

THRILLING MYSTERY

FEB.

10[¢]

SLAVES
OF THE
DANCING
DEATH

A Novelette of
Whirling Horror

By JOHN
H. KNOX

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

KISS OF
DEATH

A Weird Novelette
By DALE CLARK

HELL'S
DARKEST
HALLS

A Novelette of
Terror's Chateau
By HUGH B. CAVE

AND MANY OTHERS



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Dweller in the Tomb

Date of first publication: 1937

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Oct. 18, 2021

Date last updated: Oct. 18, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211028

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE DWELLER IN THE TOMB

By
Henry Kuttner

Author of "Coffins for Six," "Power of the Snake," etc.

First published *Thrilling Mystery*, February 1937.

The Dust of Centuries Gives Horrid Birth to a Thing of Fleshly Corruption!

Menace. The night was thick with it. As I stood before the age-blackened door of the ancient Sussex castle, listening to the hurried pounding of hoofs dying away in the darkness, I felt the first warning of that frightful horror that was to engulf my wife, Lucille, and me, and send us to the brink of madness.

For, faint, muffled as though it came from far underground, I seemed to hear a distant thudding from below, echoing the sounds of our guide's hasty retreat. As though something deep in the earth had awakened and was moving ponderously to investigate our arrival! I did not know, then, of the tomb beneath the castle, but I sensed something strangely amiss—something evil—that seemed to brood over the lichened stones like a fetid exhalation rising from foul corruption.

Lucille moved closer to me. There was fear in her blue eyes as she looked up at me.

"Jim," she said, and I saw her shiver, "do you feel it—that thing the driver told us about?"

"Nonsense," I said, trying to make myself believe my words. "He said the devil lived below the castle, and we'd be able to smell the foulness of his breath. Apparently he didn't think the moat could have a bad odor, too."

That was true. The green-scummed, black water of the moat, over which a rude bridge had been constructed, possessed a singularly horrible stench. I wondered if it had ever been drained.

Lucille, about to reply, turned sharply. The door had opened slightly, and a man with a gaunt, white face was peering at us from the gloom. A shrunken old man, with vivid dark eyes in a bloodless, wrinkled face. In a high-pitched, rasping voice he demanded:

"Well, what do you want? You're on the wrong—"

I interrupted him. "I'm Jim Mason—your nephew. Don't you remember me? This is my wife."

He scrutinized my face suspiciously. "Why—yes. You're Jim, all right. What are you doing in Sussex?"

"We're on our honeymoon, Lucille and I. As a matter of fact"—I hesitated—"we'd planned just a brief visit, merely to say hello. But the driver went off in such a hurry that I had no time to ask him to wait. We'd planned to stay in the village tonight."

A flicker of amusement appeared on the gaunt face.

"They don't like this castle, Jim. Well, come in. You too, Mrs. Mason. What's your first name? Good; I'll call you Lucille. I'm Martin Argyll. Jim's told you, of course."

He took Lucille's arm to escort her through the doorway, while I remained behind to pick up the traveling bags. Frowning, I followed them in. Somehow, I didn't like the way my uncle's clawlike hand gripped Lucille's bare arm—like the talon of a bird of prey, loathsomely caressing.

"Leave the bags in the hall," he said over his shoulder, as he swung open a paneled door. "Come in here."

The room into which he led us was comfortable enough, and a fire was blazing in a great stone fireplace. But shadows lurked disquietingly in the corners of the high ceiling. Always there were shadows in the castle, even in broad daylight. It is odd that shadows can be so—unpleasant.

"Kent!" Argyll said sharply, and a man got up leisurely from an armchair before the fire and came forward to meet us. He was a slender chap, apparently in his early twenties, with a ruff of stiff red hair and horn-rimmed spectacles that gave him an inquisitive, owl-like appearance. Argyll introduced us.

"This is Fred Kent," he said. "My assistant."

A flash of memory came to me. "Not the son of Moss Kent?" I said.

"My old partner," Argyll finished. "Yes. When Moss died, I rather took Fred under my wing. Eh?" He stared at the youth.

"That's right," Kent said. His voice was deep, pleasant. "I owe a great deal to Mr. Argyll."

"It's mutual," Argyll said, and I thought I detected a note of sarcasm in his voice. "You've been of great help in my research."

Lucille, spreading her palms to the blaze, turned.

"Jim's told me of that, Mr. Argyll. It must be fascinating work."

The old man's eyebrows shot up. "Fascinating? My dear girl, that's scarcely the word. Occultism is the one great science—" He broke off, and I saw him cast an odd glance at the floor. "Yet I'm afraid sometimes," he finished somberly. "Even though I bought this castle—"

"Bought it!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, of course. I can afford it. But come, sit down and get yourselves warm. Take this chair, Lucille." Those blue-veined fingers, resting on Lucille's shoulder, were trembling slightly. "Jim, I'll tell you something. I'm quite sure that there is something buried in a vault that exists beneath this castle, something worth—" He made a sweeping gesture. "Well, its value cannot be measured in dollars."

"What is it?" Lucille asked curiously.

Instead of answering Argyll said slowly: "This castle is built on the site of an old Druid temple. Down in the vaults—" He broke off to say almost anxiously: "Now that you're here, you'll stay for a time, won't you? I need help—and I won't be ungrateful."

"We hadn't planned—" I began, but Lucille interrupted me.

"I hardly think we can do that. Our steamer sails Monday."

"But until then," Argyll urged. "Stay with me until then. You must, Jim. I need help. If it's a question of money—"

"It isn't," I said shortly. But the old man's pathetic eagerness had rather touched me. "Lucille," I said, "can't we stay for a few days?"

She bit her lip, and then nodded slowly. Argyll smiled.

"Good—good! You've come just when I needed you most. I need your help, Jim. You're strong. You're young and strong!" And he laughed with a curious air of triumph.

I saw Kent cast a warning glance at him, and felt a vague, uneasy premonition of something wrong.

Throughout the rest of the evening this feeling persisted, and it was with a sense of relief that at last I heard my uncle offer to guide us to our rooms. He had already sent Kent upstairs to prepare our beds, but the high-ceilinged tower room to which Argyll conducted us bore the stamp of uncounted generations of tenancy, nor did the clean bed-linen tend to dispel this impression. The four-poster bed was an antique, grotesquely carved. Argyll blew the dust from a table before setting down his lamp.

“It’s the best room,” he said. “Kent and I sleep below. Come along, Jim. You have the next room.”

I followed him into a chamber similar in every respect to Lucille’s, save that a little balcony jutted out from the tower, visible through incongruous French doors which some tenant had installed. I unpacked my suitcase while Argyll watched. After a time he went to the door.

“Tomorrow we’ll go to the vaults,” he informed me, and I heard his quiet laughter as he descended the stairs.

I examined the bed, an old four-poster affair, with dark green curtains all around it. These I dragged from their place, creating a stifling smother of dust. While waiting for it to settle I went out on the balcony and lit a cigarette.

The night was very dark. The moon shed a faint, dim glow through piling black clouds, and I saw water gleaming from the moat below. But for the most part it was as though I stood staring out into the blackness of infinite space. To my mind a thought came unbidden.

Never on them does the shining sun look down with his beams—but deadly
night is spread abroad over these hapless men.

Where had I read that? Suddenly I remembered. They were Homer’s lines describing Odysseus’ visit to the Land of the Dead. And truly this was a place of deathly gloom and shadows to which I had come.

The dark burden of the centuries had fallen heavily on this Sussex castle, and from the very stones beneath my feet I imagined there exhaled a subtle odor of decay and frightening antiquity. I cast my cigarette away, watched the red spark drop down to be quenched in the waters of the moat. I turned to re-enter my room.

An iron band gripped my throat! Agony, blinding, frightful, raced through me. I felt an inexorable grip tighten, shutting off my breath, lifting me from my feet. Desperately I clawed at my throat, felt a slender, metallic strand slip beneath my fingers.

Hoarse, choking groans forced themselves between my lips. If I could only grip the wire—support my weight—

It slipped through my clutching fingers. I could get no purchase. Sparks of multi-colored light flashed before my eyes.

My head was swelling, turning into a huge ball of fire.

From the blackness above me a guttural voice rasped: “Fool! Don’t tamper with forbidden things! Go while you can—let the Dweller sleep!”

There was a thudding, rhythmic, hurried pounding at my brain. The racing blood? No, the door of my room. Someone was knocking.

They would not come in time. I would be dead very soon now, I knew. I tried to shriek for help, but the murderous loop kept me silent.

The knocking grew louder. I heard someone calling my name, and recognized the voice of Fred Kent, my uncle's assistant.

The door wasn't locked. *Open it, fool, open it!*

Again the deep voice snarled out from above: "Doom will fall if the Dweller is let out from his prison. For he is hungry and athirst!"

The door opened. Kent stood in the doorway. I saw him dimly through staring eyes. He glanced about the room, abruptly paused, frozen, as his eyes met mine. Then he was racing toward the window.

The iron grip about my throat relaxed. I collapsed, choking for air. To my ears came a faint whisper, fading, vanishing into the distance.

"He is hungry and athirst!"

Then only blackness . . .

Something was biting my throat, something hot, burning. I coughed, spluttered—and opened my eyes. I was on the bed, and bending over me was Kent, intent upon forcing brandy between my lips. I pushed the glass away, struggled to sit up. Kent's arm about my shoulders supported me.

"What was it, old man?" he asked quietly. There was a strange look in his eyes, behind the shell-rimmed glasses. Was it fear? I could not be sure.

I told him. He frowned, shaking his head.

"I can't imagine," he said. "But, look here, Mason. I'd rather you wouldn't tell Argyll of this. He's—" He hesitated, went on slowly. "Sometimes I'm rather afraid of him, in spite of all he's done for me."

"I see," I said. "Well, that's all right. Perhaps it will be better. I don't want to worry Lucille, either. But I'm going to get her away from this death-trap."

Kent pushed out his lower lip. He took off his glasses and polished them reflectively.

"That's really why I came up here," he said. "Here—take another nip of brandy. There's no use going after the fellow, whoever he was. You were out for fully fifteen minutes. And besides I want to tell you—"

He went on quietly, his calm, restrained voice lending an added touch of terror to the fantastic tale he related. As I listened a weird spell of horror seemed to close in upon me, a nightmare menace from the foul and hidden depths of antiquity. He told of his coming to the castle, for a purpose Argyll would not explain to him until a few days before our coming.

"He took me down into the vaults," he said, and I saw little beads of perspiration sprinkling his forehead. "Black as midnight, filthy with cobwebs, and infested with insects—spiders as big as walnuts, and ugly little yellow centipedes that flashed away almost before you could see them. There are seven vaults down below the castle, and in the lowest vault is the door.

"An iron door, rusted and barred. But we opened it with chisels and hammers. We had to wait half an hour before the air in that locked vault became breathable. And it was empty. Argyll told me to dig. They buried it deep, he said. I had no idea what he meant, then. I sweated and dug there until I had a shallow crater about eight feet deep, and finally, about noon the day before yesterday, I struck something that sent out a hollow clang. I kept on digging."

Kent brushed the perspiration from his forehead, went on. "I uncovered an iron disk, embedded in the solid rock. Several iron bars lay across it, their ends hidden in slots in the stone. After a great deal of hammering we slid the bars into their slots and pried up the iron disk.

"Directly beneath it was another disk, warped and bent, as though terrific pressure had been applied to it from below. Argyll was tremendously excited. As he babbled I finally managed to make out that this was the ancestral tomb of somebody or other. And finally I said impatiently, 'Well, let's open it, then.' And I sent the crowbar swinging down.

"I don't know how to tell this, Mason. I've seen some odd things during my association with Argyll. Occult research isn't all fun, you know. But this—well, Argyll shrieked out a warning and caught me about the waist, deflecting the blow. As it was the bar hit the iron near its edge and crashed through the metal.

"What happened after that—it's rather blurred and indistinct. I felt the crowbar jerked from my hand and drawn out of sight below the metal disk. Good Lord, Mason, something pulled that crowbar out of my grip as though I had been a child! And I had been clutching it with all my strength!

"As I watched I saw the iron disk bulge upward, cracking and snapping. Argyll sucked in his breath. But the disk did not rip open, as I feared—"

Then I heard it—a little gasp from the doorway. I turned. It was Lucille, in a flimsy negligee that revealed rather than concealed the rounded contours of her body. She hurried forward, her face chalk-white.

I drew her within my arms. Her heart was beating furiously.

"Jim," she said. "I heard. We've got to get out of here—now."

"Perhaps it's just as well," Kent said. "I'll give you the keys to my car. Or I'll drive you to the village myself."

"That's considerate of you, Fred," my uncle's high-pitched voice said mockingly.

He stood in the doorway, his wrinkled face twisted into a saturnine grin. In his hand was a gleaming, vicious automatic. He gestured with it preemptorily.

"Stand up, Jim. You too, Lucille. That's right, line up, like good children." His cackling laugh sent an icy chill down my spine. The man must be mad!

He read my thought with uncanny accuracy. "No, I'm sane enough, Jim, as you'll find out. Fred has been telling you things, hasn't he? Has he . . . What's the matter with your neck?" He pointed at the livid weal on my throat.

In the back of my mind had been the thought that Argyll had been responsible for the attack on the balcony. But apparently he knew nothing of it. Or was he shamming ignorance?

"Nothing's the matter with it," I said.

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Since Fred has so kindly told you of my—experiment, you may as well know the rest of it. You fools who laugh at occultism—well, you'll know the embrace of the Dweller very soon now. The Dweller . . ."

His shrunken, red lids dropped over the glittering eyes, but as I moved they lifted again. The black muzzle of the automatic was aimed unwaveringly at my heart.

"My researches enabled me to discover the Dweller. I found a manuscript—or rather Fred found it, in an old London garret in a bundle of waste paper—and there I learned of what lies beneath this castle. Ages ago, when the old Druid gods were worshipped at Stonehenge, when oak and mistletoe were sacred in Britain, there was a temple of the sun in this spot. This I

have learned. The chief priest was an adept, who spent his life delving into occult mysteries and secrets and acquiring a vast knowledge of the Black Arts. So great were his powers that when his time came to die he was able to defeat death, to live on—

“But *changed*. When he defeated death, he was no longer completely human. And so the Druids buried him below the *adytum*, in the cavern that still exists below this castle. Below the iron disk Fred uncovered.”

Argyll’s eyes were blazing now, and he was trembling visibly. But the automatic was rock-steady.

“In the manuscript I mentioned I found a tremendous secret. I learned that the Druid priest—the Dweller beneath this castle—can be freed from his age-old prison—and *enslaved*! The man who enslaves the Dweller becomes master of all the powers of the Druids—powers and knowledge long since forgotten! The stars”—he was almost shrieking now—“The stars will be within my reach!”

“Do you mean to open the tomb—now?” Kent asked.

Argyll nodded quickly. He began to speak, but Kent, his nerves apparently snapping under the strain, burst out: “But the Dweller! If you do that, the Dweller will be freed!”

My uncle suddenly became quiet. He smiled very grimly.

“Have you forgotten the sacrifice?” he asked. “The Dweller will not be dangerous—to me.”

Kent paled. He nodded slowly, and at Argyll’s peremptory gesture moved toward the door. For a moment I hesitated, then, at Argyll’s frown, followed him, my arm about Lucille.

Procession of the damned, marching down to the abyss! First came Kent; then Lucille and myself; and finally Argyll at our heels, urging us on with that deadly automatic. Down from the tower, down steep stone steps into a dungeonlyke underground room—Argyll had picked up a lamp from a table in the hall—and through an arched opening in the wall. Seven vaults, festooned with grey cobwebs. Thin strands brushed my face and clung tenaciously.

“I was down here yesterday,” Argyll said from behind us. “But the spiders spin fast.”

There was an iron door ajar in the wall of the seventh vault, and through this we passed. We were in a narrow little chamber, empty, dank, and odorous. There was a deep, craterlike hole in the dirt floor, and at its bottom I saw a rusted iron disk, warped and bent. Suddenly I felt sick and giddy. I knew Lucille must be feeling even worse. “Buck up,” I said in a whisper. “We’ll get out of this, dear.”

Argyll barked a command, and Kent turned away, picked up a crowbar that leaned against the wall. Under the menace of the gun he descended into the pit and began to break through the thin barrier of iron.

Did I hear footsteps—thudding, distant footsteps—from below? Argyll heard them, for he gave a triumphant cackle of laughter.

“Quicker, Fred, quicker!” he snarled. “We must be ready!”

I could not see Kent’s face in the shadow, but he attacked the disk with redoubled vigor. As it gave way he scrambled up the side of the pit.

Argyll moved closer to the brink, peering down, with quick side glances at us. I caught a glimpse of a dark, rough floor of stone beneath the disk, and on it was a low, oval platform, apparently intended to hold a coffin, but now empty. And, too, the light mercilessly revealed curious tracks upon the floor—dark oval patches far too huge for any human footprint!

Thud . . . thud . . . rhythmic padding of giant feet. I felt a Presence in the tomb beneath us. There was an uneasy rustling and shifting, and Argyll shrieked in triumph and leaped back.

“The Dweller!” he screamed. “He comes!” He paused to set down the lamp carefully on the floor. I felt Kent nudge me, urge me back from the pit. I put my arm protectingly about Lucille.

Something was rising from the ancient tomb, something huge and black, rising inexorably into view—very slowly. Something vaguely anthropoid in outline, but covered with a foul and glistening slime.

“The Druid priest,” I heard Kent whisper hoarsely. “*The Dweller in the Tomb!*”

Bloated and huge and vile beyond imagination it arose, the essence of all foulness and evil. Face it had none. From a featureless black globe a single glowing eye peered frightfully. The long apelike arms ended in great horny claws.

Argyll sprang toward us, the automatic menacing. He seized Lucille, jerked her away before I could prevent it. His clawing hand clutched at her negligee, ripped it from her. With a vicious push he sent her prone on the edge of the pit. She lay there, unmoving.

Cursing, I sprang forward, felt Kent seize me.

“Wait, man, wait!” he whispered urgently. I tried to pull free, but he held me in an iron grip.

The Dweller began to march up the side of the pit, slowly, ponderously. It did not pause at the nude form of Lucille. Instead, it strode on—toward Argyll!

And my uncle, his face a deathmask, drained of blood, retreated. Slowly, slowly—and slowly—the Dweller followed him. Once Argyll tried to dodge past to the door, but the monstrous being was too quick, despite its bulk. And eventually the old man was pinned in a corner, while we watched, scarcely daring to breathe.

Argyll’s nerve broke. He screamed maledictions, frantic appeals.

“Take them!” he shrieked at the being. “Three of them—for the sacrifice! Take—”

Abruptly he flung up the automatic, fired. Rolling thunder reverberated through the chamber. And then Argyll was staring stupidly at the empty gun, while the Dweller moved inexorably forward.

Argyll flattened himself against the wall. His face was frightful. His mouth hung lax and his staring eyes were frozen, glaring at the inhuman horror so close to him. A crablike claw swung up for Argyll’s throat.

With a scream of utter, agonized horror my uncle collapsed. Tottered and dropped and lay in a limp heap on the ground, his white face staring up blindly in the dim light of the lamp. I saw that he was dead.

I heard the bark of a shot. Kent had pushed past me, a gun in his hand. Again the weapon roared.

The Dweller turned, very slowly. The single eye seemed to glare at us malefically.

Kent sent shot after shot into the gross, hideous body.

And the Dweller fell. Toppled and crashed to the ground beside my uncle, and lay writhing with curiously wormlike motions. Kent kept pumping bullets into it.

Then I heard it—the thing that made me catch my breath in sheer amazement as I stared at the thing on the floor. For from the faceless, slimy head of the creature a voice croaked:

“Curse you, Kent, you blasted double-crosser—”

The words ended in the harsh death-rattle.

For an eternity, it seemed, I stood there, my mind working at lightning speed. I heard Kent's voice, all the assumed fear gone from it.

"The swine!" he said coldly. "Why did he have to—"

I broke in. "Then you're responsible for this— You've been behind the whole thing!"

His eyes were amused behind the horn-rimmed glasses. "Yes, that's right. Now, unfortunately, I'll have to kill you. I hadn't planned . . . Keep back!" The gun menaced me.

I retreated a step. If I could play for time, perhaps—

"Who's your friend, then?" I asked as calmly as I could.

Kent smiled. "The same chap who lassoed you on the balcony. The man who drove you here. He's been working for me for quite a while. But my plan went wrong. I hadn't intended to kill old Argyll, the swine! If I could only have driven him mad, as I had planned. But I hadn't realized how weak his heart was."

"But why?" I asked desperately. "What did you have against my uncle? He befriended you —"

"After he killed my father," Kent snapped. "You didn't know that, did you? They were partners, yes. But Argyll managed to defraud my father and leave him penniless. And because of that my father killed himself. I didn't know that myself until a few months ago, when I found an old notebook of his. Then I determined to have my revenge, to strike at Argyll through his belief in occultism, his weakest spot."

"What about the manuscript?"

"Forged. I located this castle, did a little construction work on these vaults. But little was necessary. There's another entrance to the tomb, of course. Then I cooked up a legend that would appear authentic to Argyll, and told him I'd found the parchment. As I expected, he bought the castle and set out to enslave the Dweller. I really didn't want to kill you unless I had to," he went on naïvely. "In fact, I tried to frighten you away by having you attacked, and by telling you a wild tale about the Dweller. I didn't expect Argyll would force the issue."

Suddenly I remembered something. "And when you told Argyll that if he opened the tomb the Dweller would escape—you were really talking to him," I ventured, nodding toward the motionless black figure that was at my feet.

He nodded. "Yes. He was outside on the balcony, and that gave him his cue. I decided to let Argyll have his way. I'd already seen to it that his gun was loaded with blanks. And I'd planned to kill the Dweller, then unmask him—and be as surprised as you." He smiled grimly as he finished. "Naturally, nobody would suspect me. They'd think our friend had been trying to hoax Argyll and me—but the fool talked. I didn't expect that. So—"

He lifted the gun. Its muzzle seemed to grow, to become a well of blackness that would swallow me. I tensed, although I read murder in Kent's eyes, and knew I'd have no chance. His finger was tightening on the trigger.

Lancing through the vault came a scream! From the corner of my eye I saw a white figure leaping up—Lucille!—racing toward the door.

In a flash I saw her plan. Kent would not dare to let her escape. The muzzle of the gun wavered, turned away momentarily. I leaped.

Flame seared my side as the gun blasted. I clinched with Kent, gripped his wrist and forced the gun up. Again it roared, and I heard the bullet whine as it ricocheted from the walls. I wrenched Kent's wrist viciously, and he dropped the gun.

His knee drove up at my groin, but I twisted aside, evading the blow. His fingers were at my throat now, digging in viciously. Suddenly I felt my strength draining away. The previous

attack had weakened me more than I had realized. Desperately I threw myself back.

We fell on the edge of the pit, and the breath was driven from my lungs. We tottered there for a moment, and then we went rolling over and over down the incline, blinded with dirt, snarling curses. Those iron fingers were closing remorselessly on my throat.

I felt emptiness beneath me, felt air rush past me as we plunged down. We struck with an impact that jarred me into momentary unconsciousness. Then I was staggering to my feet, feeling the murderous hands fall away from my neck.

Kent lay flat on his back, staring up through the horn-rimmed glasses. Oddly, they were unbroken. On the stone around Kent's head was an irregular splotch of grey and crimson.

"Jim!" It was Lucille's voice. She was on the edge of the pit, looking down at me. "Are you hurt? Is he—"

"I'm all right," I said. "Kent—is dead."

There was a ladder on the floor nearby, kicked away when the spurious Dweller had ascended. It was the work of a moment to raise it and clamber from the tomb.

I picked up Lucille's negligee, and she wrapped it around her as we hurried through the vaults, and up into the great hall of the castle. And there, as I looked down into my wife's blue eyes, so close and so tender, I felt that the shadow of evil that had brooded over us had passed away forever.

[The end of *The Dweller in the Tomb* by Henry Kuttner]