



"God only knows what strange flotsam the sea might spew forth."

Spawn of the Maelstrom

By AUGUST W. DERLETH & MARK SCHORER

*What thing of evil stalked the earth in the likeness of Jason Warwick?
A shuddery tale of the Lofoten Islands*

N OBODY speaks of Jason Warwick any more, nor mentions his strange disappearance from the face of the earth. It was a twenty-day mystery for the press, though Scotland Yard stuck at it for almost as many months before filing the case unsolved. But there are two people who know what happened and cannot speak, and only two—Sir John Hardie and I: only the two of us who know why and how Warwick vanished. Sir John has said it ought to be put down, even if only for cynical disbelief after we are gone. But some record of the weird and terrible incarnate evil that existed on an invisible plane parallel to ours must be left in the facts attending Jason Warwick's disappearance.

The mystery had its roots in Warwick's trip to the Lofoten Islands. Just before he left, I met him at the British Museum. He seemed curiously exhilarated, and his dark, handsome features were eager. He was hatless, and went about, despite a light fog, without a waterproof in his rather shabby, suit, the typical clothing already marking him out as eccentric.

"I say, Bassett—what a lucky meeting!" he began without preamble. "I want you to do something for me, will you? I've been trying to get in touch with Sir John Hardie, and I can't seem to do it. Can't get him on the wire, because he seems to have run over to Paris on business—and a telegram's too impersonal. Will you call him when he comes back and tell him from

me that I've gone off to the Lofoten Islands and that I'll write to him from there?"

"Glad to," I said. "What's taking you off this time?"

"A corking legend—really believed in, too, Bassett—that's the splendid part of it. But I can't stop to tell you about it, because my machine's waiting, and I must be off. Besides, I know enough to make me want to look into the matter. You know what these queer old beliefs do to me!"

I did know of Jason Warwick's fascination for strange beliefs existing in out-of-the-way places of the earth. "Supernatural again?" I asked, as he began to move away.

He half turned. "Nothing but that," he called back. "Very deep and sinister, Bassett—the shivery kind." Then he got into his Daimler and was gone.

Sir John Hardie returned from Paris shortly after Warwick had left England, and I found him quite easily at the Eton Club, of which both of us were members. Over liquor, I mentioned Warwick.

"He's gone to the Lofoten Islands. He left word with me for you—said he'd write you about the place as soon as he got there. Which led me to believe that you had been discussing the islands with him before he went. Have I hit it? If so, what's sent him off like that?"

Sir John did not immediately reply. His eyes narrowed abruptly, and he ran a finger meditatively along the line of his jaw. "I wish he hadn't gone, Bassett," he said finally.

"Well," I put in, "if you mean that it's another wild-goose chase, I'm inclined to agree."

Sir John shrugged. "I didn't mean that. In fact, Bassett, I'm suggesting just the opposite; from vague hints that I've been gathering, it's beginning to strike me that perhaps the legend hanging about the island of Vömma, to which he's gone, may be something more than superstitious clap-trap."

"What's the legend?"

"Nothing very clear, but certainly unusual, to put it mildly," replied Sir John. "The natives—good Norwegian stock, too—believe firmly in the existence of a deathless creature of some sort—some of them say it's a man; some are positive it's an animal—who is confined to the uninhabited island of Vömma."

"Deathless?" I cut in, perplexed.

"What, exactly, is meant by that?"

"I don't know precisely. I gather that the thing's been seen by successive generations, through at least four centuries, and naturally the belief that the thing cannot die, grew and continues to flourish."

"They've investigated, surely?"

Sir John nodded. "But not of late years. Something happened to some of them, and since then no one will go near the island."

"I looked Vömma up on a map of the islands I had sent to me, and it appears that it is quite near the Maelstrom—and God only knows what strange flotsam the sea might spew forth on the island! I've an uncanny idea that Warwick will find out more than he's bargained for. I've never cared about his unholy fascination for ancient superstitions and legends. I'm not exactly a fool, Bassett, but I don't think it's wise to push such interests too far; I think you know what I mean. Well, I'll look for letters from him; I daresay he'll be able to manage very well for himself. Nevertheless, I wish he hadn't gone."

MORE than that Sir John would not say. We parted after some small talk and I did not see him again until Warwick's return. As a matter of fact, Jason Warwick had been in London some time before any of his friends knew of his return from the Lofotens. I was the first to see him.

The meeting was accidental, and though it was very short, it left an indelible impression on my mind. I had gone into Selfridge's, and ran into Warwick standing near the main entrance, watching the stream of people passing in and out of the building with a curiously rapt interest. He did not notice me, even when I stepped directly into his line of vision. Perhaps I would have considered this fully as strange as it actually was, for Warwick had a reputation for extraordinary alertness, had it not been for the momentary excitement of coming upon him so suddenly, when to the best of my knowledge he was far from England.

I stepped up to him, put my hand on his arm, and said, "Well, Warwick—you're back!"

His reaction was astounding. He turned slowly and looked at me. His eyes were cold, and his face was perfectly expressionless. Then abruptly a change came upon his features; his expression grew somewhat intense, as if he were seeking by great mental effort to recall something long lost to memory. And then he spoke.

"Why, it's Bassett—of course. You've changed."

I had not changed, and I knew it. It was he who had changed. He had gone away a light-hearted young man, and had returned as a cold, hard individual many years older. It was that that impressed me from the first: a baffling feeling of age emanating from the still youthful Warwick. What had happened to him in the Lofoten Islands to change him so? He was decidedly not the same man who had gone to the islands. Even his belated rec-

ognition of me came with obvious hesitation—as if he were forcing the words from his lips.

And somehow, too, his voice was harsher, deeper, colder. With an effort, I spoke to him again, hoping that I had masked my surprise.

"When did you get back?"

He waved a stiff hand with an attempted airiness which did not quite come off, and said, "Oh, quite some time ago, Bassett. Some days."

"Well, you've kept yourself hidden, indeed. What's got into you?" I asked.

"Been very busy, Bassett." He fell abruptly silent, and again that intensely thoughtful expression crept over his face. He passed a hand across his eyes. Then he said, again with effort, "Let me see—you are still at the same place, I think? Weren't there some letters—I wrote you——"

With some surprise, I said, "No, you wrote me no letters. I'm afraid you wrote only to Sir John Hardie, Warwick."

He did not apparently notice the surprise in my voice. His face lightened a moment. "Of course, it was Sir John. And where is he now, Bassett? Still at——"

"His country place," I put in. "Melcombe House, in Kent."

He nodded vaguely, but with some satisfaction manifest on his face. Then he took my hand in his, shook it stiffly, and began to walk rapidly away with long loping steps not at all characteristic of him. I was too surprised to follow, and the touch of his hand even more disturbed me, for it was cold and unfeeling as arctic stone!

From Selfridge's I went at once to my apartment, where I was spared the necessity of calling Sir John Hardie, as I had intended to do, for Sir John himself was waiting for me. I saw at a glance that he looked worried.

"I've come to see you about Warwick," he said at once. "I'm a little worried

about him—afraid something's happened to him up there."

"I've just seen him," I cut in.

"Seen him!" exclaimed Sir John. "Where?"

"Why—in Selfridge's."

"Well, then, at any rate, he's safe enough."

"But he's changed," I said, and went on to describe my strange encounter with Jason Warwick.

Sir John was considerably disturbed. "Seems he *has* run into something up there," he said at last. "I'll have to see him at once. I can't imagine his having forgotten his letters to me." He stopped abruptly and looked at me oddly. "Which reminds me that it was his letters I came to talk to you about."

He got up and walked across the room in silence once or twice.

"I didn't like the tone of his letters, for one thing," he said finally, coming to a stop before me. "Had me worried. They weren't very clear. He seemed excited—natural enough, I suppose. Then for a good time I had no letter at all from him. I was beginning to think that something had happened, and came here to talk to you, Bassett. But now that you've seen him I daresay he's all right."

But Sir John did not sound convincing. My story had bothered him as it continued to bother me. However, he evidently did not wish to discuss Warwick's strange attitude until he had seen him and talked with him.

THUS the matter stood for a few days. I did not see Warwick again, and efforts to locate him at his usual haunts were fruitless. A call put through to Sir John's country place served to inform me that Sir John had spent the past days on the Continent, but was expected back within a few hours and had left word for me to run down for dinner that night.

That was on the third day after my encounter with Warwick.

So it was that I was down at Melcombe House when Sir John returned from the Continent toward evening. That he was strangely disturbed I saw at once. What bothered him, however, he was loath to say, for nothing passed between us save desultory remarks upon his trip and the present unusually balmy weather.

It was long after dinner when I said finally, "Something's bothering you, Sir John. Why not tell me?"

He shrugged. "I want to get in touch with Warwick first," he said, adding, "if possible."

I did not press him. We were sitting at the time in his trophy room on the second floor. We sat there in silence for a considerable time, and finally I took up a book, seeing that Sir John was apparently not going to open his thoughts to me.

I think it was close upon midnight when there came an interruption. Quiet had descended upon the countryside, and a thin moon had risen. I was standing at the window when I heard someone on the floor below.

At first I thought it was Sir John's night watchman, Sullatt, and paid no attention to the sounds. It was not until somewhat later that it occurred to me that the sounds were not at all like those Sullatt would make—they were too stealthy, like creeping footsteps. This thought had no sooner occurred to me than the sound of another pair of advancing footsteps came from around one corner of the rambling house.

Then abruptly came a hoarse cry from below. "Robbers!"

"Sullatt!" exclaimed Sir John, coming quickly to the window and peering over my shoulders. The window was wide open; so both of us leaned out.

There, below us, on the lawn, some twenty feet from the house, stood a dark

figure shouting at the top of his lungs—"Robbers in the library!"

Abruptly a dark form hurtled from the shadowy lower floor and launched itself straight across the lawn at Sullatt. The night watchman went down like a log; behind me Sir John whirled and ran from the room.

I would have followed, but at the same instant someone else reached the library below and turned on the light—and I saw the face of the man who was struggling with Sullatt! Sullatt was on his back, his arms beating feebly upward, and his mysterious assailant was bending over him, his shoulders oddly misshapen and hunched up, straining the clothes that seemed to bind his body—all this I saw as the light from the library streamed out across the lawn from the open French window. All this—and more. For as the light flashed forth and Sullatt lay quiet, the marauder looked up and at the house, his head thrown back, his mouth horribly distended, and his eyes glaring into the light—and it was the face of Jason Warwick!

A moment later he turned and vanished in the darkness beyond the hedge. Then I ran down the stairs, and came into the library just as Sir John was running out by way of the French window. The butler had preceded him to where Sullatt lay, and I was not far behind when he reached the body.

For body it was—Sullatt was dead, and his face as he lay there was awful to see. And despite the shortness of the time that had elapsed between his sudden death and our coming, his body was rigid and cold as arctic stone!

Sir John turned away with a shudder, directing the butler in a low voice to summon the proper authorities and attend to the removal of the body. He passed me by without so much as a glance, but by the set lines of his face I knew that he had seen what I had seen—the face of Jason War-

wick. And at the French window he stopped, turned on me, grasping my arm in a vise-like grip, and whispered in a harsh voice, "You saw—Warwick?"

I nodded.

"Say nothing." Then he went rapidly into the room, where evidence of the robbery still abounded in articles strewn about the furniture. He made a rapid survey.

"I hope your loss hasn't been too great," I ventured.

He looked at me oddly. "I haven't lost much," he said slowly. "In fact—I've lost nothing at all of value, it seems. Only a packet of letters was taken."

"Documents?"

"No, personal letters." Then he paused significantly, and added, "Letters Warwick wrote me from the islands!"

IT WAS only after the local police had finished with us that Sir John was ready to explain. Even then he paced the floor for a long time before he said anything. But abruptly he came forward and stood bending over me, speaking in a harsh, excited voice not much above a whisper.

"That attack on Sullatt was a mistake—I believe it was meant for me, Bassett!"

My quick protest was interrupted by Sir John, who went on, speaking more rapidly. "Wait—remember that Sullatt looks much like me, same general portliness, height, carriage. Suppose someone wished to make a murderous attack on me—someone who knew only my general appearance—then such a mistake would be very easy to make."

I pondered this, and was forced to agree with Sir John. Then I spoke of what was uppermost in my mind. "You say Warwick's letters were taken—and we saw Warwick out there. And he surely would not make such a mistake as confusing Sullatt with you. Can you think of any reason for this mad occurrence?"

He nodded. "I think I can, Bassett. It

is this—Jason Warwick is not the same man who went to the Lofoten Islands. Bassett, listen to me—I don't think he is Jason Warwick at all!"

Sir John paused only sufficiently to allow me to take in the statement he had just made; then he went on.

"And I'll tell you why, if you'll let me. The condition in which we found Sullatt has convinced me of something I've suspected for some hours now—say rather, something I've known, for I have proof, incontrovertible proof of something as incredible as I ever hope to know. Sullatt's body was cold as ice, and unbelievably rigid—but it wasn't the rigidity of *rigor mortis* because it came too soon for that. And the medical examiner didn't know what to make of that, as you know—but I think I do."

His voice was strangely tense, and his face was drawn.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Sir John made a rapid calculation on his fingers, then turned to me again. "Nine days ago—or ten, I think—there was committed on the Continent the first of a series of murders of which I hope that Sullatt's murder is the last. There have now been ten murders in all. First there was a man in Norway, then another in Germany, and two more in France. Then came the others—all here in England—a customs man at Dover, a guard at an isolated station at which boat trains invariably stop, two laboring men in outer London, a country gardener in Warwickshire, and now—Sullatt.

"And every one of these victims was found cold and rigid—just as we found Sullatt—and cause of death could not be determined except in one or two cases when onlookers had witnessed attacks like the shocking assault we saw made upon Sullatt!"

I felt that the incredible events that had occurred were to be eclipsed by a climax

yet more incredible, but I did not fully understand, and said so.

Sir John cut me off impatiently. "It's plain as day, Bassett!" he exclaimed. "Those murders were committed along the route from the Lofoten Islands to London—the route Warwick must have taken on his return from Vömma!—the route he must undoubtedly have taken at a time co-incidental with those mysterious murders!"

"But, good God, Sir John—you don't believe for an instant that Warwick was responsible for all of them?"

"Let me remind you that I don't think we're dealing with Warwick. Check back to your meeting with him, for instance. He seemed to think to recall who you were. And then he asked about me, about where I was at the time. That isn't like the Warwick you and I knew before he went to the islands, is it?"

"No," I admitted reluctantly.

"And now my home is entered," he went on, "and Warwick's own letters—the letters he asked you about so guardedly—are stolen. And Sullatt, who looks like me, is murdered.

"What does it look like?—as if there were something the man we call Warwick wanted desperately to conceal, doesn't it? Something he thought the real Warwick might have written me from Vömma—thus both the letters and Sir John Hardie must be destroyed!"

He paused for a moment, and then added, "Surely it is too much to believe all this merely coincidence, Bassett?"

I NODDED, glumly. Yet I was not convinced. Sir John was withholding something vital to the puzzle.

"Yes, it's all logical enough, God knows," I said. "But what's behind it? You've intimated that you knew. If so, why not tell me?"

He paced for a few moments in silence; then abruptly he sat down, lowered his face

to his hands, and sat there for a minute or two. At length he came to a decision.

"I may need your help, Bassett," he began, "and I think you ought to know the secret of Vömma Island—as much as I know of it. I haven't told the police of Warwick, and I warned you to say nothing, because it would do no good to set the police after him. You and I will have to face him—and destroy him in our own way, and God forbid that we fail!" He shuddered as he spoke, communicating some of his inexplicable fear to me.

"You mean—we've got to kill him? Good God, Sir John, surely you aren't serious!" I protested.

"I am," he said. "Wait until you've heard what I've got to say, before you offer objections."

He took a moment in which to collect himself, and then began his incredible story.

"Some months ago, Warwick heard from one of his innumerable sources that a curious Lofoten legend was reputedly based on fact—a tale of a living-dead creature, of a soulless thing living entirely alone on the island of Vömma. I had heard this story many years ago, and I confess I could not take it as lightly as Warwick did. Believe me, Bassett, there are ancient forces of evil, unbelievable powers of abysmal darkness, existing in the cosmos—and sometimes they break through. I tried to prevent Warwick's going, but nothing would hold him back from the islands once he had heard the story.

"You know how abruptly he left. Well, I had a few scattered notes from him—as I told you. He wrote me how the Lofoten fishermen shunned the haunted island, going far out of their paths to avoid it even by day. Warwick went finally to see an old priest on the mainland, and from this priest he evidently learned quite a bit. He discovered first that already two men had been found dead—not at the same time, of

course; I think there was almost a century between their deaths—and it was firmly believed that the thing on Vömma had done for them. Bassett, those men were found rigid and cold as stone, and there was nothing to show how they had come by their death!”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “When he heard the priest’s story, Warwick was naturally skeptical. He went in for the supernatural heavily, but he wasn’t a fool, by any means. He was determined to visit Vömma, even though everyone tried to dissuade him. The priest, when he heard of Warwick’s intention, came from his retreat to beg him not to go, repeating that the thing on Vömma was of elder evil, that already it had taken the souls of two others. And he warned him especially that if the thing should take one more soul, it would be free of the island to which it had for so long been bound—free to roam the earth at will, killing and slaying to satisfy its horrible appetite, gathering strength with each new soul theft. And it was deathless!

“Yet even this did not deter Warwick. But when the priest saw that his pleading did no good, he gave Warwick a sort of charm, ostensibly for his protection. Warwick took it, but I’m afraid he didn’t place much faith in it. Then he went to the island, arranging for someone to drop food fastened to a buoy quite a distance from the coast of Vömma, and to pick up anything he, Warwick, might leave there. From then on what happened is more or less indefinite, despite what I have tried to find out.

“I made some inquiries. Warwick’s strange silence caused me to send a wire inquiring after him. Apparently he did not go out to the buoy for food, but there is definite evidence that he did return some time after first going to Vömma. Then, just a few days ago, I learned that a letter for me had been picked up in a floating

bottle, evidently some days after it had been dropped. This afternoon that letter was waiting for me on my return from the Continent, and with it was the charm that the priest had given Warwick.”

SIR JOHN reached into his inner pocket and brought forth a somewhat crumpled envelope. “Only the marked portions are important,” he said.

I took the letter, asking, “How did this escape being taken tonight?”

“I had it in my pocket.”

Then I turned my attention to the letter and began to read. It was the strangest document I have ever seen, and I do not expect ever to read a stranger. The letter was scrawled in Warwick’s typically hurried hand, his great haste made apparent by frequent splotches of ink, erasures, and blocked-out sentences. I read, skipping all but the marked portions:

“My dear Hardie:

“The priest was right—and you were right before him; I should not have come. When you read this, I shall be dead. If what I fear might come to pass has happened, you will undoubtedly think me mad. But ask yourself this question: Is this Warwick who has come back from Vömma the man I knew? You must answer, *No!* . . . The legend you already know. I did not believe. May God forgive my skepticism! There are things of utter evil, ghastly beings beyond the knowledge of such puny minds as ours. Now, through my lack of foresight, my ironic disbelief, I have opened the door—and one of them has come through. . . .

“There is a man here. He has been living for centuries, yet has been dead for long ages. I should not have said a man—a *thing*, vague as it is, is better. Because it can assume any shape it chooses—it can be man or animal, and it can, if it wants, be any definite person. It is a man now. It is a thing of cosmic evil in the shape

of a man. . . . Already this thing has taken two souls, but it needs a third before it can go forth. Do you understand, can you understand what that means? It can go forth into the world, this age-old thing of evil, this thing that must have been on Vömma long before man inhabited the earth, this spawn of the Maelstrom, spewn forth a physical mass from the depths of the earth by the sea, and now inhabited by an animating spirit from the hellish cosmos, a spirit given pseudo-life and power by the souls of men. It can go forth into the world, almost deathless, eternal, and spread evil as its doctrine! . . . Only one thing can stop it; that is the charm, the five-pointed stone given me by the priest. But more of this later. . . .

"I came to Vömma last night, and at once I saw the thing slouching along in the dark. I was not afraid; I felt drawn to it. There is a hut here; it was built, the fishermen say, by one of their number long, long ago, the first man to die. I do not know anything definite about the early history of Vömma. To this hut I went, and there the creature followed me. It was unclothed. When I looked into its eyes beyond the window, for the first time I felt afraid. Its eyes were cunning, crafty, hard; that it had a living intelligence I could see at once—and so, too, the priest had said. It disappeared shortly after, but as the night wore on, I came gradually to know that I would never leave Vömma alive, that even now the creature was biding its time, waiting to strike at its leisure, to take from me the life essence, the essence of my being, and with this psyche to complete its own being. Such was the power of the creature's thought. . . .

"This morning I saw the thing at a distance. Already I had seen that my boat had been cut away. As it came closer, I saw something horrible. The creature

had taken a shape familiar to me, even to its features—yes, Hardie, *the thing had begun to look like me!* When I saw that, there was no longer any doubt in my mind—only my death would release me from the terrible fear which preyed upon me. And my death must result because I had made two mistakes—I had failed in the first place to heed the priest and you, and more bitter, having disregarded all warning, I had neglected to bring with me the stone the priest had given me for my protection; I had left it at my boarding house on the mainland. . . . I am writing because of that stone, and because even now as you read this, this thing in my guise may have met you, conversed with you, may indeed be near you at this moment. And this thing that looks so like me must die, and you must be the emissary of its death. I have written a short note to the landlord of my lodgings on the mainland, telling him where to find the stone, giving him your address; he is to send it to you, and then you must do this for my sake and for all mankind.

"The five-pointed star has great power, an older power than that which created the thing on Vömma. It is a weapon used eons past, when the Elder Gods fought and conquered the hosts of evil for possession of Earth—so the priest has told me. It is a stone impregnated with the power of these Ancient Ones, and may God grant that none of this power has been lost! Somehow you must give this star-stone into the hand of the man who calls himself Warwick. I pray that the stone may reach you, and that the thing on Vömma will make its way in my guise to my home in London, there to meet my friends, for it shall have only as much of my memory as I choose to give it; for indeed, though it take the force that animates the physical mass called Jason Warwick, it cannot take the chambers of my mind unless I so desire. This, too, the

priest warned—had I but listened! And yet, this thing may discover more, should he draw knowledge from you, or Bassett, or anyone who has known me. When the stone touches the man from the islands, then he—deathless, eternal one—he must die, he must return to the ever damned depths from which he first came upon earth. . . . Three souls he must have to give him spiritual substance, the power to escape; two he has had, and even now he is moving upon this hut from the north of the island. I am putting this in a bottle, together with the note to my landlord; some day it must reach you. I pray that the Lofoten fishermen will find it soon, will pick it from the sea before the thing can have got far from Vömma.

"WARWICK."

I LOOKED up at last, my startled incredulity evident on my features.

"But, surely, Sir John," I protested, "this cannot be true!"

He shrugged his shoulders, reached suddenly into his pocket, and disclosed a five-pointed stone in his hand, looking like a star against his palm. It was not very large, not heavy, certainly—that I could see. On it was roughly drawn a smaller pentagon, and within this, a circular thing that looked like an eye. For some reason I had expected some kind of ornament that is really associated with Christianity, but it was nothing even remotely connected with present-day religions that Sir John held in his hand; for the stone, though in all respects like a lifeless thing, gave off a definite atmosphere of incredible age, radiating it as if it were alive. There was, too, a sense of power that seemed to lie in the stone.

"That's the charm," murmured Sir John.

"Then you believe the story?" I asked.

He looked at me a moment before replying. Then he said, "Is there any other solution? Think back—apart from what

was your own personal experience, and what happened here tonight—think of the men who were killed. Why, the gardener in Warwickshire was on the estate bordering Warwick's own country place to the south—isn't that suggestive enough? Surely that alone must cast serious doubts upon your incredulity.

"But it isn't only that, Bassett. The story hangs together in all its details. Warwick—the real Warwick—wrote that his memory would not be as thorough in this new shape, or so the priest had warned him, at any rate. Your experience at Selfridge's confirms that—his inability to recognize you, and his questions about me—those questions followed by what happened here tonight. Surely you must see what is going on in the fragmentary mind of the ghastly thing that has come back from Vömma in the shape of poor Warwick's body! It's making an effort to destroy all evidence that Warwick might have put on paper—but it doesn't know about the stone, and we must use that against it in the only hope of destroying it forever.

"That's why I haven't told the police all we know of Sullatt's death—why I've concealed the part this thing has played, because then it would be wary. It could escape them easily, and go elsewhere, and the evil that is in it would still not be crushed. Even supposing Warwick's last letter to be the product of a maddened mind, and the events that happened since his trip to Vömma nothing more than a chain of extraordinary coincidences, it will do no harm to give the stone to the thing we call Warwick."

Still I hesitated.

"Come, Bassett," said Sir John. "You must agree to that."

"Very well," I replied finally. "I agree. We'll face him together when we can get him alone somewhere."

"And I'm afraid that will not be so easily done."

In that Sir John Hardie was correct. The thing that had assumed Warwick's body evaded us, sometimes inexplicably. In the course of the days that followed, two more crimes, this time in widely separated localities, were committed, making Sir John helplessly furious. But the end came more suddenly than either he or I had dared to hope.

THE occasion was Lady Drayton's weekend party, to which she had asked Warwick at the request of Sir John. Our elation knew no bounds when she telephoned to say that Warwick's formal acceptance had just come through. Our sole desire that week-end was to come into contact with the elusive Warwick, and to prove, if possible, the ghastly assumption left as the only plausible solution to the change that had come over him since his return from the Lofoten Islands.

Even then, at the party, it was somehow not easy to meet him. During the first few meals at Drayton Hall, he excused himself; it was as if some subtle knowledge of our design had come to him. But the end was destined to come with surprising suddenness, despite Sir John's mounting fear that Warwick would again evade us.

It was on our last night at Drayton Hall, and Sir John and I were standing alone in the library of the newer wing of the Hall when the door opened softly and Jason Warwick stepped into the room. I swung around. I think I gasped aloud when Warwick's strange, depthless eyes looked darkly into my face. We stood there, I as if hypnotized, staring into eyes that I knew did not belong to the Warwick I had known!

Sir John broke the spell. It was a relief to hear his affable voice saying, "Will you join us, Warwick? Bassett and I were just about to go for liqueurs."

Warwick nodded with some reluctance. "Glad to," he muttered.

We went into the drawing-room, War-

wick taking the same loping steps that had first attracted my attention at Selfridge's. His movements were less stiff, less jerky than they were at that first surprising encounter. Had everything, after all, been fantasmal—or had his movements changed because of those others that had died so strangely? Yet, as we settled ourselves there in the comfortable chairs, each holding a glass in his hand, I had a momentary impulse to discredit everything I had heard, even everything I had seen, and blurt out the whole improbable story to Warwick. But his strange, cold eyes, boring into us with an unnaturally eager intensity, dispelled any doubts I may have had.

Then something happened.

It came so swiftly that I had hardly time to notice the details. Sir John had drawn from his pocket a pack of cigarettes, and then began going through his clothes for his lighter. Not finding it, and inconvenienced by the pack he held in his hand, he thrust out his hand suddenly to Warwick, murmuring, "Here, hold this a moment, old man."

Instinctively Warwick took the pack of cigarettes. I shall never forget the change that came over him. His face went suddenly gray, and his body seemed to shrivel together in the chair. I saw his hand crumble suddenly away, and in a moment his face fell inward. In not more than one minute, a living thing died, fell together, and vanished—disintegrated before our eyes!

In the air was a sudden nauseating odor, and in the chair where the thing from the islands had been sitting lay the suit he had been wearing, together with a few sparse bones, white as lime and essentially unhuman in their structure—the last vestiges of an ancient body!

A living green flame glowing on the rug at our feet was the star-stone Sir John had given the thing from Vömma in the pack of cigarettes.