

THE CREEPING THING

(Continued from page six)

yet—something within me, something deeper than my own fear, urged me to pit my puny strength against it.

A Struggle

"Leaning forward and bracing myself against the bulk of the man in front of me, I gripped the heavy iron knob in both hands and gave a great heaving turn. Without warning and as if some fiendish elemental force were playing its grim joke upon

our puny little human intelligence, the thing gave easily and the tall narrow door swung open, precipitating both Garland and myself into the room with the others stumbling and tumbling over us in the unexpectedness of the movement.

"In the tangle of human bodies, Garland lost his flashlight, and as it swished out we found ourselves struggling in darkness so dense that it was like thick black velvet.

"Someone sobbed. It sounded like old Diaron. There was a quick gasp and a loud oath from Garland. The marshal called frantically for a light, and I heard doctor Varant and Alene Hardmore exclaim as their heads met in a thwack of mutual dismay. Then clearly and unmistakably someone laughed.

A Sob

"It was none of those struggling there in the darkness, that I will swear. It came from somewhere outside. I thought of the thick branches of those soughing trees just outside of the tiny windows, but I knew that if that low, mocking laughter came from those treetops, the one who, or the THING which, laughed had not been in that room, for there was no human larger than a six-year-old child who could have entered or left by those windows.

"Involuntarily I turned my face upward. It seemed as though I felt a quivering somewhere up there beyond me in the blank darkness.

"Then someone gave a sharp gasping cry of relief. The light swished on. Alene Hardmore had found it. "With a quick, sweeping motion of her arm she flashed the bright circular beam of light around the room. The huge shadows seemed to follow the circular whiteness and threaten it. I shuddered.

"THE ROOM WAS EMPTY."

Alec stopped, abruptly. I had been sitting forward in my chair listening. My tensed muscles had involuntarily held me rigid. At the final sentence, so horribly suggestive, so intensely inconclusive, I sank back stunned, for a moment speechless.

"But—" I said, "but—what of Meme? Where was she? Where—did you find no trace—" I stopped baffled by the strange look that crossed Alec's brown face.

"Only this," he said, and drew an oblong bundle from his pocket. With fingers that trembled slightly, I took the bundle and opened it, carefully. I spread the bit of old linen in which it was folded, open on the chair arm at my side. Then, I almost let the thing drop.

A Long Blade

A long, wicked-bladed Indian scalping knife lay revealed on the bit of yellow linen. There were rusty red stains on it and redder spots on the rag in which it had lain. Several strands of long black hair still clung to the blade. Something inside of me seemed to turn over and sicken at the sight.

"God!" I said, and again, "God!" "Yes," acquiesced Alec. "He is about the only one who can deal with this thing adequately."

"But I intend to help Him in any little way I can," I added. The first revulsion of feeling had passed. My natural bull-headedness was asserting itself. "Come on Alec, let's get going. A little thing like a python or a pre-historic caterpillar must never have it to say that he got Tom Frederick's goat." I picked up my hat. Alec followed suit.

"The mystery of the Creeping Thing seems to grow more ghastly and complex with each instalment. Better follow it closely!"

To Be Continued Next Week.

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