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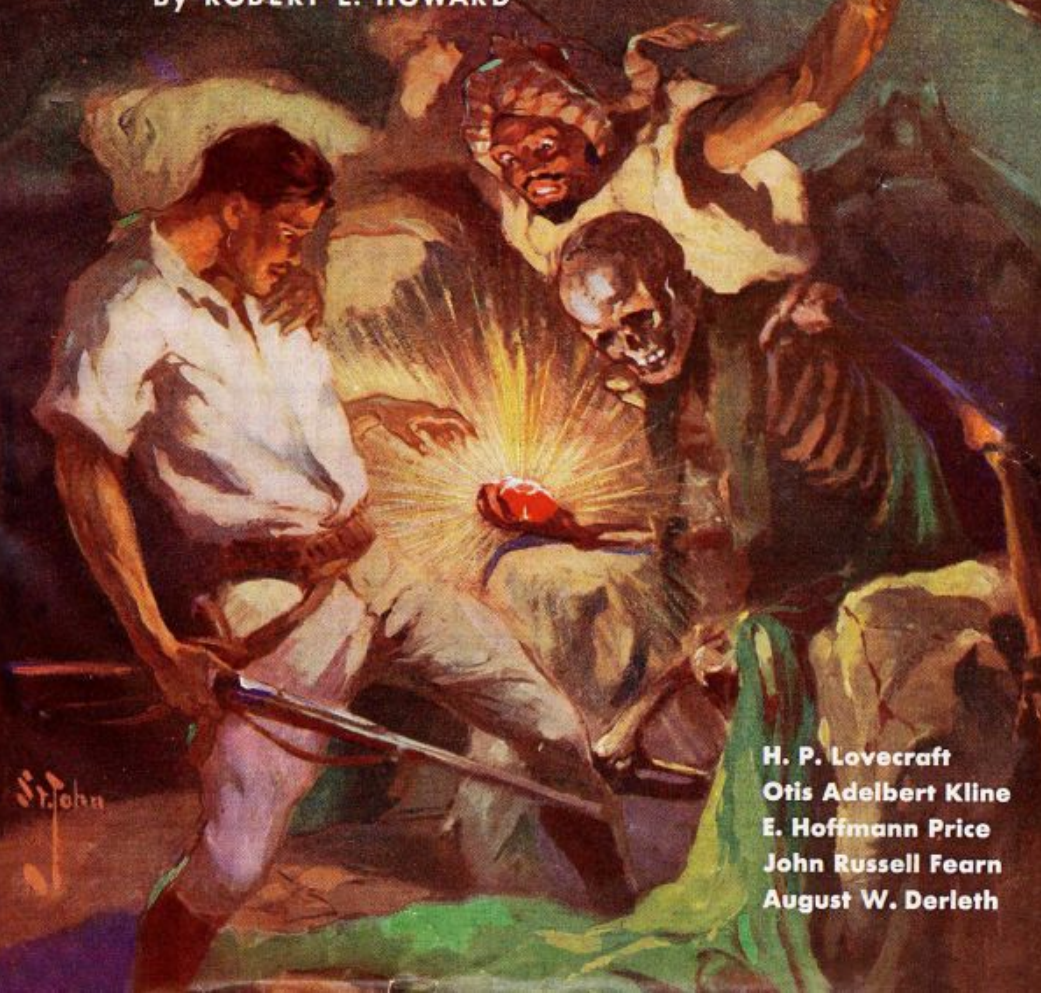
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DECEMBER

THE FIRE OF ASSHURBANIPAL

a superb weird novelette of a flaming gem that glowed with living fire...

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



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Portrait of a Murderer

By
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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An odd story of hypnotic power and a gruesome tragedy in the chasm that yawns at the foot of Coniston Crag

I am a medium; for reference purposes only I give my name as Henry Clifton of London. As to the extent of my psychic abilities, I have little to say. Also do I withdraw from all responsibility for the messages which came to me from John Carlow Moore after he had been executed at — jail on February 9th, 1936. I only know that he chose me of all men to take his communications, the essence of which I have recorded here, verbatim.

* * * * *

My name is John Carlow Moore. I first became acquainted with Enoch Pym in July of 1934. It happened in the casual manner common to potential vital happenings. I had taken a brief holiday among the lakes, and there, at my little hotel near Coniston, reposed the man for whom I was destined to commit murder.

A curious fellow, Pym—short, inclined to be stout, with wild and disordered black hair surmounting a podgy, pasty face. This general facial outline, lent added insipidness by a big, somewhat pendulous mouth and pale yet searching blue eyes, did little to make him prepossessing, and yet he held an uncanny fascination for me from the first moment I set eyes on him.

Odd though it may sound, I am half inclined to think that it was his delightful voice that interested me. Nowhere had I ever heard so mellow an intonation, so smooth and flawless a diction.

He came into my life on my second day at the Lakes, I remember. I had returned from a happy, solo jaunt to Rydal to find him in the low, old-fashioned dining-room of my country hotel. He was seated at the spotless tea-table eating poached eggs on toast, and surrounded by cakes, sugar, milk and tea-pot. Prosaic details, I know, and yet they were such integral, immovable adjuncts of that first survey. He smiled at me pleasantly as I entered, and soon I was keeping him company with another poached egg. For a long time we were silent, mentally weighing each other up as two Englishmen meeting for the first time in a lonely spot are wont to do; then at last he spoke and that wonderful voice fell on my ears for the first time.

“My name is Pym—Enoch Pym,” he explained. “Just up for a few days’ fishing—along with other matters.”

I returned the introduction, told him of my efforts to escape hard work as a journalist for a week, and went on to elaborate on my inborn love for the Cumberland scenery. We talked far beyond the cakes and cigarettes, ultimately continuing as we took an evening stroll toward Coniston village itself.

In a remarkably short space of time we had become the best of friends, which in itself was peculiar, for I had the journalist's intuition for detecting suspicious characters. Certainly I never felt in Pym's presence that there was somewhere in his make-up a streak of incarnate cruelty.

Upon that glorious evening he was civility itself. He revealed an amazing knowledge of all subjects I touched upon, from the printing of newspapers to affairs of the occult. And all the time his superb voice lulled me into a curious submission; it droned on and on, merging flawlessly into the calm perfection of that summer eve. To our left lay Coniston Water; to the right the gaunt and stern escarpments of Coniston Old Man, backed by the sullen ramparts of Dow Craggs, and farther to the north, its grim needle-pointed spires piercing the misty gray of the paling sky, stood Helvellyan.

Altogether then, it was a tranquil enough environment for two men with apparently kindred interests. We were alone on this single wooded road leading to Coniston, and I think it was this very isolation that caused me to listen with credence to Pym's observations on the subjects of mysticism, hypnotism, and the supernatural. Most certainly I would never have listened with half as much seriousness in my native London.



“A body falling into that chasm is bound to be destroyed.”

“Suppose,” he said suddenly, jabbing a well-gnawed pipe in the air, “that you were to die. Do you think you could find the way back? To here?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I could. Mind you, I believe in after-life, but only as a closed book—an untouchable plane from which mortals of this plane cannot communicate.”

He seemed to ponder over that. We walked on again in silence for a space, smoking and pursuing our own thoughts; then he suddenly resumed,

“Frankly, Mr. Moore, I came up to the Lakes here to make an experiment. One might call it an experiment with hypnotism. I was expecting to commandeer the services of a farmer or laborer for my purposes, but since a good Providence has placed me in contact with you I feel that perhaps you might——”

“Why, surely!” I exclaimed. “If I can be of any service at all I shall be only too pleased. After all, two men in a lonely spot like this . . . well, any experiment is welcome. What exactly are you going to do?”

“I don’t quite know yet.”

He stopped in mid-stride and cast a glance at the darkening sky. “It’s getting dark, Mr. Moore,” he remarked, as though the topic of hypnotism had never been mentioned. “We had better be getting back.”

That, I say, was how I met Pym. I have tried to convey my first reactions to his peculiar nature. He seemed, as I was with him day after day, to be pursuing some strange chimera of his own which controlled him with relentless power. Although he was always civil and pleasing, I had no doubts whatever about the moments of calm in which I often surprized him.

While out walking with him this odd facet of his nature was completely absent. He would talk in that fascinating, half-husky voice of his and throw out quite meaningless comments about his intended experiment—but within the staid and almost gloomy walls of our little hotel he would relapse again.

More often than not I found him gazing through the window at the stern bulk of Coniston Old Man, shifting his gaze only to take in the view of the sullen ramparts of Dow Crag to the left of the mountain. It was as though they held for him an intangible magnetism, as though they stimulated within him some unsuspected mental foible. And once I caught him muttering half aloud, quite unaware of my presence in the low-ceilinged room.

“. . . it is a fate which I shall administer justly, not with my own hands, but with all the resources of my brain. There can be no other way.”

Strange observation indeed! I was looking at him curiously when he became abruptly aware of my presence. With a curious smile he joined me at the tea-table and, with characteristic calmness, made no reference to his strange behavior.

“My wife is joining me tonight,” he said, in a matter-of-fact voice, pouring out tea.

This was a surprize to me; I had not even suspected he was married.

“I’m glad for your sake, Pym, but I shall miss our little walks,” I smiled. “Really, I’ve enjoyed them.”

He gazed at me with the oddest light in his eyes. I don’t know whether you have ever seen pale blue eyes with the evening sun catching them sideways. That was how it was at that moment. The strong summer evening light was streaming through the end window of the room and bathed one-half of his peculiar podgy face in intense radiance. Such effect threw the eyes into relief: they stared at me like glass circles, limpid blue rings with an intensely dark spot of pupil in their centers. Just for an instant they chilled me, stirred something strongly in

my brain. In those moments it seemed as though the entire soul of Enoch Pym was laid bare before me. Here, I knew, was a man to be wary of; and yet his wonderful voice gripped me in its inexplicable spell again as he began to speak.

"I really see no reason why our walks should be interfered with," he remarked calmly, his eyes still upon me. "I too have enjoyed them. The quiet mountain scenery, our mutual sociability—these are things to be treasured for their very rarity, Moore. As to my wife, she will not interfere with us. She is a strange woman, moody, usually lost in introspections. I fancy she is only joining me because she enjoys mountain air. Certainly it is not my company she is seeking."

"No, no—I see," I nodded quickly, and rather than pry into the mysteries of his domestic life I let the matter drop. For quite a time silence persisted between us, but I could feel his eyes upon me; then back came the superb diction to smooth my puzzled reflections.

"You will not like my wife, Moore."

"No?" I looked up to meet the eyes. "Why do you say that? I get on with most people."

"Maybe, but you won't with my wife. You see, you will meet as enemies; you will not like her; your dislike will grow, too. Do you understand that, Moore? You will hate her—*hate* her!"

"I—I shall hate her," I agreed slowly, trying to tear my eyes away from his, away from the bright glitter of the tea-things, the reflections from the silver tea-pot, the glare from the reflecting mirror on the wall; above all from those two pale blue pools in the expressionless face. . . . If only I could break the spell of that perfect voice of his! Its perfection sank into every fiber of my being; for a time, how long I do not know, I was in a world that shimmered and danced with bright sunlights, in a world mastered and controlled by a voice, that assured me I would hate the woman Betty Pym. Finally, I knew I *would* hate her, but for heaven's sake do not ask me why!

"Marmalade?" he asked suddenly, and I shot out of my vague, indeterminate realm of cloudy thoughts and speculations to find him holding the silver-edged receptacle almost under my nose. Again the reflected sunlight beat from it into my eyes so that I blinked.

"Sorry," I said with an apologetic laugh, taking it from him. "I—I was day-dreaming, I think. You said something about your wife, I believe?"

"Did I?" He shrugged slightly: the man was an absolute chameleon of character—he veered perpetually from one thing to another, leaving me the more mystified every time. "Perhaps I did," he agreed doubtfully, lighting a cigarette. "We don't get on very well, Betty and I. . . . However, never mind. It won't interfere with our walks."

And as though to substantiate it we went out again after tea.

It was upon that evening that he went to endless trouble to point out to me the particular advantages and defects of Coniston Old Man and Dow Crag. I remember that we walked in the clear, sweet wind to the base of the mountain and there sat down upon a massive boulder. Pym had a heavy ebony walking-stick with him, and with this he began to point out to my interested gaze certain landmarks with which he was manifestly extremely familiar.

“You will notice, Moore, that at the extreme left of the mountain summit there is a chasm, all of seven hundred feet in depth, practically sheer, while opposite stand Dow Crag?”

I nodded, shading my eyes from the glaring sun. His voice went on.

“The Dow Crag are available only to trained climbers, but anybody can climb the Old Man himself. Up the chasm between the two there blows a perpetual wind; it is not uncommon for climbers to slip and be carried away by it. And a body falling from either the Crag or the Old Man into that chasm would be bound to be destroyed.”

“I see,” I answered, and although I have a reasonably good memory I never retained information with such vivid clarity before. It seemed as though the things he had told me had been driven into my brain with sledgehammer force; I soaked them in, pondered them, reiterated them to myself all through the remainder of our evening ramble.

He talked on all kinds of topics afterward, but I cannot remember one of them. My whole mind was obsessed by the knowledge of a chasm and the fact that I hated his wife! Curious? Yes, perhaps it was. There was I, a perfectly sane journalist up for a fishing holiday, completely in the toils of this enigmatic man with the glorious voice and magnetic eyes. Try though I would I could not shake off his personality. It held me body and soul.

When we did ultimately arrive back at the hotel his wife had arrived. My first impression of her as she sat in the tiny dining-room, clearly illuminated in the specially generated electric light, was quite a favorable one. I completely forgot, for the time being, my ridiculous resolves to hate her.

She was a small dark woman with a pale, aristocratic face and oddly frightened brown eyes. From her appearance, I could better have imagined her as Pym’s daughter instead of his wife. Clearly he was considerably older.

He introduced us with that calm way he had, taking instant and masterful possession of the situation. She, for her part, remained strangely quiet, eating supper in silence and replying only in monosyllables to her husband’s inquiries as to her state of health, journey from home, and reactions to the Lake District.

It required little effort on my part to apprehend that there was a strong estrangement between them, though what it was I was too discreet to ask. I wondered too whether Pym had really told me I would hate her or whether I had imagined it. Certainly I could find nothing in her to dislike even. She was interesting, but nothing more. The domination of Pym completely overshadowed her. . . .

Finally, sensing how strained matters were, I went up to bed—and not half an hour later dropped into a doze. . . .

The instant I dropped asleep, as it seemed, I became the prey for terrible and Satanic nightmares. All the events of the day rose up before me in a solid conglomeration, intensely

magnified and potent, in the midst of which I struggled like a lost soul. There was Pym with his beautiful voice—Pym, receding, advancing, receding in perpetual reiteration; all face, now nothing but two unblinking eyes of pale and heartless blue illumined by a strong diagonal light. Once again the flash and glitter of silvered tea-things smote upon my tortured vision.

“You will hate my wife, Moore! You will hate my wife, Moore! You will hate my——” On and on, endlessly—a crazy, raging diapason of chanting words, merging into the major lunacy of the whole horrible occurrence.

Then presently he seemed to blur, but still I heard his voice ringing loud and clear in the now disordered emptinesses of my mind.

“A body falling into that chasm would be bound to be destroyed. . . .”

The voice receded, but the dream was as vivid as ever. I was staggering desperately, half clothed, up the ragged side of Coniston Old Man! About me, in the chilling wind—for I seemed to be nearly at the summit of the mountain—stood the moonlit desolations of boulders and stones. Far below, a reflected silver streak, lay Coniston Water. Something was weighing me down tremendously. To my surprize I discovered that it was a body—a woman’s body! Apparently I had carried her all the way up the mountainside. . . .

Now the dream took on a vaguely rational aspect; an ordered sequence came from the midst of the ridiculous chaos. Only intermittently now did the divine voice of Pym call strongly above the moaning wind.

“You’ll hate my wife, Moore! You’ll hate my wife! A body falling into that chasm is bound to be destroyed!”

“Yes, yes!” I yelled back hoarsely. “It’s bound to be destroyed!”

“You’ll hate my wife, Moore. . . .”

I looked down again at the woman I had been carrying. She lived, but was quite unconscious, a deep wound on her forehead from which blood flowed slowly. I realized that she was Pym’s wife, that I had stunned her and brought her here. Yes, athwart my subconscious mind lay the recollection of how I had crept into the little Gothic bedroom where she and Pym had been peacefully sleeping.

It had been easy to take that heavy ebon stick of his from near the window, so clearly visible in the moonlight, and stun her before a single sound could escape her. Stealthily I had dragged her from the bed; Pym had continued sleeping. And now? The chasm, of course! It was quite near to me. I seemed somehow to be highly elated with the gruesomeness of my mission, a mission totally foreign to my normal nature.

Grimly I picked Betty Pym’s limp body up in my arms, raised it over my head with unbelievable ease, then hurled it with all my strength into the eternal winds that rage and fume through that eight-hundred foot chasm. Immediately the body vanished, was lost to sight in the moonlight. I threw myself down on my face and stared down into the abyss. The wind stood my hair on end, whistled through my teeth. It was biting and cutting. Even on a summer night an elevation of some two thousand feet, clad only in a thin shirt and trousers—and brogues, of course—is no place to keep warm: I was chilled to the bone. Still, I had accomplished my purpose and that gave me a strange sense of complacency. Complacency for the implacable murder of a defenseless woman whom I hardly knew? What sort of a dream was this? It was endowed with a vicious and transcending realism, far more vivid than any dream before, and yet, I insisted to myself, still a dream. That being so, I realized, from all the observations on dream psychology, that I ought to become awake! The realization of a dream *being* a dream immediately causes sleep to cease—but in this instance I went on dreaming!

Puzzled, I rose up at last and turned to look toward the silver streak of Coniston Water, my only link with the hotel. I moved forward, stumbled amidst the countless stones. I was shivering and shaking both with intense cold and reaction, reeling and sprawling with ever-widening circles into the maw of a dank and wholly inexplicable darkness. . . .

I awoke suddenly, in the oddest fashion, as though I had been forcibly thrown out of sleep into the waking world. The vague hangovers of that appalling nightmare were still upon me; relentless cold gripped my limbs despite the warmth of the little bedroom.

Shakingly I scrambled out of bed and connected the electric heater. By degrees, bathed in the radius of its warmth, I began to feel more comfortable; the spasmodic twitching of my limbs ceased, the paralyzing sense of terror abated. I sat there, my back against the foot of the bed, wrapped in a blanket, and gazed into the heart of the radiator's red-hot wires, trying to marshal some sense of order out of the chaos in my mind. Once I even got up again and examined my shirt, trousers and shoes. A vast relief swept over me at discovering they were exactly where I had left them; the shoes in particular were quite clean and bore no traces of the mud of the hillside, nor did the trouser turn-ups.

Satisfied, I crawled back into bed and slept again without dreaming, awaking with the dawn, a victim to the obvious manifestations of the common cold. I dressed and shaved moodily, sneezed an absurd number of times, and finally made my way down to breakfast.

Pym was already there, quietly eating bacon and eggs.

"You look tired, Moore," he commented, surveying me. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"I had a hell of a night," I answered briefly. "Must have been a cold coming on, I think. Awful dreams, too. You know!"

"Awful dreams?" he repeated in vague surprise. "How queer! Do you know, when I have a cold approaching I don't dream at all. I seem to be drugged, in a sort of utter stupor. What, for instance, did you dream about? Dreams always interest me."

I looked at him steadily. "I dreamt I stunned your wife with your heavy ebony walking-stick, and then murdered her by throwing her body from the top of Coniston Old Man into that chasm you pointed out last evening."

"My dear fellow, you *were* in a bad way! A walk this morning will clear you up a bit, perhaps."

"Incidentally," I said, an odd feeling in my heart, "where *is* your wife?"

"Oh, she went out for an early walk—she always does when on holiday. Good Lord, Moore, you're not thinking that dream of yours was real, surely?"

"It—it was so vivid!" I muttered, "Still, thank God I did only dream it!"

I began to eat, with this consolation in my mind, but did not proceed very far. I was in no humor for food. The events of the night had upset me. I was about to rise when a hand suddenly fell upon my shoulder. A voice, deep and strong, spoke.

"John Carlow Moore, I have a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Betty Pym. . . ."

I twisted round, my heart thudding violently, and met the cold gray eyes of a police inspector. Behind him in the doorway of the dining-room stood two constables. And Pym? He sat there, smiling grimly.

"Pym!" I gasped hoarsely; "what does this mean?"

"It means that my wife's body was found in Dow Crag chasm by me, early this morning. I went for a walk before dawn, unable to sleep and puzzled at the strange disappearance of my wife. I came upon her, horribly murdered! Naturally I immediately notified the police; they

were at work while you slept after your inhuman butchery. In my room were found an old tie of yours, a button from the shirt you wore, and your fingerprints on my ebony walking-stick. It was a very simple matter to check them by your fingerprints on the bowl of your pipe up on the mantelpiece there. I persuaded the Inspector here that I could probably extract a confession from you, and I was more than successful. He and these two constables heard all you said just now—even though you did say it was a dream. A dream! My dear Moore!”

“But—but it *was* a dream!” I shouted huskily. “Damn it, you told me yourself that your wife was out walking——”

“Only to lead you on. I soon guessed that you were the culprit; you see, I remembered how you told me yesterday that you hated my wife!”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words completely refused to form. My mind became a tumbling chaos of confused thoughts. Only certain things stood out like islands in my mental turmoil, and those were of being hustled from that dining-room and being thrust, God knows how long after, into jail.

Then, and only then, did my mind readjust itself to the stunning conditions about me. I employed the best defense my modest means would permit and prayed for a satisfactory result. Poor fool that I was!

Once, and only once, did Pym visit me. He was as smooth and collected as ever, his pale blue eyes shining brightly—but I knew him at last for the devil he really was. Yet I let him talk, and I listened. His voice was as beautiful as ever.

“I felt that I should make it clear to you, my dear Moore, that I owe you no personal grudge,” he explained smoothly. “You have helped me wonderfully—proved the efficiency of the experiment I told you about. My experiment, you see, was to discover if a man could murder another without himself being anything but the mental agent behind it. It worked—admirably! My wife, you will perhaps have realized, was—shall we say?—prone to clandestine meetings with a man for whom I have an intense antipathy. I considered the problem very carefully from the moment I realized her unfaithfulness to me, and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that he was not nearly so much to blame as she. She was deceiving both him and me; therefore she was better exterminated. Do I make myself clear?”

“You make yourself clear as a cold-blooded incarnate devil!” I snapped back.

“Dear me, how very crude, Moore! However, perhaps you’re right. I came to the Lake District to find there a laborer, or some farm man who would have done equally well as my tool; but it so happened you were present. So naturally I used you. Obviously my wife did not come of her own volition; I threatened what might happen to her if she did not come. Over the telephone, of course! All verbal, my dear sir.”

“Go on!” I ground out.

“I hypnotized you, Moore—completely. You remember the glitter of the tea-things when I told you you would hate my wife? You remember the glare of the sun in your eyes when I told you that a body falling into Dow Crag chasm would be bound to be destroyed? You remember the heavy ebony stick I used to point out the landmarks? There was the medium between! A complete sequence of events was hypnotically in your mind. The hatred for my wife, the weapon for attack, and the place for the body. . . . Last night you did everything I had commanded. I was not asleep when you stunned my wife. I followed you to the top of the mountain and back again, holding you under hypnotic control all the time. I saw what you did with my wife; I followed you back to the hotel. Needless to relate, I cleaned your shoes and rearranged your clothing to reassure your perhaps puzzled mind. . . . It was I too who provided the clues in my room that led to your arrest. . . . So very simple, you see.”

“You’ll not get away with it!” I vowed thickly. “I’ll do all I can to bring you to book. . . .”

“As you will,” he shrugged. “So far as I am concerned the world is rid of a very evil and designing woman. As for you, I am seeing to it that a good motive for your crime is supplied. You see, I am naming *you* as the ‘other man.’ Maybe a little unfair of me, but very necessary. . . . But my time is up, Mr. Moore. I will wish you good day, and”—he smiled twistedly—“good luck!”

Quietly he left the cell. . . .

Need I dwell on the harrowing details of the events that ensued? I stood no earthly chance at the trial—Pym saw to that! All my efforts to prove the case one of hypnotic control failed completely. A matter-of-fact jury and judge were not impressed by my story of excursions into the mesmeric world; rather they regarded it as a deliberate fabrication to shield my guilt.

Certainly I blackened my case by resorting to the truth. . . . As for Pym, he swore my soul away with a merciless implacability, aided by the extremely clever lawyer whom he had engaged.

Finally I was found guilty and sentenced to death—a penalty which I paid on the 9th of February, 1935, at eight a.m., and the details of which I have not the courage to comment upon. But of the events following my death I have a very clear recollection. . . .

I was buoyed up into the midst of a vast and embracing darkness, in which all concept of my other life and body vanished completely. I never saw any trace of my mortal body again. I appeared to be alone in a world of utter silence—utter physical silence, that is, yet filled with a thousand thoughts and conceptions which I could only assume were the mental radiations of the living people in the everyday world so utterly hidden from me.

There was no real conviction of loneliness, no feeling of horror—just that vast and all-pervading sensation of being the recipient of constant thoughts. Some were vague, some distinct; and at last I began to realize that these latter were connected with psychic and clairvoyant people. . . . In this wise I came to the clear and mediumistic abilities of Henry Clifton of London, and through him and his untiring patience I have succeeded in giving the story of my complete innocence in what became known later, so Clifton advises me, as the “Cumberland Horror.”

But there are last words to add to this narration. I am dead? No! My body is dead, but my mind lives on, and in such capacity I have exacted revenge for the terrible thing that befell my earthly frame. Perhaps it was chance, or some instinctive mental gravitation, that caused me in my timeless wanderings to contact finally the mental vibrations of Enoch Pym himself.

His thoughts, his every mental facet, were bared to my extra-mundane perceptions. I gathered that he was in London, pursuing psychic and spiritualistic experiments, arranging seances, indulging in hypnotism, and generally turning hallowed and cherished concepts into turmoils of diabolical villainy.

He had found my vanquishment so simple that he was planning his hypnotic efforts on a larger scale, overpowering leaders of commerce and finance with his fascinating personality and ruthless mind. I perceived in him a mass-murderer, and therein also beheld my duty—and my own vengeance!

For interminable periods I held his mind in bondage until the time came when I could strike. It came at one of his seances. I fought his hypnotic power with all the terrific energy of my free mind, until at last I felt the opposition snap like the breaking of a bough in the wind and the emptiness of my eternal wanderings was devoid of all disturbing influences. The mentality of Pym had gone, and yet he could not be dead surely, or I would have felt his presence in the after-life.

No, he was not dead. Clifton has told me that he became suddenly insane and babbles now about a man named John Carlow Moore and a murdered woman on top of a mountain. . . .

Truly, then, I am avenged. I have now a lasting and eternal peace, and if I am ever destined to assume a mortal form again I am in no hurry for it. I have drawn the portrait of a murderer and now I am free. . . . Free to move endlessly in these swarming currents of mental vibration.

Free—unsullied—gloriously alone. And yet . . . unafraid!

[The end of *Portrait of a Murderer* by John Russell Fearn]