

THE CREEPING THING

A Story of Gruesome and Haunting Mystery

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SYNOPSIS

Ezra Selwyn, owner and eccentric tenant of Selwyn House, is found murdered in the OCTAGONAL ROOM, a mysterious room built on to the original home which was intended for the occupancy of his young bride who was best in the Voodoo-infested jungles of Haiti. The murder had been preceded by horrible sounds of CREEPING as if a great serpent were crawling overhead. It was discovered by Diaron, his Haitian servant, who, with his old wife, Meme, are the sole occupants of the house other than himself.

After having been viewed by several people, the body is found to have vanished when the coroner appears on the scene. No trace of it is found.

The next night, Meme, who has prevailed upon the officials to let her try to solve the mystery by staying in the room of mystery, is also murdered and spirited away.

Alene Hardmore, a woman detective, has gotten permission to try the perilous experiment this time, although the famous detective, Tom Frederick, has been summoned to the case by his friend and co-worker, Alec Jonas. He is forced to give precedence for this first night to Miss Hardmore, a dominating and unpleasant person, who brags of her ability to solve the problem.

Now go on with the story.

INSTALLMENT IV.

WHEN that fateful door of destiny closed with a sinister thud, on Alene Hardmore, I turned around to Alec and smiled. There was something of relief in being rid of the big dominating, black personality of her. It was a relief that made me forget for the moment that she was shutting herself in with a very real peril.

A bit heightened probably by my own skepticism as to the deductions arrived at by those who heretofore had been in the position of observers, or rather hearers, I was loathe to accept even Alec's explanations of just what had occurred on the two previous occasions of the weird and eerie manifestations of what they all spoke of with bated breath as the Creeping Thing.

Alec did not smile in return. Instead his face was grave with something of horror behind the gravity of it.

"We ought not to let her do this, Tom," he said and his voice was troubled.

"But, Mon Dieu! who can stop her? Such a femme, so — so —" Old Diaron's voice as he broke in, was a study in concern, vexation and helpless exasperation. He broke off abruptly. There were no words strong enough to express his opinion of a woman like Alene Hardmore, detective extraordinary, and woman hard-boiled.

"I am inclined to believe that the Creeping Thing will find a match in the lady in question," I soothed them, facetiously, although something in the mystery and uncanny silence of the place was slowly getting into my blood. I did not feel as unconcerned as I would have them think.

At the entrance to the wide corridor we stopped and involuntarily our eyes

turned with one accord to the tall, blank space of the closed doorway leading into the octagonal room. It stared back at us like a sealed entrance to a tomb. Shrugging my shoulders as if to rid them of a horror, intangible but, nevertheless, very real, I raised my voice to its normal outdoor pitch. It was an effort of which my companions were as conscious as I.

Investigation.

"Come on, Alec, let's investigate this blind alley here," I vociferated. "We may find the lair of this Thing that creeps about. It must be the father and mother of all the pythons, from what you guys are telling me about it. And if it is, it's got to have a den somewhere; it can't possibly do its deadly work and then vanish into thin air. The darned Thing's too big for that. And if it eats its prey, it's got to lie away somewhere to digest it. Come on, let's get going."

With a bravado I did not feel, I turned and went into the short corridor with the tiny window high up—its only opening—which separated the octagonal room from the rest of the house, lying toward the front.

Alec followed me in silence. Old Diaron sank with a sigh of exasperated concern into his chair just outside the narrow hall. It seemed to say: "Go on, young fool, there's nothing but your own personal experience that will teach you sense." Diaron was a fatalist. His sigh was prophetic.

The corridor was irregular. It followed the contours of the two sides of the octagonal room that faced the front of the building. I held my flashlight high and examined those walls carefully. They were smooth and solid all the way up. I turned my attention to the straight wall of the room from which, separated by the width of the passage between them, they rayed away in oblique lines from the central angle of their joined corners. Like the other walls, it was smooth and solid.

The infinitesimal window and the doorway leading to the main central corridor of the upper story of Selwyn House were the only openings in the place. Alec had been right, there was no explanation here.

I was just a big chagrined. I had been pretty sure that I would find some explanation here—some clew to a possible mode of entrance and egress from without—in that otherwise perfectly unexplained passage. When I



But in sudden rage at the water of fear that seemed to be rising silently in my own veins as that sound kept on in the dreadful house, I swore viciously at the old man and tore his clinging hands from my arms.

came again to the wide hall and looked down at old Diaron, there was something a bit worried in my glance. He said nothing, but pursed his lips in the knowing way he had.

"Well, so you are beginning to doubt your omniscience," the expression said. I shook myself. I didn't intend to let the first setback get my goat.

"Well," I said, "one swallow doesn't make a spring and one theory doesn't prove a fact."

"There aren't any theories about Ezra's murder and Meme's." The words were coldly and calmly conclusive. Alec spoke them at my elbow.

"Well, I guess you must be right there, Alec, but if this Thing gets in there tonight and makes as much racket as you folks say it does, there's not going to be any theory about what it does to the giant black Hawkshawess now grimly ensconced therein, if Tom Frederick knows himself." I ostentatiously loosened the big forty-four strapped in its holster beneath my arm and fiddled for a moment with the other at my waist, smiling determinedly the while.

"I hope so." For all my bravado, something of the fearful uncertainty in Alec's manner and tone seemed to get across to me. I found myself

wondering if I might not be up against something supernatural.

I looked across at old Diaron leaning back against the wall with his chair legs tilted in air. His sphynx-like black face gave me no comfort.

"We might as well have a smoke while we are waiting," I opined, and pulling out my cigarettes, I offered them to my two companions.

"Thanks," Alec took one. "I never smoke anything but my old pipe, Monsieur." Diaron took out his strong scented old cob pipe and began filling it.

"If the Thing can stand the odor of that pipe of yours, Diaron, it must be a pretty tough customer," I joked. It seemed to me that if I didn't do something to relieve the serious concern of those two, and at the same time break the tension of my own rapidly heightening nervous sympathy with their mood, I would go loco.

But there seemed nothing that would bring them out of it. They both seemed wrapped in an almost tangible cloak of dread and expectant horror.

Sitting thus together—Alec and I had brought chairs from the adjoining bedroom—we smoked a while in silence. At last I could stand it no longer. I got up and with the excuse that I wanted to look around some more, I left them.

I simply had to get away from the tense atmosphere of horror in Selwyn House. Taking my hat from the hall rack, where I had left it, I clapped it on my head and went out into the garden.

As I sauntered along the weed-grown paths that had once been beautifully-laid-out brick walks, I looked up at the shadowy walls of the big pile of stone and brick that was intended for the home of happiness for young Ezra Selwyn and his bride, Mary. "So," I mused, "does life bring to naught the dreams of man."

The rising wind was gathering black clouds together like some giant fist closing over the world, and bunching great shadows to fling across and blight its light. The great

Suddenly, as the plummy branches swayed above me, I thought I saw a dim glow where but a moment previously there had been blackness.

I stopped, abruptly. My breath came in short, sharp gusts. I held myself motionless. Above me in the black velvet night towered the great mass of the octagonal tower of horror and mystery. There was no mistake. I had seen a faint glow in those windows high up there above me. "But"—I thought after the first startled moment—"what of that? The woman in there would naturally have a light. The great candles would give some such glow." Yet I continued to stand and stare. "For," I reiterated my thought, "why did you not observe the light when you first looked up there?"

"You're getting as nervous as a grandmother, Tom," I spoke aloud to myself, trying to pound reason and some sort of calming balm into my mind and my nerves. "That Hardmore woman has simply lighted a candle to investigate something." But in spite of my words, I shook myself into action and turning on my heels strode hurriedly into the house.

A Ghastly Sound

As the front door closed behind me, I heard it. I thought at first it was the sudden jar of the closing door. But only for an instant did I entertain this mistake. There was no sound in the world so unmistakable as the one that fell upon

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