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SCULPTOR OF CORPS



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Joe Havlin crouched above two prostrate figures on the carpet, his huge hand clutching a knife

The
DEVIL'S BROOD

A Complete Novelet of Monster Heritage

By
Henry Kuttner

Author of "Invasion from the Fourth," "Murder for Fun," etc.

First published *Thrilling Mystery*, September 1939

*Terror Stalks the Hills When Creatures Accursed Battle Over a Grim Legacy With
Bestial, Insensate Fury!*

CHAPTER I

The Gargoyles

Ilene Havlin was dying. The pale glow of a bedside lamp outlined the tiny, shriveled face, with brittle wisps of white hair curling over the bony forehead. Faded blue eyes opened. The woman whispered almost inaudibly:

“Laing—get out. I want to—talk with Stephen.”

Dr. Felix Laing, a wiry, dark-faced man of forty or so, quirked his saturnine eyebrows at Steve Page.

“Call me if—” he began in an undertone.

He didn’t finish. He didn’t have to. Only the power of an indomitable will had kept Ilene Havlin alive for the past few weeks.

The doctor went out. Page moved closer to the bed. The woman’s withered mouth moved. She seemed to gather strength from some secret reservoir deep within her worn-out body.

“I wish your father had come, Stephen Page.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Havlin. He’s in Europe.”

“So. And I can’t wait for his return. I will die tonight. But”—the faded eyes flamed—“not till I have seen the others! Not till then!”

Page moved his broad shoulders uneasily. Junior partner in his father’s law firm, he’d had little experience with such cases. Old Rand Page had been the Havlin attorney for fifty years, but he had never told his son much of the business he had transacted. Often Steve had felt that there was some mystery about the Havlins, and his impression was confirmed now when the dying woman went on:

“You advertised? They are all coming?”

“Yes. All the Havlins. They’ll be here tonight.”

Involuntarily Page glanced at the window. Luckily it was not raining, though clouds had loomed heavy and ominous over the house that day. Luckily, for the little village of Spuyten was two miles away, and the Havlins, when they arrived on the bus would have to walk up a narrow mountain trail to their destination. He wondered why Mrs. Havlin had built this great house generations ago in the heart of the Alleghenies, so far distant from any habitation.

With uncanny intuition the woman read his thought.

“I came into these mountains years ago, Stephen, when my husband died. I wished to sever all connections with the family. They are—cursed.” An ironic smile twisted the pale lips at Page’s expression. “Don’t be a fool, Stephen! Do I look like a superstitious old woman? No, it’s the curse of Mendel—not of Satan. Heredity. . . . Give me a drink.”

Page obeyed. He felt a surge of repulsion he could not control as the woman’s hand tightened over his, and he noticed, for the first time, that between each finger grew—webs! Folds of skin, grayish and mottled with scabrous encrustations. He forced his gaze away.

“There’s bad blood in the family,” Mrs. Havlin said. “All of my descendants—all—are tainted. You will see when you meet them. And there’s hatred, too. They hate one another, and they hate me. Though probably few have seen each other before tonight. I—I sickened of my children, Stephen. They were monsters—accursed. I gave them money and sent them away.

Their children I have never seen, though your father made investigation for me. I had hoped one would be clean—clean and whole. . . .”

Without a sound Ilene Havlin went limp. Her eyes rolled up, her jaw fell, and froth drooled from the slack lips. Hastily Page called the doctor. Laing came in, glanced at the unconscious woman, and went to his satchel on the table. He administered a hypodermic, made a hasty examination.

“Not much life left in her, I’m afraid,” he said slowly. “The operation a few months ago weakened her fatally. Each time the comas last longer, and the lucid periods are shorter. She may wake up again, and she may not. God knows!”

The doorbell rang. Page went downstairs, the steps creaking noisily under his feet. Adrian, the butler and man-of-all-work, was opening the door, his uniform hanging loosely on the gaunt old frame.

Standing in the shadow at the foot of the staircase, Page saw the butler hesitate, make a little gasping noise, and draw back. Then his figure seemed to stiffen. He opened the door wider and stood aside.

A man and a woman stood on the porch. The woman marched in. Light pitilessly revealed her dumpy, monstrous form. Not over five feet high, she must have weighed at least two hundred pounds. She was horribly, incredibly fat. Her black, shapeless clothing sagged under the weight of bloated, unhealthy flesh. Her beady, sparkling eyes were almost hidden in encroaching pads of fat, and her over-red mouth was incongruously tiny in that dead-white mask.

“Will!” she said hoarsely. “Come in!”

The man shuffled forward. A youth, rather, not more than twenty years old, yet it was difficult to guess his age. He was huge, broad-shouldered, but not fat. Great muscles bulged the ill-fitting coat. With a shock of surprised horror Page saw that the man’s head was abnormally small, drawn to a bald, hairless point. Thick, blubbery lips pouted. A “pinhead”—a microcephalic idiot!

“Well?” the woman snarled. “What are you gaping at, you old fool? Want to see our invitation?”

Swiftly Page came forward.

“See if the parlor’s comfortable,” he said to Adrian, who seemed completely at a loss. “Shake up the fire, while you’re at it.”

As the butler vanished Page turned to the guests.

“I’m Stephen Page,” he said. “I wrote you—”

“Lil Shadick’s my name,” the woman said. “This is my son, Will.”

Lil Shadick, granddaughter of old Ilene Havlin. And now Page guessed something of what lay behind the cryptic reference to the “Mendelian curse.” A frightful heredity, a black taint in the blood, had left its indelible mark on these two before him.

Will made a little whimpering sound. He tugged at his mother’s sleeve, bending low to do so.

“Cold. . . .”

“Yes. Sure it’s cold. A long hike up here, Page, in the night air. You said something about a fire?”

“That’s right. Come in the parlor.”

“I’ll do that. And I want some information, too. The old woman’s dying, eh?”

“Your grandmother is dying,” Page said coldly, leading the way into a great, high-raftered room where a fire blazed redly on the hearth. “I regret—”

“The devil with your regrets!” Lil Shadick snapped, her paper-white jowls bobbing. “She should have died before she had children. At least she’s making amends now. Leaving her money to the family, eh? How much will I get?”

Page couldn’t help the grim tightening of his lips. But, conscious of Ilene Havlin’s instructions, he simply said:

“About eight thousand dollars, as I wrote you. And the same amount goes to your son.”

“Mamma,” the giant whimpered. “What’s he mean? Can I go to school now?”

Lil Shadick’s black eyes went icy cold.

“Sure,” she said gently. “Go over to the fire now, Will, and warm yourself.” And, as he hesitated: “Hear me?”

“Yes’m.” The giant shambled away, crouched on his hams before the hearth.

Mrs. Shadick turned back to Page. Her voice was low and deadly in its intensity.

“School—you heard him? I tried to send him to school. They wouldn’t take him at first. I got down on my knees, arguing with the swine. Finally I had my way. And the kids—little beasts—made life such a hell for Will that I had to keep him home. You see what he’s like, Page. He needs special care, doctors. Things I couldn’t afford to give him. And when I wrote Ilene Havlin for help—my grandmother!—you know what she said? That I should have strangled Will at birth.”

The fat face was hideous with fury.

“Know what else she said?” the woman went on. “That it wasn’t too late. That I should push Will off a cliff some dark night. That the whole family ought to be exterminated. I notice she kept herself alive as long as she could, damn her!”

With relief Page heard the jangle of the doorbell. He excused himself and went out in the hall. Adrian wasn’t in sight, so Page opened the door. At first sight the man standing on the porch seemed normal, a tall, bulky figure in a dark business suit. Then Page noticed the huge feet, the monstrous, hypertrophied hands, dangling from ragged cuffs, and the heavy, undershot jaw.

The man extended a letter.

“You’re Mr. Page? I’m Joe Havlin—Mrs. Havlin’s grandson.”

“Glad you’re here,” Page said. “Come in.”

He led the way into the parlor. At the door Page hesitated, turning sharply. He had heard no sound of the other man’s following, yet Joe Havlin stood at his shoulder, his heavy face blank. Despite the great feet, he moved as noiselessly as a cat.

Dr. Felix Laing came down the stairs, rubbing his hands together.

“Whew, it’s cold,” he said.

His saturnine eyebrows asked a question. Page stood aside while the two entered the parlor, then he made the introductions. Apparently Joe Havlin and Lil Shadick had never met, yet a curious antagonism flared in their cold glances.

Laing drew Page aside. “I left Adrian upstairs with Mrs. Havlin,” he whispered. “Thought you might need a little moral support. Am I right?”

“Yeah,” Page said softly. “What a family! What’s wrong with ’em?”

“They’re endocrine monsters. The boy, Will, is a cretin. Thyroid deficiency. The mother’s a thyroid type, too—very fat, you see. Her pituitary glands out of whack, causing obesity. And

Joe Havlin is acromegalic. He's got abnormal development of the bones of the face and extremities."

"I wonder if they're all that way," Page murmured.

"Maybe—maybe not. A man's chief gift to his children is his internal secretion composition. Mrs. Havlin's endocrine balance is haywire. I imagine her husband's was, too. So the descendants may be monsters, or they may not—depending on what characteristics are recessive and what dominant. Candidly, I don't like it." Dr. Laing's dark face was worried.

"It isn't pleasant," Page grunted. "Still, it isn't their fault."

"No, I don't mean that. The endocrines have a tremendous effect on personality. None of the people here tonight are normal. Physically, or mentally. Glandular unbalance affects the mind. We both know the purpose of this conclave, Page. A gang of freaks, most of them poverty-ridden, their warped brains filled with hate and bitterness, are going to receive an inheritance. I think—" The doctor turned to a bookshelf near by. He put out a long arm and searched the shelves. "All works on abnormal psychology and pathology. Let's see if she has Berman on 'Glands Regulating Personality'. Yes!"

He withdrew a volume, thumbed rapidly through it, indicating a passage, read:

Introspective observation of precriminal states of mind by so-called normal persons reveals that in many of them there is an impairment of reason and will power, in others an exaltation amounting almost to hysteria. What are these but endocrine states of the cells, experimentally reproducible by increasing or decreasing the influence of the thyroid, the adrenals, the pituitary? Crimes of passion may be traced in no small part to disturbances of the thyroid. . .

"In other words," Laing said, "crime can be traced to endocrine instability."

His eyes flicked over the grotesque group by the fire. The cretin, Will, was huddled in a motionless heap, blank-faced and silent. Lil Shadick and Joe Havlin were eyeing each other, and their faces were not pleasant. The woman's fat features were ugly as a bloated gargoyle's, and a passionless, hooded malignancy seemed to have veiled the man's.

A little shudder shook Page—a strange, eerie premonition that black horror was soon to engulf this house of endocrine monsters.

CHAPTER II

There Shall Be Death

The doorbell rang again. Page went into the hall, the doctor at his side.

But the porch was empty. In the moonlight the tree-covered slope was a sea of shadowy black patches. For a moment Page thought he heard the sound of footsteps, then it was gone.

He stepped out into the cold frostiness of the night.

“There’s no one . . . Wait!”

In the distance there came a faint noise; soft feet climbing the steep trail.

“Wait here, Doc,” Page said. “I’ll be back.” He sprinted into the shadows.

They closed around him darkly. The night air blew cold against his face. But unmistakably the sound of quiet footsteps grew louder.

A rock turned under his heel, and Page almost fell. He recovered himself, hurried on, and almost collided with a small figure toiling up the trail.

“Ouch!” the person complained. “Look where you’re going, won’t you?”

A patch of moonlight outlined a small, heart-shaped face, with crisp auburn curls framing it. The girl stared, and when Page didn’t speak, a curious look of apprehension came into her blue eyes. She drew back.

Page hastened to reassure her.

“You’re Jean Havlin, of course,” he said. “I’m sorry you had to come up here alone. I thought you and the others could have got a guide at the village.”

“They’re all afraid to come up here,” Jean Havlin said coolly. “I’m sure I don’t know why! Noises never killed anyone yet.” Though Page waited, she didn’t explain her words.

“Well,” he said at last, “let’s get back to the house.”

Together they started up the trail. Jean Havlin, Page knew, was not related by blood to Ilene Havlin. She was her granddaughter by adoption only, according to the information the attorney had received. When Ilene Havlin had learned of this, she had insisted that Jean come with the others.

“I want to see what she’s like,” the old woman had whispered. “She’s got the Havlin name if not the blood. And I’ll leave her her share of the estate.”

No doubt the girl would be glad of any inheritance, Page thought, glancing aside at her neat, slightly shabby business suit.

Quite suddenly the screams began.

They came from the house. And they rang out, shrill and agonized and utterly horrible, in an ear-shattering crescendo that made Page’s stomach move sickeningly within him. A woman’s voice was keening out a wordless, raw-edged shriek of ultimate pain.

And it stopped.

Page found himself racing forward, the girl, white-faced and gasping, at his side. They came out of the shadows, saw the great house looming on the slope, washed in pale moonlight. The front door was ajar, but no one was visible.

Page hurdled the threshold, glanced into the parlor. It was empty. From upstairs came a frantic, hysterical crying.

The attorney went up the steps in three leaps. At the end of the long hall he saw a bulky figure crouched before a door, beating the panel frantically with great fists. It was Will, the cretin. He turned an imbecile, tear-stained face to Page.

“Mamma’s in there! Somebody’s hurting her! I heard—”

Quickly Page pushed the cretin aside. The door was locked. But under the impact of a powerful shoulder it yielded, burst open, and Page found himself stumbling forward, his nostrils filled with an acrid, strong stench that made him suddenly nauseated. At his feet lay what was left of Lil Shadick.

Her gross body was scarcely veiled by the ripped tatters of her dress. The hot odor of blood was everywhere. Moonlight slanted in from the open window, mercilessly revealing the woman’s ruined corpse.

The blood had not yet coagulated. Seeing this, and realizing the significance of the open window, Page crossed to it swiftly. He leaned out, peered down at the ground, twenty-five or more feet below. On this side of the house the moonlight gave place to shadow, but Page thought he caught a glimpse of a figure moving swiftly away. How had the killer descended?

A drain-pipe a few feet away from the window, descending from eaves to ground, gave him the answer. Page swung himself to the sill, reached out, caught the pipe between his hands. The weathered boards of the house gave him purchase for his feet, and he went down the drain-pipe swiftly.

There was an ominous, ripping crackle. Beneath his hands Page felt the cool metal of the pipe give. It swung away from the side of the house, and, with a screaming of torn metal, came loose. Page scrambled desperately for a foothold, found none. He was falling through blackness, wind screaming in his ears.

He hit ground with a thump that drove the breath from his lungs. It was fully a minute before Page was able to stagger up, conscious of a dull, throbbing pain in his back. He stared around.

No movement, no sound. The killer had had plenty of time to make an escape.

“Page!” a voice called sharply. The attorney looked up, wincing as he moved his neck. Dr. Laing’s dark face was framed in the open window above. “Page, are you hurt?”

“No,” the attorney grunted. “I’ll be right up.”

Laing’s head popped in and vanished. Page made his way to the front of the house, encountering Joe Havlin on the porch. The man’s tall figure, with his immense hands and feet and jutting jaw, seemed inhuman in the moonlight—a warlock done by Goya, malformed and repellent.

“What’s up?” he asked. “What’s your hurry?”

“Where’ve you been?” Page asked without answering the other’s question.

“Chasing shadows. Heard noises outside and went out to have a look-see. What the devil’s the matter?”

“Just a murder,” Page said grimly, and hurried along the upper hall.

A small group—Will, the cretin, old Adrian, and Jean Havlin—were standing silent at its end. As Page came up the door opened and Dr. Laing looked out.

“Page? Come in . . . Not you, Mr. Havlin!”

He spoke sharply as Joe Havlin attempted to follow Page. Silently, but with a twisted smile, Havlin drew back. The door, closing, shut him out.

Page faced Dr. Laing, conscious of a dramatic tension in the air. It was not alone the presence of the corpse at their feet. There was something else, Page sensed, something Laing was anxious to tell.

“This isn’t just murder,” the doctor said. “Did you see—”

His gaze went down. And now Page, for the first time, noticed certain blood-smeared objects that were neatly arranged on the carpet around the dead woman’s head. Small, fatty pieces of meat.

In a cold voice that Page sensed, was used to mask the doctor’s shocked horror, Laing went on:

“After death, this woman was operated upon. Her throat and chest have been opened. The thyroid and thymus glands have been removed. I think there was an attempt to remove the pineal from within the brain-cavity. But apparently the murderer didn’t have time.”

Page’s throat was dry. This wasn’t murder—it was butchery, coldly scientific and madly logical. He remembered the doctor’s warning of half an hour ago. “Crime can be traced to endocrine instability,” Laing had said. And now—

“Let’s go downstairs,” the attorney suggested. “I want to ask some questions.”

Laing nodded. “I’ll look in at Mrs. Havlin first. Be with you in a minute.”

In the hall the others were waiting, a chill undercurrent of fear apparent in their wary glances. Page herded them downstairs into the parlor. Will, the cretin, huddled by the fire, sobbing softly. The others sank down into their chairs, waiting.

“Mrs. Shadick has been killed,” Page said.

There was no response from his audience. Only Will’s crying grew louder, less restrained.

“Adrian!”

The old butler glanced up nervously. He licked pale lips.

“Yes, Mr. Page?”

“Where were you when—”

“Down in the kitchen,” the man broke in swiftly, not waiting for Page to finish. “Mrs. Havlin woke up and wanted some water. The carafe was empty, and I went downstairs by the back staircase. When I heard the screams I couldn’t tell where they were coming from, at first. I stepped out the back door, and then I realized they were from upstairs. So I went back inside and upstairs again.”

Dr. Laing came in silently. “Adrian,” he said, “you’d better keep an eye on Mrs. Havlin. She’s in a coma. That okay, Page?”

The attorney nodded, and the butler shuffled out.

“Want my story?” Laing asked, and went on quickly when Page nodded. “After you left me on the porch I waited awhile, and then I heard noises in the bushes. Somebody was crying. I ran toward the sound and searched awhile. I heard the screams, came back to the house, and found the body.”

Page went toward the fire. He touched the cretin’s shoulder.

“Will?”

“Uh?”

“Tell me what happened, won’t you?”

“I—I—” The warped brain floundered in its fog. “I dunno. Mamma—” The sobs started again. Page waited till the cretin had quieted.

“Mamma and I were here when he”—Will pointed at Joe Havlin—“went out. We heard a noise in the hall. Mamma told me to wait here and she went out. I heard her talking to

somebody. Then I couldn't hear anything except somebody going upstairs."

A little thrill shook Page.

"Somebody talking to your mother?" he asked. "Who was it?"

Tension grew in the room.

"I dunno," the cretin mumbled. "The door was shut. Somebody—"

"There's no phone in the house, you know," Dr. Laing said quietly. "What about sending someone to the village for help?"

"Who?" Page asked. His meaning was evident. Any person in this room might have killed Lil Shadick.

"Well, I'll go," Laing offered.

"No." Page shook his head. "I need your help. You'd better stick around."

The two men's glances met. The doctor seemed to understand Page's thought—that the removal of certain glands from a corpse implied a knowledge of physiology that the study of medicine might supply.

Laing grinned wryly, nodded. And suddenly he stiffened. His thin nose twitched.

"Smell that, Page?" he asked sharply.

An acrid, familiar odor crept into the attorney's nostrils. Involuntarily he looked at the fireplace.

Jean Havlin sprang up, her face white.

"Fire!" she whispered. "Somewhere—"

Under the door a billow of smoke crept. An ominous crackling sounded from the hall. Laing sprang forward, twisted the knob. He turned a dark face to the others.

"Locked!"

"Let me try!"

Joe Havlin shouldered him aside. The man smashed one of his great fists against the panel, attacked it with his huge feet. The wood split, broke. Flames gushed in, driving Havlin back.

Laing was at the windows, flinging them wide. Too late Page shouted for him to stop. In the draft the fire gushed up hotly.

But in one glance the attorney realized that the conflagration was not serious. The carpet just outside the door was ablaze.

A faint smell of kerosene came to Page. He snatched a rug from the hearth, climbed through the splintered door, and beat at the flames.

Dimly he was conscious of other figures, vague in the black smoke, helping him. Figures that shifted and grew solid and then vanished in the red-lit gloom.

It was impossible to keep track of them. Finally, however, the fire was smothered, sending up slow trickles of greasy smoke. The lights came on.

CHAPTER III

Mad Murder

Page straightened. Beside him he saw only Jean Havlin, her auburn hair disheveled, her blue eyes wide. She was trembling a little. Page grinned at her shakily.

"It's okay. No harm done."

"Somebody was trying to kill us," the girl whispered.

"I don't think so. We could have got out the windows easily enough. There was another reason."

Jean's lashes drooped. She swayed, her eyes closing, and Page caught her, feeling an involuntary thrill at the electric nearness of her pliant body. The girl shuddered, drew away, brushing the hair from her eyes.

"I—I'm all right now. It—"

Joe Havlin came from the depths of the hall, his big fists, smoke-blackened, swinging.

"Found the master switch," he grunted. "Somebody had thrown it. I used the hammer on the switch, Page. It won't be moved again in a hurry. We don't have to worry about the lights now, anyway."

The attorney glanced back into the parlor. The cretin was still crouched on the hearth. But where was Laing?

Page's gaze went probing down the hall. A door was open there, a door that had been closed up to now. With a swift word to the others the lawyer hurried forward, paused on the threshold.

Blazing light illuminated the chamber, a good-sized storeroom, cluttered with furniture and bric-a-brac. Near a huge pile of rugs in the corner was a cedar chest, and something in its position made Page hesitate. The disturbed dust on the floor showed that it had been pulled aside recently.

A faint knocking came from within the chest. As Page leaped forward he saw, from the corner of his eye, that the single window was locked, that dust lay thick upon it. But on the floor at his feet was a sticky, red pool.

Page flung open the chest. A boy lay crumpled upon a heap of furs within it, white-faced, scarcely breathing. Hastily the attorney lifted the youth, carried him into the parlor. There he laid him on a couch and made a swift examination.

The boy seemed about fifteen. Red-haired, clad in a slightly ragged coat and knickers, he lay unmoving, blood dripping from a jagged cut in his throat, staining his dark shirt and necktie. His thin frame was suddenly shaken by a nervous shudder.

It was nearly five minutes, though, before the boy's eyes opened. Fear sprang into them. He cowered back, his breath rasping.

"It's okay, kid," Page said quietly. "No danger."

The boy searched his face. Then, with a spasmodic shiver, he clung to Page as though to a rock of refuge. His eyes went to Joe Havlin and the cretin—and widened with fright.

Havlin smiled sourly. He touched Will's muscular shoulder, urged the cretin ahead of him from the room.

"No use scaring the kid to death," he grunted to Page. "Call me when you want me."

The boy swallowed convulsively. "I—I'm all right now. Only—"

Jean applied her handkerchief to the wounded throat.

"It isn't deep," she said. "I'll get a bandage." She went out.

"You're Mr. Page?" the boy asked. "I got a letter—"

He brought it from his pocket. The attorney scanned it swiftly. It read:

As I wrote you, I had intended to accompany Tommy Courte to Mrs. Havlin's home, but unforeseen contingencies prevent this. However, Tommy is quite capable of finding his way there, and I'm putting him on the train, with detailed instructions for him to follow. His elder brother, Dwight Courte, died two years ago, as I said in our previous communications. He asked me to look out for Tommy, and I've done so. But, not being wealthy, it has been difficult at times. If there is any money coming to the boy, I shall be most glad for his sake. Enclosed you will find the identification I promised.

Page nodded, thumbed through the papers, and pocketed the material.

"You're Tommy, eh?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you'd better stick pretty close to me tonight. There's something going on—but I think you know that. Just what happened to you?"

The boy didn't answer for a moment. Over his eyes a veil dropped. His thin, pale face was suddenly afraid.

"I—I don't know."

"Eh?"

Tommy glanced at the shattered door. "I can't remember, Mr. Page. Something—"

"Something nearly cut your throat," the attorney said quietly. "You can't remember that?"

"Somebody hit me on the head," Tommy whispered. "After that it was all dark till I woke up here."

Page leaned closer. The boy drew back, but regardless the attorney explored Tommy's head with probing fingers.

"Hit you on the head, eh? There's no bump."

The boy's face was sullen, but through the sullenness Page sensed an overwhelming, ghastly fear.

"I can't help it!" he said shrilly. "I can't remember! I—"

"Leave him alone," Jean Havlin commanded, coming back into the room. "The kid's half dead. Here, let me—"

She pushed Page aside, bandaged Tommy's throat.

"You two stick around here," the attorney said, getting up. "If anything happens, sing out."

He went into the hall. Joe Havlin was nowhere in sight, but the cretin, Will, was lounging against the wall, staring dully into space. Page went upstairs.

He went into Mrs. Havlin's room. The old woman lay still and silent, under a great mound of covers. Adrian was nowhere in sight.

Whistling under his breath, Page went out again and methodically began to search the house. He found little. He was hesitating before a stairway that led up, apparently, to the attic, when he heard Jean cry out.

He whirled. The girl came racing along the hall, eyes wide, red lips open in fear. She gripped Page's arm.

"Downstairs—quick! Will's gone crazy! He's killing the boy!"

Page thrust her away, sprinted to the stairs and down them, conscious of other feet hurrying along the hall beneath him. He pushed through the shattered parlor door and stood, staring. Behind him the girl caught her breath in horror.

Joe Havlin crouched above two prostrate figures on the carpet. His huge hand clutched a clasp-knife. He straightened, whirled—and his bony, misproportioned face went blank. He glanced at the weapon he held.

"Get away from there!" Page snarled.

He reached inside his coat—a bluff, for he carried no gun. But Havlin drew back, letting the knife fall to the carpet. He moistened his lips, started to speak, and then was silent, looking down.

The great body of the cretin lay face down, drenched in blood. Scarlet spurted from an incision in the back of his neck. Gray threads of spinal tissue showed through clotted black hair. Swiftly Page sprang forward, pulled the dying monster away. The cretin's fat hands were clasped about the throat of the boy who lay beneath him—Tommy, pale and unconscious, the bandage torn brutally away from his neck.

"Good God!" Page said tonelessly, his stomach churning. He glanced at the cretin, saw that he was beyond aid. "Take care of Tommy, Jean," the lawyer commanded, and turned to Havlin.

The other's hooded eyes were steady. "You can't pin this on me," he said harshly. "They were like that when I came in. I heard the girl scream, and ran in from outside the house." He looked down at the knife. "That was sticking in Will's back when I came in. I pulled it out, that's all."

"Is the kid okay?" Page asked over his shoulder.

"I think so," the girl said. "His throat's bleeding, but . . . Yes, he's coming around."

Tommy shivered, touched his neck with exploring fingers. He sat up weakly and clung to Jean, while shudders racked his thin body.

"Tommy, who did this?" Page said almost harshly. "Who killed Will?"

The boy looked at the dead cretin, started to speak. Then his gaze dropped.

"I—I don't know. I couldn't see—"

Somehow the lawyer felt sure that Tommy was lying. But why? Did he know who was responsible for these monstrous killings? And if so, was it fear that held him silent—or another emotion? If a boy knew his brother was a murderer. . . .

But Dwight Courte was dead. Or was he? Page scowled, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. He felt a strong curiosity to know what had happened to Dr. Laing. Somehow he felt that if he knew the doctor's whereabouts it would be possible to discover what lay behind these crimes.

And there was Adrian, too. What had happened to the old butler?

"Get some rope, Jean," Page said. "There should be some in the kitchen."

Without a word the girl obeyed. Page scooped up the knife, eyeing Joe Havlin coldly. The man's great fists knotted.

"What the devil! You're not going to tie me up?"

Page put his hand inside his coat again. “Yeah. Or put a bullet through you. I don’t much care which.”

Havlin’s lips twitched. “Has it occurred to you that I may be murdered? Damn it, do you expect me to stay like a trussed chicken while somebody slits my throat?”

“You’ll do as I tell you,” Page snapped, but he felt uneasy. If his bluff failed to work, what chance would he have against Havlin’s huge fists? Luckily, the man made no resistance as Jean, under Page’s supervision, tied him to a chair.

“You’ll be safe enough,” the lawyer informed him. “We’ll be right here.”

Havlin’s face was dour. “At least if another murder’s committed, you won’t suspect me.”

Tommy lay quietly on the couch, his throat newly bandaged, and occasionally the boy sent a frightened glance toward the door. Jean sat silently by the fire.

Presently the lawyer got up and went to the bookcase. A curious thought had come to him. He scanned the shelves, removing a few volumes. These he scanned, and so deep grew his absorption that only Jean’s cry made him look up.

He was too late. A menacing figure was plunging toward him, unbound ropes flying, face twisted in a snarl. Joe Havlin had freed himself from his bonds.

Taken by surprise, Page had no chance. He caught a glimpse of Jean leaping up, trying to intercept the attacker, and going down like a ninepin under the sweep of a great arm. Page struck out desperately, felt a huge fist smash into his jaw with bone-crushing force. He subsided into pain-shot unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV

The Endocrine Monster

Slowly Page awoke, his temples throbbing. Groaning, he pulled himself to his feet, saw Tommy lying on the couch, his eyes closed; saw Jean in a crumpled heap near by. Joe Havlin was nowhere in sight.

Swaying, Page went into the hall. The porch door was open. On the threshold a body was lying. The attorney went to it, knelt, staring.

Joe Havlin was dead. His throat and chest had been opened, and around his head certain small, fatty objects were neatly arranged.

Ideas were stirring in Page's brain. He went back into the hall and paused before the storeroom. If he had guessed aright, there should be an answer to the riddle beyond that door.

He opened it, switched on the light. Heaps of furniture, rugs piled in the corner—and to this tumbled heap Page went. His gaze found smears of blood marring the nap of expensive fabrics.

His lips tight, Page turned to the cedar chest and opened it. Though he had been prepared, he caught his breath a little at sight of the motionless body that had been stuffed into the box. Dried blood caked the slit throat.

Page lifted the body, laid it gently on the floor. He rummaged through the furs still within the chest, and presently, with a little sigh, brought up a brown, damp wad of tobacco. This he put in his pocket.

"Mr. Page—"

The attorney turned. Jean and Tommy stood on the threshold. The corpse was hidden from their eyes by a heavy bureau, and Page hurried toward them.

"You're okay?" he asked. "Good! Come upstairs."

"He's dead—the man on the porch!" Tommy quavered. "We saw—"

"I know. Come upstairs, both of you."

Page herded them up the steps and into Mrs. Havlin's room. Mrs. Havlin was no longer resting quietly in bed. A rope had been attached to one tall bedpost, and the woman looked at first as if she were sitting up, her head oddly twisted to stare toward the window.

Her blue-veined fingers, with their strange webs, were deeply embedded in the scrawny throat about which a noose had been drawn tight. The mound of bed clothing still covered her from the hips down. But on the upper part of her old-fashioned nightgown were great stains of blood.

And suddenly Tommy's face began to twitch and jerk. He sobbed hysterically. Turning, he leaned against the wall and gasped out half-inarticulate words.

"Her—it was her, Mr. Page! She did it! She said she'd kill me if—if I told! I didn't dare —"

Jean's horrified gaze was fixed on the cyanosed face of the dead woman. Page nodded slowly.

"The whole thing works out," he said. "Blood all over Mrs. Havlin's nightgown. Dr. Laing murdered—yeah, I found him stuffed into the cedar chest downstairs. The story's easy to piece out. Ilene Havlin was not on her deathbed, after all. She was an endocrine monster, anyway. And her glands—the adrenals—gave her enough energy to kill the family she hated,

after luring them here on the pretext of passing out inheritances. That's why Dr. Laing was killed. He suspected Ilene was not as weak as she seemed. And Adrian—it's my guess we'll find his body hidden away in some cupboard. Ilene had to have a free hand to commit her crimes. That right, Tommy?"

Shuddering, the boy nodded.

"No ordinary-sized person could have climbed down a rain-spout that broke under my weight. I figured that out. But Ilene Havlin could. And when she'd killed the monsters of the family, she decided to kill herself. Didn't want to face a criminal trial. It sounds reasonable."

Page's face was suddenly grim and harsh. He went to the bed and with a swift movement stripped away the covers.

"But there's one weak link in the chain," he said. "This!"

His outthrust finger indicated the scrawny legs of the dead woman, bare from the shrunken calves down. The right leg was intact. But where the left foot should have been there was only a stump, a gnarled, withered pad of flesh that terminated the shin.

"Ilene Havlin had an operation three months ago," Page said. "She couldn't possibly have slid down a rain-spout, or committed these crimes, murders that required agility as well as devilish cunning. Ilene was not the killer, though she was supposed to take the rap. The murderer came here disguised. When I was looking through the library downstairs I got on the track. All the Havlins were tainted. Not one was normal. But one person was here tonight who seemed perfectly normal. His malady wasn't easily noticeable. It was infantilism!"

Tommy and Jean were staring, wide-eyed, as Page went on remorselessly.

"The pituitary and pineal glands—they cause that. They go haywire, and the victim doesn't mature. He remains a child to all appearances. It's a common medical phenomenon—*isn't it, Dwight?*"

The boy moved so swiftly that Page was caught unprepared. He brought out a small, snub-nosed automatic from some hidden pocket. And his face, twisted with rage, seemed strangely older.

"Damn you, Page!" he snarled. "You're too smart for your own good! Sure, I'm Dwight Courte—and a lot of good it'll do you to know that!"

The automatic's black muzzle centered on Page. A gust of mad laughter shook the attorney's brain. To be menaced with death by one who was, to all appearances, a fifteen-year-old boy!

Suddenly Page remembered the knife in his pocket, the knife he had taken from Joe Havlin. If he could get his fingers on it somehow! If he could keep the killer from shooting until—

"Okay," he said. "You win. You're smarter than I thought."

A twisted grin appeared on Courte's face at the words.

"Yeah, a lot smarter," he said. "Get back there!" The gun swung toward Jean. "You're dying, too, with him. But get back."

The girl retreated till she stood beside Page.

"You made some mistakes, though," the attorney said swiftly. "Your motive's too clear. Ilene Havlin's leaving eight thousand to each of her descendants. Not a hell of a lot, but if some of them were killed off, the others would profit accordingly. I had to guess a bit, but I think I guessed right. That you're not Tommy Courte, for example."

The killer's cold eyes were unwavering. "Well?"

"Tommy died awhile ago. When I wrote you, you made your plans. Decided to commit these murders. But as Dwight Courte, a dwarf with a man's mind, you'd immediately come under suspicion. So you forged letters to me, letting me think that Dwight had died, and that you were Tommy, the kid. Who'd suspect a youngster of murder—especially when he himself had been attacked?"

Page's hand was moving imperceptibly closer to his pocket.

"You rang the doorbell and got us inside," he went on quietly. "Drew us away from the house by making a commotion and crying, as Laing said. Then you waited your chance, sneaked in, and saw Lil Shadick in the hall. She was tough, all right, but she wouldn't suspect a boy. You got her upstairs on some pretext and slit her throat. That was another weak link, Courte. Either the killer was strong enough to overcome his victims, or else he was able to get close enough to murder them without arousing their suspicions. And Lil Shadick hated Ilene Havlin! She'd have been suspicious the moment she saw Ilene out of bed."

"Go on," Courte said mockingly. "What other mistakes did I make?"

"You started the fire in the hall, and during the commotion got Laing to come with you in the storeroom. He didn't realize anything was wrong till you cut his throat. You've a habit of pretending you're frightened and grabbing the nearest person—and that's a swell opportunity for you to use your knife. You killed Laing, hid his body in a pile of carpets, and climbed into the chest. You cut your neck a bit to alibi the blood on your shirt, and you waited till you heard us coming along the hall. Then you just shut the lid and shammed a faint till we rescued you. But you didn't anticipate Will's attack."

"No," Courte admitted. "He took me by surprise. But he couldn't have known I killed his mother!"

"Cretins have curious powers sometimes. Maybe Will sensed you were the murderer. We'll leave it at that. Anyway, he jumped you, and Jean ran out to get me. That left you with a free hand. You simply got out your knife, reached around, and cut Will's spinal cord, leaving the knife in the wound for Joe Havlin to pull out. He played right into your hands, especially when he knocked Jean and me out later. I can guess what happened then. Joe was going to light out for the village, and you begged him to take you with him. Begged until he let you get a little too close—for he didn't suspect you—and then you used your knife!

"I wasn't really sure, though, till I found something in the cedar chest just now. A plug of tobacco you'd used to make yourself seem almost asphyxiated. Nicotine poisoning is pretty common. When a fellow wants to get off work to go to a ball game, he'll sometimes chew a piece of tobacco and hide it in his arm-pit. The blood-stream will absorb the stuff, and for a while there'll be all the symptoms of nicotine poisoning—feeble pulse, irregular breathing, pallor, and so on. You had this tobacco—"

Almost absently Page reached into his pocket. And Courte was taken by surprise. He had failed to realize the significance of the gesture.

Then his gun steadied. He barked a command. But Page's hand swung up with the knife gripped tightly within it. The attorney lurched against Jean, knocking her aside as the killer's automatic barked.

Page hurled the knife. A bullet screamed past him, and glass tinkled noisily. The attorney lunged forward, bending low. He felt a blaze of agony rip along his arm as the gun barked again.

Then he cannoned into Courte, knocking the dwarfed figure back. The gun went spinning away. Page rolled over, putting his own body between Courte and the weapon. But the killer, not relishing a hand to hand battle, thought only of flight now. His agile form somersaulted over the threshold into the hall.

Page didn't wait to get the gun; he sprinted after the escaping murderer. Courte was not heading for the stairway. He plunged toward a door across the hall, flung it open, raced into the shadowy room. Sprinting after him, Page stumbled over something and went down headlong.

His fingers touched chill flesh—the body of Lil Shadick. He sprang up, seeing a slim figure swing out of the window. Before Page could move the thing had happened.

There was a frantic scuffle, a gasping, startled cry, terminated by a heavy thud. Page reached the window, peered out. He could see the broken end of the drain-pipe, something Courte had forgotten. On the ground below a figure lay motionless. The rays of the sinking moon showed a white face staring up blindly, and a widening stain that aureoled the head, etching it in crimson horror.

Even from the window Page could see that the man was dead.

He turned, conscious of Jean at his side. The girl huddled close, shivering, and Page put a bracing arm about her slim shoulders.

“Buck up,” he said gently. “It's all over. We've got to hike into town now, kid. There'll be quite a story to tell the sheriff!”

[The end of *The Devil's Brood* by Henry Kuttner]