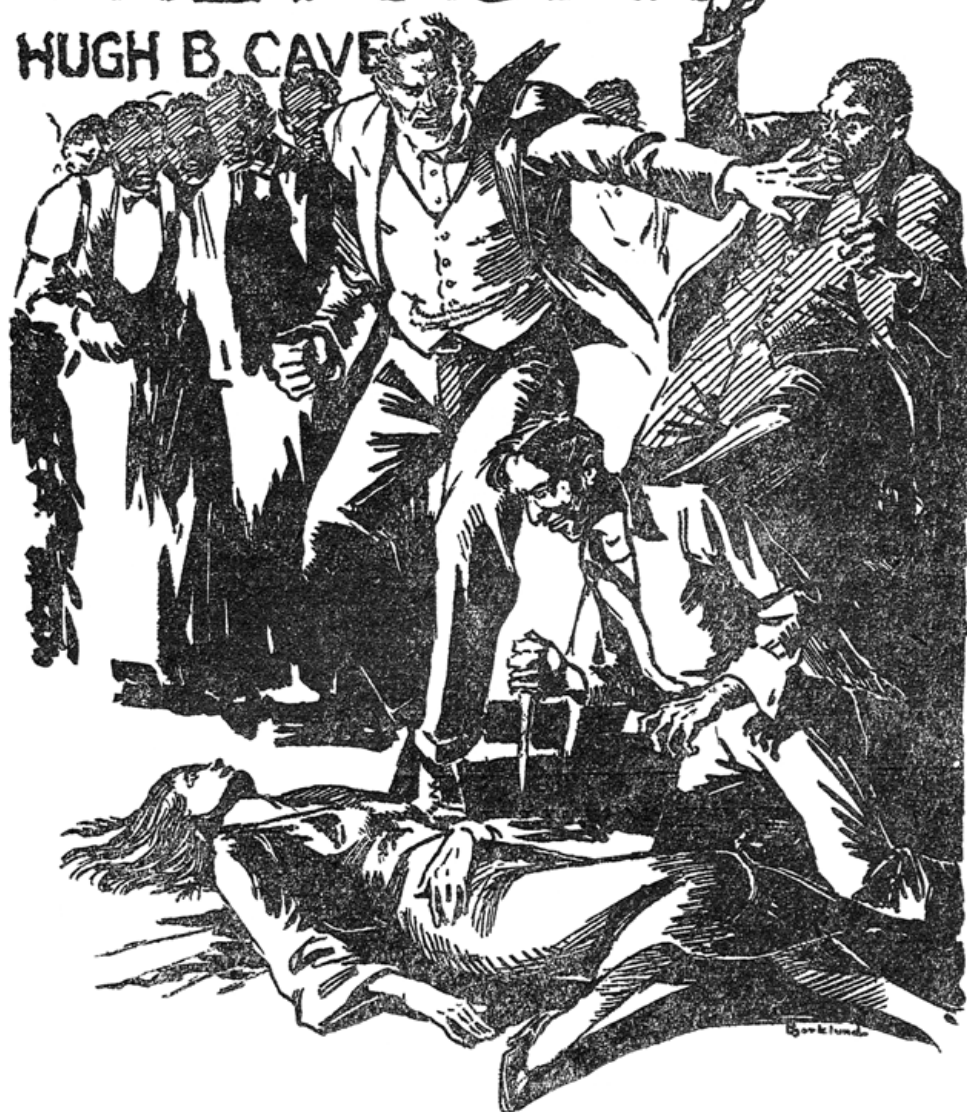


THE PROPHECY

HUGH B. CAVE



CONSIDER for a moment the five persons who are in Peter's apartment tonight. They are, in substance, any five persons in any apartment.

Swede Corler, whose large body extends from one end of the sofa to the other, with his head in Emma's lap, is an electrician of sorts. His face is an even-sided geometric figure full of stubborn practicality. He drives and repairs his own three-year-old sedan; he reads the morning paper at noon over a metal lunch box; his fingernails are crescents of sullen black because he considers it a waste of time to clean them after each day's labor. His ideas are the spawn of a matter-of-fact existence, and he

is imposing enough in appearance to enforce them.

Emma Morrisey, who supports Swede's heavy head in her lavender skirt, is twenty-two years old, three years younger than he. She is engaged to marry him. Her cheeks are too much rouged in the center; she is short of stature and inclined to obesity; she is a school teacher in the primary grades.

Godfrey Langdon, who stands gawkily in the doorway with both arms encircling the portieres behind him, is a junior at the State College. He is tall to absurdity, underweight and smooth of face. He says little; he has a religious mother at home who, he feels, would not approve of the

conversational trends now in evidence. He considers himself here to look out for his sister.

His sister, Meg Langdon, sits grotesquely in the single stuffed chair behind the sofa. She is tall, but, not, like her brother, ridiculously so. She has a straight, clear, good-looking face and a body which is beautiful to the hips and over-large from the hips down. She is in love with Peter, but too obsessed with her own importance to admit it. She will uphold Peter's arguments against the others, unconsciously echoing Peter's own voice and believing herself to be strikingly original. Alone with Peter, she will deny his slightest statement blindly and bitterly.

Peter Hughes, the fifth member of the group, leans against the phonograph and is sorting records from the cabinet below. He is slightly shorter than Meg, but exceedingly thin in face and frame. He is dark and wears square-topped glasses which emphasize his overlong features. He smokes continually. Peter writes stories—not good stories—and sells enough of them to pay the rent a month or three months after it is due.

Now listen to their conversation. Swede, who speaks in a heavy, not-to-be-denied monotone, without lifting his head from Emma's lap, is saying:

"You write so much fiction, Peter, you're beginning to believe anything is the truth. Don't be a sucker for it."

Peter shrugs indifferently. He has learned not to let himself be excited. "It isn't a case of believing or not believing. I simply say there are things we don't and can't understand, and I'm willing to be shown. I've an open mind."

"We really don't know whether there's any truth in it or not," Meg echoes importantly. "You've got to admit that, Swede. Take some of our most learned men. Take Clarence Darrow, for instance, and—well, Conan Doyle. Those men have brains, and they didn't arrive at their conclusions without plenty of deep study; and yet their conclusions are entirely different. Conan Doyle believed in life after death—"

"That's nothing but pure rot!" Godfrey Langdon scowls. "Cheap spiritualism, that's all it is. You know very well, Meg—"

"**G**ODFREY'S right," Swede declares caustically. "This spirit business is nothing more or less than exaggerated fortunetelling. What

do they do? They get you in a room with a lot of other people, and douse the lights, and then some old hag tells you that your great-great-grandfather is here, wanting to talk to you. Hell, nobody but a grammar school kid would fall for that kind of horseplay. Still, a man is entitled to his own opinions, and if Peter here wants to believe that the dead come back and deliver ghost-messages—"

"I'm not arguing," Peter shrugs. "I'm merely telling what I've seen and what I've heard. If you're so thick-skulled and practical that you won't believe anything you can't understand, then I can't help it. I say there are millions of things we don't comprehend, and death is one of them."

"Then you believe in spiritualism?"

"Well—"

"Do you or don't you?"

"I do."

"Rot!"

"If it's rot," Meg interrupts angrily, "perhaps you can explain this: Peter and I went to a negro place down on Raymond Street about a week ago. We were the first ones there, and while we were waiting for it to begin we exchanged rings, just for something to do. Then the others came in and the affair got underway, and at the very end of the evening a young colored woman got up and pointed to Peter and asked him if he had given me a ring recently, or if he was going to. She said she saw a ring around us."

"Why not?" Swede grins, his long legs over the edge of the sofa. "You're both young. She probably figured that any young couple who went to a place like that are either engaged or going to be. It's just the same as fortunetellers. They're clever, but they don't actually do anything. They tell you a lot of generalities and you supply the details subconsciously; then you think they're revealing secrets for you."

"I don't think so," Meg retorts stubbornly.

"You shouldn't go to those places anyhow." This from Godfrey Langdon, who looks at his sister angrily. "You know very well that spiritualism in all its forms is wicked. It's sinful nonsense without a germ of truth in it! If mother knew—"

"Oh, mother knows all about it. Peter and I have been there a dozen times, and every time I tell mother about anything that happens she goes off on a wild discourse about the devil. She'll never understand the way Peter and I do. All her life she's lived between the covers of a Bible, and she

never wants to learn anything else. She won't even read books; can you imagine that, Emma? Anyway, Peter and I go to listen to the singing. Don't we, Peter?"

Peter shrugs his shoulders. He feels that there is no use arguing, because the argument is getting nowhere. He knows what he himself believes, and has always believed, in things that these others are too stubbornly practical and unimaginative to understand. He turns to the phonograph and puts on a noisy record. He likes loud music.

"Where is this place you go to?" Emma asks.

"Down in the negro section." This from Meg, who frowns at the music. "Shut the doors on that thing, Peter."

"You can't hear the music if you shut the doors," Peter grumbles. He is sore.

"What do they do? Do they produce all that bunk about table-rapping and ghost voices?" Emma asks.

"That's just the trouble with you!" Peter says savagely. "You've never seen any of the real thing. You condemn it and you don't know anything about it. No, they don't rap on tables and make ghosts. It's a regular church service, after a fashion, and they sing and—"

"PETER loves to hear them sing. He joins right in with them as loud as he can," Meg volunteers.

"And I suppose you do, too!" Godfrey Langdon declares accusingly. "You'll get in trouble down there some night. It will serve you right. It's all stuff and nonsense, every single bit of it, and the devil rules it."

"Oh, go home with the devil! You and your stiff-necked religion. You're just like mother."

"I'd rather be like mother than like you! At least, she doesn't believe in a mess of idiotic tripe! There's no good in those dives you go to!"

"Do many white people go, Meg?" Emma asks hesitantly.

"No, not many."

"Do they like people to go?"

"You just walk in," Meg explains, "and take a seat, and act as if you're one of them. Don't let them get the idea you don't believe in their work."

"What happens if they think that?"

"You'll be put out."

"They wouldn't put me out," Swede says defiantly. "I'd like to see a gang of niggers put me

out of any place!"

"You'd go, all right. When these people get worked up, they're on the verge of madness. They'd kill you!"

"When's the next meeting?" Swede challenges.

Peter shuts off the phonograph and says seriously: "There's one tonight. Do you want to go?"

"Don't go with him!" Godfrey Langdon cries. "It's stuff and nonsense, that's all it is. Meg, you're not going!"

"I'm going if Peter goes," Meg declares quietly.

"Do you want to go?" Peter asks Swede.

"How about it, Em? Shall we see the dive? It'll be as good as a movie, anyhow." Swede grins.

"I'm afraid of those places, Swede. But if you want to go—"

"What time does it start, Peter?"

"Eleven."

"All right—"

"Well, I'm not going!" Godfrey Landon says bitterly. "These kind of places weren't meant for white people. They're just circus sideshows, full of lies and mummery."

"No one asked you to come," Meg retorts.

"No, and you're not going either! You'll get into trouble. Just as sure as you're my sister, you'll get into trouble—and worse. I'm telling you now! I've got a queer feeling—"

This amuses Peter. He smiles tolerantly and says: "I thought you didn't believe in hunches."

"I don't! I don't believe in any of the idiotic rot that *you* do. But if you go there tonight, something awful will happen! I'm telling you!"

"Hooey," Peter grins. "You give the horse-laugh to forebodings and omens and premonitions, yet you're the only cuss in this crowd shooting off your mouth about forebodings of evil. Kind of backfiring on yourself, aren't you?" Peter dripped sarcasm. "You can wait here for us. We'll be back about one o'clock. And don't do any floor-walking, because nothing's going to happen to us. Not a damned thing."

"I tell you—something terrible—"

RAYMOND STREET, in the slums of this city, is a thin, gloomy thoroughfare, poorly illuminated at night, separating a leering array of black buildings. It has ancient car-tracks and high curbs; the store windows on each side are gray with soot, and old newspapers mask the glass panes

on the inner surfaces to hide nefarious interiors.

You may purchase forbidden items in quantity in this section if you have been informed of the proper doorways; you may visit illicit upper rooms or procure positions at roulette tables and seatings at confidential gambling layouts if you are aware of the proper ascents of black stairways. Raymond Street is not too frequently patrolled by policemen, who prefer always to walk in pairs when they make the circuit.

Three doors down from an unsavory sideway you will find the Omega Lunch. Here, too, if you are known by sight or properly introduced, you may obtain a variety of extraneous contrabands; but if you walk through, ignoring the unclean white-topped tables and opening the door beside the washstand, you will discover a flight of unlighted stairs which seem to extend upward for ever and ever into obscurity. Counting the steps as you ascend, you will reach the number twenty-seven and arrive upon a flat landing, from which the stairway continues upward even beyond. Opening the door beside you on your right, you will enter the meeting room.

It is ten minutes after eleven o'clock when Peter opens this door. He stands aside, allowing Meg, Emma, and Swede to go in before him; and he says to Swede in an undertone:

"Keep your mouth shut in here, Swede. If you want to argue, wait until we're outside again."

Then he enters behind them.

It is a small room. Meg has been here before and does not pay any particular attention to the surrounding discrepancies. Emma is timid; she feels the repelling atmosphere of the place but cannot force herself to be conscious of its details. Swede, however, stands wide-legged just inside the door, which Peter has quietly closed behind him, and gives the interior what he would call "the once over." He ignores deliberately the stares of the people who have turned curiously to inspect. His lips are pursed in a tolerant, unconsciously sneering curve. He looks around him as a skeptic would examine the interior of a "chamber of horrors" at an amusement resort.

The entry in which Swede stands is at the rear of the room. He looks left at the back wall; the wall is fashioned of plaster, the plaster painted brownish yellow and cracked pitifully, and the entire surface repaired in four places with sheets of blackened tin. He looks right and sees a double row of unpainted

wooden benches, twelve in each row, divided by a single aisle of floor. The floor is black and gritty; it has the appearance of an improperly cured and very ancient layer of human skin.

The aisle leads straightaway to a platform, whereupon stands a thin-bellied table supporting an open Bible of huge proportions and a glass of milky white liquid. The platform terminates in a semi-circular wall with three windows which overlook the street below. These windows are closed; cotton curtains, stiff with dirt, are drawn over them. Left is a piano. Eight are three plain chairs.

A colored woman is scuffing the length of the aisle. It is her intent, evidently, to find seats for the four white folk who have just come in. She takes Peter's arm and leads him toward the front. There are two vacant places in the front bench on the left side. There are two more vacancies in the right side, close to the rear.

PETER hesitates. He says to Emma, who is walking timidly behind him: "You and Swede better sit up front; you'll see more. We've already seen it."

Swede says, "O.K." He and Emma follow the colored woman to the first row of benches. They crowd into the two empty spaces, Emma next against the wall and Swede beside her. The piano is directly in front of them on the platform. They were very close to the Bible table.

"A regular box seat," Swede grins. Emma says, "Sh!"

Peter and Meg occupy the only other vacant places. The two seats are on the aisle, at the rear. Meg silently motions Peter to take the inner one, because it is next to a very old and very wretched colored man whose face suggests the presence of venereal disease. Peter tries to avoid rubbing against him, which is impossible. Meg sits stiffly upright next to the aisle.

This has occupied about two minutes. There is a silent wait of five minutes now, interrupted by occasional whisperings and a scraping of benches. Men and women are still turning to stare at Peter and Meg and still watching Swede and Emma at the front of the room. Other white folk are here, but not of the same type. In all, three other whites were present: a sallow-featured, scrawny youth who slouches in the last bench and glares straight ahead of him out of wide-open, unmoving eyes; and two

muttering women who sit close to the wall, under a large, very dirty American flag.

There are twenty-two colored people here also. The youngest of them is perhaps eighteen years old; the oldest is the man who huddles on the piano stool in front of Swede and Emma. This one is extremely old. He wears a green sweater and two ragged overcoats; he is peering at a songbook through two pairs of metal-rimmed glasses, both of which are held together with brown string and hang from his ears. He wears also a cap which is torn at the brim.

It is time now for something to begin. The people are restless. In the front row, across the aisle from Swede, a middle-aged colored woman has struggled to her feet, holding hard to her side. She paces down the aisle, talking to herself, and bends over the white boy who slouches in the last bench. The white boy nods indifferently. He goes with her to the open space in the back of the room. There he slumps to his knees. The woman stands stiff and inflexible beside him. His nervous fingers follow up and down her clothing, at first sluggishly, then erratically quick. The boy's face becomes as rigid as the woman's body. His eyes dilate; he begins to tremble, to quiver, to twitch violently. Spitting sounds come from his lips; he hisses through his teeth. The woman screams. She runs forward again, the length of the aisle. The boy gets mechanically to his feet and returns to his place.

The woman sits down stiffly. Beside her a younger woman, also colored, reaches out to clutch her hand and says:

"Feelin' better, honey?"

"Uh."

"Dat Mister Johnson can sho' fix you up if anyone can. Missus Davis was tellin' me only yestidday how she done sent fer him when she got feelin' turrible pains in her haid. He jus' put his hands on her fer a minute an' de pains went clear gone. Dat man has de healin' touch sho'."

Swede is staring at this in bewilderment. He hears it; he does not understand. He nudges Emma to listen. At the same time, a man has risen from the rear row right and is coming with heavy steps toward the platform. He is huge of stature, taller even than Swede, and heavier. His shoulders are rectangular, as if lined with a carpenter's square. He walks with his head down. He walks with his legs; his body does not move.

HE stands behind the thin-bellied table, facing the people in the benches, and turns the brown pages of the big book. He reads from it slowly, faltering many times and repeating himself, and mispronouncing a number of words. Then he closes the book and says:

"Friends, we are heuh tonight because the spirit wills ut. The spirit brings us togedder so come we will funder unnerstan' the workin's of Almighty God. Let us be thankful fer bein' able ter be heuh, an' fer havin' our health, an' fer havin' unnerstandin' of the works of God. We thank God fer revealing unter us the secruts of his glorious ways, an' we thank God fer bringin' us heuh tonight. Our Father who art in heaven, hulled—"

The people join him reverently, loudly or softly as individual minds seem to desire. Swede says nothing. Emma whispers the words of the Lord's Prayer because she feels the penetrating eyes of the old man at the piano focused on her, and she is uncomfortable.

The prayer ends. Swede reaches down automatically and picks up a songbook. It is grimy and so worn that the title page is illegible. He reads the list of prices on the last leaf and notices that one hundred of these books may be purchased for twenty dollars. The man at the piano hammers a sudden penetrating chord; it is a chord, but three of the notes in it are notably flat, because the piano is cracked. Swede grins at this. He notices, too, that the piano has not been dusted for a long time, and the unpolished brass bowl on top of it contains blackened roses which were once alive but which are now very dead.

"Bufore we begins the readin's," the big negro was saying, "let's us sing togedder one er two hymns. Has anybody heuh a perticaler hymn which him er her wants us to sing?"

The woman beside Swede gets to her feet and says:

"I wish y'all 'ud sing nummer sixty-foah, Revrun Dall. Nummer sixty-foah was my husban's mos' fav'rite hymn an' if'n he heuhs it tonight might-be he'll come ter me an' say somethin' ter comfort me."

The big man repeats the number. Swede mechanically turns the pages of the songbook until he finds it. He stares at the piano while the old negro pounds out a discordant introduction. But he does not sing.

He listens, however, to the others. He even turns

to look at them, especially at the woman who requested the hymn, because she is wailing the words shrilly, her voice rising bitter high above all other voices. Emma touches Swede's arm nervously and whispers: "Sing it, Swede. They might say something."

Swede laughs. The man at the piano hears him and glares at him through double lenses. Swede returns the glare with equal intensity, wondering if he can stare hard enough to make the old man turn away. But the old man does not turn; he glares and glares throughout four verses of the simple melody. Swede is tempted to twist the man's ugly head the other way. He knows that this one, at least, cannot fight him; a single push would crumble the skeletal frame into itself and topple it off the stool.

But Swede is disappointed in the singing. He turns full around to catch Peter's eye and let Peter know what he thinks; but Peter is singing loudly, standing very straight and holding the book on a level with his eyes. Peter likes loud music.

Swede leans over and says to Emma in an undertone:

"If this is what Peter calls wild singing—"
"Keep still, Swede. Please!"

THE singing goes on for another five minutes. When it is over, the last verse is repeated increasingly soft. As the words drone out and become a hum, Swede watches the big man on the platform. He is pacing back and forth, with regular steps, rubbing his face with his fat hands, staring intently at the ceiling.

Swede, too, looks at the ceiling. He sees nothing there of particular interest. The top of the room is covered with white squares of oil-cloth which have begun to turn yellow.

"I would like to ask," the big man says after a moment's silence, "if there is someone in the room heuh who can place a liddle boy baby what passed out of this expression of life not more than t'ree weeks er t'ree mont's ago. It would be a boy baby about five yeuhs of age, with curly hauh and dark eyes, an' it seems ter me I feel a sharp pain heuh in my ches' like I passed out er this expression of life wid my lungs hurtin' somepin awful. It seems ter me I'm lookin' over the lef side of the room heuh, an' I'm reachin' out fer ter hold onto somepin same as I reached out w'en I entered the spirit world. Can some un unnerstan' what I'm sayin'?"

There is quiet for an instant. Swede grins and turns to look at the left benches. A woman gets to her feet suddenly with eyes alight and hands clawing: a youngish colored woman who wears a black, sack-fitting dress with white lace collar which needs washing.

"Tha's *my* baby!" she screeches. "Tha's my Baby Paul! He's come back tuh me! He's got somepin tuh say tuh me!"

The big man on the platform stands still now, and leans on the Bible table, covering his face in his hands. He remains in this position for some time. The woman who is standing up is watching him with wide, glittering, expectant eyes; she is silent again.

The big man pushes himself up and looks toward her.

"This baby boy is a-tuggin' at me an' tellin' me not to worry no more," he says. "He says he's gwine be a-waitin' fer me w'en I comes inter the spirit expression. I got pains in my haid, he says, which come at me of a sudden an' most drive me crazy wit hurtin'. He says don' worry 'bout 'em no mo'; just take a glass er wahter like dis glass heuh in front er me on dis table, an' look inter it until the pains go out'n my haid and dissol' 'emselves in 'at water. Does you unnerstan' dis message I'm tryin' ter convey ter you?"

"Yes, suh. Does he say I won' get dem pains no mo'? Does he say dat?"

"He says you lissen fer him an' he come ter you often. He says he don' come ter you now 'cause you don' listen. Does you unnerstan'?"

"Yes, yes. What else he say?"

"He don' say nothin' else 'ceptin' he be waitin' fer you w'en you comes. An' I wants ter say ter you, mysel', not ter worry no mo', sister. Does you unnerstan' dis work?"

"I unnerstan' some; not much."

"Den you do like dis message says. Don't worry none. You is downcas' mos' all de time, isn't you? What I wan' ter say is, you is all de time thinkin' what other peoples is tryin' ter do ter you. Ain't dat right?"

"Yes, suh. Dem odder peoples all time tryin' ter—"

"Dey ain't gwine hurt you. Dey jus' thinks an' talks foolish. Dey can' *do* nuttin', can dey? You jus' stop worryin' over 'em. An' I wants ter tell yer, everythin' is gwine turn out all right befo' t'ree weeks more has done gone by. Would you

unnerstan' dat?"

"Yes, suh. I sho' would."

"Den I leaves you in de hands er de devine spirit, an' I hopes you do all He tells yer. May de blessin' er God be upon yer."

"Thank yer, suh. Thank yer—"

THE woman sits down. She is smiling; her face is not the same face she possessed when she stood up a moment ago. It is alive now; it was dead before.

The big man paces again, back and forth across the platform. He stops before the table, fumbling with the pages of the book. He slides a cloth out from under the heavy cover and wipes the perspiration from his forehead with it. He drinks from the glass of milky water and continues his walking.

Swede is regarding him vigilantly, trying to discover whether this morose pacing is an intentional scheme to create suspense, or whether it is mechanical. He cannot fully comprehend that the people in this room with him are sympathetic believers of what is going on. He is eager to have it over with, so that he may tear the big negro's words bit for bit and prove to Peter that they are strictly generalities. Meanwhile he is slightly amused at the entire proceedings and has forgotten that Emma, beside him, is very still with a very real terror.

At the rear of the room the aged black beside Peter has suddenly lurched to his feet. His eyes are unnaturally wide and intensely white; the pupils are not visible. He is thrashing the air with erratic jerks of his arms and torso; he mutters continually; his mouth is flecked with spittle. As Swede turns to look, the old man stumbles past Peter and Meg into the aisle, where he writhes to the floor upon his face with a prolonged screech of agony.

His fingers scratch frantically at the dirty wood. His legs and body are thrashing from side to side as the extended coils of a snake might lash if impaled through the middle. Peter cringes from him. Meg watches him with a steady, fixed, horrified gaze.

The diseased white boy stands up from the last bench and steps forward. He bends over, seizing the prostrate man by the shoulders, and jerks him upright. Swede realizes, at this moment, that the other people in the room are not staring and are evidently not even interested; they have seen this same thing occur many times before.

The Reverend Dall is speaking again now, as the white boy leads the pitiful old man to the rear bench and helps him to be quiet. The big negro on the platform is pointing directly at Peter, and saying:

"I'm comin' to the gennleman heuh. Whilst I been talkin' to the lady up front, I felt a chokin' condition come inter my throat an' a achin' go acrost my eyes. I would like to ask the gennleman does he smoke much an' does he read a whole lot? Yes, the gennleman righ heuh; you I'm talkin' to."

"Why—yes," Peter says.

"You does. I knows it because I'm feelin' all de time like I wan' fer a breat' er fersh air. An' I wan' ter say, 'Don' do it! Don' smoke all de time. Git out in de air an' move aroun' more'n you is doin'!' Because I'm feelin' dat sickness is certain gwine git hold er me bufore long, less'n I git some breat'. Does you unnerstan' what I'm tryin' ter bring ter you?"

"Yes," Peter says.

"Does you think much, especially at night?"

Peter does not answer. He knows that he does think at night, because he writes his stories at night, when his apartment is quiet. But he cannot comprehend what the big man is thinking. He cannot understand . . . "Trouble—and worse . . ." Godfrey Langdon's menacing prophecy crowds his ears. ". . . something terrible . . ."

One of the two white women says, in a shrill, piercing voice: "Don't hold him! Speak up! If you doesn't understand, say so!"

Peter says quickly: "Yes, I guess I do."

"Because I'm feelin' dat I needs mo' sleep. I'm gettin' tire' out all de time, an' when I does go ter bed I'm thinkin' an' thinkin' an' thinkin' an' it seems like I just cain't make dem thoughts go 'way an' leave me be. Would you unnerstan' dat feeling'?"

"Yes."

"Does you worry 'bout gittin' money?"

"Yes."

“YOU gits it t'rough letters what comes ter you, an' dere ain't no letters come fer a long time. Is dat right?"

"Yes."

"Den I says ter you, don' worry no mo'. I feels mysel' usin' my fingers an' thinkin' an' usin' my fingers an' thinkin' all de time. Does you inven' things er does you write lots of letters er what?"

"I—write stories," Peter says.

"Yus. I can feel myeel' doin' it an' thinkin' about it so it near makes me crazy from thinkin'. I says ter you, don' think so much an' don't worry. Dere's letters a-comin' with money in 'em. Lots 'n lots er money; more'n you ever think fer. Would you unnerstan' dat, what I'm sayin' ter you?"

"Yes. I—I think so."

"Den I'm leavin' you in de hands er de divine spirit, an' I'm hopin' when his heuh money comes ter you, you won' forgit dis little church which is needin' money so bad. I'm comin' now to der—"

The big man closes his eyes and shakes his head from side to side. He stands very still over the table, reading the large print of the Bible desperately, as if the words there would have the power to drive away what was pursuing him. Suddenly he raises his head and sings and after the first few words the others join him.

"Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside, down by de ribberside, down by de ribberside. Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside I am' gwine study war no mo'. I ain' gwine study war no mo', I ain' gwine study war—no—mo'. Gwine lay down my sword an' shield down by de ribberside, I ain' gwine study war no mo'."

The words come one after the other so swiftly that Swede cannot learn them. He makes no attempt to join in the singing, although the big man is standing rigid and staring straight at him. Emma sings feebly; she is afraid that the emotions of these people will become uncontrollable.

The song continues through verse after verse. Remembering what Peter said, Swede glances quickly at his watch. It is a quarter after twelve o'clock. The people in the benches are standing up now, one after another; they hold no songbooks; their arms are swaying and their bodies are swaying and their voices are not in harmony. One woman is singing in a monotone in a high, screaming voice that makes Swede's ears throb. She seems never to breathe, this woman, but carries her single note over every pause without faltering. It is a weird, uncanny note that fills the entire room.

The song continues. At the termination of each verse some single voice begins another, and all voices carry along. These people love to sing, Swede decides. They sing passionately, to hurl out their feelings. They sing for glory. Peter is singing with them, as loud as the rest. He, too, loves to

sing!

It goes on without end. There will never be an end to it, Swede thinks. It will persist forever, until these folks are drunk with the madness of it. They are drunk now. Many of them are swinging their bodies with the music. They are in the aisle, pushing and straining against one another. One man is kneeling; another is standing at the rear wall, hammering the rhythm with his clenched fists, another is crawling on the floor up the aisle and being trodden on. Swede and Emma are the only ones not standing. At the rear, Meg is cringing against Peter and holding his arm fearfully, and Peter is not noticing her.

On the platform, the big man is trembling violently, spinning like a top, spitting and hissing through his lips. He falls suddenly and lies very still; and the two white women run to him and raise him up. They assist him to one of the chairs. One of them gets water from the rusty iron sink in the back of the room. The singing has ended abruptly, as if a phonograph reproducer had been lifted all at once from the groove of a record.

SWEDE stands up and grabs at Emma's hand. "Come on, let's get out of here," he says curtly. "I've had enough of this stuff."

She pulls him down again, whisperin: "We can't go now, Swede! They might kill us! Oh, do be quiet!"

Swede sits tense. In the chair on the platform, the big negro is stirring pitifully. His features are obliterated with sweat; his clothing is drenched with it; his eyes are bloodshot and dilated horribly. He pushes the two white women away from him and stumbles up to his feet, where he takes hold of the table and sways drunkenly. His gaze is once again fastened, tentacle-like, upon Swede.

"It's him!" he screams. "It's him I'm feelin'! I'm chokin' an' stranglin' with him. The spirits come ter me an' took hold er me, an' he brung 'em heuh! He ain' sayin' nuttin'—he ain' singin' ter drive the spirits out'n us—he jus' grinnin' an' laughin' an' makin' mock er us. Lissen ter me, I'm tellin' yer! He done brung de debble heuh tonight ter kill all'n us daid! He done brung—"

The big man is pointing, pointing, pointing. Swede stands up and makes for the aisle, dragging Emma with him. The big man's face is livid with anger; he screams with an intensity that smothers every other sound in the room. And the aisle is

blocked with surging men and women, muttering and yelling and hissing in answer.

"Something terrible . . . will happen!" Godfrey Langdon's words now din in Swede's head.

They close about Swede, allowing Emma to stumble and lurch toward the door at the rear. They claw and clutch and fling themselves upon Swede's big bulk as he stands alone. The aisle to the door is filled and choked with them, and they are like demons in their emotional range.

Swede strikes out with his fists. He tears himself loose and lays about him. One old woman he hurts badly; he knows it because after he hurls her into the benches she rolls upon the floor and stares up at him, and her face is shapeless. Swede is growling now. He wants to fight. Ever since he came he has wanted to fight, to hammer his fists into these rotten faces. He batters his way through.

Emma is clear of clawing hands and Peter is coming to Swede's assistance, leaving Meg and Emma near the door. Peter reaches Swede's side and mutters words of advice; then Swede sets himself and plunges. He crushes these clawing screaming hissing shapes aside and Peter comes after him. They reach the door.

The door is closed. Meg is lying on the floor in front of it, with her face to the ceiling. Her clothes are torn and her eyes are horribly wide-open. The diseased white boy is standing above her with a knife in his hand. Emma is standing flat against the door, screaming.

Emma's lavender dress is slashed and bloody. It is obvious that the diseased white boy attacked her first in his frenzy to destroy an unbeliever. It is obvious that Meg went to Emma's assistance, and that the white boy, in terrible rage at being interfered with, turned his attack upon Meg.

Meg is dead. The diseased white boy has dragged her down and killed her in his madness. Now he is again trying to reach Emma with the bloody knife that is clutched in his fist.

But he is weak. Swede twists the knife away from him at the first thrust and throws him across the room. Swede flings the door open and pushes Emma across the threshold; then he turns and seizes Pete's shoulder. Peter is on his knees sobbing, shaking Meg to bring her back to life, but she is dead. She has been stabbed many times.

"Oh, God," Peter moans. "Oh God, oh God."

Swede looks and sees that Meg cannot hear him. He says curtly: "Get up! You can't do anything for

her! Get up. She's beyond help. We better get out while we can."

BUT Peter will not get up. His soul is in Meg's body. He cannot leave her here, with these people. He cannot think of anything, except that she is dead.

Swede picks him up bodily and carries him. Emma is already descending the outer stairs to the Omega Lunch, and Swede tumbles down after her. Men in the lunch room are standing up and staring, but they do not interfere as Swede carries Peter out to the sidewalk.

Swede's battered sedan is standing at the curb, straight ahead, and Peter's car is a little lower down, near the corner. Between them now stands a third car, and beside the third car Godfrey Langdon, Meg's brother, is waiting. He rushes forward as Swede emerges from the doorway. He ignores Emma; he ignores Swede. He takes hold of Peter's arm frantically as Swede allows Peter to stand.

"Where's Meg?" he says hoarsely. "Where is she!"

Peter says nothing. He cannot look into the boy's face, and so he stares at the sidewalk. He still cannot think of anything except that Meg is dead. Godfrey goes to Swede and to Emma and repeats his demand, becoming hysterical. He gets no reply from any of them.

He seizes Peter again and shakes him.

"Where is she?" he pleads. He is crying.

"They—they killed her," Peter says heavily.

Godfrey cannot believe it. He has never faced death. He can think only of Meg sprawled in the chair at Peter's apartment where there is no suggestion of death or anything related to death. He stands foolishly on the sidewalk, staring into Swede's face and then into Peter's face. His own face is limp and empty.

"Is it true?" he cries suddenly. "Is it true what you're saying?"

"She's dead," Swede says. "We—we couldn't help it. We didn't know."

Godfrey does not move. His feet are paralyzed on the pavement. He stares long and intently at Peter, and then he cries out wildly:

"It's your fault! You brought her here! I'll kill you for it!"

He rushes at Peter. Peter stiffens and reaches out to hold him away. Godfrey claws at him the way

the others clawed, up there in the room above the Omega Lunch.

“Get hold of him, Swede,” Peter mutters. “He’ll make himself sick.”

But Swede cannot drag him away. He will not be dragged away. He forces Peter against the wall of the building, and his fingers scratch at Peter’s neck.

Peter is afraid. He tries again to push Godfrey away from him, but he is not powerful enough. Godfrey’s fingers are already locked in his neck and hurting him, and the boy’s breath is coming in animal-like grunts of fury. The religious boy means to kill.

Peter brings up his fist and drives it home. There is no defense against it and the blow is a hard one. Godfrey releases his hold and staggers back across the sidewalk. He crashes headlong into the fender of Swede’s car, and drops to the gutter and lies very still.

Swede picks him up and says quickly, as Peter comes forward:

“You’ve hurt him, Peter. Look.”

Peter looks and says, “Oh God.” The fender of the car had slashed Godfrey’s head and blood is spurting.

“Look here,” Peter says fearfully. “Take him home, will you? I—I’ve got to think.”

“You’re going back up there to get Meg!”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what to do!”

“You’ll get into trouble.”

“All right, all right. But get him home. Go on! Don’t stand there like a—”

“He’s not hurt much,” Swede says vaguely, as if the words do not mean anything to him. “I’ll take him home if you say so, but he’s not hurt much. You drive the car, Em, and I’ll hold him so he won’t get everything all bloody.”

THEY get into the car and Peter watches it jerk away from the curb. He stands there after it had gone. The number on the rear plate is 1313. Peter does not know what to do. He wants to go up and take Meg out and carry her home, but he is afraid. He tries to tell himself that she is not dead—that she is only unconscious. But he is afraid to look at her again and learn the truth.

He sees two policemen pacing toward him under a streetlamp a block distant. It frightens him. He turns and runs wildly. He runs on and on down Raymond Street. He leaves his car standing at the

curb.

He wants to get out of here and go into the city proper, where there are bright lights and people talking; but he is afraid people will talk to him and ask questions. He is afraid he will meet more policemen, and they will stare at him. He finds refuge in a doorway far down Raymond Street from the Omega Lunch, and he waits there for an hour. A woman stops and asks him for money. He shakes his head and tells her he has none; and she sneers at him. The door behind him opens and a middle-aged man slouches out. He glances at Peter curiously, but says nothing. Peter presses his hands to his face and says over and over, “Oh God, oh God, oh God!” Then he steps out of the doorway and walks back toward the Omega Lunch.

The street is deserted now. In front of the Omega Lunch, Peter’s car is still standing. Obviously the police have not yet learned what happened. Peter approaches the car timidly. He sees that there is no longer a light in the lunchroom. Furtively he tries the door, and finds it locked. He tells himself that the room above is empty and the people have fled. Perhaps they have taken Meg with them; perhaps they have left her lying there, alone in the darkness.

Peter is horribly afraid. The thought of her lying in darkness drives all resolution from him, and he turns, trembling. Quickly he jerks open the door of his car and slides into the seat. He starts the motor. The machine lurches away from the curb. The Omega Lunch is gulped in gloom behind.

Peter drives desperately. He drives down Raymond Street and into the city. Mechanically he guides the car through a maze of other cars, in and out of streets and past signal lights, and out onto the state road. Here occasional cars pass him, droning toward him with glaring, accusing lights and falling away behind him with roaring whines. He drives faster. He wants to go very fast, to make him forget.

He sees something, now, and stiffens at the wheel. Fright numbs his senses. Then a fever as of delirium burns him. Directly in front of him outside the windshield floats a white, indistinct form. It hovers over the cowl, seeming to glide along with effortless ease. It is a woman in white, with arms outstretched gently.

“Meg—” Peter whispers. Then he shrieks aloud, “Meg!”

The woman’s face is very close, looking in at

him. All else is darkness, blurring past as the car speeds onward. The face is Meg's face, smiling. Peter can see the lips move. Subconsciously he realizes what they are saying to him.

"Poor boy. Poor Peter."

"Meg . . . Meg . . ."

"Poor, poor Peter. You are so sad, so lonely. You should be happy now."

"Oh, God, come back to me!" Peter pleads.

"Come back to me, Meg! I'm so afraid!"

"Do you love me, Peter?"

"Love you—oh, God, I do!" More now than ever in life, he knows, for there is now the guilt on his soul for bringing death on her.

"Then come to me, Peter. Come to me now. The others, they can never come; they do not believe. But you, Peter—you have always believed, in your heart. You taught *me* to believe, Peter. Come to me."

Peter stares mutely, pitifully. He does not understand. It is very strange. He, who believed, had known nothing of the mad things that would happen tonight. Known nothing, nothing at all. Godfrey Langdon had said: "There will be death . . . there will be trouble . . ." And yet Godfrey Langdon was an unbeliever. Godfrey, incubated in religion that shouted Peter's beliefs in evil omens sinful, had warned of the evil whose signs he denied!

Strange . . . so strange . . . that an unbeliever should be the one to whom the whisperers in the dark beyond had sent their message. The unbeliever, the scoffer, had heard and delivered their whisperings . . . and the believer had scoffed . . .

Peter stares, and there is no floating shape beyond the windshield now. It has come closer and closer with a silent, gliding movement, and it is inside the car with him. The woman in white is close to him, very close, with her hand resting gently on his arm.

"Will you come, Peter?" she whispers, and her voice is silvery soft with pure love for him.

"Yes!" Peter cries. "*Yes!*"

"Drive fast, Peter."

Peter's foot presses to the floor. The road is

straight as an endless tube, terminating far away in darkness. The car leaps along it like an unleashed hound. Peter drives with one hand and puts his arm gently about the woman beside him. She is warm and soft; she drops her head to his shoulder and smiles up at him. She is lovelier than ever before. She is lovelier than any woman he has ever seen before.

"Faster, Peter."

Peter forces the accelerator to its limit. He does not care now what happens to him. He sees a huge truck ahead, creeping toward him with red and green lights on its side, and a single baleful yellow eye of headlight. But he does not care.

The truck's light sweeps onward, glowing in the dark. Peter's right hand clutches the wheel. He does not lift his foot from the floor. There is no need to slow, because the road is straight and wide and otherwise deserted. Peter draws the white lady very close to him and is strangely happy.

He does not care when the white lady reaches over and grips the wheel in her slender fingers. Nothing matters anymore, except that he is happy. The wheel turns sharply as the woman in white guides it.

The car swerves frantically to the left, into the path of the oncoming headlight. Peter screams. He cannot lift his foot from the accelerator because it is glued there by physical terror.

He lets go the wheel and covers his face with his hands. He hears brakes screaming. They are not his own; they belong to the monster with one light out. The single eye of illumination rushes headlong forward. Peter suddenly feels arms around him and lips touching his own.

"*Come to me, Peter.*"

He crushes the woman in white against him.

There is a grinding crash of steel against steel, and fingers are tearing him asunder like the fingers in the room above the Omega Lunch.

"Don't be afraid, Peter. Kiss me."

Darkness roars into him, bringing sudden agony.