

# The Creeping Thing

By CÔRA JEAN MOTEN

(Continued from page two)

my ears after the first subconscious effort to disguise it as something less sinister.

"Sc-r-r-u-u-s-h, Sc-r-u-u-s-h-h," it was—even there at the foot of the stairs—as if some huge body, reptilian, and monstrous, pervaded the whole building—encircled it in slimy folds of death.

Horror flooded my veins and froze me for a brief instant into inaction. Then, with a super-human effort of the will, I broke the bonds of terror that held me motionless and sped up the long stairs, two steps at a time. At the top, I saw Alec and old Diaron standing as I had stood for the breathing space at the bottom of the steps. With a cry of fear, old Diaron seemed to be released for the moment by the very knowledge of my presence. He flung himself into my arms, shrieking and chattering in very excess of terror. "It's come again. It's come again," he shrieked.

Alec, too, looked at me as if the renewal of the horror had sapped his courage—a courage that I had proven in many a bout with danger.

The sight of Alec's fear-filled eyes was almost my undoing. But in sudden rage at the water of fear that seemed to be rising relentlessly 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.

"Come on, you damned cowards," I shrieked, "there's a woman in there alone with that hellish creature. Reptile or devil, it is up to us to get her out of there and—" I was at the tall narrow door wrenching and tearing at the knob. Alec, pale-faced but with the grimly fatalistic courage that was a part of him, was at my elbow.

The knob slid easily in my fingers but there was no contact with the mechanism of the lock. It was as if some grim force jested with horror and made of us, outside there in the shadows, the butts of its humor. I twisted and turned. I hurled myself against that blank door. It was as if I hurled myself against a stone bulwark. There was no tremor, no sign of any giving of that grim barrier.

The sweat was pouring from my forehead. I turned by twisted face to Alec's. There was only the blankness of utter helplessness there.

Beyond in the entry to the open corridor Diaron crouched, whimpering fearfully.

Suddenly the sound ceased. The silence was as dreadful as the sound had been. More so, in fact.

With a sudden frenzied access of effort, I seized the knob again. This time it did not budge. The force that had been playing with me seemed suddenly to have reached the point of deadly earnest. It was as

if it would taunt me with my weakness and the futility of any power I might exert against it.

Beyond the door, muffled as though by great distance, I heard the sounds of struggle. There was a thrashing as of great bodies in conflict. Frightful breathings, stifled groans, and gaspings and gurglings made the night hideous with horror. I turned again to Alec.

"Is there an ax, a hatchet, anything with which we can batter this damned door in?" I hissed at him. My voice was hoarse with helpless rage at my own inaction.

"I don't know," he said. "Is there?" he shot the question at old Diaron. The words were a second registering on the fear-crazed mind of the Haitian. But before he could reply, the terrible creeping sound began again.

By this time my own efforts and the strength of the emotions aroused had almost exhausted my physical morale. I was close to going to pieces. But at the slow, long-drawn-out repetition of the uncanny creep-

ing, I grabbed desperately after my waning courage.

"Get me an ax," I called, and there was the menace of failing courage in the command. Old Diaron seemed to be awakening from his stupefying fear by the spirit of the words. He disappeared down the stairs.

Reaching over my shoulder, Alec added his strength to mine. Again we felt the slipping of the futile knob. Then, just as Diaron appeared again in the doorway—the ax in his trembling hands—the knob, suddenly and with the mockery of fiendish intelligence, seemed to catch hold. With a suddenness that gave us no time for preparation, we were precipitated into the dense darkness of the octagonal room.

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A quick memory of Alec's description of the happening when they found the body of old Meme, made me grip the flashlight that I had kept ready all through my efforts to open the door, more securely in my hand. I pressed the switch.

I do not know what I had expected to see; but whatever it was, the actuality was worse.

Lying sprawled half in, half out, of the great four poster bed, was the inert body of the huge, muscular, black woman-detective. Her head

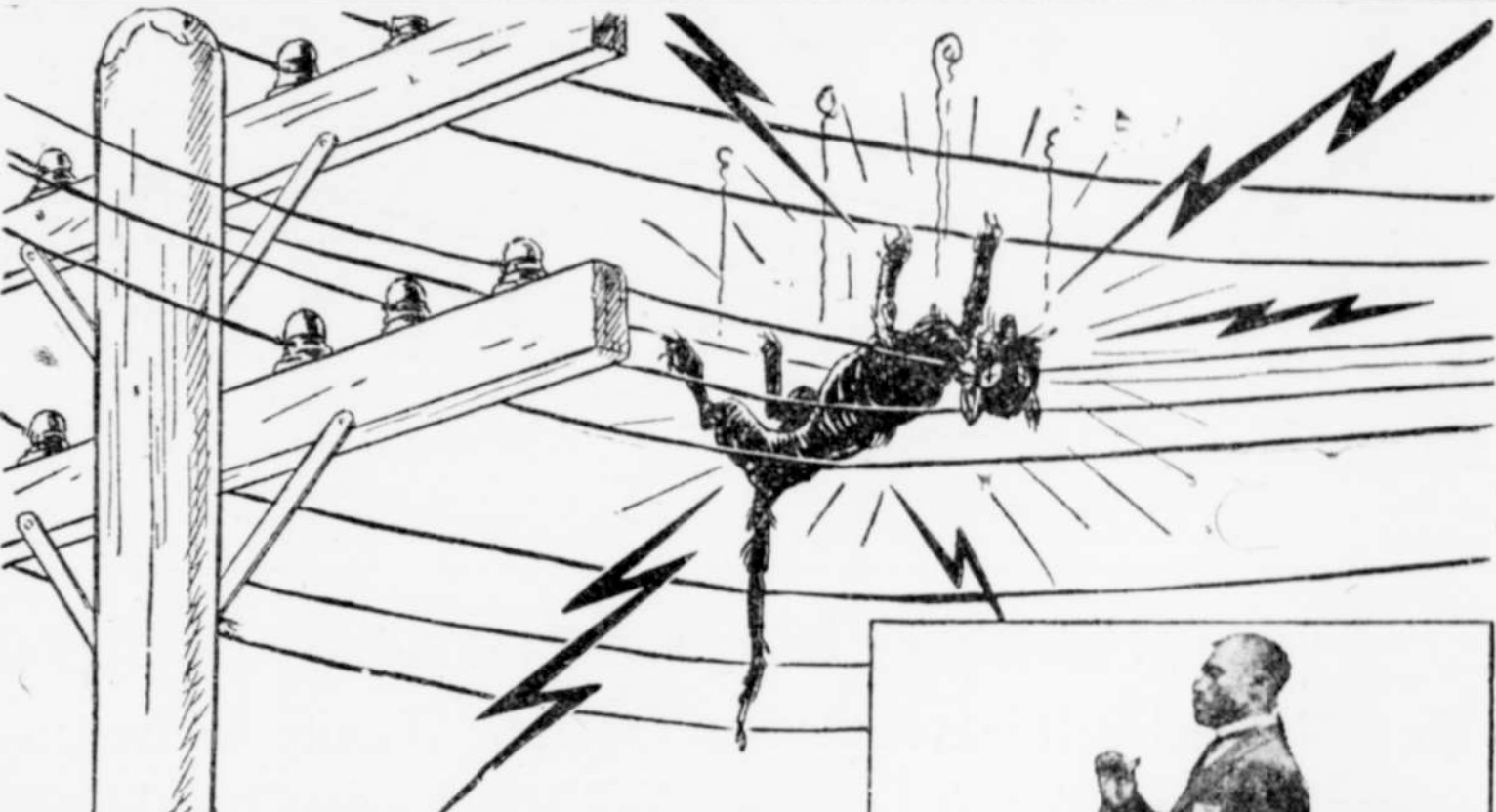
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seemed to be resting in a pool of blood. At first I thought it had been beaten in with a bludgeon. But as I cautiously drew near it, I saw that



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