzled over them, and listening idly to a vague but incessant rustling that I took to be the sound of the river near by, when my valet-butler came in to announce dinner. My host, he added, would be waiting for me on the floor below.

I snapped the locks on my valises before I left the room, for I did not trust the fellow alone with them. Then I went out into the dim corridor. I had to grope slowly along in it, and had only gotten half-way to the stairs when a sudden sound crashed out behind me and filled the hall with eery echoes.

I whirled and ran back toward my room. There could be no mistaking that sound, and my heart was pounding wildly as I reached my door. It was dark, however, and the servant was just emerging from it as I came up.

"It's all right, sir," he grated. "I just fell over a chair in th' dark, sir! Made a lot of noise, didn't it?"

The stink of gunpowder was everywhere in the corridor to belie his words. I elbowed past him and relit the lamps in my room. I don't know what I expected

to find in there. There was nothing, of course. The room was in immaculate order.

There was only that reek of powder to attest that this "valet" of mine had fired a gun at someone or something in my room not a minute before. At someone or something that had not been there when I left the room, that was not there now. And that had somehow come and gone without leaving any trace. . . .

I hurried back along that corridor and down the old creaking staircase as though a fiend of hell ran at my heels!

**D**INNER that night in Marsden House was a weird meal. Not that I had any fault to find with the food: it was superb, and the accompanying wines were all that Marsden had claimed. As for the service, it was impeccable from fine old chinaware to massive silver candelabra which supplied the only light in the long, shadowed room.

No, the fault was in none of these things. It lay rather in a certain air of strain and tension that grew worse as the meal progressed. The rat-eyed butler's face was impassive as he bent over the table, nor did Marsden betray nervousness in word or gesture, though his eyes were agonized. But the two hulking men in the white jackets who were recruited to assist in the service were obviously frightened half out of their wits. Their cauliflower ears were strained to catch every sound. They started at shadows. Their gorilla-like hands were trembling so that they could barely handle the dishes.

The pack of mongrel dogs roamed here and there in the dining-room as they pleased, but there was no yapping or fighting here. The little beasts were oddly quiet. They were incessantly sniffing along the old paneled walls, nosing beneath the moldering tapestries, sitting

with little heads cocked and ears erect. Among them the great tom-cats skulked grimly, displaying no interest in the food on the long table or in us. Man and beast seemed vigilantly alert, seemed to wait some unholy invasion, prepared for some calamity beyond my power to conjecture.

And thus dragged on the many courses of the meal, while my nerves absorbed the tenseness until I too was quivering with expectancy; until I too sat rigid and taut in my chair, ready to cope with some incredible and unimaginable emergency; until I should not have been surprized at the sudden uprushing of any horror, the invasion of any alien and menacing presence or presences of evil. Sweat formed on my brow. Strange, electric pricklings stole in the roots of my hair.

Yet nothing happened. There was not the slightest untoward incident to explain this tension to clarify the brooding mystery that hung over the room. The courses came and went, and at last there was only brandied coffee and cigars on the table, and the ordeal was at an end. The three servants withdrew, two of them almost staggering in their eagerness to get away. Most of the dogs and cats went with them, though a few elected to doze or wander about the room. I felt them touch my legs at intervals beneath the table, and their eternal sniffing intruded on every lull in our conversation. Yet obviously their extreme vigilance was at an end. The crisis, whatever it was, had definitely been passed.

**W**EB SAT long about the candle-lit table, Marsden and I. He had inveigled me into talking about myself, my aims and aspirations; and it is a topic to which almost any man does justice. He proved the ideal listener, too. If at times I got the impression that he was harkening more to distant sounds in the house

than to my words, at least he contrived to make the right remarks at proper intervals. So I talked on and on, while the candles dissolved imperceptibly on tall silver sconces, and an old clock in the hall punctuated my every pause for breath with a solemn metallic comma.

At length a slight hoarseness and the frail flickering of the candlelight warned me of the lateness of the hour. I flagged in my monolog, and Marsden was quick to catch the hint. He proposed that we retire, though I could see that he did it unwillingly.

And so we went out into the great hoary lower hall, where ancient beams arched blackly overhead and a vagrant breeze tinkled the crystal pendants of the chandeliers. These chandeliers, I noted, held electric bulbs; but as my host used only candlelight, I assumed that some accident had crippled the power-wires and left him thus dependent on more primitive luminance.

The somber rooms of the old house seemed more sinister now, for the candles gave little light beyond the hallway. Seemingly all the villainous-looking servants had retired after the meal, for we met none of them. Occasional dogs slept with snores and wheezes on the floors. I tripped over more than one little body as we walked toward the stair; and once, when my outstretched hand touched the soft fur of a cat, I felt an electric thrill of fear.

Marsden's nervousness seemed quite as great as my own. For a few short hours after the meal he had seemed almost to be his former self, had been at least the shadow of the Arthur Marsden of my university days. Now he had grown old and sick with dread again. The hand that held a candle aloft to light the way for us was crooked like a claw to keep it from trembling. And when he turned to make some casual remark, I could hardly

believe that the white and haggard face I saw was not some hideous mask. . . .

IT IS now that I approach that portion of my narrative in which care must be exercised in the telling. For the events that followed left me in a state of utter mental and physical collapse; and the greater part of my recollections have been mercifully blanked out from a brain taxed beyond its capacity to endure. Fantasy and fact, reality and delirium are oddly blended in my remembrance of that night at Marsden House. I must beware lest I confuse them utterly in the telling.

Suffice it to say that I felt a curious reluctance to return to my bedroom that night. And after Marsden had left me there and departed, his candle throwing grotesque shadows along the corridor outside, I felt even more disturbed. The room was hot and stuffy, I recall, and somehow I felt that the stuffiness was like the lull that comes before the breaking of a tropic storm. A strange inner prompting of danger was beginning to grow in my brain. The myriad mysteries of this strange mansion and its tragic owner had begun to shape themselves into a dreadful subconscious *hinting* that was all but unendurable.

It was only by an effort of the will that I forced myself to remain within that dim-lit room, to remove my clothing and don a suit of pajamas, even to extinguish the bedside lamp and crawl into that great canopied bed.

Just why I forced myself to do these things I do not know. Certainly they had no purpose. I could not sleep, I was never further from sleep in all my life! Every muscle of my body was tense and strained; every thought in my busy brain was groping for a solution of all these mysteries. This young-old recluse in his rotting mansion by the lapping, eternal river—what ghastly menace had grayed

his hair and blanched his face, had driven him to hire gangsters as servants, accumulate this imbecilic horde of mongrel animals? What threatened Arthur Marsden, that he should be ever vigilant and fearful within the four walls of his own house? Into what jigsaw puzzle of horror and madness had I so unwittingly strayed?

No need to retrace for the reader my tangled threads of speculation. They led me nowhere; yet I was conscious of an ever-mounting uneasiness and dread as I lay there in the darkness. Some hidden sense kept warning me of danger.

I do not recall the precise moment when I realized that I was *listening* for this danger instead of looking for it in the darkened room. I cannot say just when I realized that the murmurous, rustling, incessant sound that echoed in my ears was not the distant river at all, had never been the river!

That sound was in the very walls of my room—the walls, the ceiling of it, even the floor! They were—alive! Life teemed behind its ancient boards; life that crawled and scratched and slithered and raced; life that must have been engendered by centuries of neglect and darkness; that had made a seething network of corridors and passageways and tunnels in the very wood and mortar that seemed so solid about me!

Lizards, rats, roaches—what infinity of slithering forms were generating this incredible symphony of sounds I could only conjecture. I tried to tell myself that their presence in these hoary walls was natural enough. What old house is without its vermin?

And yet I knew, even while I reasoned thus, that my reasoning was absurd; for it was not the presence but the *numbers* of this hidden, crawling horde that was so disturbing. A vast, surging tide of them there must be, so great that it awed

and baffled the hearer to estimate their multitude; so great that it seemed almost that the great house should tremble and palpitate with their incessant point-counterpoint of movement. The sound of them grew in my ears until it was like the sound of the sea; until it tortured the nerves like the rush of a great wind; until it numbed the brain and baffled Reason itself with its damnable suggestion of myriads inconceivable and incalculable.

At length the listening to those goblin hordes so wore my nerves that they could not longer endure it. I sat up, lit my bedside lamp. With its glare the pulsing madness about me seemed to recede a little, and the fantasmagoria of horror my mind had been rearing seemed less credible than in darkness. Yet there was no real slackening in that incessant movement in my walls; for the welling crescendo of minute life seethed on.

Furious at this continued disturbance, I determined to dress myself and have a turn about the house, to see if other rooms were similarly infested. For though it seemed madness to suppose that this one room held all the vermin of Marsden House, yet I shrank from contemplation of the infinity of vermin life implied by its being universal throughout the entire building. Great God! No wonder poor Marsden kept that infinity of dogs and cats about him! No wonder he had ordered poisons and been distressed by their failure to arrive. The mystery of the eviscerated and dying kitten in the road, of the vigilant servants at meal-time, was no mystery now. Life here must be a constant battle for possession against these hordes. I understood the purpose of that reinforcing metal over every crack and crevice. I understood, in fine, many things.

But what in Sanity's name, I wondered as I dressed, could have led these creatures to congregate here in such impos-

sible numbers? What weird purpose held them penned up in the old walls of Marsden House?

MY DRESSING did not take long, for I was afire with curiosity. And I should have been out of the room and engrossed in searching every nook and cranny of the house, had not my attention been suddenly distracted. I had previously noted a small leather-bound book on the table by my bed. Now I carelessly knocked it to the floor in rising, and on retrieving it I saw that it lay open at a page wrinkled and dog-eared with much re-reading, and that marginal entries were scrawled on every unprinted inch of that page in ink like faded blood.

I paid scant attention to the printed matter on that page. "Legends" was the only word in the book's title I could decipher, and the tale on that opened page was a legend if ever there was one. It was impossible to imagine why anyone could have so pitifully, incessantly re-read it as those dog-eared and crumpled pages indicated. In these days of gangsters and mass-murder, the Lorde Myrsdenne of Transylvania or some such place who in 1790 locked up rebellious peasants in a barn and set fire to the barn would seem a petty tyrant indeed. And since their cries in dying doubtless did sound like the squeaking of mice, why should he not have said so? Anyone who could see a connection between his saying and the plague of mice that allegedly came up from beneath Myrsdenne Castle and devoured the lord and all his retainers would nowadays be regarded as fit subject for a lunacy commission. Nor would anyone take seriously the asseveration that all Myrsdenne's line would be cursed. . . .

As I say, it was not this fantastic and improbable folk-tale which held me there. It was the row of dates scrawled painfully in the page's margins. Opposite each date

there was a name, and apparently it was some sort of calendar or record of events over several generations. Only opposite the last name entered was there a blank space left.

And that name, barely legible in the dim light, was "Arthur Marsden"!

I suppose I must have cried out as the realization of this burst fully upon me. I recall stumbling over the lamp-table as I rushed toward the door and saw the lamp smash blazingly on a rug. But none of this mattered; for at that very moment, as if my discovery had been the signal for an elaborately rehearsed drama to begin its tragic play, there broke out from somewhere in the old house a most incredible clamoring and the yelping of tortured dogs and a high sustained shrieking that was the most horrible thing I have ever listened to. And mingled with this devil's cacophony I heard the stammering of revolver fire and the howls and curses of sorely embattled men.

It is at this point that my clear recollections wholly desert me and sheer delirium replaces coherent observation. I know that I yanked my door open and sprang out into the black hall and found it seething with sound and motion. I know that stabbing pains tormented my ankles and that my boots crunched on myriads of small shrieking entities in the darkness and that the walls and floor and even ceiling of that passage seemed beaded with small, moving points of light!

And as I kicked and stamped and cursed my way along that haunted corridor of squeaking nightmare, I saw an open, lighted doorway ahead. I knew that it led to Marsden's room. Evidently he feared to sleep in darkness; for there was no time for him to have lit the dozens of guttering lamps that lined the place and made it bright as day as I dashed in for sanctuary against the invis-

ible horde in that demon-haunted corridor.

The shrieks had stopped before I burst in there. And not even when I saw the great bed in one corner of the room did I grasp the full horror that had come upon Arthur Marsden.

I knew, of course, that he was dead, even before I saw the black pall that covered him as he sprawled in his blood there on the sheets. But for one awful, frozen moment I stood there wondering at that sable drapery, without realizing what it was. And then I saw that it moved and heaved and pulsed in a manner that no possible draft could make cloth behave. I saw that the glittering specks that gemmed it were not jewels, nor were the innumerable little pink cords that waved and twisted on it the conceits of some fantastic embroidery.

The rest is yammering madness, best forgotten. I made some crazy sound, and at the sound that shroud which cloaked the dissolving corpse broke and seemed to flow off the bed and toward me. I fled from it, shrieking crazily; I fled before that slithering horde of bloody, ravaging atomies; down, down the high-vaulted staircase I fled and burst the door of Marsden House and rushed into the night. And behind me, as I ran, the sky grew red. . . .

THEY let me out of the hospital last week — the hospital in thirty-miles-distant Ferriday where I had lain, a giggling, moaning wreck, for many days. They tried to tell me there that Arthur Marsden had died in the fire that destroyed his old house that night and left only a heap of charred wreckage there by the ancient, lapping river to show that it had ever stood. There had never been any curse, they said, nor any devouring horde of mice, and I must realize that my own delirious fancy had conjured it all.

And I pretended that I believed them. Why not?

But now I have set down at last the whole story of what really happened to Arthur Marsden. And I know now that it will also happen to me. No one but myself can hear that seething rustle in my walls, as goblin hordes gather to blot out the memory of the horror from the last living witness to it. For to me that age-old Myrsdenne curse has been trans-

mitted, a dread contagion that nothing can allay. And hark! Even now that slithering and scratching grows nearer. . . .

But I have beaten them! I have told my story! And now I shall have the courage that poor Marsden lacked! I will dare the final deed which shall release me utterly. The gun glints on my table as I pen these lines.

It will not lie there long. . . .