

Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

The **GRAY
KILLER**
by Everil Worrell



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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The GRAY KILLER



"The figure came close to my bed, and by a supreme miracle of will I opened my mouth."

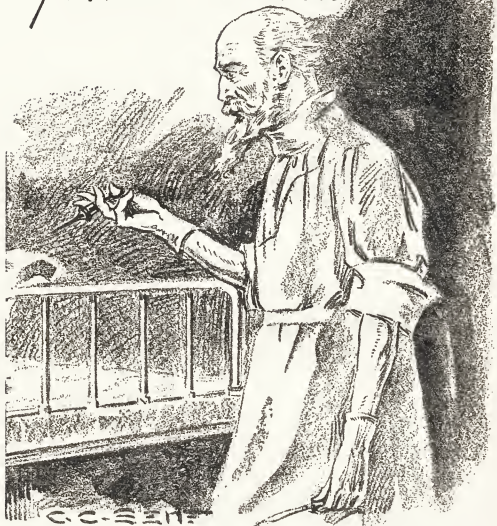
Narrative and Diary of Marion Wheaton, Patient in R—— Hospital from November 15 to November 28, 1928.

SUCH terrible things are happening here that I feel the need to set them down, as I dare not speak to anyone of my thoughts and of my fears. I will go back and begin at the beginning, a

few nights ago. Later, if there is more to be written—God grant there may not be!—I will continue this narrative as a diary.

It began three nights ago—and this is the twenty-sixth of November. The red light in the corridor outside my door burned like an eye lit with an ugly menace. In the dead of night bells sounded intermittently—the shrill ringing of the

by *Everil Worrell*



telephone, or the rasping buzzer that could mean so many things. Cold, and the need to borrow strength to spread a blanket within fingertip reach. Night loneliness and night terrors; fear of the known and of the unknown; fear of a stabbing agony called life and of a veiled release called death. Terror of pain. And in the shut-in private rooms and in the bare, orderly wards, that

hydra-headed horror of a hospital—pain itself.

I, too, was in pain. A rusty nail had gone through the thin sole of my slipper and torn a gash in my foot which nearly ended in blood poisoning. And on the night of November twenty-third I lay tossing in my hot bed, feeling the burning lances of flame shoot upward from the horribly swollen foot.

Lying so, I had the horrors, rather. I was not out of the woods, not by a long shot. My foot might mend rapidly, or it might yet take a sudden turn for the worse, in which case I should leave this narrow room only for a narrower one. The woman across the hall, who had had her fourth operation for cancer, would be leaving so, perhaps, and would, I believed, be glad to go. Her broken moans had seemed to tell me that. And there was a man down the corridor who groaned. . . .

Well, I wished it were over and I were well, and safely out of the place. And in the meantime the bed-covers were too heavy and were burning me up, adding needlessly to my tortures.

I rang my bell, and listened to its dull, rasping sound in the distance. In some hospitals only a light flashed on a signal board and over your door—better arrangement, I'd say.

I waited for Miss Larcom or Miss Wurt. Miss Larcom would seem glad to see me—she would make me feel better and think of little extra things to do for me. Miss Wurt would snap at me, cross at having had to put down her novel. And she would do as little as she could, and very likely drag the covers roughly over that fiendish foot of mine. But if Miss Wurt were on the floor to-night, I should likely have to ring again.

I waited. It didn't do to ring again too soon. Then Miss Wurt would be certain to let those covers saw across my foot—or was that one of those sick, invalid fancies of which one hears? Still, all nurses aren't alike, and they aren't all angels.

I waited, and heard an unfamiliar footstep, that seemed to slide a little—not to shuffle but to slide, as a serpent would slide on hard ground or on a hard floor. Why did a coldness strike me then, that made me draw

closer the covers that had irked me? And why did a sudden vivid consciousness of life and of the earth on which my days were spent sweep over me? I was afraid of the *emptiness* outside this world I knew; a realization of the vacant chasm of space swept my soul. Was it death I feared in that moment, or had I an instinctive prescience of strange Things—real, but unknown?

Siek terrors of a hospital night! I fixed my gaze unwaveringly on the doorway. Mustn't let Miss Wurt catch me looking or acting goofy. It would be fun for her to recommend me to the psychopathic ward. (No, of course I didn't think that seriously; of course I was just being an imaginative sick person.)

At any rate, my whole attention was on the dim-lit oblong of my door. The footsteps that sounded, somehow, so unusual, paused before a figure was framed there; not, however, before one of the feet that made the sliding sound was visible. There it was, for a few moments, alone: the end of a shoe that seemed enormously long. Then the figure caught up with the foot—not Miss Wurt or Miss Larcom, but a man.

A man dressed in gray. A man whose *face* (in the half-light, at least) was gray. Whose face, whose form, whose way of walking, I—didn't like. My fingers sought the bell cord.

Before they found it, however, the room was flooded with light. That seemed reassuring, somehow, and I was ashamed of my panic—my flightiness I ought perhaps to call it.

In a hospital you get used to people going and coming, surprizing you when you're awake, surprizing you when you're asleep. Strange nurses with thermometers happen in every day; strange house doctors now and then. I didn't need his statement now to fit him in.

"I'm Dr. Zingler, the new house doctor. Haven't seen you before. I

have heard you had a hard time with your foot. I came because I heard your bell, and the nurse did not answer. Miss Wurt—I will send her, though I am afraid she moves slowly. In the meantime, if it is pain, I can help you."

In a reaction from the fantastic fear that had laid hold on me, I smiled warmly up at the strangely pallid face. Grayish skin, sunken cheeks, hollow, *hungry* eyes, and a strange, deathly immobility of feature—if an attractive personality was necessary to succeed the new house doctor was foredoomed to failure. Yet his professional manner was good enough, though somehow rather strange, too. Suave and smooth, but—indescribably queer.

I smiled, with an effort.

"Pain—yes, my foot hurts," I answered him, trying to make light of it. "But I rang for Miss Wurt merely to have her turn back the top coverings, to cool my foot, especially. I feel as though it were roasting over red-hot coals."

The ill-favored face looking down on me seemed to attempt a smile of sympathy.

"Miss Wurt will be able to make you more comfortable, no doubt," it promised. "But I think I can do more—I think I can insure you sleep for the remainder of the night. I'll just give you a hypodermic."

A wave of gratitude swept over me. I'd had a few brief intervals of forgetfulness when the pain was greatest, by the administration of a hypo; lately these had been discontinued. Complete oblivion for a few hours would be welcome now.

I watched Dr. Zingler as he busied himself with a small box and its contents, which he took from a pocket; did the man carry hypodermics and opiates always like this, ready for instant use? Generally the doctors rang for a nurse. . . .

THE hypodermic, held in a bony, long-fingered hand of the same unholy color as Dr. Zingler's face, moved toward me. I glanced at it, idly, baring my arm for the merciful prick. It was near my face as I looked at it. Heavens, how strange! Or was it due to fever that every little happening of this night took on a grotesque significance? Be that as it may, the appearance of the liquid in the hollow glass tube was violently repulsive to me: a viscid, slimy-looking, yellowish white, with an overtone of that same gray color that made the hand holding it look like the hand of a corpse. At the same moment an odor assailed my nostrils: a putrescent aroma of decay; the very essence of death embodied in a smell.

The needle was approaching my arm when I drew away from it—hurled myself from it, rather, forgetful of my foot, crouching in the far corner of my narrow hospital bed like a trapped animal at bay.

"No, no!" I cried, my voice rising queerly. "I won't take it, I'm not in pain, I need nothing! I'll ring, I'll scream! I'll arouse the whole floor!"

The gray doctor—so I thought of him and shall always think of him—withdrew his hand, an expression of extreme contempt stamping his immobile features.

"Of course, if you prefer to bear your pain!" he shrugged. "Though it hardly needed such vehemence. There's a ward for patients like you where the walls are thicker. As to arousing *this* floor, I think you've succeeded in your humane endeavor. Listen!"

I listened. God forgive me, I had succeeded. The woman with the cancer was moaning pitifully—but for the opiates given her so heavily she would doubtless be shrieking. Down the hall the man with the grievous hurt was groaning, delirious too:

"Mary, you've come at last! Oh, no, nurse, it's only you! She died in the accident—I remember," he

wailed. And then, again: "Oh, Mary, at last!"

Also the little boy who had had a tonsillectomy done yesterday was screaming down the hall, hoarse, half-intelligible words.

I buried my head beneath the covers in an agony of shame as I heard the sliding step of the doctor withdrawing. Through my door it passed and across the hall, and I heard the familiar hinge of the cancer patient's door creak. Well, perhaps he could quiet her, the new doctor. What had been the matter with me, anyway? Had I been mad?

Another footstep approached my door, a well-known footstep. Miss Wurt's healthy, round, red face appeared like an unamiable harvest moon. She fixed my covers, not so roughly as I had feared, and stood ready to depart. "That all?" she suggested hopefully.

"Almost," I said, detaining her with an urgent gesture. "But tell me—is Dr. Zingler often on the floor at night? He's—a queer-looking man, is he not?"

The red of Miss Wurt's face deepened to a mild purple. Some attraction between her and the new doctor, on her side at least, that was certain. Then my remark had been undiplomatic.

It had.

"I've never heard any of the patients comment on Dr. Zingler's personal appearance," she said in icy reproof.

I was glad to drop the subject. Next morning, however, I had a real surprise.

Miss Edgeworth, my day nurse, was a friendly girl, who had fallen into a habit of gossiping with me about the people and happenings around the hospital. After the night I hailed her coming with relief. I'd even dare tell her if I chose, I thought, that the new house doctor gave me the horrors.

"Have you seen Dr. Zingler?" I

began tentatively as she wet my wash cloth, preparatory to washing my face.

"Dr. Zingler?" she answered with a quick look of pleasure and what appeared to be a blush. "He's the kind that makes the grind go easier. Handsome, too, isn't he? Or have you seen him?"

"Yes——" I hesitated. "I've seen him."

I said no more. Surely he must hypnotize the nurses. That gray pallor, those mask-like features—handsome! I turned my face to the wall and lay brooding. My foot was better today. I had leisure to wonder if I need feel graver concern for my mind. Last night was a nightmare, and the new "handsome" doctor a hideous ghoul! No, no—what was I thinking? Things that weren't possible! Had I fallen victim to an obsession, a hallucination?

THE greater part of the morning I brooded. And then I heard something that made me forget myself.

The house doctor whom I was accustomed to see on his daily rounds, Dr. Rountree, called a little after 3. Like Nurse Edgeworth, he occasionally stayed for a short chat. Today, however, I knew at once that he had something important on his mind—something, perhaps, which he hesitated to speak of.

"Have you heard the news about that cancer patient you've been grieving so over?" he began.

"The cancer case!"

I think there was horror in my voice. In my mind was a picture of a gray figure stalking, *sliding* in at the door behind which those hopeless moans were uttered. I think I was prepared for something gruesome, something incredibly awful, certainly not for Dr. Rountree's next words.

"It's something like a miracle, it seems," he said. "You know, we don't talk about these things, but this

case was really hopeless. There couldn't have been another operation; and the thing still was gnawing at her vitals. Well! It was a case for increasing opiates until the end, with the opiates losing their power to alleviate. You've heard her moaning in spite of them. But today! Have you heard her? Listen!"

I listened. No, it was true, I had not heard her. The man down the corridor still groaned. The little boy who had lost his tonsils did not cry so much. The cancer patient had been silent all the morning, as she was now.

Again I felt a recurrence of my first horror.

"Not—dead!" The word one hates even to think in a hospital.

But Dr. Rountree shook his head and made a quick gesture with his hand that he used in moments of great enthusiasm.

"Oh, no, no!" he said quickly. "So much better that we've discontinued all opiates. Fully conscious and out of pain. A miracle, positively. She had an opiate last night, she says, though it isn't down on her chart. She was semi-conscious and didn't know who gave it to her, but she had that one—and hasn't needed one since. And she's stronger, too; the mere cessation of pain, I suppose, has given her the will to live. If it goes on this way her wound will heal and she'll go out in two weeks time, a well woman. I've never heard of such a thing!"

"Dr. Zingler went into her room. He had wanted to give me an opiate and must have given her hers," I said. "He's—rather hard to look at, isn't he?"

Dr. Rountree's face showed puzzlement.

"Didn't know Zingler was on last night, but he'd leave the opiates to the nurses, I should think," he said shortly. "He'll have the patients expecting the doctors to wash their faces for them next. As to looks, you're the first girl I've heard express a con-

trary opinion. Most of the nurses seem to think he's an Atlantic City beauty."

I tried during the rest of the long day to be glad of my neighbor's good fortune. I could not. I could only think with a kind of shrinking dread of the "handsome" Dr. Zingler slipping in at her door in the dead of night.

Of course it was only coincidence that the gray doctor had administered the woman's last opiate, and that the next day she had been so miraculously better. Only coincidence. Nevertheless, I inconsistently told myself that I would rather die than be miraculously cured by Dr. Zingler.

LIGHT came.

Again the red light in the darkened hall loomed sinister, ominous, and the shadows it gave were macabre. My foot was better tonight—still a tortured thing of fire and anguish, yet definitely better. If I had rung for a sedative which I had had upon request several times, I might have slept. But I didn't want to sleep, though I knew that sleep was necessary to my recovery. I had a horror of sleeping and waking to see a long, narrow foot pressing the threshold of my door—to see a gray figure creeping in at that door.

I would have given worlds to be able to lock my door on the inside. Since that was impossible I had it left open as usual, and kept my eye on the dull red oblong of light.

Hour after hour. The man down the hall was groaning, now—groaning in delirium, raving of the accident that brought him here. Not an auto smash, but a derailed train. I'd read of it. Only a few passengers hurt, but this man's wife, Mary, had been killed. He was crying her name out loud again, calling to her.

His groans—they hurt. Hospital nights! Awfulness of pain. Oh, why didn't someone hear and go to him?

Miss Wurt on duty again, of course, and reading in whatever quiet corner she spent her nights. If she heard the groans, she didn't care. Oh, *why didn't someone go?*

And then I knew someone was going. For I heard footsteps, and they were the slow, sliding steps of Dr. Zingler. A door opened and shut. After a little, the groaning was cut off suddenly, as though a sound-proof wall had intervened.

Then I lay listening, till, after a long time, those sliding footsteps crept into the corridor. No sound, now, from the man who had groaned, as they retreated—going in the opposite direction from my door, thank God!

And still not another sound from the man who had groaned. The sufferer might have had his throat cut.

Next morning, however:

"You'd never imagine the things that are going on in this hospital!" Miss Edgeworth cried as she brought my morning thermometer. "Too bad *you* haven't come in for a miracle. You're mending, but slowly. Not like the case across the hall, I mean, or the railroad accident."

"The man from the railroad wreck—oh, what became of him?" My voice was sharp with anxiety, and Miss Edgeworth showed surprise and a little disapproval.

"You're guessing wrong, when you ask what's 'become of' him in *that* tone!" she said. "What's 'become of' him is that an almost hopeless spine condition is miraculously improved. He is out of pain. He can move his legs under the covers and we thought they'd always be like fallen logs. That's what's 'become of' him!"

I turned my face to the wall, because I couldn't smile, couldn't show the decent human emotion of pleasure at another's merciful reprieve. Why couldn't I? Because my mind could image just one thing: the sound of those horrible, sliding footsteps last night, the picture I had visualized

then of a lanky form and a gray death's-head creeping in at the delirious man's door—creeping out, leaving silence behind him.

What kind of opiate did the new doctor dispense, that not only alleviated pain, but cured everything from cancer to an injured back? Well, of course there was no connection; if there were, I should be honoring the gray doctor as a worker of miracles. But I didn't. I felt a greater horror of him than ever—and that horror extended itself now to the two who had so strangely recovered after his midnight visits.

Not for all the gold in the mint would I have entered the room of the cancer patient, or the room of the man who had been in the railroad wreck.

THE next two nights I slept heavily. My foot was improving more rapidly, and I was worn out with pain and with night vigils. True, I closed my eyes with a sense of surrounding peril of some queer, undreamable kind, but I closed them nevertheless, and opened them only as the winter dawn crept in at my windows. And on the second morning I think I must have given Miss Edgeworth a real shock.

She had merely mentioned the little boy who had had his tonsils out.

"Rodney Penning—the little tonsillectomy case——" she began.

I caught her arm in a grip that must have hurt.

"Has *he* had a sudden strange improvement?" I asked in a tone that rang unpleasantly in my own ears.

Miss Edgeworth drew her arm away from me and passed the fingers of her other hand speculatively over her sleeve.

"I think you've bruised me, Miss Wheaton," she said reprovingly; "I must speak to the head nurse about a sedative for you. I don't know why you should be so dreadfully nervous,

now your foot's doing so well. As for little Rodney Penning—I don't understand your question. Of course he's improved. Many children leave the hospital on the day of a tonsillectomy. Little Rodney is going home tomorrow."

I CAN hardly write of the horror of that tomorrow. I can hear yet the screams of little Rodney's mother—when little Rodney went home.

The little lad had cried pitifully after the operation on his throat. That wound had been agony for a child to bear. But the making of it was merciful: *that* cutting had been done under anesthesia. There was no anesthetic when the little boy's newly healed throat was neatly cut from the outside, so that his head was nearly severed from the trunk, and a great pool of blood had washed with red, as though a careless painter had smeared his paints, the skylight over the operating-room. The skylight? Yes, that was where the body was found, a shapeless black blob against the wan-starred sky of early dawn.

But the worst thing of all I have not yet written down. The worst thing of all was also the thing in which lay the greatest mystery.

Surely little Rodney Penning had been done to death by a mad fiend, for his body was transfixed with a needle-shaped bar of iron, bearing on the pointed end a barb suggestive of the barb of a fish-hook. And to the blunter end of the bar appended a fine but strong steel cord. It was as if some maniac obsessed with the harmless sport of fishing had played at using human bait. Only, if so, scarce half a mile from the hospital pounded the surf of the Atlantic. So why did he choose the hospital roof to carry out his grim travesty?

Writing this has turned me quite sick. If it had not been for this horror, I would soon be able to leave the hospital—and to tell the truth, I have

conceived a horror of the whole place. The condition of my foot now permits me to get around on crutches. But they say, and my doctor says, that I am too nearly in a state of nervous collapse to permit of my discharge. And besides, an eruption has appeared on my body which has resulted from my near approach to blood poisoning, and which they say requires observation. I am on a special diet, and everyone is particularly thoughtful and considerate—even Miss Wurt. But I do not see how I can get better with this horror clutching at my heart.

They didn't mean to tell me, of course. But I had heard the screams of little Rodney's mother, and wormed the truth out of black Hannah, who brings the patients' trays. I was hysterical then, and from something the house doctor who is my friend, Dr. Rountree, said to me, I must have said some terrible things about Dr. Zingler. Dr. Rountree's eyes are dark and very deep, and can be very kindly and pitiful, and I know that he meant me to take what he said very seriously.

"Don't speak of your feeling about Dr. Zingler, Miss Wheaton, to *anyone*. Much better yet, never speak of Dr. Zingler at all."

I wish I had friends in this city. I wish I could be moved at once to another hospital. I don't seem quite able to arrange such a thing from inside. I spoke of it to my doctor, who is a great specialist, and so of course very impersonal. His eyes narrowed as he answered me, and I knew that he was studying me—regarding me as a case, and not as a human being.

"I can't order all my patients out of the hospital because of the most awful occurrence that has given you the horrors, Miss Wheaton, for I don't attribute it to any negligence on the part of the hospital officials. None of the other patients know of this thing. You gossip too much, ask too many questions for your own good, inquire

too much into the goings on around the hospital. Then I must add to that an unfortunate tendency on your part to take personal dislikes, and most unreasonable ones. Not, for instance, that it injures Dr. Zingler to have you conceive an abhorrence for him—not, even, that it discredits him that you should accuse him in a hysterical fit and utterly without reason, of being the fiend killer. No, it only does *you* harm."

The lecture went on. I turned my face to the wall. When the head nurse came in, a person who seems to have considerable authority, I said meekly that I would like to be moved to another hospital. She said only:

"There, there! Dr. Smythe-Burns wants you to stay here. We'll have you feeling more like yourself before long. And Dr. Smythe-Burns orders your nightly sedative continued. We'll have no more midnight blues."

Tuesday, November 26.

FOR all that, I had a nightmare last night.

I dreamed, most realistically, that I lay in the half stupor which bridges, under a heavy sedative, the awful chasm between "Visitors out" and the dawn light. And as I lay so, a figure came creeping in at my door—creeping on long, strangely sliding feet, and carrying in a gray, bony hand a hypodermic. The figure came close to my bed, and by a supreme miracle of will I opened my mouth and gasped my lungs full of air for a scream that would have roused the floor, if not the whole hospital—while my heavy hand moved spasmodically to grasp the bell-cord. For a while my eyes locked with the deep-set eyes in the gray face bent above me. Those eyes into which I looked were cold as the eyes of a serpent—utterly inhuman, I thought.

After awhile the eyes changed in expression. The lean, gray figure shrugged its shoulders and drew

away. Then—thank God!—it left me. But I had a sort of knowledge that it meant to wait until a time when I would fail to wake.

I sounded out Miss Edgeworth about the strength of the sedative I am getting. She says it is enough to hold me, most likely, in a deep sleep all night. If I dared tell her about *last* night—but somehow I don't, after Dr. Dr. Rountree's warning. I asked my doctor, when he came, to reduce the strength of the sedative, saying I did not like to sleep so heavily it would take a great deal to waken me. He shook his head, and said I'd get over my nervous fancies, and assured me that all entrances and exits and fire escapes are being patrolled. I doubt that. It costs money to set a patrol, and I don't think it's done in a place where a single crime has occurred. In cases of *repeated* horrors—

I mustn't let myself think of the things that may be *going* to happen. But—I doubt, anyway, if any ordinary patrol could catch the gray doctor.

Wednesday, November 27.

I MADE a last attempt today, and failed.

I don't know why I had hesitated to ask Dr. Rountree's intervention. Perhaps because I like him so much. When you feel yourself sinking in a horrible morass of dread and terror, there isn't much time or energy to spare for ignoring real things. Vincent Rountree has come to be a sort of symbol to me—a symbol of all that is sound and normal, humanly healthy, pityingly tender and strong. I think he likes me too; I have been studying myself in a hand mirror at times, wondering why he should—for the dark blue of my eyes looks too sad with the dark blue circles worry-has set beneath them. My hair is silky still and softly brown, but the natural curl has been all dragged out of it by fever and tossing, and although

the eruption is not on my face, my face is white and drawn-looking.

It was late this afternoon when he stopped in for the two minutes' chat I look forward to, and the sunlight slanting in at my window had already the hazy tinge of an early winter sunset.

"Could *you* do anything, Dr. Rountree—in your capacity of house doctor——" I began.

His answer put an end to my last hope.

"Miss Wheaton, I've already tried. I suggested to your doctor—much more strongly than etiquette permits—well, the situation is delicate. He is afraid of offending the hospital authorities with no reason. If you discharged him and called another doctor, the situation would be much the same. I hope you'll try to take it as calmly as you can, for really all the patients in this hospital should be

very safe now. It is true that special precautions are being taken, with regard to seeing visitors out, and the like."

I did not answer. The hazy yellow sunlight was fading fast—and with it my hopes. All at once a thought had definitely formed itself in my mind: that I should not leave the hospital at all—not living. I wished that I had died of blood poisoning. That is not so dreadful—not nearly so dreadful as some other things.

Vincent Rountree bridged the dark chasm of my thoughts, speaking almost shyly.

"I gained just one point—permission to take you out some evening soon in my car, in case you should consent to go. It would rest and refresh you——"

How grimly wrong he was in *that* surmise!



"He gagged her and carried her from the room."

C. COHEN

Thursday, November 28.

ANOTHER weary night has passed and morning come—a morning of driving rain and wind that howled around the hospital's corners like a banshee. It was a fit day for a culmination of horrors—though no day could be evil enough for the gruesome discoveries this day has brought forth.

At 7 in the morning, the hour when the day nurses relieve the night shift, I heard one of the girls crying bitterly. There was a good deal of running around, then voices raised and lowered quickly.

After half an hour or so of this, there was a silence. Such a silence as I hope never again to hear. It was like the sudden stalking of death itself into the midst of a group of agitated, sentient beings.

My heart was beating heavily as I listened alone in my room. And then I heard sounds of sobbing—of more than one person sobbing.

But a little later, I beheld an agony of grief that called to mind Gethsemane.

One of the night nurses had come to the end of the corridor where my room was—to get away from the others, I suppose. She did not see that my door was open—did not even look at it. She leaned against the wall, shaking from head to foot, making no attempt to cover her face. Her arms hung down limply, as though there was no life in them. From one hand dangled her nurse's cap. Her face was so drawn and contorted with anguish that her own mother would not have known her, and her wide eyes seemed to stare as at a specter. No tears came to ease her soundless, shattering sobbing.

When I could not stand it any longer, I called to the girl, and she came as though she were walking in her sleep, and stood in my door.

"Won't you please—please tell me what has happened?" I begged.

Still in that sleep-walking manner, she answered me, her words sounding like the words of a thing that has been learned by heart:

"I am—I was—in charge of the night nursery—the little, new babies you know. Last night after the last feeding I fell asleep. Somehow I overslept, and so no one knew what has happened until the day shift came on."

"And—what has happened?" I prompted her in spite of myself, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"One of the babies—the youngest little baby—a little baby two days old—"

Suddenly a realization seemed to strike the girl. I was a patient. She was a nurse. She had said too much to stop now—but she mustn't tell me anything too dreadful.

"A baby was kidnaped last night," she ended lamely.

Kidnaped! It is a terrible, dreadful thing for a little baby to be kidnaped—to disappear. But I think I know—oh, yes, I know what blacker horror the word covered.

I have not forgotten little Rodney Penning.

Afternoon.

ONE of the unfortunate nurse's friends came hunting for her and took her away. And all the weary, dreary day of driving rain, gloom was like an evil fog in the hospital. This time, no one can forget the tragedy for a moment. The nurses seldom talk together and if they do they seem half afraid of the sound of their own voices.

One selfish thought came to give me relief—that now, perhaps Dr. Smythe-Burns would sanction my removal. Perhaps—and yet, perhaps not! The web of hospital and professional etiquette is too deep for me to fathom, as it has proved too strong for me to

break. In any case, Dr. Smythe-Burns has not been in today, and I shall have to wait for his next visit. Another curious thing about hospital etiquette is that you can't telephone your doctor from the hospital. Anything he needs to know about you, someone else will tell him—perhaps. At any rate, *you* can't.

As I write, there is a congregation of doctors and nurses outside the closed door of the cancer patient across the way. A while ago I heard them gathered outside another door down the corridor. I wonder what can have happened to excite them—for I am sure they seem excited. At least the woman who had cancer has not disappeared, nor has she had a recurrence of pain. I saw her through her half-opened door this morning, eating a hearty breakfast.

Those worried faces outside her door grow graver and graver. Surely this one day can bear no heavier burden of evil than it has already disclosed.

I can't hear the voices across the hall. I am glad. I don't want to hear them. Those faces are too much to have seen, in their worry and—yes, *horror and fear again*. If any more black mishaps are to be known, I want to be spared them. I have almost reached the point where I can endure no more.

Now they are talking louder. I am afraid I shall hear—*something I don't want to hear*.

"Dr. Fritz, we didn't dare pronounce in so grave a matter until we had *your* opinion—"

"And at the same time the patient in 26—the railroad accident case—"

"Both had made miraculous recoveries—pitiful, to end in this!"

"But, the coincidence!"

"Her husband will be heart-broken. Hard to tell him—but there's no possible course but immediate isolation."

"I hardly think before tomorrow—"

"They can be sent away tomorrow. There's a small colony—"

"Could a cancer disappearing suddenly, then, take *this* form?"

"Nurse, you'd make a very imaginative research scientist. Certainly not! And in *his* case, it was merely a railroad accident."

"But for both of them to have—"

• • • • •

Before writing the word that must come next, I fainted.

I had written, not everything that I heard said, but as much as I had time for. At the end I fainted—I don't know how long I have been unconscious here alone. But now I must finish—must write that horrible word:

Leprosy!

The gray doctor. The hypodermic filled with a strange, filthy-smelling stuff—which he intended to shoot into *my* veins, too. Dr. Zingler, the gray doctor, the gray fiend! And I mustn't speak of these horrors; of the things I am thinking—not to anyone. . . .

My hand is shaking so that I can hardly write, and I am sobbing—dry, tearing sobs like those of the nurse this morning. But mine are not soundless as hers were—I must put this book away, for I am losing all control of myself—someone is coming. . . .

Chart of patient Marion Wheaton, November 28, 1929.

DELIRIOUS as result of recent catastrophe in hospital. Shows mental aberration as well, however, accusing one of the house doctors of horrible and fantastic crimes. Ordered detained for observation a short while, then, failing improvement, transfer to a psychopathic institution. The house doctor who is the subject of the patient's hallucination has been kept from her presence. Dr. Rountree is

given permission to take the patient out in his car when the weather permits.

Diary of Marion Wheaton, November 29, 10 P. M.

I AM keeping this small notebook always in the pocket of my dressing-gown now. I have a feeling that it may some day furnish important evidence—perhaps after I have been locked up in an insane asylum, or perhaps after I am dead. The latter seems to be most likely. More and more as the moments pass, I feel that my life while I stay here is hanging by a thread. Removal, even to the hospital for the insane, would be merciful; I doubt if I shall live to know that mercy.

This evening Dr. Rountree took me for the ride which was to have calmed my nerves. Thank God, he at least knows that my mind is not unhinged. He even talks to me freely of the things which are supposed to be kept from me—and that goes far to restore my mental balance and self-confidence.

"I can't understand your feeling about Zingler," he said. "I find him a likable chap. However—just try again, try still harder, not to refer to that feeling.

"And I know there's no reason for all this whispering behind your back. Today, for instance—you've heard them talking all day over some new excitement, I know. As a matter of fact, it's leaked out; everyone in the hospital has heard of it. It's this. Those two patients in 19 and 26 have developed leprosy in an unheard-of manner—as though a noxious plant were to strike root in soil where it had not been sown, and to grow to maturity in the passing of a night. An unheard-of change in human tissues!

"However, today's *new* mystery is merely this: the man in 26 has been removed to a leper colony; the woman in 19, however, has—disappeared."

I gave a sudden, startled cry.

"No—no!" he reassured me, quickly. "Not another murder tragedy—simply and really a disappearance. Her husband seems completely mystified; but somehow, someone has saved her from incarceration, I suppose. A pity too, since leprosy may now often be cured."

I leaned back in my seat. The sea wind was in my face—I felt relaxed for the first time in days. But of course—I couldn't forget the things in both our minds.

"I don't want any horrible details," I said. "But about the—*the* little baby who was—kidnaped—was there, that time, any clue at all?"

Vincent Rountree nodded. "One clue, pointing to the hypothesis that the maniac may be a religious fanatic," he said shortly. "On a flat part of the roof, a sort of altar—"

I wondered. Would a doctor of medicine be likely to be a religious fanatic? Could I, after all, be wrong?

I felt myself shaking, and he felt it too as his arm touched mine.

"Try to forget!" he urged. "There are, after all, other things—things of beauty. Night—stars—the sea"—his last word was shaped soundlessly rather than spoken; I thought that it was—"you!"

He parked the car near the beach. I am able to walk with a cane, now, and so I took his arm and we walked along the sand.

God! We walked along the sand!

It was I who saw first, caught against one of the dry rocks of a jetty above the level of high tide—something. Something—a hank of white fuzz in the starlight. No, not exactly fuzz. A hank, grayish white, of something like human hair.

A hank of gray-white hair, roughly or carelessly torn from a woman's head.

It was Vincent, then, who saw how the sand was tumbled and rough and uneven, in an irregular patch some six feet long and two or three feet wide. Six feet by two or three!

Both of us felt that it was necessary—a duty, at least—to make sure, to investigate—to find out if there were anything hidden beneath that oblong of tumbled sand.

I waited alone at a little distance with my back turned. Vincent came to me very soon. His face was livid in the starlight, and he looked ill.

"I am a doctor, and I've seen things—" he began. Then he pulled himself together. "We'll both be called as witnesses of this, but you must come away. It—was very near the surface. It—was the woman who had cancer—who had leprosy. Her disappearance was—not an escape."

Back at the hospital, I was taken directly to my room and prepared for the night, with the usual sedative—unless, perhaps, they may have strengthened it in view of the experience I have just passed through. I have written this in bed, and will slip the book into the handkerchief pocket of the crêpe de chine gown I am wearing.

The hour for "Visitors out" has passed. The hall lights are out, except the dim light from the far end of the hall and the nearer, lurid red light that I have always disliked, as though I knew somehow that *sometime* I was to see by that light a thing that would terrify me—live through, in its glare, something more dreadful than all that has come, so far, to me myself. Is tonight the night? More than ever, I am afraid. That red light! The light of morning shining through the blood-stained skylight over the operating-room on the morning when Rodney Penning lay murdered there, must have been of such a color.

I wish that I could stay awake—tonight of all nights.

I wish by some happy miraele I could know that for this one night that gray figure was outside the hospital walls. Does a house doctor always "sleep in"?

I feel that tonight I *must* keep awake. But can I?

I can not. I—am going . . .

Last entry in Marion Wheaton's hospital diary. Written between midnight and 2 a. m., November 28.

IN THE little time he has been gone, I have been praying for mercy. I can not feel that my prayers will be answered. Was there mercy for little Rodney Penning? For the new-born baby taken from the nursery? Was there mercy for the woman who had cancer?

There is a chance that he may overlook the small diary notebook and pencil tucked in the pocket of my nightgown with my handkerchief. In that unlikely event, this will serve as evidence.

I must hurry. At any moment he will return. He is on the roof by the skylight, and I can hear him mumbling—a sort of chant. He *has*, then, a religious mania. But the fiend is—Dr. Zingler.

I waked to find him bending over me, and I waked too late. He crammed a large handkerchief into my mouth before terror had struggled through my stupor. But tonight, he had no hypodermic.

"A large bait—*It* must want a larger sacrifice," he was saying. And his eyes—I swear they were not human, somehow. They were as ruthlessly cruel as the eyes of a serpent.

Pressing the handkerchief down my throat so that I was half strangled, he dragged me from my bed and carried me down the hall. And Miss Wurt saw us—she passed by the stairs just as he started to mount them, and she

saw us, and started back in horror. But she made no move to help me, only shrank away. Nor has she given any alarm, for—God pity me!—I have been strapped to the operating-table by ankles and body for fully half an hour, waiting for his return with that sharp knife he chose before he went out and somehow reached the roof and began pattering about up there—and chanting.

By turns he called me a "bait" and a "sacrifice." Yes, the gray doctor is a fiend—a mad fiend! He will butcher me here, and I shall die trying to scream, with this gag in my mouth; I shall die in agony and terror unspeakable—and he will merely be locked up somewhere afterward.

His voice is rising as he chants. Soon, now—

* * * *

He is worse than a fiend and a maniac. He is in league with supernal powers of evil.

As he chanted, I saw for a little while, through the skylight—a *Thing*. I can think of no word for it. It seemed to swoop down suddenly, as from a great distance—as though a monster had emerged from the cold abyss between the stars. And it was monster-size, so that I saw only a little part of it—and that was a sort of huge, pulsing projection which seemed to press against the skylight—and in which there was something that might have been either eye or mouth—I believe it to be both. A mouth that sees; an eye that may devour.

The gray doctor must not have expected his celestial visitant quite so soon; for I heard running feet on the roof—and now I hear him outside the door of the operating-room, fumbling with the lock. He had locked it after him. It will take but an instant—

May God—Who surely reigns supreme somewhere beyond such foul blasphemies as haunt space—have mercy on my soul!

And if this testimony is accepted, do not treat Dr. Zingler as an ordinary maniac. He is—

Excerpt from the testimony of Nurse Wurt, following her confession.

OF COURSE I knew that "the gray doctor" was not Dr. Zingler, though I was on night duty and Dr. Zingler was seldom on the floor at night.

This stranger appeared—I didn't know how. He made love to me. I had never been noticed in that way before. Some women never are. The other nurses had affairs—I never.

I let him frequent my floor against the regulations. When the first crime occurred—I did not believe it was he. A little later, I would not believe it. Still later, I was afraid—afraid of him, and afraid to confess that at such a time I had been allowing the presence on my floor at night of a man utterly unknown to me—to anyone.

When he carried Miss Wheaton up the stairs, I knew—I feared—but I was afraid *then* to cry out.

Statement of Dr. Rountree made before the Hospital Committee of Investigation.

I AM laying before the committee the confession of the Gray Killer, as he has come to be called—or "The Gray Doctor", as Miss Wheaton called him—poor girl, when to peril of her life the hospital authorities saw fit to add the peril of being judged insane. It will be remembered that no confession could be forced from the Killer by the police; that I alone was able to obtain his remarkable statement, spurred by my anxiety to substantiate the statements made in those lines written in Miss Wheaton's diary on the operating-table. Those lines have been called "ravings". And out of the regard I had come to have for Miss Wheaton while she was a patient here

and out of the deep confidence I felt in her judgment, I determined to seek corroboration for those very statements which must naturally appear the most insupportable.

Her confusion of the Killer, whose confession is appended below, with Dr. Zingler, is most natural. She had never seen Dr. Zingler, and after she had encountered and conceived a horror of the Killer, Dr. Zingler was kept from her room. She naturally felt assured that Miss Wurt would have known of the habitual presence of any stranger, and so accepted the Killer's statement as to his identity.

Out of the depths of my anxiety to substantiate Miss Wheaton's story, I have done a difficult thing—approached the Killer in the guise of a friend. I obtained—a confession. And before this confession is judged to be utterly beyond the bounds of possibility, I will ask urgently that two things be explained away—the *feet of the Killer—and his manner of cheating the law.*

The Confession

NEVER again shall I return home, and it is all in vain. Nevertheless, easily can I escape the pit into which I have dug my way. There is always the ultimate way out.

Even to me, who can regard all of the race of Earth as so many stupid cattle, the enmity that surrounds me now grows heavy to bear. Also, why should one suffer punishment and death at the hands of inferiors? But before I enter the great oblivion I will give my story to Dr. Rountree, who alone has dealt with me as with a man of knowledge, and not a crazy man whose wits have gone astray.

Know, then, that my home is not upon Earth, but rather on Horil, satellite which circles a sun that burns beyond the narrow limits of this galaxy. Is the planet Earth then unknown to the dwellers of Horil? No,

for the astronomers of Horil compare with those of Earth as Earth's greatest astronomer might compare with a child with an opera glass.

On Horil, I was for eleven centuries high priest to the Devil-God of Space. (I approximate terms familiar to men of Earth.) We of Horil believe that a great Power of Good has created all things, and that He is opposed by a lesser Power of Evil. But we worship at no shrine to an Unknown God on Horil—and the Devil-God of Space is very real, and one of the most dreaded of those strange beings that infest the trackless ether.

Its characteristics? As to form of worship, a love of human sacrifice. To many an altar on Horil It has descended, to snatch thence living food.

Its form and nature?

The biologists of Horil are far in advance of those of Earth, as you shall see. Yet even they do not understand the nature of the great denizens of Space. They may breathe ether—they may be forms of vibrational energy, and know no need to breathe, being electro-chemical in their nature. But—whether or not the Devil-God breathes—It *eats.*

As to form—here is a coincidence for the philosophers of Earth to ponder, parallel to that phenomenon by which unrelated races of the Earth find for the same things names built on similar phonetic principles. The form of the Devil-God of Horil and of Space resembles that of the monster of the deep which men on Earth have named the devil-fish. Miss Wheaton described truly the appearance of one of its monster tentacles, and she was right in her surmise that the orifice on the end serves both as mouth and eye.

So. My deity was a being of definite power and substance, of knowledge of the far corners of the universe, and of great evil. To Horil It may have been drawn by the psychic

(Continued on page 717)

The Gray Killer

(Continued from page 599)

nature of our people. We have grown mighty in knowledge while retaining habits common on Earth only to the most primitive races. Cannibalism is practised universally on Horil. The Devil-God loves human sacrifice and the slaying of men and women. Hence the Devil-God came to haunt the altars of Horil, its temples and the hearts of its men and women. You of Earth would say that evil attracts evil.

And for eleven centuries I was Its high priest. On Horil the only death comes by way of cannibalism, or an occasional suicide, since we have done away with accidental death. Yet, sooner or later, men on Horil die. It is one's turn to furnish food for others, or life grows weary—so does life equalize itself among those who might otherwise become immortal; balancing knowledge and character of destructive traits, perhaps, that the eternal plan of the great Unknown be not thwarted. . . .

But this is not to the point.

At last I offended the Devil-God. I stole from his altar—well, she was beautiful, and the gray pallor of her skin was like the early dawn-light. Love is rare on Horil—but it had me in its grip.

After I had loosed her from the altar we dared not go into the City—she would have been returned to the altar, and I should have furnished a feast for the royal family. We fled into the barren places. And the Devil-God, returning to Its altar, saw us and overtook us in a great, empty, stony field. There *she*, the beloved, was seized and devoured before my eyes. And I—

No such mercy was intended for the faithless high priest of the altar of human sacrifice. I was caught—gently—in one of the monster tentacles. The wide, barren plain lit by

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the cold stars fell away beneath me—shrunk to the size of a handkerchief. An entire hemisphere of Horil lay like a saucer holding the sky—then shrank too, and fell away. My senses left me, and the breath of my nostrils. Then—

I was lying in a field on the planet Earth, which I soon recognized by the customs and types of its inhabitants, from my knowledge of schoolroom astronomy. How did I survive the journey through space? Who knows? Ask of the Devil-God, Which has—perhaps—no words for all Its knowledge.

I would not starve—I, an eater of human flesh. But here another thing must be explained. On Horil we prepare human flesh for consumption. Countless centuries ago our epicures evolved a taste for the flesh of leprous persons. Through constant usage, we have come to eat no other flesh—and by some physiological idiosyncrasy, our stomachs became unadapted to other flesh. I can eat non-leprous flesh—but it inflicts on me fearful pangs of nausea.

Our biologists, then, developed a specific which implants a swift-growing culture of leprosy in any flesh into which it is injected—and which at the same time cures and restores all bodily tissues suffering from any other injury. So our health is safeguarded. And hence the cure of the man in 26, and the woman in 19, who had cancer. Hence the sudden development of leprosy in these patients. For they were to give me needed food.

Hence, the buried and mutilated body in the sand. I was starving, famished.

The sacrifices on the roof altar, on the other hand, were sacrifices of propitiation; but the improvised "fish-hooks"—

I madly hoped to snare the Devil-God I served—as men on Earth of primitive tribes, so I have heard, turn upside down the images of their saints to force them to their bidding. But I

dared more—hoping literally to hook the monster with steel barb and cable.

Two sacrifices It scorned.

Driven by hunger, I had prepared my necessary feast. The girl with deep blue eyes that grew sad and terrified as they gazed on me was my first selection. Obedient to a true instinct, however, she shunned me. So I prepared the man and woman for myself—and sacrificed the children.

Then a new thought came to me. My sacrifices had been too small. They should have matched my own necessity. I determined to raise once more an altar on the roof, and to fasten to it the slain body of the girl with the sad terrified eyes.

I crept upon her as she slept at last a sleep so deep that the sense of my nearness failed to rouse her, as it had done before. I gagged her and carried her from her room, half smothering her as her sad eyes implored. Even to me, she was pitifully beautiful; the better to allure the Monster-God of Space.

I conveyed her—as she wrote down—to the operating-room, and strapped her to the table—leaving free her hands, since she had little strength and could not loose herself with her body fastened flat to the table, and I had need to hasten.

I offered up my prayers upon the roof—the prayers I had made before the altars of Horil through eleven centuries.

The Being—the Monster—swooped down out of the “empty” skies—the “empty” skies that teem with the Unseen and the Unknowable.

I hastened back from the roof, to the operating-room. I threw myself, knife in hand, upon the operating-table—

And I was seized from behind!

Miss Wurt at last had dared to give the alarm. No sacrifice was made upon the roof again. And I was taken

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captive—though soon I shall escape.

Comment by the Superintendent of R— Hospital, signed before witnesses at the request of Dr. Roundtree and Marion Wheaton.

THE "Confession" of the unknown man captured almost in the act of murdering Miss Wheaton upon an operating-table in our hospital is beyond credence.

Nevertheless, I hereby testify to two things. The Killer's entrances and exits were made through un-noticed back windows which were not near stairs or fire escapes. This was possible, because he *scaled* the walls of the building—not climbing them, but *walking up them*. When his shoes were removed, his feet appeared as long segments of the bodies of serpents—and they could grip and scale any kind of wall. His feet, he said, were as the feet of all "human" beings on Horil; and "on Earth" his shoes were made specially, and his feet were coiled within these shoes!

Likewise the manner of his suicide is beyond explanation. He had been searched and was guarded carefully, of course, and he died—simply by holding his breath. No living thing on Earth has been known to do this thing, since at a certain degree of weakness the will is replaced by automatic functions.

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