

THE CREEPING THING

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The Well-Known
Serial Writer

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end of this clearing were the trees and small shrubs of the not inconsiderable grounds surrounding the Beal House.

Once within the shelter of this extensive bit of cultivated forest, I would be comparatively safe from discovery. Failing, I would have to utilize my manufactured evidence to explain my presence. I was relying on Alec, and a report of a stalled car back along the highway, to account for my approach from that direction and afoot.

The gray black shadows of the looming trees were only about twenty-five feet away. I breathed a long sigh of relief. Suddenly the silence was penetrated by the low drone of a powerful motor. I hastened my steps. The car I knew was close. It had to be, to be heard, because it had that humming purr that only the most expensive and powerful cars are equipped with. I glanced back over my shoulder. The glow from powerful headlights was visible and growing brighter in the seconds. I quickened my steps.

My outstretched arms could have touched the bole of a great elm tree, the first outpost of the blackly silhouetted mass toward which my hurrying footsteps were carrying me. Suddenly, the roughened bark of the tree trunk whose shelter was my objective, sprang out at me, every convolution, every line and crevice, limned clearly in the glare of white light. With my next convulsive step I was ensconced behind the gigantic bole, on the opposite side from the searching and revealing light.

But the light was there, beyond. The powerful, quiet purr of the motor. With the instinct of wild things and of hunters, whether of men or of animals, I stood perfectly motionless, glued to the still shadowed side of the immense tree trunk.

I knew that the white glare which had picked out every detail of the rough bark to my startled eyes had thrown my own moving body in high relief against the background of giant trees in that single instant before I had gained their shelter. I wondered if the eyes of someone in the car had seen me in that revealing instant. And—I wondered if those problematical eyes had been hostile or perhaps furtively on the alert, to guard against possible discovery of sinister secrets.

For long breathless minutes I stood there pressed against that friendly roughness. For the same long, breathless space the white light lay motionless against the shadowed darkness. The straight

boles of the big trees lay like black bars all about me. Above, the wind wavered the canopy of dark green, plummy, branches. About my feet the fantastic shadows shifted and flickered back and forth with the moving wind. No other sound broke the stillness.

Then, softly, abruptly, the whirl of the starter disturbed the quiet. My breath came in a long, hissing sigh of relief. I relaxed my tensed muscles, shifted my grip on the handle of the packing case and half turned only to freeze in mid-motion. Stealthy steps, hesitant, furtive, but unmistakable were approaching—were they approaching?

A twig snapped. I held my breath. The only sound that penetrated the silence was the receding purr of the motor-car engine.

I pressed closer to the tree bole. The darkness was all about me like a velvet mantle. A sudden coolness seemed to pervade the night. A great black cloud was revealed scurrying toward the faint moon in an instant when the rising wind swept aside a great plume of leaves and let in a view of the sky.

A Mysterious Being

I listened with every nerve fibre as well as with my ears. A faint rustling caught my ear. It was the sound of steps lifting and yet dragging lightly through fallen leaves and going swiftly. They were receding—growing fainter and further with each second. Someone besides myself was in that shadowed evirion of Beal House. And he was equally as cautious as I.

Was it someone who had entered from that momentarily parked car? Had he glimpsed me as I darted among the trees? Was he searching, stealthily and cautiously, for me, or was he trying to evade me? Was it someone who had been watching from within that shelter. Had he seen me enter? Was he on his way with news of my presence to those who had need to guard against it? Was he—? Questions hurried in tangled incoherency through my mind. Yet, I stood still for a length of time long enough to assure myself that anyone lurking near would have moved and that the last lingering sound of those hurrying, furtive footsteps was no longer audible.

At last, very cautiously, I moved away from my refuge. With one hand outstretched to fend me from

the low swinging branches and the rough boles of the trees that were everywhere about me, I proceeded to make my way in the general direction of my goal.

With many a smart rap across the head and body, and at the expense of a nicked shin and a scratched arm, I came eventually to the inner edge of the miniature wood surrounding the enclosing lawn of the big white house that I had left that afternoon. Well within the shadows, I stopped to reconspire.

The white bulk of the house glimmered dully in the half blackness of the night. The shuttered windows were darker shadows in the darkness. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted. A night bird cried. So near at hand was the cry and so eerie in the shrouded silence, that I started involuntarily, shocked out of my stillness.

On the heels of the cry and timed so exactly that it seemed almost to be an answer to it, an automobile honked in the distance, three times loud and long and then twice sharp and short.

The Room

Stillness followed. I hunched my shoulders and moved a few steps toward the open space. The wind sharpened. The rain came down faster. The light in the open was an opaque grayness. Aflaw that dark gray blankness a faint spear of orange light sprang out. I raised my eyes to the dim bulk of the white house. The shutter of a window on the left hand side as I faced the front was slightly ajar.

It was from that half opened shutter that the orange beam came. It was the room that I had paid for

in the name of my friend that afternoon. Suddenly I made a decision. I HAD TO SEE IN THAT ROOM.

Beyond me and in a straight line with me, about half way between my (Continued from page eight)



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