

THE PROFESSOR'S HOBBY

by ROBERT ARTHUR

● He had an interesting hobby, the town thought. He did have an interesting hobby—but it was not at all what the town thought it was!

Illustrated by Schneeman

THE finding of the child's body, and the coroner's report, wound up the story. Little Alice Jeans had been gone four days, and during those ninety-six hectic hours, half the population of the county had abandoned its work and its play to hunt for her.

But when a State trooper, casting over some cut-over ground near an old gravel pit with a highly trained police dog to aid him, found her white and wasted body, there was nothing to do but to go back to work. Alice had been only five. Most of the searchers had been prepared in advance for the tragic termination of the search. It was unlikely in the extreme that she should survive four days in the open, alone, without food, especially when one of those days had been storm-racked and lightning-torn.

So the coroner's report—"dead of exposure and loss of blood"—satisfied everyone, even the almost, but not completely, disconsolate parents, who had eight other children and had rather enjoyed their momentary notoriety. Everyone but Dale—Jonas Dale—special events man for the New York *Daily Clarion*.

He had an idea. An idea that was screwy, wacky, as nutty as a bag full

of cashews. But an idea that would make a story. And what a story! But could he make it prove up? Could he get a shred of evidence that it *might* have happened? The *Clarion* liked its meat red, and its contents were like a rubber band, they would stretch to cover almost anything.

Jonas Dale's pale-blue eyes actually took on warmth as he visualized the headlines and text. His beaked, ugly nose, which more than once had gotten him called a "bloody bird of prey" by viciously angered individuals whom his combination of intuition, genuine reportorial ability, and unscrupulous skill at coloring facts had raised to national notoriety, twitched faintly. His large, bony hands dry-washed each other. He was already writing the story in his mind.

And as yet, with no more to go on than the fact that this upstate New York county was a hotbed of superstition, that thousands of acres of it were gloomy, barren cut-over land on which nothing more than scrub timber and brush grew, and into which human beings sometimes did not penetrate from year's end to year's end—and that coroner's report.

That coroner's report which said, "died of exposure and *loss of blood*."

Loss of blood! Funny no one else had made anything of that, had thought it amiss. How had little Alice Jeans lost blood? Oh, she was scratched up, sure. Bruised, too, where she had fallen on sharp rocks—hands, face, knees, legs and feet—but nothing so serious as to



"My Imp," smiled the professor. "He's very useful?"

cause more than a normal childish bleeding. Unless those two tiny bluish holes in her throat—

Jonas Dale's eyes gleamed brighter, and his hands made a little slithering sound as he dry-washed them now. Those two little blue holes—something

else no one had noticed—at the base of her throat, just above the jugular vein. The holes were close beside a scratch from a berry vine, and probably not noticed on that account. Certainly given no attention by the county coroner, but given attention by Jonas Dale. Photo-

graphed by him, several times, with a pocket camera having an expensive close-up lens. Printed and enlarged, they would stand out boldly even in a newspaper reproduction—touched up as they'd be by the art department, of course, with a little white arrow pointing to them. And a big, white question mark framing the whole picture of little Alice Jeans just as she had been found, crumpled at the base of a white rock, close beside a tangle of berry bushes, with the padmarks of the police dog leading up to her and the dog itself standing beyond her, howling at the sky to bring the State trooper, one of his masters—

At that point, Jonas Dale had a thought, and in following it up, turned out his collection of prints that a local photo shop had made up for him.---

He rifled through them, finally brought out three that showed the body, and the surrounding ground. Two of these he discarded. The third he stared at for a long minute. It was too much to hope for, yet—

To be honest, he couldn't swear that slight mark close to the corner, that indentation in a patch of soft earth some four feet from the child, was a padmark. It certainly wasn't a padmark of the dog, for the canine's trail, in that storm-wet earth, led straight to the body, then around it, where the beast had moved to sit down and howl until the trooper came. No, the mark hadn't been left by the dog.

Of course, it might not be anything but a natural mark resulting from the drip of water off the bushes, or it might have been made by a rolling stone, but touched up, just a little bit, it could certainly be made to look like a padmark.

And if it wasn't the padmark of a dog, what creature had left it?

Jonas Dale visualized that question, in screaming black letterpress, underneath the photo, in a two-page center-spread in the Sunday edition. And a little chill, like a centipede with frigid feet, crawled down the base of his spine. The words that were forming in his mind, the sentences that were coming together with electric agility, were so plausible that he had almost convinced himself.

But the chill brought him back to normal. When he realized that he was even frightening himself, he grinned. This was going to be one of his masterpieces. It would mean a bonus, and a week's vacation at least. Also, he could make it cover another two days here, loafing and getting pleasantly tight at night in the local inn, plus a fairly heavy load on his expense account. But it wouldn't do for him to go forgetting that he was building up a sensational screamer of a feature story out of the whole cloth. For a minute and a half there he'd found himself really convinced he had something, and that was the old bushwa.

Jonas Dale put away the photos, took a long drink from a bottle of Scotch in his suitcase, and then set out to get the little extra he'd need to convert his imaginings into the reality of hot print.

And his search led him directly to the pleasant, middle-class home of Professor Burton Leem.

BURTON LEEM was a professor of comparative religion in the small college which the town of Countyville boasted. Jonas Dale had never heard of him before, but as soon as he stated what he wanted—a book or two on witchcraft, and about werewolves in particular—Professor Leem entered his life.

"Books about ghosts and vampires and things?" the stout bartender of the small inn where Jonas Dale had stopped for additional refreshment, exclaimed. "Laddie, the man you want is Prof Leem. Ho, ho, ha! Yessir! He's the man you're after, all right. This is Saturday afternoon, an' th' library's closed, but he'll have the book for you. He'll have the ghost, too!"

The barkeep's belly jiggled with deep, rumbling laughter. The round, red face screwed up until there were almost tears in the little, flesh-embedded eyes.

"Ho, ho, ha!" the bartender chuckled. "Ghosts! Yessir, Prof Leem is the man for you. He'll introduce you to 's many 's you want to meet. Give you a social knockdown to 'em. He collects 'em."

Jonas Dale choked on the last half ounce of Scotch, and reached for the chaser quickly. When he had gotten his wind pipe cleared, he ordered another double and demanded what the devil the bartender meant.

"Just what I said, laddie," the stout man chuckled. "No more, no less. Prof Leem collects ghosts. All kinds. I don't remember all their names, though he's told me. Yep. Vampires, spooks, demons, little men, elves, and I don't know what all. They're his hobby. Ho, ho, ha, ha! His hobby! Collecting ghosts!"

The heavy man behind the bar went off into additional uncontrollable guffawing. Jonas Dale's nose twitched. His news sense overcame his irritation. He drank the double Scotch, and a little gleam came into his eyes. Already his

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busy mind was weaving Professor Burton Leem into the story he was going to write. A child killed maybe by a werewolf—that was the angle he was going to play up—and a professor who collected spooks! Holy smoke! A screwball, of course. Nutty as a peanut farm. Probably a publicity hound. An interview, pictures—

Then the barkeep got hold of himself and sobered down enough to explain, dashing Dale's newly aroused enthusiasm.

"You'll like the prof," he chuckled. "He's a card if there ever was one. What a joke! A regular guy, right down the line. You know there's a lot of talk in this county—hex stuff, and how to put the jinx on a guy, and stuff like that. The college is trying to get sense into the people around here. I'm not a native myself—I come from Brooklyn. And Prof Leem is doing his bit by kidding the pants off it. Whenever he runs into somebody who believes in that sort of bushwa, he tells 'em all about his collection of spooks, spirits, and elementals, as he calls 'em. He offers to take 'em to his home and show 'em his collection. Sometimes they go, and he shows 'em a lot of empty bottles, empty cages, and empty rooms, and with a dead pan on him like a judge, points out all the different haunts. Yes, sir, by name, with the gang outside waiting around and laughing fit to kill.

"Sometimes the prof comes in and gets a little tight—never drunk, just full of fun. Then he tells his story about a ghost named Moptimer, who got mixed up with a faun named Mildred, and what happened when her husband, who was a sat . . . sat—"

"Satyr?" Jonas Dale prompted.

"That's it, a satyr. A satyr named Melvin. Brother, if you never laughed in your life, you'll split wide open when

Prof Leem tells how Mortimer the ghost went pale as a sheet—get it?—and his spirit quailed—get it? Honest, I never heard anything like it in my life.”

“Another double—black and white,” the reporter ordered. His brain was still humming over like a top. He was in his best form. Something big was going to come out of this—the biggest story he’d ever be connected with, he had a hunch.

So the prof was a kidder, huh? Went around laughing at the local superstitions. That meant he’d have to be handled differently. He could still be used, but in a different way. An interview in which he denounced the idea of little Alice Jeans being killed by a werewolf. Then get out and build up some local nitwits to making positive statements they’d seen a curious animal making off through the woods, night after night. Get the whole town on its ear—

The reporter got the whole layout worked out in his mind. He downed the Scotch absently. The barkeep had moved off to attend a couple who were necking in a secluded booth. Anyway, he’d told Dale everything he was good for, including the prof’s address. Jonas Dale dropped a dollar on the bar and went out, his blood singing in his veins and feeling a friend to man, able to greet his bitterest enemy with a smile. This was going to be good!

THE HOUSE turned out to be on the outskirts of town, a big, rambling wooden structure dating from the seventies or eighties, when families had been larger. It was neatly painted, the grounds well kept, and looked quite normal and comfortable. No signs of a screwball owner in its exterior, Jonas Dale decided as he strode up a winding

flagstone walk and knocked.

He whistled a little tune as he waited for the door to open. It was late afternoon, and the smell of honeysuckle was thick in the air. The Scotch he had drunk was working in him, and the world seemed a little remote, as if an unseen veil hung between him and it, since he had entered these grounds.

Scotch didn’t usually affect him quite that way, but he didn’t mind. He liked it. All sounds and scents came to him subdued, but his mind was still working with the sharp precision of a newly honed razor. He watched a small, stooped man in shabby work clothes push a lawn mower across an expanse of green sward a few yards away, and put the words together in his mind.

In the midst of this peaceful community, does an unknown horror lurk? A demonic horror at which men scoff and—

He’d gotten that far when the door swung open, and Jonas Dale got a faint thrill.

There was nobody there.

He stared, nose twitching, a little sobered, into the emptiness of a long hall, not dark and not light. Then comprehension came to him. The professor was a practical joker. The barkeep had told him that. He was putting over a gag on his caller. Remote control electrical opening mechanism.

As if corroborating his thought, a voice spoke—a pleasant, masculine voice.

“Please come in,” it said. “My servant will show you the way. I’m in the library.”

The voice obviously came from a small loudspeaker just over the door knocker, and Jonas Dale swallowed with something that was close to relief. That feeling was not much added to when he

stepped into the hall and the door swung shut behind him, whereupon footsteps began to go *pad-pad-pad-pad* down the hall in front of him, each step being accompanied by a little scratching sound such as a dog's claws will make on a hardwood floor.

The footsteps preceded him down the hall and turned right at the end, leading him into a large, many-windowed room flooded with late afternoon sunlight. The shelves holding books ran up to the ceiling, and scuffed leather chairs were arranged about for the comfort of a reader. The scent of rich Havana smoke hung in the air.

Jonas Dale blinked. No, the guy wasn't a screwball. Maybe he liked eccentric practical jokes, such as having a radio speaker broadcast footsteps when nobody was there, to scare a timid visitor. But he had a good taste in cigars, and probably money, so—

THE REPORTER'S thoughts were checked by the appearance of Professor Burton Leem himself, from an elbow in the bookshelves. The professor was a tall man, rangy, his shoulders stooped by a sedentary desk life, but his face and forearms tanned—probably from regular exercise out on the tennis court. Dale had glimpsed behind the house. His face was long, but not unpleasant. The grin and the handclasp he gave Dale were as friendly as a stranger could wish for.

"Good afternoon, sir," Professor Leem said, in a voice deep and vibrant, but not unduly loud. "I don't know why you're here, but you're welcome. Trust my servant didn't startle you, Togo sometimes does upset a visitor who isn't prepared for him."

"Togo?" Jonas Dale demanded. Then he relaxed and grinned. He wanted

something from this guy, and when you wanted something from anyone, the best way to get it was to fall in with their humors. "Oh, you mean the footsteps. Ha, ha! Took me by surprise for a moment, until I caught on."

Professor Leem nodded.

"Togo is an elemental. From Japan. I decided if I were going to have an elemental for a butler, I should get one of suitable nationality. He was haunting a ruined Shintoist temple there when I ran across him, and I persuaded him to join me and come to America. He's really very efficient for the jobs to which he has been trained, although his intelligence is limited. Here he comes now, with the drinks."

Jonas Dale whirled, at the sound of those footsteps behind him. It was all right to take a joke but— Oh, well, if the fellow wanted to rig up the house with trick electric mechanisms and then tell him there were elementals around, that was all right. Part of the prof's line on the local yokelry. So he grinned again as a small wheeled bar swung into the room from the hall, advanced to them, and stopped.

The tall man lifted the lid and the reporter peered thirstily in at a glittering array of ancient bottles.

"Um," Professor Leem murmured absently. "I think—yes, it'll be just the thing. Do you like wine, Mr. . . . Mr.—"

"Dale," the reporter told him quickly. "Jonas Dale. Sorry I forgot to introduce myself. I came to get some dope from you, and to borrow a book or two—if I can. Local folk said you were the fellow who could help me. Wine? Sure."

Professor Leem held up a dusty bottle, crudely made, and looking old as the devil. He was measuring the con-

tents with his eye, and ruefulness grew on his countenance.

"Have to send for more, I'm afraid," he murmured. "Isn't a drink left."

Dale made a deprecating sound.

"Please don't, on my account," he requested. "I can drink anything you've got. Or nothing, for that matter."

"Oh, no, no," Professor Burton Leem insisted. "Wouldn't think of it. Must have a drink. I especially want you to try this wine. Won't take three shakes of a cockatrice's tail, anyway. Give you a chance to see another of my servants at work, too."

He strode to his desk, picked up a small brass jar that was serving as a



paper weight, brought it back. It had the green patina of antiquity on it, and was curiously engraved. The cork was sealed in with wax, marked by a signet. With powerful fingers, Professor Leem proceeded to peel the wax off.

"This is where I have to keep my jinni, Slo." He gazed at Jonas Dale

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with a straight face. "He came out of the Mediterranean, where Suleyman chucked him and all his brothers, after he'd gotten them properly caged up. I picked him up cheap at a little bazaar in Constantinople. He's not easy to handle, but good for jobs like this."

Leem found a grip on the cork and pulled it free. Instantly smoke began to pour out of the jar. It rose upward, spinning as it did so, taking on the form of a whirling top that grew smaller and smaller until it settled to the rug and of a sudden, seemed to solidify into a small, pitch-black, sulky-appearing Senegambian in baggy trousers, pointed shoes with upturned toes, and a black turban.

Leem tapped the bottle in his hand. "Another," he ordered. "Nothing but the genuine Wine of the Prophet."

The Senegambian shook his head dolefully. "Boss," he said, in a broad Alabama accent, "I ain't sho'—"

"I have spoken!" Leem's tone became sharp. "Another bottle."

"But there's only six left," the dusky one—Jonas Dale, grinning, refused to call him a jinni, even mentally—protested. "And they are guarded by th' Immortal Worm. Also by—"

"Enough!" Leem clapped his hand sharply. "Go!"

The darky was gone!

JONAS DALE swallowed, and his grin had become a little fixed.

"Brother," he said, with an effort, "you've sure got something there."

Leem chuckled. "I taught him that accent myself," he informed the reporter. "It's a scream, isn't it? But I figured since he had to learn English anyway, he might as well sound like a conventional darky. Causes less comment that way."

His sentence was punctuated by the

abrupt reappearance of the Senegambian in the middle of the rug. He'd probably come in from the hall, just as he'd popped out, when Jonas Dale's eyes were turned away. But he certainly appeared without any preliminaries. Now he held a bottle in his hand, dusty and moldy, and his black features were an ashen shade.

"Boss," he panted, "th' Worm most got me that time. I oney just—"

"Silence!" Professor Leem ordered, unmoved. "Time enough to worry when the Worm does get you. Now back into your home."

The dark one scowled, as if wishing to rebel. Then Leem made a pass with his hand, as though throwing a powder into the air. Instantly where the black man had been was nothing but smoke, and this smoke hissed toward the open brass jar, was sucked in as though by a powerful vacuum—operating through the desk, Jonas Dale guessed—whereupon Leem clapped the cork into place and quickly applied new wax from a drawer, impressing a seal with his signet ring.

"A copy of Suleyman's," he told Dale then, a shadow of regret on his face. "I know where I can pick up an original, but it hasn't been worth my while to do what will be necessary yet. This serves with rascals like Slo. Now for that drink."

He waved the reporter to a chair, pried the cork out with a penknife, and poured a generous draught of blood-red fluid into a goblet of spider-webbed glass which he took from the bar.

"Tickle your tonsils with this," he invited. "It's the McCoy. It's the wine that caused the Prophet to forbid liquor to all Mussulmen forever after. A girl with dark eyes gave him a bottle once,

and he— But that's a long story. You'll like it."

The news hound liked it, all right. It went down like something alive and warm, slipping down his throat and leaving an electric feeling behind it. He knew you were supposed to sip fine wine, so he restrained his impulse to gulp it. But even the sips he took sent a glow radiating out from him, and his mind took on a crystalline clarity such as he had never quite attained to with Scotch.

Professor Leem settled back in an easy-chair opposite, crossed his long legs, and sipped with dreamy pleasure at his own goblet.

"To think there are only five bottles of this left in existence," he sighed. "I don't know what I'll do when this is gone. I really don't. But let's not mourn for the future, when we can be thankful for the present. By the way, I hope I haven't upset you by springing my servants on you like this? It's sort of a hobby of mine, you know. Collecting items from—well, let's just call it the realm of the unseen and unearthly. Hope some day to have a specimen of every kind of creature of the sort there is. Have a long way to go, though, even if I do have all the better known ones now. But probably you've already heard of my little hobby?"

Jonas Dale, halfway through the wine, chuckled. "Certainly have, professor," he admitted. "Why I came here."

"Hm-m-m." Leem nodded. "Of course I don't know what you heard, but naturally, you understand, for reasons of my own I—ah, I rather misdirect the public knowledge of my hobby. Realizing that it would be impossible to keep it entirely a secret, I have made it an open matter. But—

hah!—by being so frank and above-board, I have succeeded in convincing the entire county I am either a monumental liar or a magnificent joker. And you couldn't hammer a different opinion into the heads of the local inhabitants with a sledge—leaving me considerable freedom of action. But you look like a man of intelligence, so I don't mind showing off some of my collection to you. No collector, y'know, is content if he doesn't have an audience for his things occasionally."

Jonas Dale nodded and kept a straight face. The prof was a whiz of a conjurer, and could clean up on the stage. But he certainly went a long way to keep a joke going.

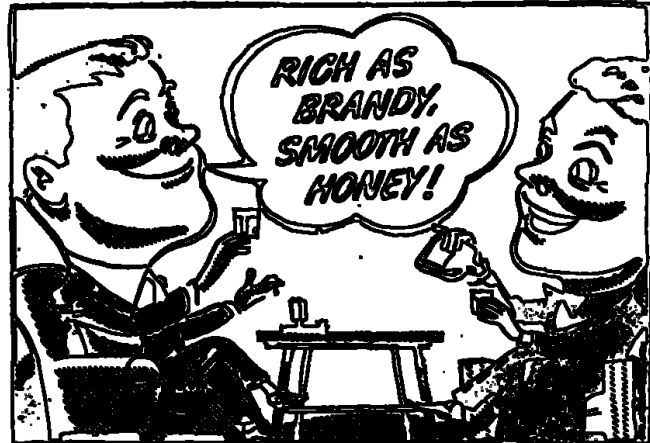
"Of course," Professor Leem went on. "not everyone appreciates a hobby like mine. And then again—luckily,

perhaps—not everyone is capable of pursuing it. It takes a lot of preliminary study, infinite precautions, and certain special qualifications to boot. But when you're equipped for it, it's really rather fascinating. I can see you're one of those interested in it. Maybe you'd like to take a look at a few more of my items?"

Jonas Dale finished off the wine, and nodded. Leem was a right guy, with a nice taste in liquor and plenty of friendliness, but his little tricks didn't exactly leave the reporter amused. Not all the way amused, even though he laughed. They were a little too— Well, a little too— He couldn't think of the word. It didn't matter. When you wanted something from a guy, you played along with him until you got it.

"Sure," he agreed. And then, with

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bland innocence of purpose, he asked, "I suppose you've got a werewolf in your collection, too, eh, professor?"

Leem was just reaching for a box of Havanas on his desk, and he paused, a little abruptly, at the query.

"A werewolf?" he asked, staring at the news hound. "Why, no. It just happens there is no werewolf in my collection. What makes you ask?"

The reporter leaned forward. "I'm working on a story that this Jeans kid didn't die of exposure," he said bluntly. "My line is that she was killed. By a werewolf."

For a long moment Leems seemed nonplused. Then a grin replaced the momentary frown on his face. He finished getting the box of cigars and held it out.

"Have one," he invited. "Finest known. My jinni keeps me supplied. I don't ask him where they come from. But about your werewolf theory. Surely you're joking."

Jonas Dale took the cigar and bit off the end.

"Whether I'm serious isn't the point. The point is, this is superstitious country, and the kid died of exposure and loss of blood. Plus two little holes in her throat. I'm going to play those up into a—werewolf."

Leem nodded then. "I see." He pinched the end of his own cigar off between two sharp nails and absently put it between his lips. Then he snapped his fingers. A bright spot that seemed to be a tiny dancing flame shot instantly out of the cold fireplace across the room, flickered through the air in a dainty, delicate dance, and touched the end of his cigar. Leem inhaled, and puffed out rich blue smoke. The dancing flame shot across to the reporter's Havana.

"Light up," the professor invited. "It's my salamander—another of my items. He's a pretty creature, isn't he?"

Comes in handy, too. I also have a cockatrice. You may be familiar with them. I had a special icebox built, and keep him in the ice compartment with a large tub of water. He's blinkered so he can't see anything else. Cockatrice's, you know, turn you to stone if they look at you. This one looks at the water, and since water, naturally, turns to ice instead of stone, he keeps it frozen. Always have plenty of ice that way, and no expense to mention. Though he'd play the deuce if he ever got loose."

JONAS DALE, in spite of being momentarily startled, accepted this new trick with an equanimity that seemed to be increasing, and inhaled. His cigar took fire. At once the brilliant little creature which had lit it darted away on a zigzag course and vanished into the fireplace again.

Leem, smoke streaming from his nostrils in twin blue plumes, leaned forward. "I understand," he said, reverting to the subject. "You want a sensational story, and you've come to me for details. Maybe for help. Perhaps you'd planned to use me somehow in your yarn. That's all right with me—with my reputation in this town, anything you said about me would be taken as a joke anyway.

"But I have to disappoint you. Your ignorance of werewolves has led you astray. A werewolf, you know, is a human who periodically assumes the body of a wolf. The werewolf seeks human flesh. When it finds a victim, it devours him. Then, satiated, it returns to human form. In human form, it can not be distinguished from anyone else, save by one special stigmata which always identifies—the long forefinger. Look at your own fingers."

The reporter did so, obediently, as

Leem continued speaking.

"Your first finger, you'll notice, is shorter than your second finger by about half an inch. In a werewolf, the first finger is *longer*. Generally, the fingers are slender and tapered, and the nails long and sharp, though this varies. But the long forefinger is invariable.

"However, that's beside the point. If little Alice Jeans *was* killed by an unnormal creature, it could only have been a vampire. Vampires, in case you're not familiar with them, are undead. Either they have been attacked themselves by vampires, and thus become one themselves, or a cat has jumped over their body as they lay awaiting burial, or any one of several other things may have happened. Unless they are then buried with a stake through the heart, preferably in the center of a crossroads, they thereafter will leave their coffins if the tiniest exit remains and will seek victims among the living. These they in turn transform into vampires. If Alice Jeans was really killed by one, it'll be easy enough to find out. Just investigate her grave tonight or tomorrow night. If it's empty, you'll know."

Jonas Dale's lips twisted wryly. "Ugh!" he said, disappointment in his voice. "Well, that sort of stymies me. My paper would stand for a werewolf, but they'd draw the line at a vampire."

"I suppose so," Leem agreed. "Sorry to have upset your plans. Like to help you if I could. A vampire, incidentally, is another item that I haven't got"—he paused to reach for the wine bottle—"in my collection. For various reasons. Here, have another spot. I wouldn't think of letting you go yet. It isn't even dark."

Jonas Dale took the goblet. There was a queer lightness to his body,

brought on by the combination of Scotch and wine, but his mind was still clear. He hadn't by any means abandoned his story—it could still be twisted to suggest that the werewolf had been driven off by the searchers before it could begin its grisly feast. But the wine was good, and there was no use hurrying away.

The tall man led him to the wide library window. "That's one of my items." The professor indicated the workman methodically mowing the lawn. He was coming toward them, and even in the half-light of sunset, Jonas Dale could see the man's blank face, unseeing eyes, gray, slack lips. "A zombie. Not a very interesting type. But handy for odd jobs around the house. Togo, my elemental, could do the work, but it's beneath his dignity.

"Now, if you'll just step in here— Oh, hello, my dear. I really didn't hear you come in."

THE REPORTER started as Professor Leem's gaze went past him, and he whirled, to confront a lovely, smiling girl and, a pace or two behind her, a stocky, tanned man of indeterminate age. The girl was about twenty-three, tall, rather pale, with a pallor that lent a curious quality of radiance to her honey-gold hair. She was smiling at them with pleasant inquiry, a smile that revealed nice teeth, a trifle long, but otherwise beyond reproach. Leem made the introduction.

"Liane, my dear, this is Mr. Dale, a newspaper reporter. Mr. Dale, my wife, Liane. Though I think you would not guess it to look at her, Mr. Dale, my wife is a rather accomplished vampire. She began her career during the French Revolution, when killed by the mob that sacked her father's manor. Subsequently her unguarded body was leaped

over by a cat. When I told you earlier that I had no vampire in my collection, I was just playing safe, as I don't know whether one's wife would care to be considered a hobbist's item or not."

Liane Leem held out her hand, and her clasp was firm and hospitable. She smiled at Jonas Dale, and pouted reprovingly at her husband.

"You mustn't let Burton tease you, Mr. Dale," she said. "His taste in jokes is sometimes a little uncouth. This is Peters, Burton's confidential secretary. We've just been going over the accounts for the month."

Peters nodded affably; and Professor Leem winked at Jonas Dale.

"Peters," he said solemnly, "is part of my collection too, in a manner of speaking. Although he takes human form most of the time, he's really a demon, temporarily banished. His nether world name is Blasphoron, and he subsists almost exclusively on a diet of human souls."

"Lucky I'm a light eater," Peters said matter-of-factly. "I certainly don't get much nourishment around this house, and that's a fact."

"Now, now," Leem chided. "No complaints. Remember, the crime you're being punished for is gluttony. You're treated very well—as well as we treat ourselves. And you'll have to put up with that until your period of servitude runs out."

"Which won't be for another ten thousand years yet," Peters sighed. "Imagine, Mr. Dale, being hired out for eleven thousand, eleven hundred and eleven years, eleven months, eleven days, and eleven hours, not to count the eleven minutes and eleven seconds, just for snitching a couple of souls that were going to spoil anyway."

"I wonder if you couldn't show our

guest your natural shape," Leem suggested, as the news hound turned a grin, manful but a little strained, from one to another of them. "It's a lulu, Mr. Dale. Wings like a bat; the body of a snake, the claws of a gargoyle, and a triple tail. Not to mention the fangs of a sea-serpent. Like nothing your worst dreams ever scared you with."

"Sorry." The secretary shook his head. "Maybe I could manage after dark, if Mr. Dale could hang around until then."

"Oh, but of course!" Liane Leem turned a ravishing smile on Jonas Dale. "He's staying for dinner, surely."

"Certainly," Professor Leem stated; as the news hound began to shake his head feebly. "I was taking that for granted. What time is dinner tonight, Liane?"

"Sundown, as usual," the girl told him. "Seven fifty-seven today. It's this daylight time makes us eat so late," she explained to the reporter. "But it won't be long now. Only twenty minutes. Excuse me until then, if you will."

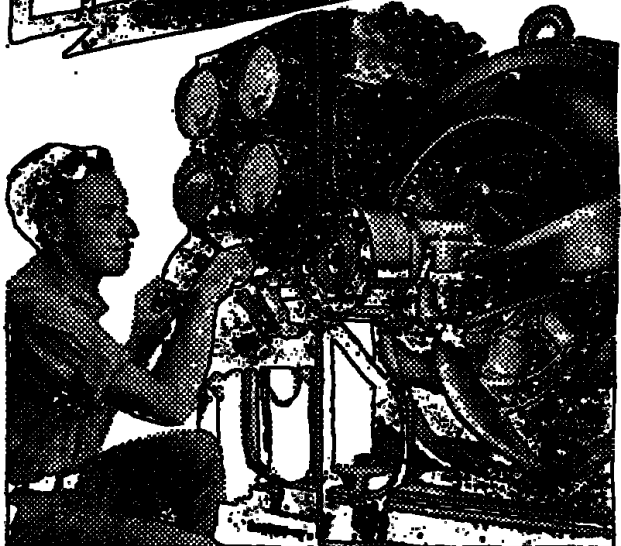
She smiled, and turned. Peters, the secretary nodded, and they went out through a door that opened and closed without visible agency.

"Of course you're staying to dinner," Professor Burton Leem said bluffly, anticipating Dale's attempt to get away from there—which was the one thing he wanted to do now.

Even through the glow of the liquor, which made him still feel cheerful and almost able to appreciate his host's macabre humor, something strong and urgent was beginning to nag at him to get out of there and do it now, while the sun was still above the horizon. But the inner warning wasn't strong enough. The wine, and Leem's refusal to take no for an answer, defeated it. Obedi-

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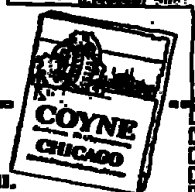
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ently the reporter followed the tall man into the next room, which they had been about to enter when the entrance of Leem's wife had interrupted them.

THIS ROOM was smaller than the library, and the floor, ceiling, and walls were curiously marked with symbols and geometrical shapes. Jonas Dale struggled to remember something he had read once about such diagrams. Pentagons—hexagons—pentacles—circles—he just couldn't bring it back. Part of the prop for the professor's jokes, of course, as were the small cages, cabinets, bottles and urns which lined tier after tier of shelves in this room.

Absently, as he noted many things and filed them away for future use, the news hawk noted that the floor of the room was stone, and sloped gently into the center, like the tiled floor of a shower-bath. But he had no time to reflect on it. Leem led him to a window—one this time which commanded a view of the tennis court and a copse of woods from which a brook meandered, behind the house.

The sun was setting redly into the trees. Leem gestured toward them.

"A lot of my collection is down there," he stated. "I have a pair of trolls living there—they help look after the garden. Also a leprechaun, who's locked up most of the time to keep him out of mischief. Then there's a faun and a satyr, a wood nymph and a water nymph, a couple of elves, and a brownie. If it wasn't so late we'd run down and look them over. No one not knowing how to see them would ever know they were there, though, for they're very expert at concealing themselves.

"However, there are some nice items in this room we can amuse ourselves glancing at while we wait for sundown. Here, for instance"—he threw open the

door to a good-sized cabinet, which on first inspection proved to be empty save for three tennis balls—"is my poltergeist. A poltergeist is an elemental, too, like Togo the butler, but less developed. They're the most usual haunters of empty houses, and their specialty is raps, knocks, lights blown out, stones thrown around—stuff like that. I've taught this one a few tricks, though. Watch."

He rapped sharply three times on the side of the cabinet. At once the three tennis balls began to move. They rose in the air, fell, rose, in the rhythmic pattern of a juggling act.

"See?" Professor Leem inquired. "He can do it with three lighted candles, too, which makes a nice parlor trick after a good dinner. He's got a use, as well. With a tennis racket he's not bad, and I often work out against him when I can't get anybody else to play with. At handball—I have a court in the basement—he's a whiz. But he cheats. Can't help it, and can't be cured of it by punishment.

"Now let's see— What would interest you next? A fairy? A standard specter—the soul-envelope that sometimes persists and is perceived as the classic sheeted ghost of fiction and fairy tale? An incubus? A succubus? A— Here's one I'd forgotten. Touissant l'Overture, my familiar. Here, Towsie, boy!"

A BLACK CAT padded into the room, stalking past the reporter with dignity, as if not seeing him at all. Jonas Dale looked down at it with dislike, and had abandoned the effort to keep a smile on his face. The joke was stale now, and had been for a long time. He didn't care for cats anyway, and this one, being

bigger and blacker than most, he cared for less than usual. He wanted to get out of there and put himself outside an honest two fingers of Scotch. The wine he had drunk left him with a deadened feeling inside. But even through this a tiny voice somewhere within his brain was screaming for him to leave before that descending sun vanished finally behind the trees, which already cast purple shadows that crept toward the house like shapeless, nameless things coming to a feast.

That though, was nothing but the jitters. The professor's joke had gotten underneath Dale's skin at last. But he wasn't going to let on if he could help it, because that was probably what the prof had been trying to do all along.

"Listen, Professor Leem," Dale said, with all the calm he could muster. "I've got to be going. Honest. Got to phone the paper. Can't put it off—"

Leem laid a compelling hand on his shoulder. "Nonsense!" he boomed, his voice echoing curiously in that shelved and cabined room. "You can't run away like this. I won't let you. It's only a matter of minutes now."

Dale turned, and the sweat was standing on his brow from the effort he made to keep his words clear and unstrained, despite the thickening of his tongue and the unnatural weakness that seemed to be clutching at his stomach.

He dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief, and his fingers were so stiff he could hardly hold the square of light linen.

"Honestly, professor," he tried to say again, hoarsely, but the tall man was talking as though he had not spoken.

"All witches have familiars, you know," he said, as the black cat squatted on its haunches a few feet away and

turned a yellow, unwinking gaze on Dale. "Though I'm not a witch exactly, I have enough ability to bind Touissant to me. A cat, of course, serves a witch as transportation to Sabbats, and such. This broomstick business is all fallacy—Halloween stuff. Demon familiars in cat form are always used. Touissant, perhaps you'll demonstrate for Mr. Dale your powers of aerial locomotion?"

"It's not dark yet," the cat said then, unexpectedly—though Dale should have guessed what was coming, he muttered to himself. The black beast ran a tiny red tongue over its lips, still maintaining the unwinking gaze it had turned on Dale. "I can't do tricks in the daytime for you. Besides, I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

"In a couple of minutes now," Leem told it. "Don't be impatient. There's going to be plenty for all of us."

"There better be," the cat muttered, sulkily, and relapsed into silence.

Jonas Dale wiped his brow again. He was beginning to hate the suave and smiling Leem now. The man's joke was too damned effective. Trick electrical gadgets, ventriloquism, and probably dope in the wine to make a man less critical. He turned to the window. For the first time he noticed that there were slender steel bars across it, and for no reason he could think of, the discovery dismayed him.

Through the window Dale saw that the grove behind the house was shrouded in shadow now. Purple blotches had stolen almost to the house. A gory redness in the sky told that the sun was still above the horizon, but the dusk that raced across the world from the east was chasing it downward. That tiny voice inside Jonas Dale was

screaming frantic warning again, and this time he was going to get out, whether he had to make a fool of himself or not to do so.

"Professor—" he began, his tongue stiff in his mouth, but Leem was looking past him.

"Ah, my dear," he said, "is it time?"

DALE SPUN about. Liane Leem and Peters the secretary had entered, and the door closed quietly behind them, though no human hand touched the knob. The girl smiled at them both.

"Not quite," she said, her voice clear and silvery, like the tinkle of ice in a glass. "We have about a minute to wait."

"I'm sorry." Dale forced the words out. "I can't wait. Got an important engagement. Sorry. But— Good-by!"

He shuffled, almost ran, toward the door. Behind him Leem's voice crackled.

"Oh, no, my boy!" the words were both playful and determined. "We're not letting you go now, when the time's so short. Togo—the door!"

Dale was still a stride from the door when the key twisted in the lock, then shot out from it and rose to the ceiling, beyond his reach. He grasped the knob, turned, shook the door, but the oaken portal scarcely quivered. He tried again, then desisted. The door was securely locked.

Jonas Dale turned, his back against the door, and saw the three of them grouped together near the other end of the room, gazing at him with unreadable faces. At their feet the cat still squatted, its yellow eyes still fixed on him.

Dale's breath was coming hard. He was making a fool of himself. He knew.

If the boys on the *Clarion* ever heard how he had been buffaloeed by a hick college professor with a taste for practical joking, he'd never be allowed to forget it. But that didn't matter—not now.

"Listen!" he panted. "A joke's a joke. All right, professor, you win! You've given me the heebie jeebies. I'm as jumpy as a Mexican bean. But one thing I want you to get straight. *I want to get out of here!*"

"Oh, Mr. Dale!" Liane Leem's voice was lightly chiding. "But we can't let you go now! We wouldn't dream of it!"

In the little silence that followed, Jonas Dale became aware that the room was filled with little whisperings and rustlings, squealings and miewlings and sounds not susceptible of being put into words. They seemed to come from the numerous boxes and cabinets and bottles and jars that lined the shelves in the room, and as the dimness increased they were growing louder. In the corners, shadows gathered and seemed to be crouching there, waiting.

Liane Leem was smiling a little at the reporter.

"Really, Mr. Dale," she murmured, "I do hope nothing we've done has upset you. It's true my husband likes to joke—I've scolded him for it many times. But—"

A faint chime, or a muffled gong, somewhere in the house cut across her words. She broke off what she was saying, to glance out the window, toward the darkening sky.

"Sunset!" she said, a touch of eagerness in her voice. "Sunset, Burton."

"I heard, my dear."

But Professor Burton Leem did not look at his wife as he spoke. He was looking at Jonas Dale.

"I am sorry, Mr. Dale, if I have been



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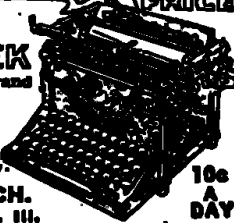
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guilty of poor taste," he said smoothly. "It is true, I do love a joke." He spread his hands, eloquently. "Sometimes I carry one to extremes. In this instance, I fear I have done so."

But the reporter scarcely heard him. His gaze was riveted on Leems' hands.

"Your finger!" Jonas Dale said, and the voice was not his, nor had he ever heard it before. Yet it came from his throat, through his lips. "*Your right forefinger is longer than your second finger!*"

"Quite so." The voice was becoming a little indistinct. "An unfailing stigma of the werewolf, as I explained earlier. Which brings me to what I was about to say"—the voice was becoming more and more blurred—"regarding the joke I have been playing. My dear Mr. Dale, I am almost sorry to have to tell you this, but the joke is—that everything I have said this afternoon is true."

Jonas Dale looked up then, and knew what it was the frantic voice within had been inarticulately trying to tell him. He saw the change beginning. He saw why Professor Burton Leem's words were becoming so blurred. Beside Leem he saw the girl, Liane, her lips drawn back so that they were but scarlet frames for teeth that were long and white, and gleaming a little in the travesty of a smile her face still wore.

And as he saw the terrible transformation that was taking place behind them, where Peters the secretary a moment before had been standing.

Then they began to advance toward him, the three of them, with the great black cat crouched on its belly behind them, waiting. Waiting—

And Jonas Dale, for a very little time, screamed. Quite futilely.

THE END.

The Moving Finger Writes,



---AND HAVING WRIT---

"The meeting will come to order—"

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Three of us were talking—three of us, that is, of the Los Angeles Science and Fantasy League.

"Well, there goes one year of Unknown!" said Guy Amory, fan author, flipping through the pages of the March, 1940, issue. "And a pretty darned nice year at that, for a new magazine. Quite a record."

"You said it," Anthony Corvais put in, leaning against his stack of Unknowns.

"Well," said I, "which issue did you guys like best?"

"All of them," said Corvais. "They all had their points. Naturally, we all think that 'Sinister Barrier,' 'Slaves of Sleep' and 'The Ghoul' are the finest yet printed. But we can't neglect the smaller stories either."

"Hell, no," cried Amory. "H. L. Gold's 'Trouble With Water,' for instance."

"And Mona Farnsworth's 'Who Wants Power,'" I added.

"'Divide and Rule!'" blurted Corvais. "Don't forget that one by De Camp."

"I think Robert Bloch's story about the vampire 'Cloak' was one of the finest things he's ever done," I said.

"And I think that 'Returned from

Hell' was the only snag hit by Unknown in all its issues." It was Amory who spoke. We both agreed with him. "But in the June issue there were two excellent stories, one by De Camp called 'The Gnarly Man,' I believe, and Guernsey's 'The Hexer.'"

"That was a good issue," I said. "Remember Coley's 'Don't Go Haunting'? That ending knocked me for a loop."

"The July issue! Ah!" Amory picked it up and flourished it. "Containing Hubbard's 'Slaves of Sleep'! I stayed up all night finishing it. The yarn scintillated! And again L. Sprague de Camp came along with 'Nothing in the Rules'—the tail of a mermaid professional swimmer." He chuckled at his feeble pun and we bombarded him with insults.

"August issue of Unknown," I said. "'The Ghoul,' another thriller-diller by Hubbard. That one certainly gave us a Ron for our money!"

"Kill him!" bawled Amory, looking for his flesh-eating ghoul.

"But look!" I hurried on. "Kuttner had a story in that issue, too. 'The Misguided Halo' it was. And darned good."

Amory looked at the wall in back of me. "Isn't that the illustration from Kuttner's story there, Brad?" he asked. I nodded. "I picked it up in New York at the con-