

THE CREEPING THING

A Story of Gruesome and Haunting Mystery

By
Cora Jean Moten
The Well-Known
Serial Writer

SYNOPSIS

An eccentric old recluse, Ezra Selwyn, is found murdered in his octagonal tower room in his mysterious home known as Selwyn House. Old Diaron and his wife, Meme, Haitian servants that have been with him ever since his return as a young man from a tragic stay in Haiti where his young bride was lost in the Voodoo ridden jungles, are the only other occupants of the house.

Diaron heard a huge something shrieking overhead and then wild shrieks just before he found his master's body. He summons the neighbors. The body is left for the coroner. When the coroner arrives they go to the octagonal room only to find that the body has disappeared.

Old Meme spends the next night in the room in an effort to solve the mystery. The same phenomenon of a huge Creeping Thing occurs again. This time the police and guards rush in and find no trace of Meme. But they find a scraping knife and bloodstained bits of cloth. There are a few long black hairs clinging to the knife.

Tom Frederick, a detective on vacation, is summoned to the case by his friend, Alec Jonas, who is convalescing from an injury received in their last case.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.



SELWYN House loomed, a gloomy specter, menacing and silent, through the great trees that all but hid it from the view of passers on the highway. High up in a single window abutting on the sinister octagonal tower a faint light gleamed.

"It is the reflection of the light in the wide corridor. That is the hall window," whispered Alec in a hushed voice as we turned in between the huge stone pillars flanking the grilled iron gates now setting open.

"But," I interjected, puzzled. "I thought you told me the wide corridor led directly back through the center of the house above stairs as it does below." My own voice was lowered in key with the general eeriness of the surroundings and the atmosphere of mystery and horror.

"It does," affirmed my companion, "but the first door leading to the left, opens on to a short passageway that serves to isolate the octagonal room more effectively from the other rooms of the house proper. This short, irregular corridor, is unlighted save for the tiny window through which you are seeing the reflected light. Since the strange horrors have been happening, this door is left open all night."

"Was anyone in this corridor able to observe it during the time the Creeping Thing was in action?" I waited eagerly for his answer.

"No,"—Alec paused, in the dimness I saw that he was regarding me almost quizzically—"But I'm afraid you won't find any explanation there, old man. The walls are perfectly bare of openings. The tiny window is a replica of the ones inside the octagonal room. That space is purely to isolate the room of mystery from the rest of the house. I went over it very carefully. There isn't so far as I can see, any possible chance of its being in any way connected with this Thing. However, to prevent the possibility of a chance, I have ordered it to be left open throughout the night. You know Jake has pretty

well turned the matter over to me with the consent of the county authorities, not officially, but by common consent," interpolated Alec.

As he ended his sentence we were standing before the great carved doors at the entrance. Alec lifted the great knocker, but before it had time to descend the door opened from within.

Old Diaron stood in the entrance. His wrinkled brown face was a study of mixed emotions. Grief and fear and anger and apprehension, all, fought to control it.

"I look for you, Monsieur. The femme she insist that she stays in the hounfort." (In the island of his youth, old Diaron had known of the lonely mystery houses set deep in secret places of Haitian jungles, and those hounforts of the voodoo worshippers were fitly exemplified by this mysterious room of horrors in the house where he served.) As he spoke, gesticulating wildly according to his custom, his dark old eyes rolled in the urgency of his excitement.

We stepped into the dimly lighted hall, Alec preceding me. Once inside, the old man's excited gaze paused as his eyes rested on my own. "Mon Dieu," he exclaimed—seeming to forget for the moment the agitating circumstances. "It is M'sieu Frederick. Now will all be well indeed. Thank the Bon Dieu you have come." The old man turned to me; his tremulous brown hands, hard and wrinkled with age, gripped mine. He was incoherent with something like relieved pleasure.

I felt some nerve inside of me tauten at that spontaneous indication of this old servant's confidence in my ability to solve the weird crimes that were being committed in this lonely place. Such confidence as this should not be misplaced if it were humanly possible to justify it; that I resolved. Old Diaron had always been the one figure in that house of mystery that offered or asked friendship from the outside world. I had been the only one of that outside world who had ever responded to his needs.

From the first day when he had timidly offered me an apple from the old orchard beyond and back of the shielding trees and bordering the walled-in garden at the back of Selwyn House, I had been his staunch and perhaps only friend.

The apple was good. It was only the first of many, as was my first rendezvous with the canny old fisherman that I soon found the "queer outlander" (as the other townfolk called him) to be. The success of my career as a detective was no news to old Diaron. Indeed it was one of his few obsessions that no solution of crime was too difficult for me. I felt bound to live up to that reputation.

Now, with Alec urging me by his silence and his relieved look of



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turning over the responsibility that rested heavily on his shoulders, I mentally took charge.

"I hope you are right, Diaron," I said with the reservation of a mental prayer that I shouldn't meet more difficulties than I could take care of. "Now just what is it that is eating you so about this insistent dame and the 'hounfort' as you call it?"

The question brought the old fellow back to the present with a jerk. He immediately began to flail the air with his expressive hands and bewail in a conglomerate patois of French and English the female propensity for trouble-making, and this one "femme" in particular. For a moment I let the stream of invective and incoherencies flow unrestrained. Then, when I felt the pressure had been somewhat relieved, I brought the excited man down to specific detail.

A Female Detective

The reprehensible and unreasonable "femme," it seemed, was the graceless, and all but unsexed (according to Diaron), female detective, Miss Alene Hardmore. She had arrived at Selwyn House something like an hour earlier, armed, as it were, cap-a-pie and with the firm and as yet undisputed intention of remaining in the octagonal room for the night; her avowed purpose being the solution of the hitherto baffling and unsolved mystery of the crimes enacted there.

"Cherchez la femme," seems to have been unnecessary advice for Diaron in this particular case. She had appeared on the scene of her own will and furthermore refused to budge from same.

"Come along, Diaron," I soothed

as the flood of invective and complaints slowed down into bubbles and sputters of impatience. "I'll see if we can't dissuade the lady from her unladylike intentions."

"Have you ever seen Miss Hardmore?" Alec whispered the question in my ear discreetly as we climbed the long shallow stairs.

"No," I flung the answer carelessly back to him, wondering at the irrelevancy of it and vaguely contemptuous of the sub rosa tone in which it was asked.

I thought Alec laughed significantly, albeit in an undertone.

Stalking nonchalantly along after Diaron, my mind busily engaged on the possibilities and probabilities of solving the nature of the criminal agency or agencies responsible for the deaths of old Meme and Ezra Selwyn and the disappearance of their bodies, I brought myself to a standstill automatically when we were confronted at the top by Alene Hardmore herself.

My first impression was of the hugeness of the woman. A hugeness and angularity that gave one the feeling of masculinity.

Alene Hardmore was two inches over six feet in height and ebony black. Her shoulders were square like a man's and the great muscles of her large half bare arms flexed and rippled as she reached out and gripped my hand in greeting.

Instantly my mind registered disapproval of this mannish woman. Her size and general masculinity aroused a fundamental antagonism in my man mind. No man likes to have to peer up at a woman; and, being considered a pretty large man myself (I am five feet eleven, and played half-back on the star eleven of the interscholastic teams three

years ago), I found it peculiarly distasteful.

Her voice, when she spoke, prejudiced me still further against her. It was hard and harsh. She spoke deep in her throat like a man.

"You're the great Detective Frederick," she said directly and without introduction from the fuming Diaron. "I know you from your pictures and because the marshal and the coroner both told me that they were expecting you in on the case before long. Your friend Mr. Jonas, here, seemed to want to hold everything till you came, but I prevailed upon the authorities at L— (the county seat), to allow me to proceed with investigations meantime. Hope you'll see the thing in a reasonable frame of mind." She regarded me keenly as she said this and paused.

I felt myself stiffening against the woman but I had to be courteous. As yet there was no excuse. (Continued on page four)

IMPORTANT NOTICE!

There are some very interesting opportunities offered to our readers among the classified advertisements which appear on page 11 of the Illustrated Feature Section in this issue. Why not look them over?