

FEBRUARY

Strange

STORIES

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE

A Story of
Witchcraft's Labyrinth

By **ROBERT
BLOCH**

IN THIS ISSUE

THE SINGING SHADOWS

A Novel of Weird Enslavement

By **VINCENT CORNIER**

15¢
TALES OF
THE UNCANNY

STRANGE
STORIES

FEB. 1939

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The Invaders

By

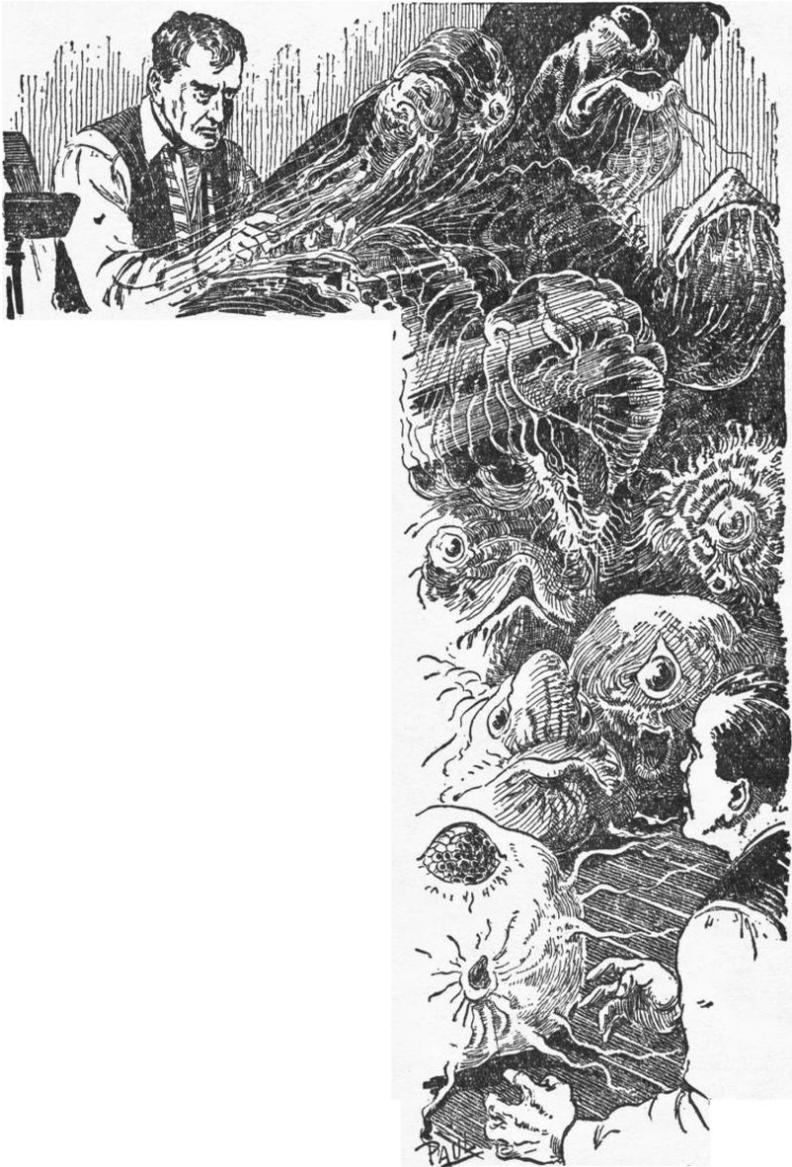
Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym

Keith Hammond

*Author of "The Seventh Coffin," "The
Hand of Ahriman," etc.*

First published in *Strange Stories*,
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The invaders squirmed about us

*When Furies of Hell from Another Age are Loosed Upon Earth by Michael Hayward,
They Teach Him a Nobler Wisdom!*

“It may turn out after all that the weavers of fantasy are the veritable realists.”

—*Machen.*

“Oh—it’s you,” said Hayward. “You got my wire?”

The light from the doorway of the cottage outlined his tall, lean figure, making his shadow a long, black blotch on the narrow bar of radiance that shone across the sand to where green-black rollers were surging.

A sea-bird gave a shrill, eerie cry from the darkness, and I saw Hayward’s silhouette give a curious little jerk.

“Come in,” he said quickly, stepping back.

Mason and I followed him into the cottage.

Michael Hayward was a writer—a unique one. Very few writers could create the strange atmosphere of eldritch horror that Hayward put into his fantastic tales of mystery. He had imitators—all great writers have—but none attained the stark and dreadful illusion of reality with which he invested his oftentime shocking fantasies. He went far beyond the bounds of human experience and familiar superstition, delving into uncanny fields of unearthliness. Blackwood’s vampiric elementals, M. R. James’ loathsome liches—even the black horror of de Maupassant’s *Horla* and Bierce’s *Damned Thing*—paled by comparison.

It wasn’t the abnormal beings Hayward wrote about so much as the masterly impression of reality he managed to create in the reader’s mind—the ghastly idea that he wasn’t writing fiction, but was simply transcribing on paper the stark, hellish truth. It was no wonder that the jaded public avidly welcomed each new story he wrote.

Bill Mason had telephoned me that afternoon at the *Journal*, where I worked, and had read me an urgent telegram from Hayward asking—in fact, begging us—to come at once to his isolated cottage on the beach north of Santa Barbara. Now, beholding him, I wondered at the urgency.

He didn’t seem ill, although his thin face was more gaunt than usual, and his eyes unnaturally bright. There was a nervous tension in his manner, and I got the odd impression that he was intently listening, alert for some sound from outside the cottage. As he took our coats and motioned us to chairs, Mason gave me a worried glance.

Something was wrong. Mason sensed it, I sensed it. Hayward filled his pipe and lit it, the smoke wreathing about his stiff black hair. There were bluish shadows in his temples.

“What’s up, old man?” I hazarded. “We couldn’t make head nor tail of your wire.”

He flushed. “I guess I was a little flurried when I wrote it. You see, Gene—oh, what’s the use—something *is* wrong, very wrong. At first I thought it might be my nerves, but—it isn’t.”

From outside the cottage came the shrill cry of a gull, and Hayward turned his face to the window. His eyes were staring, and I saw him repress a shudder. Then he seemed to pull himself together. He faced us, his lips compressed.

“Tell me, Gene—and you, Bill—did you notice anything—odd—on your way up?”

“Why, no,” I said.

“Nothing? Are you sure? It might have seemed unimportant—any *sounds*, I mean.”

“There were the seagulls,” Mason said, frowning. “You remember, I mentioned them to you, Gene.”

Hayward caught him up sharply. “Seagulls?”

“Yes,” I said. “That is, birds of some kind—they didn’t sound quite like seagulls. We couldn’t see them, but they kept following the car, calling to each other. We could hear them. But aside from the birds—”

I hesitated, astonished at the look on Hayward’s face—an expression almost of despair. He said, “No—that’s it, Gene. But they weren’t birds. They’re something—you won’t believe,” he whispered, and there was fright in his eyes. “Not till you see them—and then it’ll be too late.”

“Mike,” I said. “You’ve been overworking. You’ve—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I’m not losing my grip. Those weird stories of mine—they haven’t driven me mad, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m as sane as you are. The truth is,” he said very slowly, choosing his words with care, “I am being attacked.”

I groaned inwardly. Delusions of persecution—a symptom of insanity. Was Hayward’s mind really crumbling? Why, I wondered, were his eyes so unnaturally bright, and his thin face so flushed? And why did he keep shooting quick, furtive glances at the window?

I turned to the window. I started to say something and stopped.

I was looking at a vine. That is, it resembled a thick, fleshy vine more than anything else, but I had never seen any plant quite similar to the rope-like thing that lay along the window-ledge. I opened the window to get a better look at it.

It was as thick as my forearm, and very pale—yellowish ivory. It possessed a curious glossy texture that made it seem semi-transparent, and it ended in a raw-looking stump that was overgrown with stiff, hair-like cilia. The tip somehow made me think of the extremity of an elephant’s trunk, although there was no real similarity. The other end dangled from the window-ledge and disappeared in the darkness toward the front of the house. And, somehow, I didn’t like the look of the thing.

“What is it?” Mason asked behind me.

I picked up the—the—whatever it was. Then I got a severe shock, for it began to slip through my hand! *It* was being pulled away from me, and as I stared the end slipped through my fingers and whipped into the darkness. I craned out the window.

“There’s somebody outside!” I flung over my shoulder. “I saw—”

I felt a hand seize me, shove me aside. “Shut that window,” Hayward gasped. He slammed it down, locked it. And I heard a gasping, inarticulate cry from Mason.

He was standing in the open doorway, glaring out. His face was changing, becoming transfigured with amazement and loathing. From outside the portal came a shrill, mewling cry—and a blast of great winds. Sand swirled in through the doorway. I saw Mason stagger back, his arm flung up before his eyes.

Hayward leaped for the door, slammed it. I helped the now shuddering Mason to a chair. It was terrible to see this usually imperturbable man in the grip of what could only be called panic. He dropped into the seat, glaring up at me with distended eyes. I gave him my flask; his fingers were white as they gripped it. He took a hasty gulp. His breathing was rapid and uneven.

Hayward came up beside me, stood looking down at Mason, pity in his face.

“What the devil’s the matter?” I cried. But Mason ignored me, had eyes only for Hayward.

“G-God in heaven,” he whispered. “Have I—gone mad, Hayward?”

Hayward shook his head slowly. “I’ve seen them, too.”

“Bill,” I said sharply. “What’s out there? What did you see?”

He only shook his head violently, trying to repress the violent paroxysms of trembling that were shaking him.

I swung about, went to the door, opened it. I don’t know what I expected to see—some animal, perhaps—a mountain-lion or even a huge snake of some kind. But there was nothing there—just the empty white beach.

It was true there was a disk-shaped area of disturbed sand nearby, but I could make nothing of that. I heard Hayward shouting at me to close the door.

I shut it. “There’s nothing there,” I said.

“It—must have gone,” Mason managed to get out. “Give me another drink, will you?”

I handed him my flask. Hayward was fumbling in his desk. “Look here,” he said after a moment, coming back with a scrap of yellow paper. He thrust it at Mason, and Bill gasped out something incoherent. “That’s it,” he said, getting his voice under control. “That’s the—the thing I saw!”

I peered over his shoulder, scrutinizing the paper. It bore a sketch, in pencil, of something that looked as if it had emerged from a naturalist’s nightmare. At first glance I got the impression of a globe, oddly flattened at the top and bottom, and covered with what I thought at first was a sparse growth of very long and thick hairs. Then I saw that they were appendages, slender tentacles. On the rugose upper surface of the thing was a great faceted eye, and below this a puckered orifice that corresponded, perhaps, to a mouth. Sketched hastily by Hayward, who was not an artist, it was nevertheless powerfully evocative of the hideous.

“That’s the thing,” Mason said. “Put it away! It was all—shining, though. And it made that—that sound.”

“Where did it go?” Hayward asked.

“I—don’t know. It didn’t roll away—or go into the ocean. I’m sure of that. All I heard was that blast of wind, and sand blew in my eyes. Then—well, it was gone.”

I shivered.

“It’s cold,” Hayward said, watching me. “It always gets cold when they come.” Silently he began to kindle a fire in the stone fireplace.

“But such things can’t exist!” Mason cried out in sudden protest. Then in tones of despair: “But I saw it, I saw it!”

“Get hold of yourself, Bill,” I snapped.

“I don’t give a damn what you think, Gene,” he cried. “I saw something out there that—why, I’ve always laughed at such things—legends, dreams—but, God! when one sees it—oh, I’m not trying to fool you, Gene. You’ll probably see the thing yourself before long.” He finished with a curious note of horror in his voice.

I knew he wasn’t lying. Still—“Are you sure it wasn’t a—mirage?” I asked. “The spray, perhaps—an optical illusion?”

Hayward broke in. “No, Gene.” He faced us, grim lines bracketing his mouth. “It’s no illusion. It’s the stark, hideous truth. Even now I sometimes try to make myself believe I’m dreaming some fantastic, incredible nightmare from which I’ll eventually awaken. But no. I—

I couldn't stand it any longer—alone. The things have been here for two days now. There are several of them—five or six, perhaps more. That's why I sent you the wire."

"Five or six of what?" I demanded, but Mason interrupted me quickly. "Can't we get out? My car is down the road a bit."

"Don't you think I've tried?" Hayward cried. "I'm afraid to. I've my car too. As a matter of fact, I did start for Santa Barbara last night. I thought I might get away under cover of dark. But the noises—those sounds they make—got louder and louder, and I had the feeling, somehow, that they were getting ready to drop on me. I flagged a man and paid him to send you the wire."

"But what *are* they?" Mason burst out. "Have you no idea? Such things don't just appear. Some hybrid form of life from the sea, perhaps—some unknown form of life—"

Hayward nodded. "Exactly. An unknown form of life. But one totally alien, foreign to mankind. Not from the sea, Bill, not from the sea. From another dimension—another plane of existence."

This was too much for me. "Oh, come, Hayward," I said. "You can't really mean—why, it's against all logic."

"You didn't see it," Mason said, glaring at me. "If you'd seen that frightful, obscene thing, as I did—"

"Look here," cut in Hayward abruptly. "I—I shouldn't have brought you into this. Seeing what it's done to Bill has made me realize—you're still free to go, you know. Perhaps it would be better—"

I shook my head. I wasn't going to run from a cry in the night, an odd-looking vine, an optical illusion. Besides, I knew what an effort it had cost Hayward to get out those words of renunciation. But before I could speak, a strange, shrill cry came from outside the house. Hayward glanced quickly at the window. He had pulled the shade down.

His face was grave. "I've changed my mind," he said. "You mustn't leave the house tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps—"

He turned to his desk, picked up a small pill-box. Mutely he extended his hand, on which he had dropped a few round, blackish pellets.

I picked one up, sniffed at it curiously. It had a pungent, unfamiliar odor. I felt an odd tickling sensation in my nostrils, and suddenly, for no apparent reason, thought of a childhood incident long buried in the past—nothing important, merely a clandestine visit to an apple orchard with two youthful chums. We had filled two gunnysacks—

Why should I remember this now? I had entirely forgotten that boyhood adventure—at least, I hadn't thought of it in years.

Hayward took the pellet from me rather hastily, watching my face. "That was the beginning," he said after a pause. "It's a drug. Yes," he went on at our startled expressions. "I've been taking it. Oh, it's not hashish or opium—I wish it were! It's far worse—I got the formula from Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*."

"What?" I was startled. "Where did you—"

Hayward coughed. "As a matter of fact, Gene, I had to resort to a little bribery. The book's kept in a vault in the Huntington Library, you know, but I—I managed to get photostatic copies of the pages I needed."

"What's it all about, this book?" Mason asked, impatiently.

"*Mysteries of the Worm*," I told him. "I've seen it mentioned in dispatches at the paper. It's one of the tabooed references—we've got orders to delete it from any story in which it appears."

"Such things are kept hushed up," Hayward said. "Scarcely anyone in California knows that such a book exists in the Huntington Library. Books like that aren't for general knowledge. You see, the man who wrote it was supposed to be an old Flemish sorcerer, who had learned forbidden lore and evil magic—and who wrote the book while he was in prison awaiting trial for witchcraft. The volume's been suppressed by the authorities in every country in which it's been issued. In it I found the formula for this drug."

He rattled the pellets in his hand. "It's—I may as well tell you—it's the source of my weird stories. It has a powerfully stimulating effect on the imagination."

"What are its effects?" I asked.

"It's a time drug," Hayward said, and watched us.

We stared back at him.

"I don't mean that the drug will enable the user to move in time—no. Not physically, at any rate. But by taking this drug I have been able to remember certain things that I have never experienced *in this life*."

"The drug enables one to recall his ancestral memories," he went on swiftly, earnestly. "What's so strange about that? I am able to remember past lives, previous reincarnations. You've heard of transmigration of souls—over one-half the population of the world believes in it. It's the doctrine that the soul leaves the body at death to enter another—like the hermit crab, moving from one shell to another."

"Impossible," I said. But I was remembering my strange flash of memory while I was examining one of the pellets.

"And why?" Hayward demanded. "Surely the soul, the living essence, has a memory. And if that hidden, submerged memory can be dragged from the subconscious into the conscious—the old mystics had strange powers and stranger knowledge, Gene. Don't forget that I've taken the drug."

"What was it like?" Mason wanted to know.

"It was—well like a flood of memory being poured into my mind—like a moving picture being unfolded—I can't make it clearer than that.

"It brought me to Italy, the first time. It was during the Borgia reign. I can remember it vividly—plots and counterplots, and finally a flight to France, where I—or rather this ancestor of mine—died in a tavern brawl. It was very vivid, very real.

"I've kept taking the drug ever since, although it isn't habit-forming. After I wake up from my dream-state—it lasts from two to four hours, generally—my mind feels clear, free, unleashed. That's when I do my writing.

"You have no idea how far back those ancestral memories go. Generations, ages, inconceivable eons! Back to Genghis Khan, back to Egypt and Babylon—and further than that, back to the fabulous sunken lands of Mu and Atlantis. It was in those first, primal memories, in a land which exists today only as a memory and a myth, that I first encountered those things—the horror you saw tonight. They existed on earth then, uncounted milleniums ago. And I—"

Again the skirling, shrill cry shrieked out. This time it sounded as if it came from directly above the cottage. I felt a sudden pang of cold, as though the temperature had taken an abrupt

drop. There was a heavy, ominous hush in which the crashing of the surf sounded like the thunder of great drums.

Sweat was standing out in beads on Hayward's forehead.

"I've called them to earth," he muttered dully, his shoulders drooping. "The *Mysteries of the Worm* gave a list of precautions to be taken before using the drug—the Pnakotic pentagon, the cabalistical signs of protection—things you wouldn't understand. The book gave terrible warnings of what might happen if those precautions weren't taken—it specifically mentioned those things—'the dwellers in the Hidden World', it called them.

"But I—I neglected finally to safeguard myself. I didn't foresee—I thought I might get a stronger effect from the drug if I didn't take the directed precautions, improve my stories. I unbarred the gateway, and called them to earth again."

He stared into space, his eyes blank and unseeing. "I have committed terrible sin by my neglect," he muttered, it seemed to himself.

Mason was suddenly on his feet, his whole body shaking. "I can't stay here! It'll drive us all mad. It's only an hour's drive to Santa Barbara—I can't stand this waiting, waiting, with that thing outside gloating over us!"

Was Mason, too, losing his nerve! His mind! In the face of this unseen menace, whatever it was?

Sea-birds, a mirage of spray—men, perhaps—were responsible for Mason's fear—I tried to tell myself that.

But deep in my heart I knew that no ordinary fear could have driven my two companions to the verge of craven hysteria. And I knew that I felt a strange reluctance to go out into that brooding, silent darkness on the beach.

"No," Hayward said. "We can't—that'd be walking right into the thing. We'll be all right in here—"

But there was no assurance in his voice.

"I can't stay here doing nothing!" Mason shouted. "I tell you, we'll all go crazy. Whatever that thing is—I've got my gun. And I'll stake bullets against it any time. I'm not staying here!"

He was beside himself. A short time ago the thought of venturing outside the cottage had seemed horrible to him; now he welcomed it as an escape from nerve-racking inaction. He pulled a vicious, flat automatic from his pocket, strode to the door.

Hayward was on his feet, stark horror in his eyes. "For the love of God, don't open that door!" he shouted.

But Mason flung open the door, ignoring him. A gust of icy wind blew in upon us. Outside fog was creeping in, sending greasy tendrils coiling like tentacles toward the doorway.

"Shut the door!" Hayward screamed as he lunged across the room. I made a hasty move forward as Mason sprang out into the darkness. I collided with Hayward, went reeling. I heard the gritty crunch of Mason's footsteps on the sand—and something else.

A shrill, mewing cry. Somehow—fierce, exultant. And it was answered from the distance by other cries, as though dozens of sea-birds were wheeling high above us, unseen in the fog.

I heard another strange little sound—I couldn't classify it. It sounded vaguely like a shout that had been clipped off abruptly. There was a rushing howl of winds and I saw Hayward clinging to the door, staring out as though stupefied.

In a moment I saw why. Mason had vanished—utterly and completely, as though he had been borne off by a bird of prey. There was the empty beach, the low dunes to the left—but not a sign of Bill Mason.

I was dazed. He couldn't have sprinted from sight during the brief time my eyes had been turned away. Nor could he have hidden beneath the house, for it was boarded down to the sand.

Hayward turned a white, lined face to me. "They've got him," he whispered. "He wouldn't listen to me. Their first victim—God knows what will happen now."

Nevertheless we searched. It was vain. Bill Mason had vanished. We went as far as his car, but he wasn't there.

If the keys of the car had been in the dashboard, I might have urged Hayward to get into the car with me, to race from that haunted beach. I was growing afraid, but I dared not admit my fear even to myself.

We went back to the cottage slowly.

"It's only a few hours till dawn," I said after we had sat and stared at each other for a while. "Mason—we can find him then."

"We'll never find him," Hayward said dully. "He's in some hellish world we can't even imagine. He may, even be in another dimension."

I shook my head stubbornly. I couldn't, wouldn't believe. There must be some logical explanation, and I dared not lower my defences of skepticism and disbelief.

After a time we heard a shrill mewling from outside. It came again, and then several sharp cries at once. I lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, got up and paced the room nervously.

"That damned drug," I heard Hayward muttering. "It's opened the gateway— I have committed sin—"

I paused, my attention caught by a word, a sentence, on a sheet of paper in Hayward's typewriter. I ripped it from the platen.

"Material for a story," Hayward said bitterly, glancing up at the sound. "I wrote that two nights ago, when I first got the memory of the things. I've told you how those damnable pills work. I got the—the memory in the afternoon, and sat down to hammer out a story from it that night. I was—interrupted."

I didn't answer. I was reading, fascinated, that half-page of type. And as I read, an eerie spell of horror seemed to settle down over me, like a chill shroud of dank fog. For in that eldritch legend Hayward had written, there were certain disturbing hints of things that made my mind shudder away from their frightfulness, even while I recognized them.

The manuscript read:

I dwelt in an archaic world. A world that had been long forgotten when Atlantis and Cimmeria flourished, a world so incredibly ancient that none of its records have ever come down through the ages.

The first human race dwelt in primal Mu, worshipping strange, forgotten gods—mountain-tall Cthulhu of the Watery Abyss, the Serpent Yig, Iod the Shining Hunter, Vorvados of the Gray Gulf of Yarnak.

And in those days there came to earth certain beings from another dimension of space, inhuman, monstrous creatures which desired to wipe out all life from the

planet. These beings planned to leave their own dying world to colonize earth, building their titanic cities on this younger, more fruitful planet.

With their coming a tremendous conflict sprang into being, in which the gods friendly to mankind were arrayed against the hostile invaders. Foremost in that cyclopean battle, mightiest of earth's gods, was the Flaming One, Vorvados of Bel-Yarnak, and I, high priest of his cult, kindled—

There the manuscript ended.

Hayward had been watching me. "That was my—dream, Gene, when I last took the time-drug. It wasn't quite as clear as most of them—there are always blind spots, odd gaps where my memory somehow doesn't work. But the drug showed me what had happened in that prehistoric lifetime of mine, so many incarnations ago. We won—or rather our gods won. The invaders—those things—"

He broke off as a mewling cry sounded, very near, and then resumed in an unsteady voice. "They were driven back into their own world, their own dimension—and the gateway was closed, so they could not return. It's remained closed through all these eons.

"It would still be closed," he went on bitterly, "if I hadn't opened it with my experiments, or had taken the precautions the *Mysteries of the Worm* gave. Now they've got Mason—and that's all they need. I know that, somehow. A sacrifice to open the gate between this world and their own frightful dimension, so that their hordes can come pouring upon earth—

"That's how they got in before. By a human sacrifice—"

"Listen!" I held up my hand urgently. The mewling cries had died, but there was another sound—a faint highpitched moaning coming from outside the cottage. Hayward didn't move.

"It may be Mason," I jerked out as I went to the door. Momentarily I hesitated, and then swung it open, stepped out on the sand. The moaning grew louder. Hayward slowly came up by my side. His eyes were sharper than mine, for as he peered into the fog-banks he gave a startled exclamation.

"Good God!" He flung out his arm, pointing. "*Look at that!*"

Then I, too, saw it, and I stood there glaring at the thing, unable to move.

There, on that Pacific beach, with the yellow light from the open door pouring out into the fog, something was dragging itself painfully over the sand toward us—something distorted, misshapen, uttering little whimpering cries as it pulled itself along. It came into the beam of light and we saw it distinctly.

Beside me Hayward was swaying back and forth, making hoarse sounds as though he were trying to scream and couldn't. I stumbled back, flinging up my arm to shield my horrified eyes, croaking, "Keep away! For God's sake, stay back—you—you—you're not Bill Mason—*damn you, stay back!*"

But the thing kept on crawling toward us. The black, sightless hollows where its eyes had been were grim shadows in the dim light. It had been flayed alive, and its hands left red marks on the sand as it crept. A patch of bare white skull shone like a frightful tonsure on the crimsoned head.

Nor was that all—but I cannot bring myself to describe the dreadful and loathsomely abnormal *changes* that had taken place in the body of the thing that had been Bill Mason. And even as it crawled it was—changing!

A dreadful metamorphosis was overtaking it. It seemed to be losing its outline, to sprawl down until it wriggled rather than crawled along the sand. Then I knew! In the space of seconds it was reversing the entire evolutionary upsurge of the human species! It squirmed there like a snake, losing its resemblance to anything human as I watched, sick and shuddering. It melted and shrank and shrivelled until there was nothing left but a loathsome foul ichor that was spreading in a black puddle of odious black slime. I heard myself gasping hysterical, unintelligible prayers. And suddenly a piercing shock of cold went through me. High in the fog I heard a mewing, shrill call.

Hayward clutched at my arm, his eyes blazing. "It's come," he whispered. "It's the sacrifice—they're breaking through!"

I swung about, leaped for the open door of the cottage. The icy, unnatural chill was numbing my body, slowing my movements. "Come on," I shouted at Hayward. "You fool, don't stay out there! There has been one sacrifice already! Must there be others!"

He flung himself into the house and I slammed and locked the door.

Shrill, unearthly cries were coming from all directions now, as though the things were calling and answering one another. I thought I sensed a new note in the cries—a note of expectation, of triumph.

The window-shade rolled up with a rattle and a snap, and the fog began to move past the pane, coiling and twisting fantastically. At a sudden gust the window shook in its casing. Hayward said under his breath, "Atmospheric disturbances—oh, my God! Poor Mason—watch the door, Gene!" His voice was strangled.

For a moment I saw nothing. Then the door bulged inward as though frightful pressure had been applied from without. A panel cracked with a rending sound, and I caught my breath. Then—it was gone.

The metal doorknob had a white rime of frost on it. "This—this isn't real," I said madly, although I was shuddering in the icy cold.

"Real enough. They're breaking through—"

Then Hayward said something so strange that it brought me around sharply, staring at him. Gazing vacantly at me, like a man in a hypnagogic state, he muttered in a queer guttural voice:

"The fires burn on Nergu-K'nyan and the Watchers scan the night skies for the Enemies—*ny'ghan tharanak grii*—"

"Hayward!" I seized his shoulders, shook him. Life came back into his eyes.

"Blind spot," he muttered. "I remembered something—now it's gone. . . ."

He flinched as a new outburst of the mewing cries came from above the house.

But a strange, an incredible surmise, had burst upon my brain. There was a way out, a key of deliverance from evil—Hayward had it and did not know it!

"Think," I said breathlessly. "Think hard! What was it—that memory?"

"Does that matter now? This—" He saw the expression on my face, its meaning flashed across to him and he answered, not quickly, not slowly, but dreamily: "I seemed to be on a mountain peak, standing before the altar of Vorvados, with a great fire flaming up into the darkness. Around me there were priests in white robes—watchers—"

"Hayward," I cried. "Vorvados—look here!" I snatched up the half-page of manuscript, read from it hastily. "'The gods friendly to man were arrayed against the invaders—'"

"I see what you mean!" Hayward cried. "We triumphed—then. But now—"

“Hayward!” I persisted desperately. “Your flash of memory just now! You were standing on a mountain while the Watchers scanned the night skies for the Enemies, you said. The Enemies must have been those creatures. Suppose the Watchers saw *them*?”

Suddenly the house shook under an impact that was not the work of the screaming wind. God! Would my efforts bear fruit too late? I heard an outburst of the shrill cries, and the door creaked and splintered. It was dreadfully cold. We were flung against the wall, and I staggered, almost losing my balance. Again the house rocked under another battering-ram impact. My teeth were chattering, and I could hardly speak. A black dizziness was creeping up to overwhelm me, and my hands and feet had lost all feeling. Out of a whirling sea of darkness I saw Hayward’s white face.

“It’s a chance,” I gasped, fighting back the blackness. “Wouldn’t there—have been some way of summoning the gods, the friendly gods—if the Watchers saw the Enemies? You—you were high priest—in that former life. You’d know—how—to summon—”

The door crashed, broke. I heard wood being torn ruthlessly apart, but I dared not turn.

“Yes!” Hayward cried. “I remember—there was a word!”

I saw his frightened gaze shift past me to the horror that I knew was ripping at the broken door. I fumbled for his shoulders, managed to turn him away. “You must! Think, man—”

Abruptly a light flared in his eyes. He was reacting at last.

He flung up his arms and began a weird, sonorous chant. Strangely archaic-sounding words flowed from his tongue fluently, easily. But now I had no eyes for him—I was glaring at the horror that was squeezing itself through the splintered gap it had torn in the wall.

It was the thing Hayward had sketched, revealed in all its loathsome reality!

My dizziness, my half-fainting state, saved me from seeing the thing too clearly. As it was, a scream of utter horror ripped from my throat as I saw, through a spinning whirlpool of darkness, a squamous, glowing ball covered with squirming, snake-like tentacles—translucent ivory flesh, leprous and hideous—a great faceted eye that held the cold stare of the Midgard Serpent. I seemed to be dropping, spinning, falling helplessly down toward a welter of writhing, glossy tentacles . . . and dimly I could hear Hayward still chanting. . . .

“*Iä! Rhyn tharanak—Vorvados* of Bel-Yarnak! The Troubler of the Sands! Thou Who waiteth in the Outer Dark, Kindler of the Flame—*n’gha shugg y’haa—*”

He pronounced a Word. A Word of Power, which my stunned ears could scarcely hear. Yet hear it I did. And I felt that beyond the borders of human consciousness and understanding, that Word was flashing and thundering, through the intergalactic spaces to the farthest abyss. And in primeval night and chaos Something heard, and rose up, and obeyed the summons.

For, with the suddenness of a thunderclap, blackness fell on the room, hiding from my sight the monstrous glowing thing that was plunging toward us. I heard a dreadful skirling cry—and then there was utter silence, in which I could not even hear the recurrent crashing of the surf. The abysmal cold sent sharp flashes of pain through me.

Then, out of the darkness, there rose up before us a Face. I saw it through a haze of silvery mist that clung about it like a veil. It was utterly inhuman, for the half-seen features were arranged in a pattern different to mankind, seeming to follow the strange pattern of some unfamiliar and alien geometry. Yet it did not frighten, it calmed.

Through the silver mist I made out strange hollows, fantastic curves and planes. Only the eyes were clear, unmistakable—black as the empty wastes between the stars, cold in their unearthly wisdom.

There were tiny dancing flames flickering in those eyes, and there were little flames, too, playing over the strange, inhuman countenance. And although not a shadow of emotion passed over those brooding, passionless eyes, I felt a wave of reassurance. Suddenly all fear left me. Beside me, unseen in the darkness, I heard Hayward whisper, “Vorvados! The Kindler of the Flame!”

Swiftly the darkness receded, the face faded to a shadowy dimness. I was looking, not at the familiar walls of the cottage, but at another world. I had gone down with Hayward into the profundities of the past.

I seemed to be standing in a vast amphitheatre of jet, and around me, towering to a sky sprinkled with an infinite multitude of cold stars, I could see a colossal and shocking city of scalene black towers and fortresses, of great masses of stone and metal, arching bridges and cyclopean ramparts. And with racking horror I saw teeming loathsomely in that nightmare city the spawn of that alien dimension.

Hundreds, thousands—surging multitudes of them, hanging motionless in the dark, clear air, resting quiescent on the tiers of the amphitheatre, surging across the great cleared spaces. I caught glimpses of glittering eyes, cold and unwinking; pulpy, glowing masses of semi-transparent flesh; monstrous reptilian appendages that swam before my eyes as the things moved loathsomely. I felt contaminated, defiled. I think I shrieked, and my hands flew up to shut out that intolerable vision of lost Abaddon—the dimension of the Invaders.

And abruptly that other-world vision snapped out and vanished.

I saw the godlike, alien Face fleetingly, felt the cool glance of those strange, omniscient eyes. Then it was gone, and the room seemed to rock and sway in the grip of cosmic forces. As I staggered and almost fell I saw again around me the walls of the cottage.

The unbearable chill was no longer in the air; there was no sound but the pounding of the surf. The wind still sent the fog twisting past the window, but the brooding, oppressive feeling of age-old evil had utterly vanished. I sent an apprehensive glance at the shattered door, but there was no trace of the horror that had burst into the cottage.

Hayward was leaning limply against the wall, breathing in great gasps. We looked at each other dumbly. Then, moved by a common impulse, we went, half staggering, to the splintered gap where the door had been, out on to the sand.

The fog was fading, vanishing, torn into tatters by a cool, fresh wind. A starlit patch of night sky glittered above the cottage.

“Driven back,” Hayward whispered. “As they were once before—back to their own dimension, and the gateway locked. But not before a life was taken by them . . . the life of our friend . . . may Heaven forgive me for that. . . .”

Suddenly he turned, went stumbling back into the cottage, great dry sobs racking him.

And my cheeks, too, were wet.

He came out. I stood at his side as he threw the time-pellets into the sea. Never again would he go back to the past. He would live henceforth in the present, and a little in the future—as was more fitting, decenter, for human beings to do. . . .

[The end of *The Invaders* by Henry Kuttner (as Keith Hammond)]