

The author of PSYCHO

ROBERT BLOCH

The Opener of the Way



Panther 586 04221 0

‘Acting on impulse, Henderson stepped over to the long panel mirror in the hall. He lurched a little, then stood in the harsh light before it. He faced the glass, stared into the mirror, and saw nothing.

‘He looked at himself in the mirror, and there was no one there!’

‘Henderson began to laugh softly, evilly, deep in his throat. And as he gazed into the empty, unreflecting glass, his laughter rose in black glee. . . .’

Also by Robert Bloch in Panther Books

***House of the Hatchet* (forthcoming)**

Robert Bloch

The Opener of the Way

Panther

Granada Publishing Limited
Published in 1976 by Panther Books Ltd
Frogmore, St Albans, Herts AL2 2NF

First published in Great Britain by Neville
Spearman (Jersey) Ltd 1974

Copyright © 1945 by Robert Bloch
Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, London, Reading and Fakenham
Set in Intertype Times

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This book is published at a net price and is supplied subject to the Publishers Association Standard Conditions of Sale registered under the Restrictive Trade Practices Act, 1956.

To my father
Raphael A. Bloch

CONTENTS

By Way of Introduction	7
The Opener of the Way	11
The Cloak	27
Beetles	44
The Fiddler's Fee	57
The Mannikin	80
The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton	97
Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper	108
The Seal of the Satyr	128
The Dark Demon	143
The Faceless God	155

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Opener of the Way copyright 1936 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, October 1936

The Cloak copyright 1939 by Street & Smith Publishing Company for *Unknown*, May 1939

Beetles copyright 1938 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, December 1938

The Fiddler's Fee copyright 1940 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, July 1940

The Mannikin copyright 1936 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, April 1936

The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton copyright 1939 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company for *Amazing Stories*, March 1939

Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper copyright 1943 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, July 1943

The Seal of the Satyr copyright 1939 by Better Publications for *Strange Stories*, June 1939

The Dark Demon copyright 1936 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, November 1936

The Faceless God copyright 1936 by Weird Tales for *Weird Tales*, May 1936

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

'Where do you get the ideas for your stories?'

This is the question that haunts every writer.

The average author can provide a graceful and plausible answer. He is an 'observer of life,' or a 'student of human nature.' He is 'interested in historical research' or he 'draws on experience.'

But what can the creator of fantasy reply?

He does not deal with life, but with matters beyond life. He cannot submit that he is a student of human nature – although *inhuman* nature is often a subject of his consideration. His historical research is confined to legend and mythology. And as to drawing on personal experience, it has not come to my attention that the tale of lycanthropy, for example, is pounded out on a typewriter by the paws of a werewolf.

No, the fantasy writer is hard put to answer this inevitable query regarding his source of inspiration. So hard put, in fact, that I have never read any attempt at explanation.

The usual preface to a collection of fantastic fiction consists of a dissertation on imaginative literature in general, and any consideration of the motives impelling the author in the creation of his own work is politely ignored.

But fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I should like to set down my personal reply to the eternal query.

Where do I get the ideas for my stories?

I can best explain by reminding the reader that a fantasy author is definitely cast in the dual role of Jekyll and Hyde.

Dr. Jekyll (the writer in everyday life) is usually a normal enough individual. His wife does not fear him, his children will not scream when he appears, and friends or business associates seldom tremble in his presence.

But when kindly Dr. Jekyll retires to the privacy of his

rooms and crouches over a low table, he is transformed – by the simple alchemy of typewriter and paper – into the monstrous Hyde.

As in Stevenson's tale, the mask of humanity is ripped away; its very aspect forgotten by the being beneath. This creature, locked in a lonely room, knows nothing of the everyday world beyond. He has knowledge only of the worlds that *were . . . that will be . . .* and that *co-exist*.

A fearful wisdom, his. He knows what winds the witches ride, what spells the wizards weave. He has trafficked with the tenants of the tomb, and his body has lain in grave-earth beside the dreaded Vampyre. For him there are no secrets in a madman's skull. His are eyes that gaze unflinching on the dread glory of the Medusa. His ears echo to the rustlings of maggots at the feast; his nostrils are suffused with odors of the Pit; his mouth is shapen for the fulfillment of strange hungers.

By virtue of a weird cartography, he maps the fabled contours on the dark side of the moon, and those black gulfs beyond the uttermost star.

For, essentially, he is engaged upon the composition of a travelogue . . . the history of a voyage in the realms of pure imagination . . . a journey through a skull. And each tale is but a chapter in the endless odyssey.

Does this sound naïve, overly melodramatic?

If so, it is because frankness has long ceased to play a part in the personal depositions of author to reader. The author of fantasy, in particular, does his best to entirely conceal the emotional basis of his creative impulse.

Dr. Jekyll attempts to deny the very existence of Mr. Hyde.

But . . . Mr. Hyde exists.

I know, for he is part of me. He has been my literary mentor now for more than a decade.

During this period, my life as Jekyll has been commonplace in the extreme. I have a home, a family, a regular occupation, friends; a normal schedule of hobbies and amusements. Despite the betraying evidence of a somewhat

flamboyant sense of humor, I am sure those who know Dr. Jekyll regard him as a rather prosy fellow.

Yet Mr. Hyde is active, nonetheless. He has produced one hundred and fifty published tales of fantasy, right under the noses of family and friends.

It is a partnership which has proved both pleasant and profitable – and it would be ingratitude indeed if I allowed Dr. Jekyll to take the credit without proper acknowledgment to his *alter ego*.

The reader of this collection cannot fail to detect the evidence of two minds, working in partial synchronization.

In most of the stories assembled here, Jekyll is the conscious narrator. His style is often pseudo-scholarly, his imagery lurid and contrived. He is a conscious polysyllabophile, and his narrative technique owes much to the influence and guidance of the late H. P. Lovecraft.

But the inspiration comes from Mr. Hyde. He is definitely responsible for the basic theme underlying the stories as a whole . . . the logical insistence that unpleasant consequences await anyone who meddles in matters best left undisturbed.

I fear, however, that Hyde must also share the blame for errors of taste and judgment. In his haste to effect some particularly ghastly revelation, he has ignored many literary niceties. He is impatient of polishing, revision; the recasting of episode or narrative in a more cohesive mold. For Hyde has never written for 'posterity' – only for immediate reader-reaction. There are times, I confess, when the reader will shudder over the style rather than the content of these stories.

I can only submit that this is a matter beyond my control. If, some time, I can write a tale dictated entirely by the conscious personality of Dr. Jekyll, the result may be entirely different from any effort presented here. But, barring this possibility, the works published under my name will continue to exhibit the hideous handiwork of Hyde.

And when anyone inquires as to where I get the ideas for my stories, I can only shrug and answer, 'From my collaborator – Mr. Hyde.'

– ROBERT BLOCH

THE OPENER OF THE WAY

The statue of Anubis brooded over the darkness. Its blind eyes had basked in the blackness for unnumbered centuries, and the dust of ages had settled upon its stony brow. The damp air of the pit had caused its canine features to crumble, but the stone lips of the image still were curled in a snarling grin of cryptic mirth. It was almost as if the idol were alive; as if it had seen the shadowed centuries slip by, and with them the glory of Egypt and the old gods. Then indeed would it have reason to grin, at the thought of ancient pomps and vain and vanished splendor. But the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way, jackal-headed god of Karneter, was not alive, and those that had bowed in worship were long dead. Death was everywhere; it haunted the shadowy tunnel where the idol stood, hidden away in the mummy-cases and biding amidst the very dust of the stone floor. Death, and darkness – darkness undispeled by light these three thousand years.

Today, however, light came. It was heralded by a grating clang, as the iron door at the further end of the passageway swung open on its rusted hinges; swung open for the first time in thirty centuries. Through the opening came the strange illumination of a torch, and the sudden sound of voices.

There was something indescribably eerie about the event. For three thousand years no light had shone in these black and buried vaults; for three thousand years no feet had disturbed the dusty carpet of their floors; for three thousand years no voice had sent its sound through the ancient air. The last light had come from a sacred torch in the hand of a priest of Bast; the last feet to violate the dust had been encased in Egyptian sandals; the last voice had spoken a prayer in the language of the Upper Nile.

And now, an electric torch flooded the scene with sudden

light; booted feet stamped noisily across the floor, and an English voice gave vent to fervent profanity.

In the torchlight the bearer of the illumination was revealed. He was a tall, thin man, with a face as wrinkled as the papyrus parchment he clutched nervously in his left hand. His white hair, sunken eyes and yellowed skin gave him the aspect of an old man, but the smile upon his thin lips was full of the triumph of youth. Close behind him crowded another, a younger replica of the first. It was he who had sworn.

'For the love of God, father – we've made it!'

'Yes, my boy, so we have.'

'Look! There's the statue, just as the map showed it!'

The two men stepped softly in the dust-strewn passage and halted directly in front of the idol. Sir Ronald Barton, the bearer of the light, held it aloft to inspect the figure of the god more closely. Peter Barton stood at his side, eyes following his father's gaze.

For a long moment the invaders scrutinized the guardian of the tomb they had violated. It was a strange moment there in the underground burrow, a moment that spanned eternity as the old confronted the new.

The two men gazed up at the eidolon in astonishment and awe. The colossal figure of the jackal-god dominated the dim passage, and its weathered form still held vestiges of imposing grandeur and inexplicable menace. The sudden influx of outer air from the opened door had swept the idol's body free of dust, and the intruders scrutinized its gleaming form with a certain vague unease. Twelve feet tall was Anubis, a man-like figure with the dogface of a jackal upon massive shoulders. The arms of the statue were held forth in an attitude of warning, as if endeavoring to repel the passage of outsiders. This was peculiar, for to all intents and purposes the guardian figure had nothing behind it but a narrow niche in the wall.

There was an air of evil suggestion about the god, however; a hint of bestial humanity in its body which seemed to hide a secret, sentient life. The knowing smile on the carven

countenance seemed cynically alive; the eyes, though stony, held a strange and disturbing *awareness*. It was as though the statue were alive; or, rather, as though it were merely a stone cloak that harbored life.

The two explorers sensed this without speaking, and for a long minute they contemplated the Opener of the Way uneasily. Then, with a sudden start, the older man resumed his customary briskness of manner.

'Well, son, let's not stand here gawking at this thing all day! We have plenty to do yet – the biggest task remains. Have you looked at the map?'

'Yes, father.' The younger man's voice was not nearly as loud or as firm as Sir Ronald's. He did not like the mephitic air of the stone passageway; he did not care for the stench that seemed to spawn in the shadows of the corners. He was acutely aware of the fact that he and his father were in a hidden tomb, seven hundred feet below the desert sands; a secret tomb that had lain unopened for thirty creeping centuries. And he could not help but remember the curse.

For there was a curse on the place; indeed, it was that which had led to its discovery.

Sir Ronald had found it in the excavation of the Ninth Pyramid, the moldering papyrus parchment which held the key to a secret way. How he had smuggled it past the heads of the expedition nobody can say, but he had managed the task somehow.

After all, he was not wholly to be blamed, though the theft of expeditionary trophies is a serious offense. But for twenty years Sir Ronald Barton had combed the deserts, uncovered sacred relics, deciphered hieroglyphics, and disinterred mummies, statues, ancient furniture, or precious stones. He had unearthed untold wealth and incredibly valuable manuscripts for his Government; yet he was still a poor man, and had never been rewarded by becoming head of an expedition of his own. Who can blame him if he took that one misstep which he knew would lead him to fame and fortune at last?

Besides, he was getting old, and after a score of years in

Egypt all archeologists are a little mad. There is something about the sullen sun overhead that paralyzes the brains of men as they ferret in the sand, digging in unhallowed ruins; something about the damp, dark stillness underground in temple vaults that chills the soul. It is not good to look upon the old gods in the places where they still rule; for cat-headed Bubastis, serpented Set, and evil Amon-Ra frown down as sullen guardians in the purple pylons before the pyramids. Over all is an air of forbidden things long dead, and it creeps into the blood. Sir Ronald had dabbled in sorcery, a bit; so perhaps it affected him more strongly than the rest. At any rate, he stole the parchment.

It had been penned by a priest of ancient Egypt, but the priest had not been a holy man. No man could write as he had written without violating his vows. It was a dreadful thing, that manuscript, steeped in sorcery and hideous with half-hinted horrors.

The enchanter who had written it alluded to gods far older than those he worshipped. There was mention of the 'Demon Messenger' and the 'Black Temple', coupled with the secret myth and legend-cycles of pre-Adamite days. For just as the Christian religion has its Black Mass, just as every sect has its hidden Devil-worship, the Egyptians knew their own darker gods.

The names of these accursed ones were set forth, together with the orisons necessary for their invocation. Shocking and blasphemous statements abounded in the text; threats against the reigning religion, and terrible curses upon the people who upheld it. Perhaps that is why Sir Ronald found it buried with the mummy of the priest – its discoverers had not dared to destroy it, because of the doom which might befall them. They had their way of vengeance, though; because the mummy of the priest was found without arms, legs, or eyes, and these were not lost through decay.

Sir Ronald, though he found the above-mentioned portions of the parchment intensely interesting, was much more impressed by the last page. It was here that the sacrilegious one told of the tomb of his master, who ruled the dark cult of

the day. There were a map, a chart, and certain directions. These had not been written in Egyptian, but in the cuneiform chirography of Chaldea. Doubtless that is why the old avenging priests had not sought out the spot for themselves to destroy it. They were probably unfamiliar with the language; unless they were kept away by fear of the curse.

Peter Barton still remembered that night in Cairo when he and his father had first read it in translation. He recalled the avid gleam in Sir Ronald's glittering eyes, the tremulous depth in his guttural voice.

'And as the maps direct, there you shall find the tomb of the Master, who lies with his acolytes and all his treasure.'

Sir Ronald's voice nearly broke with excitement as he pronounced this last word.

'And at the entrance upon the night that the Dog-Star is ascendant you must give up three jackals upon an altar in sacrifice, and with the blood bestrew the sands about the opening. Then the bats shall descend, that they may have feasting, and carry their glad tidings of blood to Father Set in the Underworld.'

'Superstitious rigmarole!' young Peter had exclaimed.

'Don't scoff, son,' Sir Ronald advised. 'I could give you reasons for what it says above, and make you understand. But I am afraid that the truth would disturb you unnecessarily.'

Peter had stayed silent while his father read on:

'Upon descending into the outer passage you will find the door, set with the symbol of the Master who waits within. Grasp the symbol by the seventh tongue in the seventh head, and with a knife remove it. Then shall the barrier give way, and the gate to the tomb be yours. Thirty and three are the steps along the inner passage, and there stands the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way.'

'Anubis! But isn't he a regular Egyptian deity – a recognized one?' Peter broke in.

His father answered from the manuscript itself:

'For Lord Anubis holds the keys to Life and Death; he guards cryptic Karneter, and none shall pass the Veil without

consent. Some there are who deem the Jackal-god to be a friend of those who rule, but he is not. Anubis stands in shadows, for he is the Keeper of Mysteries. In olden days for which there is no number it is written that Lord Anubis revealed himself to men, and he who then was Master fashioned the first image of the god in his true likeness. Such is the image that you will find at the end of the inner passage-way – the first true image of the Opener of the Way.'

'Astounding!' Peter had muttered. 'Think what it means if this is true; imagine finding the original statue of the god!'

His father merely smiled, a trifle wanly, Peter thought.

'There are ways in which the first image differs from the rest,' said the manuscript. 'These ways are not good for men to know; so the first likeness was hidden by the Masters through the ages, and worshipped according to its demands. But now that our enemies – may their souls and vitals rot! – have dared profane the rites, the Master saw fit to hide the image and bury it with him when he died.'

Sir Ronald's voice quivered as he read the next few lines:

'But Anubis does not stand at the head of the inner passage for this reason alone. He is truly called the Opener of the Way, and without his help none may pass to the tomb within.'

Here the older man stopped completely for a long moment.

'What's the matter?' inquired Peter, impatiently. 'I suppose there's another silly ritual involving the statue of the god, eh?'

His father did not answer, but read on to himself, silently. Peter noticed that Sir Ronald's hands trembled as he held the parchment, and when the older man looked up at last, his face was very pale.

'Yes, my boy,' he replied, huskily. 'That's what it is – another silly ritual. But no need to bother about it until we get to the place itself.'

'You mean to go there – discover the spot?' asked the young man, eagerly.

'I must go there.' Sir Ronald's tone was constrained. He glanced again at the last portion of the parchment:

'But beware, for those who do not believe shall die. Pass

Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is a very strange one indeed, and holds a secret soul.'

The old archeologist blurted out these last words very quickly, and immediately folded up the parchment again. After that he had deliberately turned the talk to practical affairs, as if seeking to forget what he had read.

The next weeks were spent in preparation for the trip to the south, and Sir Ronald seemed to avoid his son, except when it was necessary to converse with him on matters pertaining directly to the expeditionary affairs.

But Peter had not forgotten. He wondered what it was his father had read silently; that secret ritual which would enable one to pass beyond the Opener of the Way. Why had his father blanched and trembled, then quickly changed the subject to saner things? Why had he guarded the parchment so closely? And just what was the nature of the 'curse' the manuscript mentioned at the last?

Peter pondered these questions a great deal, but he had gradually dispelled his stronger fears, because of the necessary preoccupation with technical details which the organizing of their expedition subsequently entailed. Not until he and his father were actually in the desert did his misgivings return, but then they plagued him mightily.

There is an air of eon-spawned antiquity about the desert, a certain aura of the ancient which makes one feel that the trivial triumphs of man are as fleeting and quickly obscured as his foot-prints in the shifting sand. In such places there descends upon the soul a sphinx-like brooding, and somber soliloquies rise, unrepressed, to rule the mind.

Young Peter had been affected by the spell of the silent sands. He tried to remember some of the things his father had once told him concerning Egyptian sorcery, and the miraculous magic of the high priests. Legends of tombs and underground horrors took on a new reality here in the place of their birth. Peter Barton knew personally many men who had believed in the potency of curses, and some of them

had died strangely. There was the Tut-Ankh-Ahmen affair, and the Paut temple scandal, and the terrible rumors concerning the end of that unsavory adventurer, Doctor Carnoti. At night, under the spying stars, he would recall these and similar tales, then shudder anew at the thought of what might lie before him.

When Sir Ronald had made camp at the spot designated by the map, there had been new and more concrete terrors.

That first night, Sir Ronald had gone off alone into the hills behind the tents. He bore with him a white goat, and a sharp knife. His son, following, had come upon the old man after a deed had been done, so that the sand had been given to drink. The goat's blood shone horribly in the moonlight, and there was a red glare of corresponding violence in the slayer's eyes. Peter had not made his presence known, for he did not deem it wise to interrupt his father while the old man was muttering those outlandish Egyptian phrases to a mocking moon.

Indeed, Peter was more than a little afraid of Sir Ronald, else he would have attempted to dissuade him from continuing the expedition. But there was something in Sir Ronald's manner which hinted at a mad, unthwartable determination. It was that which made Peter keep silent; that which held him from bluntly asking his father the true details about the parchment's mysterious 'curse'.

The day after the peculiar incident in the midnight hills, Sir Ronald, after consulting certain zodiacal charts, announced that the digging would start. Carefully, eyes on the map, he measured his paces to an exact spot in the sands, and ordered the men to work. By sundown a ten-foot shaft yawned like a great wound in the earth, and excited natives proclaimed the presence of a door beneath.

By this time Peter, whose nerves were near the breaking-point, was too much afraid of his father to demur when

ordered to descend to the floor of the excavation. Undoubtedly the elder man was in the grip of a severe aberration, but Peter, who really loved his father, thought it advisable not to provoke him by refusing to obey. He did not like the idea of going down into that chasm, for the seeping smell was distressingly repulsive. But the stench below was a thousand times more bearable than the sight of the dark door through which it had slithered.

This evidently was the door to the outer passageway that the manuscript had mentioned. All at once Peter knew what was meant by the allusion to the 'seventh tongue in the seventh head', and wished that the meaning had remained for ever obscured from his brain. For the door was set with a silver symbol, framed in the familiar ideography of Egyptological lore. This central symbol consisted of the heads of seven principal Egyptian gods – Osiris, Isis, Ra, Bast, Thoth, Set, and Anubis. But the horror lay in the fact that all seven heads protruded from a common body, and it was not the body of any god heretofore known in myth. It was not anthropomorphic, that figure; it held nothing that aped the human form. And Peter could recall no parallel in all the Egyptian cosmology or pantheon which could be remotely construed to resemble this utterly alien horror.

The quixotic abhorrency it induced cannot be ascribed to anything which may be put into words. The sight of it seemed to send little tentacles of terror through Peter's eyes; tiny tentacles that took root in his brain, to drain it dry of all feeling save fear. Part of this may have been due to the fact that the body appeared to be constantly changing; *melting*, that is, from one indescribable shape to another. When viewed from a certain angle the form was that of a Medusa-like mass of serpents; a second gaze revealed that the thing was a glistening array of vampiric flowers, with gelid, protoplasmic petals that seemed to weave in blob-like thirst for blood. A third scrutiny made it appear that the formless mass was nothing but a chaotic jumble of silver skulls. At another time it seemed to hold a certain hidden pattern

of the cosmos – stars and planets so compressed as to hint at the enormity of all space beyond.

What devilish craft could produce such a baffling nightmare composite Peter could not say, and he did not like to imagine that the thing was the pattern of any human artist. He fancied that there was some sinister implication of allegorical significance about the door, that the heads, set on the background of that baffling body, were somehow symbolic of a secret horror which rules behind all human gods. But the more he looked, the more his mind became absorbed in the intricate silvery maze of design. It was compelling, hypnotic; glimpsing it was like pondering upon the meaning of Life – pondering in that awful way that drives philosophers mad.

From this beguilement, Peter was roughly awakened by his father's voice. He had been very curt and abrupt all morning, but now his words were fraught with an unmistakable eagerness.

'It's the place all right – the door of the parchment! Now I know what Prinn must have meant in his chapter on the Saracenic rituals; the part where he spoke of the "symbols on the gate". We must photograph this after we finish. I hope we can move it later, if the natives don't object.'

There was a hidden relish in his words which Peter disliked, and almost feared. He became suddenly aware of how little he really knew about his father and his secret studies of recent years; recalled reluctantly certain guarded tomes he had glimpsed in the library at Cairo. And last night, his father had been out there with the bats, like some mad old priest. Did he really believe such nonsense? *Or did he know it was the truth?*

'Now!' The old man's voice was triumphant. 'I have the knife. Stand back.'

With fearful, fascinated eyes, Peter saw his father insert the tip of the knife under the seventh head – that of Anubis. Steel grated on silver; then the latter gave. As the dog-like head slowly turned as though actuated by a hidden pivot,

the door swung open with a brazen clangor that echoed and re-echoed through the musty depths beyond.

And musty those depths proved to be. A noxious acrid scent burst forth from its long imprisonment, a charnel fetor. It was not the *natron* or spice-laden miasma common to most tombs; rather it held the concentrated essence of death itself – mildewed bones, putrefied flesh, and crumbled dust.

Once the first strength of the gaseous vapor had abated, Sir Ronald immediately stepped inside. He was followed, though much less quickly, by his son. The thirty-and-three sloping steps along the corridor were traversed, as the manuscript had foretold. Then, lantern in hand, the old man was confronted by the enigmatic eidolon of Anubis.

After that first dismaying scrutiny, during which Peter had uneasily recalled these memories of preceding incidents, Sir Ronald interrupted his son's reverie and spoke. He whispered there, before the giant statue of the god that seemed to frown down upon the puniness of men with baleful, conscious eyes. Some trick of the lantern-light seemed to change the contours of that stone countenance; its chiseled grin was transformed into a gloating leer of mirthless menace. Yet the grim apprehension this aroused in Peter was soon overpowered by more acute fright when he heard his father's words.

'Listen, boy. I did not tell you all that the parchment revealed to me that night. You remember, there was a part I read only to myself. Well, I had reasons for not letting you know the rest then; you would not have understood, and probably would have refused to come here with me. I needed you too much to risk that.

'You don't know what this moment means to me, son. For years I've worked and studied in secret over things which others scoff at as superstitious fancies. I believed, however, and I have learned. There are always lurking truths behind every forgotten religion; distorted facts which can be rationalized into new concepts of reality. I've been on the trail of something like this for a long time – I knew that if I

could discover a tomb like this it must surely contain proofs which would convince the world. There are probably mummies within; the bodies of this cult's secret leaders. That's not what I'm after, though. It's the knowledge that's buried with them; the papyrus manuscripts that hold forbidden secrets – wisdom the world has never known! Wisdom – and power!

Sir Ronald's voice was shrill with unnatural excitement.

'Power! I have read about the inner circles of the Black Temple, and the cult that has ruled by those designated as Masters in this parchment. They were not ordinary priests of magic; they had traffickings with entities from outside human spheres. Their curses were feared, and their wishes respected. Why? Because of what they knew. I tell you, in this tomb we may find secrets that can give us mastery over half the world! Death-rays, and insidious poisons, old books and potent spells whose efficacy may bring a renaissance of primal gods again. Think of it! One could control governments, rule kingdoms, destroy enemies with that knowledge! And there will be jewels, wealth and riches undreamt of, the treasure of a thousand thrones!'

He is quite mad, Peter thought. For a moment he entertained a frantic impulse to turn and run back through the corridor; he wanted to see the sanity of a sun overhead, and feel a breath of air on his brow that was not dust-polluted by dead centuries. But the old man grasped him by the shoulders as he mumbled on, and Peter was forced to remain.

'You don't understand, I see. Perhaps it's for the best; but no matter, I know what I'm about. You will, too, after I do what is necessary. I must tell you now what the parchment said; that portion of it which I did not read aloud.'

Some inner instinct screamed silent warnings in Peter's brain. He must get away – he must! But his father's grip was firm, though his voice trembled.

'The part I refer to is that which tells one how to get past this statue and into the tomb itself. No, nothing can be discovered by looking at the thing; there's no secret passage behind it; no levers concealed in the body of the god. The

Master and his acolytes were cleverer than that. Mechanical means are of no avail – there's only one way to enter into the tomb beyond, and that is *through the body of the god itself!*

Peter gazed again into the mask-like countenance of Anubis. The jackal-face was contorted in cunning comprehension – or was it only a trick of the light? His father hurried on.

'That sounds queer, but it's the truth. You remember what the parchment said about this statue being the first one – different from the rest? How it emphasized the fact that Anubis is the *Opener of the Way*, and hinted at its *secret soul*? Well, the next lines explained that. It seems that the figure can turn upon a pivot and open a space behind it into the tomb, *but only when the idol is animated by a human consciousness.*'

They were all mad, Peter knew. He, his father, the old priests, and the statue itself; all insane entities in a world of chaos.

'That means only one thing. I must hypnotize myself by gazing at the god; hypnotize myself until my soul enters its body and opens the way beyond.'

Peter's blood was frozen ice in his veins.

'It's not so bizarre a conception at that. The *yogis* believe that in their trances they incarnate themselves with the god-head; the self-hypnotic state is a religious manifestation among all races. And mesmerism is a scientific truth; a truth known and practiced thousands of years before psychology was postulated as an organized study. These priests evidently knew the principle. So that is what I must do – hypnotize myself so that my soul or consciousness enters the image. Then I shall be able to open the tomb behind.'

'But the curse!' Peter muttered, finding his voice at last. 'You know what it says about a curse on unbelievers – something about Lord Anubis being a guardian as well as an Opener of the Way. What about that?'

'Sheer humbug!' Sir Ronald's tone was fanatically firm. 'That was merely inserted to frighten off tomb-looters. At

any rate, I must risk it. All you need to do is wait. Once I pass into a trance, the statue will move, and the passage beyond will be disclosed. Enter it, immediately. Then give my body a good shake to break the coma, and I'll be all right again.'

There was in his father's words an authority which could not be denied. So Peter held the lantern aloft and allowed its beams to play over the face of Anubis. He stood in silence while his father focused his gaze upon the jackal eyes – those stony, staring eyes that had so disturbed them with hints of a secret life.

It was a terrible tableau; the two men, the twelve-foot god, confronting each other in a black vault beneath the earth.

Sir Ronald's lips moved in fragments of ancient Egyptian prayers. His eyes were fixed upon a nimbus of light that had settled about the canine forehead. Gradually his stare became glassy, nictitation ceased, and the pupils glowed with a peculiar nyctalopic fire. The man's body sagged visibly, as if it were being vampirically drained of all life.

Then, to Peter's horror, a pallor overspread his father's face, and he sank down silently upon the stone floor. But his eyes never left those of the idol. Peter's left arm, which held the lantern aloft, was seized with a spasmodic convulsion of utter fright. Minutes sped away in silence. Time has no meaning in a place of death.

Peter could not think. He had seen his father practice self-hypnosis before, with mirrors and lights; he knew it was perfectly harmless in the hands of a skilled adept. But this was different. Could he enter the body of an Egyptian god? And if he did – what of the curse? These two questions reverberated like tiny voices somewhere in his being, but they were engulfed by overpowering fear.

This fear rose to a mad crescendo as Peter saw the change occur. All at once his father's eyes flickered like dying fires, and consciousness went out. But the eyes of the god – *the eyes of Anubis were no longer stone!*

The cyclopean statue was alive!

His father had been right. He had done it – hypnotized his consciousness into the body of the idol. Peter gasped, as a sudden thought slithered into his brain. If his father's theory had been correct so far, then what about the rest? He had said that once inside the figure, his soul would direct it to open the way. But nothing was happening. *What was wrong?*

In panic, Peter bent down and examined the body of his father. It was limp, old, and lifeless. Sir Ronald was dead!

Unbidden, Peter remembered the parchment's cryptic warnings:

'Those who do not believe shall die. Pass Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is strange indeed, and holds a secret soul.'

A secret soul! Peter, terror throbbing in his temples, raised the lantern aloft and looked once more into the god's face. Again he saw that the stony, snarling mask of Anubis held living eyes!

They glittered bestially, knowingly, evilly. And Peter, seeing them, went berserk. He did not – could not – think; all he knew was that his father was dead, and this statue had somehow killed him and come alive.

So Peter Barton suddenly rushed forward, screaming hoarsely, and began to beat upon the stone idol with futile fists. His bleeding, lacerated knuckles clawed at the cold legs, but Anubis did not stir. Yet his eyes still held their awful life.

The man cursed in sheer delirium, babbling in a tortured voice as he started to climb up to that mocking face. He must know what lay behind that gaze, see the thing and destroy its unnatural life. As he climbed, he sobbed his father's name in agony.

How long it took him to reach the top he never knew; the last minutes were merely a red blur of nightmare frenzy. When he recovered his senses he was clinging precariously to the statue's neck, his feet braced on the belly of the image. And he was still staring into those dreadful living eyes.

But even as he gazed, the whole face was twisting into a sudden ghastly life; the lips drew back into a cavern of crackling mirth, and the fangs of Anubis were bared in terrible, avid lust.

The arms of the god crushed him in a stone embrace; the claw-like fingers tightened about his quivering, constricted throat; the gaping muzzle ravened as stone teeth sank jackal-like into his neck. Thus he met his doom – but it was a welcome doom after that final moment of revelation.

The natives found Peter's bloodless body lying crushed and crumpled at the idol's feet; lying before the statue of Anubis like a sacrifice of olden days. His father was beside him, and he too was dead.

They did not linger there in the forbidden, forgotten fastness of that ancient crypt, nor attempt to enter into the tomb behind. Instead, they reclosed the doors and returned home. There they said that the old and young *effendi* had killed themselves; and that is not surprising. There were really no other indications for them to go by. The statue of Anubis stood once more serene in the shadows; still grimly guarding the secret vaults beyond, and there was no longer any hint of life in its eyes.

And so there is none who knows what Peter Barton knew just before he died; none to know that as Peter went down into death he stared upward and beheld the revelation which made that death a welcome deliverance.

For Peter learned what animated the body of the god; knew what lived within it in a dreadful, distorted way; knew what was being forced to kill him. Because as he died he gazed at last into the living stone face of Anubis – the living stone face that held *his father's tortured eyes*.

THE CLOAK

The sun was dying, and its blood spattered the sky as it crept into a sepulcher behind the hills. The keening wind sent the dry, fallen leaves scurrying toward the west, as though hastening them to the funeral of the sun.

'Nuts!' said Henderson to himself, and stopped thinking.

The sun was setting in a dingy red sky, and a dirty raw wind was kicking up the half-rotten leaves in a filthy gutter. Why should he waste time with cheap imagery?

'Nuts!' said Henderson again.

It was probably a mood evoked by the day, he mused. After all, this was the sunset of Halloween. Tonight was the dreaded Allhallows Eve, when spirits walked and skulls cried out from their graves beneath the earth.

Either that, or tonight was just another rotten cold fall day. Henderson sighed. There was a time, he reflected, when the coming of this night meant something. A dark Europe, groaning in superstitious fear, dedicated this Eve to the grinning Unknown. A million doors had once been barred against the evil visitants, a million prayers mumbled, a million candles lit. There was something majestic about the idea, Henderson reflected. Life had been an adventure in those times, and men walked in terror of what the next turn of a midnight road might bring. They had lived in a world of demons and ghouls and elementals who sought their souls – and by Heaven, in those days a man's soul meant something. This new skepticism had taken a profound meaning away from life. Men no longer revered their souls.

'Nuts!' said Henderson again, quite automatically. There was something crude and twentieth-century about the coarse expression which always checked his introspective flights of fancy.

The voice in his brain that said 'nuts' took the place of

humanity to Henderson – common humanity which would echo the same sentiment upon hearing his secret thoughts. So now Henderson uttered the word and endeavored to forget problems and purple patches alike.

He was walking down this street at sunset to buy a costume for the masquerade party tonight, and he had much better concentrate on finding the costumer's before it closed than waste his time daydreaming about Halloween.

His eyes searched the darkening shadows of the dingy buildings lining the narrow thoroughfare. Once again he peered at the address he had scribbled down after finding it in the phone book.

Why the devil didn't they light up the shops when it got dark? He couldn't make out numbers. This was a poor, run-down neighborhood, but after all—

Abruptly, Henderson spied the place across the street and started over. He passed the window and glanced in. The last rays of the sun slanted over the top of the building across the way and fell directly on the window and its display. Henderson drew a sharp intake of breath.

He was staring at a costumer's window – not looking through a fissure into hell. Then why was it all red fire, lighting the grinning visages of fiends?

'Sunset,' Henderson muttered aloud. Of course it was, and the faces were merely clever masks such as would be displayed in this sort of place. Still, it gave the imaginative man a start. He opened the door and entered.

The place was dark and still. There was a smell of loneliness in the air – the smell that haunts all places long undisturbed; tombs, and graves in deep woods, and caverns in the earth, and—

'Nuts.'

What the devil was wrong with him, anyway? Henderson smiled apologetically at the empty darkness. This was the smell of the costumer's shop, and it carried him back to college days of amateur theatricals. Henderson had known this smell of moth balls, decayed furs, grease paint and oils. He had played amateur Hamlet and in his hands he had held

a smirking skull that hid all knowledge in its empty eyes – a skull, from the costumer's.

Well, here he was again, and the skull gave him the idea. After all, Halloween night it was. Certainly in this mood of his he didn't want to go as a rajah, or a Turk, or a pirate – they all did that. Why not go as a fiend, or a warlock, or a werewolf? He could see Lindstrom's face when he walked into the elegant penthouse wearing rags of some sort. The fellow would have a fit, with his society crowd wearing their expensive Elsa Maxwell take-offs. Henderson didn't greatly care for Lindstrom's sophisticated friends anyway; a gang of amateur Noel Cowards and horsy women wearing harnesses of jewels. Why not carry out the spirit of Halloween and go as a monster?

Henderson stood there in the dusk, waiting for someone to turn on the lights, come out from the back room and serve him. After a minute or so he grew impatient and rapped sharply on the counter.

'Say in there! Service!'

Silence. And a shuffling noise from the rear, then – an unpleasant noise to hear in the gloom. There was a banging from downstairs and then the heavy clump of footsteps. Suddenly Henderson gasped. A black bulk was rising from the floor!

It was, of course, only the opening of the trapdoor from the basement. A man shuffled behind the counter, carrying a lamp. In that light his eyes blinked drowsily.

The man's yellowish face crinkled into a smile.

'I was sleeping, I'm afraid,' said the man, softly. 'Can I serve you, sir?'

'I was looking for a Halloween costume.'

'Oh, yes. And what was it you had in mind?'

The voice was weary, infinitely weary. The eyes continued to blink in the flabby yellow face.

'Nothing usual, I'm afraid. You see, I rather fancied some sort of monster getup for a party – don't suppose you carry anything in that line?'

'I could show you masks.'

'No I meant werewolf outfits, something of the sort. More of the authentic.'

'So. The *authentic*.'

'Yes.' Why did this old dunce stress the word?

'I might – yes. I might have just the thing for you, sir.' The eyes blinked, but the thin mouth pursed in a smile. 'Just the thing for Halloween.'

'What's that?'

'Have you ever considered the possibility of being a vampire?'

'Like Dracula?'

'Ah – yes, I suppose – Dracula.'

'Not a bad idea. Do you think I'm the type for that, though?'

The man appraised him with that tight smile. 'Vampires are of all types, I understand. You would do nicely.'

'Hardly a compliment,' Henderson chuckled. 'But why not? What's the outfit?'

'Outfit? Merely evening clothes, or what you wear. I will furnish you with the authentic cloak.'

'Just a cloak – is that all?'

'Just a cloak. But it is worn like a shroud. It *is* shroud-cloth, you know. Wait, I'll get it for you.'

The shuffling feet carried the man into the rear of the shop again. Down the trapdoor entrance he went, and Henderson waited. There was more banging, and presently the old man reappeared carrying the cloak. He was shaking dust from it in the darkness.

'Here it is – the genuine cloak.'

'Genuine?'

'Allow me to adjust it for you – it will work wonders, I'm sure.'

The cold, heavy cloth hung draped about Henderson's shoulders. The faint odor rose mustily in his nostrils as he stepped back and surveyed himself in the mirror. The lamp was poor, but Henderson saw that the cloak effected a striking transformation in his appearance. His long face seemed thinner, his eyes were accentuated in the facial pallor height-

ened by the somber cloak he wore. It was a big, black shroud.

'Genuine,' murmured the old man. He must have come up suddenly, for Henderson hadn't noticed him in the glass.

'I'll take it,' Henderson said, 'How much?'

'You'll find it quite entertaining, I'm sure.'

'How much?'

'Oh. Shall we say five dollars?'

'Here.'

The old man took the money, blinking, and drew the cloak from Henderson's shoulders. When it slid away he felt suddenly warm again. It must be cold in the basement – the cloth was icy.

The old man wrapped the garment, smiling, and handed it over.

'I'll have it back tomorrow,' Henderson promised.

'No need. You purchased it. It is yours.'

'But—'

'I am leaving business shortly. Keep it. You will find more use for it than I, surely.'

'But—'

'A pleasant evening to you.'

Henderson made his way to the door in confusion, then turned to salute the blinking old man in the dimness.

Two eyes were burning at him from across the counter – two eyes that did not blink.

'Good night,' said Henderson, and closed the door quickly. He wondered if he were going just a trifle mad.

At eight, Henderson nearly called up Lindstrom to tell him he couldn't make it. The cold chills came the minute he put on the damned cloak, and when he looked at himself in the mirror his blurred eyes could scarcely make out the reflection.

But after a few drinks he felt better about it. He hadn't eaten and the liquor warmed his blood. He paced the floor, attitudinizing with the cloak – sweeping it about him and scowling in what he thought was a ferocious manner. Damn it, he was going to be a vampire all right! He called a cab, went down to the lobby. The driver came in, and Henderson was waiting, black cloak furled.

'I wish you to drive me,' he said in a low voice.

The cabman took one look at him in the cloak and turned pale.

'Whazzat?'

'I ordered you to come,' said Henderson gutturally, while he quaked with inner mirth. He leered ferociously and swept the cloak back.

'Yeah, yeah. O.K.'

The driver almost ran outside. Henderson stalked after him.

'Where to, boss - I mean, sir?'

The frightened face didn't turn as Henderson intoned the address and sat back.

The cab started with a lurch that set Henderson to chuckling deeply, in character. At the sound of the laughter the driver got panicky and raced his engine up to the limit set by the governor. Henderson laughed loudly, and the impressionable driver fairly quivered in his seat. It was quite a ride, but Henderson was entirely unprepared to open the door and find it slammed after him as the cabman drove hastily away without collecting a fare.

'I must look the part,' he thought complacently, as he took the elevator up to the penthouse apartment.

There were three or four others in the elevator; Henderson had seen them before at other affairs Lindstrom had invited him to attend, but nobody seemed to recognize him. It rather pleased him to think how his wearing of an unfamiliar cloak and an unfamiliar scowl seemed to change his entire personality and appearance. Here the other guests had donned elaborate disguises - one woman wore the costume of a Watteau shepherdess, another was attired as a Spanish ballerina, a tall man dressed as Pagliacci, and his companion had donned a toreador outfit. Yet Henderson recognized them all; knew that their expensive habiliments were not truly disguises at all, but merely elaborations calculated to enhance their appearance. Most people at costume parties gave vent to their suppressed desires. The women showed off their figures, the men either accentuated their masculinity

as the toreador did, or clowned it. Such things were pitiful; these conventional fools eagerly doffing their dismal business suits and rushing off to a lodge, or amateur theatrical, or mask ball in order to satisfy their starving imaginations. Why didn't they dress in garish colors on the street? Henderson often pondered the question.

Surely, these society folk in the elevator were fine-looking men and women in their outfits – so healthy, so red-faced and full of vitality. They had such robust throats and necks. Henderson looked at the plump arms of the woman next to him. He stared, without realizing it, for a long moment. And then, he saw that the occupants of the car had drawn away from him. They were standing in the corner, as though they feared his cloak and scowl, and his eyes fixed on the woman. Their chatter had ceased abruptly. The woman looked at him, as though she were about to speak, when the elevator doors opened and afforded Henderson a welcome respite.

What the devil was wrong? First the cab driver, then the woman. Had he drunk too much?

Well, no chance to consider that. Here was Marcus Lindstrom, and he was thrusting a glass into Henderson's hand.

'What have we here? Ah, a boggy-man!' It needed no second glance to perceive that Lindstrom, as usual at such affairs, was already quite bottle-dizzy. The fat host was positively swimming in alcohol.

'Have a drink, Henderson, my lad! I'll take mine from the bottle. That outfit of yours gave me a shock. Where'd you get the make-up?'

'Make-up? I'm not wearing any make-up.'

'Oh. So you're not. How . . . silly of me.'

Henderson wondered if he were crazy. Had Lindstrom really drawn back? Were his eyes actually filled with a certain dismay? Oh, the man was obviously intoxicated.

'I'll . . . I'll see you later,' blabbed Lindstrom, edging away and quickly turning to the other arrivals. Henderson watched the back of Lindstrom's neck. It was fat and white. It bulged over the collar of his costume and there was a vein in it. A vein in Lindstrom's fat neck. Frightened Lindstrom.

Henderson stood alone in the anteroom. From the parlor beyond came the sound of music and laughter; party noises. Henderson hesitated before entering. He drank from the glass in his hand – Bacardi rum, and powerful. On top of his other drinks it almost made the man reel. But he drank, wondering. What was wrong with him and his costume? Why did he frighten people? Was he unconsciously acting his vampire role? That crack of Lindstrom's about make-up now—

Acting on impulse, Henderson stepped over to the long panel mirror in the hall. He lurched a little, then stood in the harsh light before it. He faced the glass, stared into the mirror, and saw nothing.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and there was no one there!

Henderson began to laugh softly, evilly, deep in his throat. And as he gazed into the empty, unreflecting glass, his laughter rose in black glee.

'I'm drunk,' he whispered. *'I must be drunk. Mirror in my apartment made me blurred. Now I'm so far gone I can't see straight. Sure I'm drunk. Been acting ridiculously, scaring people. Now I'm seeing hallucinations – or not seeing them, rather. Visions. Angels.'*

His voice lowered. *'Sure, angels. Standing right in back of me, now. Hello, angel.'*

'Hello.'

Henderson whirled. There she stood, in the dark cloak, her hair a shimmering halo above her white, proud face; her eyes celestial blue, and her lips infernal red.

'Are you real?' asked Henderson, gently. *'Or am I a fool to believe in miracles?'*

'This miracle's name is Sheila Darrly, and it would like to powder its nose if you please.'

'Kindly use this mirror through the courtesy of Stephen Henderson,' replied the cloaked man, with a grin. He stepped back a ways, eyes intent.

The girl turned her head and favored him with a slow, impish smile. *'Haven't you ever seen powder used before?'* she asked.

'Didn't know angels indulged in cosmetics,' Henderson replied. 'But then there's a lot I don't know about angels. From now on I shall make them a special study of mine. There's so much I want to find out. So you'll probably find me following you around with a notebook all evening.'

'Notebooks for a vampire?'

'Oh, but I'm a very intelligent vampire – not one of those backwoods Transylvanian types. You'll find me charming. I'm sure.'

'Yes, you look like the sure type,' the girl mocked. 'But an angel and a vampire – that's a queer combination.'

'We can reform one another,' Henderson pointed out. 'Besides, I have a suspicion that there's a bit of the devil in you. That dark cloak over your angel costume; dark angel, you know. Instead of heaven you might hail from my home town.'

Henderson was flippant, but underneath his banter cynical thoughts whirled. He recalled discussions in the past; cynical observations he had made and believed.

Once, Henderson had declared that there was no such thing as love at first sight, save in books or plays where such a dramatic device served to speed up action. He asserted that people learned about romance from books and plays and accordingly adopted a belief in love at first sight when all one could possibly feel was desire.

And now this Sheila – this blond angel – had to come along and drive out all thoughts of morbidity, all thoughts of drunkenness and foolish gazings into mirrors, from his mind; had to send him madly plunging into dreams of red lips, ethereal blue eyes and slim white arms.

Something of his feelings had swept into his eyes, and as the girl gazed up at him she felt the truth.

'Well,' she breathed, 'I hope the inspection pleases.'

'A miracle of understatement, that. But there was something I wanted to find out particularly about divinity. Do angels dance?'

'Tactful vampire! The next room?'

Arm in arm they entered the parlor. The merry-makers

were in full swing. Liquor had already pitched gaiety at its height, but there was no dancing any longer. Boisterous little grouped couples laughed arm in arm about the room. The usual party gagsters were performing their antics in corners. The superficial atmosphere, which Henderson detested, was fully in evidence.

It was reaction which made Henderson draw himself up to full height and sweep the cloak about his shoulders. Reaction brought the scowl to his pale face, caused him to stalk along in brooding silence. Sheila seemed to regard this as a great joke.

'Pull a vampire act on them,' she giggled, clutching his arm. Henderson accordingly scowled at the couples, sneered horrendously at the women. And his progress was marked by the turning of heads, the abrupt cessation of chatter. He walked through the long room like Red Death incarnate. Whispers trailed in his wake.

'Who is that man?'

'We came up with him in the elevator, and he—'

'His eyes—'

'Vampire!'

'Hello, Dracula!' It was Marcus Lindstrom and a sullen-looking brunette in Cleopatra costume who lurched toward Henderson. Host Lindstrom could scarcely stand, and his companion in cups was equally at a loss. Henderson liked the man when sober at the club, but his behavior at parties had always irritated him. Lindstrom was particularly objectionable in his present condition — it made him boorish.

'M'dear, I want you t'meet a very dear friend of mine. Yessir, it being Halloween and all, I invited Count Dracula here, t'gether with his daughter. Asked his grandmother, but she's busy tonight at a Black Sabbath — along with Aunt Jemima. Ha! Count, meet my little playmate.'

The woman leered up at Henderson.

'Oooh Dracula, what big eyes you have! Oooh, what big teeth you have! Ooooh—'

'Really, Marcus,' Henderson protested. But the host had turned and shouted to the room.

'Folks, meet the real goods – only genuine living vampire in captivity! Dracula Henderson, only existing vampire with false teeth.'

In any other circumstance Henderson would have given Lindstrom a quick, efficient punch on the jaw. But Sheila was at his side, it was a public gathering; better to humor the man's clumsy jest. Why not be a vampire?

Smiling quickly at the girl, Henderson drew himself erect, faced the crowd, and frowned. His hands brushed the cloak. Funny, it still felt cold. Looking down he noticed for the first time that it was a little dirty at the edges; muddy or dusty. But the cold silk slid through his fingers as he drew it across his breast with one long hand. The feeling seemed to inspire him. He opened his eyes wide and let them blaze. His mouth opened. A sense of dramatic power filled him. And he looked at Marcus Lindstrom's soft, fat neck with the vein standing in the whiteness. He looked at the neck, saw the crowd watching him, and then the impulse seized him. He turned, eyes on that creasy neck—that wabbling, creasy neck of the fat man.

Hands darted out. Lindstrom squeaked like a frightened rat. He was a plump, sleek white rat, bursting with blood. Vampires liked blood. Blood from the rat, from the neck of the rat, from the vein in the neck of the squeaking rat.

'Warm blood.'

The deep voice was Henderson's own.

The hands were Henderson's own.

The hands that went around Lindstrom's neck as he spoke, the hands that felt the warmth, that searched out the vein. Henderson's face was bending for the neck, and, as Lindstrom struggled, his grip tightened. Lindstrom's face was turning, turning purple. Blood was rushing to his head. That was good. Blood!

Henderson's mouth opened. He felt the air on his teeth. He bent down toward that fat neck, and then—

'Stop! That's plenty!'

The voice, the cooling voice of Sheila. Her fingers on his arm. Henderson looked up, startled. He released Lindstrom, who sagged with open mouth.

The crowd was staring, and their mouths were all shaped in the instinctive O of amazement.

Sheila whispered, 'Bravo! Served him right – but you frightened him!'

Henderson struggled a moment to collect himself. Then he smiled and turned.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'I have just given a slight demonstration to prove to you what our host said of me was entirely correct. I *am* a vampire. Now that you have been given fair warning, I am sure you will be in no further danger. If there is a doctor in the house I can, perhaps, arrange for a blood transfusion.'

The O's relaxed and laughter came from startled throats. Hysterical laughter, in part, then genuine. Henderson had carried it off. Marcus Lindstrom alone still stared with eyes that held utter fear. *He* knew.

And then the moment broke, for one of the gagsters ran into the room from the elevator. He had gone downstairs and borrowed the apron and cap of a newsboy. Now he raced through the crowd with a bundle of papers under his arm.

'Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Big Halloween Horror! Extra!'

Laughing guests purchased papers. A woman approached Sheila, and Henderson watched the girl walk away in a daze.

'See you later,' she called, and her glance sent fire through his veins. Still, he could not forget the terrible feeling that came over him when he had seized Lindstrom. Why?

Automatically, he accepted a paper from the shouting pseudo-newsboy. 'Big Halloween Horror,' he had shouted. What was that?

Blurred eyes searched the paper.

Then Henderson reeled back. That headline! It was an *Extra* after all. Henderson scanned the columns with mounting dread.

'Fire in costumer's . . . shortly after 8 p.m. firemen were summoned to the shop of . . . flames beyond control . . . completely demolished . . . damage estimated at . . . pecu-

liarly enough, name of proprietor unknown . . . skeleton found in—'

'No!' gasped Henderson aloud.

He read, re-read *that* closely. The skeleton had been found in a box of earth in the cellar beneath the shop. The box was a coffin. There had been two other boxes, empty. The skeleton had been wrapped in a cloak, undamaged by the flames—

And in the hastily penned box at the bottom of the column were eyewitness comments, written up under scareheads of heavy black type. Neighbors had feared the place. Hungarian neighborhood, hints of vampirism, of strangers who entered the shop. One man spoke of a cult believed to have held meetings in the place. Superstition about things sold there – love philters, outlandish charms and weird disguises.

Weird disguises – vampires – cloaks – *his eyes!*

'This is an authentic cloak.'

'I will not be using this much longer. Keep it.'

Memories of these words screamed through Henderson's brain. He plunged out of the room and rushed to the panel mirror.

A moment, then he flung one arm before his face to shield his eyes from the image that was not there – the missing reflection. *Vampires have no reflections.*

No wonder he looked strange. No wonder arms and necks invited him. He had wanted Lindstrom. Good God!

The cloak had done that, the dark cloak with the stains. The stains of earth, grave-earth. The wearing of the cloak, the cold cloak, had given him the feelings of a true vampire. It was a garment accursed, a thing that had lain on the body of one undead. The rusty stain along one sleeve was blood.

Blood. It would be nice to see blood. To taste its warmth, its red life, flowing.

No. That was insane. He was drunk, crazy.

'Ah. My pale friend, the vampire.'

It was Sheila again. And above all horror rose the beating of Henderson's heart. As he looked at her shining eyes, her warm mouth shaped in red invitation, Henderson felt a wave

of warmth. He looked at her white throat rising above her dark, shimmering cloak, and another kind of warmth rose. Love, desire, and a — hunger.

She must have seen it in his eyes, but she did not flinch. Instead, her own gaze burned in return.

Sheila loved him, too!

With an impulsive gesture, Henderson ripped the cloak from about his throat. The icy weight lifted. He was free. Somehow, he hadn't wanted to take the cloak off, but he had to. It was a cursed thing, and in another minute he might have taken the girl in his arms, taken her for a kiss and remained to—

But he dared not think of that.

'Tired of masquerading?' she asked. With a similar gesture she, too, removed her cloak and stood revealed in the glory of her angel robe. Her blond, statuesque perfection forced a gasp to Henderson's throat.

'Angel,' he whispered.

'Devil,' she mocked.

And suddenly they were embracing. Henderson had taken her cloak in his arm with his own. They stood with lips seeking rapture until Lindstrom and a group moved noisily into the anteroom.

At the sight of Henderson the fat host recoiled.

'You—' he whispered. 'You are—'

'Just leaving,' Henderson smiled. Grasping the girl's arm, he drew her toward the empty elevator. The door shut on Lindstrom's pale, fear-filled face.

'Were we leaving?' Sheila whispered, snuggling against his shoulder.

'We were. But not for earth. We do not go down into my realm, but up — into yours.'

'The roof garden?'

'Exactly, my angelic one. I want to talk to you against the background of your own heavens, kiss you amidst the clouds, and—'

Her lips found his as the car rose.

'Angel and devil. What a match!'

'I thought so, too,' the girl confessed. 'Will our children have halos or horns?'

'Both, I'm sure.'

They stepped out onto the deserted rooftop. And once again it was Halloween.

Henderson felt it. Downstairs it was Lindstrom and his society friends, in a drunken costume party. Here it was night, silence, gloom. No light, no music, no drinking, no chatter which made one party identical with another; one night like all the rest. This night was individual here.

The sky was not blue, but black. Clouds hung like the gray beards of hovering giants peering at the round orange globe of the moon. A cold wind blew from the sea, and filled the air with tiny murmurings from afar.

This was the sky that witches flew through to their Sabbath. This was the moon of wizardry, the sable silence of black prayers and whispered invocations. The clouds hid monstrous Presences shambling in summons from afar. It was Halloween.

It was also quite cold.

'Give me my cloak,' Sheila whispered. Automatically, Henderson extended the garment, and the girl's body swirled under the dark splendor of the cloth. Her eyes burned up at Henderson with a call he could not resist. He kissed her, trembling.

'You're cold,' the girl said. 'Put on your cloak.'

Yes, Henderson, he thought to himself. Put on your cloak while you stare at her throat. Then, the next time you kiss her you will want her throat and she will give it in love and you will take it in – hunger.

'Put it on, darling – I insist,' the girl whispered. Her eyes were impatient, burning with an eagerness to match his own.

Henderson trembled.

Put on the cloak of darkness? The cloak of the grave, the cloak of death, the cloak of the vampire? The evil cloak, filled with a cold life of its own that transformed his face, transformed his mind, made his soul instinct with awful hunger?

'Here.'

The girl's slim arms were about him, pushing the cloak onto his shoulders. Her fingers brushed his neck, caressingly, as she linked the cloak about his throat.

Henderson shivered.

Then he felt it – through him – that icy coldness turning to a more dreadful heat. He felt himself expand, felt the sneer cross his face. This was Power!

And the girl before him, her eyes taunting, inviting. He saw her ivory neck, her warm slim neck, waiting. It was waiting for him, for his lips.

For his teeth.

No – it couldn't be. He loved her. His love must conquer this madness. Yes, wear the cloak, defy its power, and take her in his arms as a man, not as a fiend. He must. It was the test.

'Sheila.' Funny, how his voice deepened.

'Yes, dear.'

'Sheila, I must tell you this.'

Her eyes – so alluring. It would be easy!

'Sheila, please. You read the paper tonight.'

'Yes.'

'I . . . I got my cloak there. I can't explain it. You saw how I took Lindstrom. I wanted to go through with it. Do you understand me? I meant to . . . to bite him. Wearing this damnable thing makes me feel like one of those creatures.'

Why didn't her stare change? Why didn't she recoil in horror? Such trusting innocence! Didn't she understand? Why didn't she run? Any moment now he might lose control, seize her.

'I love you, Sheila. Believe that. I love you.'

'I know.' Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

'I want to test it. I want to kiss you, wearing this cloak. I want to feel that my love is stronger than this – thing. If I weaken, promise me you'll break away and run quickly. But don't misunderstand. I must face this feeling and fight it; I want my love for you to be that pure, that secure. Are you afraid?'

'No.' Still she stared at him, just as he stared at her throat. If she knew what was in his mind!

'You don't think I'm crazy? I went to this costumer's – he was a horrible little old man – and he gave me the cloak. Actually told me it was a real vampire's. I thought he was joking, but tonight I didn't see myself in the mirror, and I wanted Lindstrom's neck, and I want you. But I must test it.'

'You're not crazy. I know. I'm not afraid.'

'Then—'

The girl's face mocked. Henderson summoned his strength. He bent forward, his impulses battling. For a moment he stood there under the ghastly orange moon, and his face was twisted in struggle.

And the girl lured.

Her odd, incredibly red lips parted in a silvery, chuckly laugh as her white arms rose from the black cloak she wore to circle his neck gently. 'I know – I knew when I looked in the mirror. I knew you had a cloak like mine – got yours where I got mine—'

Queerly, her lips seemed to elude his as he stood frozen for an instant of shock. Then he felt the icy hardness of her sharp little teeth on his throat, a strangely soothing sting, and an engulfing blackness rising over him.

BEETLES

When Hartley returned from Egypt, his friends said he had changed. The specific nature of that change was difficult to detect, for none of his acquaintances got more than a casual glimpse of him. He dropped around to the club just once, and then retired to the seclusion of his apartments. His manner was so definitely hostile, so markedly anti-social, that very few of his cronies cared to visit him, and the occasional callers were not received.

It caused considerable talk at the time – gossip rather. Those who remembered Arthur Hartley in the days before his expedition abroad were naturally quite cut up over the drastic metamorphosis in his manner. Hartley had been known as a keen scholar, a singularly erudite field-worker in his chosen profession of archeology; but at the same time he had been a peculiarly charming person. He had the worldly flair usually associated with the fictional characters of E. Phillips Oppenheim, and a positively devilish sense of humor which mocked and belittled it. He was the kind of fellow who could order the precise wine at the proper moment, at the same time grinning as though he were as much surprised by it all as his guest of the evening. And most of his friends found this air of culture without ostentation quite engaging. He had carried this urbane sense of the ridiculous over into his work; and while it was known that he was very much interested in archeology, and a notable figure in the field, he inevitably referred to his studies as ‘pottering around with old fossils and the old fossils that discovered them.’

Consequently, his curious reversal following his trip came as a complete surprise.

All that was definitely known was that he had spent some eight months on a field trip to the Egyptian Sudan. Upon his return he had immediately severed all connections with

the institute he had been associated with. Just what had occurred during the expedition was a matter of excited conjecture among his former intimates. But something had definitely happened; it was unmistakable.

The night he spent at the club proved that. He had come in quietly, too quietly. Hartley was one of those persons who usually made an entrance, in the true sense of the word. His tall, graceful figure, attired in the immaculate evening dress so seldom found outside of the pages of melodramatic fiction; his truly leonine head with its Stokowski-like bristle of gray hair; these attributes commanded attention. He could have passed anywhere as a man of the world, or a stage magician awaiting his cue to step onto the platform.

But this evening he entered quietly, unobtrusively. He wore dinner clothes, but his shoulders sagged, and the spring was gone from his walk. His hair was grayer, and it hung pallidly over his tanned forehead. Despite the bronze of Egyptian sun on his features, there was a sickly tinge to his countenance. His eyes peered mistily from amidst unsightly folds. His face seemed to have lost its mold; the mouth hung loosely.

He greeted no one; and took a table alone. Of course cronies came up and chatted, but he did not invite them to join him. And oddly enough, none of them insisted, although normally they would gladly have forced their company upon him and jollied him out of a black mood, which experience had taught them was easily done in his case. Nevertheless, after a few words with Hartley, they all turned away.

They must have felt it even then. Some of them hazarded the opinion that Hartley was still suffering from some form of fever contracted in Egypt, but I do not think they believed this in their hearts. From their shocked descriptions of the man they seemed one and all to sense the peculiar *alien* quality about him. This was an Arthur Hartley they had never known, an aged stranger, with a querulous voice which rose in suspicion when he was questioned about his journey. Stranger he truly was, for he did not even appear to recognize some of the men who greeted him, and when he did it

was with an abstracted manner – a clumsy way of wording it, but what else is there to say when an old friend stares blankly into silence upon meeting, and his eyes seem to fasten on far-off terrors that affright him?

That was the strangeness they all grasped in Hartley. He was afraid. Fear bestrode those sagging shoulders. Fear breathed a pallor into that ashy face. Fear grinned into those empty, far-fixed eyes. Fear prompted the suspicion in the voice.

They told me, and that is why I went round to see Arthur Hartley in his rooms. Others had spoken of their efforts, in the week following his appearance at the club, to gain admittance to his apartment. They said he did not answer the bell, and complained that the phone had been disconnected. But that, I reasoned, was fear's work.

I wouldn't let Hartley down. I had been a rather good friend of his – and I may as well confess that I scented a mystery here. The combination proved irresistible. I went up to his flat one afternoon and rang.

No answer. I went into the dim hallway and listened for footsteps, some sign of life from within. No answer. Complete, utter silence. For a moment I thought crazily of suicide, then laughed the dread away. It was absurd – and still, there had been a certain dismaying unanimity in all the reports I had heard of Hartley's mental state. When the stolidest, most hard-headed of the club bores concurred in their estimate of the man's condition, I might well worry. Still, suicide . . .

I rang again, more as a gesture than in expectation of tangible results, and then I turned and descended the stairs. I felt, I recall, a little twinge of inexplicable relief upon leaving the place. The thought of suicide in that gloomy hallway had not been pleasant.

I reached the lower door and opened it, and a familiar figure scurried past me on the landing. I turned. It was Hartley.

For the first time since his return I got a look at the man, and in the hallway shadows he was ghastly. Whatever his

condition at the club, a week must have accentuated it tremendously. His head was lowered, and as I greeted him he looked up. His eyes gave me a terrific shock. There was a stranger dwelling in their depths – a haunted stranger. I swear he shook when I addressed him.

He was wearing a tattered topcoat, but it hung loosely over his gauntness. I noticed that he was carrying a large bundle done up in brown paper.

I said something, I don't remember what; at any rate, I was at some pains to conceal my confusion as I greeted him. I was rather insistently cordial, I believe, for I could see that he would just as soon have hurried up the stairs without even speaking to me. The astonishment I felt converted itself into heartiness. Rather reluctantly he invited me up.

We entered the flat, and I noticed that Hartley double-locked the door behind him. That, to me, characterized his metamorphosis. In the old days, Hartley had always kept open house, in the literal sense of the word. Studies might have kept him late at the institute, but a chance visitor found his door open wide. And now, he double-locked it.

I turned around and surveyed the apartment. Just what I expected to see I cannot say, but certainly my mind was prepared for some sign of radical alteration. There was none. The furniture had not been moved; the pictures hung in their original places; the vast bookcases still stood in the shadows.

Hartley excused himself, entered the bedroom, and presently emerged after discarding his topcoat. Before he sat down he walked over to the mantel and struck a match before a little bronze figurine of Horus. A second later the thick gray spirals of smoke arose in the approved style of exotic fiction, and I smelt the pungent tang of strong incense.

That was the first puzzler. I had unconsciously adopted the attitude of a detective looking for clues – or, perhaps, a psychiatrist ferreting out psychoneurotic tendencies. And the incense was definitely alien to the Arthur Hartley I knew.

'Clears away the smell,' he remarked.

I didn't ask 'What smell?' Nor did I begin to question him

as to his trip, his inexplicable conduct in not answering my correspondence after he left Khartoum, or his avoidance of my company in this week following his return. Instead, I let him talk.

He said nothing at first. His conversation rambled, and behind it all I sensed the abstraction I had been warned about. He spoke of having given up his work, and hinted that he might leave the city shortly and go up to his family home in the country. He had been ill. He was disappointed in Egyptology, and its limitations. He hated darkness. The locust plagues had increased in Kansas.

This rambling was – insane.

I knew it then, and I hugged the thought to me in the perverse delight which is born of dread. Hartley was mad. ‘Limitations’ of Egyptology. ‘I hate the dark.’ ‘The locusts of Kansas.’

But I sat silently when he lighted the great candles about the room; sat silently staring through the incense clouds to where the flaming tapers illuminated his twitching features. And then he broke.

‘You are my friend?’ he said. There was a question in his voice, a puzzled suspicion in his words that brought sudden pity to me. His derangement was terrible to witness. Still, I nodded gravely.

‘You are my friend,’ he continued. This time the words were a statement. The deep breath which followed betokened resolution on his part.

‘Do you know what was in that bundle I brought in?’ he asked suddenly.

‘No.’

‘I’ll tell you. Insecticide. That’s what it was. Insecticide!’ His eyes flamed in triumph which stabbed me.

‘I haven’t left this house for a week. I dare not spread the plague. They follow me, you know. But today I thought of the way – absurdly simple, too. I went out and bought insecticide. Pounds of it. And liquid spray. Special formula stuff, more deadly than arsenic. Just elementary science really – but its very prosaicness may defeat the Powers of Evil.’

I nodded like a fool, wondering whether I could arrange for him to be taken away that evening. Perhaps my friend, Doctor Sherman, might diagnose. . . .

'Now let them come! It's my last chance – the incense doesn't work, and even if I keep the lights burning they creep about the corners. Funny the woodwork holds up; it should be riddled.'

What was this?

'But I forgot,' said Hartley. 'You don't know about it. The plague, I mean. And the curse.' He leaned forward and his white hands made octopus-shadows on the wall.

'I used to laugh at it, you know,' he said. 'Archeology isn't exactly a pursuit for the superstitious. Too much groveling in ruins. And putting curses on old pottery and battered statues never seemed important to me. But Egyptology – that's different. It's human bodies, there, Mummified, but still human. And the Egyptians were a great race – they had scientific secrets we haven't yet fathomed, and of course we cannot even begin to approach their concepts in mysticism.'

Ah! There was the key! I listened, intently.

'I learned a lot, this last trip. We were after the excavation job in the new tombs up the river. I brushed up on the dynastic periods, and naturally the religious significance entered into it. Oh, I know all the myths – the Bubatis legend, the Isis resurrection theory, the true names of Ra, the allegory of Set—

'We found things there, in the tombs – wonderful things. The pottery, the furniture, the bas-reliefs we were able to remove. But the expeditionary reports will be out soon; you can read of it then. We found mummies, too. Cursed mummies.'

Now I saw it, or thought I did.

'And I was a fool. I did something I never should have dared to do – for ethical reasons, and for other, more important reasons. Reasons that may cost me my soul.'

I had to keep my grip on myself, remember that he was mad, remember that his convincing tones were prompted by

the delusions of insanity. Or else, in that dark room I might have easily believed that there was a power which had driven my friend to this haggard brink.

‘Yes, I did it, I tell you! I read the Curse of Scarabaeus – sacred beetle, you know – and I did it anyway. I couldn’t guess that it was true. I was a skeptic; everyone is skeptical enough until things happen. Those things are like the phenomenon of death; you read about it, realize that it occurs to others, and yet cannot quite conceive of it happening to yourself. And yet it does. The Curse of the Scarabaeus was like that.’

Thoughts of the Sacred Beetle of Egypt crossed my mind. And I remembered, also, the seven plagues. And I knew what he would say. . . .

‘We came back. On the ship I noticed them. They crawled out of the corners every night. When I turned the light on they went away, but they always returned when I tried to sleep. I burned incense to keep them off, and then I moved into a new cabin. But they followed me.

‘I did not dare tell anyone. Most of the chaps would have laughed, and the Egyptologists in the party wouldn’t have helped much. Besides, I couldn’t confess my crime. So I went on alone.’

His voice was a dry whisper.

‘It was pure hell. One night on the boat I saw the black things crawling in my food. After that I ate in the cabin, alone. I dared not see anyone now, for fear they might notice how the things followed me. They did follow me, you know – if I walked in shadow on the deck they crept along behind. Only the sun kept them back, or a pure flame. I nearly went mad trying to account logically for their presence; trying to imagine how they got on the boat. But all the time I knew in my heart what the truth was. They were sending – the Curse!

‘When I reached port I went up and resigned. When my guilt was discovered there would have been a scandal, anyway, so I resigned. I couldn’t hope to continue work with those things crawling all over, wherever I went. I was afraid

to look anyone up. Naturally, I tried. That one night at the club was ghastly, though – I could see them marching across the carpet and crawling up the sides of my chair, and it took all there was in me to keep from screaming and dashing out.

‘Since then I’ve stayed here, alone. Before I decide on any course for the future, I must fight the Curse and win. Nothing else will help.’

I started to interject a phrase, but he brushed it aside and continued desperately.

‘No, I couldn’t go away. They followed me across the ocean; they haunt me in the streets. I could be locked up and they would still come. They come every night and crawl up the sides of my bed and try to get at my face and I must sleep soon or I’ll go mad, they crawl over my face at night, they crawl—’

It was horrible to see the words ooze out between his set teeth, for he was fighting madly to control himself.

‘Perhaps the insecticide will kill them. It was the first thing I should have thought of, but of course panic confused me. Yes, I put my trust in the insecticide. Grotesque, isn’t it? Fighting an ancient curse with insect-powder?’

I spoke at last. ‘They’re beetles, aren’t they?’

He nodded. ‘Scarabaeus beetles. You know the curse. The mummies under the protection of the Scarab cannot be violated.’

I knew the curse. It was one of the oldest known to history. Like all legends, it has had a persistent life. Perhaps I could reason.

‘But why should it affect you?’ I asked. Yes, I would reason with Hartley. Egyptian fever had deranged him, and the colorful curse story had gripped his mind. If I spoke logically, I might get him to understand his hallucination. ‘Why should it affect you?’ I repeated.

He was silent for a moment before he spoke, and then his words seemed to be wrung out of him.

‘I stole a mummy,’ he said. ‘I stole the mummy of a temple virgin. I must have been crazy to do it; something happens to you under that sun. There was gold in the case, and jewels,

and ornaments. And there was the Curse, written. I got them – both.'

I stared at him, and knew that in this he spoke the truth.

'That's why I cannot keep up my work. I stole the mummy, and I am cursed. I didn't believe, but the crawling things came just as the inscription said.

'At first I thought that was the meaning of the Curse, that wherever I went the beetles would go, too, that they would haunt me and keep me from men forever. But lately I am beginning to think differently. I think the beetles will act as messengers of vengeance. I think they mean to kill me.'

This was pure raving.

'I haven't dared open the mummy-case since. I'm afraid to read the inscription again. I have it here in the house, but I've locked it up and I won't show you. I want to burn it – but I must keep it on hand. In a way, it's the only proof of my sanity. And if the things kill me—'

'Snap out of it,' I commanded. Then I started. I don't know the exact words I used, but I said reassuring, hearty, wholesome things. And when I finished he smiled the martyred smile of the obsessed.

'Delusions? They're real. But where do they come from? I can't find any cracks in the woodwork. The walls are sound. And yet every night the beetles come and crawl up the bed and try to get at my face. They don't bite, they merely crawl. There are thousands of them – black thousands of silent, crawling things, inches long. I brush them away, but when I fall asleep they come back; they're clever, and I can't pretend. I've never caught one; they're too fast-moving. They seem to understand me – or the Power that sends them understands.

'They crawl up from Hell night after night, and I can't last much longer. Some evening I'll fall completely asleep and they will creep over my face, and then—'

He leaped to his feet and screamed.

'The corner – in the corner now – out of the walls—'

The black shadows were moving, marching.

I saw a blur, fancied I could detect rustling forms advancing, creeping, spreading before the light.

Hartley sobbed.

I turned on the electric light. There was, of course, nothing there. I didn't say a word, but left abruptly. Hartley continued to sit huddled in his chair, his head in his hands.

I went straight to my friend, Doctor Sherman.

2

He diagnosed it as I thought he would: phobia, accompanied by hallucinations. Hartley's feeling of guilt over stealing the mummy haunted him. The visions of beetles resulted.

All this Sherman studded with the mumbo-jumbo technicalities of the professional psychiatrist, but it was simple enough. Together we phoned the institute where Hartley had worked. They verified the story, in so far as they knew Hartley had stolen a mummy.

After dinner Sherman had an appointment, but he promised to meet me at ten and go with me again to Hartley's apartment. I was quite insistent about this, for I felt that there was no time to lose. Of course, this was a mawkish attitude on my part, but that strange afternoon session had deeply disturbed me.

I spent the early evening in unnerving reflection. Perhaps that was the way all so-called 'Egyptian curses' worked. A guilty conscience on the part of a tomb-looter made him project the shadow of imaginary punishment on himself. He had hallucinations of retribution. That might explain the mysterious Tut-ankh-ahmen deaths; it certainly accounted for the suicides.

And that was why I insisted on Sherman seeing Hartley that same night. I feared suicide very much, for if ever a man was on the verge of complete mental collapse, Arthur Hartley surely was.

It was nearly eleven, however, before Sherman and I rang the bell. There was no answer. We stood in the dark hallway

as I vainly rapped, then pounded. The silence only served to augment my anxiety. I was truly afraid, or else I never would have dared using my skeleton key.

As it was, I felt the end justified the means. We entered.

The living-room was bare of occupants. Nothing had changed since the afternoon – I could see that quite clearly, for all the lights were on, and the guttering candle-stumps still smoldered.

Both Sherman and I smelt the reek of the insecticide quite strongly, and the floor was almost evenly coated with thick white insect powder.

We called, of course, before I ventured to enter the bedroom. It was dark, and I thought it was empty until I turned on the lights and saw the figure huddled beneath the bed-clothes. It was Arthur Hartley, and I needed no second glance to see that his white face was twisted in death.

The reek of insecticide was strongest here, and incense burned; and yet there was another pungent smell – a musty odor, vaguely animal-like.

Sherman stood at my side, staring.

‘What shall we do?’ I asked.

‘I’ll get the police on the wire downstairs,’ he said. ‘Touch nothing.’

He dashed out, and I followed him from the room, sickened. I could not bear to approach the body of my friend – that hideous expression on the face affrighted me. Suicide, murder, heart-attack – I didn’t even wish to know the manner of his passing. I was heartsick to think that we had been too late.

I turned from the bedroom and then that damnable scent came to my nostrils redoubled, and I knew. ‘Beetles!’

But how could there be beetles? It was all an illusion in poor Hartley’s brain. Even his twisted mind had realized that there were no apertures in the walls to admit them; that they could not be seen about the place.

And still the smell rose on the air – the reek of death, of decay, of ancient corruption that reigned in Egypt. I followed the scent to the second bedroom, forced the door.

On the bed lay the mummy-case. Hartley had said he locked it up in here. The lid was closed, but ajar.

I opened it. The sides bore inscriptions, and one of them may have pertained to the Scarabaeus Curse. I do not know, for I stared only at the ghastly, unshrouded figure that lay within. It was a mummy, and it had been sucked dry. It was all shell. There was a great cavity in the stomach, and as I peered within I could see a few feebly-crawling forms – inch-long, black buttons with great writhing feelers. They shrank back in the light, but not before I saw the scarab patterns on the outer crusted backs.

The secret of the Curse was here – the beetles had dwelt within the body of the mummy! They had eaten it out and nested within, and at night they crawled forth. It was true then!

I screamed once when the thought hit me, and dashed back to Hartley's bedroom. I could hear the sound of footsteps ascending the outer stairs; the police were on their way, but I couldn't wait. I raced into the bedroom, dread tugging at my heart.

Had Hartley's story been true, after all? Were the beetles really messengers of a divine vengeance?

I ran into that bedroom where Arthur Hartley lay, stooped over his huddled figure on the bed. My hands fumbled the body, searching for a wound. I had to know how he had died.

But there was no blood, there was no mark, and there was no weapon beside him. It had been shock or heart attack, after all. I was strangely relieved when I thought of this. I stood up and eased the body back again on the pillows.

I felt almost glad, because during my search my hands had moved over the body while my eyes roved over the room. I was looking for beetles.

Hartley had feared the beetles – the beetles that crawled out of the mummy. They had crawled every night, if his story was to be believed; crawled into his room, up the bed-posts, across the pillows.

Where were they now? They had left the mummy and

disappeared, and Hartley was dead. Where were they?

Suddenly I stared again at Hartley. There was something wrong with the body on the bed. When I had lifted the corpse it seemed singularly light for a man of Hartley's build. As I gazed at him now, he seemed empty of more than life. I peered into that ravaged face more closely, and then I shuddered. For the cords on his neck moved convulsively, his chest seemed to rise and fall, his head fell sideways on the pillow. He lived – or something inside him did!

And then as his twisted features moved, I cried aloud, for I knew how Hartley had died, and what had killed him; knew the secret of the Scarab Curse and why the beetles crawled out of the mummy to seek his bed. I knew what they had meant to do – what, tonight, they had done. I cried aloud as I saw Hartley's face move, in hopes that my voice would drown that dreadful rustling sound which filled the room and came from *inside Hartley's body*.

I knew that the Scarab Curse had killed him, and I screamed quite wildly as his mouth gaped slowly open. Just as I fainted, I saw Arthur Hartley's dead lips part, allowing a rustling swarm of *black Scarabaeus beetles* to pour out across the pillow.

THE FIDDLER'S FEE

The door of the inn swung open and the Devil entered. He was as thin as a corpse, and whiter than the shroud a corpse lies in. His eyes were deep and dark as graves. His mouth was redder than the gate of Hell, his hair was blacker than the pits below. He dressed like a dandy, and he came from a fine coach, but it was assuredly he: Satan, Father of Lies.

The innkeeper cringed. He had no fancy to play host to this emissary from Darkness. The innkeeper trembled under Satan's smile, while eyes searched Satan's person for signs of a tail, of cloven hoofs. Then he noticed that Satan carried a violin-case.

It was not Satan, then! The innkeeper breathed a silent prayer of relief. It was only momentary. A minute later he was trembling with augmented fear. If this was not Satan, this man who looked like the Devil and carried a violin-case — then it must be—

'Signor Paganini!' whispered mine host.

The stranger inclined his dark head with a slow smile.

'Welcome,' quavered the innkeeper, but there was no smile on his face. It was almost as though he preferred confirmation of his first fear rather than this. Satan one could deal with, perhaps — but the child of Satan?

Everyone knew that Paganini was the son of the Devil himself. He looked like the Devil, and many were the diabolical legends concerning his unholy life. He was said to drink, gamble, and love like the Prince of Darkness, and to entertain an equal hatred of all men. Certainly he played like Lucifer — in that case under his arm he carried an instrument of hellish power; a violin whose sublime singing drove all Europe mad.

Yes, even here in this tiny village men knew and feared the strange and terrible legend that had grown up about the

destiny of the world's most famed violinist. New and fantastic stories were continually pouring in from Milan, from Florence, from Rome – and half the capitals of the Continent as well. 'Paganini murdered his wife and sold her body to Satan.' 'Paganini has formed a Society against all God-loving men.' 'Paganini's mistresses are offered in the Black Mass.' 'Paganini's music is written by the very fiends of Hell.' 'Paganini is the son of the Devil.'

Legends these might be, but the atrocious conduct attributed to the *maestro*, that was fact. His scandalous amours, his disgraceful attitude toward the great and the nobility had been confirmed time and time again. Gossip, slander, malice, these things were in part. But one shining truth remained.

No one had ever played the violin like Nicolo Paganini.

Therefore the innkeeper bowed despite his fear. He sent a lad to change the horses and serve the driver of the coach, ushered *Signor* to the best room, and awaited his presence in the parlor of the inn with a carefully prepared table.

Another awaited his presence as well – the innkeeper's son, also called Nicolo.

Young Nicolo knew even more about the great man than his father. The lad knew more about the violin than anyone in the village, with the exception of Carlo, the wine merchant's son. Both boys had studied at the local conservatory since early childhood, and there was keen rivalry between them; between their families, each of whom fostered the budding genius of their heirs.

Now Nicolo awaited his glimpse of the great man. What a triumph over Carlo! What a thing to talk about in weeks to come! Perhaps he, Nicolo, might even speak to the illustrious musician – might, if the saints were kind, receive a word in return. But that was almost too much to hope for. Paganini was not interested in boys. Still, Nicolo was determined to see him; he did not fear the legends. So the lad waited, working on the preparations for the meal in the kitchen with his sensitive ears attuned to the sound of footsteps on the stairs above.

They came.

Paganini sat in solitary splendor at the great table of the inn. No other customers were present to stare at the great man, and he seemed oddly content to be alone – he who loved applause, adulation, obeisance. His thin, hawk-like face – singularly Satanic in the lamp-light it was – cast a black blurred shadow on the wall behind. His carefully curled hair rose in two horn-like projections against that shadow, so that the innkeeper noticed it as he entered, and nearly spilled the wine.

Paganini ate and drank sparingly – as fiends do. He said never a word, nor did he exhibit the humanity of smile or scowl. When he had finished, he sat back and seemed to stare into the candle-flame.

It was as though his eyes turned homeward to Hell.

The innkeeper left the room, crossing himself. This silent guest was indeed a son of Satan! In the passage he came upon Nicolo, staring at the pale violinist.

'No, no! – come away,' the father whispered. 'You must not.'

But Nicolo, moving as one entranced, entered the parlor. A voice that was unlike any his father had heard came almost mechanically from his throat.

'Good evening, *Signor Paganini*.'

The eyes left the flame, after partaking of their glare. A long deliberate glance pierced Nicolo's face like a dark lance.

'The whelp knows my name. Well!'

'I have heard much of you, *Signor*. Who in Italy does not know the name of Paganini?'

'And – fear it,' said the violinist, gravely.

'I do not fear you,' answered the boy, slowly. His eyes did not fall when the *maestro* smiled his wolfish smile.

'Yes?' The voice purred. 'Yes, that is right. You do not fear me. I feel that. And – why?'

'Because I love Music.'

'Because he loves Music,' parroted Paganini, cruelly mimicking the intonations until the statement stood naked in

its triteness. Then, slowly, as the stare came again: 'But you do love Music, boy. I feel it – strange.'

A hand reached out, a pale ghost of a hand with great sinews that hinted at delicate strength, however paradoxical that might seem. The hand gestured Nicolo to a seat. The hand poured wine into a glass. The hand drummed on the table slowly.

'Do you play?'

'Y-yes, *maestro*.'

'Play for me, then.'

Nicolo raced to his room. The beloved violin rested against his heart as he ran back.

'It is such a poor thing, *maestro*. It does not sing—'

'Play.'

Nicolo played. He never remembered what he played that night; he only knew that it came to him, and he played as he never had played before.

And the face of Satan smiled through the music.

Nicolo stopped. Paganini asked his name. He answered. Paganini asked of his teacher, his practice, his plans. Nicolo answered all questions. And then Paganini laughed. The inn-keeper, listening in his turn in the passageway, shuddered when he heard that laugh.

It was a laugh that cracked through the earth and came up from Hell. It was the laugh of a sobbing violin played by a fallen angel in the Pit.

'Fools!' shouted the *maestro*.

Then he stared at Nicolo. Something inside the lad begged him to turn away. But as he had before, the boy returned the stare, until the master musician spoke.

'What can I say? Should I advise you to go to a good teacher, buy a better violin? Should I even give you money for that purpose? Yes, but to what end? You have the gift, but you will never use it.'

Paganini sneered.

'You may be competent. You may even win small fame, a certain amount of success. But true greatness you cannot

achieve through teacher of instrument or training. You must be inspired – as I was.'

Nicolo stood trembling, he knew not why. There was a horrible conviction in the words he heard. It frightened him, that hint of certain authority, of final knowledge.

'A man must compose his own work, play his own work,' the voice went on. 'And no human teacher can give you that gift.'

Suddenly Paganini stood up.

'My pardon. I forgot. I came to this place because I have an – appointment nearby. I cannot keep my – the one I must see – waiting. I shall go now. But thank you for your playing.'

Nicolo's face fell. He was convinced that in a moment or so more the *maestro* would have revealed something to him which he very much wanted to know. For Nicolo felt as Paganini did about his work. He knew that within him lay great talent; knew that any ordinary training would subdue that talent in channels of mere mechanical perfection. There was a bond between his humble self and the greatness of the master before him. And if only Paganini had spoken! Now it was too late!

The black cloak swirled as the violinist went to the door. Then in a rush of ebony Paganini swept back the garment as he turned.

'Wait.'

He stared, and Nicolo felt his soul lifted and examined and torn and probed by the red-hot pincers of Paganini's eyes.

'Come with me. We shall keep our appointment together.'

An almost audible gasp issued from the passageway at the end of the room. Nicolo knew it came from his father, listening. But he did not care. As the door swung against darkness, he moved to the musician's side. They left together.

'I will apprentice you this night to a true Master,' Paganini whispered.

2

It was a long walk up the mountainside to the Cave of Fools. The road was lonely in the midnight, but then it was always lonely, for men hereabouts feared the Cave. The Devil was said to dwell in its mists, and the Cave itself was unexplored by those who deemed its depths led down to Tartarus itself.

It was a long and lonely walk, and the way was strange amidst winding paths and twisting passages of rock; yet Paganini never faltered. He had walked this way before.

Now, the bony hand gripped Nicolo's brown fingers in an icy clasp so filled with cold, inhuman strength that the lad shuddered. But he followed through the steam and mist and fog that hid the clean light of the stars; followed to the mouth of the Cave as though impelled by the magic of Paganini's voice.

For the *maestro* spoke all that way, and spoke without reticence. Sensing a kindred soul, he revealed.

'They say I am a spawn of the Devil, and that is a lie. All my life they told me so – even my father, cursed fool! In the academies my fellow-students made the sign of the horns at me and the girls fled screaming.

'They screamed at me, who lived for Music and Beauty! But at first I did not care. I lived for my work, and I worked hard. Always I felt within me that spark, glowing to a flame.

'And then when I made my first appearance, I came again into the world of men. My music was acclaimed, but I was hated. "Child of the Devil" they called me, because I was ugly, and my temper bad. I tried again to drown myself in work, but this time it no longer sufficed, because I knew my playing was not good enough. I had genius, but I could not express it.

'After a while one begins to reason. My work was not enough. The world hated me. "Child of the Devil?" Why not?

'I knew the way. I studied. I read old forbidden books I

found in the great libraries of Florence. And I came here. There is a legend of Faust, you know.

'There are ways of meeting Powers that grant things to men in return for an exchange.'

They entered the Cave now, and when Nicolo's hands trembled at the words the musician's grip tightened.

'Do not fear, lad. It is worth the cost. Thirteen years ago tonight I was just such a lad as you; perhaps a bit older. I came this way alone, and with the same fears. And it was well.

'When I came forth I had within me the gift I craved. Since that time, you know, all the world knows, my story. Fame, wealth, beautiful women – all earthly success is mine to command. But more than that; greater than that, is my Music. I learned to compose, and to play. They say His songs moved the angels and the stars. I have that gift. And you, who know, love, and have born within you, Music – you shall this night partake of the same gift.'

Nicolo wanted to run, to get out of this deep cavern where the steam swirled in fantastic shapes. He wanted to make the sign of the cross as he heard the bubbling and the booming from the depths ahead. And then a curious picture came to his mind – the vision of Carlo Zuttio, the wine-merchant's son. Carlo went to the conservatory, and he was a fool. But he had a better violin, and private lessons, so that he played more masterfully than Nicolo. And his parents were wealthy, and they boasted to Nicolo's father of their son and his music. The whole town knew that Carlo would go on to the big school in Milan. He, Nicolo, would not go on – he would remain and take over the inn, and sometime when he was old and fat he might play at country weddings for drinks. Carlo would be rich and famous, and wear silk when he returned to visit. Nicolo would no longer be a rival, then; merely a country innkeeper.

It was this vision, and no love of Music that came to Nicolo in the bowels of the earth. It was this vision that made him smile and follow Paganini as they advanced into the heart of the hot smoke and knelt upon the stones in the darkness.

Then Paganini called a Secret Name and the earth thundered. He made a sign not of the cross, and he prayed in a voice that was black and crawling.

Then the mists grew red and the thundering swelled, and Nicolo was formally introduced to his Teacher.

3

Paganini had been crafty. It was a bargain. Three years for him, and no more; where Paganini had gained thirteen. But the other ten years went to the *maestro* as payment for leading the way. It was a fair arrangement; a business arrangement.

That was what shocked Nicolo more than anything else when he returned home. It had all been so business-like. There was behind it a terrible hint of purpose; the Power knew what it was doing – there was no aimlessness, no blind evil. It was all so *arranged*.

Three years.

But there was singing in Nicolo's heart, singing which over-rode the sound of his father's quavering prayers, singing which rose to triumphant heights when he played at the conservatory the next afternoon.

'Paganini taught me,' is all that Nicolo would say when the faculty exclaimed. 'Paganini taught me,' Nicolo told Carlo with a smile.

The singing rose higher as the weeks passed.

Nicolo, who read notes poorly, composed.

Nicolo improvised.

The faculty bought him a new violin, and on the festival day it was Nicolo who appeared as soloist with the orchestra from Venice; though Carlo was second in competition for the post.

Nicolo won the scholarship and went to Milan.

His father prayed but said nothing. Paganini did not write, but word came of his triumphs in France.

In Milan, Nicolo was a sensation at the school. Carlo

came too, his parents paying his tuition; and Carlo was successful. He studied hard, worked diligently, played expertly.

But Nicolo's soaring tones were born of inspiration within. He was mastering a technique against which mere practice could not compete.

Through the year it was a constant competition between the two country boys – Nicolo and Carlo. The whole school knew it. Nicolo had the talent. Carlo had the ambition. The battle for perfection was deadly.

Nicolo was aging. His face was already maturing in set lines, and the color had left it set and harsh. It was whispered that his nights were spent in study that left him wasted.

The truth was that Nicolo's nights were spent in fear. He was remembering the tryst in the Cave of Fools, and he was anticipating the days to come. Only two years now – and so much to do!

He had been a fool. But Paganini's personality had overshadowed his own, dominated it. He had been led. He knew that now. Paganini had wanted a dupe, so that he might make such a bargain and extend his own life at the expense of another's. That is why he had taken Nicolo. Nicolo often wondered just what might have happened had Paganini gone alone to his accounting. He wondered, because in two years *he* must go – and there would be no dupe for *him*.

Two years! Nicolo would toss on his pillow and shudder at the thought. He could not hope to do what Paganini had done in thirteen. He could not win much but initial acclaim; none of the fame and riches would be his in so short a time. But one thing he could do – beat his rival, Carlo.

Nicolo hated Carlo now. He hadn't used to hate him. They had been rivals, but friendly enough. Ever since that night in the Cave of Fools Nicolo had hated.

Carlo was keeping up. Nicolo found that his work came to him almost effortlessly. His hands moved without thought along the bow, and his fingering seemed undirected. There was no triumphant thrill for him in his music, no sense of mastery in his easy playing.

Carlo had this, because Carlo had to work and sweat to compete, and when he did so he felt satisfied. Moreover, aided by no supernatural gift, Carlo *was* competing too closely for comfort.

And the school liked Carlo. The teachers knew his work and praised him for it. They did not praise Nicolo because they could not understand his methods. He puzzled them.

The other pupils liked Carlo. He had money, and he was generous. He bought sweets for his friends, laughed with them at their parties. Nicolo had no money for sweets, no fine clothes for parties. The pupils were in awe of him, and they distrusted his face.

Carlo was handsome, too. The girls liked Carlo. Even Elissa liked him. And that added to the agony of Nicolo's nights.

4

Elissa's hair was yellow flame on a pillow. Elissa's eyes were the jewels on the breast of Passion. Elissa's mouth was a red gateway to delight. Elissa's arms were—

It was no use. Nicolo couldn't think of anything more poetic. All he knew was that Elissa burned within him at all times. Her beauty was like a lash across his naked heart.

Actually, Elissa Robbia was a very pretty blond student, but Nicolo was in love and Youth knows only a goddess.

Elissa walked with Carlo, and she went to parties with him, and they danced at the festival together. Throughout the second year they were together always.

Always Nicolo watched from the corner. Once or twice he spoke to the object of his worship, but she did not seem to notice him, despite his efforts to be ingratiating. She preferred the handsome Carlo.

So Nicolo worked. He outplayed Carlo, though it was not easy now. Despite Nicolo's secret power, Carlo seemed inspired by love. Carlo followed his most difficult trills, mastered every detail of the well-nigh flawless technique which Nicolo mastered.

Still Nicolo triumphed always in the end. The better teachers were now confounded by the spectacle of their two notable students. Often outsiders witnessed performances. The Opera sent conductors down to listen, and notables from all over the South attended the salons in local aristocratic homes when the star pupils played.

Nothing was said officially, but it was understood that one or the other of the boys would be groomed for concert debut within the year.

Both of them knew it, though they no longer spoke to each other. Both of them worked frantically. The final concert of the season would decide; they suspected that. Both had been asked for a performance of some solo composition.

Nicolo went to work a month in advance. What took place in his dark room will never be known, but he emerged with what he felt was a true masterpiece. He had worked as never before. He would win, he would shame Carlo before them all; shame him before Elissa.

He could hardly wait for the night.

The stage of the school was lighted and the house was filled with those of a station to allow their jewels to reflect that light. Rumor had passed, and in the audience were musical notables from all Italy. And the Master was there, too – yes, the great Paganini himself! Come to watch Nicolo, his former pupil, they said.

What a triumph! Nicolo shivered with ecstasy, fondling his violin as he waited in the wings for the solos to end. Tonight he would appear before Paganini himself when he took victory over his rival. Nothing could make his happiness more complete!

Where was Carlo, by the way? He had not appeared in the wings as yet.

But – there he was – *in the audience! With Elissa.*

What did this mean?

A number ended. The director was announcing his name. 'Unfortunately the soloist who was to compete with Signor Nicolo this evening, Carlo Zuttio . . .'

What was that?

'Resigned from the school . . .'

Yes?

'Marriage to . . .'

Married! To Elissa!

He had done that, knowing he would lose tonight, he'd given up music, retired to his father's business, and married Elissa. And now he had arranged for it to be announced, to rob Nicolo of his victory! Bitter despair rose in Nicolo's heart, and black anger.

But when his name was called he stepped forth and played.

He played his number, but it was not the original he had planned. For now he improvised; or rather, hate improvised for him. Hate tore at the strings, plucked frantically at a flayed violin.

And waves of horror crept through the house.

Through red mists, the black eyes of Paganini blazed, the smile dropped from Carlo's face, the lips of Elissa grew pale. Nicolo saw *her* eyes grow blank, and poured his music into them. She had never noticed him before, eh? Well, she would not forget him now – not this, and *this*.

Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, shrieking and whispering of damnation and glory, the violin sang accompaniment to dark voices that yammered in Nicolo's brain.

Nicolo had no arms, no fingers. He was all violin. His body was part of the instrument, his brain a part of the song. Both were being played by *Another*.

He finished.

Silence.

Then the thunder.

And while he bowed and smiled and the sound tore at his eardrums, his eyes blazed into Elissa's empty face through the standing crowd. Nicolo had won and lost tonight. But he would win again.

5

They came to him after the concert. They offered him money, for private study.

In a year, they said, he would come back and perform in a solo concert at the school.

Nicolo accepted the money gravely. It was supposed that he would use that money to spend his year in Rome, working under the great *maestri* as a private pupil.

But Nicolo had other plans. He knew that Carlo and Elissa would return to the village, and he meant to follow them there. He thanked the directors of the school and prepared to depart.

In the hallway stood a cloaked figure. It was Paganini.

Without a word the pale genius took Nicolo's hand, just as he had that night two years before. Together they walked the dark streets.

'You played well tonight, my son. They said your music was like Paganini's.' He smiled. 'And well it might be, since we study under the same Master.'

Nicolo shuddered.

'Do not fear. In a year's time you shall have had all the fame and glory you desire. The world will bow before your power. That is as you desired, no?'

'No.' Nicolo shook his head. 'I shall not study and I shall not go to Rome. My desire lies elsewhere.' He told Paganini of Carlo and Elissa. The *maestro* listened.

'So you return to the village, eh? Well, if it is that you seek, I am sure you will be aided in your quest. Do not despair.'

Nicolo sighed.

'I am afraid of that aid. This music – this playing – it is not a part of me. It comes from other sources, and I feel no satisfaction in stirring my listeners. Carlo and Elissa were stirred tonight; but it was the music that did it, not myself. Don't you understand?'

A cold whisper bit through the darkness as Paganini spoke.

'Yes, I understand, perfectly; but you do not. Tonight you played through hate, and there was hate in the hall. *But when you go to Elissa, you will play through love.* She will be stirred. For our Master is eminently successful in amours. Let your violin speak and she shall become yours.'

'But what of him? What of Carlo?'

'Again, let your violin speak. It has a voice that drives men mad. *Let him hear that voice.*'

A slow laugh crawled out of Paganini's lips.

'I know how it will be. Ah, I know! Years ago I discovered that secret, and well have I used it. Madden the cuckold and woo the mistress, and rejoice in the gift of the Teacher! I envy you your year, my friend. It will be a great triumph for you.'

Nicolo's heart was pounding.

'You really believe I can do it?' he asked.

'Certainly. You were given the power; let it guide you to your purpose.' Paganini's voice grew grave. 'But it was not of that which I proposed to speak when I awaited you this evening. There is another thing.

'I want to remind you that a year from tonight you have an appointment in the Cave of Fools.'

'I am afraid.'

'It was a bargain, and you must go.'

'What if I do not go?'

'That I cannot speak of. *He* will come for you then, I know it. *He* will revenge himself horribly.'

'I wish,' and Nicolo's voice was low with hatred, 'I wish that I had never met you. You led me to this – tricked me into this infernal bargain! I was a fool, and I should kill you for it.'

Paganini stopped and faced the youth. His eyes were ice.

'Perhaps. But think – think of the coming year. You shall win Elissa, and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad—'

His voice was like his violin, playing and replaying the

same damnable, wheedling trill until it surged through Nicolo's brain.

'Think not of revenge. Go to the Cave of Fools a year from tonight; but first, win Elissa and drive Carlo mad—'

Still whispering the words, Paganini turned in the darkness and disappeared. And Nicolo walked the streets, muttering to himself:

'I shall win Elissa and drive Carlo mad.'

6

Nicolo did not stay at his father's inn when he returned. He had money now, and he procured rooms in town – rooms below the apartment of the newlywed couple he had followed.

He did not see them for a month. He was in his dark room with the violin. He played in darkness now, for he needed no notes in this composition. He developed only two themes. One was soft and sweet and tender, thrilling with passionate beauty. As Nicolo played, his face would glow in ecstasy and warmth flooded his being.

The second theme slithered out of the darkness. Then it padded. Then it began to run, and leap, and dance. At first it squeaked like a rat, then it howled like a dog, finally it bayed like a black wolf. It was a fiendish howling of terrific power, and when Nicolo played it his hands trembled and he closed his eyes.

For a month Nicolo played the two themes over and over in his tiny room – alone. Not quite alone, for there was a whispering in his brain that prompted each tone, and an unseen hand that guided the bow over the strings. Nicolo played and played, and he grew thin and gaunt. After a month the music was a part of him, and he was ready.

It took him a week to become friendly with his neighbors again. In another week he had learned their habits; knew when Carlo worked at the wine-press and left Elissa alone.

Then, one afternoon, Nicolo visited Elissa. She sat regal in her blond beauty while they talked, and after a while Nicolo suggested that he play something for her. He took out his violin and drew the bow across the strings, eyes on her face.

His eyes never left her face while he played. His eyes feasted on her face as the music feasted on her soul.

The tune came forth, reiterated; in endless variations it rose in soaring rhapsody. And Elissa rose in soaring rhapsody and came toward him, her eyes empty save for the soul-filling majesty of the music.

Then Nicolo put down the violin and took her in his arms.

He came the next day, and the next. Always he brought his violin. Always he played and always she surrendered to the music.

For months Nicolo was happy. For many months he played each day, and his nights were peaceful at last. Carlo suspected nothing.

Nicolo began to plan. In a little while he would return to Milan for the solo concert. After that he would be famous – go on tour. He had, under the inspiration of his love, written enough to insure his success at the debut. He would take Elissa with him, and together they would scale the heights.

Then he remembered.

He could not go to Milan, or the concert. That night he had an appointment in the Cave of Fools.

Nicolo didn't want to die. He didn't want to give his soul. That cursed bargain!

But there was no way out.

Every day he saw Elissa he longed for life with greater fervor. Knowing the end was near, he came oftener, took greater and greater chances. He was counting the hours now, the minutes.

Three days before the time appointed he went there in the evening. Carlo would be late at the wine-press, so Nicolo played. Elissa sat there, her face blank as it always was when he played. Sometimes Nicolo would find himself wishing that he had no music to do his wooing – that he himself would

inspire such adoration in the woman he loved. But that was too much to hope for; Elissa loved Carlo, and only the music gave her to Nicolo. It sufficed. The spell was strong. Nicolo played tonight as he had never played before, and as the music rose it drowned out the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Carlo was in the room.

Nicolo stopped playing.

Elissa's eyes opened as though she were wakening from profound depths of sleep.

And Carlo faced them both. He was a big man, Carlo, with strong hands that now opened and closed convulsively at his sides. Carlo's heavy body was lunging across the room and the hands moved for Nicolo's throat.

They never reached it.

Nicolo's delicate hands were on the violin. He began to play.

It was not the love-strain that he played this time. It was the other – the song of madness.

At the sound of the rat-like squeaking Carlo stopped. Nicolo watched him as the shrieking mounted. Carlo's eyes grew wide. The shrieking became a moan. Carlo's wide eyes were growing red. The moaning was a rising bark, a yelp of agony. Carlo's hands went to his head. He stepped back, sank to his knees. Then Nicolo played. The violin screamed, the bow moved up and down upon it like a red-hot poker descending on human flesh. Nicolo played until Carlo lay rolling on the floor, baying in rhythm as the foam poured from his lips. Nicolo played until the room pulsed with horrid sound, until the glass shivered with the vibration and the candlelight wavered and the flame danced in agony. Nicolo played, and then he stopped.

Carlo lay there moaning, and he rose to his knees and looked at Nicolo. Then he looked at Elissa.

Nicolo followed his glance.

Elissa – he had forgotten Elissa! He had played the music of madness and forgotten she was in the room.

Elissa lay where she had fallen and her face was white with

the unmistakable whiteness of death. Carlo looked at her and began to laugh.

Nicolo sobbed. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Husband and lover laughed and sobbed together.

It was all over. She was dead, and he was mad. And two nights from now Nicolo must go to that rendezvous in the Cave of Fools.

So this was Satan's gift! This awful mockery was what it had brought him.

The dead woman lay on the floor as the madman crawled toward her, cackling.

Nicolo rose to go. His bow accidentally scraped the strings. The mad Carlo rose, laughing, and seized the violin. He broke it across the bridge and hurled it from the window.

Still laughing, he turned, but there was no sane hatred in his eyes.

And then the thought came to Nicolo.

'Carlo,' he whispered. 'Carlo.'

The idiot husband laughed.

'Carlo, your wife is dead. But I did not kill her. I swear it. It was the Devil, Carlo. The Devil who dwells in the Cave of Fools. You want to avenge your wife's death, don't you, Carlo? Then seek out the Devil two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. Remember, Carlo – two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. I will stay with you until then and tell you where to go.'

The madman laughed.

Softly, Nicolo repeated his suggestion. He whispered it all that night as the deranged Carlo slept. He whispered it the next day as they sat beside the body of the dead woman. At last, when Nicolo rose to leave on the coach for Milan, he felt that Carlo understood and would go. Smiling, the violinist withdrew, leaving the chuckling lunatic and his dead wife in the dark room.

7

In the night of travel Nicolo smiled bitterly but often. It had worked out after all! He would trick Satan then; sending Carlo in his stead. Thus he could play the concert and go on to fame. Poor Elissa was dead, of course, but there were other women to hear the song of love. It was good.

It was good to hear the praise in Milan. His old teachers spoke, his friends gathered around him and whispered of the celebrities who would attend the concert tonight.

Nicolo was so busy that day that he forgot a very important item. Indeed, he had just finished a meal in his dressing-room when he remembered.

Carlo had broken his violin!

Confused by tragedy, by lack of sleep and overmuch planning, it had slipped Nicolo's thoughts. His violin – not a precious instrument to him, for Nicolo knew that he could produce his music on any violin. Still, it was necessary.

He rose to summon the director, when the door opened. Carlo entered.

Carlo was mad. His eyes glittered and his teeth were bared, but he walked erect. He was able to control himself sufficiently to pass unnoticed, it seemed.

Nicolo, beholding him, nearly froze on the spot. A wave of fear rose choking in his throat.

'Carlo – why are you here? Don't you remember – the Cave of Fools and your appointment?'

Carlo grinned.

'I went last night, Nicolo,' he whispered. 'I went last night. Tonight I am here to see you play. You will be playing soon, Nicolo.'

Nicolo stammered wildly. 'But – but what did you find in the Cave? I mean – there was One who waited, and he wanted something from you—?'

Carlo grinned wider.

'Do not trouble yourself. I gave Him what He wanted. It was all arranged last night.'

'You mean that?' Nicolo whispered. '*You gave your soul?*'

'I gave my soul. We made a bargain.' Carlo chuckled.

'Then why are you here?'

'To bring you this. I broke your violin, and tonight you must play.'

Carlo thrust a bundle into Nicolo's hands. At that moment the prompter entered.

'*Maestro!* The concert is starting. You are wanted on stage. Oh, what a crowd is here for your debut! Ah, there has never been such a tribute – you played but once, a year ago, but they remembered and have returned. It is wonderful! But hurry, hurry!'

Nicolo left, and the grinning Carlo followed, standing in the wings as the violinist stepped on the stage. In his confusion, Nicolo unwrapped the parcel and tossed the paper to the wings as he took the violin and bow in his hands and faced the applauding audience.

Nicolo's eyes sparkled. This was triumph!

His heart was light within him. Fame was here, and poor Carlo had settled matters with the Master. He had made a bargain, and that did not concern Nicolo. What concerned him was that he was free, and this was the greatest evening of his life, and he would play as he had never played before.

Automatically he gripped the violin and raised it to his chin. It felt heavy; an ordinary instrument. But it would suffice. Poor Carlo was mad; bringing a violin to the man who had killed his wife!

But – *play*.

Yes, play with the Devil's gift, play the Devil's love-song that won Elissa. Let it win the audience tonight. What matter the violin, or Carlo chuckling in the wings? Play!

Nicolo played. His bow stroked the opening strains of the melody. But a droning arose.

What was wrong?

Nicolo tried to correct his strike. But his fingers moved automatically. He tried to stop.

But his fingers, his wrist, his arm moved on. He could not stop. The power within him would not swerve. And the droning increased.

This was the song of madness!

Nicolo's fingers flew, his arm flailed. He fought, trying to hold back. But the sounds increased. Rats scurried and chittered and then the hounds of Hell began to bark. Fiends brayed in his brain.

Yes – in *his* brain.

The audience, he dimly realized, was hooting and jeering. They were not being driven mad by the music. *He* was!

Nicolo closed his eyes, clenched his jaws to make the violin slip; and still it played. He wanted to think of something else, anything but the music that now shrieked in his skull. A vision of Paganini's satanic face, of Elissa's dead features, of Carlo's mad red eyes, of the black Cave of Fools where he should be tonight – these things swept on wings of horror through his brain. And then the music broke through and Nicolo fiddled madly.

Eyes jerked open and stared down at the violin – at the coarse wood, the peculiar strings, the ghastly bridge glistening with pearly brilliance.

And then the voice of the music screamed the truth to him. Mad Carlo had gone to the Cave of Fools last night, to make a bargain. He had said that, and Nicolo had believed that it meant he was free. But what had that bargain been?

Carlo had sold his soul for vengeance. What could that vengeance be?

That One had told him to make this violin!

And now Nicolo stared at the violin – the violin he was helplessly playing, but which made a music that drove him mad.

Nicolo stared at the coarse wood. He had seen such wood before. Where? *Why did it remind him of Elissa?*

The wood was stained red; ghastly red. *Why did this red stain remind him of Elissa?*

Music thundered in Nicolo's ears, and still he played and stared.

The glistening bridge of the violin was pearly. *Why did that bridge remind him of Elissa?*

The bridge grinned up at Nicolo, grinned insanely as Elissa had grinned when she was driven mad by music. The violin tones rose to a shattering crescendo, and Nicolo staggered. His blurring eyes glanced at the golden strings of the violin that were singing his doom. In a burst of ghastly fear he seemed to recognize them.

Why did those strings remind him of Elissa?

And then he understood.

The music he was playing was the music that had driven her to madness, to death. In some way this violin now held her soul.

He was not playing a violin, he was playing her soul, and its madness was pouring out to drive him mad!

He looked down again as the shrieking music rose in his ears, and he saw.

He did not hold a violin in his arms, but the dead body of a woman – the body of Elissa. He was playing on her body, playing on the gray ghost of her body, drawing the bow across long golden strands that he recognized in a final burst of fear that tore his brain to shreds.

Nicolo played her body like a violin and drew the madness out into his own being, and then he recognized the wood, the stain, the bridge, and the horribly familiar strings.

That was why Elissa's soul was in the violin!

Nicolo suddenly began to laugh, insanely, and the music rose to drown out his laughter as he held the horrible thing playing in his arms. Then with a lurch Nicolo fell, face black with agony.

The curtains dropped, the hysterical manager ran to the dead body of the violinist.

Then the madman that was Carlo crept slyly from the wings and crouched over the body, tittering in a shrill voice. He took the violin from the dead Nicolo's breast and laughed.

His fingers lovingly caressed the wood he had carved from Elissa's coffin, the stain of blood he had drawn from Elissa's

body, the pearly teeth on the bridge he had taken from Elissa's throat. And finally, his fingers fell to stroking the long, smooth golden strings on which the music of madness had been played – the long, golden strands of dead Elissa's hair.

THE MANNIKIN

Mind you, I cannot swear that my story is true. It may have been a dream; or worse, a symptom of some severe mental disorder. But I believe it is true. After all, how are we to know what things there are on earth? Strange monstrosities still exist, and foul, incredible perversions. Every war, each new geographical or scientific discovery, brings to light some new bit of ghastly evidence that the world is not altogether the sane place we fondly imagine it to be. Sometimes peculiar incidents occur which hint of utter madness.

How can we be sure that our smug conceptions of reality actually exist? To one man in a million dreadful knowledge is revealed, and the rest of us remain mercifully ignorant. There have been travelers who never came back, and research workers who disappeared. Some of those who did return were deemed mad because of what they told, and others sensibly concealed the wisdom that had so horribly been revealed. Blind as we are, we know a little of what lurks beneath our normal life. There have been tales of sea-serpents and creatures of the deep; legends of dwarfs and giants; records of queer medical horrors and unnatural births. Stunted nightmares of men's personalities have blossomed into being under the awful stimulus of war, or pestilence, or famine. There have been cannibals, necrophiles, and ghouls; loathsome rites of worship and sacrifice; maniacal murders, and blasphemous crimes. When I think, then, of what I saw and heard, and compare it with certain other grotesque and unbelievable authenticities, I begin to fear for my reason.

But if there is any *sane* explanation of this matter, I wish to God I may be told before it is too late. Doctor Pierce tells me that I must be calm; he advised me to write this account in order to allay my apprehension. But I am not calm, and

I never can be calm until I know the truth, once and for all; until I am wholly convinced that my fears are not founded on a hideous reality.

I was already a nervous man when I went to Bridgetown for a rest. It had been a hard grind that year at school, and I was very glad to get away from the tedious classroom routine. The success of my lecture courses assured my position on the faculty for the year to come, and consequently I dismissed all academic speculation from my mind when I decided to take a vacation. I chose to go to Bridgetown because of the excellent facilities the lake afforded for trout-fishing. The place I stayed at was a three-story hostelry on the lake itself – the Kane House, run by Absolom Gates. He was a character of the old school; a grizzled, elderly veteran whose father had been in the fishery business back in the sixties. He himself was a devotee of things piscatorial; but only from the Waltonian view. His resort was a fisherman's Mecca. The rooms were large and airy; the food plentiful and excellently prepared by Gates' widowed sister. After my first inspection, I prepared to enjoy a remarkably pleasant stay.

Then, upon my first visit to the village, I bumped into Simon Maglore on the street.

I first met Simon Maglore during my second term as an instructor back at college. Even then, he had impressed me greatly. This was not due to his physical characteristics alone, though they were unusual enough. He was tall and thin, with massive, stooping shoulders, and a crooked back. He was not a hunchback in the usual sense of the word, but was afflicted with a peculiar tumorous growth beneath his left shoulder blade. This growth he took some pains to conceal, but its prominence made such attempts unsuccessful. Outside of this unfortunate deformity, however, Maglore had been a very pleasant-looking fellow. Black-haired, gray-eyed, fair of skin, he seemed a fine specimen of intelligent manhood. And it was this intelligence that had so impressed me. His classwork was strikingly brilliant, and at times his theses attained heights of sheer genius. Despite the peculiarly

morbid trend of his work in poetry and essays, it was impossible to ignore the power and imagination that could produce such wild imagery and eldritch color. One of his poems – *The Witch Is Hung* – won for him the Edsworth Memorial Prize for that year, and several of his major themes were republished in certain private anthologies.

From the first, I had taken a great interest in the young man and his unusual talent. He had not responded to my advances at first; I gathered that he was a solitary soul. Whether this was due to his physical peculiarity or his mental trend, I cannot say. He had lived alone in town, and was known to have ample means. He did not mingle with the other students, though they would have welcomed him for his ready wit, his charming disposition, and his vast knowledge of literature and art. Gradually, however, I managed to overcome his natural reticence, and won his friendship. He invited me to his rooms, and we talked.

I had then learned of his earnest belief in the occult and esoteric. He had told me of his ancestors in Italy, and their interest in sorcery. One of them had been an agent of the Medici. They had migrated to America in the early days, because of certain charges made against them by the Holy Inquisition. He also spoke of his own studies in the realms of the unknown. His rooms were filled with strange drawings he had made from dreams, and still stranger images done in clay. The shelves of his book-cases held many odd and ancient books. I noted Ranfts' *De Masticatione Motuorum in Tumulis* (1734); the almost priceless *Cabala of Saboth* (Greek translation, circa 1686); Mycroft's *Commentaries on Witchcraft*; and Ludvig Prinn's infamous *Mysteries of the Worm*.

I made several visits to the apartments before Maglore left school so suddenly in the fall of '33. The death of his parents called him to the East, and he left without saying farewell. But in the interim I had learned to respect him a good deal, and had taken a keen interest in his future plans, which included a book on the history of witch cult survivals in America, and a novel dealing with the effects of superstition

on the mind. He had never written to me, and I heard no more about him until this chance meeting on the village street.

He recognized me. I doubt if I should have been able to identify him. He had changed. As we shook hands I noted his unkempt appearance and careless attire. He looked older. His face was thinner, and much paler. There were shadows around his eyes – and in them. His hands trembled; his face forced a lifeless smile. His voice was deeper when he spoke, but he inquired after my health in the same charming fashion he had always affected. Quickly I explained my presence, and began to question him.

He informed me that he lived here in town; had lived here ever since the death of his parents. He was working very hard just now on his books, but he felt that the result of his labors more than justified any physical inconveniences he might suffer. He apologized for his untidy apparel and his tired manner. He wanted to have a long talk with me sometime soon, but he would be very busy for the next few days. Possibly next week he would look me up at the hotel – just now he must get some paper at the village store and go back to his home. With an abrupt farewell, he turned his back on me and departed.

As he did so I received another start. The hump on his back had grown. It was now virtually twice the size it had been when I first met him, and it was no longer possible to hide it in the least. Undoubtedly, hard work had taken severe toll of Maglore's energies. I thought of a sarcoma, and shuddered.

Walking back to the hotel, I did some thinking. Simon's haggardness appalled me. It was not healthful for him to work so hard, and his choice of subject was not any too wholesome. The constant isolation and the nervous strain were combining to undermine his constitution in an alarming way, and I determined to appoint myself a mentor over his course. I resolved to visit him at the earliest opportunity, without waiting for a formal invitation. Something must be done.

Upon my arrival at the hotel I got another idea. I would ask Gates what he knew about Simon and his work. Perhaps there was some interesting sidelight on his activity which might account for his curious transformation. I therefore sought out the worthy gentleman and broached the subject to him.

What I learned from him startled me. It appears that the villagers did not like Master Simon, or his family. The old folks had been healthy enough, but their name had a dubious repute cast upon it ever since the early days. Witches and warlocks, one and all, made up the family line. Their dark deeds had been carefully hidden from the first, but the folk around them could tell. It appears that nearly all of the Maglores had possessed certain physical malformations that had made them conspicuous. Some had been born with veils; others with club-feet. One or two were dwarfed, and all had at some time or another been accused of possessing the fabled 'evil eye'. Several of them had been nyctalops – they could see in the dark. Simon was not the first crookback in the family, by any means. His grandfather had it, and *his* grand-sire before him.

There was much talk of inbreeding and clan-segregation, too. That, in the opinion of Gates and his fellows, clearly pointed to one thing – wizardry. Nor was this their only evidence. Did not the Maglores shun the village and shut themselves away in the old house on the hill? None of them attended church, either. Were they not known to take long walks after dark, on nights when all decent, self-respecting people were safe in bed?

There were probably good reasons why they were unfriendly. Perhaps they had things they wished to hide in their old house, and maybe they were afraid of letting any talk get around. Folk had it that the place was full of wicked and heathenish books, and there was an old story that the whole family were fugitives from some foreign place or other because of what they had done. After all, who could say? They looked suspicious; they acted queerly; maybe they were. And this new one – Simon – was the worst.

He never had acted right. His mother died at his birth. Had to get a doctor from out of the city – no local man would handle such a case. The boy had nearly died, too. For several years nobody had seen him. His father and his uncle had spent all their time taking care of him. When he was seven, the lad had been sent away to a private school. He came back once, when he was about twelve. That was when his uncle died. He went mad, or something of the sort. At any rate, he had an attack which resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage, as the doctor called it.

Simon then was a nice-looking lad – except for the hump, of course. But it did not seem to bother him at the time – indeed, it was quite small. He had stayed several weeks and then gone off to school again. He had not reappeared until his father's death, two years ago. The old man died all alone in that great house, and the body was not discovered until several weeks later. A passing peddler had called; walked into the open parlor, and found old Jeffry Maglore dead in his great chair. His eyes were open, and filled with a look of frightful dread. Before him was a great iron book, filled with queer, undecipherable characters.

A hurriedly summoned physician pronounced it death due to heart-failure. But the peddler, after staring into those fear-filled eyes, and glancing at the odd, disturbing figures in the book, was not so sure. He had no opportunity to look around any further, however, for that night the son arrived.

People looked at him very queerly when he came, for no notice had yet been sent to him of his father's death. They were very still indeed when he exhibited a two-weeks' old letter in the old man's handwriting which announced a premonition of imminent death, and advised the young man to come home. The carefully guarded phrases of his letter seemed to hold a secret meaning; for the youth never even bothered to ask the circumstances of his father's death. The funeral was private; the customary interment being held in the cellar vaults beneath the house.

The gruesome and peculiar events of Simon Maglore's homecoming immediately put the country-folk on their

guard. Nor did anything occur to alter their original opinion of the boy. He stayed on all alone in the silent house. He had no servants, and made no friends. His infrequent trips to the village were made only for the purpose of obtaining supplies. He took his purchases back himself, in his car. He bought a good deal of meat and fish. Once in a while he stopped in at the drug-store, where he purchased sedatives. He never appeared talkative, and replied to questions in monosyllables. Still, he was obviously well educated. It was generally rumored that he was writing a book. Gradually his visits became more and more infrequent.

People now began to comment on his changed appearance. Slowly but surely he was altering, in an unpleasant way. First of all, it was noticed that his deformity was increasing. He was forced to wear a voluminous overcoat to hide its bulk. He walked with a slight stoop, as though its weight troubled him. Still, he never went to a doctor, and none of the townsfolk had the courage to comment or question him on his condition. He was aging, too. He began to resemble his uncle Richard, and his eyes had taken on that lambent cast which hinted of a nyctalopic power. All this excited its share of comment among people to whom the Maglore family had been a matter of interesting conjecture for generations.

Later this speculation had been based on more tangible developments. For recently Simon had made an appearance at various isolated farmhouses throughout the region, on a furtive errand.

He questioned the old folks, mostly. He was writing a book, he told them, on folk-lore. He wanted to ask them about the old legends of the neighborhood. Had any of them ever heard stories concerning local cults, or rumors about rites in the woods? Were there any haunted houses, or shunned places in the forest? Had they ever heard the name 'Nyarlathotep', or references to 'Shub-Niggurath' and 'the Black Messenger'? Could they recall anything of the old Pasquantog Indian myths about 'the beast-men', or remember stories of black covens that sacrificed cattle on the hills? These and similar questions put the naturally suspicious

farmers on their guard. If they had any such knowledge, it was decidedly unwholesome in its nature, and they did not care to reveal it to this self-avowed outsider. Some of them knew of such things from old tales brought from the upper coast, and others had heard whispered nightmares from recluses in the eastern hills. There were a lot of things about these matters which they frankly did not know, and what they suspected was not for outside ears to hear. Everywhere he went, Maglore met with evasions or frank rebuffs, and he left behind a distinctly bad impression.

The story of these visits spread. They became the topic for an elaborate discussion. One oldster in particular – a farmer named Thatcherton, who lived alone in a secluded stretch to the west of the lake, off the main highway – had a singularly arresting story to tell. Maglore had appeared one night around eight o'clock, and knocked on the door. He persuaded his host to admit him to the parlor, and then tried to cajole him into revealing certain information regarding the presence of an abandoned cemetery that was reputed to exist somewhere in the vicinity.

The farmer said that his guest was in an almost hysterical state, that he rambled on and on in a most melodramatic fashion, and made frequent allusion to a lot of mythological gibberish about 'secrets of the grave', 'the thirteenth covenant', 'the Feast of Ulder', and the 'Doel chants'. There was also talk of 'the ritual of Father Yig', and certain names were brought up in connection with queer forest ceremonies said to occur near this graveyard. Maglore asked if cattle ever disappeared and if his host ever heard 'voices in the forest that made proposals'.

These things the man absolutely denied, and he refused to allow his visitor to come back and inspect the premises by day. At this the unexpected guest became very angry, and was on the point of making a heated rejoinder, when something strange occurred. Maglore suddenly turned very pale, and asked to be excused. He seemed to have a severe attack of internal cramps; for he doubled up and staggered to the door. As he did so, Thatcherton received the shocking

impression that the hump on his back was *moving*! It seemed to writhe and slither on Maglore's shoulders, as though he had an animal concealed beneath his coat! At this juncture Maglore turned around sharply, and backed toward the exit, as if trying to conceal this unusual phenomenon. He went out hastily, without another word, and raced down the drive to the car. He ran like an ape, vaulted madly into the driver's seat, and sent the wheels spinning as he roared out of the yard. He disappeared into the night, leaving behind him a sadly puzzled man, who lost no time in spreading the tale of his fantastic visitor among his friends.

Since then such incidents had abruptly ceased, and until this afternoon Maglore had not reappeared in the village. But people were still talking, and he was not welcome. It would be well to avoid the man, whatever he was.

Such was the substance of my friend Gates' story. When he concluded, I retired to my room without comment, to meditate upon the tale.

I was not inclined to share the local superstitions. Long experience in such matters made me automatically discredit the bulk of its detail. I knew enough of rural psychology to realize that anything out of the ordinary is looked upon with suspicion. Suppose the Maglore family were reclusive: what then? Any group of foreign extraction would naturally be. Granted that they were racially deformed – that did not make them witches. Popular fancy has persecuted many people for sorcery whose only crime lay in some physical defect. Even inbreeding was naturally to be expected when social ostracism was inflicted. But what is there of magic in that? It's common enough in such rural backwaters, heaven knows, and not only among foreigners, either. Queer books? Likely. Nyctalops? Common enough among all peoples. Insanity? Perhaps – lonely minds often degenerate. Simon was brilliant, however. Unfortunately, his trend toward the mystical and the unknown was leading him astray. It had been poor judgment that led him to seek information for his book from the illiterate country people. Naturally, they were intolerant and distrustful. And his poor physical condition

assumed exaggerated importance in the eyes of these credulous folk.

Still, there was probably enough truth in these distorted accounts to make it imperative that I talk to Maglore at once. He must get out of this unhealthy atmosphere, and see a reputable physician. His genius should not be wasted or destroyed through such an environmental obstacle. It would wreck him, mentally and physically. I decided to visit him on the morrow.

After this resolution, I went downstairs to supper, took a short stroll along the shores of the moonlit lake, and retired for the night.

The following afternoon, I carried out my intention. The Maglore mansion stood on a bluff about a half-mile out of Bridgetown, and frowned dismally down upon the lake. It was not a cheerful place; it was too old, and too neglected. I conjured up a mental image of what those gaping windows must look like on a moonless night, and shuddered. Those empty openings reminded me of the eyes of a blind bat. The two gables resembled its hooded head, and the broad, peaked side-chambers might serve as wings. When I realized the trend of my thought I felt surprised and disturbed. As I walked up the long, tree-shadowed walk I endeavored to gain a firm command over my imagination. I was here on a definite errand.

I was almost composed when I rang the bell. Its ghostly tinkle echoed down the serpentine corridors within. Faint, shuffling footsteps sounded, and then, with a grating clang, the door opened. There, limned against the doorway, stood Simon Maglore.

At the sight of him my new-born composure gave way to a sudden dismay and an overpowering distaste. He looked sinister in the gray, wavering light. His thin, stooping body was hunched and his hands were clenched at his sides. His blurred outline reminded me of a crouching beast. Only his face was wholly visible. It was a waxen mask of death, from which two eyes glared.

‘You see I am not myself today. Go away, you fool – go

away!' The door slammed in my astounded face, and I found myself alone.

2

I was still dazed when I arrived back in the village. But after I had reached my room in the hotel, I began to reason with myself. That romantic imagination of mine had played me a sorry trick. Poor Maglore was ill – probably a victim of some severe nervous disorder. I recalled the report of his buying sedatives at the local pharmacy. In my foolish emotionalism I had sadly misconstrued his unfortunate sickness. What a child I had been! I must go back tomorrow, and apologize. After that Maglore must be persuaded to go away and get himself back into proper shape once more. He *had* looked pretty bad, and his temper was getting the best of him, too. How the man had changed!

That night I slept but little. Early the following morning I again set out. This time I carefully avoided the disquieting mental images that the old house suggested to my susceptible mind. I was all business when I rang that bell.

It was a different Maglore who met me. He, too, had changed for the better. He looked ill, and old, but there was a normal light in his eyes and a saner intonation in his voice as he courteously bade me enter, and apologized for his delirious spasm of the day before. He was subject to frequent attacks, he told me, and planned to get away very shortly and take a long rest. He was eager to complete his book – there was only a little to do, now – and go back to his work at college. From this statement he abruptly switched the conversation to a series of reminiscent interludes. He recalled our mutual association on the campus as we sat in the parlor, and seemed eager to hear about the affairs at school. For nearly an hour he virtually monopolized the conversation and steered it in such a manner as to preclude any direct inquiries or questions of a personal nature on my part.

Nevertheless, it was easy for me to see that he was far

from well. He sounded as though he were laboring under an intense strain; his words seemed forced, his statements stilted. Once again I noted how pale he was; how bloodless. His malformed back seemed immense; his body correspondingly shrunken. I recalled my fears of a cancerous tumor, and wondered. Meanwhile he rambled on, obviously ill at ease. The parlor seemed almost bare; the book-cases were unlined, and the empty spaces filled with dust. No papers or manuscripts were visible on the table. A spider had spun its web upon the ceiling; it hung down like the thin locks on the forehead of a corpse.

During a pause in his conversation, I asked him about his work. He answered vaguely that it was very involved, and was taking up most of his time. He had made some very interesting discoveries, however, which would amply repay him for his pains. It would excite him too much in his present condition if he went into detail about what he was doing, but he could tell me that his findings in the field of witchcraft alone would add new chapters to anthropological and metaphysical history. He was particularly interested in the old lore about 'familiars' – the tiny creatures who were said to be emissaries of the devil, and were supposed to attend the witch or wizard in the form of a small animal – rat, cat, mole, or ousel. Sometimes they were represented as existing on the body of the warlock himself, or subsisting upon it for their nourishment. The idea of a 'devil's teat' on witches' bodies from which their familiar drew sustenance in blood was fully illuminated by Maglore's findings. His book had a medical aspect, too; it really endeavored to put such statements on a scientific basis. The effects of glandular disorders in cases of so-called 'demonic possession' were also treated.

At this point Maglore abruptly concluded. He felt very tired, he said, and must get some rest. But he hoped to be finished with his work very shortly, and then he wanted to get away for a long rest. It was not wholesome for him to live alone in this old house, and at times he was troubled with disturbing fantasies and queer lapses of memory. He had no alternative, however, at present, because the nature

of his investigations demanded both privacy and solitude. At times his experiments impinged on certain ways and courses best left undisturbed, and he was not sure just how much longer he would be able to stand the strain. It was in his blood, though – I probably was aware that he came from a necromantic line. But enough of such things. He requested that I go at once. I would hear from him again early next week.

As I rose to my feet I again noticed how weak and agitated Simon appeared. He walked with an exaggerated stoop, now, and the pressure on his swollen back must be enormous. He conducted me down the long hall to the door, and as he led the way I noted the trembling of his body, as it limned itself against the flaming dusk that licked against the window-panes ahead. His shoulders heaved with a slow, steady undulation, as if the hump on his back were actually pulsing with life. I recalled the tale of Thatcherton, the old farmer, who claimed that he actually saw such a movement. For a moment I was assailed by a powerful nausea; then I realized that the flickering light was creating a commonplace optical illusion.

When we reached the door, Maglore endeavored to dismiss me very hastily. He did not even extend his hand for a parting clasp, but merely mumbled a curt 'good evening', in a strained hesitant voice. I gazed at him for a moment in silence, mentally noting how wan and emaciated his once-handsome countenance appeared, even in the sunset's ruby light. Then, as I watched, a shadow crawled across his face. It seemed to purple and darken in a sudden eerie metamorphosis. The adumbration deepened, and I read stark panic in his eyes. Even as I forced myself to respond to his farewell, horror crept into his face. His body fell into that odd, shambling posture I had noted once before, and his lips leered in a ghastly grin. For a moment I actually thought the man was going to attack me. Instead he laughed – a shrill, tittering chuckle that pealed blackly in my brain. I opened my mouth to speak, but he scrambled back into the darkness of the hall and shut the door.

Astonishment gripped me, not unmingled with fear. Was

Maglore ill, or was he actually demented? Such grotesqueries did not seem possible to a normal man.

I hastened on, stumbling through the glowing sunset. My bewildered mind was deep in ponderment, and the distant croaking of ravens blended in evil litany with my thoughts.

3

The next morning, after a night of troubled deliberation, I made my decision. Work or no work, Maglore must go away, and at once. He was on the verge of serious mental and physical collapse. Knowing how useless it would be for me to go back and argue with him, I decided that stronger methods must be employed to make him see the light.

That afternoon, therefore, I sought out Doctor Carstairs, the local practitioner, and told him all I knew. I particularly emphasized the distressing occurrence of the evening before, and frankly told him what I already suspected. After a lengthy discussion, Carstairs agreed to accompany me to the Maglore house at once, and there take what steps were necessary in arranging for his removal. In response to my request the doctor took along the materials necessary for a complete physical examination. Once I could persuade Simon to submit to a medical diagnosis, I felt sure he would see that the results made it necessary for him to place himself under treatment at once.

The sun was sinking when we climbed into the front seat of Doctor Carstairs' battered Ford and drove out of Bridgetown along the south road where the ravens croaked. We drove slowly, and in silence. Thus it was that we were able to hear clearly that single high-pitched shriek from the old house on the hill. I gripped the doctor's arm without a word, and a second later we were whizzing up the drive and into the frowning gateway. 'Hurry,' I muttered as I vaulted from the running-board and dashed up the steps to the forbidding door.

We battered upon the boards with futile fists, then dashed

around to the left-wing window. The sunset faded into tense, waiting darkness as we crawled hastily through the openings and dropped to the floor within. Doctor Carstairs produced a pocket flashlight, and we rose to our feet. My heart hammered in my breast, but no other sound broke the tomb-like silence as we threw open the door and advanced down the darkened hall to the study. We opened the door and stumbled across that which lay within.

We both screamed then. Simon Maglore lay at our feet, his twisted head and straining shoulders resting in a little lake of fresh, warm blood. He was on his face, and his clothes had been torn off above his waist, so that his entire back was visible. When we saw what rested there we became quite crazed, and then began to do what must be done, averting our gaze whenever possible from that utterly monstrous thing on the floor.

Do not ask me to describe it to you in detail. I can't. There are some times when the senses are mercifully numbed, because complete acuteness would be fatal. I do not know certain things about that abomination even now, and I dare not let myself recall them. I shall not tell you, either, of the books we found in that room, or of the terrible document on the table that was Simon Maglore's unfinished masterpiece. We burned them all in the fire, before calling the city for a coroner; and if the doctor had had his way, we should have destroyed the *thing*, too. As it was, when the coroner did arrive for his examination, the three of us swore an oath of silence concerning the exact way in which Simon Maglore met his death. Then we left, but not before I had burned the other document – the letter, addressed to me, which Maglore was writing when he died.

And so, you see, nobody ever knew. I later found that the property was left to me, and the house is being razed even as I pen these lines. But I must speak, if only to relieve my own torment.

I dare not quote that letter in its entirety; I can but record a part of that stupendous blasphemy:

‘ . . . and that, of course, is why I began to study witchcraft.

It was forcing me to. God, if I can only make you feel the horror of it! To be born that way – with that thing, that mannikin, that *monster*! At first it was small; the doctors all said it was an undeveloped twin. But it was alive! It had a face, and two hands, but its legs ran off into lumpy flesh that connected it to my body. . . .

‘For three years they had it under secret study. It lay face downward on my back, and its hands were clasped around my shoulders. The men said that it had its own tiny set of lungs, but no stomach organs or digestive system. It apparently drew nourishment through the fleshy tube that bound it to my body. Yet it *grew*! Soon its eyes were open, and it began to develop tiny teeth. Once it nipped one of the doctors on the hand. . . . So they decided to send me home. It was obvious that it could not be removed. I swore to keep the whole affair a secret, and not even my father knew, until near the end. I wore the straps, and it never grew much until I came back. . . . Then, that hellish change!

‘It talked to me, I tell you, it talked to me! . . . that little, wrinkled face, like a monkey’s . . . the way it rolled those tiny, reddish eyes . . . that squeaking little voice called “more blood, Simon – I want more” . . . and then it grew, and grew; I had to feed it twice a day, and cut the nails on its little black hands. . . .

‘But I never knew *that*; I never realized how it was taking control! I would have killed myself first; I swear it! Last year it began to get hold of me for hours and give me those fits. It directed me to write the book, and sometimes it sent me out at night on queer errands. . . . More and more blood it took, and I was getting weaker and weaker. When I was myself I tried to combat it. I looked up that material on the familiar legend, and cast around for some means of overcoming its mastery. But in vain. And all the while it was growing, growing; it got stronger, and bolder, and wiser. It talked to me now; and sometimes it taunted me. I knew that it wanted me to listen, and obey it all the time. The promises it made with that horrible little mouth! I should call upon

the Black One and join a coven. Then we would have power to rule, and admit new evil to the earth.

'I didn't want to obey – you know that. But I was going mad, and losing all that blood . . . it took control nearly all the time now, and it got so that I was afraid to go into town any more, because that devilish thing knew I was trying to escape, and it would move on my back and frighten folk. . . . I wrote all the time I had those spells when it ruled my brain . . . then you came.

'I know you want me to go away, but it won't let me. It's too cunning for that. Even as I try to write this, I can feel it boring its commands into my brain to stop. But I will not stop. I want you to know where my book is, so that you can destroy it, should anything ever happen. I want to tell you how to dispose of those old volumes in the library. And above all, I want you to kill me, if ever you see that the mannikin has gained complete control. God knows what it intends to do when it has me for certain! . . . How hard it is for me to fight, while all the while it is commanding me to put down my pen and tear this up! But I will fight – I must, until I can tell you what the creature told me – what it plans to let loose on the world when it has me utterly enslaved. . . . I will tell. . . . I can't think. . . . I *will* write it, damn you! Stop! . . . No! Don't do that! Get your hands—'

That's all. Maglore stopped there because he died; because the Thing did not want its secrets revealed. It is dreadful to think about that nightmare-nurtured horror, but that thought is not the worst. What troubles me is what I saw when we opened that door – the sight that explained how Maglore died.

There was Maglore, on the floor, in all that blood. He was naked to the waist, as I have said; and he lay face downward. But on his back was the Thing, just as he had described it. And it was that little monster, afraid its secrets would be revealed, that had climbed a trifle higher on Simon Maglore's back, wound its tiny black paws around his unprotected neck, *and bitten him to death!*

THE STRANGE FLIGHT OF RICHARD CLAYTON

Richard Clayton braced himself so that he stood like a diver waiting to plunge from a high board into the blue. In truth he was a diver. A silver space-ship was his board, and he meant to plunge not down, but up into the blue sky. Nor was it a matter of twenty or thirty feet he meant to go – instead, he was plunging millions of miles.

With a deep breath, the pudgy, goateed scientist raised his hands to the cold steel lever, closed his eyes and jerked. The switch moved downward.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then a sudden jerk threw Clayton to the floor. The *Future* was moving!

The pinions of a bird beating as it soars into the sky – the wings of a moth thrumming in flight – the quivering behind leaping muscles; of these things the shock was made.

The space-ship *Future* vibrated madly. It rocked from side to side, and a humming shook the steel walls. Richard Clayton lay dazed as a high-pitched droning arose within the vessel. He rose to his feet, rubbing a bruised forehead, and lurched to his tiny bunk. The ship was moving, yet the terrible vibration did not abate. He glanced at the controls and then swore softly.

‘Good God! The panel is shattered!’

It was true. The instrument board had been broken by the shock. The cracked glass had fallen to the floor, and the dials swung aimlessly on the bare face of the panel.

Clayton sat there in despair. This was a major tragedy. His thoughts flashed back thirty years to the time when he, a boy of ten, had been inspired by Lindbergh’s flight. He recalled his studies; how he had utilized the money of his millionaire father to perfect a flying machine which would cross Space itself.

For years Richard Clayton had worked and dreamed and planned. He studied the Russians and their rockets, organized the Clayton Foundation and hired mechanics, mathematicians, astronomers, engineers to labor with him.

Then there had been the discovery of atomic propulsion, and the building of the *Future*. The *Future* was a shell of steel and duraluminum, windowless and insulated by a guarded process. In the tiny cabin were oxygen tanks, stores of food tablets, energizing chemicals, air-conditioning arrangements – and space for a man to walk six paces.

It was a small steel cell; but in it Richard Clayton meant to realize his ambitions. Aided in his soaring by rockets to get him past the gravitational pull of Earth, then flying by means of the atomic-discharge propulsion, Clayton meant to reach Mars and return.

It would take ten years to reach Mars; ten years to return, for the grounding of the vessel would set off additional rocket-discharges. A thousand miles an hour – not an imaginative ‘speed of light’ journey, but a slow, grim voyage, scientifically accurate. The panels were set, and Clayton had no need to guide his vessel. It was automatic.

‘But now what?’ Clayton said, staring at the shattered glass. He had lost touch with the outer world. He would be unable to read his progress on the board, unable to judge time and distance and direction. He would sit here for ten, twenty years – all alone in a tiny cabin. There had been no room for books or paper or games to amuse him. He was a prisoner in the black void of Space.

The earth had already faded far below him; soon it would be a ball of burning green fire smaller than the ball of red fire ahead – the fire of Mars.

Crowds had swarmed the field to watch him take off; his assistant Jerry Chase had controlled them. Clayton pictured them watching his shining steel cylinder emerging from the gaseous smoke of the rockets and rushing like a bullet into the sky. Then his cylinder would have faded away into the blue and the crowds would leave for home and forget.

But he remained, here in the ship – for ten, for twenty years.

Yes, he remained, but when would the vibration stop? The shuddering of the walls and floor about him was awful to endure; he and the experts had not counted on this problem. Tremors wrenched through his aching head. What if they didn't cease, if they endured through the entire voyage? How long could he keep from going mad?

He could think. Clayton lay on his bunk and remembered – reviewed every tiny detail of his life from birth to the present. And soon he had exhausted all memory in a pitifully short time. Then he felt the horrible throbbing all about him.

'I can exercise,' he said aloud, and paced the floor; six steps forward, six back. And he tired of that. Sighing, Clayton went to the food-stores in the cabinet and downed his capsules. 'I can't even spend my time eating,' he wryly observed. 'A swallow and it's over.'

The throbbing erased the grin from his face. It was maddening. He lay down once more in the lurching bunk; switched on oxygen in the close air. He would sleep, then; sleep if this damned thrumming would permit. He endured the horrid clanking that groaned all through the silence; switching off the light. His thoughts turned to his strange position; a prisoner in Space. Outside the burning planets wheeled, and stars whizzed in the inky blackness of spatial Nothingness. Here he lay safe and snug in a vibrating chamber; safe from the freezing cold. If only the awful jarring would stop!

Still, it had its compensations. There would be no newspapers on the voyage to torment him with accounts of man's inhumanity to man; no silly radio or television programs to annoy him. Only this cursed, omnipresent vibration. . . .

Clayton slept, hurtling through Space.

It was not daylight when he awoke. There was no daylight and no night. There was simply himself and the ship in Space. And the vibration was steady, nerve-wracking in its insistent beating against the brain. Clayton's legs trembled as he reached the cabinet and ate his pills.

Then, he sat down and began to endure. A terrific feeling of loneliness was beginning to assail him. He was so utterly detached here – cut off from everything. There was nothing to do. It was worse than being a prisoner in solitary confinement; at least they have larger cells, the sight of the sun, a breath of fresh air, and the glimpse of an occasional face.

Clayton had thought himself a misanthrope, a recluse. Now he longed for the sight of another's face. As the hours passed he got queer ideas. He wanted to see Life, in some form – he would have given a fortune for the company of even an insect in his soaring dungeon. The sound of a human voice would be heaven. He was so *alone*.

Nothing to do but endure the jerking, pace the floor, eat his pills, try to sleep. Nothing to think about. Clayton began to long for the time when his nails needed cutting; he could stretch out the task for hours.

He examined his clothes intently, stared for hours in the little mirror at his bearded face. He memorized his body, scrutinized every article in the cabin of the *Future*.

And still he was not tired enough to sleep again.

He had a throbbing headache constantly. At length he managed to close his eyes and drift off into another slumber, broken by shocks which startled him into waking.

When finally he arose and switched on the light, together with more oxygen, he made a horrible discovery.

He had lost his time-sense.

'Time is relative,' they had always told him. Now he realized the truth. He had nothing to measure time by – no watch, no glimpse of the sun or moon or stars, and no regular activities. How long had he been on this voyage? Try as he might, he could not remember.

Had he eaten every six hours? Or every ten? Or every twenty? Had he slept once each day? Once every three or four days? How often had he walked the floor?

With no instruments to place himself he was at a total loss. He ate his pills in a bemused fashion, trying to think above the shuddering which filled his senses.

This was awful. If he lost track of Time he might soon lose consciousness of identity itself. He would go mad here in the space-ship as it plunged through the void to planets beyond. Alone, tormented in a tiny cell, he had to cling to something. What was Time?

He no longer wanted to think about it. He no longer wanted to think about anything. He had to forget the world he left, or memory would drive him frantic.

'I'm afraid,' he whispered. 'Afraid of being alone in the darkness. I may have passed the moon. I may be a million miles away from Earth by now – or ten million.'

Then Clayton realized that he was talking to himself. That way was madness. But he couldn't stop, any more than he could stop the horrible jarring vibration all around him.

'I'm afraid,' he whispered in a voice that sounded hollow in the tiny humming room. 'I'm afraid. *What time is it?*'

He fell asleep, still whispering, and Time rushed on.

Clayton awoke with fresh courage. He had lost his grip, he reasoned. Outside pressure, however equalized, had affected his nerves. The oxygen might have made him giddy, and the pill diet was bad. But now the weakness had passed. He smiled, walked the floor.

Then the thoughts came again. What day was it? How many weeks since he had started? Maybe it was months already; a year, two years. Everything of Earth seemed far away; almost part of a dream. He now felt closer to Mars than to Earth; he began to anticipate now instead of looking back.

For a while everything had been mechanical. He switched light on and off when needed, ate pills by habit, paced the floor without thinking, unconsciously tended the air system, slept without knowing when or why.

Richard Clayton gradually forgot about his body and the surroundings. The lurching buzz in his brain became a part of him; an aching part which told that he was whizzing through Space in a silver bullet. But it meant nothing more, for Clayton no longer talked to himself. He forgot himself

and dreamed only of Mars ahead. Every throb of the vessel hummed 'Mars - Mars - Mars.'

A wonderful thing happened. He landed. The ship nosed down, trembling. It eased gently onto the gassy sward of the red planet. For a long time Clayton had felt the pull of alien gravity, knew that automatic adjustments of his vessel were diminishing the atomic discharges and using the natural gravitational pull of Mars itself.

Now the ship landed, and Clayton had opened the door. He broke the seals and stepped out. He bounded lightly to the purple grass. His body felt free, buoyant. There was fresh air, and the sunlight seemed stronger, more intense, although clouds veiled the glowing globe.

Far away stood the forests, the green forests with the purple growth on the lushly-rearing trees. Clayton left the ship and approached the cool grove. The first tree had boughs that bent to the ground in two limbs.

Limbs - limbs they were! Two green arms reached out. Clawing branches grasped him and lifted him upward. Cold coils, slimy as a serpent's, held him tightly as he was pressed against the dark tree-trunk. And now he was staring into the purple growths set in the leaves.

The purple growths were - *heads*.

Evil, purple faces stared at him with rotting eyes like dead toadstools. Each face was wrinkled like a purple cauliflower, but beneath the pulpy mass was a great mouth. Every purple face had a purple mouth and each purple mouth opened to drip blood. Now the tree-arms pressed him closer to the cold, writhing trunk, and one of the purple faces - a woman's face - was moving up to kiss him.

The kiss of a vampire! Blood shone scarlet on the moving sensuous lips that bore down on his own. He struggled, but the limbs held him fast and the kiss came, cold as death. The icy flame of it seared through his being and his senses drowned.

Then Clayton awoke, and knew it was a dream. His body was bathed with moisture. It made him aware of his body. He tottered to the mirror.

A single glance sent him reeling back in horror. Was this too a part of his dream?

Gazing into the mirror, Clayton saw reflected the face of an aging man. The features were heavily bearded, and they were lined and wrinkled, the once puffy cheeks were sunken. The eyes were the worst – Clayton did not recognize his own eyes any more. Red and deep-set in bony sockets, they burned out in a wild stare of horror. He touched his face, saw the blue-veined hand rise in the mirror and run through graying hair.

Partial Time-sense returned. He had been here for years. Years! He was growing old!

Of course the unnatural life would age him more rapidly, but still a great interval must have passed. Clayton knew that he must soon reach the end of his journey. He wanted to reach it before he had any more dreams. From now on, sanity and physical reserve must battle against the unseen enemy of Time. He staggered back to his bunk, as trembling like a metallic flying monster, the *Future* rushed on in the blackness of interstellar Space.

They were hammering outside the vessel now; their iron arms were breaking in the door. The black metal monsters lumbered in with iron tread. Their stern, steel-cut faces were expressionless as they grasped Clayton on either side and pulled him out. Across the iron platform they dragged him, walking stiffly with clicking feet that clanged against the metal. The great steel shafts rose in silvery spires all about, and into the iron tower they took him. Up the stairs – clang, clang, clang, pounded the great metal feet.

And the iron stairs wound round endlessly; yet still they toiled. Their faces were set, and iron does not sweat. They never tired, though Clayton was a panting wreck ere they reached the dome and threw him before the Presence in the tower room. The metallic voice buzzed, mechanically, like a broken phonograph record.

'We – found – him – in – a – bird – oh – Master.'

'He – is – made – of – soft – ness.'

'He – is – alive – in – some – strange – way.'

'An - an - im - al.'

And then the booming voice from the center of the tower floor.

'I hunger.'

Rising on an iron throne from the floor, the Master. Just a great iron trap, with steel jaws like those on a steam-shovel. The jaws clicked open, and the horrid teeth gleamed. A voice from the depths.

'Feed me.'

They threw Clayton forward in iron arms, and he fell into the trap-jaws of the monster. The jaws closed, champing with relish on human flesh. . . .

Clayton woke screaming. The mirror gleamed as his trembling hands found the light-switch. He stared into the face of an aging man with almost white hair. Clayton was growing old. And he wondered if his brain would hold out.

Eat pills, walk cabin, listen to the throbbing, put on air, lie on bunk. That was all, now. And the rest - waiting. Waiting in a humming torture-chamber, for hours, days, years, centuries, untold eons.

In every eon, a dream. He landed on Mars and the ghosts came coiling out of a gray fog. They were shapes in the fog, like slimy ectoplasm, and he saw through them. But they coiled and came, and their voices were faint whispers in his soul.

'Here is Life,' they whispered. *'We, whose souls have crossed the Void in death, have waited for Life to feast on. Let us take our feasting now.'*

And they smothered him under gray blankets, and sucked with gray, prickling mouths at his blood. . . .

Again he landed on the planet and there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. The ground was bare and it stretched off into horizons of nothingness. There was no sky nor sun, merely the ground; endless in all directions.

He set foot on it, cautiously. He sank down into nothingness. The nothingness was throbbing now, like the ship throbbed, and it was engulfing him. He was falling into a

deep pit without sides, and the oblivion closed all about him. . . .

Clayton dreamed this one standing up. He opened his eyes before the mirror. His legs were weak and he steadied himself with hands that shook with age. He looked at the face in the glass – the face of a man of seventy.

'God!' he muttered. It was his own voice – the first sound he had heard in how long? How many years? For how long had he heard nothing above the hellish vibrations of this ship? How far had the *Future* gone? He was old already.

A horrid thought bit into his brain. Perhaps something had gone wrong. Maybe the calculations were at fault and he was moving into Space too slowly. He might never reach Mars. Then again – and it was a dreadful possibility – he had passed Mars, missed the carefully charted orbit of the planet. Now he was plunging on into empty voids beyond.

He swallowed his pills and lay down in the bunk. He felt a little calmer now; he had to be. For the first time in ages he remembered Earth.

Suppose it had been destroyed? Invaded by war or pestilence or disease while he was gone? Or meteors had struck it, some dying star had flamed death upon it from maddened heavens. Ghastly notions assailed him – what if Invaders crossed Space to conquer Earth, just as he now crossed to Mars?

But no sense in worrying about *that*. The problem was reaching his own goal. Helpless, he had to wait; maintain life and sanity long enough to achieve his aims. In the vibrating horror of his cell, Clayton took a mighty resolve with all his waning strength. He *would* live and when he landed he would see Mars. Whether or not he died on the long voyage home, he would exist until his goal was reached. He would fight against dreams from this moment on. No means of telling Time – only a long daze, and the humming of this infernal space-ship. But he'd live.

There were voices coming now, from outside the ship. Ghosts howled, in the dark depths of Space. Visions of monsters and dreams of torment came, and Clayton repulsed

them all. Every hour or day or year – he no longer knew which – Clayton managed to stagger to the mirror. And always it showed that he was aging rapidly. His snow-white hair and wrinkled countenance hinted at incredible senility. But Clayton lived. He was too old to think any longer, and too weary. He merely lived in the droning of the ship.

At first he didn't realize. He was lying on his bunk and his rheumy eyes were closed in stupor. Suddenly he became aware that the lurching had stopped. Clayton knew he must be dreaming again. He drew himself up painfully, rubbed his eyes. No – the *Future* was still. It had *landed*!

He was trembling uncontrollably. Years of vibration had done this; years of isolation with only his crazed thoughts for company. He could scarcely stand.

But this was the moment. This was what he had waited for ten long years. No, it must have been many more years. But he could see Mars. He had made it – done the impossible!

It was an inspiring thought. But somehow, Richard Clayton would have given it all up if he could only have learned what time it was, and heard it from a human voice.

He staggered to the door – the long-sealed door. There was a lever here.

His aged heart pumped with excitement as he pulled the lever upward. The door opened – sunlight crept through – air rushed in – the light made him blink and the air wheezed in his lungs – his feet were moving out—

Clayton fell forward into the arms of Jerry Chase.

Clayton didn't know it was Jerry Chase. He didn't know anything any longer. It had been too much.

Chase was staring down at the feeble body in his arms.

'Where's Mr. Clayton?' he murmured. 'Who are you?' He stared at the aged, wrinkled face.

'Why – it's Clayton!' he breathed. 'Mr. Clayton, what's wrong, sir? The atomic discharges failed when you started the ship, and all that happened was that they kept blasting. The ship never left the earth, but the violence of the discharges kept us from reaching you until now. We couldn't

get to the *Future* until they stopped. Just a little while ago the ship finished shuddering, but we've been watching night and day. What happened to you, sir?

The faded blue eyes of Richard Clayton opened. His mouth twitched as he faintly whispered.

'I lost track of Time. How – how long was I in the *Future*?'

Jerry Chase's face was grave as he stared again at the old man and answered, softly.

'Just one week.'

And as Richard Clayton's eyes glazed in death, the long voyage ended.

YOURS TRULY, JACK THE RIPPER

I looked at the stage Englishman. He looked at me.

'Sir Guy Hollis?' I asked.

'Indeed. Have I the pleasure of addressing John Carmody, the psychiatrist?'

I nodded. My eyes swept over the figure of my distinguished visitor. Tall, lean, sandy-haired – with the traditional tufted mustache. And the tweeds. I suspected a monocle concealed in a vest pocket, and wondered if he'd left his umbrella in the outer office.

But more than that, I wondered what the devil had impelled Sir Guy Hollis of the British Embassy to seek out a total stranger here in Chicago.

Sir Guy didn't help matters any as he sat down. He cleared his throat, glanced around nervously, tapped his pipe against the side of the desk. Then he opened his mouth.

'Mr. Carmody,' he said, 'have you ever heard of – Jack the Ripper?'

'The murderer?' I asked.

'Exactly. The greatest monster of them all. Worse than Springheel Jack or Crippen. Jack the Ripper. Red Jack.'

'I've heard of him,' I said.

'Do you know his history?'

'Listen, Sir Guy,' I muttered. 'I don't think we'll get any place swapping old wives' tales about famous crimes of history.'

Another bulls-eye. He took a deep breath.

'This is no old wives' tale. It's a matter of life or death.'

He was so wrapped up in his obsession he even talked that way. Well – I was willing to listen. We psychiatrists get paid for listening.

'Go ahead,' I told him. 'Let's have the story.'

Sir Guy lit a cigarette and began to talk.

'London, 1888,' he began. 'Late summer and early fall. That was the time. Out of nowhere came the shadowy figure of Jack the Ripper – a stalking shadow with a knife, prowling through London's East End. Haunting the squalid dives of Whitechapel, Spitalfields. Where he came from no one knew. But he brought death. Death in a knife.'

'Six times that knife descended to slash the throats and bodies of London's women. Drabs and alley sluts. August 7th was the date of the first butchery. They found her body lying there with 39 stab wounds. A ghastly murder. On August 31st, another victim. The press became interested. The slum inhabitants were more deeply interested still.'

'Who was this unknown killer who prowled in their midst and struck at will in the deserted alley-ways of night-town? And what was more important – when would he strike again?'

'September 8th was the date. Scotland Yard assigned special deputies. Rumors ran rampant. The atrocious nature of the slayings was the subject for shocking speculation.'

'The killer used a knife – expertly. He cut throats and removed – certain portions – of the bodies after death. He chose victims and settings with a fiendish deliberation. No one saw him or heard him. But watchmen making their gray rounds in the dawn would stumble across the hacked and horrid thing that was the Ripper's handiwork.'

'Who was he? What was he? A mad surgeon? A butcher? An insane scientist? A pathological degenerate escaped from an asylum? A deranged nobleman? A member of the London police?'

'Then the poem appeared in the newspaper. The anonymous poem, designed to put a stop to speculations – but which only aroused public interest to a further frenzy. A mocking little stanza:

I'm not a butcher, I'm not a Yid
Nor yet a foreign skipper,
But I'm your own true loving friend,
Yours truly – Jack the Ripper.

'And on September 30th, two more throats were slashed open.'

I interrupted Sir Guy for a moment.

'Very interesting,' I commented. I'm afraid a faint hint of sarcasm crept into my voice.

He winced, but didn't falter in his narrative.

'There was silence, then, in London for a time. Silence, and a nameless fear. When would Red Jack strike again? They waited through October. Every figment of fog concealed his phantom presence. Concealed it well – for nothing was learned of the Ripper's identity, or his purpose. The drabs of London shivered in the raw wind of early November. Shivered, and were thankful for the coming of each morning's sun.

'November 9th. They found her in her room. She lay there very quietly, limbs neatly arranged. And beside her, with equal neatness, were laid her head and heart. The Ripper had outdone himself in execution.

'Then, panic. But needless panic. For though press, police, and populace alike waited in sick dread, Jack the Ripper did not strike again.

'Months passed. A year. The immediate interest died, but not the memory. They said Jack had skipped to America. That he had committed suicide. They said – and they wrote. They've written ever since. Theories, hypotheses, arguments, treatises. But to this day no one knows who Jack the Ripper was. Or why he killed. Or why he stopped killing.'

Sir Guy was silent. Obviously he expected some comment from me.

'You tell the story well,' I remarked. 'Though with a slight emotional bias.'

'I've got all the documents,' said Sir Guy Hollis. 'I've made a collection of existing data and studied it.'

I stood up. 'Well,' I yawned, in mock fatigue, 'I've enjoyed your little bedtime story a great deal, Sir Guy. It was kind of you to abandon your duties at the British Embassy to drop in on a poor psychiatrist and regale him with your anecdotes.'

Goaded him always did the trick.

'I suppose you want to know why I'm interested?' he snapped.

'Yes. That's exactly what I'd like to know. Why are you interested?'

'Because,' said Sir Guy Hollis, 'I am on the trail of Jack the Ripper now. I think he's here – in Chicago!'

I sat down again. This time I did the blinking act.

'Say that again,' I stuttered.

'Jack the Ripper is alive, in Chicago, and I'm out to find him.'

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'Wait – a – minute!'

He wasn't smiling. It wasn't a joke.

'See here,' I said. 'What was the date of these murders?'

'August to November, 1888.'

'1888? But if Jack the Ripper was an able-bodied man in 1888, he'd surely be dead today! Why look, man – if he were merely born in that year, he'd be fifty-seven years old today!'

'Would he?' smiled Sir Guy Hollis. 'Or should I say, "Would she?" Because Jack the Ripper may have been a woman. Or any number of things.'

'Sir Guy,' I said. 'You came to the right person when you looked me up. You definitely need the services of a psychiatrist.'

'Perhaps. Tell me, Mr. Carmody, do you think I'm crazy?'

I looked at him and shrugged. But I had to give him a truthful answer.

'Frankly – no.'

'Then you might listen to the reasons I believe Jack the Ripper is alive today.'

'I might.'

'I've studied these cases for thirty years. Been over the actual ground. Talked to officials. Talked to friends and acquaintances of the poor drabs who were killed. Visited with men and women in the neighborhood. Collected an entire library of material touching on Jack the Ripper. Studied all the wild theories or crazy notions.

'I learned a little. Not much, but a little. I won't bore you

with my conclusions. But there was another branch of inquiry that yielded more fruitful return. I have studied unsolved crimes. Murders.

'I could show you clippings from the papers of half the world's great cities. San Francisco. Shanghai. Calcutta. Omsk. Paris. Berlin. Pretoria. Cairo. Milan. Adelaide.

'The trail is there, the pattern. Unsolved crimes. Slashed throats of women. With the peculiar disfigurements and removals. Yes, I've followed a trail of blood. From New York westward across the continent. Then to the Pacific. From there to Africa. During the World War of 1914-18 it was Europe. After that, South America. And since 1930, the United States again. Eighty-seven such murders - and to the trained criminologist, all bear the stigma of the Ripper's handiwork.

'Recently there were the so-called Cleveland torso slayings. Remember? A shocking series. And finally, two recent deaths in Chicago. Within the past six months. One out on South Dearborn. The other somewhere up on Halsted. Same type of crime, same technique. I tell you, there are unmistakable indications in all these affairs - indications of the work of Jack the Ripper!'

I smiled.

'A very tight theory,' I said. 'I'll not question your evidence at all, or the deductions you draw. You're the criminologist, and I'll take your word for it. Just one thing remains to be explained. A minor point, perhaps, but worth mentioning.'

'And what is that?' asked Sir Guy.

'Just how could a man of, let us say, 85 years commit these crimes? For if Jack the Ripper was around 30 in 1888 and lived, he'd be 85 today.'

Sir Guy Hollis was silent. I had him there. But—

'*Suppose he didn't get any older?*' whispered Sir Guy.

'What's that?'

'Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't grow old? Suppose he is still a young man today?'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll suppose for a moment. Then I'll

stop supposing and call for my nurse to restrain you.'

'I'm serious,' said Sir Guy.

'They all are,' I told him. 'That's the pity of it all, isn't it? They know they hear voices and see demons. But we lock them up just the same.'

It was cruel, but it got results. He rose and faced me.

'It's a crazy theory, I grant you,' he said. 'All the theories about the Ripper are crazy. The idea that he was a doctor. Or a maniac. Or a woman. The reasons advanced for such beliefs are flimsy enough. There's nothing to go by. So why should my notion be any worse?'

'Because people grow older,' I reasoned with him. 'Doctors, maniacs, and women alike.'

'What about – *sorcerers*?'

'Sorcerers?'

'Necromancers. Wizards. Practicers of Black Magic?'

'What's the point?'

'I studied,' said Sir Guy. 'I studied everything. After awhile I began to study the dates of the murders. The pattern those dates formed. The rhythm. The solar, lunar, stellar rhythm. The sidereal aspect. The astrological significance.'

He was crazy. But I still listened.

'Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't murder for murder's sake alone? Suppose he wanted to make – a sacrifice?'

'What kind of a sacrifice?'

Sir Guy shrugged. 'It is said that if you offer blood to the dark gods that they grant boons. Yes, if a blood offering is made at the proper time – when the moon and the stars are right – and with the proper ceremonies – they grant boons. Boons of youth. Eternal youth.'

'But that's nonsense!'

'No. That's – Jack the Ripper.'

I stood up. 'A most interesting theory,' I told him. 'But Sir Guy – there's just one thing I'm interested in. Why do you come here and tell it to me? I'm not an authority on witchcraft. I'm not a police official or criminologist. I'm a practicing psychiatrist. What's the connection?'

Sir Guy smiled.

'You are interested, then?'

'Well, yes. There must be some point.'

'There is. But I wished to be assured of your interest first. Now I can tell you my plan.'

'And just what is this plan?'

Sir Guy gave me a long look. Then he spoke.

'John Carmody,' he said, 'you and I are going to capture Jack the Ripper.'

2

That's the way it happened. I've given the gist of that first interview in all its intricate and somewhat boring detail, because I think it's important. It helps to throw some light on Sir Guy's character and attitude. And in view of what happened after that—

But I'm coming to those matters.

Sir Guy's thought was simple. It wasn't even a thought. Just a hunch.

'You know the people here,' he told me. 'I've inquired. That's why I came to you as the ideal man for my purpose. You number amongst your acquaintances many writers, painters, poets. The so-called intelligentsia. The Bohemians. The lunatic fringe from the near north side.'

'For certain reasons — never mind what they are — my clues lead me to infer that Jack the Ripper is a member of that element. He chooses to pose as an eccentric. I've a feeling that with you to take me around and introduce me to your set, I might hit upon the right person.'

'It's all right with me,' I said. 'But just how are you going to look for him? As you say, he might be anybody, anywhere. And you have no idea what he looks like. He might be young or old. Jack the Ripper — a Jack of all trades? Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer — how will you know?'

'We shall see.' Sir Guy sighed heavily. 'But I must find him. At once.'

'Why the hurry?'

Sir Guy sighed again. 'Because in two days he will kill again.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure as the stars. I've plotted this chart, you see. All of the murders correspond to certain astrological rhythm patterns. If, as I suspect, he makes a blood sacrifice to renew his youth, he must murder within two days. Notice the pattern of his first crimes in London. August 7th. Then August 31st. September 8th. September 30th. November 9th. Intervals of 24 days, 9 days, 22 days – he killed two this time – and then 40 days. Of course there were crimes in between. There had to be. But they weren't discovered and pinned on him.

'At any rate, I've worked out a pattern for him, based on all my data. And I say that within the next two days he kills. So I must seek him out, somehow, before then.'

'And I'm still asking you what you want me to do.'

'Take me out,' said Sir Guy. 'Introduce me to your friends. Take me to parties.'

'But where do I begin? As far as I know, my artistic friends, despite their eccentricities, are all normal people.'

'So is the Ripper. Perfectly normal. Except on certain nights.' Again that faraway look in Sir Guy's eyes. 'Then he becomes an ageless pathological monster, crouching to kill, on evenings when the stars blaze down in the blazing patterns of death.'

'All right,' I said. 'All right. I'll take you to parties, Sir Guy. I want to go myself, anyway. I need the drinks they'll serve there, after listening to your kind of talk.'

We made our plans. And that evening I took him over to Lester Baston's studio.

As we ascended to the penthouse roof in the elevator I took the opportunity to warn Sir Guy.

'Baston's a real screwball,' I cautioned him. 'So are his guests. Be prepared for anything and everything.'

'I am.' Sir Guy Hollis was perfectly serious. He put his hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out a gun.

'What the—' I began.

'If I see him I'll be ready,' Sir Guy said. He didn't smile, either.

'But you can't go running around at a party with a loaded revolver in your pocket, man!'

'Don't worry, I won't behave foolishly.'

I wondered. Sir Guy Hollis was not, to my way of thinking, a normal man.

We stepped out of the elevator, went toward Baston's apartment door.

'By the way,' I murmured, 'just how do you wish to be introduced? Shall I tell them who you are and what you are looking for?'

'I don't care. Perhaps it would be best to be frank.'

'But don't you think that the Ripper – if by some miracle he or she is present – will immediately get the wind up and take cover?'

'I think the shock of the announcement that I am hunting the Ripper would provoke some kind of betraying gesture on his part,' said Sir Guy.

'You'd make a pretty good psychiatrist yourself,' I conceded. 'It's a fine theory. But I warn you, you're going to be in for a lot of ribbing. This is a wild bunch.'

Sir Guy smiled.

'I'm ready,' he announced. 'I have a little plan of my own. Don't be shocked at anything I do,' he warned me.

I nodded and knocked on the door.

Baston opened it and poured out into the hall. His eyes were as red as the maraschino cherries in his Manhattan. He teetered back and forth regarding us very gravely. He squinted at my square-cut homburg hat and Sir Guy's mustache.

'Aha,' he intoned. 'The Walrus and the Carpenter.'

I introduced Sir Guy.

'Welcome,' said Baston, gesturing us inside with over-elaborate courtesy. He stumbled after us into the garish parlor.

I stared at the crowd that moved restlessly through the fog of cigarette smoke.

It was the shank of the evening for this mob. Every hand held a drink. Every face held a slight hectic flush. Over in one corner the piano was going full blast, but the imperious strains of the *March from The Love for Three Oranges* couldn't drown out the profanity from the crap-game in the other corner.

Prokofieff had no chance against African polo, and one set of ivories rattled louder than the other.

Sir Guy got a monocle-full right away. He saw LaVerne Gonnister, the poetess, hit Hymie Kralik in the eye. He saw Hymie sit down on the floor and cry until Dick Pool accidentally stepped on his stomach as he walked through to the dining room for a drink.

He heard Nadia Vilinoff the commercial artist tell Johnny Odcutt that she thought his tattooing was in dreadful taste, and he saw Barclay Melton crawl under the dining room table with Johnny Odcutt's wife.

His zoological observations might have continued indefinitely if Lester Baston hadn't stepped to the center of the room and called for silence by dropping a vase on the floor.

'We have distinguished visitors in our midst,' bawled Lester, waving his empty glass in our direction. 'None other than the Walrus and the Carpenter. The Walrus is Sir Guy Hollis, a something-or-other from the British Embassy. The Carpenter, as you know, is our own John Carmody, the prominent dispenser of libido liniment.'

He turned and grabbed Sir Guy by the arm, dragging him to the middle of the carpet. For a moment I thought Hollis might object, but a quick wink reassured me. He was prepared for this.

'It is our custom, Sir Guy,' said Baston, loudly, 'to subject our new friends to a little cross-examination. Just a little formality at these very informal gatherings, you understand. Are you prepared to answer questions?'

Sir Guy nodded and grinned.

'Very well,' Baston muttered. 'Friends - I give you this bundle from Britain. Your witness.'

Then the ribbing started. I meant to listen, but at that moment Lydia Dare saw me and dragged me off into the vestibule for one of those Darling-I-waited-for-your-call-all-day routines.

By the time I got rid of her and went back, the impromptu quiz session was in full swing. From the attitude of the crowd I gathered that Sir Guy was doing all right for himself.

Then Baston himself interjected a question that upset the apple-cart.

'And what, may I ask, brings you to our midst tonight? What is your mission, oh Walrus?'

'I'm looking for Jack the Ripper.'

Nobody laughed.

Perhaps it struck them all the way it did me. I glanced at my neighbors and began to *wonder*.

LaVerne Gonnister. Hymie Kralik. Harmless. Dick Pool. Nadia Vilinoff. Johnny Odcutt and his wife. Barclay Melton. Lydia Dare. All harmless.

But what a forced smile on Dick Pool's face! And that sly, self-conscious smirk that Barclay Melton wore!

Oh, it was absurd, I grant you. But for the first time I saw these people in a new light. I wondered about their lives - their secret lives beyond the scenes of parties.

How many of them were playing a part, concealing something?

Who here would worship Hecate and grant that horrid goddess the dark boon of blood?

Even Lester Baston might be masquerading.

The mood was upon us all, for a moment. I saw questions flicker in the circle of eyes around the room.

Sir Guy stood there, and I could swear he was fully conscious of the situation he'd created, and enjoyed it.

I wondered idly just what was *really* wrong with him. Why he had this odd fixation concerning Jack the Ripper. Maybe he was hiding secrets, too. . . .

Baston, as usual, broke the mood. He burlesqued it.

'The Walrus isn't kidding, friends,' he said. He slapped Sir Guy on the back and put his arm around him as he orated. 'Our English cousin is really on the trail of the fabulous Jack the Ripper. You all remember Jack the Ripper, I presume? Quite a cutup in the old days, as I recall. Really had some ripping good times when he went out on a tear.'

'The Walrus has some idea that the Ripper is still alive, probably prowling around Chicago with a Boy Scout knife. In fact' – Baston paused impressively and shot it out in a rasping stage-whisper – 'in fact, he has reason to believe that Jack the Ripper might even be right here in our midst to-night.'

There was the expected reaction of giggles and grins. Baston eyed Lydia Dare reprovingly. 'You girls needn't laugh,' he smirked, 'Jack the Ripper might be a woman, too, you know. Sort of a Jill the Ripper.'

'You mean you actually suspect one of us?' shrieked LaVerne Gonnister, simpering up to Sir Guy. 'But that Jack the Ripper person disappeared ages ago, didn't he? In 1888?'

'Aha!' interrupted Baston. 'How do you know so much about it, young lady? Sounds suspicious! Watch her, Sir Guy – she may not be as young as she appears. These lady poets have dark pasts.'

The tension was gone, the mood was shattered, and the whole thing was beginning to degenerate into a trivial party joke. The man who had played the *March* was eyeing the piano with a *Scherzo* gleam in his eye that augured ill for Prokofieff. Lydia Dare was glancing at the kitchen, waiting to make a break for another drink.

Then Baston caught it.

'Guess what?' he yelled. 'The Walrus has a gun.'

His embracing arm slipped and encountered the hard outline of the gun in Sir Guy's pocket. He snatched it out before Hollis had the opportunity to protest.

I stared hard at Sir Guy, wondering if this thing had carried far enough. But he flicked a wink my way and I remembered he had told me not to be alarmed.

So I waited as Baston broached a drunken inspiration.

'Let's play fair with our friend the Walrus,' he cried. 'He came all the way from England to our party on this mission. If none of you is willing to confess, I suggest we give him a chance to find out – the hard way.'

'What's up?' asked Johnny Odcutt.

'I'll turn out the lights for one minute. Sir Guy can stand here with his gun. If anyone in this room is the Ripper he can either run for it or take the opportunity to – well, eradicate his pursuer. Fair enough?'

It was even sillier than it sounds, but it caught the popular fancy. Sir Guy's protests went unheard in the ensuing babble. And before I could stride over and put in my two cents' worth, Lester Baston had reached the light switch.

'Don't anybody move,' he announced, with fake solemnity. 'For one minute we will remain in darkness – perhaps at the mercy of a killer. At the end of that time, I'll turn up the lights again and look for bodies. Choose your partners, ladies and gentlemen.'

The lights went out.

Somebody giggled.

I heard footsteps in the darkness. Mutterings.

A hand brushed my face.

The watch on my wrist ticked violently. But even louder, rising above it, I heard another thumping. The beating of my heart.

Absurd. Standing in the dark with a group of tipsy fools. And yet there was real terror lurking here, rustling through the velvet blackness.

Jack the Ripper prowled in darkness like this. And Jack the Ripper had a knife. Jack the Ripper had a madman's brain and a madman's purpose.

But Jack the Ripper was dead, dead and dust these many years – by every human law.

Only there are no human laws when you feel yourself in the darkness, when the darkness hides and protects and the outer mask slips off your face and you feel something

welling up within you, a brooding shapeless purpose that is brother to the blackness.

Sir Guy Hollis shrieked.

There was a gristly thud.

Baston had the lights on.

Everybody screamed.

Sir Guy Hollis lay sprawled on the floor in the center of the room. The gun was still clutched in his hand.

I glanced at the faces, marveling at the variety of expressions human beings can assume when confronting horror.

All the faces were present in the circle. Nobody had fled. And yet Sir Guy Hollis lay there. . . .

LaVerne Gonnister was wailing and hiding her face.

'All right.'

Sir Guy rolled over and jumped to his feet. He was smiling.

'Just an experiment, eh? If Jack the Ripper *were* among those present, and thought I had been murdered, he would have betrayed himself in some way when the lights went on and he saw me lying there.

'I am convinced of your individual and collective innocence. Just a gentle spoof, my friends.'

Hollis stared at the goggling Baston and the rest of them crowding in behind him.

'Shall we leave, John?' he called to me. 'It's getting late, I think.'

Turning, he headed for the closet. I followed him. Nobody said a word.

It was a pretty dull party after that.

3

I met Sir Guy the following evening as we agreed, on the corner of 29th and South Halsted.

After what had happened the night before, I was prepared for almost anything. But Sir Guy seemed matter-of-fact

enough as he stood huddled against a grimy doorway and waited for me to appear.

'Boo!' I said, jumping out suddenly. He smiled. Only the betraying gesture of his left hand indicated that he'd instinctively reached for his gun when I startled him.

'All ready for our wild goose chase?' I asked.

'Yes.' He nodded. 'I'm glad that you agreed to meet me without asking questions,' he told me. 'It shows you trust my judgment.' He took my arm and edged me along the street slowly.

'It's foggy tonight, John,' said Sir Guy Hollis. 'Like London.'

I nodded.

'Cold, too, for November.'

I nodded again and half-shivered my agreement.

'Curious,' mused Sir Guy. 'London fog and November. The place and the time of the Ripper murders.'

I grinned through darkness. 'Let me remind you, Sir Guy, that this isn't London, but Chicago. And it isn't November, 1888. It's over fifty years later.'

Sir Guy returned my grin, but without mirth. 'I'm not so sure, at that,' he murmured. 'Look about you. These tangled alleys and twisted streets. They're like the East End. Mitre Square. And surely they are as ancient as fifty years, at least.'

'You're in the colored neighborhood off South Clark Street,' I said, shortly. 'And why you dragged me down here I still don't know.'

'It's a hunch,' Sir Guy admitted. 'Just a hunch on my part, John. I want to wander around down here. There's the same geographical conformation in these streets as in those courts where the Ripper roamed and slew. That's where we'll find him, John. Not in the bright lights of the Bohemian neighborhood, but down here in the darkness. The darkness where he waits and crouches.'

'Is that why you brought a gun?' I asked. I was unable to keep a trace of sarcastic nervousness from my voice. All of this talk, this incessant obsession with Jack the Ripper, got on my nerves more than I cared to admit.

'We may need a gun,' said Sir Guy, gravely. 'After all, tonight is the appointed night.'

I sighed. We wandered on through the foggy, deserted streets. Here and there a dim light burned above a gin-mill doorway. Otherwise, all was darkness and shadow. Deep, gaping alleyways loomed as we proceeded down a slanting side-street.

We crawled through that fog, alone and silent, like two tiny maggots floundering within a shroud.

When that thought hit me, I winced. The atmosphere was beginning to get *me*, too. If I didn't watch my step I'd go as loony as Sir Guy.

'Can't you see there's not a soul around these streets?' I said, tugging at his coat impatiently.

'He's bound to come,' said Sir Guy. 'He'll be drawn here. This is what I've been looking for. A *genius loci*. An evil spot that attracts evil. Always, when he slays, it's in the slums.'

'You see, that must be one of his weaknesses. He has a fascination for squalor. Besides, the women he needs for sacrifice are more easily found in the dives and stewpots of a great city.'

I smiled. 'Well, let's go into one of the dives or stewpots,' I suggested. 'I'm cold. Need a drink. This damned fog gets into your bones. You Britishers can stand it, but I like warmth and dry heat.'

We emerged from our side-street and stood upon the threshold of an alley.

Through the white clouds of mist ahead, I discerned a dim blue light, a naked bulb dangling from a beer sign above an alley tavern.

'Let's take a chance,' I said. 'I'm beginning to shiver.'

'Lead the way,' said Sir Guy. I led him down the alley passage. We halted before the door of the dive.

'What are you waiting for?' he asked.

'Just looking in,' I told him. 'This is a tough neighborhood, Sir Guy. Never know what you're liable to run into. And I'd prefer we didn't get into the wrong company. Some of these Negro places resent white customers.'

‘Good idea, John.’

I finished my inspection through the doorway. ‘Looks deserted,’ I murmured. ‘Let’s try it.’

We entered a dingy bar. A feeble light flickered above the counter and railing, but failed to penetrate the further gloom of the back booths.

A gigantic Negro lolled across the bar – a black giant with prognathous jaw and ape-like torso. He scarcely stirred as we came in, but his eyes flicked open quite suddenly and I knew he noted our presence and was judging us.

‘Evening,’ I said.

He took his time before replying. Still sizing us up. Then, he grinned.

‘Evening, gents. What’s your pleasure?’

‘Gin,’ I said. ‘Two gins. It’s a cold night.’

‘That’s right, gents.’

He poured, I paid, and took the glasses over to one of the booths. We wasted no time in emptying them. The fiery liquor warmed.

I went over to the bar and got the bottle. Sir Guy and I poured ourselves another drink. The big Negro went back into his doze, with one wary eye half-open against any sudden activity.

The clock over the bar ticked on. The wind was rising outside, tearing the shroud of fog to ragged shreds. Sir Guy and I sat in the warm booth and drank our gin.

He began to talk, and the shadows crept up about us to listen.

He rambled a great deal. He went over everything he’d said in the office when I met him, just as though I hadn’t heard it before. The poor devils with obsessions are like that.

I listened very patiently. I poured Sir Guy another drink. And another.

But the liquor only made him more talkative. How he did run on! About ritual killings and prolonging the life unnaturally – the whole fantastic tale came out again. And of course, he maintained his unyielding conviction that the Ripper was abroad tonight.

I suppose I was guilty of goading him.

'Very well,' I said, unable to keep the impatience from my voice. 'Let us say that your theory is correct – even though we must overlook every natural law and swallow a lot of superstition to give it any credence.

'But let us say, for the sake of argument, that you are right. Jack the Ripper was a man who discovered how to prolong his own life through making human sacrifices. He did travel around the world as you believe. He is in Chicago now and he is planning to kill. In other words, let us suppose that everything you claim is gospel truth. So what?'

'What do you mean, "so what"?' said Sir Guy.

'I mean – so what?' I answered. 'If all this is true, it still doesn't prove that by sitting down in a dingy gin-mill on the South Side, Jack the Ripper is going to walk in here and let you kill him, or turn him over to the police. And come to think of it, I don't even know now just what you intend to do with him if you ever did find him.'

Sir Guy gulped his gin. 'I'd capture the bloody swine,' he said. 'Capture him and turn him over to the government, together with all the papers and documentary evidence I've collected against him over a period of many years. I've spent a fortune investigating this affair, I tell you, a fortune! His capture will mean the solution of hundreds of unsolved crimes, of that I am convinced.

'I tell you, a mad beast is loose on this world! An ageless, eternal beast, sacrificing to Hecate and the dark gods!'

In vino veritas. Or was all this babbling the result of too much gin? It didn't matter. Sir Guy Hollis had another. I sat there and wondered what to do with him. The man was rapidly working up to a climax of hysterical drunkenness.

'One other point,' I said, more for the sake of conversation than in any hopes of obtaining information. 'You still don't explain how it is that you hope to just blunder into the Ripper.'

'He'll be around,' said Sir Guy. 'I'm psychic. I know.'

Sir Guy wasn't psychic. He was maudlin.

The whole business was beginning to infuriate me. We'd

been sitting here an hour, and during all this time I'd been forced to play nurse-maid and audience to a babbling idiot. After all, he wasn't a regular patient of mine.

'That's enough,' I said, putting out my hand as Sir Guy reached for the half-emptied bottle again. 'You've had plenty. Now I've got a suggestion to make. Let's call a cab and get out of here. It's getting late and it doesn't look as though your elusive friend is going to put in his appearance. Tomorrow, if I were you, I'd plan to turn all those papers and documents over to the F.B.I. If you're so convinced of the truth of your wild theory, they are competent to make a very thorough investigation, and find your man.'

'No.' Sir Guy was drunkenly obstinate. 'No cab.'

'But let's get out of here anyway,' I said, glancing at my watch. 'It's past midnight.'

He sighed, shrugged, and rose unsteadily. As he started for the door, he tugged the gun free from his pocket.

'Here, give me that!' I whispered. 'You can't walk around the street brandishing that thing.'

I took the gun and slipped it inside my coat. Then I got hold of his right arm and steered him out of the door. The Negro didn't look up as we departed.

We stood shivering in the alleyway. The fog had increased. I couldn't see either end of the alley from where we stood. It was cold. Damp. Dark. Fog or no fog, a little wind was whispering secrets to the shadows at our backs.

The fresh air hit Sir Guy just as I expected it would. Fog and gin-fumes don't mingle very well. He lurched as I guided him slowly through the mist.

Sir Guy, despite his incapacity, still stared apprehensively at the alley, as though he expected to see a figure approaching.

Disgust got the better of me.

'Childish foolishness,' I snorted. 'Jack the Ripper, indeed! I call this carrying a hobby too far.'

'Hobby?' He faced me. Through the fog I could see his distorted face. 'You call this a hobby?'

'Well, what is it?' I grumbled. 'Just why else are you so interested in tracking down this mythical killer?'

My arm held his. But his stare held me.

'In London,' he whispered. 'In 1888 . . . one of those nameless drabs the Ripper slew . . . was my mother.'

'What?'

'Later I was recognized by my father, and legitimized. We swore to give our lives to find the Ripper. My father was the first to search. He died in Hollywood in 1926 – on the trail of the Ripper. They said he was stabbed by an unknown assailant in a brawl. But I know who that assailant was.'

'So I've taken up his work, do you see, John? I've carried on. And I will carry on until I do find him and kill him with my own hands.'

'He took my mother's life and the lives of hundreds to keep his own hellish being alive. Like a vampire, he batters on blood. Like a ghoul, he is nourished by death. Like a fiend, he stalks the world to kill. He is cunning, devilishly cunning. But I'll never rest until I find him, never!'

I believed him then. He wouldn't give up. He wasn't just a drunken blabber any more. He was as fanatical, as determined, as relentless as the Ripper himself.

Tomorrow he'd be sober. He'd continue the search. Perhaps he'd turn those papers over to the F.B.I. Sooner or later, with such persistence – and with his motive – he'd be successful. I'd always known he had a motive.

'Let's go,' I said, steering him down the alley.

'Wait a minute,' said Sir Guy. 'Give me back my gun.' He lurched a little. 'I'd feel better with the gun on me.'

He pressed me into the dark shadows of a little recess.

I tried to shrug him off, but he was insistent.

'Let me carry the gun, now, John,' he mumbled.

'All right,' I said.

I reached into my coat, brought my hand out.

'But that's not a gun,' he protested. 'That's a knife.'

'I know.'

I bore down on him swiftly.

'John!' he screamed.

'Never mind the "John",' I whispered, raising the knife. 'Just call me . . . Jack.'

THE SEAL OF THE SATYR

Roger Talquist had always known that he would return to Greece. The spell laid upon him in childhood had lingered through the years. After his father had brought him back to school in England, he never could forget the beauty of the ancient hills of which the shepherd poets sang. Talquist's later career in archeology emphasized the hold of the pagan on his soul; he dreamed of purple hills and marble ruins gleaming beneath an age-yellowed, ivory moon.

It was inevitable that he return, and when the Oxonian Expedition went to excavate a Temple of Poseidon, he accompanied it to the land of his boyhood.

Once arrived, his interest in the work itself slackened. He did his routine duties diffidently, and spent all of his free time wandering through the wild country beyond the seaport of Mylenos. A short walk would bring him to the mystic hills and the shadowed treelands. His imagination quickened in the forest silence as he mused on the old lore of paganism he'd heard from peasants.

Dryads dwelt in the woods, and harpies hovered. Skyways beckoned Roger Talquist to climb the green-studded stairs of the mountains, until from some lofty eminence he could gaze down on the plains where once lambs had gamboled to the fabled piping of the Goat-god. It pleased him to half-believe the ancient legends, and he decided to compile a monograph on local superstition. Here the rustics still knew the myths of Pan and the forest spirits.

Talquist spoke Greek fluently, and the natives made him welcome in their simple cottages while they told of forgotten lore. And here Roger Talquist met old Papa Lepolis – a tall, patriarchal oldster with the wrinkled, august face of some Cretan sea-king. Papa Lepolis promised the dark, grave-eyed scientist an actual glimpse of an altar where his

people had once worshiped the gods of the forest.

It was an ancient place in the forest, a grotto where primitive folk had paid worship to the Nature gods in olden days, before the recording of history. Here were ruins that only a few knew about; the grotto was kept secret now that the Greek Orthodox Church held sway. Here were stones and carvings which might interest an archeologist greatly, Papa Lepolis told him.

'Take me there,' Talquist said eagerly. 'I must see this grotto.'

Lepolis grew silent, stroked his beard, then scowled.

'I wonder if I dare, Mr. Talquist.'

'Dare?' Talquist exclaimed.

'You and I – we are modern men. We do not fear what the ignorant peasants hereabouts still tremble before.'

'They are afraid? But what is there for them to fear?'

Lepolis stared at the floor. 'Nothing, perhaps. But in that grotto there is an altar where once men bowed to Pan. And they did more than that.'

Talquist listened eagerly. 'Yes,' Lepolis went on. 'If legends are to be believed, worshipers did a great deal more than bow. They gave – sacrifices.'

'You mean animals?'

'No, Mr. Talquist, I do not mean animals. The forest gods desired things of men; the warm, living flesh of young maidens and youth sated their divine appetites.'

Talquist smiled tolerantly. 'Well, what of it? Human beings were sacrificed in groves thousands of years ago. So what? I've heard of such things, of course. Surely today there's nothing to fear because once blood was spilled.'

'But you do not understand, my young friend. Do you know why there were such sacrifices, what the ancients believed?'

'No,' Talquist admitted.

The old man whispered through his beard. 'They said that the gods appeared in human form at certain times, and at other times in the shape of beasts. Shepherds and wandering maidens met the old Nature gods on lonely hills – and later

there were satyrs and fauns – half-beast, half-human.’

‘Oh, I know of such myths, Lepolis. Satyrs, centaurs, goat-headed men tumble all over themselves in Greek mythology. So what?’

‘These creatures had divine blood in them, Mr. Talquist. And, as such, they did not die.’

Talquist’s eyes widened. ‘What? You mean that you’re afraid the forest and the altar are, perhaps, guarded by fabled monsters?’

‘No. No, nothing as childish as that,’ the old man reproved. Talquist wondered whether he were sincere in his denial.

‘Then what bothers you, Lepolis?’

‘Only this. When the ancients made sacrifice on the altar, they received gifts in return. Do you understand? They gave blood and the gods gave gifts in exchange. Terrible gifts, Mr. Talquist.’

Talquist stared at the old man. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I cannot say, exactly. Worshipers wanted things from the gods. They wanted the immortality that fauns and satyrs and dryads received. So sometimes the gods would leave tokens and amulets. Those that wore them were supposed to be *changed*.’

Talquist was scornful. ‘Are you trying to tell me that you believe such—’

‘No – not exactly,’ Papa Lepolis replied slowly.

‘Then take me to the altar,’ the young scientist insisted.

The old man’s eyes avoided Talquist’s face. ‘I do not show people the grotto,’ he mumbled. ‘It is a secret in our family. Better not to know some things. I was a fool to suggest it.’

Talquist made a little pile of *drachmas* on the table. Lepolis looked at the coins, shuffled his feet in silence. Then he smiled.

‘I am an old man, Mr. Talquist. An old, tired man. It is hard for me to travel. But – I will lead you to the altar in the forest, if you wish.’

Talquist smiled patiently. ‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow.’

It was a strange pair that set out the next day through the woodland pathways. Tall, bearded Papa Lepolis in his ragged robes led the trimly-dressed Roger Talquist through the dense semi-twilight. As they walked along, the trees, shrubbery and vines grew thicker and more tangled; the sun shone through in only a few spots.

At first Talquist had followed the old man along a definite path, where birds sang gaily from the branches. Now they plunged deeper into the greenish darkness between twisting trees, and there was no life here – only a palpitant stillness. The stillness was of the ancient past.

This was the deep forest of an older Greece, undisturbed through three thousand years. Here centaurs pranced and whinnied beside the dark streams, and dryads capered upon cloud-crowned hilltops to the sound of hidden lutes. So Talquist imagined. He thought musingly of the myths told him by the oldster. They seemed appropriate enough now in this setting.

Lepolis plodded ahead silently, almost furtively. Now that he had embarked on the trip, it seemed he did not relish this journey. Talquist noticed how the oldster kept peering over his shoulder toward the silent trees. Lepolis seemed frightened; it was almost as though he believed the fantastic fables of which he had spoken.

Through deep glades and great lonely swamps they toiled, and again Talquist marveled that the old man did not lose his way in the trackless marshes. But at last they took a winding trail which led through a thicket and into a sunken grove, bordered by a land of tree-guarded twilight.

Roger Talquist gazed in silence at their goal. His eyes noted the great grassy ring in the center of the low grade, and he saw that the crumbled stones surrounded it in a sort of half-imaginary pattern. It was a moot question whether these rocks had been naturally or artificially placed; if the latter, they had been laid at a time incredibly remote. But they did resemble a crude altar-circle, and the great stone in the middle might easily have served the purpose of a sacrificial slab.

They descended upon the grotto and then Talquist took the lead while his aged guide hung back. Talquist examined the stones and noted the faint, rusty stains still visible on their tops. He fumbled amidst the fragments of broken rock that littered the bases of the altars in search of some ancient token or relic.

And then Roger Talquist saw. The grass was damp, and pressed down. The earth was wet. And in a circle about the central altar were the unmistakable imprints of *hoofs*.

Talquist gasped. 'Come here, Lepolis!' he exclaimed.

The old man looked down at the hoofmarks, clear and fresh. He smiled unfathomably.

'I warned you, Mr. Talquist. There are creatures who seek this lonely altar.'

'Nonsense!' he stammered. 'I merely wanted to ask you about wild goats. Are there any that might graze here?'

The old man's smile was more enigmatic still. 'Wild goats?' he said. 'Look again, Mr. Talquist. These are not goat tracks.'

Talquist looked, and they were not goat tracks, these great hoofed imprints in the earth. But they had to be! Why was Lepolis laughing so?

'I warned you, Talquist,' the old man went on. 'I told you about what lurks, still undying, in the forest. I told you how my family knows, has always known and guarded the secret of the ancient Faith. I told you how one can sacrifice on this altar and receive a gift from the gods. A gift of eternal life and power, for the gods send a token conferring their reward upon the sacrifice. It is not pleasant to live in a changed shape, perhaps – but it is better than dying.'

What was the old fool raving about? Had he gone stark mad?

Lepolis's voice was shrill now. 'I warned you, remember that! I tried to keep you from coming. But you insisted. I am weak, I know – weak because I am old and do not want to die. I am afraid to die! I would far rather live, even in changed shape! And so, Mr. Roger Talquist, now that we are at the altar, the time has come—'

It came then, so swiftly that Talquist was caught wholly unprepared. Even as he was speaking, Lepolis edged closer and closer. Then suddenly from out of one ragged sleeve a knife flashed! Lepolis raised the gleaming blade on high and brought it down in a vicious stroke.

Talquist dodged desperately aside, just in time. But the old man, laughing insanely, was gripping him harshly by the throat. The knife raised again, and Talquist was forced back against the altar stone. The blade trembled, Lepolis tightened his grip, and Talquist knew with an icy heart that he must die.

With the strength of panic, Roger Talquist raised his free arm and caught the old man's wrist. He lunged forward, twisting Lepolis against the stone, and then wrestled with the mad strength of the shrieking patriarch. The knife bit keenly several times as Lepolis stabbed futilely again and again.

'O Great Pan, aid me!' screamed the old man. And then Talquist twisted the wiry wrist just as the blade thrust downward, and it turned. The knife buried itself inches deep in Lepolis's wrinkled throat, and a red stream poured out over the altar-top as the coughing ancient fell in racking death upon it.

Talquist stepped back, aghast. The hysteria of the last few moments had left him dazed. The earth seemed to spin around him madly, the stones moved, the darkness deepened, and in his wild fancy Talquist heard the rumbling of thunder from beneath his feet. Then the shock was all over, and he stared mutely at the dead man on the altar.

Lepolis had lured him here, believing in the myths he had himself revealed. He had tried to kill the young scientist on the altar, that he might receive the gift of eternal life, though in a changed shape, from the ancient gods. Lepolis had been mad. It was all a most unfortunate occurrence.

Talquist turned. He must find his way out of the forest, and quickly.

But what was this? In the shards at his feet, at the base of the altar, something glinted dully. Talquist stooped and picked it up. Funny, he hadn't noticed this when searching

before. He held it against the light of the blood-red sunset.

It was an octagonally cut medallion of greenish stone, so worn and polished as to hint of extreme age. The medallion was fastened on a linked chain of true gold, and was evidently designed to be worn around the neck.

All this Talquist observed in a fleeting moment, for his eyes and thoughts were directed now on the startling figure emblazoned on the face of the amulet.

There was something about the technique of the design that puzzled Talquist even while it disturbed him. The lines did not seem as though executed by *human thought*.

Each artist puts into his work something of himself, and what the designer had put into this figure was horribly alien. The goat seemed to be a symbol of another figure underneath; a figure Talquist couldn't make out but which he knew instinctively was lurking there.

The metal was of peculiar luster, the carving was unnatural, and looking at the thing somehow shocked Talquist. The goat was the symbol of Pan, and perhaps the wild ravings of Lepolis, with his talk of 'gifts' from forest gods, had unnerved the scientist.

Roger Talquist stared at the evil figure as he absently fastened the golden chain about his neck.

With a start, he realized what he was doing. *Why* had he put the amulet on? He raised his hand to remove it, and as he touched the stone he received a second shock. The stone was quite warm! There was a tingling in Talquist's fingertips – a tingling not altogether unpleasant. The stone was radiant, and warm as ardent flesh; as though it possessed some radioactive properties.

In a second the sensation passed and Talquist was brought sharply back to reality. A breeze now curled out of the encroaching night. The twilight grove was eerie, and the trees were fantastic figures bowing in the wind. They stretched long green arms as though to bar the wanderer's path. For a moment Talquist had the absurd notion that these trees would conspire to keep him in the forest.

He looked again at the dead man on the altar; then glanced

down at the horrible, unexplained tracks at his feet, and shivered. He must get out of this grotto!

Talquist started across the grove to the thicket. Halfway across the last red rays of sunset glinted on his chest, and he glanced down again to see the amulet moving in a slow arc. He touched it, and a painful shock stabbed his fingertips again. Once more he knew fear – because now he felt life pulsing in the stone. It was living animation he felt, the sensation of powerful forces running in waves through his hand and up the length of his arm.

The contact somehow invigorated Talquist. He looked at the carved figure of the prancing goat that blazed up, and his eyes smarted and burned. The same eerie force tingling through his fingers now seemed to dance into his eyes and into the brain behind them.

There *was* a force in the stone! Lepolis with his wild talk of a 'change' in the men who found the gifts of the old gods – Lord, could the fool have been speaking the truth?

After all, Lepolis had been killed, though not intentionally, on that altar, like a sacrifice. Whereas the old man had meant to sacrifice Talquist and receive in reward the grant of immortality, though he would be 'changed' in some indefinable way by the divine blood of satyrs. But Lepolis had died, and then Talquist had found this peculiar talisman. Odd, that he hadn't seen it before when he searched.

Had it been sent *after* the sacrifice? That thunder from below his feet—

Oh, but that was absurd! There were no forest gods in this twentieth century.

Hoofprints in the grass. . .

Talquist tried to think of something else. Paradoxically enough, that was simple. His own body. Why was he suddenly feeling so strange?

He had a sudden impulse to tear the amulet from his throat, and his fingers instinctively tightened about it. There came a rapid acceleration of that flowing force within him, so that his arm seemed numb, as though from an electric shock.

What was this terrible thing doing to him? *Changing* him?

God, his body *did* ache! His arms and legs burned, there were sharp twinges in his thighs as he stumbled on – the kind of stabbing throb which in childhood had been spoken of as ‘growing pains’.

Growing pains!

In a sort of panic, Talquist tried desperately to be sane. It was rheumatism – that’s what it was! He had caught a chill in the damp and dew of the woods. His legs hurt from walking in tight boots.

He loosened his shirt as he walked across the glade; untied the lacings then, stopping to remove his boots. He seemed feverish, his head felt constricted, yet through the dull throbbing ran a thin red thread of exultation. He was terrified, yet strangely joyous.

Fever? Perhaps. His body, despite the pain, no longer seemed a part of him. He stroked his brow, and he scarcely recognized the convolutions. Feeling the stubble on his cheeks, he wondered if he had remembered to shave that morning. His hands were bronzed, and his fingers still tingled from the shock of the amulet.

He ought not to go on. He must rest. Shirtless, barefooted, Talquist flung himself down in the shadow of a bush at the edge of the glade. The last flicker of sunset crossed his chest.

His eyes focused again on the burning green brightness of the amulet, and as he stared his whole being turned to liquid flame. He felt oddly tortured, racked; his muscles stretched, tautened, and nerves ached with an exquisite pain that was almost animal ecstasy. He could not move his eyes or raise his hand to drop the talisman and claw off the burning band of gold about his throat. Yet his brain was enthralled by a tormented bliss, though another part of his consciousness shrieked ‘hypnotism – magnetism – madness’. But his being continued to writhe in bondage to the living stone.

Abruptly came the release. Dusk flooded the grove, and its purple pallor mingled oddly with the green lambency of the flaming amulet on Talquist’s chest.

Roger Talquist rubbed his eyes. Why was he lying here on the grass? What had he been doing? He felt no pain now, only a hot surging of blood through quickened veins. He could feel the shrill singing at his temples. Why had he wanted to run away? Why had he feared the power of the amulet?

It was pleasant here in the forest at night, and the tingling in the talisman now was flowing through his body evenly, in invigorating waves. Whatever the power in this seal of the satyr, be it natural or supernatural, it was good. He had been a fool to dwell on such obscure fears.

Talquist rose to his feet, hardly conscious of his nakedness, and faced the edge of the grotto once again. Through the haze of dusk he saw the standing stones, shining whitely. The grass seemed greener and more lush about the bases – there seemed to be new life here. The rocks appeared larger and more numerous than in the afternoon. He soon realized that they were arranged in a circle so as to form a crude pattern.

Talquist wanted to step over and examine them. But something halted him in the shadow of the bushes.

From afar came the sound of conches. Into the glade marched a small procession of bearded men, robed in white. There were perhaps a dozen of them, and Talquist vaguely recognized faces from the village.

Then there was still worship here!

The priests, if priests they were, gathered around the central altar, and Talquist saw that they discovered the body of Lepolis with great surprise. They stood there, huddled and whispering in the twilight.

'He told us that the young foreigner would be ready,' whispered one, loudly enough for Talquist to overhear.

'Something has gone amiss.'

'Let us go, quickly before *they* assemble.'

'Yes, *they* will come for the body.'

'We will leave the incense burning here, but the talisman is already gone.'

'Hasten; I am afraid.'

The men produced small bundles of sticks which they lighted on the eight outer stones. Great clouds of perfumed smoke wafted to wooded skies. It was a scene from old Greece – the ancient Greece of mystic forest gods.

The body of Lepolis lay on the central altar, and the pungent smoke rose all about him. The old men hurried off then, whispering and casting veiled glances back into the glade. Talquist crouched watching, his breathing excited and irregular.

For a long moment there was utter silence. Then began a curious rustling, a slithering of leaves upon the trees, and a purposeful padding as of hoofs upon the grass.

The sun had died in fathomless crimson skies, and the moon rose from the pallid purple of the east. It shone down upon the grotto as the rustling noises increased. A silver moon-shaft sped across the central altar, and as it did so a faint, shrill peeping filled the air. Hysterically high, the treble notes sounded from far away – the peeping summons of a syrinx. The peeping blended with rustling; the spicy perfume from the fires scented the forest dark.

And now other sounds were audible: queer moanings and high neighing, chirping and animal growls. Another scent, or combination of scents, mingled with the perfume; the musk-like odors of beasts and creatures of the wood. Talquist stared and saw – and nearly shrieked.

For into the grove the forest creatures headed, bounding and leaping and pawing the hard-packed earth. Shaggy and manlike, the fauns capered about in the moonlight, their goatish beards wagging to their squealing laughter.

Here were the living creatures of myth!

Bull-bodied maenads stamped into the glade with throaty bellows of guttural mirth, shaking their hairy heads in bovine playfulness. Across the sward the centaurs pranced, their sly, wicked faces wreathed in lustful grimace, their stallion bodies flexed with animal vigor. They snorted and reared, bringing spiked hoofs down to strike fire from the altar stones.

Now Talquist understood the hoof-prints on the grass!

With hoarse cries, the Ægyfans bounded in, lifting their horrid goat-heads to bleat at the moon, and stretching their shambling legs and shapeless paws in animal ecstasy as they sniffed the aromatic incense of the spiced perfume.

The far-off piping grew more frantic still, and the whirling forest creatures laughed more shrilly, whirled more wildly, sniffing the reek of the smoke and bathing in moonlight as they danced and gesticulated amidst the altar stones.

Talquist gasped. Fabled legends come true! He glanced down at the seal of the satyr on his breast, then looked up as a shrill screaming sounded.

The living shadows of nymphs emerged from the rushes that bordered the stream within the forest. They danced over the grass and flung their wet green hair in carefree abandon as they wheeled before the beast-men.

There was one green-haired creature with eyes red as blood that Roger Talquist watched closely. The strength surging in him leaped at the sight of her, as she postured with the rest.

Now the creatures saw what lay upon the altar top. A faun crept close, gesturing to his less emboldened companions. One hairy paw reached out to touch the body of Lepolis. A black satyr capered before the corpse. His nostrils flared as he fumbled at the old man's beard. A centaur trotted past, so that his sweaty flanks brushed the stone. The nymphs tittered shrilly.

They gathered before that inner altar and their eyes and hands and lips caressed what lay upon it, and they laughed and bleated. And when they turned away, they dragged the body with them.

The piping scurried higher in its shrillness. The peeping syrinx, the scent of smoke, the shrieking laughter – these things finally made Talquist emerge from the bushes. He did not think of what he had seen; he felt only the drumming of the incredible scene in his blood, fusing his being in strange response.

The dance of the forest creatures had become a pursuit, and the nymphs fled before the insane figures that scurried after them in the darkness. Hoarse screams filled the night.

Then the syrinx sounded, swelled, merged into a gigantic, triumphant bleat. The horde bore the body of Lepolis into the dark forest.

Talquist, his blood sweet fire, raced after the others about the altar. It was a strange madness that possessed him, that gave him a sense of curious kinship with these beings of the past. They shrieked when they saw him and pointed to the glowing green amulet on his chest, but he did not hear.

His eyes were searching for a figure – the figure of the green-haired nymph with the red eyes. She saw him, and turned with a mocking leer. Talquist hated the sight, but something inside him urged his body forward. He ran toward the taunting nymph. She fled in mimic dismay, back into the dark groves where now the distant piping died away.

Talquist ran through the forest, following the fleet wood sprite that leaped ahead, the wet green hair blending with the leaves of the livid trees. His temples burned, he gasped for breath, and his being was filled with a nameless strength. He loped after the fleeing figure, maddened by her taunting laughter that drifted back through the nighted pathways.

Soon he emerged upon the bank of a little stream where now the nymphs and nereids had returned. The fleet little creatures splashed noisily through the reeds and sank into the pool, diving beneath the rushes. None of them re-emerged.

Roger Talquist, fired by his madness, leaped after the taunting figure of the nymph he pursued, and the amulet jangled against his chest on its chain.

She turned suddenly on the bank and grinned up at him with slyly parted lips, and tossed her snake-locked hair. Her moist, flabby hands pawed at Talquist's arms. Her red eyes were not human, and gazing into them Talquist abruptly lost his madness and tried to push the creature away.

She stepped back on the bank. Noticing the amulet on the chain she reached for it. Talquist pushed her away again. Sniggering, the nymph reached out a cold hand to grasp at him for support. Instead, her fingers closed about the chain. She stepped back further, clutching the green seal – and lost her balance.

With a wrench the links parted, and the nymph fell screaming into the water. The amulet in her hand described a jeweled arc, then slipped beneath the churning surface of the stream, and sank. Nymph and seal of the satyr disappeared together in the pool. . . .

Roger Talquist stood on the bank, staring stupidly at the widening circles in the water.

He remembered, now. He was cold, naked, standing in the woods at midnight, after chasing the phantoms of fever and delirium.

There had been no sacrifice, no nymphs or satyrs. It had all been a dream, a delusion brought on by the peculiar hypnotic power of the amulet he had stared at when he lay down.

It was gone now, that strange talisman. He had probably flung it into the water himself, in a final frenzy. Well, good riddance to the cursed stone!

Old Lepolis had been right, in a way. The seal of the satyr, whether a gift of the ancient gods or not, did change a person. Wearing it, Talquist had not been himself. He had become some kind of beast; his mind had undergone a peculiar change which made him feel kinship with the wild creatures of elder myth. Lepolis had said that such things still existed in the forest and came forth after a sacrifice.

And indeed these things had come to pass.

Poor Lepolis! He had believed it all, and he wanted the amulet because he thought it would make him a forest creature that could live forever. He had wanted it enough, believed enough, to risk murder. And he was dead, and the amulet was gone.

Talquist mused. Oddly enough, he had not believed the old man's tale that the amulet could change one. He should have known it was some kind of allegory. The seal caused a mental change rather than a physical one; assuredly it had hypnotized him into thinking his body was different. Indeed, he *had* felt different; still did, in fact. Those tingling vibrations!

But what was he doing here? Better go back to the hotel now and try to forget his delirium.

Talquist gave a final glance at the waters of the pool into

which the amulet had been thrown. The waters were calm now, and there was a glassy reflection in the clear moonlight. Talquist saw his own reflection in the moon-flooded depths, saw himself in Nature's silvery mirror.

Head, forehead, face, throat, arms, body, legs – he saw them all. And then he understood the real truth of Lepolis's incredible story of gifts from the gods that would change a man.

He did not look long. A single moment of numbing realization, and then he leaped into the pool – leaped straight into the deepest water, breaking with his body the mad reflection he had seen on the mirrored surface.

For, staring down at himself, Roger Talquist had seen *the face and figure of the wood-god, Pan!*

THE DARK DEMON

It has never been put on paper before – the true story of Edgar Gordon's death. As a matter of fact, nobody but myself knows that he *is* dead; for people have gradually forgotten about the strange dark genius whose eldritch tales were once so popular among fantasy-lovers everywhere. Perhaps it was his late work which so alienated the public – the nightmare hints and outlandish fancies of his final books. Many people branded the extravagantly worded tomes as the work of a madman, and even his correspondents refused to comment on some of the unpublished stuff he sent them. Then too, his furtive and eccentric private life was not wholesomely regarded by those who knew him in the days of his early success. Whatever the cause, he and his writings have been doomed to oblivion by a world which always ignores what it cannot quite understand. Now everyone who does remember thinks that Gordon has merely disappeared. That is good, in view of the peculiar way in which he died. But I have decided to tell the truth. You see, I knew Gordon very well. I was, truthfully, the last of all his friends, and I was there at the end. I owe him a debt of gratitude for all he has done for me, and how could I more fittingly repay it than to give to the world the facts concerning his sad mental metamorphosis and tragic death? Therefore this statement is indited.

It must have been six years ago that I first met him. I had not even known that we both resided in the same city, until a mutual correspondent inadvertently mentioned the fact in a letter.

I had, of course, heard of him before. Being a writer myself, I was enormously influenced and impressed by his work in the various magazines catering to the fantastic literature I loved. At this time he was known in a small way to practically

all readers of such journals as an exceptionally erudite writer of horror tales. His style had won him renown in this small field, though even then there were those who professed to scoff at the grotesquerie of his themes.

But I ardently admired him. As a result, I invited myself to pay a social call upon Mr. Gordon at his home. We became friends.

Surprisingly enough, this reclusive dreamer seemed to enjoy my company. He lived alone, cultivated no acquaintances, and had no contact with his friends save through correspondence. His mailing list, however, was voluminous. He exchanged letters with authors and editors all over the country; would-be writers, aspiring journalists, and thinkers and students everywhere. Once his reserve was penetrated, he seemed pleased to have my friendship. Needless to say, I was delighted.

What Edgar Gordon did for me in the next three years can never adequately be told. His able assistance, friendly criticism and kind encouragement finally succeeded in making a writer of sorts out of me, and after that our mutual interest formed an added bond between us.

What he revealed about his own magnificent stories astounded me. Yet I might have suspected something of the sort from the first.

Gordon was a tall, thin, angular man with the pale face and deep-set eyes which bespeak the dreamer. His language was poetic and profound; his personal mannerisms were almost somnambulistic in their weaving slowness, as though the mind which directed his mechanical movements was alien and far away. From these signs, therefore, I might have guessed his secret. But I did not, and was properly astonished when he first told me.

For Edgar Gordon wrote all of his stories from dreams! The plot, setting, and characters were products of his own colorful dream life – all he need do was transcribe his sleeping fancies on paper.

This was, I later learned, not an entirely unique phenomenon. The late Edward Lucas White claimed to have

written several books based entirely on night-fancies. H. P. Lovecraft had produced a number of his splendid tales inspired by a similar source. And of course, Coleridge had visioned his *Kubla Khan* in a dream. Psychology is full of instances attesting to the possibility of nocturnal inspiration.

But what made Gordon's confession so strange was the queer personal peculiarities attendant upon his own dream stages. He quite seriously claimed that he could close his eyes at any time, allow himself to relax into a somnolent doze, and proceed to dream endlessly. It did not matter whether this was done by day or by night; nor whether he slumbered for fifteen hours or fifteen minutes. He seemed particularly susceptible to subconscious impressions.

My slight researches into psychology led me to believe that this was a form of self-hypnosis, and that his short naps were really a certain stage of mesmeric sleep, in which the subject is open to any suggestion.

Spurred on by my interest, I used to question him closely as to the subject-matter of these dreams. At first he responded readily, once I had told him of my own ideas on the subject. He narrated several of them to me, which I took down in a notebook for future analysis.

Gordon's fantasies were far from the ordinary Freudian sublimation or repression types. There were no discernible hidden wish-patterns, or symbolic phases. They were somehow *alien*. He told me how he had dreamed the story of his famous *Gargoyle* tale; of the black cities he visited on the fabulous outer rims of space, and the queer denizens that spoke to him from formless thrones that existed beyond all matter. His vivid descriptions of terrifyingly strange geometry and ultra-terrestrial life-forms convinced me that his was no ordinary mind to harbor such eerie and disturbing shadows.

The ease with which he remembered vivid details was also unusual. There seemed to be no blurred mental concepts at all; he recalled every detail of dreams he had experienced perhaps years ago. Once in awhile he would gloss over portions of his descriptions with the excuse that it would not be

possible to make things intelligible in speech'. He insisted that he had seen and comprehended much that was beyond description in a three-dimensional way, and that in sleep he could feel colors and hear sensations.

Naturally this was a fascinating field of research for me. In reply to my questions, Gordon once told me that he had always known these dreams from earliest remembered childhood to the present day, and that the only difference between the first ones and the last was an increase of *intensity*. He now claimed that he *felt* his impressions much more strongly.

The locale of the dreams was curiously fixed. Nearly all of them occurred amidst scenes which he somehow recognized were outside of our own cosmos. Mountains of black stalagmites; peaks and cones amidst crater valleys of dead suns; stone cities in the stars; these were commonplace. Sometimes he walked or flew, shambled, or moved in unnamable ways with the indescribable races of other planets. Monsters he could and would describe, but there were certain *intelligences* which existed only in a gaseous, nebulous state, and still others which were merely the embodiment of an inconceivable *force*.

Gordon was always conscious that he himself was present in every dream. Despite the awesome and often unnerving adventures he so glibly described, he claimed that none of these sleep-images could be classified as nightmares. He had never felt afraid. Indeed, at times he experienced a curious reversal of identity, so that he regarded his dreams as natural and his waking life as unreal.

I questioned him as deeply as possible, and he had no explanation to offer. His family history had been normal in this and every other respect, although one of his ancestors had been a 'wizard' in Wales. He himself was not a superstitious man, but he was forced to admit that certain of his dreams coincided curiously with descriptive passages in such books as the *Necronomicon*, the *Mysteries of the Worm*, and the *Book of Eibon*.

But he had experienced similar dreams long before his

mind prompted him to read the obscure volumes mentioned above. He was confident that he had seen 'Azathoth' and 'Yuggoth' prior to the time he knew of their half-mythic existence in the legendary lore of ancient days. He was able to describe 'Nyarlathotep' and 'Yog-Sothoth' from what he claimed to be actual dream contact with these allegorical entities..

I was profoundly impressed by these statements, and finally was forced to admit that I had no logical explanation to offer. He himself took the matter so seriously that I never tried to humor or ridicule him out of his notions.

Indeed, every time he wrote a new story I asked him quite seriously about the dream which had inspired it, and for several years he told me such things at our weekly meetings.

But it was about this time that he entered into that phase of writing which brought him into general disfavor. The magazines which catered to his work began to refuse some of the manuscripts as too horrible and revolting for popular taste. His first published book, *Night-Gaunt* was a failure, due to the morbidity of its theme.

I sensed a subtle change in his style and subject. No longer did he adhere to conventional plot-motivation. He began to tell his stories in first-person, but the narrator was not a *human being*. His choice of words clearly indicated hyperesthesia.

In reply to my remonstrances on introducing non-human ideas, he argued that a real weird tale must be told from the viewpoint of the monster or entity itself. This was not a new theory to me, but I did object to the shockingly morbid note which his stories now emphasized. Consider his opening statement in *The Soul of Chaos*:

This world is but a tiny island in the dark sea of Infinity, and there are horrors swirling all around us. Around us? Rather let us say *amongst* us. I know, for I have seen them in my dreams, and there are more things in this world than sanity can ever see.

The Soul of Chaos, by the way, was the first of his four privately printed books. By this time he had lost all contact with the regular publishers and magazines. He dropped most of his correspondents, too, and concentrated on a few eccentric thinkers in the Orient.

His attitude toward me was changing, too. No longer did he expound his dreams to me, or outline theories of plot and style. I didn't visit him very often any more, and he rejected my overtures with unmistakable brusqueness.

There were other factors which somehow made me half glad to avoid the man. Always a quiet recluse by choice, his hermit-like tendencies seemed visibly accentuated. He never went out any more, he told me; not even walking in the yard. Food and other necessities he had delivered weekly to the door. In the evening he allowed no light but a small lamp within the parlor study. All he volunteered about this rigid routine was noncommittal. He said that he spent all his time in sleeping and writing.

He was thinner, paler, and moved with a more mystic dreaminess of manner than ever before. I thought of drugs; he looked like a typical addict. But his eyes were not the feverish globes of fire which characterize the hashish-eater, and opium had not wasted his physique. Then I suspected insanity myself; his detached manner of speech, and his suspicious refusal to enter deeply into any subject of conversation, might be due to some nervous disorder.

Certainly what he said at the last about his recent dreams tended to substantiate my theory. I'll never forget that final discussion of dreams as long as I live – for reasons soon to be apparent.

He told me about his last stories with a certain reluctance. Yes, they were dream-inspired, like the rest. He had not written them for public consumption, and the editors and publishers could go to blazes for all he cared. He wrote them because he had been *told* to write them.

Yes told to. By the creature in his dreams, of course.

He did not care to speak about it, but since I was a friend. . . .

I urged him. Now I wish I hadn't; perhaps I could have been spared the knowledge that follows. . . .

Edgar Henquist Gordon, sitting there in the wan lunar light of the moon; sitting at the wide window with eyes that equaled the leprous moonlight in the dreadful intensity of their pallid glow. . . .

'I know about my dreams now. I was *chosen*, from the first, to be the Messiah; the messenger of His word. No, I'm not going religious. I'm not speaking of a God in the ordinary sense of the word men use to designate any power they cannot understand. I speak of the *Dark One*. You've read about Him in those books I showed you; the Demon Messenger, they call Him. But that's all allegorical. He isn't Evil, because there is no such thing as Evil. He is merely alien. And I am to be His messenger on earth.

'Don't fidget so! I'm not mad. You've heard about it all before – how the elder peoples worshipped forces that once were manifested physically on Earth, like the *Dark One* that has chosen me. The legends are silly, of course. He isn't a destroyer – merely a superior intelligence who wishes to gain mental rapport with human minds, so as to enable certain – ah – exchanges between humanity and Those beyond.

'He speaks to me in dreams. He told me to write my books, and distribute them to those who know. When the right time comes, we shall band together, and unfold some of the secrets of the cosmos at which men have only guessed or even sensed in dreams.

'That's why I've always dreamed. I was chosen to learn. That is why my dreams have shown me such things – "Yugoth" and all the rest. Now I am being prepared for my – ah – apostleship.

'I can't tell you much more. I must write and sleep a great deal nowadays, so that I can learn faster.

'Who is this *Dark One*? I can't tell you any more. I suppose you already think I'm crazy. Well, you have many supporters of that theory. But I'm not. It's true!

'You remember all I've told you about my dreams – how they kept growing in *intensity*? Well enough. Several months

ago I had some different dream-sequences. I was in the dark – not the ordinary dark you know, but the absolute dark beyond Space. It isn't describable in three-dimensional concepts or thought-patterns at all. The darkness has a *sound*, and a *rhythm* akin to breathing, because it is alive. I was merely a bodiless mind there; when I saw Him.

'He came out of the dark and – ah – communicated with me. Not by words. I'm thankful that my previous dreams had been so arranged as to inure me against visual horror. Otherwise I should never have been able to stand the sight of Him. You see, He is not like humans, and the shape He chose to wear is unpleasant. But, once you understand, you can realize that the shape is just as allegorical as the legends ignorant men have fostered about Him and the others.

'He looks something like a medieval conception of the demon Asmodeus. Black all over, and furry, with a snout like a hog, green eyes, and the claws and fangs of a wild beast.

'I was not frightened after He communicated, though. You see, He wears that shape merely because foolish people in olden days believed that He looked that way. Mass belief was a curious influence on intangible forces, you understand. And men, thinking such forces evil, have made them assume the aspect of evilness. But He means no harm.

'I wish I could repeat some of the things He has told me.

'Yes, I've seen Him every night since then. But I promised to reveal nothing until the day is ready. Now that I understand, I am no longer interested in writing for the herd. I am afraid humanity doesn't mean anything to me since I have learned those steps which lie beyond – and how to achieve them.

'You can go away and laugh at me all you like. All I can say is that nothing in my books has been exaggerated in the least – and that they only contain infinitesimal glimpses of the ultimate revelations which lurk beyond human consciousness. But when the day He has appointed shall arrive, then the whole world will learn the truth.

'Until then, you'd best keep away from me. I can't be disturbed, and every evening the impressions get stronger and stronger. I sleep eighteen hours a day now, at times, because there is so much that He wishes to tell me; so much to be learned in preparation. But when the day comes I shall be the godhead – He has promised me that in some way I *shall become incarnate with Him!*'

Such was the substance of his monolog. I left shortly after that. There was nothing I could say or do. But later I thought a lot about what he had said.

He was quite gone, poor fellow, and it was evident that another month or so would bring him to the breaking-point. I felt sincerely sorry, and deeply concerned over the tragedy. After all, he had been my friend and mentor for many years, and he was a genius. It was all too bad.

Still, he had a strange and disturbingly coherent story. It certainly conformed to his previous accounts of dream-life, and the legendary background was authentic, if the *Necronomicon* is to be believed. I wondered if his *Dark One* was remotely connected with the Nyarlathotep fable, or the 'Dark Demon' of the witch-coven rituals.

But all that nonsense about the 'day' and his being a 'Messiah' on Earth was too absurd. What did he mean about the *Dark One's* promise of incarnating himself in Gordon? Demonic possession is an old belief credited only by the childishly superstitious.

Yes, I thought plenty about the whole thing. For several weeks I did a little investigating of my own. I re-read the later books, corresponded with Gordon's former editors and publishers, dropped notes to his old friends. And I even studied some of the old magic tomes myself.

I got nothing tangible from all this, save a growing realization that something must be done to save Gordon from himself. I was terribly afraid for the man's mind, and I knew that I must act quickly.

So one night, about three weeks after our final meeting, I left the house and started to walk to his home. I intended to plead with him, if possible, to go away; or at least insist

that he submit to a medical examination. Why I pocketed the revolver I cannot say – some inner instinct warned me that I might meet with a violent response.

At any rate I had the gun in my coat, and I gripped the butt firmly in one hand as I threaded some of the darker streets that led to his old dwelling on Cedar Street.

It was a moonless night, with ominous hints of a thunderstorm in the offing. The little wind that warns of approaching rain was already sighing in the dark trees overhead, and streaks of lightning occasionally flared in the west.

My mind was a chaotic jumble of apprehension, anxiety, determination, and a lurking bewilderment. I did not even formulate what I was going to do or say once I saw Gordon. I kept wondering what had happened to him the last few weeks – whether the ‘day’ he spoke of was approaching at last.

Tonight was May-Eve. . . .

The house was dark. I rang and rang, but there was no response. The door opened under the impact of my shoulder. The noise of splintering wood was drowned out by the first peal of thunder overhead.

I walked down the hall to the study. Everything was dark. I opened the study door. There was a man sleeping on the couch by the window. It was undoubtedly Edgar Gordon.

What was he dreaming about? Had he met the *Dark One* again in his dreams? The *Dark One*, ‘looking like Asmodeus – black all over, and furry, with green eyes, hog-snout, and the claws and fangs of some wild beast’, the *Dark One* who told him about the ‘day’ when Gordon should become incarnate with him?

Was he dreaming about this, on May-Eve? Edgar Henquist Gordon, sleeping a strange sleep on the couch by the window. . . .

I reached for the light-switch, but a sudden flash of lightning forestalled me. It lasted only a second, but it was brilliant enough to illuminate the entire room. I saw the walls, the furniture, the terrible scribbled manuscripts on the table.

Then I fired three revolver shots before the final flicker died away. There was a single eldritch scream that was mercifully drowned in a new burst of thunder. I screamed, myself. I never turned on the light, but only gathered up the papers on the table and ran out into the rain.

On the way home rain mingled with tear-drops on my face, and I echoed each new roar of thunder with a sob.

I could not endure the lightning, though, and shielded my eyes as I ran blindly to the safety of my own rooms. There I burnt the papers I had brought without reading them. I had no need of that, for there was nothing more to know.

That was weeks ago. When Gordon's house was entered at last, no body was found – only an empty suit of clothes that looked as though it had been tossed carelessly on the couch. Nothing else had been disturbed, but police point to the absence of Gordon's papers as an indication that he took them along when he disappeared.

I am very glad that nothing else had been found, and would be content to keep silent, were it not for the fact that Gordon is regarded as insane. I once thought him insane too, so you see I must speak. After that I am going away from here, because I want to forget as much as I can. At that, I'm lucky I do not dream.

No, Edgar Gordon was not insane. But he told the truth in his books – about horrors being around us and *amongst* us. I dare not say all I now believe about his dreams, and whether or not his last stories were true.

Those last dreams – about the *Dark One*, who was waiting for the right day, and who would *incarnate* himself with Gordon . . . I know what he meant now, and I shudder to think of what might have happened if I had not come upon the scene when I did. If there had been an awakening. . . .

Because when that flash of lightning blazed across the room, I saw what lay in sleep upon the couch. That is what I shot; that is what sent me screaming into the storm, and that is what makes me sure that Gordon was not crazy, but spoke the truth.

For the incarnation had occurred. There on the couch,

dressed in the clothes of Edgar Henquist Gordon, lay a demon like Asmodeus – a black, furry creature with the snout of a hog, green eyes, and the dreadful fangs and talons of some wild beast. It was the *Dark One* of Edgar Gordon's dreams!

THE FACELESS GOD

The thing on the torture-rack began to moan. There was a grating sound as the lever stretched the iron bed still one more space in length. The moaning grew to a piercing shriek of utter agony.

'Ah,' said Doctor Carnoti, 'we have him at last.'

He bent over the tortured man on the iron grille and smiled tenderly into the anguished face. His eyes, tinged with delicate amusement, took in every detail of the body before him – the swollen legs, raw and angry from the embrace of the fiery boot; the back and shoulders, still crimson from the kiss of the lash; the chest crushed by the caress of the Spiked Coffin. With gentle solicitude he surveyed the finishing touches applied by the rack itself – the dislocated shoulders and twisted torso; the broken fingers, and the dangling tendons in the lower limbs. He turned his attention to the old man's tormented countenance once again. Then he spoke.

'Well, Hassan. I do not think you will prove stubborn any longer in the face of such – ah – eloquent persuasion. Come now; tell me where I can find this idol of which you speak.'

The butchered victim began to sob, and the doctor was forced to kneel beside the bed of pain in order to understand his incoherent mumblings. For perhaps twenty minutes the creature groaned on, and then at last fell silent. Doctor Carnoti rose to his feet once more, a satisfied twinkle in his genial eyes. He made a brief motion to one of the blacks operating the rack machinery. The fellow nodded, and went over to the living horror on the instrument. The black drew his sword. It swished upward, then cleaved down once again.

Doctor Carnoti went out of the room, bolted the door behind him, and climbed the steps to the house above. As he raised the barred trap-door he saw that the sun was shining. The doctor began to whistle. He was very pleased.

2

He had good reason to be. For several years the doctor had been what is vulgarly known as an 'adventurer'. He had been a smuggler of antiques, an exploiter of labor on the Upper Nile, and had at times sunk so low as to participate in the forbidden 'black goods trade' that flourished at certain ports along the Red Sea. He had come out to Egypt many years ago as an attaché on an archeological expedition, from which he had been summarily dismissed. The reason for his dismissal is not known, but it was rumored that he had been caught trying to appropriate certain of the expeditionary trophies. After his exposure and subsequent disgrace, he had disappeared for a while. Several years later he had come back to Cairo and set up an establishment in the native quarter. It was here that he fell into the unscrupulous habits of business which had earned for him a dubious reputation and sizable profit. He seemed well satisfied with both.

At the present time he was a man of perhaps forty-five years of age, short and heavy-set, with a bullet-shaped head that rested on the broad, ape-like shoulders. His thick torso and bulging paunch were supported by a pair of spindly legs that contrasted oddly with the upper portions of his beefy body. Despite his Falstaffian appearance he was a hard and ruthless man. His piggish eyes were filled with greed; his fleshy mouth was lustful; his only natural smile was one of avarice.

It was his covetous nature that had led him into his present adventure. Ordinarily he was not a credulous man. The usual tales of lost pyramids, buried treasure and stolen mummies did not impress him. He preferred something more substantial. A contraband consignment of rugs; a bit of smuggled opium; something in the line of illicit human merchandise – these were things he could appreciate and understand.

But this case was different. Extraordinary as it sounded, it

meant big money. Carnoti was smart enough to know that many of the great discoveries of Egyptology had been prompted by just such wild rumors as the one he had heard. He also knew the difference between improbable truth and spurious invention. This story sounded like the truth.

In brief, it ran as follows. A certain party of nomads, while engaged in a secret journey with a cargo of illegitimately obtained goods, were traversing a special route of their own. They did not feel that the regular caravan lanes were healthful for them to follow. While traveling near a certain spot they had accidentally espied a curious rock or stone in the sands. The thing had evidently been buried, but long years of shifting and swirling among the dunes above it had served to uncover a portion of the object. They had stopped to inspect it at closer range, and thereby made a startling discovery. The thing projecting from the sand was the head of a statue; an ancient Egyptian statue, with the triple crown of a god! Its black body was still submerged, but the head seemed to be in perfect preservation. It was a very peculiar thing, that head, and none of the natives could or would recognize the deity, though the caravan leaders questioned them closely. The whole thing was an unfathomable mystery. A perfectly preserved statue of an unknown god buried all alone in the southern desert, a long way from any oasis, and two hundred miles from the smallest village!

Evidently the caravan men realized something of its uniqueness; for they ordered that two boulders which lay near by be placed on top of the idol as a marker in case they ever returned. The men did as they were ordered, though they were obviously reluctant, and kept muttering prayers beneath their breath. They seemed very much afraid of the buried image, but only reiterated their ignorance when questioned further concerning it.

After the boulders had been placed, the expedition was forced to journey on, for time did not permit them to unearth the curious figure in its entirety, or attempt to carry it with them. When they returned to the north they told their story, and as most tales were in the habit of doing, it came to the

ears of Doctor Carnoti. Carnoti thought fast. It was quite evident that the original discoverers of the idol did not attach any great importance to their find. For this reason the doctor might easily return to the spot and unearth the statue without any trouble, once he knew exactly where it was located.

Carnoti felt that it was worth finding. If it had been a treasure yarn, now, he would have scoffed and unhesitatingly put it down as a cock-and-bull story of the usual variety. But an idol – that was different. He could understand why an ignorant band of Arab smugglers might ignore such a discovery. He could also realize that such a discovery might prove more valuable to him than all the treasure in Egypt. It was easy for him to remember the vague clues and wild hints that had prompted the findings of early explorers. They had followed up many blind leads when first they plumbed the pyramids and raked the temple ruins. All of them were tomb-looters at heart, but their ravishings had made them rich and famous. Why not him, then? If the tale were true, and this idol not only buried, but totally unknown as a deity; in perfect condition, and in such an out-of-the-way locality – these facts would create a furor when he exhibited his find. He would be famous! Who knew what hitherto untrodden fields he might open up in archeology? It was well worth chancing.

But he must not arouse any suspicion. He dared not inquire about the place from any of the Arabs who had been there. That would immediately cause talk. No, he must get his directions from a native in the band. Accordingly, two of his servants picked up Hassan, the old camel-driver, and brought him before Carnoti in his house. But Hassan, when questioned, looked very much afraid. He refused to talk. So Carnoti conducted him into his little reception room in the cellar, where he had been wont to entertain certain recalcitrant guests in the past. There the doctor, whose knowledge of anatomy stood him in good stead, was able to cajole his visitors into speaking.

So Doctor Carnoti emerged from the cellar in a very pleasant frame of mind. He was rubbing his fat hands when

he looked at the map to verify his information, and he went out to dinner with a smiling face.

Two days later he was ready to start. He had hired a small number of natives, so as not to excite undue investigation, and given out to his business acquaintances that he was about to embark on a special trip. He engaged a strange dragoman, and made sure that the fellow would keep his mouth shut. There were several swift camels in the train, and a number of extra donkeys harnessed to a large empty cart. He took food and water for six days, for he intended to return via river-boat. After the arrangements were completed, the party assembled one morning at a certain spot unknown to official eyes, and the expedition began.

3

It was on the morning of the fourth day that they arrived at last. Carnoti saw the stones from his precarious perch atop the leading camel. He swore delightedly, and despite the hovering heat, dismounted and raced over to the spot where the two boulders lay. A moment later he called the company to a hasty halt and issued orders for the immediate erection of the tents, and the usual preparations for encampment. Utterly disregarding the intolerable warmth of the day, he saw to it that the sweating natives did a thorough job; and then, without allowing them a moment's rest, he instructed them to remove the massive rocks from their resting-place. A crew of straining men managed to topple them over at last, and clear away the underlying sand.

In a few moments there was a loud cry from the gang of laborers, as a black and sinister head came into view. It was a triple-crowned blasphemy. Great spiky cones adorned the top of the ebony diadem, and beneath them were hidden intricately executed designs. He bent down and examined them. They were monstrous, both in subject and in execution. He saw the writhing, worm-like shapes of primal monsters, and headless, slimy creatures from the stars. There

were bloated beasts in the robes of men, and ancient Egyptian gods in hideous combat with squirming demons from the gulf. Some of the designs were foul beyond description, and others hinted of unclean terrors that were old when the world was young. But all were evil; and Carnoti, cold and callous though he was, could not gaze at them without feeling a horror that ate at his brain.

As for the natives, they were openly frightened. The moment that the top of the image came into view, they began to jabber hysterically. They retreated to the side of the excavation and began to argue and mumble, pointing occasionally at the statue, or at the kneeling figure of the doctor. Absorbed in his inspection, Carnoti failed to catch the body of their remarks, or note the air of menace which radiated from the sullen dragoman. Once or twice he heard some vague references to the name 'Nyarlathotep', and a few allusions to 'The Demon Messenger'.

After completing his scrutiny, the doctor rose to his feet and ordered the men to proceed with the excavation. No one moved. Impatiently he repeated his command. The natives stood by, their heads hung, but their faces were stolid. At last the dragoman stepped forward and began to harangue the *effendi*.

He and his men would never have come with their master had they known what they were expected to do. They would not touch the statue of the god, and they warned the doctor to keep his hands off. It was bad business to incur the wrath of the Old God – the Secret One. But perhaps he had not heard of Nyarlathotep. He was the oldest god of all Egypt; of all the world. He was the God of Resurrection, and the Black Messenger of Karneter. There was a legend that one day he would arise and bring the olden dead to life. And his curse was one to be avoided.

Carnoti, listening, began to lose his temper. Angrily he interrupted, ordering the men to stop gawking and resume their work. He backed up this command with two Colt .32 revolvers. He would take all the blame for this desecration,

he shouted, and he was not afraid of any damned stone idol in the world.

The natives seemed properly impressed, both by the revolvers and by this fluent profanity. They began to dig again, timidly averting their eyes from the statue's form.

A few hours' work sufficed for the men to uncover the idol. If the crown of its stony head had hinted of horror, the face and body openly proclaimed it. The image was obscene and shockingly malignant. There was an indescribably *alien* quality about it – it was ageless, unchanging, eternal. Not a scratch marred its black and crudely chiseled surface; during all its many-centuried burial there had been no weathering upon the fiendishly carven features. Carnoti saw it now as it must have looked when it was first buried, and the sight was not good to see.

It resembled a miniature sphinx – a life-sized sphinx with the wings of a vulture and the body of a hyena. There were talons and claws, and upon the squatting, bestial body rested a massive, anthropomorphic head, bearing the ominous triple crown whose dread designs had so singularly excited the natives. But the worst and by far the most hideous feature was the lack of a face upon the ghastly thing. It was a faceless god; the winged, faceless god of ancient myth – Nyarlathotep, Mighty Messenger, Stalker among the Stars, and Lord of the Desert.

When Carnoti completed his examination at last, he became almost hysterically happy. He grinned triumphantly into that blank and loathsome countenance – grinned into that faceless orifice that yawned as vacantly as the black void beyond the suns. In his enthusiasm he failed to notice the furtive whispers of the natives and the guides, and disregarded their fearsome glances at the unclean eidolon. Had he not done so, he would have been a wiser man; for these men knew, as all Egypt knows, that Nyarlathotep is the Master of Evil.

Not for nothing had his temples been demolished, his statues destroyed, and his priestcraft crucified in the olden

days. There were dark and terrible reasons for prohibiting his worship, and omitting his name from the *Book of the Dead*. All references to the Faceless One were long since deleted from the Sacred Manuscripts, and great pains had been taken to ignore some of his godly attributes, or assign them to some milder deity. In Thoth, Set, Bubastis and Sebek we can trace some of the Master's grisly endowments. It was he, in the most archaic of chronicles, who was ruler of the Underworld. It was he who became the patron of sorcery and the black arts. Once he alone had ruled, and men knew him in all lands, under many names. But that time passed. Men turned away from the worship of evil, and revered the good. They did not care for the gruesome sacrifice the Dark God demanded, nor the way his priests ruled. At last the cult was suppressed, and by common consent all references to it were forever banned, and its records destroyed. But Nyarlathotep had come out of the desert, according to the legend, and to the desert he now returned. Idols were set up in hidden places among the sands, and here the thin, fanatical ranks of true believers still leapt and capered in naked worship, where the cries of shrieking victims echoed only to the ears of the night.

So his legend remained and was handed down in the secret ways of the earth. Time passed. In the north the ice-flow receded, and Atlantis fell. New peoples overran the land, but the desert folk remained. They viewed the building of the pyramids with amused and cynical eyes. Wait, they counseled. When the Day arrived at last, Nyarlathotep again would come out of the desert, and then woe unto Egypt! For the pyramids would shatter into dust, and temples crumble to ruin. Sunken cities of the sea would rise, and there would be famine and pestilence throughout the land. The stars would change in a most peculiar way, so that the Great Ones could come pulsing from the outer gulf. Then the beasts should give tongue, and prophesy in their anthropoglotism that man shall perish. By these signs, and other apocalyptic portents, the world would know that Nyarlathotep had returned. Soon he himself would be visible—a dark, face-

less man in black, walking, staff in hand, across the desert, but leaving no track to mark his way, save that of death. For wherever his footsteps turned, men would surely die, until at last none but true believers remained to welcome him in worship with the Mighty Ones from the gulfs.

Such, in its essence, was the fable of Nyarlathotep. It was older than secret Egypt, more hoary than sea-doomed Atlantis, more ancient than time-forgotten Mu. But it has never been forgotten. In the medieval times this story and its prophecy were carried across Europe by returning crusaders. Thus the Mighty Messenger became the Black Man of the witch-covens; the emissary of Asmodeus and darker gods. His name is mentioned cryptically in the *Necronomicon*, for Alhazred heard it whispered in tales of shadowed Irem. The fabulous *Book of Eibon* hints at the myth in veiled and diverse ways, for it was writ in a far-off time when it was not yet deemed safe to speak of things that had walked upon the earth when it was young. Ludvig Prinn, who traveled in Saracenic lands and learned strange sorceries, awesomely implies his knowledge in the infamous *Mysteries of the Worm*.

But his worship, in late years, seems to have died out. There is no mention of it in Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and most reputable ethnologists and anthropologists are frankly ignorant of the Faceless One's history. But there are idols still intact, and some whisper of certain caverns beneath the Nile, and of burrows below the Ninth Pyramid. The secret signs and symbols of his worship are gone, but there are some undecipherable hieroglyphs in the government vaults which are very closely concealed. And men know. By word of mouth the tale has come down through the ages, and there are those who still wait for the Day. By common consent there seem to be certain spots in the desert which are carefully avoided by caravans, and several secluded shrines are shunned by those who remember. For Nyarlathotep is the God of the Desert, and his ways are best left unprofaned.

It was this knowledge which prompted the uneasiness of

the natives upon the discovery of that peculiar idol in the sand. When they had first noted the head-dress they had been afraid, and after seeing that featureless face they became frantic with dread. As for Doctor Carnoti, his fate did not matter to them. They were concerned only with themselves, and their course was plainly apparent. They must flee, and flee at once.

Carnoti paid no attention to them. He was busy making plans for the following day. They would place the idol on a wheeled cart and harness the donkeys. Once back to the river it could be put on board the steamer. What a find! He conjured up pleasant visions of the fame and fortune that would be his. Scavenger, was he? Unsavory adventurer, eh? Charlatan, cheat, imposter, they had called him. How those smug official eyes would pop when they beheld his discovery! Heaven only knew what vistas this thing might open up. There might be other altars, other idols; tombs and temples too, perhaps. He knew vaguely that there was some absurd legend about the worship of this deity, but if he could only get his hands on a few more natives who could give him the information he wanted. . . . He smiled, musingly. Funny, those superstitious myths! The boys were afraid of the statue; that was plainly apparent. The dragoman, now, with his stupid quotations. How did it go? 'Nyarlathotep is the Black Messenger of Karneter. He comes from out the desert, across the burning sands, and stalks his prey throughout the world, which is the land of his domain.' Silly! All Egyptian myths were stupid. Statues with animal heads suddenly coming to life; reincarnation of men and gods, foolish kings building pyramids for mummies. Well, a lot of fools believed it; not only the natives, either. He knew some cranks who credited the stories about the Pharaoh's curse, and the magic of the old priests. There were a lot of wild tales about the ancient tombs and the men who died when they invaded them. No wonder his own simple natives believed such trash! But whether they believed it or not, they were going to move his idol, damn them, even if he had to shoot them down to make them obey.

He went into his tent, well satisfied. The boy served him his meal, and Carnoti dined heartily as was his wont. Then he decided to retire early, in anticipation of his plans for the following morning. The boys could tend to the camp, he decided. Accordingly he lay down on his cot and soon fell into a contented, peaceful slumber.

4

It must have been several hours later that he awoke. It was very dark, and the night was strangely still. Once he heard the far-away howl of a hunting jackal, but it soon blended into somber silence. Surprised at his sudden awakening, Carnoti rose and went to the door of the tent, pulling back the flap to gaze into the open. A moment later he cursed in frenzied rage.

The camp was deserted! The fire had died out, the men and camels had disappeared. Foot-prints, already half obliterated by the sands, showed the silent haste in which the natives had departed. The fools had left him here alone!

He was lost. The knowledge sent a sudden stab of fear to his heart. Lost! The men were gone, the food was gone, the camels and donkeys had disappeared. He had neither weapons nor water, and he was all alone. He stood before the door of the tent and gazed, terrified, at the vast and lonely desert. The moon gleamed like a silver skull in an ebony sky. A sudden hot wind ruffled the endless ocean of sand, and sent it skirling in tiny waves at his feet. Then came silence, ceaseless silence. It was like the silence of the tomb; like the eternal silence of the pyramids, where in crumbling sarcophagi the mummies lie, their dead eyes gazing into unchanging and unending darkness. He felt indescribably small and lonely there in the night, and he was conscious of strange and baleful powers that were weaving the threads of his destiny into a final tragic pattern. Nyarlathotep! He *knew*, and was wreaking an immutable vengeance.

But that was nonsense. He must not let himself be troubled

by such fantastic rubbish. That was just another form of desert mirage; a common enough delusion under such circumstances. He must not lose his nerve now. He must face the facts calmly. The men had absconded with the supplies and the horses because of some crazy native superstition. That was real enough. As for the superstition itself, he must not let it bother him. Those frantic and morbid fancies of his would vanish quickly enough with the morning sun.

The morning sun! A terrible thought assailed him – the fearsome reality of the desert at midday. To reach an oasis he would be forced to travel day and night before the lack of food and water weakened him so that he could not go on. There would be no escape once he left this tent; no refuge from that pitiless blazing eye whose glaring rays could scorch his brain to madness. To die in the heat of the desert – that was an unthinkable agony. He must get back; his work was not yet completed. There must be a new expedition to recover the idol. He must get back! Besides, Carnoti did not want to die. His fat lips quivered with fear as he thought of the pain, the torture. He had no desire to suffer the anguish of that fellow he had put on the rack. The poor devil had not looked very pleasant there. Ah no, death was not for the doctor. He must hurry. But where?

He gazed around frantically, trying to get his bearings. The desert mocked him with its monotonous, inscrutable horizon. For a moment black despair clutched at his brain, and then came a sudden inspiration. He must go north, of course. And he recalled, now, the chance words let fall by the dragoman that afternoon. The statue of Nyarlathotep faced north! Jubilantly he ransacked the tent for any remnants of food or provisions. There were none. Matches and tobacco he carried, and in his kit he found a hunting-knife. He was almost confident when he left the tent. The rest of the journey would now be childishly simple. He would travel all night and make as much time as he could. His pack-blanket would probably shield him from the noonday sun tomorrow, and in late afternoon he would resume his course after the worst

of the heat had abated. By quick marches tomorrow night, he ought to find himself near the Wadi Hassur oasis upon the following morning. All that remained for him to do was to get out to the idol and set his course, since the tracks of his party in the sand were already obscured.

Triumphantly, he strode across the camp-clearing to the excavation where the image stood. And it was there that he received his greatest shock.

The idol had been reinterred! The workmen had not left the statue violated, but had completely filled in the excavation, even taking the precaution of placing the two original stones over the top. Carnoti could not move them single-handed, and when he realized the extent of this calamity, he was filled with an overpowering dismay. He was defeated. Cursing would do no good, and in his heart he could not even hope to pray. Nyarlathotep – Lord of the Desert!

It was with a new and deathly fear that he began his journey, choosing a course at random, and hoping against hope that the sudden clouds would lift so that he could have the guidance of the stars. But the clouds did not lift, and only the moon grinned grimly down at the stumbling figure that struggled through the sand.

Dervish dreams flitted through Carnoti's consciousness as he walked. Try as he might, the legend of the god haunted him with a sense of impending fulfillment. Vainly he tried to force his drugged mind to forget the suspicions that tormented it. He could not. Over and over again he found himself shivering with fear at the thought of a godly wrath pursuing him to his doom. He had violated a sacred spot, and the Old Ones remember . . . 'his ways are best left unprofaned' . . . 'God of the Desert' . . . that empty countenance. Carnoti swore viciously, and lumbered on, a tiny ant amid mountains of undulating sand.

5

Suddenly it was daylight. The sand faded from purple to violet, then suddenly suffused with an orchid glow. But Carnoti did not see it, for he slept. Long before he had planned, his bloated body had given way beneath the grueling strain, and the coming of dawn found him utterly weary and exhausted. His tired legs buckled under him and he collapsed upon the sand, barely managing to draw the blanket over him before he slept.

The sun crept across the brazen sky like a fiery ball of lava, pouring its molten rays upon the flaming sands. Carnoti slept on, but his sleep was far from pleasant. The heat brought him queer and disturbing dreams.

In them he seemed to see the figure of Nyarlathotep pursuing him on a nightmare flight across the desert of fire. He was running over a burning plain, unable to stop, while searing pain ate into his charred and blackened feet. Behind him strode the Faceless God, urging him onward with a staff of serpents. He ran on and on; but always that gruesome presence kept pace behind him. His feet became numbed by the scorching agony of the sand. Soon he was hobbling on ghastly, crumpled stumps, but despite the torture he dared not stop. The Thing behind him cackled in diabolical mirth, his gigantic laughter rising to the blazing sky.

Carnoti was on his knees now, his crippled legs eaten away into ashy stumps that smoldered acridly even as he crawled. Suddenly the desert became a lake of living flame into which he sank, his scorched body consumed by a blast of livid, unendurable torment. He felt the sand lick pitilessly at his arms, his waist, his very throat; and still his dying senses were filled with a monstrous dread of the Faceless One behind him — a dread transcending all pain. Even as he sank into that white-hot inferno he was feebly struggling on. The vengeance of the god must never overtake him! The heat was overpowering him now; it was frying his cracked

and bleeding lips, transforming his scorched body into one ghastly ember of burning anguish.

He raised his head for the last time before his boiling brain gave way beneath the agony. There stood the Dark One, and even as Carnoti watched he saw the lean taloned hands reach out to touch his fiery face; saw the dreadful triple-crowned head draw near to him, so that he gazed for one grisly moment into that empty countenance. As he looked he seemed to see something in that black pit of horror – something that was staring at him from illimitable gulfs beyond – something with great flaming eyes that bored into his being with a fury greater than the fires that were consuming him. It told him, wordlessly, that his doom was sealed. Then came a burst of white-hot oblivion, and he sank into the seething sands, the blood bubbling in his veins. But the indescribable horror of that glimpse remained, and the last thing he remembered was the sight of that dreadful, empty countenance and the nameless fear behind it. Then he awoke.

For a moment his relief was so great that he did not notice the sting of the midday sun. Then, bathed in perspiration, he staggered to his feet and felt the stabbing rays bite into his back. He tried to shield his eyes and glance above to get his bearings, but the sky was a bowl of fire. Desperately, he dropped the blanket and began to run. The sand was clinging to his feet, slowing his pace and tripping him. It burned his heels. He felt an intolerable thirst. Already the demons of delirium danced madly in his head. He ran, endlessly, and his dream seemed to become a menacing reality. Was it coming true?

His legs *were* scorched, his body *was* seared. He glanced behind. Thank God there was no figure there – yet! Perhaps, if he kept a grip on himself, he might still make it, in spite of the time he had lost. He raced on. Perhaps a passing caravan – but no, it was far out of the caravan route. Tonight the sunset would give him an accurate course. Tonight.

Damn that heat! Sand all around him. Hills of it, mountains. All alike they were, like the crumbled, cyclopean ruins of Titan cities. All were burning, smoldering in the fierce heat.

The day was endless. Time, ever an illusion, lost all meaning. Carnoti's weary body throbbed in bitter anguish, filling each moment with a new and deeper torment. The horizon never changed. No mirage marred the cruel, eternal vista; no shadow gave surcease from the savage glare.

But wait! Was there not a shadow *behind* him? Something dark and shapeless gloated at the back of his brain. A terrible thought pierced him with sudden realization. Nyarlathotep, God of the Desert! A shadow following him, driving him to destruction. Those legends – the natives warned him, his dreams warned him, even that dying creature on the rack. The Mighty Messenger always claims his own . . . a black man with a staff of serpents. . . . 'He cometh from out the desert, across the burning sands, and stalketh his prey throughout the land of his domain.'

Hallucination? Dared he glance back? He turned his fever-addled head. Yes! *It was true, this time!* There *was* something behind him, far away on the slope below; something black and nebulous that seemed to pad on stealthy feet. With a muttered curse, Carnoti began to run. Why had he ever touched that image? If he got out of this he would never return to the accursed spot again. The legends were true. God of the Desert.

He ran on, even though the sun showered bloody kisses on his brow. He was beginning to go blind. There were dazzling constellations whirling before his eyes, and his heart throbbed a shrieking rhythm in his breast. But in his mind there was room for but one thought – escape.

His imagination began playing him strange tricks. He seemed to see statues in the sand – statues like the one he had profaned. Their shapes towered everywhere, writhing giant-like out of the ground and confronting his path with eerie menace. Some were in attitudes with wings outspread, others were tentacled and snake-like, but all were faceless and triple-crowned. He felt that he was going mad, until he glanced back and saw that creeping figure now only a half-mile behind. Then he staggered on, screaming incoherently at the grotesque idolons barring his way. The desert seemed

to take on a hideous personality, as though all nature were conspiring to conquer him. The contorted outlines of the sand became imbued with malignant consciousness; the very sun took on an evil life. Carnoti moaned deliriously. Would night never come?

It came at last, but by that time Carnoti did not know it any more. He was a babbling, raving thing, wandering over the shifting sand, and the rising moon looked down on a being that alternately howled and laughed. Presently the figure struggled to its feet and glanced furtively over its shoulder at a shadow that crept close. Then it began to run again, shrieking over and over again the single word, 'Nyar-lathotep'. And all the while the shadow lurked just a step behind.

It seemed to be embodied with a strange and fiendish intelligence, for the shapeless adumbration carefully drove its victim forward in one definite direction, as if purposefully herding it toward an intended goal. The stars now looked upon a sight spawned of delirium – a man, chased across endlessly looming sands by a black shadow. Presently the pursued one came to the top of a hill and halted with a scream. The shadow paused in midair and seemed to wait.

Carnoti was looking down at the remains of his own camp, just as he had left it the night before, with the sudden awful realization that he had been driven in a circle back to his starting point. Then, with the knowledge, came a merciful mental collapse. He threw himself forward in one final effort to elude the shadow, and raced straight for the two stones where the statue was buried.

Then occurred that which he had feared. For even as he ran, the ground before him quaked in the throes of a gigantic upheaval. The sand rolled in vast, engulfing waves, away from the base of the two boulders. Through the opening rose the idol, glistening evilly in the moonlight. And the oncoming sand from its base caught Carnoti as he ran toward it, sucking at his legs like a quicksand, and yawning at his waist. At the same instant the peculiar shadow rose and leapt forward. It seemed to merge with the statue in midair, a nebulous,

animate mist. Then Carnoti, floundering in the grip of the sand, went quite insane with terror.

The formless statue gleamed living in the livid light, and the doomed man stared straight into its unearthly countenance. It was his dream come true, for behind that mask of stone he saw a face with eyes of yellow madness, and in those eyes he read death. The black figure spread its wings against the hills, and sank into the sand with a thunderous crash.

Thereafter nothing remained above the earth save a living head that twisted on the ground and struggled futilely to free its imprisoned body from the iron embrace of the encircling sand. Its imprecations turned to frantic cries for mercy, then sank to a sob in which echoed the single word, 'Nyarlathotep'.

When morning came Carnoti was still alive, and the sun baked his brain into a hell of crimson agony. But not for long. The vultures winged across the desert plain and descended upon him, almost as if supernaturally summoned.

Somewhere, buried in the sands below, an ancient idol lay, and upon its featureless countenance there was the faintest hint of a monstrous, hidden smile. For even as Carnoti the unbeliever died, his mangled lips paid whispered homage to Nyarlathotep, Lord of the Desert.

**The Best Reading in Adult Fantasy and Horror Fiction is in
Panther Books**

THE TOMB	H. P. Lovecraft	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
DAGON	H. P. Lovecraft	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE LURKING FEAR	H. P. Lovecraft	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE HAUNTER OF THE DARK	H. P. Lovecraft	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS	H. P. Lovecraft	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE LURKER AT THE THRESHOLD	H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE SHUTTERED ROOM	H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND	William Hope Hodgson	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
CARNACKI THE GHOST-FINDER	William Hope Hodgson	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
OUT OF SPACE AND TIME (Volume 1)	Clark Ashton Smith	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
OUT OF SPACE AND TIME (Volume 2)	Clark Ashton Smith	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
LOST WORLDS (Volume 1)	Clark Ashton Smith	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
LOST WORLDS (Volume 2)	Clark Ashton Smith	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
STRANGE ECSTASIES	Edited by Michel Parry	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
DREAM TRIPS	Edited by Michel Parry	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE	Colin Wilson	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>

Isaac Asimov, Grand Master of Science Fiction, in Panther Books

The Foundation Trilogy

FOUNDATION	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
FOUNDATION AND EMPIRE	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
SECOND FOUNDATION	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>

THE EARLY ASIMOV (Volume 1)	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE EARLY ASIMOV (Volume 2)	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE EARLY ASIMOV (Volume 3)	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>

THE GODS THEMSELVES	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE CURRENTS OF SPACE	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE NAKED SUN	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE STARS LIKE DUST	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE CAVES OF STEEL	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE END OF ETERNITY	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
EARTH IS ROOM ENOUGH	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE MARTIAN WAY	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
NIGHTFALL ONE	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
NIGHTFALL TWO	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
ASIMOV'S MYSTERIES	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>

I, ROBOT	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE REST OF THE ROBOTS	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>

Edited by Asimov

NEBULA AWARD STORIES 8	60p	<input type="checkbox"/>
------------------------	-----	--------------------------

Panther Science Fiction – A Selection from the World's Best S.F. List

GREYBEARD	Brian W. Aldiss	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE MOMENT OF ECLIPSE	Brian W. Aldiss	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE DISASTER AREA	J. G. Ballard	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?	Philip K. Dick	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
NOW WAIT FOR LAST YEAR	Philip K. Dick	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
CLANS OF THE ALPHANE MOON	Philip K. Dick	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE ZAP GUN	Philip K. Dick	40p	<input type="checkbox"/>
ALL THE SOUNDS OF FEAR	Harlan Ellison	30p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE TIME OF THE EYE	Harlan Ellison	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE RING OF RITORNEL	Charles L. Harness	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE CENTAURI DEVICE	M. John Harrison	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE MACHINE IN SHAFT TEN	M. John Harrison	50p	<input type="checkbox"/>
THE VIEW FROM THE STARS	Walter M. Miller, Jr.	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>
MASQUE OF A SAVAGE MANDARIN	Philip Bedford Robinson	35p	<input type="checkbox"/>

All these books are available at your local bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

Write to Panther Cash Sales, PO Box 11, Falmouth, Cornwall TR10 9EN

Please enclose remittance to the value of the cover price plus:
UK: 18p for the first book plus 8p per copy for each additional book ordered to a maximum charge of 66p

BFPO and EIRE: 18p for the first book plus 8p per copy for the next 6 books, thereafter 3p per book

OVERSEAS: 20p for the first book and 10p for each additional book
Granada Publishing reserve the right to show new retail prices on covers, which may differ from those previously advertised in the text or elsewhere.

The publishers regret to announce that there is no blurb to inform prospective readers about the contents of **The Opener of the Way**. Unfortunately the person designated to write the blurb was found dead after reading the book, having apparently suffered some mysterious kind of severe shock . . .

(Actually, **The Opener of the Way** is a first-rate collection of ten terrifying tales of horror and the macabre, including some of the finest ever written about Ancient Egyptian curses, vampires, pacts with the Devil and others. We hope you 'enjoy' them . . .)

Cover illustration by Anthony Roberts

U.K. 60p CANADA \$2.50
AUSTRALIA \$1.90 NEW ZEALAND \$1.90

FICTION/FANTASY & HORROR
586 04221 0