★ Lovecraft ★ Jesse Stuart ★ Wakefield ★

★ Johnstone ★ Counselman ★ Jacobi ★ Howard ★ Shea ★ Campbell ★

★ Hodgson ★ Long ★ Brennan ★ Pocsik ★ Bailey ★ Derleth ★

OVER THE EDGE

NEW STORIES OF THE MACABRE

18 stories never before published

Edited by

AUGUST DERLETH

★ Metcalfe ★ Ashton Smith ★ Leiber ★

Here is a really outstanding new collection of tales of the macabre and the supernatural. And when we say "new" we mean precisely that: not one of the eighteen memorable stories in this collection has been published before, anywhere, in any form. The collection includes tales by many of the masters of the *genre*—H. P. Lovecraft (author of *The Haunter in the Dark, At the Mountains of Madness*), W. H. Hodgson (author of *The House on the Borderland, The Ghost Pirates*), John Metcalfe (author of *The Smoking Leg, The Bad Lands*), H. Russell Wakefield (author of *They Return at Evening, Imagine a Man in a Box*); and at the other end of the spectrum, there are several exciting newcomers, two of whom make their first appearance in print in this volume.

The collection opens, most fittingly, with Hodgson's *The Crew of the Lancing*, a tale of the days of the great sailing ships, and of a desperate encounter with a lost ship which has been seized and manned by the demons of the sea. This is a story which might have been conceived by that greatest master of them all, Edgar Allan Poe; as indeed might the next in the volume, Wakefield's *The Last Meeting of Two Old Friends*, a tale of a mass murderer, dead for a century, whose tomb is reopened in our own time.

H. P. Lovecraft died in 1937, and left a draft of the story which we have here. It has now been completed by his old collaborator (and

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the book's editor), August Derleth, and is in the authentic and spine-chilling vein: a possession. But there are benign ghosts in the collection too: the father who returns to keep a helpful eye on how his family are running his farm; the mother who returns to care for her sick child; and there's a whole benign oasis, to save an Arab who is dying of thirst. Then, to redress the balance again, there are tales of monstrous evil, of the power of an Inca curse which spans the centuries, the powers of necromancy and of vampires.

The collection ranges from the last prodigious adventure of Robert E. Howard's splendidly old-fashioned hero, Solomon Kane, swashbuckling and indestructible, to the most sophisticated science fiction of Frank Belknap Long's *When the Rains Came*. There is an element of science fiction in Carl Jacobi's *Kincaid's Car* too; but perhaps the remarkable range of the collection is most strikingly seen in J. Vernon Shea's *The Old Lady's Room* and Fritz Leiber's *The Black Gondolier*. The former might fairly be described as a fine example of the classic ghost story, and the latter takes the macabre about as far as it can go. Its setting is a grim, broken-down Venice of cement-shell constructions, oil derricks and heavy wire barricades; and its ghost is no ordinary one, no demon or monster, no elemental or emanation; the consciously hostile power is quite simply, oil; the life-blood of our modern technological culture. This is a book packed with good stories, all of them guaranteed to set the scalp tingling and the blood curdling.

Over The Edge

edited by

AUGUST DERLETH

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1967

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OVER THE EDGE

William Hope Hodgson (1875-1918) was the son of an Essex clergyman. He left home early in his life to spend eight years at sea, an experience which profoundly influenced his writing career, for his best macabre tales were about the sea. His first book was *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig,"* followed a year later—in 1908—by his finest novel, *The House on the Borderland.* The reception accorded these tales was so encouraging that Hodgson in rapid succession wrote and published *The Ghost Pirates, Carnacki the Ghost Finder, The Night Land, Poems, Men of the Deep Waters, Cargunka, The Luck of the Strong,* and *Captain Gault.* He was granted a commission in the 171st Brigade of Royal Field Artillery when World War I broke out, distinguished himself for bravery at Ypres and after, and was killed by a shell while on duty as an observation officer. Two collections of his verse, *The Calling of the Sea* and *The Voice of the Ocean,* were published posthumously. This story is one of three unpublished tales discovered by Hodgson's late sister, and sent to Arkham House for a further collection of Hodgson tales.

The Crew of the Lancing

William Hope Hodgson

"Come out on deck and have a look, Darky," shouted Jepson, rushing into the berth. "The Old Man says there's been a submarine earthquake and the sea's all babbling and muddy."

Out I ran to find the everlasting blue of the sea mottled with splotches of a muddy hue, and the water disturbed by huge bubbles floating about and bursting with a hissing pop.

The skipper and the three Mates were all on the poop with their glasses, staring out at this strange phenomenon. Far away to windward something like a mass of seaweed hove up into the evening air, and fell back into the sea with a sullen splash. Then the tropical sun fell and in the afterglow things grew shadowy. The wind which had been fresh during the day was gradually dropping and the night was becoming oppressively hot.

The First Mate called to me from the poop to dip a bucket of water and bring it to him. I did, and he put the thermometer into it.

"Just as I thought," he muttered, taking it out and showing it to the Skipper. "Ninety-nine degrees! Why, the sea's hot enough to make tea with!"

"Hope it won't get any hotter," growled the Captain. "We shall be boiled alive if it does."

I took the bucket and, after emptying it, put it back in the rack, then I went to the side while the Skipper and the Mate paced the poop together. The air grew hotter and hotter, and an hour or so passed in silence, broken only by the pop of some bursting gas bubble.

The moon rose and showed watery through a warm fog of vapour which had risen from the heated sea, enveloping the ship in a moist shroud that penetrated to the skin.

Slowly the interminable night rolled away and the sun rose dimly through the steam. From time to time we tested the temperature, but found only a slight increase in heat. No work was done. A general feeling of something impending was over the whole ship. The ship's bell was kept going constantly, while the lookout-man peered uselessly into the wreathing mists, and the

Captain and Mates kept an anxious watch.

There was evidently some difference of opinion amongst them for I heard the Second Mate say, "That's all rot. I've seen things in fogs before today and they've always turned out to be nothing."

The Third Mate made some reply which I couldn't catch, and the matter dropped.

When I came on deck at eight bells after a short sleep, the steam still held us, and if anything it seemed thicker. Hansard, who had been taking the temperature at intervals while I was below, told me that it had gone up three degrees, and that the Old Man was getting into a rare old state.

About three bells I went forrard to have a look over the bows.

As I leaned on the rail Stevenson, whose lookout it was, came and stood by me.

"Rum go, this," he grumbled.

Suddenly there appeared up out of the water a huge, black face, like a monstrous caricature of a human face.

I grasped his arm and pointed. "Look!" I whispered, "Look!"

Stevenson turned quickly and stared down. "Lord!" he said, and bent over more to see the thing. "It's a devil," he cried, and as he spoke the thing, whatever it was, disappeared. Blankly we both looked down into the dark water. When I glanced up at him, his face wore a puzzled, startled look.

"Better go aft and tell the Old Man," he said, and I nodded and went.

On the poop I found the Skipper and First Mate pacing moodily. To them I told what I had seen.

"Bosh!" sneered the Captain, "you've been looking at your own ugly reflection in the water!" Yet in spite of his sneers, he questioned me, and finally the Mate went forrard himself to have a look, but returned in a few minutes to say that he could see nothing.

Four bells went, and we were relieved for tea. After that I went on deck again, I found the men clustered together forrard. They were talking about the thing Stevenson and I had seen. Several questioned me, and I told them all I knew.

"I suppose, Darky," said one of the older men, "it couldn't by any chance have been a reflection? Johnson, here, says as he heard the Old Man tell yer as how you'd been alookin' at yer own face in the water."

I laughed. "Ask Stevenson," I replied, and went away.

At eight bells I made my way aft. So far nothing further had appeared.

About an hour before midnight the Mate called out for me to bring him up a match to light his pipe. He struck a light and handed me back the box, and as he did so, there rose far out in the night, a muffled screaming, and then a clamour of hoarse braying like an ass's, only deeper, and with a horribly suggestive human note ringing through it.

"Did you hear that, Darky?" asked the Mate sharply.

"Yes, sir," I answered. I was listening intently for a repetition of the sounds, and scarcely noticed his question. Suddenly the noise came again and other voices took it up. It sounded away on our starboard bow. The Mate's pipe dropped with a clatter to the deck.

"Run forrard!" he shouted. "Quick now, and see if you can see anything!"

I flew forrard, and there I found the lookout man and all the watch gathered in a clump.

"Have you seen anything?" I called out as I reached the fo'cas'le head.

A frightened voice answered me. "Listen!"

The sound rose again. It seemed closer and almost ahead,

though the fog confused one and made it impossible to tell for certain.

Undoubtedly the noises were nearer, and I hurried aft to the Mate. I reported that there was nothing to be seen but that the sounds seemed considerably closer and to come from more ahead. On hearing this he told the helmsman to let the ship's head go off a couple of points.

A minute later, a shrill screaming tore its way through the mists, followed by the braying sounds again.

"It's close on the starboard bow," muttered the Mate, as he beckoned the helmsman to let her head go off a little more.

A minute passed and then another, yet the silence was unbroken.

Then, overpoweringly, the sounds recommenced, and so close were they that it seemed they must be right aboard of us.

I noticed a strange booming note that mingled with the asinine brays, and once or twice there came a sound which can only be described as a sort of "gug, gug, gug." Then would come a wheezy whistling, for all the world like an asthmatic person breathing.

The moon shone dimly through the steam which seemed to me somewhat thinner. Once the Mate gripped my shoulder tightly as the noises rose and fell. The sounds were coming from right opposite us. I was staring hard into the gloom when I saw something—something long and black, which was sliding past us into the night. Out of it rose indistinct towers which gradually resolved into masses of ropes and sails. Thus I saw it, spectrally and unreal.

"A Ship! It's a ship!" I cried, excitedly. I turned to Mister Grey. He too had seen something and was staring after the thing fading away into our wake.

Then our sails gave a sudden slat and the Mate glanced aloft.

"Wind's dropping," he growled, savagely. "We shall never get out of this infernal place at this rate."

Gradually the wind fell until not a breath stirred, and the steamy mists closed in thicker than ever.

Hours passed. The watch was relieved and I went below.

At seven bells we were called again. As I went along the deck to the galley, I noticed that the steam-fog was much thinner, and the air felt cooler.

At eight bells I went on deck to relieve Hansard at coiling down the ropes. From him I learned that the steam had started to clear about four bells, and the temperature of the sea had fallen ten degrees.

It must have been some half hour later that the dissolving mists gave us a glimpse of the surrounding sea. It was still mottled with darker patches but the bubbling and popping had ceased. Such of the ocean as I could see had a peculiar desolate aspect. At times a wisp of steam would float up from the nearer sea and roll undulatingly across its silent surface until it was lost in the vagueness that still held the horizon hidden. Here and there columns of steam rose up in pillars of mist which gave me the impression that the sea was hot in patches.

I crossed to the starboard side and looked over. It was the same there. The sea preserved a forlorn, deserted look that impressed me with a feeling of chilliness, though the air was quite warm and muggy.

"Get me my glasses, Darky" I heard the Mate speak up on the poop.

I ran to his berth and then up on the poop with them. He walked aft to the taffrail and took a look astern. Here the mists seemed to be gathered more thickly, though the water was much heated thereabouts.

I stayed up on the poop a minute looking in the same direction as the Mate. Presently something shadowy grew on my vision. Steadily I watched it until I distinctly saw the ghostly outline of a ship within the mists.

"See!" I cried, but even as I spoke a lifting wreath of mist had disclosed to view a great four-masted barque lying becalmed with all sail set a few hundred yards astern of us. Then the mist fell again and the strange ship lay hidden.

The Mate was all excitement, taking quick jerky strides up and down the poop, only to stop every few minutes to have another peer through his glasses. Gradually, as the mists dispersed, the vessel became more plainly seen, and it was then we got an inkling of the cause of those dreadful noises in the night.

For some time we watched her silently, the conviction growing on me that, in spite of the steam, I could distinguish some sort of movement aboard her. In a little while the doubt became a certainty; and also I could see, hazily, a continuous splashing and churning of the water round about her hull.

Suddenly the Mate dropped the glasses from his eyes. "Fetch me the speaking trumpet," he called quickly, without looking round.

In a moment I was back with the instrument. He gave me his glasses to hold while he raised the trumpet to his mouth and sent a loud "Ship Ahoy" across the water to the stranger. We waited intently for an answer.

A moment later came a deep hollow mutter out of the mist that rose quickly into the asinine bellowing of the previous night. Higher and louder drove the horrid sounds, and then they sank and died away amongst the further mistiness.

At this unexpected answer to his hail the Mate stood amazed. Now he turned sharply and told me to call the Old Man at once.

The watch had come aft, attracted by the noise, and were

now climbing into the rigging to get a view over the stern. After calling the Captain, I returned to the poop where I found the Second and Third Mates standing by the First, all engaged in trying to pierce the clouds of steam. A minute later the Skipper appeared, carrying his telescope. The Mate gave him a short account of the state of affairs and handed him the trumpet. Putting his telescope down, the Captain raised the trumpet to his mouth and hailed the shadowy craft.

We all listened breathlessly. Again came that distant mutter, and again it rose into that ass-like bellow through which rang that terrible, half human note, rising and falling in the dreadful cadence.

The Skipper lowered the trumpet, and stood for a moment with an expression of astonished horror on his face.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. "What an ungodly row!"

Suddenly the Third Mate, who had been spying through his binoculars, broke the silence.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "There's a wind coming up astern." At his words the Captain looked up quickly, and we all watched the ruffling water.

"That packet yonder is bringing up the wind with her," said the Skipper. "She'll be alongside in a few minutes if this cat's-paw lasts."

Some minutes passed and the bank of fog had come to within a hundred yards of our taffrail. The strange ship could be seen distinctly just within the fringe of driving wisps. Then the wind died away. A minute passed, then another, and the water became faintly ruffled astern of us. At the same time the stranger vessel neared us steadily. Quickly the seconds passed, and she was within fifty yards; then the wind reached us and blew clammily through our rigging. Our sails filled and we started to forge ahead. The strange barque came on rapidly; she had the wind before us,

and consequently, had better way through the water.

Just as her bows came abreast of our quarter she yawed sharply and came up into the wind with her sails all a-flutter. I looked towards her wheel, but could see it only dimly through the mistiness. Slowly she fell off again and started to go through the water.

We, meanwhile, had gone ahead; but it was soon evident that she was the better sailer, for she came up to us hand over fist. The wind freshened and the fog began to clear quickly so that each moment the detail of her spars and cordage showed more plainly.

The Skipper and the Mates were watching her closely through their glasses when an almost simultaneous exclamation of fear broke from them.

"My God!"

Crawling about the decks now visible in the thinning mist, were the most horrible creatures I had ever seen. In spite of their unearthly strangeness I had a feeling that there was something familiar about them. They were like nothing so much as men. They had bodies the shape of seals, but of a dead, unhealthly white colour. The lower part ended in a sort of double curved tail on which they had two long, snaky feelers, and at the ends a very human-like hand with talons instead of nails—fearsome parodies of humans.

Their faces, which, like their arm-tentacles, were black, were the most grotesquely human things about them, and save that the upper jaw shut into the lower—much after the manner of the jaw of an octopus—I have seen men amongst certain tribes of natives who had faces uncommonly like theirs; yet no native I have ever seen could have given me the extraordinary feeling of horror and revulsion that I experienced towards those brutal looking creatures.

"What devilish beasts!" burst out the Captain in disgust.

He turned to look at the Mates and, as he did so, the expression on their faces told me that they had all realised what the presence of those bestial looking brutes meant.

If, as was doubtless the case, these creatures had boarded this vessel and destroyed the crew, what was to prevent them from doing the same with us? We were a smaller ship and a small crew, and the more I thought about the matter the less I liked it.

Her name, *Lancing,* could be read easily on her bows with the naked eye, while the lifebuoys and boats had the name bracketed with Glasgow painted on them, showing that she hailed from that port. At times the derelict would yaw wildly, thus loosing so much ground that we were able to keep some distance ahead of her.

Then, as we gazed at her, we noticed that there was some disturbance aboard, and several of the creatures started to slide down her side into the water.

The Mate pointed and called out excitedly.

"See! See! They've spotted us. They're coming after us!"

It was only too true. Scores of them were sliding into the sea, letting themselves down with their long arm-tentacles. On they came, slipping by scores into the water and swimming towards us in great bodies. The ship was going some three knots an hour, otherwise they would have caught us in a very few minutes. As it was they came on, gaining slowly but surely, nearer and nearer. Their long tentacle-like arms rose out of the water in hundreds, and the foremost ones were already within a score of yards of use before the Captain bethought himself to shout to the Mates to fetch up the half dozen cutlasses comprising the ship's armoury. Then, turning to me, he bade me go below and bring him the two revolvers out of the top drawer of his cabin table, also a box of cartridges that was there.

When I returned with the weapons he handed one to the Mate, keeping the other himself. Meanwhile the pursuing creatures were getting steadily closer, and soon half a dozen of the leaders were right under our stern. Immediately the Captain leaned over the rail and discharged the weapon amongst them; but without apparently producing any effect whatever. I think he realised how puny and ineffectual all efforts against such an enemy must be, for he did not even trouble to reload his pistol.

Some dozens of the brutes had reached us, and the arm tentacle rose into the air and caught at the rail. I heard the Third Mate scream suddenly as he was dragged violently against the taffrail. Seeing his danger, I snatched one of the cutlasses and made a fierce cut at the thing that held him, severing it clean in two. A gout of blood splashed me in the face, and the Third staggered and fell to the deck. A dozen more of those grasping arms rose and wavered but they seemed to be some yards astern. A rapidly widening patch of clear water appeared between us and the foremost of the monsters and I gave a crazy shout of joy, for we were leaving them behind. The cause was soon apparent; the wind, now that it had come, was freshening rapidly and the ship was running some eight knots through the water.

Away in our wake the barque was still yawing. Presently we hauled up on the port tack and left the *Lancing* running away to leeward, with her devilish crew of octopus-beasts aboard her.

The Third Mate was struggling to his feet with a dazed look. Something fell from him as he rose and I stooped to pick it up. It was the severed portion of the talon-like hand that had gripped him.

• • •

Three weeks later we anchored off 'Frisco'. There the Captain made a full report of the affair to the authorities with the result that a gunboat was dispatched to investigate.

Six weeks later she returned to report she had been unable to find any signs, either of the ship herself, or of the fearful creatures that had attacked her. And since then nothing as far as I know has ever been heard of the four-masted barque *Lancing,* last seen by us in the possession of creatures which may be rightly called the demons of the sea.

Whether she still floats occupied by her hellish crew, or whether some storm has sent her to her last resting place beneath the waves is purely a matter of conjecture. Perchance, on some dark, fog-bound night, a ship in that wilderness of waters may hear cries and sounds beyond those of the wailing of the winds. Then let them look to it; for it may be that the demons of the sea are near them.

H. Russell Wakefield (1890-) is the son of Bishop Wakefield of Birmingham. He was educated at Marlborough College and Oxford University, where he took Second Class Honours in Modern History. He was for a while secretary to Lord Northcliffe, in service in both World Wars, and a writer of teleplays for the B.B.C. He is one of the foremost living authors in the genre of the macabre. He is the author of five outstanding collections of supernatural tales—*They Return at Evening, Others Who Returned, Imagine a Man in a Box, The Clock Strikes Twelve, Strayers from Sheol*—three remarkable mystery novels—*Hearken to the Evidence, Belt of Suspicion,* and *Hostess to Death*—and two notable studies in criminology—*Landru* and *The Green Bicycle Case.* Mr. Wakefield lives in London, where he continues to write for the B.B.C. and is slowly assembling another collection of his excellent stories.

The Last Meeting of Two Old Friends

H. Russell Wakefield

Reflections of those whose death is
passed and whose bones are buried
Lucretius

Dikellian came most abruptly and unexpectedly upon the cemetery, for it had been entirely masked by the towering hulk

of a hospital, and he was so taken aback by the suddenness and strangeness of the great, green vision set down in, yet rescued from, the drab and turgid bowels of North Fulham, that he stopped dead in his tracks for a moment before moving slowly forward to the entrance arch on which was inscribed the legend "1824." As he passed through it and returned the salute of a drowsy warden, he knew that, so deeply had that first view been etched on his memory, that he would always be able to recall it at will till his dying day. As he stood gazing around him he felt, for some reason he could not in the least explain, highly alert and "charged," even a shade ill-at-ease. The great Death-Place was, he roughly judged, about three-quarters of a mile in length with a beam of some five hundred yards. It was an early spring and the trees, in varying degrees of leaf, were already combining to reveal a delicate blue-green shimmer. He was standing at the head of the main axis which ran dead straight to the south, through an avenue of horse-chestnuts for perhaps, 500 yards, when the tree-border gave place to some white structures, the nature of which distance and a thin mist rendered uncertain. After glancing down the long vista for a few moments he picked out, almost at the limit of vision, a figure looking toy-soldier-size at that range. This pygmy person, male, he was pretty sure, was quite stationary and, it might have been supposed, staring back at him; and so they remained for a few seconds, till Dikellian turned away and strolled back to Queen's Gate.

At the time of these events Victor Dikellian had just celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday. He was the son of two pure-blooded Armenians of distinguished lineage. His father had been a partner in—and British Manager of—a huge Levantine Trading concern, who in his early retirement settled permanently in London, a city which suited his rather delicate constitution better than any other. This was after a quarter of a century's flaw-

lessly happy marriage to his darkly, lovely, aristocratic lady who bore him this one child upon whom they lavished all the parental fervour of their race. But during his first term at Balliol both his parents perished in an aeroplane, which disappeared without a trace between Athens and Rome. The psychic shock which resulted, particularly the loss of his mother between whom and himself the spiritual umbilical cord had never been severed, permanently affected his character so that it became prematurely austere and, to a great extent, remained so. Thus, though he was now a very rich young man and by nature no celibate or eremite, he forthwith put away all childish things, which happily brought him to concentrate on a great natural talent, amounting perhaps—the question was debated by his peers—to genius. He was by right of birth an Inductive Historian, being possessed of a most penetrating insight into such perennial arcana as the Evolution of the Chinese Junk, the very odd literary sources of Santa Teresa, the Tablets of Easter Island, and the Queens of Heaven in Greek Mythology.

In attacking such problems he was never dogmatic but always original, and cogent, and simple, which made the books and lectures in which he recorded the fruits of his researches as appealing to the educated public as to the critical expert. He was a taut, nimble, rather swarthy person. His face was squareish, plumpish, healthily sallow, and altogether dominated by a pair of piercing black eyes, alive with intelligence and sometimes savage mockery. Though superficially anglicised, he was, just below that surface, alien and un-Western, physically and psychically. It must be mentioned that he was just beginning to collect paunch and poundage, a process he was resolute to resist, for he knew that an Armenian of forty is only too likely to be "contemporary," as it were, with a Western European of sixty, and that premature senility was one of his racial hazards to which he

had no intention of succumbing, rigid determinist though he professed to be.

For fifteen years his headquarters and sally-port had been All Souls College, Oxford, of which, of course, he was a Fellow, and he had come to regard himself as a bachelor, presumably confirmed—his occasional affairs with women having withered in the bud—he was still so regarding himself when he met a Miss Carlotta Gavin, who, coincidentally enough, until that moment, had accepted with a small shrug of smiling resignment that she was destined, if not to celibacy, certainly to spinsterhood, for she had received no less than forty-five offers of marriage, many of them from the most eligible young suitors in the land, all of which she had unhesitatingly refused, and yet within two minutes of their meeting both had recognized, with solemn ecstacy, that, de facto, at least, they were already inseparably one. Such is the might and mysterious Drang of a flawless mutual affinity. Carlotta was the daughter of a reasonably eccentric Irish nobleman and an imperiously handsome Italian mother, and she herself was physically endowed enough to be the subject of a detailed rhapsody, but this sombre narrative is no place for such a paean. Suffice it to say that Celt and Latin had linked to breed a curious masterpiece in ebony and scarlet, save for those great, round hazel eyes, their expression meditating, a shade melancholy, entirely self-reliant, and occasionally blazingly malevolent. Technically she was neither "pretty" nor a beauty, but she possessed that *something* which many times drove those who desired her vainly to seek the Bottle or the Grave! She had an athlete's body, an ardent, volatile temperament, reasonably well controlled, and not for a second was she anybody's fool.

So, very soon, it was a long farewell to All Souls, and Dikellian was more than ready for the change. An Armenian *can* readily be an indomitable ascetic, he can also be a formidable sybarite,

and Dikellian could be both. He had already known ancestral longings for a really superb abode on his *own* account, and now he had to find one worthy of Carlotta, spacious and luxurious. He wanted the Study of Studies, the Bedroom of Bedrooms, a Lucullian cook, and, of course, money is the dowsingrod which locates all such requisites, in this case a vast penthouse in Queen's Gate with a staggering rent and soon with appointments and furnishings in perfect taste. The cook, too, a Mrs. Renton, a widow of immense talent and fission-fussion temper—he found, in fact, his Heart's Desire.

And when he and Carlotta had been made (de jure) one it was there that he and she, Arthur his valet, and Simone, her maid, together with that most aware, beloved and happy bird, Mick the Mynah, took up residence in the middle of March some years ago.

During dinner he told Carlotta about the strange cemetery, and she at once made an inspired suggestion.

"You are worrying about your weight and so am I, for I want you to—you *must*—live for a hundred years. You hate games, and this cemetery sounds an excellent place in which to *train*—or whatever you like to call it, round and round the Stone Garden and few to mock your humble toil, I imagine. Well?"

"It's a sparkling idea," he replied, and turning to Arthur, who was pouring some Montrachet into his glass, he exclaimed, "Get out my Balliol blazer, my grey bags, and my least moth-devoured sweater; I have need of them! I'll start tomorrow and keep it up till I can look that weighing-machine full in the face without a blush!"

And so it was; for after a hard morning's work and a light lunch, he returned to the great Garden of Corruption in a sartorial ensemble last worn at Easter Island. "1824," he thought, as he passed through the arch, "It must have been right out in

the country then, the nearest peopled place being Kensington Village, two miles or so to the north-east." Firstly, in duty bound, he completed a fast circuit of the perimeter. It was, he found, a slog of just about 2,500 yards and he encompassed it in a creditable thirty minutes. His pores responded well and when he eased up, panting just a little, he felt a lighter and a better man. Then he looked expertly about him and decided to examine those white structures, which he had noted on the previous evening, and strolled placidly down to them. He found they comprised a low arcade or colonnade, divided to right and left, which first swung out to east and west and then curved back in pleasing arcs to a domed chapel, flanked by what he judged to be the Administrative Offices. The system was stucco on brick, and it was in a poorish state of repair. In fact there were obvious signs that renovation was in progress on the eastern arm. He climbed the dozen steps which took him to the floor of that wing, and paced slowly along it. There were narrow arches on both sides, about every twenty yards, from which one could look out to right and left upon masses of weathered, commemorative metal, perched at varying angles above the teeming dead. It was rather dim inside there and would, he knew, always be so even on the brightest days, always somewhat sullen and uninviting. On the walls were a few scattered, mostly battered, remnants of what must once have been a plethora of memorial tablets. These referred in most cases to *"The Remains Interred Below,"* or some such phrase; and soon he came upon some railings on the east side across an archway. They were about four feet high and clearly intended to prevent anybody, particularly children, from falling through the arch. And with good reason, he soon realized, for he found on inspection that there was a stark drop of fifteen feet on to some stone steps leading steeply downwards. And now he "got" it. Down there must be the catacombs housing those de-

parted commemorated above. He'd investigate. So on reaching the end of the wing, he made his way down and back to the stone steps. (He later discovered there were six of these descents, three in each wing). There were sixteen massive steps which, he surmised, had been little trodden for many years, since, near the bottom, the sprays from two dense ivy bushes met across the way, and he had to break through their barrier of leaves. Past it, he felt rather isolated from the rest of the world, in a sort of achieved Descensus Averni. At the bottom was a massive, open-work, wrought iron door, held in place by a big rusty padlock. He peered through the bars into a dim and uncertain beyond, and his eyes presently adjusting themselves to the murk, he found himself facing a wooden-walled enclosure which, judging from its shelves, had once held at least a dozen coffins. There were none now, but there was one box lying in front of the enclosure and almost blocking the passage-way. It was in a highly indecorous state, its lid raised askew and some dubious material protruding from its interior. What material? No amount of peering answered that question. A tart, rancid reek was coming from its vicinity. He could now discern several other such enclosures, family sepulchres quite obviously, some fully, some semi-occupied, and he realized what had happened. When the cemetery was first opened the Three-Handed-Mandarins (Dikellian had sporadic egalitarian leanings) had been persuaded, in the cause of Conspicuous Waste, to buy space in the socially superior catacombs, while the more polloi and impoverished persons had to be content to await the Last Trump in the mould above. These catacombs, the evidence of dates went to show, had been closed about 1875, when "House Full" boards had had to be displayed. After that the only cenotaphic status symbol available had been to build a sepulchre *above* ground. He had noticed a number of these littered about, and time had revealed the

shocking jerry-building of most of them. But there were a few, of the most massive and bulky proportions and vehement vulgarity, which might last almost as long as time. These, no doubt, contained the dust of most notable commercial dacoits. So *that* petty problem was solved! He next turned his attention to the lively design on the iron door. This was mainly an affair of *serpents,* two vigorous specimens of which, *Brillenschlangen,* in spacial opposition, after chafing their clammy coils over much of the sullen metal, came menacingly or matingly together near the top. Fitted rather clumsily between them was an enigmatic winged object, presumably a soul in process of ascent. Supposedly, he thought, these reptiles were erotic symbols meant to suggest the perennial buoyancy of Life itself as against all Death's individual conquests; though perhaps he was reading into it more than its deviser had intended to convey; anyway it was tolerably well conceived and executed, considering its period. Well, that was that, and after one more glance at the deplorable coffin, he began to ascend those unaccommodating steps; how, he thought, they must have irked the coffin bearers! As he breasted his way through the ivy barrier a cloud of small black insects flew out at him and pounced on his face and neck, nipping venomously. He drove them off, but they repeatedly returned to the attack till he regained ground level. What now? he asked himself uncertainly, as he breathed in the cool, clean air. Then he frowned, for it suddenly came to him that, not long before, his attention had been caught—or half caught—by something he had observed, but not, as it were, *absorbed;* its cerebral penetration had been just insufficient. What had it been? The attempt to remember was searing. With an effort he cleared his head and waited for his memory to act. After a very long minute it did so, and enormously to his relief, he "had" it. He remembered that, during his saunter down the arcade, his eye

had been *almost* caught by something which, as it were, his clerkly *sub-conscious* had duly "signed for" and passed on to that high level authority, his *conscious*, for consideration and appropriate action. He climbed back to the arcade and retraced his steps along it till he espied that thing cleaving to the brick. As he did so he slackened his pace, for he had suddenly experienced a sharp crisis of nerves. He had known such before, as, for example, when he first saw Carlotta, and on other vector-swinging occasions, occasions of urgency—or augury—but why came it now? Very odd! As he reached the thing he found it was only a yard or two to the right of that entry to the catacombs he had just visited. He fixed his gaze upon it in a prolonged, appraising scrutiny. It was a bizarre, enigmatic object, apparently a deeply corroded copper panel set in a stone frame which, in turn, was held flush with the wall by an invisible agency. It was some four feet high by two across and divided into three sections, the top and bottom about equalling in area the middle. That corrosion had laid a most destructive and obscuring hand upon it, colouring the once, doubtless, lovely chestnut into a sour, verdigrisian, green, and the original smooth surface was pock-marked to a diseased lunar look. Yet it was by no means wholly ruined. For example, the top panel, the least affected, showed in high relief the full face of a man pretty clearly delineated. It was, he at once decided, an uningratiating countenance. The hair was so flattened down upon the skull that it resembled a cheap toupe. The brow was abnormally narrow, the nose "beaky" and spread. The lips were over-full and thick to caricature point. The expression on this disenchanting mask was equally chilling, the mouth, he thought, suggesting it was telling a very displeasing joke with glutinous relish, the eyes and the rest of it being redolent of eager malice and vicious intent, merciless and bestial. The portrayal was merciless, too, and quite

obviously high-voltage loathing had inspired its executant. The big middle panel was dominated by one, clearly the same, person, displayed full length in profile. The figure was crouching, rather as a runner leans over his mark just before the starting pistol sounds. Its guise was, however, far less innocent and suggested stealthy motion in implacable pursuit of some prey which, perhaps, was in fatal ignorance of its fearful peril and that Death was on its trail. It moved Dikellian more than he cared to admit. "What's it all about?," he murmured in half-mocking perplexity, only *half,* because from first to last he was never quite candid with himself about his attitude towards that plaque, which frailly contributed something to the obstinacy with which he devoted himself to it. He was never at psychic peace with the thing. He now transferred his attention to the bottom panel—to receive a total rebuff. It comprised merely some lines of script, entirely illegible. The light in the arcade was always fickle owing to the capricious mode in which the sun's rays were filtered by the arches, and it was particularly so that afternoon. Dikellian tried a number of angles but the corrosion had gone too far and he could de-cypher nothing. He decided that only an expert photographer with a very good camera, after some cunning de-corrosion, could possibly make anything of it. But why bother about it at all? Well, it was in its little way one of the oddest things he'd ever seen adorning a cemetery, and he detested being frustrated. All the same he was inclined to let the thing drop, and thus undecided, he noted that someone was apparently gazing back at him from the top of the steps. Dikellian was looking due north just to the west of that main axis, and from the end of the arcade a path, with some seats, ran parallel with that axis right to the railings. The figure filled in and thus obscured only about half of the prospect, so Dikellian *should* have been able to see at least the rows of young trees lining the

path on either side of that figure! Those little leafing trees—instead of that sullen scarlet glare—and then he tripped on a loose stone and glanced down for a moment. When he looked up again that figure had disappeared and the view of path and trees was "obeying the rules" once more. The light in such places certainly played tricks, he decided, as he started to stroll homewards in a somewhat irritable psychic state.

After dinner, while Carlotta studied with profound regret a recently published report on the erotic vagaries of American females, Dikellian brooded, somewhat idly, on the afternoon's experiences. Good food and a renowned vintage had induced a mellow mood. He'd been *absurdly* melodramatic! That miserable tablet was just a little crank-product, such as no doubt all big cemeteries could display; death made many people a little mad—indeed it was remarkable that it didn't send every sane person over sixty stark crazy. It would amuse him—very mildly—to focus his small talent for investigation on this petty freak. He *wanted* to, and it was vain to argue with such cerebral follies; one cherished them or one *didn't,* that was all there was to it. He yawned, and a picture formed itself upon his inner eye. Why *hadn't* that scruffy coffin been removed? He was certain that its deposit there had been unplanned. Could it be that the workmen engaged in the clearance of the catacombs had started a sort of Unofficial Strike and refused to continue handling it and that no volunteering "scabs" had since been forthcoming? It sounded *far-fetched,* but that had been true of many of his most successful guesses. He scratched his neck and found several sizeable welts upon it. Why hadn't those tiny black devils attacked him on the way *down?* Where had they been lurking? A certain displeasing possibility occurred to him. He mentioned them to Carlotta, who was somewhat concerned, "Your glands are up a bit," she said, and got busy with various germicides and medica-

ments. (Though it will not be mentioned again during the course of this chronicle he was never free from irritation and evidence of glandular poisoning. The insects concerned *will be* referred to—with pertinence—*once* again.)

So he returned to the cemetery on the following afternoon and set forth on a sharp circuit which resulted, he was sure, in some liquidated ounces and a charming sense of well-being. He then wandered along to that section where the new arrivals were being put to bed, a dismal amalgam of churned clay and decaying wreaths. There he observed a solitary and elderly grave-digger plying his spade where many, many spades had been plied before excavating holes for penurious cadavers. Down they go, he thought, and rot and rot, but not for ever and a day; for up they'll come soon enough, a mingling of coffin debris and the dust of worms, and then down will go their successors to the same beds, like niggers in Brixton—and equally unsalubrious and insanitary. He glanced at the Ancient who glanced back at him—none too amicably. "Tell me, my good fellow," he inauspiciously began—and was peremptorily interrupted. "I am *not* your 'good fellow', or any other patronishing clichè. My name is Joshua Van Rendel. You can call me 'Van Rendel' or 'Josh'. You may not address me in any other manner." The voice was rustily 'educated' as though, like its owner, it had come down in the world. Dikellian fancied he recognized the forcible-feeble, low flash-point testiness of the declassé. But it sounded a good deal more forcible than feeble.

"I'll call you 'Van Rendel'," he laughed.

"You're doubtless surprised," remarked the other, "that one who was—technically—educated at Eton and Magdalen should be pursuing so little esteemed a career in this pestilential excavation. No duobt the hushed suggestion *'Drink'* at *once* oc-

curs to you; and how right you are! Why I took to the Flagons —there *was* a reason—is no concern of yours. Anyway it's just one of those conventional cautionary chronicles. And now I'm old, and old age, as someone truly said, is like being flayed alive."

"Well, you look fit enough," said Dikellian, recognizing he thought, the defensive rhetoric of the self-destructive person, at once boring and pathetic.

"And what's your business?," asked the Ancient. "I can see you're after something, or you wouldn't have bothered with the likes of me."

"I'm a historian by profession," replied Dikellian rather lamely, "and always interested in places like this which are, in a way, historical documents."

"You may be right, but I doubt if you find much material here. One sportsman buried three young wives in ten years. All were 'young and faithful' he says on the stone! Whether his beard was blue isn't stated. Then there are a lot of actors 'resting' here. But I fancy something in particular caught your expert eye?"

"Yes, you're right. As I was strolling along the eastern wing of the arcade I noticed an oddish tablet on the wall, a biggish green one. Actually it's heavily corroded copper—you know the one?"

The old man leaned on his spade.

"Yep," he replied slowly, "and I'd have had some ten-to-one on it! By the way, didn't you notice you weren't supposed to enter that sector? Didn't you see it was barricaded?"

"It certainly wasn't! I noticed a couple of planks on the ground, that was all!"

"That's typical of those lousy contractor's sleep-walkers; Polacks, Pats and Blacks, *most* of em, and dead-beats *all* of em. They *should* have blocked it up, but they never do a 'should'."

"But why *shouldn't* one go there?," Dikellian demanded. "Is it in a dangerous condition? It doesn't look it."

"I'm not in a position to answer that question. It's enough that you're *not allowed* in *there*. It was all walled-up until Herr Adolphus Schnickelwurster lost patience with it."

"Oh, *now* I understand—it was bombed," exclaimed Dikellian, "but even so, why is that particular stretch, only 30 yards, out-of-bounds? I'm baffled."

"That's often the way with historians!," smirked the Ancient, "isn't it? All right; I see I'll have to tell you something—just to get rid of you. Well, it's all on account of that bloody tablet. When I first came here, thirty-two years ago, a grimy, fag-stained, foreman's finger was waggled at me and I was instructed, under threat of the Leather-Funnel Ordeal, never to say a word about that closed-in section."

"But why?"

"Look here; were you proposing to donate me a Pourboire or Trinkgeld?"

"Certainly *not,* for I'm sure you'd throw it back in my face."

"Try it and see!," grinned the old man. "Try it with a brace of half-crowns—that's four pints—and you might hear something you'd never hear otherwise!"

"Well," grunted Dikellian, fishing out a brace of half-crowns and handing them over, "I hope I get my money's worth."

"You'll have to chance that," replied the Ancient spitting on and pouching them. "See; *completely* pleb!"

"Self-pity's half your trouble," snapped Dikellian. "Proceed and earn your obols."

"Okay. Well, the yarn is that once upon a time, say a hundred and twenty years ago, there was a *Jack* the *Raper* living near here in a big house, somewhere, I take it, about the top of Fulham Palace Road. He was as rich as he was wicked, and he is

said to have forced his servants to waylay young birds, whom he first knocked-off and then tortured to death. He was never accused of any of his crimes, but after his death his servants gave the show away and a number of bodies were found on his estate."

"Was he buried in the catacombs?"

"Yeah. However, the relatives of his victims were determined to see some justice done, so they put up that tablet, though no one can read what they inscribed on it. Long ago that section was filled in. I understand it was considered 'unlucky'—and with good reason. Along comes Adolphus and opens it up again. Well, believe it or not—it's *still* unlucky."

"How d'you mean?"

"He was a middle-aged, rather a mouldy-looking bloke who was writing a guide book to Kensington and its oddities. Well, *he* took rather an interest in that tablet—like you. This was about two years ago. One afternoon—lateish—a woman tending a grave about twenty yards away saw a man running down the arcade away from the tablet. She thought someone was chasing him. She told a warden, who found *that* historian lying dead at the bottom of the steps leading down to an entrance to the catacombs. The cops had a suspect, but he also died a few days later. That's all!"

"Just worth five bob, perhaps," said Dikellian, who was actually extremely interested. "Who told you that story about the murderer?"

"A queer old sod. He was over ninety when he conked-out just before the war. *His* father had told *him* it. He said that as long as he could remember, that section had been rumoured about."

"What about that open coffin in the catacombs?," asked Dikellian.

"Ah, whipped up a springer there, haven't you!," replied the Ancient after a perceptible pause, "you notice *everything*."
"Well, if I told you it was the Raper's I'd be merely guessing. Some say it is, and that's why no one'll touch the ruddy thing —that's why it's still there. Some lads are said to have got a big scare when they got hold of it, dropped it, and ran like hares. Died of blood poisoning. That's 'aural tradition', isn't it? And you don't believe a word of it, do you?"

"Frankly, *no*. Aural tradition is nearly always at least fifty per cent fiction."

"Now listen, my erudite friend. I don't believe in anything. Or rather the things I believe in require no faith: pubs, pints, police stations. Yet now I'm right away going to contradict myself and tell you that cemeteries, if *this* one's anything to go by, aren't quite *'normal places'* as the miners say. They seem to have rules of their own."

"Rules?," queried Dikellian.

"Possibly not the right word. For one thing—well, when I was at Eton we had to learn a poem by Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott,* and it's odd how one remembers things learnt at school, better *not* sometimes! However there were some lines in it that went—

'And moving thro' a mirror clear,
That hung before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear'

Well, I've had that sort of experience in this dump. Shadows—of *what* world? I'm not sure. Of course you don't take me?"

"I probably *will*. Go on."

"Places like this are *exceptions* which neither prove nor disprove any rule. And they're all the more sticky for that—they catch you with your *briefs down*. Now a good number of times I've been in here alone after the mob's gone, finishing off a job.

And I've seen someone—I *think* it's always the *same* one. He's always standing a fairish way off and staring at me. He stands and stares."

"Someone who'd no business to be in here, you mean?"

"I couldn't tell you his business;" replied the Ancient tartly, "but I can tell you this: suddenly you look up and there he is. But there's something else: now when you see someone in a looking-glass, you see what's behind you, so if that person's in a chair you *see* him in a chair in front of you and if there's a fire blazing beside him you see *that*. Our Alec in the Looking-Glass brings his props with him and bloody odd props!"

"Yes," said Dikellian, a nerve beginning to shake in his forehead. "Well?"

"I'm not going to say any more, I've forgotten how to express myself properly. To you this great Golgotha, this seethe of worms, is just a little sepulchral park. Don't be too sure! But I can see you're getting bored—you've had enough of my burbling. Perhaps you're saying to yourself; 'it's not the *dump* that's queer but the boozy old dope who digs holes in it!' "

"Don't be absurd," said Dikellian sharply. "You're no fool, far from it! I've been following your train of thought closely, but remember that to me this stone garden *must* seem just a receptacle for dead bodies."

"Of course you're right, it's just a last pull-up for stiffs."

"I suppose you're being tremendously sarcastic?"

"I'm not! Now *listen!* Keep away from that mucking thing on the wall. I mean that! It'll be closed up again one day—even British contractors finish jobs in the end. I warn you *not* to go bitching about with that bloody tablet any more. I know more than I'm telling you and saying much more than I should. Now that's the lot, and I must get on with the job of digging the temporary Final Resting-Place of an exiled Jugo-Slav, who'd

have led an easier life if he'd kissed Tito's bottom with the correct assiduity and technique. And, brother, I don't want to talk to you again. Get that! I like you all right, but I've made my bed and must lie in it. It's *just* comfortable enough, but if I saw more of you, I might find it a job to get to sleep. I don't want to meet *recalling* people. I don't really belong to this world, and if I'd had the guts, I'd have left it before now. But alky has lulled me into letting Nature do the job. Now give me your promise; you won't annoy me again?"

"Most readily," replied Dikellian, "for I understand you. It's odd though; you've been trying to destroy yourself for years and yet you're enjoying a bronzed and beery old age!"

"That's the way of the world," laughed the Ancient. "But if *you* want an old age of *any* brand, keep away from that bloody tablet!" And he slammed in his spade.

Though Dikellian had no intention of heeding this counsel, he by no means despised it. The old man was impressive in his way and he had told him a highly kinetic legend, a kind of folk-tale, with almost certainly *something* of truth as its foundation. There *were* 'unlucky' places, he'd known several, though what exactly the epithet denoted it was impossible to say. And it *was* a queer and suggestive fact that the cemetery authorities, stolidity personified, no doubt, had kept, and intended to go on keeping, that section walled-in. How, if the sinister legend of that plaque were sheer fiction, could the justification for that enclosure have arisen? It was indisputably a stark little enigma.

He was in no hurry to get home, so he made his meandering way through the intricate maze of narrow paths which permeated the middle section. One of the old man's remarks recurred to him " 'Shadows of the world appear', what world? I'm not sure." He *thought* he saw what he'd meant.

Once immersed on this baby jungle one was, he found, very

much on one's own for a few moments and so utterly outnumbered by its *permanent denizens*. One had invaded *their* domain, penetrated *their* preserve, violated *their* privacy—and without their permission. "Let the Dead bury their Dead," an odd remark! What precisely did it mean? Was it an angular disparagement of aged gravediggers? He was, he realized, talking nonsense to himself, but slightly disconcerting things were happening; flocks of feeding birds kept springing fiercely up at his very feet from the coarse turf round the rotting stones: they seemed terrified, like game birds before the killers guns, and as though they were mistaking him for *another*. What *did* he mean by *that!* He paused at intervals to read the worn lettering on the weathered stones, occasionally deciphering a name he recalled as once of some ephemeral consequence. Some groups of graves were hemmed in by morose and sinister rings of yews. One became, he amusedly granted, rather inclined to weary of, and break away from, all this oppressive weight of dissolution, and it might well be possible for one who was over vulnerable to melancholy suggestion to imagine that he or she might be on converging courses with some enigmatic *stroller* in the little labyrinth. Playing lightly with this fancy, he found to his delectation that on more than one, on at least *three* occasions he confessed, just when rounding a bend, that he *might* have surrendered to the suspicion—*had* he been one of that susceptible set—that a slippery, shadow figure had been *just* discernable for an eye-flick, almost as though it had been trailing him, keeping him under sly, hostile observation. Such, he wryly confessed, was the influence, the spirit of such sorry acres, such, doubtless, was, in the last analysis, the *fons et origo* of every ghost story ever laboriously contrived. Well, it was time to go home, and then to his chagrin he quite lost his bearings for a while and found himself back near the colonnade. However, after a few

more wrong turnings and one odd little incident, he found a straight path back to the gateway, where a warden had been watching him in, he thought, rather a furtive way before quickly averting his gaze. Just before passing him Dikellian glanced back down the main pathway, and there, in the far distance, was a tiny motionless figure, seemingly staring back at him. "Good-day," he said to the warden as he turned on his heel, "Good-day, sir," replied that official still looking down at his boots.

For the next three days Dikellian was extremely busy, and it was not until late on the afternoon of the fourth that, after his regulation high-speed circuit, he returned to the "site," as he now termed it. He had with him both a powerful torch and magnifying glass. He had only just begun certain operations when he became conscious of the increasingly loud sounding of a hand-bell and for a moment he was a child again harkening hungrily to the mouth-watering angelus of the Last of the Muffin Men. Nothing so welcome now, rather, a moment later, some raucous remonstrances from an extensive, rosy-visaged official in a palpably piqued emotional state.

"Now then, sir," he wailed, "yer didn't ought to be there yer know, don't yer!"

"I know nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Dikellian, with over-tones of choler in his voice. "Why *shouldn't* I be here? What law forbids it?"

"I'm not saying nothin' abaht no law," prudently puffed the warden, "but as you can observe there's some sort of a barrier up there to keep the public out of that bit. I give you its a poor job, becos the contractor's men are a lazy lot of black and dago *dodgers*. Still, them planks is at least a 'int and the Public should take 'ints when they gets em!"

"I quite agree," replied Dikellian smoothly, "but I did not

realize what those two very dirty and askew pieces of wood were meant to convey. They strike me as a very inadequate *hint* indeed. I merely happen to be a little bit interested in the green tablet hanging up there."

"Well, sir," said the official, still a bit querulously, "I consider them planks *is* an 'int to them what knows 'ow to reckenize an 'int. They're not there for no purpose; they're put there as a warnin'. Disregard that warnin' and you can't squeal if you suffers. As for that green object, so 'ave others taken a hinterest in it—and wished they 'adn't! It'll be a great blessin' when those lazy bastards have blocked it up again—for *keeps* this time! Then the Public won't be nuisances no more. Its extryordinary how pretty decent blokes go all bloody-minded once they become part of the *Public*. Now sir, you 'eard my bell, why d'you think I ring it?"

"For a moment I imagined you were a muffin-man."

"Oh yer did! A muffin-man! You, a fine gent, thinks you can take the micky out of a mere working man! Well, let me tell yer ——————"

Dikellian hurriedly fished in his trouser pockets and produced a brace of florins. The Official Eye fixed itself upon them. "My dear Mr. ?"

"Wartwallah's me name, ending with *hay haitch*, not *he hai*," said that person as he gracefully pocketed the largesse.

"I didn't mean to offend you at all," said Dikellian warmly, "it's just that it's all so *mysterious*. You talk about people 'suffering'. I don't get it!"

"I can understand that sir, I'll just say this, I wouldn't 'ang about 'ere meself and I wouldn't let the wife and kids neither. I aint allowed to say no more."

"All right," said Dikellian, who was fed to the marrow with

all this chain-rattling. "Now all I want is for you to allow me to come here just *three* more times, all within the next ten days or so, will you give me your permission?"

"Well sir, it's not that I want to play 'copper'. I've no use for coppers—who 'as? But I 'as me orders. 'Owsoever I'll say nothin' against three times, but that must be your lot, and don't give me away for allowin' it, and be *careful,* sir. It's no place to fool about at I can tell you!" And he departed southwards, tinkling like a tin tabernacle.

These encounters irked Dikellian. All this minatory head-wagging by local cognoscenti was familiar enough to him from his travels—usually solemn warnings against quite non-existent perils. And this time it had cost him nine shillings and rattled his psyche sorely. He'd have liked to have seized both recipients of his reluctant bounty and bashed their heads together. He was in moderately high dudgeon. As he reached the steps which led from the arcade to ground level he happened to glance back down the way he had come. He frowned slightly, and then began staring intently, for it seemed to him that there was someone standing by the panel, and though of this he couldn't be sure—gazing in his direction. The light had begun to fade and really all he could pick out definitely were the sense-data "Something whiteish about five feet from the ground, and a subfuse area beneath it," which *could* be interpreted—*gestalted*—as "a very short man in a dark suit." And then he found himself completely fooled, for, as he was still staring, the "data" dissolved into the air, and he laughingly exclaimed to himself, "I've projected an eidetic image, and I haven't succeeded in doing that since I was a small boy!"

When he reached the big arch, he glanced back and there, just where the line of the arcade began, he spied—*projected*

rather, he assured himself, a diminished version of that same image.

"I'm in form tonight!" he told himself, and he also told Carlotta about it during dinner. She wasn't amused or responsive.

"I think, darling, you spend too much time in that mouldering place."

"But you suggested it!"

"I'm talking about this wretched tablet thing, surely its not worthy of your brains?"

"Well, I'm only paying about three more visits to it. It's going to be closed in again soon."

"Why?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"Well, I'm very glad to hear it," rapped Carlotta, "I've been feeling depressed lately and dreaming bad dreams."

"What sort of bad dreams?"

"Never mind," said Carlotta slowly. "I want you to give up going to that bloody tablet." (Everyone seems agreed about *that* Dikellian told himself sourly.)

This troubling little talk, coming on top of his encounters in the cemetery, made him exacerbated and on edge. But making Carlotta unhappy was the unforgivable, intolerable wickedness and folly (that sentiment is the sign manual of true love); so he took her to Claridges for supper, where physical excellence and aristocratic bearing aroused the usual admiration and feline envy. But the charm didn't quite work and he, too, slept fitfully and dreamed ill.

He returned to the site the next afternoon. Already, perhaps, conditioned by his critics and advisers, he approached it with some slight revulsion. He had brought with him torch, magnifying glass, and a piece of red chalk. He flashed the torch on the

plaque from a number of fine angles eventually marking on the ground the one which he deemed, in the conditions of light prevailing about three o'clock that week in fine weather, best "threw up" and disclosed the eroded lettering. The job was lightly hampered by the fact that he was almost persuaded someone was spying on him, but although he kept his eyes on the flicker, he was unable to detect the sly observer. In fact he began to doubt his reality and to tell himself that it was merely the always odd lighting in the arcade which was creating this illusion and yet—! Well, *this* was the queer phenomenon: he would focus on some object; a bay tree below to the left of him, the southern end of the arcade, a tomb framed by an arch, and as he did so, he would get the strongest impression that some fugitive entity slipped away from that object just at the very moment he focussed on it and before he could decide on its shape or any of its components. Could it be some mischievous small boy? Could it be, which seemed rather more probable, a defect in his vision? He wore reading glasses for astigmatism; perhaps his sight had deteriorated slightly—he'd make a date with his oculist, he reluctantly decided. Nothing is more disturbing, he told himself, than, around middle age, to experience an entirely novel and unexplained physical sensation. It is like the Bell before the Last Lap. It suggests coming ordeals, versatile derangements, and all the strains that deteriorating flesh is heir to. But wasn't thirty-eight a *shade* early to expect or experience such changes of life! He mocked at himself—you pathetic hypochondriac!—and then—as he saw that figure standing there, he was reminded of what the Ancient had said "Alec in the Looking Glass brings his props with him!" He knew what he meant ("One for women to admire, in his finery of fire"). "Well," he said to himself vaguely, "I'll try to make your acquaintance, my friend," and strode forward towards that figure. But as he drew nearer that figure flickered,

became somehow less substantial, and as he drew nearer still it merged wholly into the freckled air, into its background of foliage and sky. Dikellian shook himself violently—came out from his trance-state—and the thrush in the hornbeam was improvising brilliantly once again.

On the walk home he tested his vision in various modes and found no flaw at all, so his spirits rose again, and even more so when he had a sudden bright idea, at least he hoped it would turn out to be bright. This concerned a certain Prof. Denys Cosgrave, F.R.S., who had a chair at London University and owned a world repute as the leading living authority on the decyphering and exegesis of historical inscriptions, a highly specialized art for which he possessed an immense flair. He was, in addition, an archaeologist of high renown. He was still in his forties, and had been at one time Dikellian's best friend, and though neither was inclined to sentimentality in friendship, they had been—and still were genuinely fond of each other. But Carlotta had changed all that, that close amity had "gone with a lass." She had told Dikellian that Denys had fallen in love with her at first sight—she knew all the classic and far too familiar and cloying symptoms, and that if he went on seeing her, it would be incurable. It would be far far better if he didn't see her again for a very long time. Dikellian, most reluctantly, agreed, but how exceedingly indecorous, how shaming and scudering that it must be so! How *animal*—how *doggy!* That had been just twelve months ago. It was, therefore, in a somewhat embarrassed tone that he said to Carlotta at dinner. "Would you mind *frightfully* if I asked Denys to lunch on Saturday?" There was a noticeable pause and then Carlotta replied coolly—"Oh no, why should I? But why do you want him here?"

"Oh, just to help me with the inscription on that blasted panel. It'll be the last time, I promise."

"Go ahead," said Carlotta smoothly, but she was a shade irritated with Victor. But then she remembered he was a marvellous husband on the whole, and relented and smiled. "If I *did* mind I shouldn't say so. I'll give him a very good luncheon, poor old thing!"

So Dikellian rang him up, found him in, and said rather hurriedly what ages it was since they'd met and so on and so on, and promised good food and wine and a little puzzle which might amuse him.

"What does Carlotta think of this?" asked Cosgrave.

"She'll be overjoyed to see you again."

"Very well," said Cosgrave rather heavily. "Give her my love."

Dikellian didn't visit the site on the next day as he had business to attend to. He took Carlotta to a Menuhin concert in the evening, then supper at the Ritz—and then came Saturday. Denys arrived punctually at one o'clock. As fitted a member of the best looking race in the world, he was still a young and brilliantly handsome man. Over a tall lithe, and powerful body was a beautifully formed and balanced head, thick black hair, vehemently modelled mouth and chin, and an immediately reassuring expression, suggesting humour and humaneness, spirited and spiritual. His voice had about three-sevenths of a brogue in it which gave it character without monotony. All the same Dikellian was chagrined to observe that Carlotta had done him no good at all. Some virtue, some elan, seemed to have gone out of him. For a moment Dikellian glanced at her almost with animosity, based on deep affection and sexual sympathy. She sustained that glance and returned it unflinchingly, understanding precisely its significance and inevitable ephemerality.

Cosgrave was everywhere recognised as a man of absolute integrity and honour, but his love for Carlotta was consuming and demoralising him, and he knew himself he could never recover

from it. Seeing her again, he knew ecstatically, he was doomed—"Liebestod!" He did his best to be a cheerful guest and to enjoy that Lucullian luncheon, but his profound malaise was only too apparent. He ate lightly and drank rather heavily, not heeding it much. To Carlotta he was charmingly, though vaguely, friendly. So the meal was a sad one, for the triangle upon which it was based was insoluble. Then at a quarter-to-three Dikellian forced a smile and said, "Come along, Denys, and do your stuff!" and a little later they were entering the cemetery.

"You may possibly have come to the premature conclusion that I've brought you here on a fool's, or at least a *sleeveless* errand, but restrain your impatience." Denys made no reply, and Dikellian was irritated and a shade dismayed to see that his expression had become 'tight' and tense. Was he a little drunk? Dikellian presently took him by the arm and led him down those same stone steps and asked him to observe what was within. He had planned this as a small pleasantry. It didn't come off and he knew that he should not have expected that it would. For after Denys had glanced within, he retched violently and raced back up the steps. When Dikellian himself regained ground level, he found Denys panting heavily and slapping at his face and neck, slapping at those little black devils which Dikellian had temporarily forgotten about. A moment later he was doing the same as they settled on his half-healed sores.

"What an utterly foul place!" exclaimed Cosgrave with violence.

Dikellian kept his temper, "Surely not as bad as all that!" he protested half smiling. "I'm sorry I didn't warn you about those little bastards; it quite slipped my mind." Cosgrave didn't reply, but to Dikellian's surprise, mounted the steps of the arcade, hurried along it, and halted in front of the tablet.

"So this is it," he said harshly.

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"From your description, of course."

"But I *didn't* describe it. I merely spoke of a tablet."

"Never mind," said Cosgrave. "Tell me its history." He seemed much troubled in mind and was sweating profusely.

Dikellian told him, briefly but succinctly, though the whole affair was beginning to go very sour on him. When he'd finished Cosgrave exclaimed, "How repulsive! Odious to the 9th degree."

"Oh, don't take all so bloody seriously," said Dikellian explosively. "All concerned are dust long ago, and it may be mostly sheer fable!"

"What d'you want me to do precisely?"

"Decipher the words in the bottom panel, I found that red mark seems to show the best angle in this light. Even if you can't read it, you may be able to say if it's worth photographing."

Cosgrave paced up and down for some moments, his gaze hard on the plaque. Then he said, "Yes, you found the angle—give me the emery paper." Dikellian handed him a sheet and he began rubbing the copper with vigorous, obviously calculated, strokes, till he seemed satisfied. Then he went back to the chalk mark and gave the plaque a long steady stare. "All right," he said. "Ready? Then take this down. 'Directly beneath this memorial lie the remains of the bestial and infamous assassin'—I can't get his name—'Passers by, pray for his eternal damnation. But beware; de not linger here'. That's all, I'll have a last try at the name." He had just began rubbing again when he stopped abruptly. "Whose that?" he asked urgently, staring to his right. Dikellian followed the direction of his gaze, but saw nothing.

"Oh," he replied lightly, "people naturally wonder what I'm

up to here and come and have a look. Actually I didn't see that one."

"Get out!" exclaimed Cosgrave harshly, still staring at the same spot.

"Don't bother about him," said Dikellian irritably, for he was not at his ease. "I wonder they were ever allowed to inscribe such invective in a public grave-yard. I suppose it shows what public feeling must have been at the time. Well, Denys, it was very clever of you to read it off like that, but I wish we could get his name."

"I'm going now," said Cosgrave with intensity. "This is no place for a decent man, and it's dangerous!"

"You're in an odd mood, Denys," said Dikellian, "I've never known you to be like this before."

"You don't possess a faculty that I do!"

"What faculty?"

"It is 'sans nom' but it is also infallible. It tells me that this is an evil place for *me!*" His face was set and sweat showing thickly upon it. Suddenly he began to run down the arcade to the north. Dikellian shrugged his shoulders and hurried after him. He was very much perturbed by Denys's behaviour. When the latter reached the end of the arcade he swung to the right and shouted out loudly something unintelligible, then he thrust out violently with both arms, as though fighting off an adversary, and disappeared. Dikellian following hard upon him, heard some vague shouting, but saw Cosgrave no more. As he reached the arch a warden was watching him, an odd look on his face. Dikellian could not quite meet his eyes and walked home in a wicked mood.

"D'you think Denys was drunk?" he asked Carlotta.

"I think you were mad to ask him here! Of course he drank!

Why d'you ask?"

"He behaved very queerly."

"It's because he's hopelessly in love with me!"

"Is he still? I thought he seemed a bit better—less keen."

"That's what he wants you to think, but it isn't so. I wish it were! I warn you, in a way he *hates* you, Victor!"

"Hates me!"

"I said *in a way*. You're frightfully naive at times, darling. Don't ever have him here again. Falling in love for the first time —so he says—and hopelessly—is the Devil and all his Angels for a man of his temperament. Keep him away! Something might happen if you don't."

"What d'you mean?"

"Oh shut up! Shut up!" she suddenly screamed. "Don't make me despise and loathe you!" and she ran from the room.

Dikellian felt a righteous wrath rising within him. This talk of loathing and despising him! What had triggered all this? The notion of being the innocent object of such violent and frenetic emotions was utterly repugnant to him, a relapse into the Irrational Primitive. Being assailed like this by Carlotta, who alone made life worth enduring, and by his oldest friend, was simply dumbfounding. He and Carlotta shared a silent meal, but not a silent bed, for they lay miserably awake in sorry separate rooms.

The next morning he received the following communication.

"Victor, I have something of the utmost importance and urgency to put before you. You must *never never* visit that foul and lethal place again; it is a matter of Life or Death. You must try to realize this, though in such matters you are grossly impercipient. The 'occult', as I suppose you would term it, is *altogether evil*. There are no *good* spirits, no god, no hell, or heaven. All such is wishful mythopaeia. There is no system governing the shades, we are surrounded by, submerged in, inchoate evil.

The fact that you are innocent, that you are a fool who has done nothing to deserve his fate, will not save you, it will make your destruction more certain. What you cannot realize, what seems incredible, mere raving, to you would be revealed,—were the aeons scrutinized and analysed, as almost a commonplace. Every wicked idea or concept, once formed, is perennial and indestructibly possessed of an evil life of its own. Every evil spirit has an inherent tendency to realize itself, repeatedly and eternally, in some physical form, some vulnerable person, whom it invades, seizes, and compels to its will. It does so with irresistible power and by any means, however foul. Take that potent spirit commemorated on that tablet—" Dikellian ceased to read for a moment, Denys, he remembered, could command a decorative, if rather characterless, *script,* but here he was employing a most loutish scrawl, which now degenerated even further. With an effort he read on. "Against whom might it feel a murderous hate? Surely against *you,* Victor, who are prying into its secrets and intending to reveal them to the world. *There* is a motive for your destruction! And how would it bring that about? Might it not enter and seize upon the living body of one who wishes you ill? Do you know of any such person, Victor? One who madly covets, for example, something you possess, do you, Victor? One who could only obtain possession of that something through your death. Do you, Victor? Something exquisite, infinitely desirable. Do you, Victor? I have said that this spirit is altogether evil. That might not, in its own estimation, be so. During its carnal career it killed, it seems, certain women. What sort of women? May they not have been abandoned harlots, sowers of pestilence, far better dead? Victor, I implore you not to continue with this thing. That arcade is a place of terrible danger to you. It has killed and it will kill again—if *he can!* Soon it will be enclosed and safe, cut off from the world again, perhaps for ever. Do *not*

visit it again! You are out of your depth, in contact with forces you cannot comprehend or control. Why was that warning given to you? How did those others die? Victor, do this last service for me! Victor, remember this, whatever happens, I, the *real* I, will always love you, and I blame you not at all. Superb good luck—I mean Carlotta—merits only praise. Victor, I know your imperceptience, your doltish stubbornness, only too well. You may think it to be a virtue. Well it can be a fatal one and not only for yourself. I have learnt much of this in the deeply significant domain of dreams. We two, Victor, are on converging courses to mutual death. Disregard this warning and you will betray us both, and it will be due to a fatal frailty of character. How and why did those others perish! Heed me, I implore you, or we shall all three of us suffer the ultimate agony because . . ."

Thus did this astounding composition break off, unsigned. Dikellian fluttered his hands in a Levantine mode and for some moments his thoughts were inchoate. Denys was definitely unbalanced, was there anything he could do for him? Partly, he thought, this was the perennial Celtic Cringe before that *ignis fatuus,* the supernormal. The Irish were potentially the most brilliant race in the world, but they were often near-aborted by their credulity. Well, this was no time for ruminating racial dissection. This man had been his best friend. He believed he'd understood him better than well. But this dreadful missive shewed he had hardly known him at all. How little one *really* knew of one's "Best Friends!" "Oh, yes, he's one of my 'best friends' and that's *all* I know about him!" What was the matter with Denys? Was it late-love and its agonising frustrations? Or was it just growing old, the last change of Life? Or was it some thing other? Dikellian shivered slightly and his lips moved. He had his full share of *amour propre* and he was little pleased at those caustic references to his character flaws. All the same it was

a tribute to Denys's rhetoric that he began a sharp inner debate as to whether or not he *might* take his advice. Had he, in fact, been making a bit of a fool of himself and wasting his time? He hadn't much more time to waste—how close that Winged Chariot seemed at dejected moments, the Charioteer's dark breath upon his neck!

No, no, what nonsense! He'd been working hard and had spent in reality a very very few hours on that trifling tablet. It was most definitely a lively little puzzle and *sui generis* in his experience. Anyhow he'd only one more visit to pay—his promise to the warden held absolutely. Was there anything he could do for Denys, anything better than a sympathetic, affectionate reply? How odd that so tart a moralist should seem almost perversely intent upon finding some excuse for this de Sade of North Fulham! He'd heard that Irishmen of a certain type had a most frenetic loathing for strumpets, but being his *Best Friend,* he naturally didn't know if Denys was one of them! Yet it was unexpected to find him fabricating excuses for that reeking butcher. "Pray for his eternal damnation!" That hadn't been devised in the *Middle Ages,* but in the reign of Victoria, relatively the day before yesterday; so it *must* be a *true* story, and there *had* lived and died this typical sex-slaughterer, this unspeakable rogue. Yet Denys———oh well!

The next morning was flawless and eager-aired and Dikellian worked hard all through it preparing a lecture. At luncheon Carlotta suddenly burst into a fury of tears.

"I'm terribly depressed, Victor," she cried. "I had a most frightful night and most beastial dream. I saw you—I saw myself—no, I won't say it, it was too foul."

"I apologize, my darling, profoundly for asking Denys here," said Dikellian emphatically, "it was a selfish and crass thing to do."

"I loathe him," said Carlotta, "he's *dangerous!*"

"Oh darling!"

"He *is,* I tell you! Don't go there again!"

"I swear to you this will be the very last time. I'll never go near the plaque again. Anyhow it will be enclosed any day now."

"I'm thankful to hear it. I have a horror of it!" said Carlotta, wiping her eyes. "Now please be back by five at the latest, or I'll start worrying."

"I promise I will," said Dikellian, knowing in his heart he was being selfish again.

The splendour of the day had brought many visitors to the great Garden of Death; some tending graves, some praying beside them, some drowsing on seats, some pacing the paths. But they did not stroll the arcade, Dikellian noted again, no, not one, by communal consent they shunned it. It was possible, he thought, to explain that rationally, or to surmise fancifully. Yet surely on that triumphant afternoon fear could be repelled and mocked, the tabu defied, the Worm derided. Not so! Wildly winging, fiercely singing birds were furiously pursuing their procreant commerce, a myriad of fresh flowers were drinking in the sun, Death itself, just for those few fleeting hours, seemed held at easy bay by that intense creative surge. But no one strolled the arcade. Not *one!*

As he climbed its steps Dikellian knew he had never seen that morose parabola so cleansed by light, so, as it were, *benign.* Even the Tablet, when he reached its ever-dim abode, seemed almost reassuring. And this was the last time he'd thus come upon it—always with that slight sense of tension. After glancing about him for a while and then remembering his promise to Carlotta, he took the emery paper from his pocket and began rubbing with vigorous delicacy where that elusive name retained its secret. And just at that moment a slow riding, very dense little

cloud, the vanguard of a great storm to be, passed across the sun and a fierce gust of wind pulsed down the arcade.

Dikellian got out his torch and had just begun rubbing again when he stopped abruptly, stiffened, and became inert. The torch clattered, the emery paper fluttered, down. Then, very very slowly he straightened himself and began turning his head, trembling convulsively, and suddenly his virtue fell from him for he was staring into the foully contorted and murderous mask of Denys Cosgrave.

But he uttered no sound.

* * *

The passage of the little black cloud across the sun stirred Carlotta from a haunted drowse. She shivered and her hazel eyes became stretched and huge. Suddenly she dashed from the room screaming, "He's dead! He's dead!"

Simone came rushing down the passage to her crying, "What is it, Madame! Oh Madame!" Carlotta threw open the front door and seemed to fling herself forward as though at some adversary. For a moment she struggled and writhed and then it seemed, was hurled back, striking her head violently on the floor and dying instantly. There was the sound of confused shouting and outcry and then the door slammed to. Mike the Mynah whistled the first few bars of *"Ua bell 'Giorno,"* and then screamed stridently, leaping hysterically up and down upon his perch.

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HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT (1890-1937) has achieved for all time a place as a minor master of the macabre. Lovecraft was born in and spent most of his life in and around Providence, Rhode Island, with but brief excursions to older cities on the American continent, indulging his taste for antiquities. Chronic illness in youth led him to omnivorous reading, and his solitary nature directed him toward astronomy, amateur press work, and an active imagination in the development of which he sought to compensate his solitudes by the creation of a memorable pantheon of mythical lands and beings. His crowning achievement was the Cthulhu Mythos, to which a majority of his fictions belong. His work has been collected into several volumes, notably *The Outsider and Others, Beyond the Wall of Sleep, Marginalia, The Lurker at the Threshold* (with August Derleth), *Something About Cats and Other Pieces, The Survivor and Others* (with August Derleth), *The Shuttered Room and Other Pieces,* and *Selected Letters,* and recently the best of it has been published in two companion volumes, *The Dunwich Horror and Other Stories,* and *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels.* Lovecraft's work has been widely published abroad.

The Shadow in the Attic

H. P. LOVECRAFT*

I

My Great-uncle Uriah Garrison was not a man to cross—a dark-faced, shaggy-browed man with wild black hair and a face

* Completed by August Derleth.

that haunted my childhood dreams. I knew him only in those early years. My father crossed him, and he died—strangely, smothered in his bed a hundred miles from Arkham, where my great-uncle lived. My Aunt Sophia condemned him, and she died—tripped on a stair by nothing visible. How many others might there have been? Who knows? Who could do more than whisper fearfully of what dark powers were at Uriah Garrison's command?

And of how much of what was said of him was superstitious gossip, baseless, and malicious, none could say. We never saw him again after my father's death, my mother hating her uncle then and until the day she died, though she never forgot him. Nor did I, either him or his gambrel-roofed house on Aylesbury Street, in that part of Arkham south of the Miskatonic River, not far from Hangman's Hill and its wooded graveyard. Indeed, Hangman's Brook flowed through his grounds, wooded, too, like the cemetery on the hill; I never forgot the shadowed house where he lived alone and had someone in—by night—to keep his house for him—the high-ceilinged rooms, the shunned attic which no one entered by day and into which no one was permitted, ever, to go with a lamp or light of any kind, the small-paned windows that looked out upon the bushes and trees, the fan-lit doors; it was the kind of house that could not fail to lay its dark magic upon an impressionable young mind, and it did upon mine, filling me with brooding fancies and, sometimes, terrifying dreams, from which I started awake and fled to my mother's side, and one memorable night lost my way and came upon my great-uncle's housekeeper, with her strange emotionless, expressionless face—she stared at me and I at her, as across unfathomable gulfs of space, before I turned and sped away, spurred by new fear imposed upon those engendered in dreams.

I did not miss going there. There was no love lost between

us, and there was little communication, though there were occasions on which I was moved to send Uriah Garrison a short greeting—the old man's birthday, or Christmas—to which he never responded, which was as well.

It was, therefore, all the more surprising to me that I should have inherited his property and a small competence at his death, with no more annoying a provision but that I inhabit the house for the summer months of the first year after his death; he had known, clearly, that my teaching obligations would not permit occupancy throughout the year.

It was not much to ask. I had no intention of keeping the property. Arkham had even in those years begun to grow outward along the Aylesbury Pike, and the city which had once been so detached from my great-uncle's home, was now pressing close upon it, and the property would be a desirable acquisition for someone. Arkham held no particular attraction for me, though I was fascinated by the legends that haunted it, by its clustering gambrel roofs, and the architectural ornamentation of two centuries ago. This fascination did not run deep, and Arkham as a permanent home did not appeal to me. But before I could sell Uriah Garrison's house, it was necessary to occupy it in accordance with the terms of his will.

In June of 1928, over my mother's protests and in spite of her dark hints that Uriah Garrison had been peculiarly cursed and abhorred, I took up my residence in the house on Aylesbury Street. It required little effort to do so, for the house had been left furnished since my great-uncle's death in March of that year, and someone, clearly, had kept it clean, as I saw on my arrival from Brattleboro. My great-uncle's housekeeper had evidently been instructed to continue her duties at least until my occupancy.

But my great-uncle's lawyer—an ancient fellow who still af-

fected high collars and solemn black attire—knew nothing of any arrangements Uriah Garrison had made, when I called upon him to investigate the provisions of the will. "I've never been in the house, Mr. Duncan," he said. "If he made arrangements to have it kept clean, there must have been another key. I sent you the one I had, as you know. There is no other, to my knowledge."

As for the provisions of my great-uncle's will—these were barrenly simple. I was merely to occupy the house through the months of June, July and August, or for ninety days following my coming, if my teaching obligations made it impossible to take up occupancy on the first of June. There were no other conditions whatsoever, not even the ban on the attic room I had expected to see set down.

"You may find the neighbors a trifle unfriendly at first," Mr. Saltonstall went on. "Your great-uncle was a man of odd habits, and he rebuffed the neighbors. I suppose he resented their moving into the neighborhood, and they for their part took umbrage at his independence and made much of the fact that, because he took walks into the cemetery on Hangman's Hill, he seemed to prefer the company of the dead to that of the living."

As to what the old man had been like in his last years, about which I asked,—"He was a lusty, vigorous old fellow, very tough, actually," answered Mr. Saltonstall, "but, as so often happens, when his decline came, it came fast—he was dead in just one week. Senility, the doctor said."

"His mind?" I asked.

Mr. Saltonstall smiled frostily. "Well, now, Mr. Duncan, you must know there was always some question about your uncle's mind. He had some very strange ideas which were, in a real sense, archaic. This witchcraft exploration, for one thing—he spent a good deal of money investigating the Salem trials. But you'll find his library intact—and filled with books on the sub-

ject. Other than this obsessive interest in one subject, he was a coldly rational man—that describes him best. Unfriendly, and holding himself aloof."

So Great-uncle Uriah Garrison had not changed in the years that had intervened between my childhood and my late twenties. And the house had not changed, either. It still had that air of watchful waiting—like someone huddled together against the weather, waiting for a stage-coach—nothing more recent, certainly, for the house was two hundred years old, and, though well kept up, it had never been invaded by electricity and its plumbing was archaic. Apart from its appointments, and some aspects of its finishing lumber, the house had no value—only the property on which it stood had considerable monetary worth in view of the expansion of Arkham along the Aylesbury Pike.

The furniture was in cherry and mahogany and black walnut, and I more than half suspected that if Rhoda—my fiancée, saw it, she would want to keep it for our own house when we built one—and, what with the money the sale of the property and the furniture might realize, we should be able to build that house, leaving my salary as an English Department assistant and hers as an instructor in philology and archaeology to keep it up.

Three months' time was not long to do without electricity, and I could endure the ancient plumbing for those weeks, but I decided forthwith that I could not do without a telephone; so I drove into Arkham and ordered a telephone installed without delay. While I was in the business section, I stopped in at the telegraph office on Church Street and sent wires to both my mother and Rhoda, assuring them of my arrival and inviting Rhoda, at her leisure, to drive around and inspect my newly acquired property. I stopped long enough, too, for a good meal at one of the restaurants, bought a few necessary provisions for breakfast—however little inclined I might be toward building a

fire in the old iron range in the kitchen—and went back fortified against hunger for the remainder of that day.

I had brought with me various books and papers necessary to the doctoral dissertation on which I was at work, and I knew that the shelves of the library of Miskatonic University, scarcely a mile from the house, would offer me all the additional assistance I might need; Thomas Hardy and the Wessex country hardly constituted a subject so obscure as to make necessary application to the Widener or some more expanded college library. So to that work I set myself until mid-evening of my first day in Uriah Garrison's old house, when, being tired, I went to bed in what had been my great-uncle's room on the second floor rather than in the guest-room on the ground floor.

II

Rhoda surprised me by coming to visit late the following day. She arrived without any prior notice, driving her own roadster. Rhoda Prentiss. It was, actually, a ridiculously prim name for such a lively young lady, one so filled with excitement and so vigorously alive. I failed to hear her drive in, and was not aware of her until she opened the front door of the house and called out, "Adam! Are you home?"

I bounded out of the study where I was at work—by lamplight, for the day was dark and louring with squalls—and there she stood, with her shoulder-length ash-blonde hair damp with raindrops, and her thin-lips parted, and her candid blue eyes taking in what she could see of the house with lively curiosity.

But when I took her in my arms, a faint tremor ran through her body.

"How can you bear three months in this house?" she cried.

"It was made for doctoral dissertations," I said. "There's nothing here to disturb me."

"The whole house disturbs me, Adam," she said with unaccustomed gravity. "Don't you feel anything wrong?"

"What was wrong about it is dead. That was my great-uncle. When he was here, I admit, the house reeked of evil."

"And it still does."

"If you believe in psychic residue."

She might have said more, but I changed the subject.

"You're just in time to drive into Arkham for dinner. There's a quaint old-fashioned restaurant at the foot of French Hill."

She said no more, however much, as I saw by the small frown that held for a while, she was of a mind to say. And at dinner her mood changed, she spoke of her work, of our plans, of herself and of me, and we spent over two hours in the French House before we returned to the house. It was only natural that she should stay for the night, taking the guest room, which, being below my own, enabled her simply to rap on the ceiling if she wanted for anything, or if, as I put it, "the psychic residue crowds you."

Nevertheless, despite my jesting, I was aware from the moment of my fiancée's arrival of a kind of heightened awareness in the house; it was as if the house had shaken off its indolence, as if, suddenly, it had come upon need to be more alert, as if it apprehended some danger to itself in somehow learning of my intention to dispose of it to someone who would unfeelingly tear it down. This feeling grew throughout the evening, and with it a curious response that was basically sympathetic, unaccountably. Yet, I suppose this should not have been so strange to me, since any house slowly assumes an atmosphere, and one of two centuries in age has undeniably more than a house less old. Indeed, it was the great number of such houses that lent to Arkham its chief distinction—not alone the architectural treasures, but the atmosphere of the houses, the lore and legendry of human

lives come into being and spent in the relatively small confines of the city.

And from that moment, too, I was aware of something on another plane about the house—not that Rhoda's intuitive reaction to it had been communicated to me, but simply that her arrival spurred events, the first of which took place that very night. I have thought afterward that Rhoda's appearance on the scene hastened the happenings that were bound to take place in any event, but which would, in the normal course of circumstances, have taken place more insidiously.

We went to bed late that night. For my part, I fell asleep instantly, for the house was set well away from most of the city traffic, and there was nothing in the house of those settling and creaking noises so common to old houses. Below me, Rhoda still moved restlessly about, and she was still up and around when I drifted off.

It was sometime after midnight when I was awakened.

I lay for a few seconds growing to full wakefulness. What was it that had awakened me? A sound of breathing not my own? A nearby presence? Something on my bed? Or all these things together?

I thrust forth a hand and encountered, unmistakably, a woman's naked breast! And at the same moment I was aware of her hot, fervid breath—and then, instantaneously, she was gone, the bed lightened, I felt, rather than heard, her movement toward the door of the bedroom.

Fully awake now, I thrust back the light sheet covering me—for the night was sultry and humid, and got out of bed. With hands that trembled a little, I lit the lamp and stood there, undecided as to what to do. I was clad only in my shorts, and the experience had unsettled me more than I cared to say.

I am ashamed to admit that I thought at first it had been

Rhoda—which was only evidence of the mental confusion the incident had brought me to, for Rhoda was incapable of such an act; had she wished to spend the night in my bed, she would have said as much—she had done so before this. Further, the breast I had touched was not Rhoda's; her breasts were firm, beautifully rounded—and the breast of the woman who lay next to me on my bed was flaccid, large nippled, and old. And the effect of it, unlike Rhoda's, was one of shuddering horror.

I took up the lamp and stepped outside my room, determined to search the house. But at the moment of my entry into the hall I heard, drifting down as if from somewhere outside, high up over the house, the wailing and screaming of a woman's voice, the voice of a woman being punished—only a drift of sound that grew more and more tenuous and was finally lost. It could not have lasted thirty seconds in all, but it was, in its way, as unmistakable as what I had felt beside me on my bed.

I stood, shaken—and in the end retreated to my bed and lay sleepless for over an hour, waiting for what might happen.

Nothing did, and when at last I slept again, I had begun to wonder whether I had not confused dream with reality.

But in the morning, the cloud on Rhoda's face told me that something was wrong. She had got up to prepare breakfast for the two of us, and I came upon her in the kitchen.

Without a greeting, she turned and said, "There was a woman in the house last night!"

"Then it wasn't a dream!" I cried.

"Who was she?" she demanded.

I shook my head. "I wish I could tell you."

"It seems to me an extraordinary thing to have a cleaning woman in in the middle of the night," she went on.

"You saw her?"

"I saw her, yes. Why?"

"What did she look like?"

"She seemed to be a young woman—but I had a strange feeling that she wasn't young at all. Her face was expressionless—fixed. Only her eyes seemed to be alive."

"She saw you?"

"I don't think so."

"My great-uncle's cleaning woman!" I cried. "That's who it must have been. I found the house clean when I came. You see how clean it is. He must never have left orders for her not to come again. I remember seeing her once when I was a child. He always had her in at night . . ."

"How utterly ridiculous! Uriah Garrison died in March—over three months ago. Only a cretin couldn't tell by this time that he was no longer alive. Who pays her?"

Who, indeed? I could not answer.

Furthermore, in the circumstances, I could not tell Rhoda of my experience in the night. I could only assure her that I had not seen a woman in the house since that night in my early years when I had inadvertently caught a glimpse of the cleaning woman at her work.

"I remember having the same impression, too—the expressionlessness of her face," I said.

"Adam, that was twenty years ago—perhaps more," Rhoda pointed out. "It couldn't be the same woman."

"I shouldn't think so. Still, I suppose it isn't impossible. And in spite of what Mr. Saltonstall said, she must have a key."

"It simply doesn't make sense. And you've hardly been here long enough to hire anyone yourself."

"I didn't."

"I believe it. You wouldn't lift a finger to dust and if you were

drowning in it." She shrugged. "You'll have to find out who she is and put a stop to it. It won't do to have people gossiping, you know."

On this note we sat down to breakfast, after which, I knew, Rhoda intended to be on her way.

But the troubled frown remained on Rhoda's forehead, and she said very little during the meal, responding to my comments with only the briefest of monosyllables, until at last she burst forth with, "Oh, Adam—can't you *feel* it?"

"Feel what?"

"Something in this house wants you, Adam—I sense it. It's you the house wants."

After my initial astonishment, I pointed out soberly that the house was an inanimate object, I was to the best of my knowledge the only living creature in it, exclusive of mice I may not have seen or heard, and that the house could not want or not want anything.

She was not convinced, and when, an hour later, she was ready to leave, she said impulsively, "Adam come away with me—now."

"It would be folly to surrender a valuable property we can both turn to good use simply to satisfy your whim, Rhoda," I answered.

"It's more than a whim. Take care, Adam."

On this note we parted, Rhoda promising to come again later in the summer, and exacting my promise to write her faithfully.

III

The experience of that second night in the house stirred my memory to thoughts of the sinister gloom that had pervaded the house for me as a boy—gloom which radiated from my Great-uncle Uriah's forbidding countenance, and from the locked attic room which no one dared enter, however often my great-uncle

went in and out of it. I suppose it was only natural that eventually I would think again of the challenge represented by the attic room and would respond to it.

The rain of yesterday had given way to bright sunlight which streamed into the house through the windows on the sunny side and gave to it an air of genteel and mellow age, one far removed from the sinister. It was such a day as to make all that was dark and ominous seem very far away, and I did not hesitate to light a lamp to dispel the darkness in the windowless attic and set out forthwith for the top of the old house, carrying along all the keys Mr. Saltonstall had surrendered to me.

None was necessary, however. The attic room was unlocked.

And empty, too, I thought, when I stepped into it. But not quite. A single chair stood in the middle of that gabled room, and on it lay a few prosaic objects and one which could not be so described—some woman's clothing—and a rubber mask—one of that kind which moulds to the features of the wearer. I crossed to it, astonished, and put the lamp down on the floor the better to examine the things on the chair.

They were nothing more than what I had seen at a glance—a common cotton house dress in a very old-fashioned square print design, in various shades of grey—an apron—a pair of skin-tight rubber gloves—elastic stockings—house slippers—and then the mask, which, on examination, proved to be ordinary enough, save for having hair attached to it—however unusual it was to find it here. The clothing could very likely have belonged to Great-uncle Uriah's cleaning woman—it would have been like him to let her use only the attic room in which to change. And yet, of course, this did not ring true, considering the care he had always taken to allow no one to enter that room but himself.

The mask could not be so readily explained. It was not at all hardening, betokening long disuse; it had the softness and flexi-

bility of rubber that is being used, which was all the more mystifying. Moreover, in common with all the rest of the house, the attic was spotless.

Leaving the clothing undisturbed, I picked up the lamp again and held it high. It was then that I saw the shadow, which lay beyond my own, against the wall and sloping ceiling—a monstrous, misshapen, blackened area, as if some vast flame had flared forth and burnt its image into the wood there. I stared at it for some time before I realized that, however grotesque it was, it bore a resemblance to a distorted human figure, though its head —for it had a surmounting blob of shapelessnes that served it as head—was horribly out of shape.

I walked over to examine it, but its outlines faded as I drew close. Yet, undeniably, it had the appearance of having been burned into the wood by some searing blast. I moved back again, toward the chair, and a trifle beyond it. The shadow bore the appearance of having come from a blast of flame virtually at floor level; its angle was odd and inexplicable. I turned, accordingly, and tried to find the possible point from which whatever had made this strange blemish on the wall and ceiling could have come.

As I turned, the light fell upon the opposite side of the attic room and disclosed, at the point I sought, an opening at the juncture of the roof and the floor—for there was along this side of the house no wall between floor and roof—an opening no larger than that for a mouse, and I assumed instantly that it was, indeed, a mouse-hole, and it did not attract my attention for more than a second, but what was painted in garish red chalk or oil all around it did—a sequence of curious angular lines, which seemed to me completely unlike any geometrical designs with which I was familiar and which were arranged in such a fashion as to make the mouse-hole seem their precise center. I

thought instantly of my great-uncle's absorption in witchcraft, but no, these were not the familiar pentagrams and tetrahedrons and circles associated with sorcery—rather their opposite.

I carried the lamp toward the painted lines and examined them; up close, they were simply lines, no more—but from the middle of the attic they had a strange kind of design, essentially other-dimensional, I thought. There was no telling how long they had been there, but they did not seem to be of recent origin—that is, within the last three decades or so, and they might very well have been a century old.

It was while I was pondering the meaning of the strange shadow and the painted lines opposite it, that I began to grow aware of a kind of tension in the attic; it was actually indescribable; it felt—how curious it is to put it into words—as if the attic *were holding its breath!* I began to grow uneasy, as if not the attic but I were under observation, and the flame on the wick wavered and began to smoke, and the room seemed to grow dark. There was a moment that was as if the earth had taken a half turn backward or something of that kind, and I had not gone along with it but were suspended somewhere far out in space at the instant before plunging into orbit of my own—and then the moment passed, the earth resumed its regularity of turning, the room lightened, the flame in the lamp steadied.

I left the attic in unseemly haste, with all the whispered lore of my childhood pressing after me out of the store of memories. I wiped away from my temples the fine beading of perspiration which had gathered there, blew out the lamp, and started down the narrow stairs, considerably shaken, though, by the time I reached the ground floor I had regained my composure. Nevertheless, I was now a little less ready than I had been to brush aside my fiancée's perturbation about the house in which I had consented to spend the summer.

I pride myself on being a methodical man. In her lighter moments, Rhoda has referred to me as her "little pedant,"—referring strictly, of course, to my concern with books and writers and the circumstances of literature. Not that I mind. The truth, no matter how it is put, is no less truth. Once recovered from my momentarily frightening experience in the attic, following so hard upon the events of the night, I resolved to get to the bottom of the matter and uncover some tenable explanation for what had happened in both instances. Had I, in fact, been in an hallucinatory state on both occasions? Or had I not?

The cleaning woman obviously was the nearest point of departure.

An immediate telephone call to Mr. Saltonstall, however, only confirmed what he had said before—he knew of no cleaning woman, he had no knowledge that my great-uncle had ever employed a housekeeper of any kind, and to the best of his knowledge there was no other key to the house.

"But you do understand, Mr. Duncan," finished Mr. Saltonstall, "that your great-uncle was a reclusive sort of man, secretive almost to the point of fanaticism. What he did not wish others to know, others did not know. But, if I may make a suggestion—why not make inquiry among the neighbors? I've set foot in the house only once or twice, and they've had it under daily observation for years. There isn't much, you know, that neighbors don't find out."

I thanked him and rang off.

Approaching the neighbors, however, apart from a frontal attack, represented a problem, for most of the houses in the area were at more than lot-line distances from my great-uncle's house. The nearest house was two lots away, off to the left of my great-uncle's ancient house; I had noticed very little sign of life about

it, but now that I peered from the windows, I saw someone in a rocking-chair taking the sun on the porch of that house.

I pondered for a few minutes about my best approach, but I could think of nothing but a direct question. So I walked out of the house and down the lane to the house next door. As I turned into the yard, I saw that the occupant of the chair was an old man.

"Good morning, sir," I greeted him. "I wonder if you could help me."

The old man stirred. "Who're you?"

I identified myself, which aroused an immediate responsive interest. "Duncan, eh? Never heard the old man mention you. But then, I never spoke with him more'n a dozen times. What can I do for you?"

"I'm trying to find out how to reach my great-uncle's cleaning woman."

He gave me a sharp glance out of suddenly narrowed eyes. "Young fellow, I'd like to have known that myself—just out of curiosity," he said. "I never knew her to have any other place."

"You've seen her come?"

"Never. Saw her through the windows at night."

"You've seen her leave, then?"

"Never saw her come, never saw her leave. Neither did anybody else. Never saw her by day, either. Maybe the old man kept her there—but I wouldn't know where."

I was baffled. I thought briefly that the old man was being deliberately obstructive, but no, his sincerity was self-evident. I hardly knew what to say.

"That's not the only thing, Duncan. You seen the blue light yet?"

"No."

"You heard anything you couldn't explain?"

I hesitated.

The old man grinned. "I thought so. Old Garrison was up to something. I wouldn't be surprised if he's still at it."

"My great-uncle died last March," I reminded him.

"You can't prove it by me," he said. "Oh, I saw a coffin carried out of that house up to the cemetery on Hangman's Hill—but that's as much as I know about it. I don't know who or what was in the coffin."

The old fellow went on in this vein until it was clear to me that he knew nothing, no matter how much he suspected. He gave me hints and innuendos, but nothing tangible, and the sum of what he hinted was little more than what I had known myself—that my great-uncle kept to himself, that he was engaged in some "hellish business," and that he was better dead than alive—if in fact he were dead. He had concluded also that there was something "wrong" with my great-uncle's house. He did concede that, left alone, he did not trouble the neighbors. And he had been left strictly alone ever since old Mrs. Barton had gone to his house and upbraided him for keeping a woman there—and was found dead of a heart attack next morning at her home, "scared to death, they said."

There was plainly no short-cut to information about my great-uncle to be had; unlike the subject of my doctoral dissertation, there were no references in libraries—other than my great-uncle's own, to which I repaired at once, only to find there an almost solid array of books, both ancient and modern, on the subject of sorcery and witchcraft and allied superstitions—the *Malleus Maleficarum,* for example, and very old books by Olaus Magnus, Eunapius, de Rochas and others. Few titles meant anything to me; I had never heard of Anania's *De Natura Daemonum* or De Vignate's *Quaestio de Lamiis* or Stampa's *Fuga Satanae.*

It was evident that my great-uncle had read his books, for they were marked up with annotations—principally cross-references jotted down for his easy use. I had no difficulty reading the often ancient printing, but it was all on related themes—my great-uncle's interest ran not only to the ordinary practises of witchcraft and demonology, but to a persistent fascination with succubi, the retention of the "essence" from one existence to another—not, apparently, a reference to reincarnation, familiars, the wreaking of vengeance by means of sorcery, incantations, and the like.

I had no intention of studying the books, but I took time to follow through some of his references on the "essence," and found myself led from book to book from a discussion of the "essence" or "soul" or "life-force," as it was variously called, through chapters on transmigration and possession, to a dissertation on taking over a new body by driving out the life-force within and substituting one's own essence—the sort of rigmarole which might conceivably have appealed to an aging man on the threshold of death.

I was still at work among the books when Rhoda called from Boston.

"Boston!" I was astonished. "You didn't get very far."

"No," she said. "I just began to think about your great-uncle and stopped off here at the Widener to look at some of their rare books."

"Not on sorcery?" I hazarded a guess.

"Yes. Adam, I think you ought to get out of that house."

"And just throw a tidy little inheritance over my shoulder? Not a chance."

"Please don't be stubborn. I've been doing some research. I know what a closed mind you have, but believe me," she said earnestly, "your uncle was up to no good when he made that

stipulation. He wants you there for a definite reason. Are you all right, Adam?"

"Perfectly."

"Has anything happened?"

I told her in detail what had taken place.

She listened in silence. When I had finished, she said again, "I think you ought to leave, Adam."

As she spoke, I was conscious of a growing irritation with her. Her possessiveness, her assumption of the right to tell me what I ought to do—which did, certainly, postulate her conviction of knowing better than I what served my welfare, angered me.

"I'm staying, Rhoda," I said.

"Don't you see, Adam—that shadow in the attic—some monstrous thing came in by way of that hole and blasted that shadow there," she said.

I'm afraid I laughed. "I've always said women simply aren't rational creatures."

"Adam—this isn't a man-woman thing. I'm scared."

"Come back," I said. "I'll protect you."

Resigned, she rang off.

IV

That night was memorable for what I chose then to believe pure hallucination. It began, literally, with a step on the stair some time after I had gone to bed. I listened for a moment, to hear it again; then I slipped out of bed, made my way in the dark to the door, and opened it just enough to enable me to look out.

The cleaning woman had just passed my door, bound for the ground floor. I backed into my room at once, fumbled my way to my dressing-gown in my bag—I had not had occasion to use it

before—and left myself out of the room, bent upon facing the woman at her work.

I moved quietly in the darkness down the stairs, though the dark was alleviated somewhat by the iridescence of moonlight flowing into the house from outside. Not quite midway down, I experienced that curious sensation I had known previously—of being watched.

I turned.

There in the well of glowing darkness behind and a little above me hung the spectral likeness of Great-uncle Uriah Garrison—something as ephemeral as air—the heavy bearded face distorted a little by the moonlight's iridescence, the burning eyes, the shock of touseled hair, the high bones of his cheeks with the parchment skin tight over them—seen for an instant so, unmistakably—then it collapsed like a pricked balloon and vanished, save for a thin, serpentine coil or rope of some dark substance which seemed to flow writhing and turning, down the stairs to where I stood, until it, too, disappeared like smoke.

I stood frozen with terror until reason reasserted control. I told myself I had had an hallucination of a kind not to be entirely unexpected, in view of my concern during the day about my great-uncle and his curious preoccupations, though I should have thought this far more likely to have occurred in dream than in a vision while awake. But at this moment, too, I questioned the degree of my wakefulness. I had to think what I was doing on the stairs, and remembered the cleaning woman. I had an impulse to return to my room and go to sleep, but I would not. I pulled myself together and went on.

There was a light in the kitchen—a lamp burning dimly and low, by the glow of it. I crept silently toward the kitchen and stood where I could look in.

The woman was there, cleaning, as always. Now was the time

to front her directly and demand an accounting of her presence.

But something held me where I was. Something about the woman repelled me. Something other stirred my memories, and I remembered that other woman I had seen there in the years of my childhood. Slowly, certainly, I became aware that they were one and the same; the woman's impassive, expressionless face was unchanged over twenty years or more, her actions were mechanical, and she seemed even to be wearing the same clothing!

And intuitively I knew that this was the woman whose body I had felt beside me on the bed in the night!

My reluctance to face her grew. But I forced myself to step into the room just over the threshold, on the tip of my tongue the demand for an accounting of her presence.

But no word left my lips. She turned and for but a brief few moments our eyes met—and I looked into pools of glowing fire, eyes that were hardly eyes at all but so much more—the epitome of passion and hunger, the apex of evil, the embodiment of the unknown. In every other respect the confrontation was no different from what it had been in the earlier years—she did not move, her face save for her eyes remained expressionless. Then I lowered my eyes, unable to gaze into hers any longer, and stepped back across the threshold into the darkness behind me.

And fled up the stairs to my room, where I stood trembling, my back to the door, my thoughts confused, for I knew that what I had seen was something more than a woman, but I did not know what, something in bondage to my dead uncle, something bound to return night after night and perform these rites. Where she came from remained unknown.

It was while I still stood there that I heard her once again on the stairs, starting up from below. For a few moments I thought her bound for my room—as once before—and I felt myself grow

cold with fear—but her steps carried her past, on to the stairs that led to the attic.

As the sound of her steps receded, my courage returned, and, emboldened, I opened the door and looked out.

All was in darkness. But no—up at the top of the stairs, out from under the attic door, shone a blue glow.

Even as I mounted to the attic, the blue glow began to fade.

I stood with my ear pressed to the door, listening. There was no sound.

Pressed by mounting courage, I threw open the door.

There was no sign of the woman. But over against the floor, where the angle of the roof joined it, the blue light I had noticed under the door was flowing out like water through the mouse-hole there! And the painted lines all around the hole glowed as with a light all their own, which faded even as I watched.

I lit a match and held it high.

The clothing the woman had worn lay as before, on the chair. And the mask.

I crossed to the chair and touched the mask.

It was warm.

The match burned my fingers and went out.

All was now black as pitch. But from the direction of the mouse-hole I felt such a drawing power as must I fling myself on my knees and try to follow the blue light, if I did not at once escape—a pulsing, sensate evil—and once again the earth seemed to stop in its turning, there was a lurch in time, and a great cloud of paralyzing fear enveloped me.

I stood as if transfixed.

Then, from the mouse-hole, a drift of blue light like smoke came seeping into the attic. The sight of it burgeoning there broke the spell that held me—I ran, crouching, to the door, and

flung myself out of the attic. I raced down the stairs to my room, looking back as if I expected some eldritch thing to be hot on my heels.

There was nothing but blackness, nothing but the dark.

I went into my room and threw myself upon the bed, fully clothed, and there I lay, waiting apprehensively, for whatever might come—knowing I should do as Rhoda had asked, yet curiously reluctant to leave the house on Aylesbury Street—not because it was my inheritance, but for a frightening kind of bondage, almost kinship, that kept me there.

I waited in vain for even the ghost of a sound to disturb the quiet. Nothing whatsoever came to ear but the natural sounds the house made on a windy night, for a wind had come up—and the occasional keening of a screech owl from the direction of Hangman's Hill.

And presently I slept, fully clothed as I was, and in my sleep I dreamed—dreamed that the blue light burgeoned and mushroomed into the attic, came flowing down the stairs and into the room where I lay, and out of the mouse-hole at the apex of the angle of roof and floor came to swell and grow the figures of the cleaning woman, now clad and rubber-masked, now hideous with age, now naked and beautiful as a young woman, and beside her my Great-uncle Uriah Garrison, invading the house and the room and at last me—a dream from which I woke bathed in perspiration on the edge of dawn which lay pale blue in the room before it gave way to the roseate hue of the morning sky.

What kept me awake, exhausted as I was, was the pounding at the outside door. I struggled to my feet and made my way to the door.

Rhoda stood there.

"Adam!" she cried. "You look terrible."

"Go away," I said. "We don't need you."

I was momentarily shocked to hear my own words, but in a few moments I was resigned to them, I began to understand that I meant them, I resented Rhoda's interference—as if she thought I could not take care of myself.

"So—I'm too late then," she said.

"Go away," I said again. "Just leave us alone."

She pushed past me and strode into the house. I went after her. She was bound for the study, and when she got there she put together my notes and manuscript for my Hardy dissertation and confronted me with them.

"You won't need these any more, will you?" she asked.

"Take them," I said. "Take them all."

She took them. "Goodbye, Adam," she said.

"Goodbye, Rhoda," I said.

I could hardly believe the evidence of my eyes, but Rhoda went, as meek as any lamb. And though I was still vaguely troubled by it, I was aware of a secret satisfaction at the way things were turning out.

V

I spent most of the rest of that day just relaxing and, in a sense, waiting upon the events of that night. It is impossible now to describe my frame of mind. All fear had left me, and I was consumed with a vivid curiosity, even with a kind of eagerness.

The day dragged. I slept through part of it. I ate very little. My appetite now was for something no food could satisfy, and it did not trouble me that this was so.

But the night and darkness came at last, and I set myself to waiting with keen anticipation for whatever might come from that room in the attic. I waited at first down stairs, but at last I understood that it was the room above—my Great-uncle Uriah's old room—where I must wait upon the events of night in the house; so I went there and sat in the darkness.

I waited while the night grew older, hearing the old clock downstairs strike the hours of nine and ten and eleven. I expected to hear, soon, the step of the woman on the stair, the woman called Lilith, but it was the blue light that came first, seeping in under the door—as in my dream.

But I was not sleeping, I was not dreaming.

The blue light came, filling the room, until I could just faintly see the naked form of the woman and the shaping form of Great-uncle Uriah looming up, with a writhing, twisting, serpentine coil reaching out from where he was taking shape to where I sat on the bed . . .

And then something more, something that filled me with sudden terror. I smelled smoke—and I heard the crackling of flames.

And from outside came Rhoda's voice calling, "Adam! Adam!"

The vision collapsed. The last thing I saw was the expression of terrible rage on my great-uncle's spectral face, the fury on the face of the woman changing in that light from that of a lissome girl to that of an ancient hag. Then I flung myself to the window and opened it.

"Rhoda!" I cried.

She had taken no chances. There was a ladder up against the windowsill.

* * *

The house burned to the ground with everything in it.

Its burning did not affect my great-uncle's will. As Mr. Saltonstall put it, I had been fulfilling his condition when circumstances beyond my control made it impossible to continue. So I did inherit the property, and I sold it, and Rhoda and I were married.

In spite of her insistently feminine delusions.

"I set fire to it myself," she said. She had spent the day after

she had left with my papers and books at the library of Miskatonic University, famed for its collection of arcane books, studying witchcraft lore. She had concluded that the spirit animating the house and responsible for the events in it was that of Great-uncle Uriah Garrison, and that his sole reason for the condition that I must live there was to place me within his reach so that he could usurp my own life-force and take possession of my body. The woman was a succubus, perhaps his mistress. The mouse-hole obviously an opening into another dimension.

Trust a woman to construe some kind of romantic angle out of even the most curious events. Succubus, indeed!

There are times even now when her notions affect me. From time to time I find myself unsure of my own identity. Am I Adam Duncan or Uriah Garrison? It does no good to mention it to Rhoda. I did so once and she said only, "It seems to have improved you, Adam."

Women are fundamentally not rational creatures. Nothing will shake her free of her notions about the house on Aylesbury Street. It annoys me that I find myself unable to come up with a more rational explanation myself, one that will satisfy all the questions that occur to me when I sit down and think about the events in which I played such a small, if motivating, part.

JOHN METCALFE (1891-) belongs to that distinguished group of British authors whose work in the genre of the macabre has set such high standards for all who have followed them. Among his classic tales in the genre are *The Smoking Leg, The Bad Lands, Brenner's Boy, The Feasting Dead,* and many others. His published books—not limited to the field of the uncanny—include *Judas and Other Stories, The Smoking Leg and Other Stories, Arm's Length, Spring Darkness, Foster-Girl, All Friends Are Strangers,* and *My Cousin Geoffrey.* Mr. Metcalfe now lives in New York, where he writes and teaches.

The Renegade

JOHN METCALFE

Barbara St. John Cass used frequently to accompany her uncle, Mr. Theodore St. John Cass, F. Z. S. (and a host of other letters) to the Zoo. She liked the Zoo well enough, and Uncle Thedie just well enough too, but she might probably not have gone there with him quite so often had it not been tacitly assumed in the Cass family that she was to be his heiress.

That she *should* be his heiress was rendered urgently desirable by the low ebb, at present, of the Cass finances. Papa Cass—a gaunt, low-slung, long-toothed man of sanguine complexion

and with a general unanalysable resemblance to a rocket—was in poorish health and needed delicacies and more of what he called 'purchasable refinement'. Night-work was telling on him, he complained, and therefore also indirectly, on Mama. Old Thedie was a rum'n and it was hard on Babs to have to suck up to him as she did, but it would be worth it, for her and all of them, in the end.

Uncle Thedie, when Barbara was ten, had returned from a protracted sojourn in east Africa, and now that she was over twenty, and an assistant librarian to boot, was still blethering about salt-licks and drinking-pools and *safaris*. In London, however, he had become very respectable and unsafarilike, wearing, on Sundays, a top hat and churchwardenish sort of overcoat even at the Zoo. He had a big nose, little twinkling pig-eyes and a trick of splaying out his elbows as if he were a frog, but belonged to a number of those learned societies to membership of which the lack of personal charm is not a bar. Barbara had attended an exquisitely boring reception-dinner once whereat, in evening dress, he had looked comically hideous enough to stop a clock and made a lengthy speech, declaring, in preliminary, that "the Pachydermata were his passion and eternal theme-song and the rhinoceroses in particular his love-life." The assembled *savants* had politely tittered, but Barbara, who was a temperately-minded maiden and abhorred exaggerations, had thought it merely silly.

As for the Pachydermata, there were plenty of them, of course, at the Zoo, and Barbara grew rather tired of always being lugged by Uncle Thedie to *their* houses. Why not the monkeys, or lions, for a change? she protested inwardly; but no, it must be those old ever-lasting Pachyderms, and, at that, not even elephants or hippopotamuses as some slight variation but continually the rhinos. And, at last, and at that again, not even just the rhinos,

but continually one especial and perpetual ugly brute of a rhinoceros called 'Bob'. Barbara was desolated with *ennui,* and a faint disgust, at standing, doing nothing, while Bob and Uncle Thedie also stood, similarly doing nothing, except stare, in a maudlin fashion, at each other for a solid quarter-of-an-hour.

"Do you love Bob very much?" she had asked Uncle Thedie one afternoon, demurely, yet, for her, quite cuttingly. She realised, before the words were properly out of her mouth, that she ought never to have risked saying such a tactless thing, for Uncle Thedie made an offended, bulkily bridling motion. He vouchsafed no answer to her query, but, on the way back, regaled with a dissertation upon African tribal customs and beliefs. The M'bungwi-bhatâs, for example, Barbara gathered scornfully, not merely feared but *reverenced* the rhinoceros. "It is a superstition," Uncle Thedie had expounded, "cognate with the widespread myth, in Europe, of lycanthropy. And while, in Europe, you have were-wolves, or, in Burma, the were-tiger, so, in these parts of Africa, there is the were-leopard or more subtly terrible were-rhino, a creature whose distinctive vampire-characteristics are developed, as a rule, upon the passing into it, immediately after the demise, of the congenial, freshly disembodied soul of an appropriately sympathetic human being." Barbara repressed a sniff. How *could* people be such idiots? And for her Uncle Thedie, the old hypocrite, to talk of 'myth'. . . . What a colossal humbug he must be! But she had concealed all outward signs of her contempt and dedicated the rest of an unprofitable day to pleasing her relative.

This had been in March, and soon Barbara had even greater reason for regretting her unwise speech about the wretched 'Bob', for Uncle Thedie in the following month fell dangerously ill. Barbara used to journey from her home in Kensington to his house in Eaton Square and chat with him, or leave him flowers.

She was genuinely sorry for the old, lonely chap, notwithstanding his whims and oddities, but, besides that, she was a practical, common-sensible type of girl and appreciated perfectly that there was little point in dreaming of a nice home with Tony (the young man to whom, and unknown to her parents, she was all-but-engaged) unless, from somewhere, she procured money to endow this home. And, Tony's salary being unfortuntely what it was, the only calculable or envisageable source of such endowment was her ailing uncle.

"Well," Uncle Thedie would demand in anxious petulance from his sick-bed, "and how was he this morning? Still off his feed?"

For, oddly enough, the rhinoceros Bob had also, almost simultaneously, contracted some complaint, and it was Bob's health, rather than his own, that now seemed Uncle Thedie's chief concern. Barbara, at his behest, had to visit the brute and, from its keeper, a Mr. Finquist, bring back detailed reports. Between the two invalids, recently, she was pretty busy, and upon one occasion she had nearly left a bunch of dahlias for the rhinoceros by mistake.

Easter was just over when, rather suddenly, Uncle Thedie grew much weaker, and expired. Barbara, attending his funeral, was sorrier than ever about all the times she had been misunderstanding or intolerant of him. She was not, at heart, a mercenary girl, but human nature is human nature, and, thinking of her home-to-be with Tony, she could not help feeling just a little grateful to her poor dead uncle in advance.

Her gratitude, however, was ere long appreciably dimmed when, on the reading of the will, it turned out that her uncle had rewarded her devotion with a mere thousand pounds together with what he was pleased to call a 'lucky trinket'. The bulk of his considerable fortune went to a couple of his beastly

old societies and to the Zoo with, as regards the last bequest, an express stipulation that the money be applied to the 'upkeep and liberal provisioning' of the rhinoceros house!

This was enormity enough, but the disgustingness did not end there. After (one might almost have said) robbing her and disappointing her in the way he had and putting off her dream-cottage in Bucks with Tony until kingdom-come, her uncle had the callous nerve, the gall, to leave a special message 'to my niece' requesting her 'in memory of so many happy hours' to go on visiting the Zoo and, should that animal survive him, Bob.

Papa and Mama, of course, were livid. They had been used, before Barbara was born, to far less straitened circumstances than at present, and consequently their yearnings after a return to affluence amounted to nostalgia. As for Barbara herself, she was, as had been indicated, most annoyed. A thousand pounds is all right, and nearly always proves enjoyable so long as you have not too eagerly and confidently been expecting about twenty times as much. As Barbara *had*. It was in no sunny or contented frame of mind that she again, and with a measure of surprise, found her steps trending towards Regents Park.

At first, rebelliously, she had vowed not to go. Why should she? The Zoo had been the spring of all her trouble, for she had now the wretched inward certainty that, had she only held her tongue, that time, concerning the unutterable Bob, her uncle would have been more generous. And the absurd 'lucky trinket' had but rubbed-in and reinforced this mortifying conclusion. It was a silver bracelet, actually quite pretty and of unusual workmanship and pattern, with a sort of locket-clasp containing, coiled, what was described in an accompanying note as a 'rhinocerous hair'. *"Hair?"* Barbara had demurred in dull, chagrined dejection. An "Oh yes," Mr. Cass conjectured glumly. "From the tail, I suppose . . ."

What with one thing and another, there had been more than a surfeit, lately, of rhinoceros, and every possible excuse and provocation, Barbara thought, for never setting eyes upon a pachyderm again; but something, curiosity perhaps, had drawn her in her own despite. Three months had passed since Uncle Thedie's death. It was summer, a July Saturday, and houses, terraces and walks were thronged. She wandered slowly here and there,—hot, dusty, jaded, and jostled by the crowds. Tony was not with her. *His* expectations too had cruelly been dashed, and there was—well, not exactly an estrangement but a perceptible degree of coolness now between them.

Eventually, of course, she drifted to the rhinoceros house. She would not tell her parents she had been. She wanted to keep up the pretence, to them, of sticking to her resolution to avoid rhinoceroses, in future, as the plague. How funny it all was, how funny. . . . She recalled the innumberable occasions of her previous pilgrimagings here with Uncle Thedie, his tranced eternal communings with soul-mate Bob. It was like visiting a grave . . .

Mr. Finquist, the keeper, welcoming her at once, expressed respectful sorrow at her loss. "A pity!" he deplored. "Ah, a sad pity! A most uncommon kind of gentleman, your uncle, Miss. And I'm quite certain as old Bob 'as missed 'im too!"

Till now, oddly, 'old Bob' had not been uppermost in Barbara's conscious mind. Unrealisedly, maybe, she had presumed him dead, but of this notion Mr. Finquist disabused her. "Oh no! 'E's right as rain agen, old Bob is. Perked up surprisin' just about the time your uncle was took worse arter that last bad turn of 'is—of Bob's I mean—round Easter. Fit as a fiddle now, with all them extry rations that 'e gets. Oh, 'e's a card, 'is nibs is . . . a proper card. *Encher* boy, eh?"

"*Umph,*" assented Bob. The sound was a rich, guttural chortle, laconic but indulgent. Barbara shivered. The animal's unwieldy

bulk was stationed in a far corner of the pen, by a low doorway leading to the enclosed exercising-yard without. Mr. Finquist by and by removed himself to attend to denizens of neighbouring pens, and it was not until the keeper had departed that the brute slowly wheeled and lumbered heavily across hay-littered floor-boards to the rails.

Barbara confronted it with unmixed feelings. It was Bob who had cut her out with Uncle Thedie and she had no doubt at all about her sentiments towards the creature. Bob, for his part, considered her intently though impassively. His tiny eyes (one of them narrowing slyly in the fantastic semblance of a wink) held, as before, a clumsy and remote malevolence,—a precarious, sullen semi-humour (at the moment) that could turn instantly to hate. Yet was there not a new alertness in his gait and posture, an almost waggish glint in his once sluggish gaze? Could she not recognise an actual rakishness, a dim reminding hint of impish and deliberate drollery, in that ungainly form? The animal's horned head was cocked spryly in a manner little short (and difficult as it must always be for a rhinoceros to compass such a mien) of debonair; his prehensile upper lip was lifted slightly in what might have been a prehistorically sub-human leer, and his—

Suddenly Barbara, overcome either by the heat or by she did not quite know what, uttered a faint, half-startled exclamation, strode quickly from the pen, and, not delaying for goodbyes to Mr. Finquist, left the rhinoceros house and, presently, the Zoo. The late afternoon was still sultry and she felt limp, 'done up', and, for some reason singularly disconcerted and disturbed. Next day, Sunday, she spent fractiously at home, 'nervy' with her parents and quarrelsome with her younger sister. The 'lucky' bracelet, she gave out with baldness, had been lost ('good riddance too'), and nobody had bothered to challenge or query the statement, or even to ask, in the silly way that people do, just *where*

she had mislaid or dropped it. In fact, and far more enterprisingly, she had without compunction pawned it and, on the proceeds, had a most successful perm.

Should she revisit the rhinoceros house or shouldn't she? Tony had met Uncle Thedie once or twice and she would like Tony, if she did go, to be with her and—and compare notes . . . What *rubbish,* she thought. What *rubbish!* . . . She did not, ever, want to venture so much as a further little-finger or big-toe inside the hateful place, yet, at the same time, seemed compelled to. A maggot, a nonsensicality—some odd uneasy fidget of the mind, some curious unstilled preposterous doubt that must be set at rest—constrained her. Till she *had* gone, and seen, she would enjoy no peace.

It was a week and more however before she passed again through the familiar stiles. Tony, snowed under, he explained in dudgeon, with his office-work, would be unable to escort her yet awhile, and at last, rather than wait longer, she had come alone.

Her mood of irritation, in this interval, had not abated. Something that cloaked its actuality, at first, in trivial symptoms of malaise, impatience and short temper—attributable to general exhaustion or 'heat-sickness'—must, she was fain now to confess, have scared and jolted her; and, recently, she had become the prey of queer imaginings. What could be wrong with her? Try to deny and scout such megrims as she might, she appeared forced to harbour a grotesque delusion, and must admit the impact of a monstrous, a bizarre, suspicion. For several nights she had slept poorly, with appalling dreams. A gust would seem to blow under her bed,—a slowly panting, heavy-breathing gust that dreadfully compressed the mattress-springs and nosed uncertainly about the floor beneath. *'Umph'*, it said. *'Umph'* . . . And then the ploughing, 'rootling' and exploring sounds would cease and

she would have instead a vision of—yes, 'Bob'. But not of the beast merely. In the repellent, brutish lineaments of Caliban would be reflected, flickeringly, other features . . . As through a mask, another face would look, another well-remembered countenance too plainly peer. A fiendish resemblance waxed and waned, and faded. Before her eyes a hideous parody took smirking shape and substance. A gross absurdity, a sheer unthinkability, crowned with a glossy 'topper' although horned and hooved, solicited her entertainment and assent. With the high, thready gasp of terror she would awaken and switch on the light . . .

And now, as she had reapproached the scene of her first shock, her steps had lagged and her heart laboured. It was still extremely hot. The shabby pastures of the park were sun-baked to a sallow slipperiness, and she had stumbled. For a while, craving a reprieve, she had delayed the moment that would put anything to any further test.

But eventually, conquering her qualms, she had paid her shilling and gone in. Done with all cowardly evasions and postponements, she walked straight to the rhinoceros house, ready to face the worst.

"It *can't* be," she essayed to encourage herself on the way. "It's *ridiculous*. The brother of my father . . . It *can't* be!" Yet a sense of portent, tipping the scales increasingly against her reason, outweighed both probability and logic. She thought, too, of her dreams, which had dated, in milder form, not merely from her last visit to the Zoo but from her uncle's death. And she recalled how Bob, according to his keeper, had got suddenly much better just when her uncle had collapsed, and, when she saw him in his pen the other day, had given her, she was convinced, that meaning wink. "It *can't* be," she went on none the less repeating, valiantly but now more faintly. "Oh, it *can't* be . . . !

As before, Mr. Finquist met her, but this time with a worried

frown replacing his accustomed smile.

"Good afternoon," Barbara began awkwardly. "I'm back again you see. I—"

She stopped as Mr. Finquist, obviously moved, made a peculiar 'shushing', warning gesture with a hand, and shook his head. "Not 'ere no more," he said. "Not 'ere. You won't see Bob no more. Not 'ere . . ."

" 'Not here'," echoed Barbara, stupidly. "But—but why? How —Why 'not here'?"

There was an embarrassed pause. Mr. Finquist scowled at her pensively a while, then added, almost in a whisper: "Shot . . . We 'ad to."

Something cold and uncanny unwound itself in Barbara's reluctant brain. Mastering an intense disinclination, she persisted:

"Shot? But *why?*"

The keeper shifted his weight to the other foot, opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. He spoke slowly, coyly, with a sort of sickly confidentialness: "Bad 'abits. At—at night. 'E—There, we knows *wot* we knows, don't we? Or we can 'ave a guess . . . It's no good talking."

Barbara did not press him for elucidation but, with confused adieux, left the rhinoceros house and regained the outer air. She felt stifled and wanted to think, or rather, maybe, did not want to. Always a girl with a neat, well-dusted mind, she found both her intelligence and her sentimental prejudices affronted by the interpretation she now seemed forced to place upon events. A second viewing of Bob in his new *Cassnius redivivus* phase might or might not have strengthened her original suspicions, but her few words with Mr. Finquist certainly had done so. However painful and unusual this phenomenon, the harsh unpalatable truth must be accepted.

" 'Were-rhino'," she mused. "How odd! People just don't

have uncles like that, in this country, as a rule. I hope they took care to shoot him with a *silver* bullet if—if he *was* that . . . It simply doesn't altogether add up, either. According to that book in B.M. were-rhinos are absolutely different from were-*wolves* . . . Papa and Mama, being so stuck on Lineage and Tradition as they are, would never believe it. I can hardly believe it myself. I shan't tell *them,* and I don't actually *think* I shall tell Tony. Better not . . ."

Opportunely, she noticed, by the gravel path, a litter-bin. Unclipping her hand-bag, she removed from one of its compartments the pawn-ticket, tore the ticket into shreds and thoughtfully dropped them in the receptacle. Was it a 'precaution'? She wasn't sure. But she wanted as much distance and disconnection as possible between Barbara St. John Cass and anything to do with Uncle Thedie—even (as, she supposed, it now might be considered) just his hair. Oh, what a skeleton-in-the-cupboard he had become,—or at least might become if only she dare publish the facts! Very, yes very, fervently she trusted that the powers of were-rhinos had been exaggerated . . .

Still, the affair was not without its compensations,—if she could but regard it as completely closed. How many girls were able nowadays to boast (not that they would, perhaps) of a were-rhino uncle? Were-*wolves,* or—wolverines, maybe, but not were-*rhinos,* which were another kettle-of-fish entirely as the authorities unanimously agreed. The mechanics, so to speak—the "know-how"—of the racket (thus to term it) appeared quite dissimilar; and, in the case of orthodox conforming lycanthropes, the vampire faculty, while not inheritable or, save by infection of a 'victim', ordinarily transmissible, did tend to 'run' in families,—as she could testify! Such of *her* forebears as had been 'weres' at all had been were-*wolves,* the whole absorbing business starting with the coming-over, from Prague, in the fifteenth

century, of Wenceslas and Hragny Cassnius (or 'cnassis'), from the first-named of whom her own remarkable papa was proud to trace descent. Then there had been her great-great-uncle Mark Abner Cass who, in his heyday, had operated in Salisbury, and, more recently, her cousin Sarah, practising around Balham, till discovered and denounced, in 1903, by a vulpaphobe of a vestryman, who had her transfixed in her coffin, shrieking and spouting blood in the customary way.

Were-*wolves*, by all means, but were-*rhinos*, no. That her uncle should prove so double-dyed a renegade and innovator staggered credence.

It was really, she reflected, the one truly out-of-the-common thing that had ever happened to her,—or, she hoped, ever would.

CLARK ASHTON SMITH (1893-1961) was one of America's foremost writers of fantasy. He was associated with Ambrose Bierce and George Sterling, and, later, with H. P. Lovecraft, to whose Cthulhu Mythos he contributed many features in his tales. He spent his life in California, where he wrote poems and short stories, and carved out of minerals and rocks the strange sculptures which have become collectors' items. His work appeared widely in magazines ranging from *Poetry* to *The London Mercury, The Black Cat* to *Weird Tales, The Yale Review* to *Smart Set.* One of the most effective lyric poets of his time, he collected his verse into seven books, from *The Star-Treader and Other Poems* to *Spells and Philtres,* and prepared his forthcoming *Selected Poems* before his death. His remarkable macabre fiction has been widely anthologized and collected into four published books—*Out of Space and Time, Lost Worlds, Genius Loci and Other Tales, The Abominations of Yondo,*—and one forthcoming book, *Tales of Science and Sorcery.*

Told in the Desert

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Out of the fiery furnace of the desert sunset, he came to meet our caravan. He and his camel were a single silhouette of shadow-like thinness that emerged above the golden-crested dunes and disappeared by turns in their twilight-gathering hollows. When he descended the last dune and drew near, we had

paused for the night, we were pitching our black tents and lighting our little fires.

The man and his dromedary were like mummies that could find no repose in the subterranes of death, that had wandered abroad beneath the goading of a cryptic spur, ever since the first division of the desert from the town. The face of the man was withered and blackened as by the torrefaction of a thousand flames; his beard was grey as ashes; and his eyes were expiring embers. His clothing was like tatters of the ancient dead, like the spoils of ghoulish rag-pickers. His camel was a mangy, moth-eaten skeleton such as might bear the souls of the damned on their dolorous ride to the realms of Iblis.

We greeted him in the name of Allah and bade him welcome. He shared our meal of dates and coffee and dried goat-flesh; and later, when we sat in a circle beneath the crowding stars, he told us his tale in a voice that had somehow taken on the loneliness, the eerie quavers and disconsolate overtones of the desert wind, as it seeks among infinitely parching horizons for the fertile, spicy valleys it has lost and cannot find.

Of my birth, my youth, and the appelation by which I was known and perhaps renowned among men, it would now be bootless to speak: for those days are one in remoteness with the reign of Al Raschid, they have gone by like the Afrit-builded halls of Suleiman. And in the bazaars or in the harems of my natal city, none would recall me; and if one spoke my name, it would be as a dying and never-repeated echo. And my own memories grew dim like the fires of hesternal wanderings, on which the sands are blown by an autumn gale.

But, though none will remember my songs, I was once a poet; and like other poets in their prime, I sang of vernal roses and autumnal rose-leaves, of the breasts of dead queens and the mouths of living cup-bearers, of stars that seek the fabled ocean-

isles, and caravans that follow the eluding and illusory horizons. And because I was fevered with the strange disquietude of youth and poesy, for which there is neither name nor appeasement, I left the city of my boyhood, dreaming of other cities where wine and fame would be sweeter, and the lips of women more desirable.

It was a gallant and merry caravan with which I set forth in the month of the flowering of almonds. Wealthy and brave were the merchants with whom I travelled; and though they were lovers of gold and wrought ivory, of rugs and damascus blades and olibanum, they also loved my songs and could never weary of hearing them. And though our pilgrimage was long, it was evermore beguiled with recital of odes and telling of tales; and time was somehow cheated of its days, and distance of its miles, as only the divine necromancy of song can cheat them. And the merchants told me stories of the far-off, glamorous city which was our goal; and hearkening to their recountal of its splendors and delights, and pondering my own fancies, I was well content with the palmless leagues as they faded behind our dromedaries.

Alas! for we were never to behold the bourn of our journey, with its auriphrygiate domes that were said to ascend above the greening of paradisal trees, and its minarets of nacre beyond waters of jade. We were waylaid by the fierce tribesmen of the desert in a deep valley between hills; and though we fought valiantly, they bore us down from our hamstrung camels with their over-numbering spears; and taking our corded bales of merchandise, and deeming us all securely dead, they left us to the gier-eagles of the sand.

All but myself, indeed, had perished; and sorely wounded in the side, I lay among the dead as one on whom there descends the pall-like shadow of Azrael. But when the robbers had departed, I somehow stanched my streaming wound with tatters of

my torn raiment; and seeing that none stirred among my companions, I left them and tottered away on the route of our journey, sorrowing that so brave a caravan should have come to a death so inglorious. And beyond the defile in which we had been overtaken with such dastardy, I found a camel who had strayed away during the conflict. Even as myself, the animal was maimed, and it limped on three legs and left a trail of blood. But I made it kneel, and mounted it.

Of the hours that ensued I remember little. Blinded with pain and weakness, I heeded not the route that the camel followed, whether it were the track of caravans or a desert-ending path of Bedouins or jackals: But dimly I recalled how the merchants had told me at morn that there were two days of travelling in a desolation where the way was marked by serried bones, ere we should reach the next oasis. And I knew not how I should survive so arduous a journey, wounded and without water; but I clung dizzily to the camel.

The red demons of thirst assailed me; and fever came, and delirium, to people the waste with phantasmagoric shadows. And I fled through aeons from the frightful immemorial Things that held lordship of the desert, and would have proffered me the green, beguiling cups of an awful madness with Their bone-white hands. And though I fled, They dogged me always; and I heard Them gibbering all around me in the air that had turned to blood-red flame.

There were mirages on the waste; there were lucent meres and palms of fretted beryl that hovered always at an unattainable distance. I saw them in the interludes of my delirium; and one there was at length, which appeared greener and fairer than the rest; but I deemed it also an illusion. Yet it faded not nor receded like the others; and in each interval of my phantom-clouded fever it drew nearer still. And thinking it still a mirage,

I approached the palms and the water; and a great blackness fell upon me, like the web of oblivion from the hands of the final Weaver; and I was henceforth bereft of sight and knowledge.

Waking, I deemed perforce that I had died and was in a sequestered nook of Paradise. For surely the sward on which I lay, and the waving verdure about me, were lovelier than those of earth; and the face that leaned above me was that of the youngest and most compassionate houri. But when I saw my wounded camel grazing not far away, and felt the reviving pain of my own hurt, I knew that I still lived; and that the seeming mirage had been a veritable oasis.

Ah! fair and kind as any houri was she who had found me lying on the desert's verge, when the riderless camel came to her hut amid the palms. Seeing that I had awakened from my swoon, she brought me water and fresh dates, and smiled like a mother as I ate and drank. And, uttering little cries of horror and pity, she bound my wound with the soothness of healing balsams.

Her voice was gentle as her eyes; and her eyes were those of a dove that has dwelt always in a vale of myrrh and cassia. When I had revived a little, she told me her name, which was Neria; and I deemed it lovelier and more melodious than the names of the sultanas who are most renowned in song, and remotest in time and fable. She said that she had lived from infancy with her parents amid the palms; and now her parents were dead, and there was none to companion her except the birds that nested and sang in the verdant frondage.

How shall I tell of the life that began for me now, while the spear-wound was mending? How shall I tell of the innocent grace, the child-like beauty, the maternal tenderness of Neria? It was a life remote from all the fevers of the world, and pure from

every soilure; it was infinitely sweet and secure, as if in the whole of time and space there were no others than ourselves and naught that could ever trouble our happiness. My love for her, and hers for me, was inevitable as the flowering of the palms and their fruiting. Our hearts were drawn to each other with no shadow of doubt or reluctance; and the meeting of our mouths was simple as that of roses blown together by a summer wind.

We felt no needs, no hungers, other than those which were amply satisfied by the crystal well-water, by the purple fruit of the trees, and by each other. Ours were the dawns that poured through the feathering emerald of fronds; and the sunsets whose amber was flung on a blossom-purified sward more delicate than the rugs of Bokhara. Our was the divine monotony of contentment, ours were the kisses and endearments ever the same in sweetness yet illimitably various. Ours was a slumber enchanted by cloudless stars, and caresses without denial or regret. We spoke of naught but our love and the little things that filled our days; yet the words we uttered were more than the weighty discourse of the learned and the wise. I sang no more, I forgot my odes and ghazals; for life itself had become a sufficing music.

The annals of happiness are without event. I know not how long it was that I dwelt with Neria; for the days were molten together in a dulcet harmony of peace and rapture. I remember not if they were few or many; since time was touched by a supernal sorcery, and was no longer time.

Alas! for the tiny whisper of discontent that awakens sooner or later in the bosoms of the blest, that is heard through the central melodies of heaven! There came a day when the little oasis seemed no longer the infinite paradise I had dreamt, when the kisses of Neria were as honey too often tasted, when her bosom was a myrrh too often breathed. The sameness of the days was no longer divine, the remoteness was no longer security but a

prison-house. Beyond the fringed horizon of the trees there hovered the opal and marble dream of the storied cities I had sought in former time; and the voices of fame, the tones of sultana-like women, besought me with far, seductive murmurs. I grew sad and silent and distraught; and, seeing the change that was on me, Neria saddened also and watched me with eyes that had darkened like nocturnal wells in which there lingers a single star. But she uttered no breath of reproach or remonstrance.

At last, with halting words, I told her of my longing to depart; and, hypocrite that I was, I spoke of urgent duties that called me and would not be denied. And I promised with many oaths to return as soon as these duties would permit. The pallor of Neria's face, and the darkening of her violet-shadowed eyes, were eloquent of mortal sorrow. But she said only, "Go not, I pray thee. For if thou goest, thou shalt not find me again."

I laughed at her words and kissed her; but her lips were cold as those of the dead, they were unresponsive as if the estranging miles had already intervened. And I too, was sorrowful when I rode away on my dromedary.

Of that which followed there is much, and yet little, to tell. After many days among the veering boundaries of the sand, I came to a far city; and there I abode for awhile and found in a measure the glory and delight of which I had dreamed. But amid the loud and clamoring bazaars, and across the silken whisper of harems, there returned to me the parting words of Neria; and her eyes besought me through the flame of golden lamps and the luster of opulent attire; and a nostalgia fell upon me for the lost oasis and the lips of abandoned love. And because of it I knew no peace; and after a time I returned to the desert.

I retraced my way with exceeding care, by the dunes and remotely scattered wells that marked the route. But when I thought to have reached the oasis, and to see again the softly waving

palms above Neria's abode, and the glimmering waters beside it, I saw no more than a stretch of featureless sand, where a lonely, futile wind was writing and erasing its aimless furrows. And I sought across the sand in every direction, till it seemed that I must overtake the very horizons as they fled; but I could not find a single palm, nor a blade of grass that was like the blossomy sward on which I had lain or wandered with Neria; and the wells to which I came were brackish with desolation and could never have held the crystalline sweetness of the well from which I had drunk with her. . . .

Since then, I know not how many suns have crossed the brazen hell of the desert; nor how many moons have gone down on the waters of mirage and marah. But still I seek the oasis; and still I lament the hour of careless folly in which I forsook its perfect paradise. To no man, mayhap, is it given to attain twice the happiness and security, remote from all that can trouble or assail, which I knew with Neria in a bygone year. And woe to him who abandons such, who becomes a voluntary exile from an irretrievable Aidann. For him, henceforward, there are only the fading visions of memory, the tortures and despairs and illusions of the quested miles, the waste whereon there falls no lightest shadow of any leaf, and the wells whose taste is fire and madness. . . .

We were all silent when the stranger ceased; and no one cared to speak. But among us all there was none who had not remembered the face of her to whom he would return when the caravan had ended its wayfaring.

After awhile, we slept; and we thought that the stranger also slumbered. But awaking before dawn, when a horned moon was low above the sands, we saw that the man and his dromedary had disappeared. And far-off in the ghostly light a doubtful shadow passed from dune to dune like a fever-driven phantom. And it seemed to us that the shadow was the single silhouette of a camel and its rider.

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When the Rains Came

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

"I'm the luckiest fellow alive!" Conovan said, aloud to himself.

Conovan felt himself to be lucky primarily because the Krajans were such friendly people. They were a delight to behold, too. Easy on the eyes—when once you became accustomed to having a daily talk with completely transparent philosophers and joyous pagans in deep forest glades. Delicately fashioned they were, and they moved with a strange, almost unbelievable grace—a lightness and an elasticity which conjured up unrealistic but wholly enchanting visions of ballet dancers on a tightrope.

When a man is cut off from all human companionship thousands of light years from Earth he is likely to seek good fellowship at any price. And the price Conovan had to pay was not high. He had only to give up a small fraction of his independence and be a good listener.

It had been necessary for him to overcome a few prejudices, of course. Mastering the language difficulty had required study, tact and patience, and it had not been easy for him to grow animated and enthusiastic when a Krajan male started boasting about his love life.

The Krajans mated, apparently—just as Terrans did. But their courtship was dull and unromantic in the extreme from a Terran point of view.

A male Krajan would say: "You are a pleasant person. I like you." And a female Krajan would reply: "I like you, too."

"Shall we build a home together?"

"Yes, we will build a home."

"Until the rains come?"

"Until the rains come."

And that was all!

It was hard for Conovan to understand why the Krajans were always talking about the possibility of rain when the entire planet was as dry as a tinder-box. If rain had fallen even a year before his arrival he would have known about it, for the Krajans seemed at times to have an obsessive-compulsive need to talk about nothing else.

Rain, rain, rain—someday it will arrive! It was amazing how luxuriant vegetation could become without rain, and how naturally a man—*and* the Krajans—could adjust to the complete absence of water when a refreshing, fruit-juice beverage hung suspended in a ready-shell container on virtually every tree.

Perhaps there was something beneath the surface soil which

stored up water like a sponge—or a camel. The surmise, while superficially a little wild, was certainly worth exploring. But whenever Conovan asked the Krajans about it they pretended not to hear him, and quickly guided the conversation into other channels.

It was horribly frustrating, of course. It undermined a man's confidence in his own powers of persuasion and made him feel that he was the victim of a secret conspiracy that stopped just short of showing its teeth. But Conovan was grateful to the Krajans notwithstanding. They had accepted him almost immediately as a fellow human; and despite the etymological restrictions commonly associated with the term "human" it would have been a gross injustice to have refused to apply it to the Krajans.

The Krajans were not men but they *were* human. They were so human, in fact, that Conovan was afraid to protest too strenuously. Much as he disliked unsolved riddles he had no desire to cause them pain or have them think him ungrateful.

They had given him a hut of his own, clothing suited to the planet and an abundance of edibles. It was certainly not their fault that the ship which had brought him to their planet had been wrecked beyond repair and that he had experienced a worse-than-post-operative shock reaction which was only now beginning to wear off.

Good friends they had been to him! Wonderful, generous, light-hearted friends. How could he doubt it?

Sitting now in the door of his hut Conovan raised his eyes, and saw that his friend Kolat-Mur had stopped gyrating and was smiling down at him.

It was a smile, surely. What reason did he have for thinking otherwise? And why should he even *want* to think otherwise? A smile was simply a contraction of the features in an upward direction—a natural response to emotions of pleasure.

All right. The convolution of amusement and good fellowship on the Krajans' alert, intelligent faces were no more than evanescent crinklings—conspicuous one minute, gone the next. But Conovan had seen men smile in almost the same fashion, and a smile was a smile, no matter how thin you sliced it.

That didn't mean, of course, that the physical appearance of the Krajans wouldn't have kept most Terrans guessing. There were animals on Earth just as transparent—the newly hatched fry of certain fishes and glass snakes, glass lizards. But the Krajans were in all respects the opposite of fishlike and they were certainly not reptillian. They were, in fact, startlingly manlike in aspect—bipeds with almost human features, three-jointed limbs and long, flexible fingers.

Despite their fragile build and the strange, frondlike growths on their chest—tinted green and coral pink—it was easy to picture them winning almost instant acceptance in imaginative circles on Earth.

They were, in brief, fantastic, but somehow very real. And of course they *were* real—indigenous to a planet which had its own evolutionary patterns and adhered to them with an Alice-in-Wonderland kind of tenacity.

It was only when they were in motion that Conovan had to blink furiously to convince himself of their reality. When the Krajans were whirling gracefully about their bodies became translucent lenses, mirroring entire sections of the forest in kaleidoscopic fashion.

It was extremely unnerving at times. But there was no need for Conovan to be disturbed now, for Kolat-Mur was standing so still that only a single tree was visible through him. The tree had wide, spreading branches, and it was stirring a little in the faint breeze which was blowing across the clearing, its tremblings magnified by the pale sheen of Kolat-Mur's stationary body.

"Tell me, Miss-tur Conovan," Kolat-Mur said. "How did you occupy your days on Earth? Were your tasks agreeable and of your own choosing? Or were they difficult and unpleasant?"

Conovan sighed, "It's *Mister* Conovan, Kolat-Mur," he said. "Repeat it after me—short and quick. *Mister.*"

"Mister Conovan. Mister—Mister. Yes, I shall remember."

"Thank you, Kolat-Mur. As for your question—I'm afraid that answering it accurately would be a pretty big order."

"But what did you *do,* Mister Conovan? How did you pass the time? You must have done something."

"Brother, you don't know the half of it," Conovan said. "We've never found the key to the kind of peace and serenity you have here. You eat, drink, dance and are merry most of the time. We work hard for a living."

"But why, Mister Conovan? The forest takes care of us. We have enough to eat and wear without working. Why should we make ourselves miserable?"

"Oh, it's been tried on Earth," Conovan said. "Primitives live that way and so do some civilized people. But the primitives get no credit for it and the others—well!"

"You talk very strangely at times, Mister Conovan. We just try to be happy—until the rains come."

"And you *are* happy. I'd give my right arm to be as happy as you are, Kolat-Mur. If I stay here long enough I may not even have to sacrifice an arm. I'll just be like you. It's a fine way to be, Kolat-Mur. My advice to you is to stick with it. Don't ever change."

"You haven't answered my question, Mister Conovan."

"I told you it was a big order. Actually that's something of an understatement. The things we do on Earth are almost all based on unreason. But unreason can be a cruel taskmaster. It never relaxes its grip. You have to get away from it completely to re-

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alize what a jackass you were to knuckle under in the first place."

"But you *are* happy here with us, Mister Conovan?"

"You bet I am. At least, I'm learning to be—much happier than I ever was on Earth."

"I'm glad, Mister Conovan. We are all glad."

"So am I. Oh, and just incidentally, Kolat-Mur. There's a question I've been meaning to ask *you* for some time. A very little one. What actually happens when the rains come?"

"It is very late, Mister Conovan. You should be having your dinner now. It is not wise to put off eating the way you do."

"Thanks, Kolat-Mur. On Earth we often have to eat at odd hours—on the run, you might say. But thanks for reminding me. I'll eat now—and until the rains come."

"Just eat now, Mister Conovan. Let us do the worrying."

"You do worry then—about the rains? Why?"

"Mister Conovan, if you found a seed in the forest and you opened it, and out of it came another seed, and when you opened that second seed you found still another seed and after that a fourth seed—how long would you go on opening seeds?"

"Are you trying to tell me something important, Kolat-Mur? Or are you just trying to discourage me?"

"Perhaps both, Mister Conovan. It is not wise to question the wisdom of a mystery if you can never hope to understand it. What will be—will be."

Conovan was about to protest when Kolat-Mur terminated the interview with ceremonious dispatch. He bowed slightly, paid a flattering verbal tribute to Conovan's gifts as a conversationalist, and was in motion again, flitting away over the leaf-strewn clearing without a backward glance.

Conovan cursed softly, his hand gripping hard on his knee. He wondered what would happen if the rains should come and catch Kolat-Mur by surprise. Would the Krajan throw in the

sponge? Would he thrust aside all reticence and take refuge in a complete reversal of his present attitude? Would he break down and become a shoulder-weeper? Or would he maintain his composure to the bitter end, ignoring the downpour, and pretending that a mystery so solemn was still too much of a Krajan personal matter to be discussed with an outsider?

Conovan went inside his hut and ate his evening meal. It consisted solely of fruit and undersoil vegetables. One of the vegetables looked so stringy and dried out that he was astonished to discover that it tasted remarkably like a well-cooked garden slug. Not only was it rich and succulent—it was almost meaty in flavor.

And there was a small red vegetable that resembled a tomato but tasted instead like an oyster on the half-shell. The cucumber-like vegetable was the most surprising of all. It made a faint, whistling sound when he cut it open and for an instant he feared that it might be suffering pain.

For an instant a culinary episode from the remote past flashed unpleasantly across his mind. In his mind's gaze he was a boy again, and his aunt was dropping clams into boiling water. Impassively, with a stony-eyed stare, she was watching the bivalves *scrunch* and open while he cringed with the excessive kind-heartedness of the very young.

Conovan did not enjoy his meal very much and that night he scarcely slept at all. A strange feeling came upon him—the feeling that he was being smothered. It wasn't a dream. The feeling only came when he awoke in fitful starts and stared into the darkness. He wasn't being smothered by anything solid or visibly threatening. It was as if a film of moisture had grown up about him and was preventing him from breathing freely.

Moisture—the rains! Of course. It was quite obviously an inward frustration—the way he felt about the rains—subconsciously imposed on the darkness by his tormented mind. If you want

something to happen badly enough and it fails to happen the human brain can rebel in strange ways.

A too disturbing mystery can create its own pressure valves. Starting as it invariably does in the pre-frontal region—the worry center—the pressure can rise quite high without agitating the temporal and occipital lobe nerve centers at all. But if it rises too high hallucinations set in—hallucinations of sight and hearing and smell.

Conovan could almost smell the moisture filling the hut now. He could almost hear the persistent, monotonous patter of the rain. And when he raised his hand to his forehead his fingers encountered a dampness and came away sticky to the touch.

Perspiration? Why not? What could be more natural under the circumstances? As for the rest—the patter and the smell of rain—he could quickly enough banish such bogies by refusing to believe in them. In fact—

Conovan leapt from his cot with a startled cry, his eyes wide and staring. The leap itself was a triggered reflex, set off by the sudden, totally unexpected descent of a raindrop on his head. But when several more drops descended, and the first drop burst and ran down his face his wavering disbelief was replaced by a certainty so acute that he recoiled as if he had been struck.

Like great tears the raindrops seemed—tears shed in compassion by some towering elder god of a man-pitying race. But Conovan knew they were coming from the roof. The doorway of the hut was only a small dark oval but by straining his eyes Conovan could make out a shining in the darkness—a shining which propelled him almost automatically forward and out through the doorway into the night.

It was not only raining. It was raining hard and steadily, it was coming down in sheets. It soaked through Conovan's clothes and drenched him to the skin. His teeth started chattering and

after a moment the weight of the descending water so oppressed his limbs that he felt as helpless as a swimmer trapped by an undertow that was carrying him swiftly out to sea. Almost he had to beat his way back into the hut.

For four days and four nights the downpour continued, while between the sky and the ground a vertical ocean seemed to hang suspended. Then gradually the ocean thinned out and he could see the trees in the clearing leaning sharply to windward amidst confused reflections of light. Finally the rain stopped.

Conovan was grateful for the respite, but when he studied the sky he knew that it would be of short duration. A few of the storm clouds had beat a retreat, but far to the east the sky was bringing up reinforcements. The new clouds were so dense and black that he could visualize tons upon tons of rain pouring out of them.

Or was "tons" precisely the right word? Surely rain such as he had endured couldn't be weighed or measured. Its drenching *wetness* was the most intolerable thing about it, and wetness was a puzzling intangible. A meteorologist who insists that when moisture reaches a saturation point it has no gradients may have sound science on his side. But he could just as well be wrong.

There was a *very* wet stage of wetness that piled insult on injury, that went contrary to all the rules. Conovan found himself wondering if the myth of Noah's Flood had not originated from just such an exaggerated piling up and concentration of wetness.

The escape mechanism which enables the frustrated to erect incredible mental structures simply by splitting hairs occupied Conovan for most of the morning. Then he got to thinking about the Krajans. Why had none of the Krajans paid him a visit during his almost unbearable, four-day incarceration? Where was Kolat-Mur and why had he not appeared before the hut with his customary reassuring smile and graceful cavortings?

At the very least, why had Kolat-Mur not come slushing through the ankle-deep rain to apologize and made amends, to say in wonderment: "We never really believed ourselves that it could happen—at least, not so unexpectedly. Now you know. We could have stopped talking in riddles, but we just didn't want to worry you."

Here is good old Kolat-Mur to make amends. Kolat-Mur dissected and analyzed and fully explained. Not really such an impossible fellow after all. If Kolat-Mur would only—

When a longed-for presence appears in Aladdin-lamp fashion—at the very instant when he's being conjured up—only a fool would contend that the coincidence does violence to reason and common sense. A coincidence of that sort only does violence to mathematical probability, and mathematical probability has avenues long and wide which no reasonable man would attempt to navigate.

A reasonable man can be sure of only one thing. The most incredible coincidences *do* happen—very frequently and under circumstances which seem to link them to psychological wishing in moments of great stress.

And of course Kolat-Mur didn't actually materialize before the hut out of thin air. He did come slushing through the rain, and there was a look on his face which was in all respects the exact opposite of a suddenly-freed genie look.

He was real and he was earnest, and he paused for only an instant to wipe the moisture from his face before he spoke.

"It has happened, Mister Conovan," he said. "I am very sorry. When we go into the water you will be left without friends. You'll be entirely alone. We are all very sorry."

Conovan said nothing. He was not only stunned. He could think of no words which would have satisfied self-interest without implying that he felt outraged and betrayed and angry enough to have sent his fist crashing into Kolat-Mur's face.

It was incredible, in a way—but he knew exactly what was going to happen. He knew just how frightful his predicament had become. He found himself suddenly drenched with moisture from his own ice-cold limbs—trembling and aghast and unable to utter a word.

Whatever Conovan's human deficiencies, he was, in moments of crisis, an aggressive and observant man. He had noticed almost instantly the change in the coral-pink, frondlike growths on Kolat-Mur's chest and the Krajan's statement had simply confirmed what he could see with his own eyes.

The frondlike growths had broadened out. They had become bladder-like projections which terminated in gill slits—unmistakable gill slits high up on Kolat-Mur's thorax.

If Kolat-Mur had been a captive animal in a zoo, and his cage had been adorned with a small, neatly-lettered information card it would in all probability have read: "Notice the unusual, amazingly adaptive breathing apparatuses which nature has bestowed upon these creatures. In periods of drought the structures have an undifferentiated, flowerlike aspect. But at the slightest hint of moisture they expand and exhibit structural peculiarities without parallel on this or any other planet. It is a biological miracle of the first water—a perfect example of what natural selection can accomplish when it operates over a sufficiently long period of time with just one mutational idea in mind!"

"Mister Conovan, we are truly sorry," Kolat-Mur said. "We will miss you and we will grieve. When we go underwater we must stay submerged. It is dangerous for us to even approach the surface, because of the crushing weight of the rain. But you must not despair, Mister Conovan. You may live to see us again. You are strong and without fear, and there is a mountain—that one over there—" Kolat-Mur gestured toward the lofty peaks of Mount Troj-Ula, purple-capped in the evanescent sun glow, and

fell silent, as if fearful that he might have said too much.

Then he seemed to regret his silence and went on quickly: "Climb, Mr. Conovan. Climb high and take some food with you. What is the word you use. Ah, yes—camp. Camp on the highest peak and wait for the rains to cease. That mountain is so very high that sometimes the rising water becomes a coward, not daring to embrace the highest peak. It does not always happen but it could happen—it has happened.

"Mr. Conovan, we like you so very much. We will miss you and remember you—even if the rains should take you from us. We will always remember you, Mr. Conovan."

The hell you will! thought Conovan, and for an instant he had difficulty in keeping his anger in check. And then his anger evaporated. Intelligence, humanoid life everywhere, could not be blamed for its shortcomings. Pervading all the assemblage of humanoid macrocosms were blind spots, tragic defects of character which nature had implanted and which could never be erased.

It was curious, but as Conovan watched Kolat-Mur go sloshing away through the now almost totally eclipsed sunlight he felt a tug of wholly illogical affection constricting the muscles of his throat.

He went back into his hut and gathered together a few of his things. His things! How much that phrase embraced—camping utensils, and edibles, and a stout weather garment salvaged from the wreck of his ship. A faded photograph, a dog-eared, log-book recording which no one would ever read. A needle and a thread. A needle and a thread, a needle on a haystack. The haystack was the mountain and he was the needle—a thin sliver of human awareness shivering on the highest peak, fighting off despair. Fighting off *fear.*

The rain had commenced again when he emerged from the

hut and turned his face toward Mount Troj-Ula. Surely the injunction to "turn the face" was the opposite of meaningless, and he could hardly fail to draw strength from it if he repeated it to himself often enough. In heroic ages on Terra the most prideful of men—kings and merchant princes—turned their faces toward some shining but unattainable goal and obstacles fell away or ceased to matter. In the wilderness we remembered Zion, we turned our faces toward Zion.

It symbolized something magnificent and obdurate in human nature, the courage of the condemned warrior who has not forgotten his chosen lines.

Turn your face toward the battle axes, be strong in the teeth of the foe. Only—there was no foe and no battle axes. There was only the rain.

For forty hours it rained without ceasing, in cloudbursts so torrential that he seemed to be ascending the mountain through an almost vertical sea. The trees and the plants on the slopes became waving marine growths, lifting pale, beseeching tentacles to the darkness.

Onward and upward he climbed, his face turned continually in only one direction—toward the rain. Just how to manage to reach the summit he never quite knew. But reach it he did and for a moment stood triumphant on the heights, remembering how as a boy he had run recklessly through the rain on Terra, and had ended up in a doorway almost skin-dry.

Then all at once he became frightened again—more terrified and sick at heart than he had ever been before in his entire life. It rained, rained, rained. It came down in thin sheets and thick torrents. It formed puddles everywhere and when he tried to set up camp he found himself floundering around in sticky mud or sprawling headlong over misplaced eating utensils. It rained for fifteen days and fifteen nights.

A few of his utensils were washed away. They became metal-

bottomed boats sailing a new Pacific down into the valley below, and up from the valley came floating the huts of the Krajans, cylindrical and palm-thatched.

He longed in vain for his own hut, the home that had been so graciously bestowed upon him by creatures he had come to like, but could never hope to understand. Never hope to understand—Suddenly Conovan sat up straight. Suddenly he knew.

Sitting there watching the water rise, a flash of psychological intuition played like sheet-lightning over the darkest recesses of his mind.

The Krajans were friendly, joyous, carefree—wonderful creatures easy to like. But—they lacked something. What was it they lacked? Human sympathy, of course—human empathy—deep human concern. His plight had certainly not passed unnoticed by them. On the contrary, they were sad because of it and they wanted—oh, so much—to see him again. But their concern had ended there.

What had they really done for him? Nothing—beyond pointing to an elevated stretch of land and informing him that he might have a chance of surviving the flood if he camped on the heights until the rains ceased, and the water receded again. And he would have done that anyway.

If they had warned him sooner he might have set about building a boat. But the thought of warning him had seemingly never even crossed their minds. How self-centered could you get? To the Krajans just thinking about the rains meant conjuring up an unpleasant prospect of underwater living, an existence-cycle change which they did not relish at all. Sure, they talked about the rains. Like people on Terra talked about sex when they were afraid of sex or frustrated by it. But actually they could only talk about the rains by pretending that it was a riddle which shouldn't be talked about at all.

Hence just thinking about the rains in an honest way had be-

come taboo, sacrilegious, and that taboo had been widened to include a well-liked visitor from Earth.

On Earth most people were fools. Nine-tenths of the things they did were completely meaningless. But just doing those meaningless things endowed them with a certain empathy. They became violently attached to one another. They could hate one another too—as only people crowded together in a storm-tossed boat could hate. But at least they built boats and urged their friends to do likewise. They passed out storm warnings in advance, and when the rains came they were united in their folly, living pillars of sympathy, resourcefulness and strength. They knew that drowning could be—horrible, horrible.

The valley was gone now. It had become a lake completely surrounding the mountain. It was turning the mountain into an island so small that the rising water was less than a yard from Conovan's dangling feet.

He got up quickly and retreated up the slope. The water followed him. It followed him like a streak of mercury rising in a thermometer, faster and faster and with the chill, clear intention of outdistancing the patient's fever chart.

There was a basalt-smooth, slablike rock just below the summit of the peak. Breathless from his exertions, Conovan sank down upon it and stretched out at full length. Then something about the rock—its shape perhaps—caused him to leap up with a shudder and descend to the ground again.

He climbed higher through the pelting rain, climbed to the top-most crag and stood motionless while a tree was torn from its moorings far below and carried away by the flood.

There was something mandrakelike about the tree's bobbing, outflung roots and for an instant a mandrake scream seemed to echo through the corridors of Conovan's tormented mind.

How much like a mandrake scream would a man's last scream

be—if he surrendered utterly to terror in the last few seconds of his life? Conovan couldn't believe that he would die with a scream on his lips. He was a coward, of course—like everybody else. But even without witnesses he was convinced he could carry it off without damaging the picture which he had of himself.

The picture was a little absurd, of course. But it was the only picture he'd ever created with complete honesty according to his lights, and he didn't want to spoil it.

As Conovan stared downward the flood waters held him entranced for an instant, casting an almost hypnotic spell upon his thoughts, and conjuring up horribly unnerving, imaginary pictures.

What could be more mind-congealing than to actually see Kolat-Mur swimming up toward the surface, looming in ghoulish dimness through the waves? For an instant he thought he *did* see a stirring in the depths, a slender form gyrating about like a skin-diving ballet dancer. But of course it wasn't Kolat-Mur and after a moment his sane, waking mind resumed its sway. He had no intention of countenancing such a weakness in himself, for he knew from experience that from its first monstrous assumption in the wrong direction the unconscious could erect an edifice of pure horror impossible to overthrow.

The water was less than eighty feet beneath him now. The last tree had been uprooted, but a few sturdy little shrubs remained upright and firmly rooted, defying even the rain. Downward into the flood they marched, like tiny soldiers bristling with defiance and determined to prove that valor had nothing to do with size.

The flood reached the slablike rock, swirled around it, and cut a deep channel at its base. The rock seemed to half-glide, half-float down into the depths.

Conovan stood very straight and still, watching the water

creep up over the base of the topmost crag. A patch of gray lichen began to glisten and swell with moisture less than forty feet beneath him. Numbly he watched it float free, his breathing shallow, his eyes distended.

The water rose another ten feet . . . another five.

Then, abruptly, the rain ceased.

The cynic who said: "Troubles never come singly, but in pairs," might just as easily have been talking about strokes of good fortune. Even the other variant of that discerning remark: "It never rains but it pours," might with equal verisimilitude been turned completely about and plumped down on its head in a mud puddle.

Two days after the rains stopped Conovan was rescued by a ship from a far-away planet—a little green world spinning through zodiacal beams half across the great curve of the universe. The planet was called Earth by its incredibly self-centered inhabitants and Conovan just happened to be self-centered, too.

He was very glad to depart without even bidding goodbye to the Krajans. In fact, he never had a chance, for *their* planet was still nine-tenths submerged on the day of his leavetaking. So he waved farewell only to the receding water and the tops of the tallest trees, and went on board without a backward glance, rejoicing, deep in his heart, that he had not been born a Krajan.

Robert Ervin Howard (1906-1936) was born and lived his short life in Texas. He began writing at 15, and sold his first story to *Weird Tales,* which later published most of his stories, a great many of which were distinguished for the rapid and relatively gory action associated with his work. He wrote macabre fiction, sports stories, mystery stories, tales of Oriental adventure, and poems, and invented a number of memorable characters, including Conan the Cimmerian, Solomon Kane, King Kull, Bran Mak Morn, Brule the Spear-Slayer, Breckinridge Elkins, Sailor Steve Costigan, and others. Howard's books include *A Gent from Bear Creek, Skull-Face and Others, The Coming of Conan, Conan the Barbarian, The Sword of Conan, King Conan, Conan the Conqueror, The Dark Man and Others,* and the collected poems, *Always Comes Evening.* Among stories left unpublished at the time of Howard's death was this final tale of Solomon Kane.

The Blue Flame of Vengeance

Robert E. Howard*

"At birth a witch laid on me monstrous spells, and I have trod strange highroads all my days . . ."—Solomon Kane

1. The Flame Burns Bright

The stranger paused beside the gnarled oak at the cliff's edge to study the melancholy scene before him. To his right, the cliffs

* Completed by John Pacsik.

fell away sheer to the moor, an ugly waste of raw earth sparsely covered by the rotting grass. Fanglike spires of granite, thrusting up out of the foam-slashed water at the base of the palisades, straggled out in forbidding lines to oppose the angry breakers. Farther out, the sea sent up a low, continuous murmuring as it washed grey and restless against the reef's jagged spine. An unmarked ship was anchored in a cove some distance down the driftwood-strewn beach.

Turning, he gazed across the moorland with its stark rock out-croppings and solitary trees to where in the distance could be seen the drab roofs of a village. And there, about a mile beyond the cluster of cottages—barely visible through the gloom—stood the manor house of Sir George Banway.

The stranger's hand tightened on his rapier hilt. The keen wind cut through his clothing like a knife, making him pull the worn cloak more tightly around him. Beads of moisture dripped from the brim of his featherless slouch hat. Taller than most men, he was spare of frame; his broad shoulders, deep chest, and long arms betokened strength and agility in swordplay. There were no golden buttons on his close-fitting garments, no silver buckles on his shoes, no gems flashing on the hilt of his leather-sheathed rapier. A dirk and two duelling pistols hung at his side.

But if the man's appearance was such as to command attention, even more so was his face, which was rather long, smooth shaven, and of an odd pallor that lent it an almost corpselike aspect—until one looked at the eyes. These gleamed with vibrant life, rigidly suppressed. What their color was men never had been able to say for they held both the greyness of the storm-swept midsea and the blueness of ancient ice. Heavy brows hung above them and the whole effect of his countenance was vaguely sinister. He was as grim and cheerless as the setting he was in.

The day's cold aura lay like a shroud over his soul as he

thought of the man he had come to kill. There rose in his mind a picture of another coastal town much like this, but one lit by the red flames of its own destruction; of squat figures leaping and blaspheming to the sullen roar of the cannonade; and of seas torn by winds and the sheet lightning of an outraged heaven. The bleak seascape faded out of existence for an instant as he saw again the smoke, flame, and mindless chaos, shapes dangling from yard-arms, writhing bodies hurtling from a plank laid over a rail—and the girlish form whose lips framed frenzied pleas as muscular arms pulled her to the bloodstained deck—

His face twisted by hate, Solomon Kane raised a clenched fist to the brooding sky. The muscles at the side of his neck corded in the violence of his passion.

"Hear me, God," he said in a terrible voice. "The blue flame of vengeance burns in my heart by night and by day, allowing me no rest. It must be quenched in blood, in the blood of that filth known to men as George Banway. I shall slay this man ere dawn's light or, by the hounds of hate, may Satan carry me down to the twinkling floors of Hell. Upon my soul be it!"

A gull's lonely cry answered him and the wind moaned sadly. The fires that had sprung into Kane's eyes flickered down to a steady pulse. His face relaxed into its usual calm exterior. As the light began to fade, he made his way down the steep hillside and out across the wasteland towards the manor house now hidden by the gathering mist.

2. The Man Who Came in the Night

Slowly Jack Hollinster drifted back to consciousness. A red glow was in his eyes and his head throbbed agonizingly. He shut them against the glare, hoping to ease the pain, but the radiance beat through his lids mercilessly. Where was he? What had happened? A medley of laughing, cursing voices bore in upon his

ears. Raising his head, he again opened his eyes. The memory of the treachery suddenly returned: he was fully awake.

Bound hand and foot, he was lying on the floor of a vast cellar piled high with casks and barrels. The lofty ceiling was braced with massive, smoke-begrimed beams, from one of which hung the lanthorn that only partially illumined the room. There was a flight of broad stone stairs at one end; at the other, a barred archway gave onto darkness.

Many men were in the cellar. Jack saw the mocking face of Banway, the goatlike traitor Sam's drink-flushed countenance, and the inscrutable masks of the two mulattoes who were Sir George's only servants. The rest—some ten or twelve men—he did not know, but recognized for what they were.

Pirates! So his suspicions about Banway's nocturnal activities had been right after all! No honest seamen, these, with their tarry breeks and silken shirts. They wore no stockings, yet many had shoes of the finest hand-tooled leather. Costly rings glittered on their stubby fingers; gems, tied with bits of bright-colored ribbon, dangled from their ear rings. There was not a sailorman's dagger among them, only elaborately fashioned Spanish cutlasses and jewel-crusted poniards from Italy. Their grotesque clothing, scarred faces, and wild bearing stamped them with the mark of the vulture's trade.

A man who was casting dice beside Sir George turned toward the captive. "Ho, George, our prey wakes!" he shouted jeeringly. "By Zeus, Sam, I thought you'd give him his resting dose, but he's a thicker pate than I imagined."

The pirate crew ceased their gaming and drinking to stare curiously or mockingly at the youth. Sir George's saturnine face darkened as he walked over to him. Holding his left arm out so that the bandage could be seen through the ruffled silk, he smiled thinly. The lanthorn-light shone on his silky hair.

"You spoke truth, Hollinster, when you said no magistrate should intervene at our next meeting. Only now, methinks, t'is your cursed hide that shall suffer for what you did to me today."

"Jack!"

The sudden, agonized voice cut deeper than Banway's taunt. His heart pounded violently as he twisted around to see a girl, tied to a ring in an oaken support, kneeling on the floor nearby. She was straining toward him, her face white and eyes wide with fear. Her golden hair was tangled and her dress torn—

"Mary! Oh my God!" he cried out in anguish. A wave of brutal laughter drowned his words.

"Drink a health to the loving pair," roared a tall man with a cocked hat and a hooklike nose. He lifted a brimming mug. "Let's drink to the lovers, lads! Meseemeth he dislikes our company. Wouldst rather be alone with the saucy wench, eh, boy?"

"You scum, you gutter swill," Jack raved, wrenching at his bonds while Banway looked on, amused. "Gods, if my arms were but free! Loose me, if any of you have a drop of manhood between you and I'll be at your throats with my bare hands!"

Banway's lips drew back in a snarl. "You waste your breath, you stupid fool. Be silent! Not this time do I face you with naked blade. I should have blasted you on the spot that night you dared strike me at the inn, but that would have given my secret away. So, perforce, I had to submit to a duel with you and again you hurt me. But the third time pays for all, Hollinster: tonight I shall finish what you started."

His hand closed on Hollinster's shirt and he bent his face close. "You don't know who I really am, do you? If you did, you would have fled this place long ago and gladly left the girl for me. But because you chose to meddle, you're going to die the way wild beasts die—beneath fang and claw. The sea hides better bodies than yours and shall conceal many more after your

bones have turned to slime. As for her—," he nodded toward the girl, "she'll abide with me in this house awhile. I'll wager she'll be a lithesome mount to ride. Then, when I've wearied of her . . ."

"Hadst better be, Fish Hawk, by the time I return," broke in the man with the cocked hat sourly. "If I have to take clay out this trip—which, Satan knoweth, is a plaguey cargo—I must have a fairer passenger next time. A bargain, Sir Aristocrat?"

Sir George eyed him narrowly. "So be it, Hardraker. In two months she's yours, unless she dies on me aforetime. But, Jonas," he added in a steely voice, "anger me not. I've changed since the old days with the Brotherhood. I've learned the secrets of the spheres—secrets that are mine alone—that may some day make me master of all England."

"No good'll come of your mixing with magic, Fish Hawk," Hardraker replied with just the hint of a quiver in his voice. "Having us steal them books and those bottles and bringing you that, that . . ." He nodded toward the archway. Some of the men stirred uneasily. Eyes flashed and one or two shaggy heads bobbed in assent.

"It's one thing to rob the dead, but quite another to have dealing with them as you do," he finished lamely, lapsing into silence while Banway continued to stare at him as if he were just seeing the man for the first time. The rest resumed their former activities, though with noticeably lesser enthusiasm.

Jack's mind was whirling from what he had heard. He turned toward the girl.

"Mary, lass, how did they get you here?"

"A man brought a missal," she whimpered. "It had a message written in it in a hand much like yours with your name signed. He told me you'd been hurt near the beacon and asked me come with him. But as we passed this house Sir George had his men seize me and bring me down here."

"As I told 'e, maaster!" Sam mumbled drunkenly. "I told 'e she was here, di'n't I? Trust ole Sam to trick 'em. 'E come along like a lamb, boys. Thought 'e'd just have the Sair Garge to deal wi'. Oh, that were a rare trick—an' a rare fool 'e were too!"

"Belay!" spoke up a one-armed man with sad eyes who was evidently the first mate. "T'is perilous enough puttin' in this way to get rid o' the loot we takes and bring them ungodly things the Fish Hawk wants. What if the girl escapes and tips 'em to the lay? It'ud be Gallowsgate for us all."

Sir George laughed. "Be at ease, Allardine. Wast ever a melancholy chap even when you sailed for me. No one knows they've come here; no one ever will. The villagers will think they eloped: I've heard his father is against the match. They'll never be seen on this earth again. Besides, I can summon powers undreamt of should any man jack among them suspect and come ferreting about."

"Mayhap. But I'll feel safer wi' these waters and this house far behind. The day o' the Brotherhood is passin' in these climes. Best the Caribs for us. Here I feel evil creepin' through my bones. Death's a'hoverin' over all of us with his black wings a'flappin' and even your sorceries mayn't keep him from us . . ."

Hardraker slammed his mug down, strode swiftly over to the mate, and sent him reeling across the room with a mighty blow of his fist. "That's ill talk, man! Execution Dock—that's all we got to fear and we're well to windward of *that*."

He pointed at Banway. "T'is him what has to fear. Taking chances with them bods and those spirits. Hast forgotten you've a human wolf on your trail, Sir Aristocrat? Hast forgotten the word he sent you nigh two years ago after you thought you killed him?"

Sir George paled slightly. He glanced nervously from Hardraker to the puzzled Hollinster and back again. The wild blood

which the pirate captain's words had stirred threatened momentarily to burst through his civilized veneer.

"Hardraker, you try my patience! All of you oafs, listen to me. I fear nothing, do you understand; nothing. Have I not proved it before? Wouldst die along with the youth, Jonas? Then you had better curb that wagging tongue. The trail's too long, I tell you. It's too long and too faint even for . . ."

A long shadow fell across him, causing him to whirl around. His face turned white; his mouth hung open. The others turned and all eyes sought the stairway. No one had heard the door open or shut, but there on the stairs stood a tall man, clad all in black. His eyes shone like burning coals beneath heavy brows. He held a cocked pistol in each hand.

"Solomon Kane!" Allardine gasped.

3. Into the Vault

"Move not, George Banway," Kane said tonelessly. "Nor you, Jonas Hardraker. All of you, keep your hands in front of you. Let no man so much as think of touching his sword or musket if he wishes to live." He came down the stairs slowly into the light.

"Kane! I knew it," muttered the first mate. "Death's in the air when he's about. He comes like a shadow and slays like a ghost. Oh, the Indians of the New Lands are naught to him in subtlety . . ."

The Puritan's sombre gaze chilled him into silence. "You remember me of old, do you not, Ben Allardine? You knew me before the Brotherhood of Buccaneers turned into a cut-throat pack under the Fish Hawk. But how many of you others remember *those* days? As for my subtlety—Darien schools one well in the art of stealth so that I had no difficulty slipping past the guards in the fog. In sooth, your true pirate is a very hog: stupid

and quite careless as was the man at the top of the stairs. But he'll make no more such mistakes, I trow."

Sir George had recovered his composure somewhat by this time. He stepped forward cautiously, keeping an eye on the long barrel of Kane's pistol which followed his every move. He spoke calmly, almost conversationally.

"What do you want here, Sir? Why have you entered my house in such a fashion?"

Concentrated hate flamed in the Puritan's eyes and, even more disturbing, a relentless bloodlust that was sure of satisfaction.

"To kill you, George Banway." Passion hummed at the back of his level voice.

"Now hearken to me. You know well why I've hunted you from the Main to Portugal and from Portugal to England. Two years ago you attacked a ship in the Tortugas: the 'Flying Heart' by name. I was on that ship, accompanying a young girl, the daughter of—never mind the name—to Dover. Her father was a very dear friend of mine; many a time in byegone years had I dandled his child upon my knee. Your men took our ship and mercilessly butchered every man aboard. T'was your own mate who struck me down from behind while I was trying to cut my way to your murdering throat. I fell with three feet of his steel in me, but before I lost consciousness I saw what you and your crew did to the women. Death was kinder to that girl than you were. When I came to my senses the next morning I found her torn body among the dead and though the deck was awash and I half dead from fever and loss of blood I vowed I would track you even to the Pit's entrance if need be to take vengeance."

Kane sighed. "It hath been a long trail to follow. I've journeyed among godless peoples, through deserted villages that bore the sign of your coming. But now the hunt is over. You've an

added mark against you also for when the girl's father learned of the massacre and her fate he went mad and is in such a state to this day. He had no sons, no one to avenge her—"

"Except you, Sir Galahad?" Banway sneered.

"Yes, I, you damned whoreson!" The unexpected crash of Kane's oath shattered the silence. For an instant the Puritan lost his iron control and flamed into a withering blast of fury. In that instant Hardraker acted. He snatched up a pistol from a table and, scarcely taking time to aim, pulled the trigger.

The ball grazed Kane's cheek and ricocheted off the wall with an angry whine. Simultaneously the pistol in his left hand roared its reply of death. Hardraker's head snapped back. Blood spurted from the hole in the center of his forehead. He fell against the table, upsetting it. His blood mixed with the spilt wine on the floor.

The other black muzzle centered on Banway's heart.

"You deserve a crueler death," he said as his finger tightened on the trigger.

What he saw happen next made Jack Hollinster doubt his very senses. Stepping back, Sir George drew a triangle in front of him with his forefinger. The chamber darkened and a soft buzzing sounded even before the figure was completed. The Puritan's arm was savagely jerked up into the air as if seized in an invisible grasp. The pistol, torn from his hand, landed on the floor some distance away. All of the pirates were frozen in a fear-stricken tableau, but not so Kane. He sprang forward with the swiftness of a wolf, the long steel finger of his dirk glimmering in the murky light.

"Norte nulada, lameshta." Banway's fingers wove a constantly intertwining pattern.

The droning grew louder, angrier. Kane was halted in mid-rush, bent double with an agonized expulsion of breath, and

hurled backward to crash against the steps. His head cracked audibly on the stone. As his vision blurred and whips of fire coiled round his brain, he seemed to glimpse a bluish, wraithlike Shape leaning over him. Then Banway was slapping him in the face with stinging blows.

"Come on, Broadbrim! Wake up or must I have consciousness beaten back into you?" He kicked him viciously in the side.

Kane's eyes flicked open and the men who were tying him fell back before his baleful gaze.

" 'E's got the look o' Satan about 'im. Gaw', look at 'is eyes!"

"Best thrust him in the brisket, Banway," advised Allardine. "Every moment he breathes is a moment lost to us. I remember hearin' a man once tell how Kane lay all but dead on the rack in the Spanish dungeons, yet when they came to cart his body off for burnin' he rose up from the heap o' corpses and snapped the Inquisitor's neck. Kill him now, I say. Let us leave this accursed place for cleaner waters. Hardraker's already dead and more may go into the dark before this man's soul has passed the Judge's seat."

Sir George's face was flushed with triumph. None of the uncouth seamen ventured to meet his wild eyes just as they shunned the Puritan's. He studied each face carefully before he spoke.

"The plans are changed, Allardine. You're in command now. You can stay here or you can go—as you choose. I've decided to keep Hollinster with me for awhile so that he may see with what festive sport I entertain my female guests."

He motioned curtly to his servants who pulled Kane roughly to his feet and dragged him over to the arched portal. The bars of its gate glistened in the guttering lamp light. The nobleman picked up a stout length of wood from among the chests, tied

an oil-soaked rag around it, and lit it. His face was like a Mandarin's death mask in the gloom.

"Come with me or leave, Allardine: it matters naught to me. Only remember what you've seen here tonight and know that I am your master in all things. Each day while you reap paltry plunder I shall be growing in the mantic arts. Therefore, think not of treachery or, by the Cevinnes, I will rend you from wherever I chance to be. Take the girl up to my chamber and lock her in—and touch not a hair on her head, any of you. Leave Hollinster down here: I want him to hear Kane's death cries—if the Puritan has any throat left to scream with."

The first mate signed for two of his men to carry the body of their former captain from the cellar.

"I'll not truck wi' this devil's work, Fish Hawk. Come on, lads; we got our due. We'll be back in two months and that'll be none too soon."

Sir George watched them in contemptuous silence as they filed up the stairs, taking the struggling girl with them. No one turned back to look upon the small group they left behind.

Jack called out to Mary, but the spirit had gone out of his voice. His heart was like a dead limp thing within him as he thought of what lay ahead for them all at the hands of this warlock. There flashed into his mind the memory of the man that had been found, frightfully mangled, in Banway's yard one winter morning. The body had been almost torn in half and great gouts of frozen blood stained the snow for many feet around. When questioned, the aristocrat said his dogs had attacked the poacher, but many were the tongues in the village to point out how curious it was that Sir George never purchased meat for these hounds, how odd it was that the beasts had never been seen or heard. The nobleman's influence had kept these mutterings just mutterings.

Banway unlocked the gate and led the way down a long tunnel-like corridor. His torch cast shadows that capered like antic gnomes upon the wall. Their footsteps echoed hollowly. Feigning a slight unsteadiness, Kane made no move to break free. He had tested his bonds as they entered the tunnel and found them to be strong and well tied. The man on his left kept a pistol thrust against his temple: they were taking no chances. The Puritan's anger still boiled deep, but uppermost in his mind now was the frantic need for destroying Banway before he should harm the helpless pair.

They came to the end of the tunnel where a heavy grate was set in the floor. Handing the pistol to Sir George the servant on the left went over and lifted it out. A dank miasma and a soft rustling floated up out of the hole.

"These are my vaults, Kane," said Banway in a quiet voice. "Hast heard of the 'Low Dungeon with the Rats'? A tunnel leads from them out to the sea. When the tide is full, as it is now, I can flood the whole chamber just by opening the seaward door. Ah, but drowning is not the death I have planned for you."

He paused to see what effect his words were having, but Kane's eyes were pools of dark fire.

"I intended to put Hollinster down there, though methinks he would have put on but a poor show with his puny arms. You are fairer game, equal to your doom. Naytheless, no matter how strong you may be, there is no escaping. Be thankful I did not blot you out of existence with the Spell of the Worm. I offer you a fighting man's death: in this regard I have mercy."

He gestured with the pistol and the other mulatto forced Kane over to the yawning aperture. A sickening fish odor mingled with smell of decaying seaweed welled up from the blackness. Somewhere far off a faint booming could be heard.

"Loose him." Sir George's voice was tinged by a fear that be-

lied his confidence and bravado. The servant drew a knife and cut the ropes. As Kane began massaging his aching arms to restore circulation, the aristocrat suddenly cast the torch into the chamber below. Something scuttled back into the darkness.

"'*Fiat lux.*' Any last words, Broadbrim?"

"Yes, offal of Purgatory," Kane replied. "You think to rid yourself of me by doing this, but know that I have vowed to kill you before cockscrow and I shall keep that pledge though I be thrice cursed and triply damned. You are a stench in the nostrils of God, a black smirch on the books of men. Take heed, for your life is slowly sifting away with each grain in the hour-glass."

"Push him in!" snarled Banway. The hand that held the pistol was trembling.

The servant gave a shove and Kane fell through the hole, landing catlike on his hands and feet. He rose and gazed up at the faces framed in the circular opening. Sir George no longer smiled.

"Think of the wench, Kane; mayhap she will help you to die well. And think of the other wench too."

The grate clanged down into place over the opening. A broad flagstone was laid on top of that, leaving Solomon in the chill dankness with his hate.

4. Sea Change

He was not alone. A man was watching him from beyond the small circle of light cast by the torch. He was taller than the Puritan by a head and incredibly gaunt. His skin had that sickly unborn pallor of those who have been confined in the dark too long. There was not a trace of hair anywhere on his naked body. His arms were unnaturally long, possessing ropelike muscles that gave indication of great strength despite his skeletal thinness. From the look in the man's eyes, Kane judged that he must be half mad.

The two studied each other for a time before Kane took in the rest of his surroundings. The chamber was long and rather low. A forest of thick pillars supported the vaulted ceiling. The floor was nearly hidden under mounds of ooze and shallow patches of water in which seaweed and the half-eaten bodies of many fish floated. The stale air reeked of the nauseating musk of the sea. A rusty metal door of large proportions was recessed deeply in the wall opposite, behind which he fancied he heard a distant thundering. Then his eyes shot back to the man who started to speak.

"Aye, another life. Woe piled on woe." The quality of his voice shocked the Puritan. He had great difficulty in forming the words as if his throat was long unused to the speech of men. They were hideously distorted, like the words that might rise from the decaying lips of mariners buried beneath the muck on the ocean floor.

Kane picked the torch up and stuck the shaft in the bracket of a nearby pillar. He walked back toward his companion, noting with revulsion his long nails and the filth that caked his serpentlike hide.

"Who are you? What have you to do with the master of this place?"

"What doth it matter to you?" the other replied with a groan. For the first time Kane saw the tears that were rolling down his cheeks. But any pity the Puritan might have had for this suffering wretch was killed by the unholy hunger and evil longing that swam in his eyes.

His thick, bubbly voice went on. "He put me down here many years ago, it seemeth. I cannot remember how long it has been. I only remember that I was an outcast in the Northern Isles—hated, shunned, and feared—until his men came and took me away. He knew what I was and did not fear me . . .

"But have done with your questions! I care not for memory:

t'is a cursed loathly thing that haunts me waking and sleeping. Mine is not a barren lot. He feeds me well, you see, for anything that enters these vaults is my prey. That is the way it is, stranger. Behold."

A taloned forefinger pointed to the massive door which was slowly sliding upward. Sea water gushed through the widening opening in a foaming wave that swept up to Kane's feet and then receded. He stood awestruck for a moment before a guttural croak brought him round to a horrifying sight.

The dweller of the vaults was changing shape before him. His face had lengthened and flattened and his eyes bulged like dead pearls. Two ragged holes marked the place where his nose had been. A flap at each side of his neck pulsed rhythmically. His skin was assuming a greenish hue while thick scales overspread it. He lifted one hand and the Puritan saw the webbing between the fingers. He shambled with an odd limping gait into the light. The gash of a mouth opened to reveal needlelike fangs that glistened.

" 'a wter. Shange, t'comes," gurgled from the puffed throat.

"Satan's work!" Kane gasped, backing away. The water frothed whitely among the pillars and an ever increasing roar filled the chamber. The creature turned and dove into the water, revealing for an instant the fins that jutted from his back. So this was the doom Banway had spoken of! Kane had heard of such beings before: sea changelings, men who turned into things less than human when the tide ran and they were near the water.

An eddy tugged at his legs as the water rose to his knees. There was no sign of the changeling in the swiftly rising flood. Kane began to wade toward the flickering torch which the spray threatened to extinguish.

A scaled body suddenly erupted from the water in front of him. Long arms reached toward him and talons flexed to sink

into flesh. The face was a mocking travesty of its former humanity. Only the eyes glowed with the same hunger. He hurled himself out of the way, but the fish-man moved even more quickly, leaping after him and flailing out with its scything claws. A forearm struck Kane on the side of the neck, knocking his feet from under him. He fell backward and the cold water closed over his head.

As he struggled to rise, a heavy body pressed down upon him. Talons sank deep into his breast. The changeling grabbed at his long hair with its other hand and dragged his head beneath the water. Choking for breath, Kane exploded into furious activity. He lashed out with his feet and fists and felt the monster's grip relax before his hammerlike blows. He floundered away to lurch to his feet. Blood dripped from his torn hand.

Water washed against his waist as he wallowed toward the torch—his last hope. His fingers closed round the hard wood and he jerked it out of the holder. A wild splashing sounded directly behind him. Whirling, he brought the brand whistling around with all the force he could muster. The flaming end cracked against the fish-man's skull. Its eyes glimmered whitely with pain as it reeled backward. Without giving the creature a chance to escape into the water, Kane swung the torch like a madman; he drove it before him under a hail of smashing blows to its head and side. Wood thudded savagely against leathery flesh. Sparks showered and flame laced the changeling's hide. But then the Puritan's foot slipped on the mud. He fell forward and the torch flew from his grasp, winking out of existence.

An arm coiled round his neck, pulling him under. His own fingers sought and found the throbbing gill slits. He began to tear even as the beast was tearing at him. Locked in their deathly embrace they crashed against the pillars, but neither felt this. It was a nightmare battle of snapping fangs and inhuman pain,

barbaric and to the death. The Puritan, realizing that his strength was fast waning, sent the last of his energy flowing into his powerful fingers. His lips split in a ghastly grin of superhuman effort. A blinding light flashed before his eyes and his heart thundered deafeningly beneath the water. His mouth opened to scream his defiance of Satan's minions . . .

He found himself treading the water weakly, sucking in great gasping breaths of air. His muscles were numbed by the cold water. A limp body floating beside him nudged him. Kane was mildly surprised to find his fingers still sunk in the stringy neck. He pulled them loose and pushed the corpse away from him in disgust. Every move he made caused him excruciating pain, but he knew that he had to get out before he drowned.

The water had risen above the top of the sea door and it was strangely quiet in the vaults now that the roaring had subsided. All that could be heard was the slapping of tiny waves against the walls. Nevertheless, the swift current told him that the sea was pouring in as fast as it had been and was rapidly nearing the domed ceiling.

He swam off among the pillars, hurriedly groping for the grate that marked his only means of escape. After what seemed like centuries, his fingers caught hold of the iron bars. He uttered a silent prayer and pushed upward with a volcanic surge of energy. His muscles knotted with the effort as he trod the water furiously. Water poured into his mouth, making him cough. But the grate moved upward bit by bit until he was able to slide his fingers between the rough metal and the rim of the opening. He heaved with a final burst of power and the grate and the flagstone fell back with a loud crash. Kane hauled himself out of the whirlpooling darkness to lay on the floor like a sodden dead thing.

5. The Quenching of the Flame

George Banway let the curtain fall and turned away from the window. He was rapt in thought for a moment as he gazed at the age-stained wainscotting, the funereal hangings, and the dust-filmed table on which the ponderous astrolabe stood. One whole wall was lined with battered books of all shapes and sizes. The dry odor of the years filled the room like a pungent incense. Removing his coat, he started to unbutton his shirt angrily.

"They're going, the pack of cowards!" he said to the girl who lay on the couch before him. "They're going because they cannot understand what I've done and hence fear me. Soon, ah, soon England will be mine for the taking. Now that I've gotten that black hunter off my trail, there's naught for me to fear—either from demons or from men."

He laughed as he poured himself a goblet of wine.

"The look on Galahad's face when I put down in the hole—he actually had the gall to threaten me. Give us a kiss for him, girl; give us a kiss for your boy and your rescuer."

He bent toward her and his lips pressed brutally upon hers. She tried to twist her head away, but he held her in an iron grip. When he lifted his head, there was blood on his lips.

"By God, you're a fierce one, you hussy! I'll tame you though —*now!*"

He picked her up and rushed over to the slab of milk-white marble that stood in the center of the chamber. Star-shaped candlesticks containing long scarlet tapers had been placed at each corner. He laid her on the purple velvet cloth that covered the block's surface.

"This room is also my chapel, wench, and this is my altar which no hammer has ever touched. Hast heard of the Black Venus? No, I suppose not. Well, know then that whosoever takes

a girl's maidenhood on this altar and offers the act to the *Nigra Mulier* receives sorcerous powers threefold."

He placed a missal-like volume trimmed with gold on the altar and turned the pages rapidly. Mary Garvin shuddered, closing her eyes in horror when she saw a picture of an obscenely fat witch posturing brazenly before the leering Master of the Sabbat.

Sweat beaded the nobleman's forehead as he lit the candles and the silver lamp which bore the Hydra's sigil. When he finished, he took his shirt off. His hairy chest was criss-crossed with the scars of many a fight; on his left breast was branded the fateful sign of the cloven hoof. Mary's heart sank. She wept bitterly.

Scarcely heeding her, Banway raised his arms and intoned solemnly. *"Infames amores incubi succubique veniunt accepti tibi, Nigra Mulier. Sic quoque meus amor veniat."*

One hand closed over her mouth before she could scream while the other grabbed the front of her dress and ripped it down to her waist.

"Meus amor . . ." He stooped toward her, his eyes fierce slits of lust.

"Banway!"

The shout came like the crack of a pistol in the silence. He stiffened and wheeled around, but was unable to collect himself for a second. Jack Hollinster stood in the doorway, a heavy broadsword in his hand. The bloody form of one of the servants sprawled at his feet. His face was a terrifying sight, but he made no move to enter the room.

"Hollinster! How did you get out of the cellar? Do you think to thwart me even now? Fool, I'll have your heart for this."

He raised his hand and inscribed a circle.

"Lameshta."

The swordblade exploded into glowing fragments. The useless hilt dropped to the carpet from the youth's numbed hand.

Banway came closer, smiling in spite of his anger.

Mary screamed. "Run, Jack! He'll kill you . . ."

"Your limbs are bound, you may not move or stir," the warlock chanted in a sing-song voice. Fear sprang into Jack's eyes as he tried to lift his arm and found he could not.

"Now, Hollinster, die like a dog in front of your girl . . ."

Solomon Kane stepped through the doorway past the paralyzed youth. His garments were in tatters and stained a deep ruby red; his iron-gray hair was matted to his forehead with drying blood. But his eyes burned with the same cold light they had held before.

"Kane!" Banway gasped in a choked whisper. "No, it . . ."

There was a sudden blinding flurry of light and then Sir George Banway lay at the Puritan's feet, twitching a little. Saliva dribbled from his gaping mouth; only a slight trickle of blood seeped from his left eye. A blue flame seemed to play about the dead man's head for an instant before it vanished.

"Through the eyeball and into the brain," Kane said moodily, wiping his rapier blade on a tapestry. "He merited not a quick and easy death. My heart lies heavy within me for giving him such."

He looked up to see Jack, now uncharmed, freeing the weeping girl and calming her as he wrapped his coat about her. The room was strangely chill and the house creaked around them as they made their way down the great central staircase, past the cellar entrance and the other dead mulatto, and out the front door into the crisp air and the wholesome night.

They paused in the yard before the ominously bulking house. A crescent moon shone frostily through the bluish mist veil, revealing the dark bent ghosts of trees and hedges. Each was lost in his own thoughts until the Puritan spoke at last.

"He sailed an ocean of blood, lad, and tampered with vile un-

earthly things. God grant death and destruction follow him to Hell for all eternity. Crimson is his ruin; black be his doom!"

His sombre mood passed as quickly as it had come. He smiled tenderly at the couple. When he put his hands on Jack's shoulders, the youth felt their power.

"Soon your friends will be about you, Jack, and the memories of this house shall be forgotten. Out of travail cometh strength, peace, and happiness. Mayhap your paths will run the straighter for this night of horror."

The girl clutched at his hand. "We know not how to thank you . . ."

"Thou hast thanked me enough already, little one," Solomon replied in his deeply vibrant voice. "T'is enough to see you well and delivered from evil. May you thrive to wed and bear strong sons and rosy daughters."

"But, Sir, who are you? What do you seek?"

A mystic look flashed into the Puritan's eyes; his voice held just a hint of sadness. "I am but a landless wanderer, one time of Devon. Out of the sunset I have come and into the sunrise must I go—where ever the Lord doth guide my feet, whether along fair ways or foul. Perhaps I seek my soul's salvation, perhaps not. I came here following a trail of vengeance. Now I must leave you for the dawn is not far off and I fain would not have it find me idle. Aye, my feet grow weary of wandering and age comes on apace, yet while men are persecuted and women wronged, while the weak things of the earth suffer, there can be no rest for me beneath the blue skies, nor peace at any bed or board. Fare thee well."

"Stay!" Jack called out, his throat aching oddly.

"Oh, please wait awhile, Sir!" cried Mary.

But the tall figure had vanished in the darkness and the only sound to be heard was the pattering of the mist droplets on the dead leaves.

JESSE STUART (1907-) was born and has lived all his life in or near W-Hollow, Kentucky. He is of Scottish-English descent, and is today perhaps America's best regional writer. He is devoted to his region and the people of that land, and his books are permeated with his affection for them. In 1934 he startled the literary world with his book of 703 poems, *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow,* many of which were written on scraps of paper and even on leaves while he worked on his father's farm. This was followed by a book of short stories, *Head o' W-Hollow.* In 1937 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in the following year he published his autobiography, *Beyond Dark Hills.* His first novel, *Trees of Heaven,* came in 1940, after which books for old and young came with fair frequency, including *Men of the Mountains, Taps for Private Tussie* (a Book-of-the-Month Club selection), *Mongrel Mettle, Album of Destiny, Foretaste of Glory, Tales from the Plum Grove Hills, The Thread That Runs So True* (a second volume of autobiography), *Hie to the Hunters, Clearing in the Sky, Kentucky Is My Land,* and many others. His most recent works are *God's Oddling, The Year of My Rebirth, Hold April,* and *The Jesse Stuart Reader*—these are also among his best books.

Crabgrass

JESSE STUART

I was taking down a clothesline wire that had rusted and replacing it with one that wouldn't rust when I heard footsteps coming around the house. I turned to look and there was Pa.

"Pa!" I said, tightening my grip on the hatchet-handle.

Pa laughed in his old familiar way. "What's the matter with you, Shan? Aren't you glad to see me? You act like you don't know me!"

"Sure, I know you," I told him as he came closer.

There he stood dressed in his brown suit, white shirt, and polkadot bow tie. But time was the same. The house, the back yard, the stream flowing under the house and the surrounding hills covered with dogwood and redbud had not changed.

"I must be dreaming," I said.

"Wake up, Shan," he said. "Don't get old before your time! Wake up, boy, and let's laugh like we used to."

"But somehow I can't understand," I said. "Is that really you, Pa? Am I seeing and hearing you?"

"Sure you are, my boy," he replied with words quicker than the wind that rustled the dogwood leaves on the tree above us. "Don't let my little visit upset you. If I seem a little too happy remember it's the way I've always felt after I've been away on a visit and got back home to my valley."

Then he laughed again and slapped his long thin calloused hands on his sharp creased pant legs. "You ought to know your own father," he said, his voice louder than the murmur of summer wind in the dogwood leaves.

Same old Pa, I thought. Can't be away anytime he doesn't worry about his home and valley. Tools can't be left out. Each tool must have a place. Each animal must have a home inside the barn away from the icy winds and winter snows. Every living thing must have a home. It must be fed regularly, too.

"Come to think about it," I spoke too quickly, "that ditch above the barn has filled up and the surface water has rotted the ends of the barn siding. And the barn roof sags and leaks—"

The smile left his red clean-shaven face but his blue eyes still looked searchingly at me.

"Where's the family?" he asked.

"At Blakesburg," I replied. "You should have met the car coming up the road!"

"The old black one?" he asked.

"No, sand-colored," I corrected him. "It's been quite awhile since we had a black car."

"Oh, that's right," he said. "I should have known that."

He fidgeted around, putting his hands in his pockets and taking them out again. He took a step forward and then turned around. He was always as restless as an impatient high-spirited horse lined up for a race.

"Are you treating your Deanems all right?" he asked chuckling.

"Sure am," I said.

But that was Pa all right. He had always liked to tease.

"Say, Shan, what about old Dinah?"

"Dinah?" I said. "First time I've heard that mule mentioned in a long time. You remember she didn't live long after Old Dick died. We retired her on the green pasture. She died in three months. She grieved herself to death!"

"Oh, yes, I remember," he said. "I wondered if you'd remember!"

"Don't you remember her bones were picked clean by the scavengers before we found her," I asked him. "And don't you remember a forest fire got into our pasture, raced over the brown autumn grass and burned her bones!"

"But fire, Shan," he said, "you know how I fit fire and copperhead snakes with my little gooseneck hoe! Have you forgot that?"

I had neglected his land. I had not taken care of the farm like he had before he went away. He watched about forest fires, waterholes in the pastures, brush growing in fencerows and along the banks of the creek that flowed past his meadows. He in-

spected the roofs for leaks in all of his buildings before winter and cleaned the ditches.

He'd never let but one fire get on his fifty acres as long as he owned them. Lightning set that fire in three places but he soon reached these fires and put them out before each one got a head start.

"Watch fire while I'm away, Shan," he warned me. "You can't have me always to take the lead running to a fire with my little gooseneck hoe across my shoulder. I'm getting to be an old man you know! I can't run like a turkey, for my old ticker won't let me."

I nodded to him that I would.

"And something else I want to mention to you," he talked on, his face serious as he pointed his skinny index finger at me, "Have you watched the tires on the joltwagon wheels and when have you put axle grease in the hubs? Have you put the wagon wheels in water to soak the rims and spokes and tighten the tires?"

"Pa, what are you talking about?" I asked him. "We use the tractor and the tractor wagon now."

Pa didn't answer me. Something was troubling him now. He wasn't as happy as he'd been when he first walked around the house. But it was like him to change his mood as suddenly as a wind can reverse itself and blow back the way it came. His mood had lined his red face with a serious expression.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "What's gone wrong now?"

"The Valley," he said. "My tracks have barely washed away from the fields and The Valley is neglected! Creek banks need scythin' and the brush is crowdin' in. Son, you're too young to let the brush whip you."

"I know I am," I said apologetically.

Words spoken in his familiar voice always made me think.

And after each little visit he had ever taken he came back finding fault when the little jobs had been neglected. This trip was no different from the rest. He had always been like this and he would never change.

While there was silence between us, I thought of the time once when he told me that he'd dug up so much crabgrass from corn and tobacco with his little gooseneck hoe that when he departed from this life and was planted at Plum Grove, if we let that stuff grow over him he would grow restless in his grave. And, if there was a way he would get out of his grave.

He requested that I keep the crabgrass from his grave and that I use his little gooseneck hoe, as long as it lasted, to dig this grass up. I promised him that I would. And a promise to him, living or dead, was one I'd better keep. If any man could ever return from that silent homeland where Plum Grove men were laid, he would be that man.

"Well, I must be leavin' you, Shan," he said. "I want to get up on the hill and see the place—the barn and garden—oh, yes, I'm about to forget—what about my bull?"

"Which one?" I asked.

"You know—Old Boss, the last one and the best one," he replied instantly.

"Old Boss," I said. "Pa, what's between us?"

"Oh, maybe a little time," he said. "A little time—that's all. A little time can change everything. Let a man be gone—yes, even a little while and his wife and dog won't know him. A man and his bull are forgotten, and his place goes down. Shan, I tell you, you're lettin' this place go to hell."

I stood there beside him as stunned as when he first came around the corner of the house into the backyard in his Sunday Clothes. I was glad to hear the sound of the car pull up in front of the house and slow down for the driveway.

"There they are," I sighed. "Pa, you wanted to see them. They're coming home now."

He didn't seem to hear what I was saying. He had something more on his mind to tell me before he went up on the hill.

"Shan, when have you been to Plum Grove?"

"Well, let me see," I said, putting my hand on my head as I tried to remember.

"I'll tell you," he interrupted me with words that came faster than a mad March wind. "Decoration Day—last May . . ."

"Well, that's . . ."

"Sure it's right," he interrupted. "That place is a wild hurricane of tall grass. I always saw to it that Old Alec cut the grass. My flesh and blood so neglectful, so full of broken promises . . ."

"But, Pa . . ."

"You promised me once," he went on, with his skinny index finger pointed at me.

"Oh, now I see," I said, but he was gone.

"Who were you apologizing to this time?" Deanems asked. She had come through the garage to the back of the house with Janet beside her.

When I looked quickly at Deanems and Janet, time was the present. Pa died in 1954. Deanem's hair was a dark brown then as an October whiteoak leaf. Now that brown was streaked with late October's frosted gray. Janet wasn't the pudgy little girl with the long pigtails and pink cheeks who came running to me for candy. She was tall as her mother now and she had her mother's eyes and hair. She was a sophomore at the University. Now she watched me carefully to see if my necktie was tied properly and if my cigar had a pleasant aroma. If time had reverted to the past, it now jumped back to the present.

"I was talking to Pa," I told Deanems. She gave me an understanding look. "He seems to think I've been neglecting things."

"Well, have you?" Deanems asked.

"Pa reminded me again of the things he told me to do before he went away. He accused me of being asleep when I was never more awake in my life."

"Daddy, are you sure Grandpa was here?" Janet asked.

"As sure as I live and breathe," I replied.

Deanems looked at me knowingly while Janet half-smiled as if she were a little amused by her aging father who wasn't fifty-four yet.

"It isn't hard to believe," Deanems said. "I knew your voice and the other voice sounded so familiar."

"If he wasn't here, then I'm the one who is dead," I said.

"Knowing your father as well as I did, I know he never came to see you without a reason," Deanems said softly. "Did he have one this time?"

"Do I have to answer that?" I asked.

"You could never break a promise with him," she said. "Have you broken one? Did you promise him something this time? Tell me, and maybe I can help you."

"Yes, if you can find Pa's little gooseneck hoe for me," I replied. "I put it away—but I've forgotten where."

Now she understood. But perhaps she had never doubted what I had told her.

CARL JACOBI (1908-) is a native and resident of Minnesota, where he is at present employed as a journalist while he writes in his leisure hours. He was launched on a writing career when he won a short story contest at the University of Minnesota with his fine macabre tale, *Mive.* His short fiction has appeared in *Ghost Stories, MacLean's Magazine, Weird Tales, Wonder Stories, The Toronto Star, Strange Stories,* etc.; the best of his tales have been collected into two volumes—*Revelations in Black* and the forthcoming *Portraits in Moonlight.*

Kincaid's Car

CARL JACOBI

The boxcar which arrived in Bayou City via the Southbound 6:25 that July morning was an oddity. According to the manifest, it contained one hundred wish suppliers—station agent Jeb Collins checked this twice to make sure his bifocals were not playing him tricks—and was consigned to the Standard Chair Factory.

There was no Standard Chair Factory in Bayou City. Twenty years ago the old Latham place had housed for a brief time such a concern. But the company had gone out of business and the house had been abandoned for as long as the station agent could remember.

Collins, however, was not an imaginative man. If the manifest said "chair factory", his not to reason why. He watched the brakeman oil the rusted switch and a moment later saw the car creak slowly down the weed-overgrown spur.

The 6:25 had another observer that morning. Up on Grover's Hill, a half mile south of town, Durgan Kincaid looked through field glasses out across the valley. He was a thin, erect man, with copper-colored hair, and at that hour he had finished milking and had a few moments before starting the rest of his chores. There he could quietly contemplate the vista across the river, of which he never tired. Today, while the approaching train was still a smear of smoke on the horizon, he gazed at the farther shore, the trees all grey and misty in the early light.

Then the train pulled into the station, and he saw the car.

He lowered the binoculars and wiped the lenses with his handkerchief.

At first he thought he had seen an ordinary boxcar. Then, as if viewed through water, it seemed to blur, become silver in color and elongate like a bullet. He thought he saw a bluish aura, like foxfire, hover over it, moving slowly from stem to stern.

Kincaid cased the glasses. Half an hour later he had driven his vintage station wagon to the depot and confronted station agent Collins.

"Circus come to town, Jeb?"

The station agent looked mildly irritated. "Not that I know of."

"What became of that silver car?"

Collins applied a match to his pipe. "I don't know nothin' about a silver car. If you mean the one that come in on the 6:25, it was sided on the old spur."

"The Latham place!" exclaimed Kincaid. "What's it doing there?"

But the station agent shrugged and limped off down the platform. Kincaid stood in puzzled silence, then turned and strode down the abandoned spur. Presently he came upon the car, stopped short and viewed it with disappointment.

It wasn't silver at all, but faded red, with rusty trucks and iron work, a commonplace, swaybacked boxcar. Standing there before the boarded-up windows of the Latham house, it looked strangely lonely and forlorn.

Kincaid approached it slowly. The seal on one of the doors was broken and the door stood slightly open. It wasn't like Collins to overlook such a discrepancy. He moved to the open door, hesitated and then climbed in.

It took a moment for his eyes to accustom themselves to the half light.

The car was divided into two parts. On the right, piled almost ceiling-high, were rows of cartons, each bearing the stenciled legends, FRAGILE, THIS SIDE UP, DO NOT CRUSH.

On the left of the door a six foot square section had been arranged to resemble the corner of a room. An old-fashioned room. Quaint, homelike.

A white flounced curtain draped from a high painted likeness of a window. An oval braided rug covered the floor. Drawn up before a pot-bellied stove was a spindle rocking chair. On the table stood a Rochester lamp and beside it a wicker sewing basket with several black stockings peeping out. A Currier & Ives print hung upon the wall.

But apart from the utter incongruity of its presence here, there was something magic about the room likeness. It carried Kincaid back to his boyhood and his holiday visits to his grandmother's house. He could almost see the Connecticut snow blowing past the window, hear the wood crackling in the stove, see his grandmother rocking slowly to and fro.

He turned and looked at the stacked cartons. One lay at his feet where it had fallen after breaking loose from the steel restraining tape. The box was open and its contents spilled out.

Revealed there in miniature was a duplicate of the old-fashioned room beside him. In amazingly perfect detail he saw a tiny replica of the flounced curtain, the spindle rocking chair, braided rug and Rochester lamp.

Kincaid left the car and headed thoughtfully down the track. He had gone only a few yards when he saw a woman coming toward him. Dressed entirely in lavender with an oversized hat, she might have stepped out of a Godey's print. Her skirts all but swept the ground and her fringed parasol belonged to another age.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "Do you live here?"

"No, I don't," Kincaid replied.

The woman nodded toward the vacant house. "Then can you tell me who handles the leasing of this property? That is, if it's available for rent."

"It's been empty for a long time," Kincaid said somewhat uncertainly. "I believe the South Shore Agency has the listing."

She nodded. "And where will I find the South Shore Agency?"

"On River Street. You can't miss it, Miss . . .?"

"Lavinia Parker. I'm new to Bayou City."

There was something mildly disturbing about the woman. Something alien in the way she twisted her head jerkily and peered at him with fixed lashless eyes.

"Can I drive you into town, Miss Parker?" Kincaid said. "My car is down by the depot."

"Thank you, no." She shook her head. "This house attracts me. I think I'll look about a while."

Driving back to his farm, Kincaid found himself smiling at the woman's out-dated costume and her interest in the tumble-

down mansion. Then his face sobered as his thoughts returned to the boxcar and its strange contents.

On Wednesday morning Miss Lavinia Parker appeared at the office of the South Shore Real Estate Agency. That afternoon three repair men began a hasty refurbishing job on the old Latham mansion. They patched the roof, put new panes in broken windows, straightened the lintels on jammed doors. And on Friday Miss Parker moved in.

Meanwhile, agent Collins had notified the railroad that the Standard Chair Factory, the consignee of car No. 165943, Seal MS 2960, was no longer in existence. That report, plus an irregularity in the car's serial number, resulted in the matter being turned over to Railroad Police.

In due course, Lieutenant Dane Woodrow was dispatched to Bayou City. He was a heavy-set, ruddy man who smoked too many cigars and was completely devoted to detail. After conferring briefly with Collins, he set off down the spur to the boxcar.

The first thing he saw was Miss Lavinia Parker sitting on the Latham veranda, busy with her knitting. Then he saw something else. In the open doorway of the boxcar Durgan Kincaid appeared, a camera under his arm.

"Here, you!" Woodrow cried. "Don't you know you can be arrested for breaking into railroad property?"

Kincaid shrugged. "The door was open," he said. "I haven't taken anything except a few pictures."

With an agility unusual for a man of his bulk, Woodrow vaulted into the car. A moment later he was back at the door, glaring down at Kincaid.

"Have you been living in this car?" he demanded.

"Certainly not," Kincaid said.

"Then what's this furnished room doing here?"

Kincaid shook his head. "I don't know."

Woodrow ducked back into the car again. When he reappeared at the door he looked bewildered.

"I'm damned!" he said slowly.

On the veranda Miss Lavinia Parker put aside her knitting and strode down the steps to the two men.

"Mr. Kincaid," she said, "I think you should give some thought to the suggestion I made to you this morning. That is, since the company this merchandise was sent to is no longer in business, why not offer the officer a price for the contents of the car. Plus demurrage charges, of course."

Lieutenant Woodrow shook his head. "Sorry. The railroad doesn't operate that way. If the consignee no longer is in business, the merchandise goes back to the shipper—at the shipper's expense."

Miss Parker nodded. "I'm sure Mr. Kincaid appreciates that. But it occurred to me—to him, that is—that if there should be any mix-up over the identity of the shipper, Mr. Kincaid could put in a bid, couldn't he?"

Woodrow shrugged. "It's out of my field," he said. "But I'll speak to the freight agent."

Bayou City, steeped in midsummer boredom, awoke abruptly that July day to find itself seized by boredom-inspired curiosity. In one bound the boxcar became the settlement's principal topic of conversation. Like crown fire word of the car raced up one side of River Street and down the other. Rumor mounted rumor and the fact that no one seemed to know anything definite only added to the enigma.

When the story reached Sam Wharton, editor of the *Bayou City Sentinel*—he would have heard of it sooner had he not chosen that particular day to go fishing—he viewed it with a newspaperman's characteristic suspicion. Not discounting its news

value, however, he nosed around, asked a lot of questions and eventually drove out to see Kincaid who, gossip said, knew more about the matter than anyone else.

"Kincaid," he said, accepting gratefully the dipper of cold water from the pump, "what the devil's in that car and what's it doing by the old Latham place?"

Kincaid shrugged. "Why don't you see for yourself?" he said.

"Why? Because it's locked now, that's why, and that fool Collins refuses to open it. And, because that Parker woman—the one who dresses as if this were the year, 1910—sits on her front porch with a shotgun and threatens to shoot anyone who comes near it."

Kincaid chuckled.

"Collins says that car is supposed to contain wish suppliers," Warton continued. "What's a wish supplier?"

"I don't know."

Warton lit a cigar. "This chap who was around here the other day—Woodrow or Woodring—he's from the Railroad Police, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"I'm not sure. He asked a lot of questions."

The editor gave up in despair, but he wasn't through yet by any means. Next day he ran a three column picture of the boxcar on page one of the *Sentinel* under the caption, "Mystery Car," and had the satisfaction of having the story picked up by one of the press associations with a request for "more".

As for Kincaid, he forgot about the matter until he received that odd letter from the assistant freight agent of the railroad company.

> This is to inform you that this office has taken under advisement your bid of one hundred dollars for merchandise

in car No. 165943, now sided at Bayou City. As there are no claims outstanding and as both shipper and consignee remain unidentifiable, this bid has been accepted, and you are hereby authorized to remove the merchandise immediately.

Kincaid read the letter again and frowned. Somehow it didn't ring true. Since when did a railroad company, always a stickler for red tape, accept an unwritten bid that hadn't gone through the regular channels?

He brooded over the matter. He didn't want any of the silly doll houses that were loaded in the car and neither, he felt sure, would anyone else. Moreover he certainly wasn't going to pay a hundred dollars for them simply because of the whim of some senile woman.

Next day, however, he drove to the car—it wasn't locked as Warton had said. The broken seal had been fixed so that casual inspection made it look intact. He entered and stood looking at the cartons. And there in the hot silence of the car he felt his determination slip away and an overwhelming obsession sweep over him. As in a dream he began to carry the cartons out and stack them in neat rows on the Latham house veranda.

Miss Parker viewed his work with silent approval. When the task was completed she scribbled a few words on a sheet of paper and handed it to him. "Take this over to the *Sentinel* office," she said.

"What is it?"

"Notice of an auction. We're going to hold a public sale to dispose of those cartons."

"But we can't sell merchandise we haven't paid for. We can't . . ."

Miss Parker smiled benignly. "Never you mind. I'll take care of the details."

Two mornings later a crowd of several hundred persons

gathered before the Latham house. The temperature was 97, the humidity high and handkerchiefs appeared frequently, mopping perspiring brows. Kincaid watched Lavinia Parker take a position on the veranda steps.

The woman did not begin to speak at once. She drew a lorgnette from her pocket, raised it to her eyes and surveyed the assemblage before her. She moved the glass slowly from left to right, lingering momentarily as it focused on individuals and groups and causing noticeable unease as each person felt himself the object of her inspection.

For the lorgnette was unlike any they had ever seen. Between the two lenses a small prism caught and radiated the sunlight; and circling about the prism, seemingly without support, a series of tiny globes looked like transparent marbles.

Later, when the sale was over and the last of the crowd had gone, Kincaid looked at the money on the veranda table with disbelief.

"They didn't even ask that the cartons be opened . . to see if their contents were damaged or not," he said. "They bought them as if they were hypnotized."

Miss Parker smiled. "Maybe they were. Sometimes people are so curious they want something without knowing what it is." She bent down and lifted a carton to the table. "I saved one for you, Durgan. Take it along home."

If the citizens of Bayou City thought themselves cheated with their strange purchases, they made no complaints. Neither did they discuss them openly. It was as if some strange tabu cloaked the subject. True, the *Sentinel* carried a sly dig at two town bachelors who had bought doll houses. And the press association which had used the original story of the boxcar created a mild sensation when it interviewed a professor of psychology at the state university on the subject. But in newspaper parlance

this was the "silly season", and the story died a natural death.

It was some time before Kincaid opened the carton he had brought home from the auction sale. To his surprise, he found it did not contain a doll house but an object vaguely reminiscent of Miss Parker's lorgnette. There were two tubes between which a prism was encircled by a row of tiny globes. From the under side, two appendages hung down; they looked like roots of a plant but they were formed of a strange metal that was hard to the touch, yet soft and pliable.

A card wired to one corner bore the words: *Negative Receiver. Keep in an open space.*

After a moment's thought, Kincaid picked the thing up and carried it outside. He walked across the furrowed fields until he was some distance from the house and threw it out before him.

He then tidied up his thoughts and turned his attention to a number of tasks he had been putting off for sometime. One morning as he was heading across the yard the banging of the tool-shed door caught his attention. He strode to it and stopped on the threshold.

The interior of the tool shed was filled almost wall to wall with a car he recognized instantly. Ed Hinkle's dilapidated '35 Ford.

For years Hinkle, the town druggist, had been the laughing stock of Bayou City because he persisted in driving that beat-up jalopy. But what was the car doing here?

Out in the yard again, he looked at the ground before the doorway, still moist from the heavy rain of two nights ago. Lips tight, he trailed the tracks down the slope and into the night pasture. The sprawled, motionless bodies of two of his best milch cows loomed up before him.

Kincaid's jaw set hard as he saw the skid marks where the car had struck and done its killing. Then he saw something else.

The tracks began there in mid-career as if the car had descended from the sky.

He retraced his steps, got into the station wagon and headed down the lane. At the junction with the highway he drew up.

A shiny new convertible was barreling down the highway, motor snarling like an angry hornet. When the driver sighted Kincaid he blew a blast from his horn and slewed to a stop.

"Hi, Durgan." It was Ed Hinkle. "Got myself a new chariot."

Kincaid nodded coldly.

"Yep," Hinkle went on, "I made a good deal, and I cashed in on it."

"Funny thing," the man went on, "know that rock-covered hundred and sixty acres of mine out on the Old Timber Road? I was saying only the other day I wished I could get rid of that property and then out of a clear sky Sam Warton made me an offer. I put the money down kerplunk on this car before I could change my mind. It's got power brakes," he said proudly.

"What did you do with your old '35?" Kincaid said.

Hinkle scratched his head. "Now that's a funny thing. Feller at the agency said it was too old to trade in, so I left it in my back yard and somebody stole it."

"Then you didn't put it in my tool shed?"

It was Hinkle's turn to stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," said Kincaid slowly.

Hinkle sat in puzzled silence. "Well, I gotta go," he said. "Be seein' you."

He drove off with a screech of tires.

Next morning after coffee, curiosity prompted Kincaid to go out and look at the thing which had been labeled a "negative receiver" but which he preferred to think of as an oversized lorgnette. He was half way through that section of field before he

became aware of his surroundings. Then an exclamation of wrath and astonishment burst from him.

The entire east-forty was a sea of rocks!

Rocks were everywhere . . . in piles . . . in cairns in scattered formless array. They stretched as far as the road on the right, to the pine copse on the left. What had once been one of the finest farming tracts in the state now resembled a spread-out quarry.

He stood there, mouth open, a man stunned. Who could have done such a thing? And in the name of all that was eternal . . . why?

Half an hour later, he drove down River Street in defiance of speed laws. Abreast of the hardware store, he jammed on the brakes, thrust open the car door and yelled, "Get in!" Miss Parker climbed in the car.

"What's wrong, Durgan? You look upset."

His hands tightened on the wheel. "I don't know what's going on around here," he said savagely, "but somebody's going to pay . . ."

"Pay for what?"

"For my land. It's full of rocks."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

He told her what happened. Miss Parker patted his hand reassuringly. "Now, Durgan," she said, "you stop fretting. I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

A muscle on Kincaid's cheek began to pulsate. "Ever since that boxcar arrived here I've felt something strange hanging over this town.

"Another thing," he continued, "that carton I took home contained something called a negative receiver."

A gleam entered the woman's eyes.

"It's made of some funny kind of metal and . . it's growing . . .!"

Kincaid was not by nature an apprehensive man. Yet the chain of events which now began and cataclysmically reached a climax in Bayou City left him badly shaken.

Quite suddenly the town changed into a place of mystery and confusion.

Without warning everybody, it seemed, had his innermost wish gratified. New cars, driven by smugly content townsfolk, appeared on the streets. Trucks moved back and forth, delivering new washing machines, television sets and refrigerators. Houses had fresh coats of paint. Garages were built, porches enclosed and the Bayou City Clothing Store did a rush business.

The queer part of it was that all of these transactions were part of an endless chain. A man suddenly learned that his stock holdings in a light and power utility had tripled its value. He sold and with the money contracted to have a new front erected on his variety store, a dream which had been his for a long time. The two contractors profited nicely from this job, and each bought a new car. The double purchase boosted the car salesman's record over the top in the annual sales contest . . .

And so it went. Wishes . . . dreams . . . suddenly brought into realization, spreading through Bayou City's populace like a ripple in a pool of water.

Questioned, Sam Warton, editor of the *Sentinel,* said vaguely that he always had had an eye on Ed Hinkle's Timber Road property but never knew how to get rid of the rocks. On the other hand, Tom Owens who farmed the land to the east, the other side of the ridge, said that while there were no rocks on his property, there was a lake smack-dab in the center of it. "I've wished a hundred times there was a way to drain that lake," he said.

Back home, Kincaid went over the day's events with a sense

of desperation. He had the feeling he had become enmeshed in a web which was slowly tightening about him and from which there was no escape. He went to bed and fell into a restless slumber.

Some time after midnight he awoke with a low pitched, muffled sound in his ears. As he lay there it steadily grew louder.

He slid out of bed, got into his trousers and shoes and went out into the star-softened darkness. He headed for Clover Creek, a normally placid stream that meandered through his property. Then he was on the creek bank, facing a stream gone mad, rushing past him in the darkness.

The truth filtered into him slowly. Owens' Lake! In some impossible way it had found a channel through the ridge.

Tom Owens had had his wish!

As had Sam Warton . . . As had Ed Hinkle . . . !

He knew what it meant. The lake, seeking its own level, would inundate his farm. His house, set on low ground, would be the first to go.

He stood there, the muddy water swirling up over his ankles, the smell of wet earth thick and heavy in his nostrils. Then he turned and ran stiff-legged toward the house.

Water was already swirling across the lane as he headed the station wagon toward the highway.

And now he saw an incredible sight. There were things in the fields on either side of the lane which no sane person would expect to see on farmland . . . discarded things that were old. He looked upon scratched and worn television sets, rusty, paint-faded cars, piles of outmoded appliances. He saw stacks of old lumber, studded with rusty nails, weatherbeaten store signs and hand-push lawn mowers. All there in the glare of his headlights, partially covered with brown, silt-heavy water that was rising with fantastic speed. His farm had been turned into one vast junk yard.

Fifteen minutes later, he was driving past the silent stores of Bayou City. He turned left and drew up before the Latham place. The house was in darkness. He got a flashlight out of the glove compartment and, after a moment's thought, a heavy iron bar from the floor of the station wagon. Then, switching out the lights, he moved toward the boxcar which still stood on the weed-grown spur.

He climbed in and played the beam of the flashlight before him. In the far corner was the familiar furnished room.

He walked over to it, idly lifted the sewing basket from the table. When he put it down again he was conscious of its clicking into position like the piece of a puzzle moving into its proper slot.

Far back in a corner of his brain the suggestion of an idea began to grow.

When this boxcar had first arrived in Bayou City, there had been three different items in the car: the large room, the miniature rooms packed in cartons, and the negative receiver.

Suppose, he told himself, the miniature rooms were exactly what they were listed as on the railroad manifest—wish suppliers. In some incredible way they gave their owners the gratifications of their desires. Kincaid chewed his upper lip. He was stretching the thin cord of logic. Anyway, why a room?

A room was a symbol, wasn't it, representing one of the basic elements of our culture—the living quarters of the family. What better device in which to incorporate something which would affect the very foundations of that culture?

Kincaid moved across to the Currier and Ives print that hung upon one wall of the furnished room. Like the other objects, it brought a host of memories rushing to him.

Suppose the entire chain of events part of a plan in which this town had been selected as a focal point. And assume for the purpose of argument that an alien intelligence—there, he had said

it! —had chosen what it considered routine details to accomplish its end.

And what was that end? His pulse quickened as his hands lifted the Rochester lamp and then returned it to the table. Again he was conscious of the object's clicking into position like the final piece in a picture puzzle.

Grant a cross section of human society the attainment of its wants without the benefit of labor and you had—luxury spoon fed . . . magnified a thousand times. That, in essence, is what had happened to Bayou City, and it was not a pleasant happening. The town had become a smug town. With the realization of its wishes, complacency and self-satisfaction were the order of the day.

And if somehow the wish suppliers gave their owners the material things of our culture and those objects came from outside our Universe, then the objects which they replaced would by physical law have to be removed.

That's where the negative receiver fitted in. It had made of his farm a vast receptacle for all things which the simple act of wishing had replaced. Gathered them in one place preparatory to their obliteration, he supposed. Kincaid's head began to ache.

He bent down and opened and closed the sewing basket on the table. As he did, he was vaguely aware that the air above the table staggered slightly. And for one fleeting second he had the impression he was standing before a surrealist panel faced by an array of fantastic dials and gauges.

It came to him then with sudden insight. The life-sized furnished room was the master control, the operation-console from which the plan was directed. The quaint, old-fashioned trappings were only a mask.

In his mind's eye, he saw a woman dressed in lavender seated before that panel while her hands played with the switches and dials.

And, as he considered, why shouldn't an alien look like a lady of quality of 1900? In crossing the vast gulf of space-time that must separate her from her own culture, wasn't an oversight of a few decades to be taken as a matter of course?

He remembered other discrepancies: The letter from the railroad company; the listing of the wish suppliers as such on the manifest; the mix-up over the boxcar's serial and seal numbers; and the selection of a concern which had been out of business twenty years as consignee.

All rough edges in the plan. *But what was incredible was that the plan had been carried out at all, that the discrepancies had been so few and so minor.*

A voice cut through the silence of the boxcar. "What are you doing here, Mr. Kincaid?"

He swung the flash. Lavinia Parker stood there, just inside the door of the car. In one hand she held her lorgnette.

He said, "I told you I don't like what's been happening to me. Well, I don't like what's happening to this town either."

She smiled a hard smile. "Are you quite sure the townspeople will thank you for interfering with their lives? They seem quite satisfied with conditions as they are."

"But don't you see," Kincaid said, "you've spoiled the very concept our culture is based on—that a man must earn the things he wants, to appreciate them."

The woman continued as if she hadn't heard the interruption. "You fail to understand. I may as well tell you now that this insignificant planet was being considered for one of the greatest sociological and cultural honors known to intelligent life—a place in the Galactic Federation. As a member you would have found yourself rich beyond your loftiest dreams in opportunity afforded by contact with cultures eons older than yours. Some of us objected on the grounds that you had not yet reached a high

enough point in the Mokart civilization scale. But others thought different. They examined your art and your music and your literature, and they assumed you had advanced farther than you had. So they sent me here to make a test . . . and you failed . . ."

"What do you mean?" Kincaid said.

"I mean that when the citizens of this community were granted the fulfillment of their wishes—a basic checkpoint of the test—they gave no thought to the advancement of their society or enrichment of their culture but reacted to elemental desires. They wanted things material. They showed themselves to be an immature race close to the primordial slime from which they evolved.

"Of course this is but a minute segment of your civilization, but what happened here would happen other places; it is a representative cross section.

"Now, Mr. Kincaid, I suggest you leave this car immediately!"

But Kincaid didn't leave. He turned to the life-sized room at his side, reached out and seized the wicker sewing basket. Moving with an instinctive sense of direction he twisted it in its invisible slot until the air directly above staggered again and a hum sounded as if hidden machinery somewhere were put into operation.

Eyes glittering, Lavinia Parker leveled her lorgnette. From the twin tubes a mother-of-pearl radiance fanned outward to bathe Kincaid in its glow.

Even as the malignant mist thickened about him, Kincaid saw the Rochester lamp on the table transform itself into an elliptic shaped dial and a strangely calibrated gauge above it. He raised the iron bar still gripped in his hand and brought it smashing down upon them.

There was a slight implosion like an electric light bulb breaking. Then the shock wave came. The furnished room disinte-

grated before his eyes and Kincaid felt himself flung forward and bludgeoned against the car wall. The last thing he saw before blackness closed down on him was the woman in lavender stretched motionless on the floor, the broken lorgnette beside her.

But it was a woman in costume only. The face and form—were those of a creature—indescribably alien!

On August 2nd Durgan Kincaid was released from the hospital. He returned to his farm and the newly formed lake there, but he made no mention of Lavinia Parker who was never seen again in Bayou City.

Nor did he speak of the boxcar which also vanished completely.

Curiously, only a brief mention of car appeared in the *Sentinel.* It quoted the night operator at Thatcher's Bend, the next station north, who insisted he had seen a boxcar running wild down main line trackage.

"It went past me like a bat out of Hell," he said. "It was all silver and shaped like a bullet."

The operator was suspended for drunkenness and turning in false reports. "And rightly so," the *Sentinel* concluded editorially.

August Derleth (1909-) is the author of well over a hundred books of all kinds, though the macabre was his first love and it was in this genre that he first published in 1926. Among his macabre books are such titles as *Someone in the Dark, Lonesome Places, Mr. George and Other Odd Persons, The Lurker at the Threshold* (with H. P. Lovecraft), *Not Long for This World,* and others. As the publisher of H. P. Lovecraft, he has won the admiration of Lovecraftians the world over for his assiduous devotion to the perpetuation of Lovecraft's literary reputation. He is also a columnist, a literary editor, a publisher, a lecturer and a teacher—though his career as a writer takes first place in his affections. Once married, now divorced, he is the father and sole custodian of two children, a boy and a girl, who demand as much of his time as his creative work. He is listed at length in both *Twentieth Century Authors* and *Contemporary Authors.*

The Patchwork Quilt

August Derleth

In the second night of Ariel Bennett's visit to her aunts, the weather turned cold. She woke from sleep, feeling it in this old house to which her aunts had come to live during the year just past, and lay for a few minutes trying to imagine herself warming, trying to believe that the chill would pass. But the room was cold; there was no denying it; so she got resolutely out of bed

and turned on the lamp so that she could look about for something to add to the thin covers on the bed. She regretted now that she had left her coat hanging downstairs, and she would not disturb either Aunt Ellen or Aunt Beatrice by leaving her room to go for it.

She opened one drawer after another of the old-fashioned high bureau against the wall. There were sheets and pillow-cases, but no blankets. She looked into the closet. It was empty save for a cardboard carton pushed away in one corner of the overhead shelf. She was about to turn away when, on impulse, she turned and took down the carton.

She carried it into the room, untied the string around it, and opened it. A kind of tissue paper met her eyes, yellowing and old. She pushed it aside and was immediately gratified at the sight of what could be only a quilt, handmade of patchwork. As she took it out of the carton, she could see that it was almost new, virtually unused, and of exquisite workmanship, in a pattern of blues and reds and dark gray.

Without hesitation, she spread it over the bed, put out the light, and got back into bed once more, snuggling into the warmed spot she had left.

Within a few minutes she was asleep once more.

She woke again in an hour, uncomfortably warm. Somehow the quilt had bunched up over her shoulders and drawn up from her feet, so that her feet, at the same time that her head and shoulders were overly warm, were chilled. She straightened the blanket carefully, without getting out of bed to do it, and settled back.

By this time she had worn off the edge of the need to sleep, and getting back to sleep took longer. The moonlight from outside made a pale luminosity in the room, making a parallelogram on the floor immediately off the sill of the one window in the south wall, and along the eastern horizon there was just the hint

that dawn was not far away. Far off somewhere across the fields a dog barked, and an errant rooster crowed; all else was silence.

She waited upon sleep to come again, growing slowly drowsy. The room dimmed and darkened, her eyelids lowered. On the outer boundary of sleep she thought she saw one of her aunts bending over the bed, tucking the blanket in; she smiled but was too close to sleep to speak.

In the morning she folded the patchwork quilt and lay it across the bottom of the bed. Then she went downstairs, refreshed.

Her aunts were up. Aunt Beatrice was just pouring coffee; Aunt Ellen was in the pantry.

"Good morning, dear," said Aunt Beatrice, her thin face lit with a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh, yes, of course," she answered. "I was a little cold at first, but after I put the quilt on, I was warm enough."

"That's good," said Aunt Beatrice. "There's some real cream for your coffee, Ariel." She pushed the pitcher toward her.

Aunt Ellen bustled in from the pantry and plumped her fat little body into her chair. "It *was* cold last night. The weather does turn fast sometimes like this in Vermont."

"All over New England," said Aunt Beatrice.

"We should have thought to leave an extra blanket on your bed," Aunt Ellen went on.

Aunt Beatrice paused in the act of stirring the sugar in her coffee. She looked blankly at her niece. "What quilt?" she asked suddenly.

"The one in the closet," said Ariel.

Aunt Beatrice took the spoon from her cup and laid it carefully beside her plate. She looked across the table at her sister. For a moment neither of them spoke a word. A sort of restraint seemed to have fallen upon the breakfast table.

"It was just a patchwork quilt," Ariel went on. "I didn't think

you'd mind if I used it. Of course, I realized it was put away, but it was a perfectly good quilt—almost like new. I thought," she ended lamely, "you knew I had it on the bed. Didn't one of you come in during the night to tuck it in?"

Aunt Beatrice ignored her question. "That quilt was in the house when we came here. It's not really ours. I don't think we ought to use it. We always understood someone would come for it."

"Yes," put in Aunt Ellen hastily, "Miss Flora Payne, who sold us the house, said it had belonged to a niece of hers and some day she might come for it. So it ought not to be used. We'll put another blanket in your room today—this morning."

"We surely will," added Aunt Beatrice, with an undeniable air of having settled the matter.

And the blanket was on her bed before dinner time that noon. The patchwork quilt had been folded and put back into its carton, which in turn had been restored to the shelf in the closet. Ariel felt guilty; she would not have been surprised to find the closet locked, too; but it was not.

Nevertheless, in spite of the strange disapproval she had felt so strongly in her aunts—strange because they had indulged her since her childhood—she took the quilt out of its carton again that night and sat examining it. Its workmanship was exquisite, she saw at once. And it was quite obviously the work of but one hand—not the product of a quilting party—for the quality of the work was the same from one end of the quilt to the other. A labor of love, she decided—and felt that her decision was confirmed when she found, sewn in pink thread into one corner of it, up along the edge of a blue patch, the words *Baby's Quilt.* She concluded forthwith that the quilt must have been made for an undersized bed, not a baby's bed exactly, but perhaps a child's

bed, which explained in part why it had just barely served her the previous night.

She had already put the extra blanket on her bed, spreading it to her pillow; now, rather than fold the quilt, she laid it across the bottom of the bed against the possibility of even colder weather in the night. And, feeling thus fortified against any bitter weather, she opened the window a little, and stood for a moment there looking out to where the moon was rising, a waning moon, quite orange in that sky, with an unleafing tree silhouetted against it, and the few stones below it which belonged to the neighborhood cemetery.

How quiet and peaceful the country was! she thought again. And how welcome after months in the city! Save for the moon, all was dark except for a few yellow squares of windows, and in one place a light flowing from a barn. A dog barked, another answered far down the valley, a cow lowed, an owl hooted nearby—all else was still. And the house, too, was still, for her aunts had gone to their rooms well before her; perhaps they were already asleep.

She read for half an hour in a book of poems by Robert Frost and then yielded to her growing languor and went to bed. When the light was out, the pale glowing of the moon made a wan iridescence in the room, filling it with a personality it did not have under the clearer glow from the lamp. She lay for a little while contemplating the room, learning to "feel", as it were, the changed character of the room—the "guest" room, as her aunts had described it.

Under the moonlight, the room seemed to expand, and she, curiously, to seem smaller by comparison, and younger. How strange it was! It was a not altogether unpleasant sensation to feel very young again, almost helplessly young, and she indulged

it briefly before resolutely thrusting it from her thoughts and turning drowsily on her side to drift into sleep.

But she did not sleep as readily as she thought she might. The feeling of being young and helpless persisted, and with it came a sort of apprehension; it was nothing tangible, but only something that had a tenuous existence on the perimeter, as it were, of awareness, somewhere between the world of waking and the night of sleep, something that seemed to nag at her dispiritedly, not insistently, so that at last she was able to overcome it and close her eyes in sleep, shutting away the moonlit room and its odd character.

She started awake in less than an hour, and lay wondering what had awakened her. She lay quite still, senses alert, until she felt a movement at the foot of her bed. Then she turned her head slowly and cautiously.

In the room's reflected moonlight, she saw a woman bending over the bed, drawing the patchwork quilt up over the blankets.

"Aunt Ellen?" she murmured.

There was no answer.

She lay motionless. The woman was too slender to be Aunt Ellen, but not slender or tall enough to be Aunt Beatrice. And there was an indefinable quality of youth about her, too. Ariel could not see her face, but the moonlight did not glow there. She pretended to be asleep; the woman had evidently not heard her question; perhaps she was one of the domestics who "did" for her aunts, thought Ariel, though this would hardly explain her concern for the house guest.

The patchwork quilt came slowly, snugly up about Ariel's shoulder; she could feel the woman tucking it into place around her. But it had been drawn up too high, up over her feet, almost to her knees, so that it was bunched on top of her, where it would certainly leave her too warm before the night was done.

She had the impulse to straighten it, but refrained from doing so.

She strove to catch a glimpse of the woman's face, so that she might be able to identify her among the domestics; but there was only a moment when the woman looked down at her, the moonlight at her back, and then turned away, leaving Ariel conscious only of eyes that seemed to burn with longing, and a slight body as evanescent as the wind that had begun to billow the light lace curtains into the room at the window left open to the night.

Then the woman turned away and, though Ariel did not see the door open, for lying with her back to it, she knew intuitively that she was gone. She sat up and pulled down the quilt, then lay back and went wonderingly to sleep once more.

She woke again, past midnight, unbearably warm.

The quilt was back in place, bunched over her body.

She pulled it down once more, folding it loosely across the foot of the bed. Having now satisfied her most urgent need for sleep, she lay for a while on her back, waiting for sleep to overtake her again. Some of the moonlight had now withdrawn from the room, for the moon had risen higher, and only a small parallelogram of light lay under one window; though still airy, the room had grown darker and the foot of the bed was now shadowed.

It seemed to her presently that the shadows beyond the bed coalesced into one, and a vague apprehension stole into her awareness. She raised herself on her elbows, straining to look into the darkness, banishing the shadows. There was enough reflected light from this perspective to enable her to see that the door of the room was still closed, all the furniture was in its place, everything was as she had left it. Her apprehension washed away, and she lay back.

Almost at once, after she had composed herself, she felt a distinct movement at the foot of the bed. In a quick access of fear, she leaped from bed and reached for the lamp.

The patchwork quilt had been partly unfolded. It lay up along the bed by almost two feet further than she had left it.

She looked wildly around, her pulse racing. There was no one else in the room. In the soft lamplight, the room seemed almost naked in its ordinariness.

She stood until she grew aware of the chill air flowing in through the open window, looking unbelievingly at the patchwork quilt. Though her pulse subsided in the face of silence and the plainness of the room in the light of the lamp, her perplexity remained. How had the quilt moved? She had not touched it—nor had anyone else done so? She began to think that the quilt had a life all its own, but the absurdity of this smote her and drove her at last to snatch up the quilt, fold it resolutely, and put it back into its carton, which she carried back to the closet and restored to the shelf where she had found it.

Nothing further disturbed her sleep.

In the morning she saw at once in the way her aunts looked at her when she came into the kitchen for breakfast that they waited on her words, afraid of what she might say. So they know something's the matter with that room, she thought. She said only "Good morning!" as cheerfully as possible.

"Was the extra blanket enough to keep you warm, Ariel?" asked Aunt Beatrice.

"Oh, yes, thank you."

"You slept all right?" asked Aunt Ellen.

"Shouldn't I have?"

"Being at the southeast corner with cross-window circulation," put in Aunt Beatrice easily, "that room's subject to more temperature changes."

It did not sound quite reasonable to Ariel, so she only smiled and said nothing.

"Besides, it's the only guest room we have," said Aunt Ellen apologetically. "Of course, you could sleep in the parlor on the lounge," she added.

Aunt Beatrice interposed hastily, "Why on earth should she?" her manner formidably forbidding.

Aunt Ellen retreated meekly. "I only meant, if the room grew too cold."

Silence fell.

Ariel consumed a slice of toast. She felt the wary tension between her aunts as some sentient thing that had risen up to dominate the breakfast table. The silence grew oppressive.

"How many people help you here?" she asked presently.

"Oh, just two or three," said Aunt Ellen with manifest relief. "You know Mrs. Arons, who cooks for us. Then there's Johnson, who works outside—he's our hired man. And Mrs. Vickers comes in sometimes to 'do' the house for us."

"A small, slight woman?" asked Ariel.

"Yes, I guess you'd say she was that," said Aunt Ellen.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say "Then it must have been she who came to tuck me in last night," but something in her Aunt Beatrice's intent gaze kept the words unspoken. Instead, she said, "I should think it would be too much for just the two of you."

A few moments passed. Aunt Beatrice grew a little less tense.

"You said you bought this house from an old lady named Payne," Ariel ventured presently. "Is she dead?"

"Oh, no," said Aunt Ellen. "She's still alive. She must be eighty, wouldn't you say, Bea?"

"Yes, just eighty," said Aunt Beatrice.

"She lives down the road on that farm just across from the cemetery—her family cemetery it is, that little one on the knoll.

The Paynes settled this valley two hundred years ago."

By degrees, the tension thawed and vanished. They spoke of Ariel's life in Portland, Maine and of less prosaic matters, through breakfast and the morning.

Immediately after the noon meal, Ariel set out for a walk in the country. The day was pleasant; the autumn sun shone out of a clear sky and its light lay warmly on the leaves still clinging to the trees here and there, and on the sere grass in pastures and along the roadsides and woodlots. Her destination was Miss Flora Payne's house, but, so as not to seem obvious to her aunts, she went by a roundabout way and found herself presently in the cemetery on the knoll.

A stone wall that bounded it had broken down in three places. The tree Ariel had seen rose almost in the middle of it. The entire cemetery could not have been more than forty feet square, yet it was crowded with stones. She walked among them, reading the names now and then. *Josiah Payne, ae. 90—Hezekiah —Mary Fabor,* gathered in at but seven—*Abel Payne,* struck down in his middle years—*Rella Payne Fabor,* dead in her early twenties—*John Fabor,* also dead in his early years—*Helen Payne— Marilla Payne Forster*—there were four or five generations of them represented in the little graveyard, which was bathed in an air of sweet melancholy, and which afforded the visitor a splendid view of the surrounding countryside, so that Ariel stayed long enough to look all up and down the valley and enjoy the rolling countryside so beautiful in the autumn sunlight, before she went on down the slope toward the home of Miss Flora Payne.

The old lady was at home. She was a hawk-nosed, thin-faced old lady, very slight of frame, but evidently quite alert, for her eyes lit up at sight of company and she welcomed Ariel with patent delight. Ariel was not sure, but it seemed to her that a

wariness came into the old lady's eyes when she learned who Ariel was and where she had come from.

Ariel was determined to give her no chance to put up her defences, as her aunts had done. "They've put me into that room in the southeast corner," she said. "What happened there, Miss Payne?"

The old lady shook her head. "Ah, it's a sad house, Miss Bennett. It was originally my uncle's, but it came to his daughter. She lived there, and she died there—pined away, I expect you'd say. Her husband was killed—a runaway horse—such a young man, too. Then little Mary took sick and died."

"In that room."

"Yes. And her mother lost her will to live after that. Seemed she couldn't wait to get up there on that hill with John and Mary."

"And the patchwork quilt you left there in the closet?"

The old lady gasped. "You've used it!" she said, accusingly.

"It was cold one night. There was no blanket," said Ariel. "It shouldn't have been left there."

"I know. I couldn't bear to destroy it. Rella made it for her little girl. It's a beautiful quilt. But I couldn't take it with me, either—because—well, because the house was *uncomfortable* with the quilt, and I was afraid this one would be, too—wherever the quilt might be." She hesitated; then she asked, "Has the room been—*difficult* for you, Miss Bennett?"

"Not particularly."

"Because it seems to be just in that room—I suppose because Mary died there, under that quilt—I tried to figure it out, but I gave up at last. They've been dead ten or eleven years. A body'd think—in all that time—" Her sentence trailed off, unvoiced.

"You've never told anyone the room was haunted?"

"I've never said such a thing. Is it haunted, Miss Bennett? It's just the quilt that keeps coming up on the bed—you can't keep it off if you put it on the bed at all. I don't know what to make of it. I wish now—I've wished it often—we'd have done what Rella wanted—buried the quilt with her. It was such a crazy thing to ask and we all thought she was out of her mind."

Walking back down the road, Ariel thought she understood. The quilt had been bunched up on her in the night as if a child slept beneath it. All else was beyond her comprehension, and her entire experience required a suspension of disbelief which she was not entirely ready to concede. That she was not alone in this seemed to her evident in the curious hesitation everyone had in speaking about the house and the room and the patchwork quilt.

That night she took out the patchwork quilt and laid it at the foot of the bed. Then she put out the light and sat down to wait.

Once again moonlight flooded into the room, and the night wind blew, and the character of the room seemed to alter. She sat near the quilt at the foot of the bed, tense with apprehension, but firm in her determination. This time she would not be asleep or drowsy; this time she would see the woman who came.

From outside came the sounds of the countryside at night, rising, subsiding. The moon rose higher and the wind died down to a gentle breeze. The clock downstairs struck ten, then eleven. She began to feel a little absurd, and her tension thinned.

Then suddenly she was aware of a thickening of the shadows between the door and the bed.

The woman was there—the frail woman with the luminous eyes—coming toward the quilt.

Despite the quickening of fear that enveloped her, Ariel came to her feet, strode forward, picked up the quilt, and held it out.

"Here," she said. "Please take it."

She felt the patchwork quilt sliding from her hands.

In a few moments, the door of the bedroom opened and closed.

Ariel was alone. Her relief was so great that she stumbled to the bed and fell across it.

Next morning Aunt Beatrice asked anxiously how she had slept.

"Fine, when I once got to sleep," said Ariel. "I should tell you, though, that the patchwork quilt is gone."

"Gone!" cried Aunt Ellen. "Wherever did it go?"

"That 'someone' you mentioned came for it and I gave it to her," said Ariel.

A long minute of profound silence engulfed the breakfast table and everyone around it. Ariel expected that now, at last, her aunts would speak out, would admit what she herself could hardly deny.

But Aunt Beatrice only said, at last, "Well, it's a good thing. We're going to have a lovely day. There's a west wind blowing, and it's going to be warm."

Not another word.

By mid-morning she began to wonder herself whether it had really happened.

The quilt was gone; there was no doubt whatever about that.

She was impelled by wild curiosity to walk to the cemetery on the knoll, and there, as she had feared, she found that something had disturbed the grave of Rella Payne Fabor. It looked as if something had dug down into it and covered it up again—something like a mole or a woodchuck.

The day was so pleasant that she stood for a few moments looking down in disbelief. She resisted the impulse to dig down a little to see what she could find. She was afraid of what might be there.

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The Black Gondolier

FRITZ LEIBER

Daloway lived alone in a broken-down trailer beside an oil well on the bank of a canal in Venice near the cafe La Gondola Negra on the Grand Canal not five blocks from St. Mark's Plaza.

I mean, he lived there until after the fashion of intellectual lone wolves he got the wander-urge and took himself off, abruptly and irresponsibly, to parts unknown. That is the theory of the police, who refuse to take seriously my story of Daloway's strange dreads and my hints at the weird world-spanning power which was menacing him. The police even make light of the very material clues which I pointed out to them.

Or else Daloway was taken off, grimly and against his will, to parts utterly unknown and blackly horrible. That is my own theory, especially on lonely nights when I remember the dreams he told me of the Black Gondolier.

Of course the canal is a rather small one, showing much of its rough gravel bottom strewn with rusted cans and blackened paper, except when it is briefly filled by one of our big winter rains. But gondolas did travel it in the illusion-packed old days and it is still spanned by a little sharply humped concrete bridge wide enough for only one car. I used to cross that bridge coming to visit Daloway and I remember how I'd slow down and tap my horn to warn a possible car coming the other way, and the momentary roller-coaster illusion I'd get as my car heaved to the top and poised there and then hurtled down the opposite dusty slope for all of a breathless second. From the top of the little bridge I'd get my first glimpse of the crowded bungalows and Daloway's weed-footed trailer and close beside it the black hunch-shouldered oil well which figured so strangely in his dreads. "*Their* closest listening post," he sometimes called it during the final week, when he felt positively besieged.

And of course the Grand Canal is pretty dismal these days, with its several gracefully arching Bridges of Sighs raddled with holes showing their cement-shell construction and blocked off at either end by heavy wire barricades to keep off small boys, and with both its banks lined with oil wells, some still with their towering derricks and some—mostly those next to beachside houses—with their derricks dismantled, but all of them wearily pumping twenty four hours a day with a soft slow syncopated thumping that the residents don't hear for its monotony, interminably sucking up the black petroleum that underlies Venice, lazily ducking and lifting their angularly oval metal heads like so many iron dinosaurs or donkeys forever drinking—donkeys

moving in the somnambulistic rhythm of Ferde Grofe's Grand-Canyon donkey when it does its sleepy *hee...haw*. Daloway had a very weird theory about that—about the crude oil, I mean—a theory which became the core of his dreads and which for all its utter black wildness may still best explain his disappearance.

And La Gondola Negra is only a beatnik coffee house, successor to the fabulous Gashouse, though it did boast a rather interesting dirty drunken guitarist, whose face always had blacker smears on it than those of his stubbly beard and who wore a sweatshirt that looked like the working garment of a coal miner and whom Daloway and I would hear trailing off (I won't venture to say home) in the small hours of the morning, picking out on his twangy instrument his dinky "Texas Oilman Suite," which he'd composed very much in imitation of Ferde Grofe's one about the Grand Canyon, or raucously wailing his eerie beatnik ballad of the Black Gondola. He got very much on Daloway's nerves, especially towards the end, though I was rather amused by him and at the same time saw no harm in his caterwauling, except to would-be sleepers. Well, he's gone now, like Daloway, though not by the same route . . . I think. At least Daloway never suggested that the guitarist was one of *their* agents. No, as it turned out, *their* agent was a rather more formidable figure.

And they don't call the plaza St. Mark's, but it was obviously laid out to approximate that Adriatic-lapped area when it was created a half century ago. The porticos still shade the sidewalks in front of the two blocks of bars and grimy shops and there are still the authentic Venetian pillars, now painted salmon pink and turquoise blue—you may have seen them in a horror movie called *Delirium* where a beautiful crazy slim Mexican girl is chased round and round the deserted porticos by a car flashing its headlights between the pillars.

And of course the Venice isn't Venice, Italy, but Venice, USA—Venice, California—now just another district and postal address in the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles, but once a proud little beachside city embodying the laughably charming if grotesque dream of creating Venice, Italy, scaled down but complete with canals and arched bridges and porticos, on the shores of the Pacific.

Yet for all the childish innocence of its bizarre glamor, Venice developed an atmosphere, or became the outpost of a sinister deep-rooted power, that did in Daloway. It is a place of dreams, not only the tinseled ones, but also the darker sort such as tormented and terrified my friend at the end.

For a while toward the beginning of this century the movie folk and real estate agents and retired farmers and the sailors from San Pedro went to spanking-new Venice to ride the gondolas—they had authentic ones poled by Italian types possibly hired from Central Casting—and eat exotic spaghetti and gambol romantically a bit with their wide-hatted long-skirted lady friends who also wore daring bathing suits with bare arms and rather short skirts and long black stockings—and gamble too with piled big yellow-backed green bills—and, with their caps turned front to rear, roar their wooden-spoked or wire-wheeled open touring cars along the Speedway, which is now a cramped one-way street that changes direction every block.

But then Redondo and Laguna and Malibu called away the film folk and the other people with fat pocketbooks, but as if to compensate for that they struck oil in Venice and built wells almost everywhere, yet despite this influx of money the gambling never regained its éclat, it became just bingo for housewives, and the Los Angeles police fought that homely extramural vice for a weary decade, until sprawling LA reached out a pseudopod one day and swallowed Venice up. Then the bingo stopped and

Venice became very crowded indeed with a beach home or a beach apartment or a beach shack on every square yard that wasn't sidewalk or street—or oil well!—and with establishments as disparate as Bible Tabernacle and Colonic Irrigation Clinic and Mother Goldberg's Home for the Aged. It would have been going too far to have called Venice a beach slum, but it was trending in that direction.

An then, much later, the beats came, the gutter geniuses, the holy barbarians, migrating south in driblets from Big Sur and from North Beach in Frisco and from Disillusion, USA, everywhere, bringing their ratty art galleries and meager *avant garde* bookstalls and their black-trousered insolent women and their Zen and their guitars, including the one on which was strummed the Ballad of the Black Gondola.

And with the beats, but emphatically not of them, came the solitary oddballs and lone-wolf intellectuals like Daloway.

I met Daloway at a check-out desk of the excellent Los Angeles downtown public library, where our two stacks of books demonstrated so many shared interests—world history, geology, abnormal psychology, and psychic phenomena were some of them—that we paused outside to remark on it. This led to a conversation, in which I got some first intimations of his astonishing mentality, and eventually to my driving him home to save him a circuitous bus-trip, or, more likely, as I learned later, a weary hitch-hike.

Our conversation continued excitingly throughout most of the long drive, though even in that first exploratory confabulation Daloway made so many guarded references to a malefic power menacing us all and perhaps him in particular, that I wondered if he mightn't have a bee in his bonnet about World Communism or the Syndicate or the John Birch Society. But despite this

possible paranoid obsession, he was clearly a most worthy partner for intellectual disputation and discourse.

Toward the end of the drive Daloway suddenly got nervous and didn't want me to take him the last few blocks. However, I overcame his reluctance. I remarked on the oil well next to his trailer—not to have done so would have implied I thought he was embarrassed by it—and he retorted sardonically, "My mechanical watchdog! Innocent-looking ugly beast, isn't it? But you've got to keep in mind that much more of it or of its domain is below the surface, like an iceberg. Which reminds me that I once ran across a seemingly well-authenticated report of a black iceberg—"

Thereafter I visited Daloway regularly in his trailer, often late at night, and we made our library trips together and even occasional brief expeditions to sleazily stimulating spots like La Gondola Negra. At first I thought he had merely been ashamed of his battered aluminum-walled home, though it was neat enough inside, almost austere, but then I discovered that he hated to reveal to anyone where he lived, in part because he hesitated to expose anyone else to the great if shadowy danger he believed overhung him.

Daloway was a spare man yet muscular, with the watchful analytic gaze of an intellectual, but the hands of a mechanic. Like too many men of our times, he was amazingly learned and knowledgeable, yet unable to apply his abilities to his own advancement—for lack of connections and college degrees and because of nervous instabilities and emotional blockages. He had more facts at his fingertips than a Ph.D. candidate, but he used them to buttress off-trail theories and he dressed with the austere cleanly neatness and simplicity of a factory hand or a man newly released from prison.

He'd work for a while in a machine shop or garage and then live very thriftily on his savings while he fed his mind and pondered all the problems of the universe, or sometimes—this was before our meeting and the period of his dreads—organized maverick mental-therapy or parapsychology groups.

This unworldly and monetarily unprofitable pattern of existence at least made Daloway an exciting thinker. For him the world was a great conundrum or a series of puzzle boxes and he a disinterested yet childishly sensitive and enthusiastic observer trying to unriddle them. A scientist, or natural philosopher, rather, without the blinkered conformity of thought which sometimes characterizes men with professional or academic standing to lose, but rather with a fiercely romantic yet clear-headed and at times even cynical drive toward knowledge. Atoms, molecules, the stars, the unconscious mind, bizarre drugs and their effects (he'd tried out LSD and mescaline), the play of consciousness, the insidious interweaving of reality and dream (as climatically in his dreams of the Black Gondola), the bafflingly twisted and folded strata of Earth's crust and man's cerebrum and all history, the subtle mysterious swings of world events and literature and sub-literature and politics—he was interested in all of them, and forever searching for some unifying purposeful power behind them, and sensitive to them to a preternatural degree.

Well, in the end he did discover the power, or at least convinced himself he did, and convinced me too for a time—and still does convince me, on lonely nights—but he got little enough satisfaction from his knowledge, that I know of, and it proved to be as deadly a discovery, to the discoverer, as finding out who is really back of Organized Crime or the Dope Traffic or American Fascism. Gunmen and poisoners and scientifically-coached bombers would be loosed against anyone making any of the last three discoveries; the agent who did away with Daloway was

murkier-minded and deadlier even than the man who shot Kennedy.

But I mentioned sensitivity. In many ways it was the hallmark of Daloway. He'd start at sounds I couldn't hear, or that were blanked out for me by the ceaseless ponderous low throb of the oil wells, especially the one a few yards beyond the thin wall of his trailer. He'd narrow his eyes at changes in illumination that didn't register on my retinas, or dart them at little movements I usually missed. He'd twitch his nostrils for special taints that to me were blanketed, at least in Venice, by the stench of the petroleum and the salt-fishy reek of the ocean. And he'd read meanings in newspaper articles and in paragraphs of books that I would never have seen except for his pointing them out, and I am not exactly unsubtle.

His sensitivity was almost invariably tinged with apprehension. For example, my arrivals seemed always to startle and briefly upset him, no matter how quiet or deliberately noisy I made them, and regardless of how much he seemed afterwards to enjoy my company—or at the very least the audience-of-one with which I provided him. Indeed this symptom—this jitteriness or jumpiness—was so strong in him that, taken together with his solitary fugitive mode of life and his unwillingness to have his dwelling known, it led me to speculate early in our relationship whether he might not be in flight from the law, or the criminal underworld, or some fearsomely ruthless political or sub-political organization, or from some less tangible mafia.

Well, considering the nature of the power Daloway really feared, its utter black inhumanity, its near-omnipresence and almost timeless antiquity, his great apprehension was most understandable—provided of course that you accepted his ideas, or at least were willing to consider them.

It was a long time before he would unequivocally identify the

power to me—give a specific name to his *They*. Perhaps he dreaded my disbelief, my skeptical laughter, even feared I would cut him off from me as a hopeless crank. Perhaps—and this I credit—he honestly believed that he would subject me to a very real danger by telling me, the same danger he was darkly shadowed by, or at least put me into its fringes—and only took the risk of doing so when the urge to share his suspicions, or rather convictions, with someone capable of comprehending them, became an overpowering compulsion.

He made several false starts and retreats. Once he began, "When you consider the source of the chemical fuels which alone make modern civilization possible, and modern warfare too, and the hope—or horror—of reaching other planets—" and then broke off.

Another time he launched off with, "If there is one single substance that has in it all of life and the potentiality for life, all past life by reason of its sources and all future life by the innumerable infinitely subtle compounds it provides—" and then shut tight his lips and opened them only to change the subject.

Another of these abortive revelations began with, "I firmly believe that there is no validity whatever in the distinction between the organic and the inorganic—I think it's every bit as false as that between the artificial and the natural. It's my absolute conviction that consciousness goes down to the level of the electrons—yes, and below that to the strata of the yet-undiscovered sub-particles. The substance which before all others convinces me that this is so, is—"

And once when I asked him without warning, "Daloway, what *is* it you're afraid of, anyhow?" he replied, "Why, the oil, of course," and then immediately insisted he was thinking of the possible role of hydrocarbons and coal tars—and their combustion products—in producing cancer.

I had better state as simply as possible Daloway's ideas about the power, as he finally revealed them to me.

Daloway's theory, based on his wide readings in world history, geology, and the occult, was that crude oil—petroleum—was more than figuratively the life-blood of industry and the modern world and modern lightning-war, that it truly had a dim life and will of its own, an inorganic consciousness or sub-consciousness, that we were all its puppets or creatures, and that its chemical mind had guided and even enforced the development of modern technological civilization. Created from the lush vegetation and animal fats of the Carboniferous and adjoining periods, holding in itself the black essence of all life that had ever been, constituting in fact a great deep-digged black graveyard of the ultimate eldritch past with blackest ghosts, oil had waited for hundreds of millions of years, dreaming its black dreams, sluggishly pulsing beneath Earth's stony skin, quivering in lightless pools roofed with marsh gas and in top-filled rocky tanks and coursing through myriad channels and through spongy rocky bone, until a being evolved on the surface with whom it could live symbiotically and through whom it could realize and expend itself. When man had appeared and had attained the requisite sensitivity and technical sophistication, then oil—like some black collective unconscious—had begun sending him its telepathic messages.

"Daloway, this is beyond belief!" I burst out here the first time he revealed to me his theory *in toto*. "Telepathy by itself is dubious enough, but telepathic communication between a lifeless substance and man—"

"Do you know that many companies hunting oil spend more money for dowsers than they do for geologists?" he shot back at me instantly. "For dowsers and for those psionic-electronic gadgets they call doodlebugs. The people whose money's at stake and who know the oil lands in a practical way believe in dowsing,

even if most scientists don't. And what is dowsing but a man moving about on the surface until he gets a telepathic signal from . . . something below."

In brief, Daloway's theory was that man hadn't discovered oil, but that oil had found man. Venice hadn't struck oil; oil had thrust up its vicious feelers like some vast blind monster, and finally made contact with Venice.

Everyone admits that oil is the lifeblood of modern technological culture—its automobiles and trucks and airplanes, its battleships and military tanks, its ballistic missiles and reekingly fueled space vehicles. In a sense Daloway only carried the argument one step further, positing behind the blood a heart—and behind the heart, a brain.

Surely in a great age-old oil pool with all its complex hydrocarbons—the paraffin series, the asphalt series, and many others—and with its subtle gradients of heat, viscosity, and electric charge, and with all its multiform microscopic vibrations echoing and re-echoing endlessly from its lightless walls, there can be the chemical and physical equivalent of nerves and brain-cells; and if of brain-cells, then of thought. Some computers use pools of mercury for their memory units. The human brain is fantastically isolated, guarded by bony walls and by what they call the blood-brain barrier; how much more so subterranean oil, within its thick stony skull and earthen flesh.

Or consider it from another viewpoint. According to scientific materialism and anthropologic determinism, man's will is an illusion, his consciousness but an epiphenomenon—a useless mirroring of the atomic swirlings and molecular churnings that constitute ultimate reality. In any such world-picture, oil is a far more appropriate primal power than man.

Dalloway even discovered the chief purpose animating oil's mentality, or thought he did. Once when we were discussing

spaceflight, he said suddenly, "I've got it! Oil wants to get to other planets so that it can make contact with the oil there, converse with extraterrestrial pools—fatten on *their* millennial strength, absorb *their* graveyard wisdom . . ."

Of course a theory like that is something to laugh at or tell a psychiatrist. And of course Daloway may have been crazy or seeking a dark sort of laughter himself. I mean it is quite possible that Daloway was deceiving and mystifying me for his own amusement, that he elaborated his whole theory and repeatedly simulated his dreads simply as part of a long-drawn-out practical joke, that he noted a vein of credulity in me and found cruel delight in fooling me to the top of my bent, and that—as the police insist—even the starkly material evidence for the horror of his disappearance which I pointed out to them was only a final crude hoax on his part, a farewell jest.

Yet I knew the man for months, knew his dreads, saw him start and shiver and shake, heard him rehearse his arguments with fierce sincerity, witnessed the birth-quivers of many of his ideas—and I do not think so.

Oh, there were many times when I doubted Daloway, doubted his every word, but in the end his grotesque theory about the oil did not elicit from me the skepticism it might have from another hearing it elsewhere—perhaps, it occurs to me now, because it was advanced in a metropolis that is such a strange confirmation of it.

To the average tourist or the reader of travel brochures, Los Angeles is a gleaming city or vast glamorous suburb of movie studios and orange groves and ornate stucco homes and green-tiled long swimming pools and beaches and now great curving freeways and vast white civic centers and sleekly modern plants—aviation, missile, computer, research and development. What is overlooked here is that the City of the Angels, especially in its

southern reaches stretching toward Long Beach, is almost half oil-field. These odorous grim industrial barrens interweave elaborately with airfields and showy tract housing developments—with an effect of savage irony. There is hardly a point from which one cannot see in the middle or farther distance, looming through the faintly bluish haze of the acrid smog, a hill densely studded with tall oil derricks. Long Beach herself is dominated by Signal Hill with oil towers thick as an army's spears and cruel as the murders which have been committed on its lonely slopes.

The first time I ever saw one of those hills—that near Culver City—I instantly thought of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and of his brain-heavy Martians on their lofty metal tripods wherewith they strode ruthlessly about the British countryside. It seemed to me that I was seeing a congeries of such tower-high beings and that the next moment they might begin to stride lurchingly toward me, with something of the feeling, modernistically distorted, of Macbeth's Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane.

And here and there along with the oil derricks, like their allies or reinforcements, one sees the gleaming distillation towers and the monstrous angular-shouldered cracking plants with muscles of knotted pipe, and the fields of dull silver oil tanks, livid in the smog, and the vaster gas tanks and the marching files of high-tension-wire towers, which look at a distance like oil derricks.

And as for Venice herself, with the oil's omnipresent reek, faint or heavy, and with her oil wells cheek-by-jowl with houses and shacks and eternally throbbing, as if pulsing the beat of a vast subterranean chemic heart—well, it was only too easy to believe something like Daloway's theory there. It was from the beach by Venice, in 1926, that Aimee Semple McPherson was mysteriously vanished, perhaps teleported, to the sinisterly-named Mexican town of Black Water—Agua Prieta. The coming of the il-

lusioneers to Venice, and of the beatniks—and of the black oil, *aceite prieto*—all seemed alike mindless mechanic movements, or compulsive unconscious movements, whether of molecules or people, and in either case a buttressing of Daloway's wild theory—and at the very least an ironic picture of modern man's industrial predicament.

At all events the black savage sardonicism of that picture, along with Daloway's extreme sensitivity, made it easy to understand why his nerves were rasped acutely by the ballad of the Black Gondola, as the black-smeared lurching beatnik guitarist came wailing it past the thin-walled trailer in the small hours of the night. I heard it only two or three times and the fellow's voice was thick to unintelligibility, though abominably raucous, so it was mostly from Daloway that I got the words of the few scattered lines I remember. They were a half-plagiarized melange of ill-fitted cadences, but with a certain garishly eerie power:

Oh, the Black Gondola's gonna take you for a ride
With a cargo of atom bombs and Atlases and nightmares . . .
The Black Gondola's gonna stop at your door
With a bow-wave of asphalt and a gravel spray . . .
The Black Gondola'll . . . get . . . you . . . yet!

Even of those five lines, the second comes—with a few changes of word—from a short poem by Yeats, the fifth derives from Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo,* while the Black Gondola itself sounds suspiciously like the nihilism-symbolizing Black Freighter in Brecht's and Weill's *The Three-Penny Opera.* Nevertheless, this crude artificial ballad, in which the Black Gondola seems to stand for our modern industrial civilization—and so, very easily, for petroleum too—may well have shaped or at least touched off Daloway's dreams, though his Black Gondola was of a rather different sort.

But before I describe Daloway's dreams, I had better round

out his picture of the power which he believed dominated the modern world and, because he was coming to know too much about it, menaced his own existence.

According to Daloway, oil had intelligence, it had purpose . . . and it also had its agents. These beings, Daloway speculated, might be parts of itself, able to move independently, man-shaped and man-sized for purposes of camouflage, composed of a sort of infernal black ectoplasm or something more material than that—a darkly oleaginous humanoid spawn. Or they might be, at least to begin with, living men who had become oil's worshippers and slaves, who had taken the Black Baptism or the Sable Consecration—as he put it with a strange facetiousness.

"The Black Man in the Witch-cult!" he once said to me abruptly. "I think he was a forerunner—spying out the ground, as it were. We have to remember too that oil was first discovered, so far as the modern world is concerned, in Pennsylvania, the hexing state, though in another corner than the Dutch territory—at Titusville, in fact, in 1859, just on the eve of a great and tragic war that made fullest use of new industrial technologies. It's important to keep in mind, incidentally, that the Black Man wasn't a Negro, which would have made him brown, but simply a man of Caucasian features with a dead-black complexion. Though there are dark brown petroleums, for that matter, and greenish ones. Of course many people used to equate the Black Man with the Devil, but Margaret Murray pretty well refuted that in her *God of the Witches* and elsewhere.

"Which is not to say that the Negro's not mixed up in it," Daloway continued on that occasion, his thoughts darting and twisting and back-tracking as rapidly as they always did. "I think that the racial question and—as with spaceflight—the fact that it's come to the front today, is of crucial significance. Oil's using the blacks as another sort of camouflage."

"What about atomic energy? You haven't brought that in yet," I demanded a little crossly, or more likely nervously.

Daloway gave me a strange penetrating look. "Nuclear energy is, I believe, an entirely separate subterranean mentality," he informed me. "Helium instead of marsh gas. Pitchblende instead of pitch. It's more introspective than oil, but it may soon become more active. Perhaps the conflict of these two vampiristic mentalities will be man's salvation!—though more likely, I'm afraid, only a further insurance of his immediate destruction."

Oil's dark agents not only spied, according to Daloway, but also dispersed clues leading to the discovery of new oil fields and new uses for oil, and on occasion removed interfering and overly perceptive human beings.

"There was Rudolf Diesel for one, inventor of the all-important engine," Daloway asserted. "What snatched him off that little North Sea steamer back in 1913?—just before the first war to prove the supremacy of petrol-powered tanks and armored cars and zeppelins and planes. No one has ever begun to explain that mystery. People didn't realize so well then that oil is as much a thing of the salt water—especially the shallows above the continental shelves—as it is of the shores. I say that Diesel knew too much—and was snatched because he did! The same may have been true of Ambrose Bierce, who disappeared at almost the same time down in the oil lands between Mexico and Texas, though I don't insist on that. The history of the oil industry is studded with what some call legends, but I believe are mostly true accounts, of men who invented new fuels, or made other key discoveries, and then dropped out of existence without another word spoken. And the oil millionaires aren't exactly famous for humanitarianism and civilized cosmopolitan outlook. And every oil field has its tales of savagery and its black ghosts—the fields of Southern California as much as the rest."

I found it difficult—or, more truthfully, uncomfortable—to adjust to Daloway's new mood of piled revelations and wild sudden guesses, in contrast to his previous tight-lipped secrecy, and especially to these last assertions about a black lurking infernal host—here, in the ultramodern, garishly new American Southwest. But not too difficult. I have never been one to be dogmatically skeptical about preternatural agencies, or to say that Southern California cannot have ghosts because its cities are young and philistine and raw that sprawl across so much of the inhospitable desert coast and because the preceding Amerind and Mission cultures were rather meagre—the Indians dull and submissive, the padres austere and cruel. Ghostliness is a matter of atmosphere, not age. I have seen an unsuccessful subdivision in Hollywood that was to me more ghostly than the hoariest building I ever viewed in New England. Only thirty years ago they had scythed and sawed down the underbrush and laid out a few streets and put in sidewalks and a water pipe and a few hydrants. But then the lot-buyers and home-builders never materialized and now the place is a wilderness of towering weeds and brush, with the thin-topped streets eroded so that at some points they are a dozen feet below the hanging under-eaten sidewalks, and the water pipe is exposed and rusting and each hydrant is in the midst of a yellow thicket and the only living things to be seen are the tiny darting lizards and an occasional swift sinuous snake or velvet dark shifty tarantula and whatever else it is that rustles the dry near-impassable vegetation.

Southern California is full of such ghost-districts and ghost-towns despite the spate of new building and hill-chopping and swamp-draining that has come with the rocket plants and television and the oil refineries and the sanatoria and the think-factories and all the other institutions contributing to the area's exploding population.

Or I could let you look down into Potrero Canyon, an eroded

earthquake crack which cuts through populous Pacific Palisades, another postal address in Los Angeles. But I could hardly lead you down into it, because its sides are everywhere too steep and choked with manzanita and sumac and scrub oak, where they don't fall away altogether to the clay notch of its bottom. Trackless and almost impenetrable, Potrero Canyon dreams there mysteriously, the home of black foxes and coyotes and silently-soaring sinister hawks, oblivious to the bright costly modern dwellings at its top—"that deep romantic chasm . . . a savage place . . . holy and enchanted," to borrow the words of Coleridge.

Or I could invite you on any clear day to look out across the Pacific at the mysterious, romantically crested Santa Barbara Islands—all of their 218,000 acres, save for Santa Catalina's 55,000, forbidden territory by Government ukase or private whim.

Even the earth of Southern California, sedimentary, lacking a strongly knit rocky skeleton, seems instinct with strange energies hardly known in geologically stabler areas and lending a weird plausibility to Daloway's theory of sentient, seeking, secretive oil. Every year there are unforseen earth-falls—and falls of houses too—and mud-slides that drown dwellings and engulf cars. Only in 1958 one of them sent half of a hundred-foot-high hill slumping forward to bury the Pacific Coast Highway; they were more than six months filling in beach, trucks running rock night and day, to get a bed on which to lay the road around it.

Once, not too long ago, they called that road Roosevelt Highway, but now it is Cabrillo Highway or even El Camino Real. Just as the street names, straining for glamor, have progressed from Spanish to British to Italian and back to Spanish again, and the favorite subdivision names from Palisades to Heights to Knolls to Acres to Rivieras to Mesas to Condominiums. In Southern California, seemingly, history can run backwards, with an unconscious fierce sardonicism.

And then there are all the theosophists and mystics and oc-

cultists, genuine and sham, who came swarming to Southern California in the early decades of the century. A good many of those were sensitive to the uncanny forces here, I think, and were drawn by them—as well as by the lavish gypsy camp of the movie-makers, the bankrolls of the retired and the elderly, and a health-addict's climate, the last somewhat marred by chilly damp western winds and by burningly dry Santa Anas, threatening vast brush fires, and now by smog. And the occultists keep swarming here—the I Am folk with their mysterious mountain saints and glittering meetings in evening dress; the barefoot followers of Krishna Venta and the mysterious errand-of-mercy appearances they made at local disasters and finally their own great Box Canyon mystery-explosion of December 7, 1958, which claimed ten lives, including—possibly—their leader's; the Rosicrucians and Theosophists; Katherine Tingley and Annie Besant; the latter's World Master, Krishnamurti, still living quietly in Ojai Valley; the high-minded Self-Realization movement, the dead body of whose founder Paramhansa Yogananda resisted corruption for at least twenty days, as testified by Forest Lawn morticians; Edgar Rice Burroughs, who fictionalized the fabulous worlds of theosophy on Mars and is immortalized in Tarzana; the flying-saucer cultists with their great desert conventions; beautiful Gloria Lee listening raptly to her man on Jupiter—there is no end to them.

So when Daloway began to rehearse to me his fearful suspicions, or beliefs rather, about oil's black ghosts—or acolytes, or agents, or budded-off black ameboid humanoid creatures, or whatever they exactly might be—I was uneasily sympathetic to the idea if not consciously credulous. Good Lord, if there could be such things as ghosts, it would be easy to imagine them in Venice—ghosts of the Channel Indians and those whom the Indians called "the Ancient Ones," ghosts of Cabrillo's men when he discovered this coast in 1542 before he died on windswept for-

bidden San Miguel, westernmost of the Santa Barbara Islands; ghosts from the harsh theocratic Mission days and the lawless Mexican years that followed, ghosts of the Spanish and Yankee Dons, ghosts of gold-seekers and vigilantes, anarchists and strike-breakers, and ghosts of the gamblers and gondoliers and the other folk from the illusion-packed years. Especially now that the illusions are edging back again: in the swampy south end of Venice they've just built a great marina or small-boat harbor, with fingers of sea interlocking fingers of low-lying land and with all sorts of facilities for luxurious dockside apartments and homes—if the buyers materialize and if they fully subdue the strange tidal waves which first troubled the marina. There is even talk of linking the marina to the old canal system and cleaning that up and filling it all year round and perhaps bringing back the gondolas. Though at the same time, by a cackling irony, a battle goes on in the courts as to whether or not industry may be licensed to drill for offshore oil, setting up its derricks in the shallows of the Pacific, just beyond the breakers that beat against the beaches of Venice—Wells' Martians submerged to their chests in waves. In our modern world, illusion and greed generally walk hand in hand.

So it was by no means with complete skepticism about his wild theory of black buried oil and its creatures that I listened to Daloway's accounts of his dreams of the Black Gondola, or rather his dream, since it was always basically the same, with minor variations. I will tell it one time in his words, as he most fully told it, remembering too how I heard it—in his cramped trailer, late at night, perhaps just after the passing of the wailing drunken guitarist, no other sound but the faint distant rattle of the breaking waves and the slow throb of the oil pump a few yards beyond the thin metal wall with the small half-curtained window in it, the edges of my mind crawling with thoughts of the black preter-

natural creatures that might be on watch outside that same wall and pressing even closer.

"I'm always sitting in the Black Gondola when the dream begins," Daloway said. "I'm facing the prow and my hands grip the gunwales to either side. Apparently I've just left the trailer and got aboard her, though I never remember that part, for we're in the canal outside, which is full to the top of its banks, and we're headed down the middle of it toward the Grand Canal. There's oil on my clothes, I can feel it, but I don't know how it got there.

"It's night, of course, dark night. The street lights are all out. There's just enough glow in the sky to silhouette the houses. No light shows in any of their windows, only the glimmer coming between them—a glimmer no brighter than the phosphorescence that paints the breakers some summer nights when the sewage breeds too big an algae crop and there's a fish-kill. Yet the glimmer and glow are enough to show the tiny ripples angling out from the gondola's prow as we move along.

"It's a conventional gondola, narrow and with a high prow, but it's black—sooty black—no highlights reflect from it. You know, gondola also means coal car, those black open-topped cars on the railroads. I've ridden the freights often enough—perhaps there's a connection there.

"I can hear the swish and the faint fluid-muffled thump of the gondolier's pole against the bottom as he drives us along. It's thudding in the same slow rhythm as the pumping of the oil wells. But I cannot look around at him—I daren't! The fact is, I'm frozen with terror, both of the voiceless gondolier standing behind me and of our destination, though I cannot yet conceive or name that. My grip on the gunwales tightens convulsively.

"Sometimes I try to visualize what the gondolier looks like—never in my dreams, but at times like this—what his appearance would be if I had the courage to turn my head, or if the dream

changed so that I was forced to look at him. And then I get a glimpse of a thin figure about seven feet tall. His shoulders are twisted and his head, bent forward, is hooded. The rest of his clothing is tight-fitting, down to his long narrow sharply pointed shoes. His big long-fingered hands grip the black pole strongly. And everywhere he himself is black, not dull black like the gondola, but gleaming black as if he were thickly coated with black oil which has just the faintest greenish sheen to it—as if he were some infernal merman newly swum up from the depths of a great oil ocean.

"But in my dream I dare not look or even think of him. We turn into the Grand Canal and head toward the Marina, but there are no lights there or on the heights of Playa del Rey beyond. There are no stars in the sky, only that exceedingly faint distant shimmer. I watch for the lights of a plane mounting from the International Airport. Even one tiny red-green pair moving across the sky out to sea so far away would be a great comfort to me. But none comes.

"The reek of the oil is strong. (In how many dreams do we experience odors? This is the only one where it's happened to me.) We pass under two of the bridges. The glimmer shows me their curving ruin-notched outlines and one or two ragged fragments of cement dangling by the wires imbedded in them.

"The reek grows stronger. And now at last I notice a change in our movement, although the bow ripples have the same angles and the muffled thud of the pole has the same slow rhythm. The change is simply that the gondola has settled a little deeper in the water, not more than two or three inches.

"I ponder the problem. Nothing has entered the boat—nothing before me that I have seen or behind me that I have felt. I scrape my feet against the bottom—it is dry, no water has entered. Yet the gondola is riding deeper. Why?

"The reek grows stronger still—suffocatingly so, almost. The

gondola settles still deeper in the water, so deep that the ends of my fingers on the outside of the gunwales are immersed. And now the problem is solved. Touch tells me that the gondola is riding not in water, but in oil. Or rather in an ever-thickening layer of oil floating on top of the water. The thicker the layer gets, the deeper the boat sinks."

Daloway stared at me sharply. "That would actually be true, you know," he interjected. "A boat would ride very high in a sea of mercury, because the stuff is heavier than lead, but low in a sea of gasoline or petroleum—sink, in fact, if it hadn't enough freeboard—because the stuff is light. Petroleum may have as little as seven-tenths the weight of water. Which is odd considering the thick greases we get out of it. Yet thick greases like vaseline float.

"And it would be true, too, that a boat riding in a layer of oil floating atop water—an oil-layer thinner than the boat's draught—would sink proportionately deeper as the layer got thicker, until it was riding wholly in oil. Then it would steady—or sink for good.

"The layer of oil in which my gondola is riding is getting thicker, at all events," he went on, resuming the narration of his dream.

"I get the impression that we are reaching a length of the Grand Canal in which there is nothing but oil. The black stuff begins to pour over the gunwales in a thin sleek waterfall. Yet the Black Gondola is moving ahead as steadily and strongly as ever and even more swiftly. We are like an airplane taking off—downward. Or like a submarine diving.

"I nerve myself to loosen my grip on the gunwales and make a wild plunge toward the bank, though I fear I will drown in even that short distance. But at that instant the gondolier's pole comes down firmly on my right shoulder, projecting perhaps a

yard ahead of me and pinning me to my seat. Though its injunction not to move is more hypnotic, or magical, than physical, it is absolute. I cannot stir, or break my grip on the submerging gondola.

"I know this is Death. I peer yearningly one last time for the lights of a mounting airplane. Then as the oil, moving past me in an unending sleep caress, mounts to my face, I shut my lips, I hold my breath, I close my eyes.

"The oil covers me. I am aware in those last paralyzed seconds that we are moving still more swiftly through the black stuff. Yet the solid oil rushing past does not unseat me from the gondola, or even tug at me. The effect is always of a great unending caress.

"Death and Agony do not come. I wait for the urge to breathe to become overpowering. There is no urge. The straining muscles of my chest and jaw and face relax.

"I open my eyes. I can see through the oil. It has become my medium of vision. By a darkly green shimmering I can see that, still descending and even more swiftly now, we are traversing a great rocky cavern filled with oil. Evidently we plunged into it from the Grand Canal, by way of some unsuspected gate or lock, while I waited with closed eyes for my death-spasm.

"During the same period of blindness, the Black Gondolier has moved from behind me and taken up a position below and a little ahead of the Black Gondola, dragging it along like some mythic slim long dolphin or infernal merman. Now and again past the forward gunwales I glimpse, greenly outlined in mid-kick, the black soles of his long narrow sharply pointed feet—or bifid narrow tail-fin.

"I say to myself, 'I have received the Black Baptism. I have partaken of the Black Communion.'

"Our speed ever increasing, we pass through weird grottos, we twist and turn through narrow passageways whose irregular walls

flash with precious gems and nuggets of gold and copper, we soar across great vaults domed with crusty salt crystals glittering like thick-packed diamonds.

"I know, even in my dream, that this picture of underground oil in vast interconnected lakes and tanks is false by all geology —that untapped oil is mixed with earth and porous rocks and shales and sand, not free—but the picture and experience remain the same and exquisitely real. Perhaps I have suffered a size-change, become microscopic. Perhaps I have suffered a sense-change and see things symbolically. Perhaps geology is false.

"Our speed becomes impossible. We flash about like a single black corpuscle in the oil plasma of the great world-creature. I know, intuitively, that one instant we are beneath Caracas; the next, Ploesti; then Baku, Iraq, Iran, India, Indonesia, Argentina, Colombia, Oklahoma, Algeria, Antarctica, Atlantis . . .

"It is more as if we were flashing through black outer space, softly gleaming with galaxies, than through earth's depths.

"There is a feeling of nightmare-ride now . . . wild whirlings and spiralings . . . a blurred glitter . . . a blessed sense of fatigue . . .

"Yet at the same time I become aware that the white-green sinuous gleamings I see are the nerves of oil, which stretch everywhere, to every tiniest well; that I am approaching the great brain; that I will soon see God.

"And I never, even in this nightmare phase, lose the awareness of the close presence of my conductor. From time to time I still glimpse, in frozen instants, standing out sharply against the glistening green, the black shapes of his long narrow sharply pointed lower extremities.

"There the dream ends. I can no longer endure its flashing transitions. I am outwearied. I awake sweating and groaning or fall into a deeper dreamless sleep from which I slowly arouse hours later, lethargic and spent."

As he finished his narrative he would generally give me a tired questioning look, smiling thinly as if at the extravagance of it all, but with a loneliness in his eyes that made me think of him looking hopelessly in his dream for the lights of a distant plane as the Black Gondola went under.

That was Daloway's dream. To describe my reactions to it is more difficult. Remember that he did not tell it to me all at once, but only sketchily at first with an air of, "Here's a ridiculous dream;" later much more seriously, putting in the details, building the picture. Also remember that he dreamed it about six times during the period of our friendship, and that each time the dream was somewhat fuller and he told me more of it—and between times revealed to me more of his wild theory of world oil, bit by bit, and revealed, bit by bit, too, how deeply he believed or at least felt this theory. Remember finally that his nerves were in pretty good shape when he first told me the dream, but pretty bad toward the last.

I seem to recall that the first time or two, we both poked at the dream psychoanalytically. There were obvious birth and death and sex symbols in it: trips through fluid, return to the womb, the caress of oil, the gondolier's punting pole, passage under bridges, twisting tunnels, difficulties in breathing, flying sensations, all the usual stuff. I think he advanced the rather far-fetched notion that his disappearing into strangling darkness with an unknown menacing male indicated unconscious fears of homosexuality, while I championed the prosier explanation that the whole horror of oil might merely stand for his resentment at having to work as a mechanic to earn a living. We speculated as to whether the racial question might not be tied up in it—Daloway had a touch of Indian blood—and tried to identify the person in his early life whom the Black Gondolier might represent.

But the last time he told it to me, we just looked at each other for a long while and I went over stoopingly and drew the curtain

fully across the little window in the side of the low-ceilinged trailer toward the oil well and the night, and we began to talk about something else, something trivial.

By that time, you see, he'd had the first of his outbursts of more active fear. It had been touched off by a rumour or report that petroleum was leaking into the Grand Canal through some underground fissure, perhaps from a defective well. He wanted us to walk over to the spot and have a look, but the sun set before we got there and we couldn't see any lights indicating men at work or hunting for the leak, and he suddenly decided it would be too much trouble and we turned back. The dark comes quite quickly in Venice—Los Angeles is near enough to the Tropic of Cancer so you can see all of Scorpius and the Southern Crown too, while Fomalhaut rides high in the southern sky. And Venice's narrow streets, half of them only pedestrian passageways blocked off to cars, swiftly grow gloomy. I remember that going back we hurried a bit, stumbling through sand and around rubbish, but hardly enough to account for the way Daloway was gasping by the time we reached his trailer.

Once during that unconfessed flight, while we were crossing an empty lot by the Grand Canal, he stopped me by catching hold of my elbow and then he led us in a circle around a slightly darker stretch of ground—almost as if he feared it were a scummed-over dust-camouflaged oil pool which might engulf us. You do run into such things in oil fields, though I've never heard of them in Venice.

And two or three times, later that night, Daloway made excuses to go out and scan the light-patched darkness toward the Grand Canal, almost as if he expected to see tongues of petroleum runneling toward us across the low ground, or other shapes approaching.

To quiet his nerves and put the thing on a more rational

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basis, I pointed out that, as he himself had told me, natural oil leakages are by no means uncommon in the Pacific Southland. Ocean bathers are apt to get bits of tar on their feet and they usually blame it on modern industry and its poorly-disposed wastes, seldom discovering that it is asphalt from undersea leakages which were recurring regularly long before Cabrillo's time. Another example, this one in the heart of western Los Angeles, is La Brea tar pits, which trapped many saber-toothed tigers and their prey, as the asphalt-impregnated bones testify. (There's a tautology there: *brea* means tar. Other glamorous-sounding old Los Angeles street names have equally ugly or homely meanings: Las Pulgas means "the fleas," Temescal means "sweat house," while La Ciénega, street of the wonder-restaurants, means "the swamp.")

My effort was ill-considered. Daloway's nerves were not quieted. He muttered, "Damned oil killing animals too! Well, at least it got the exploiters as well as the exploited," and he stepped out again to scan the night, the growl of the pump growing suddenly louder as he opened the door.

The report of the petroleum leakage turned out to have been much exaggerated. I don't recall hearing how they fixed it up, if they ever did. But it gave me an uncomfortable insight into the state of Daloway's nerves—and didn't do my own any good, either.

Then there was the disastrous business of Daloway's car. He bought an old jalopy for almost nothing at about this time and put it in good shape, expending most of his dwindling cash-reserve buying essential replacements at second hand. I inwardly applauded—I thought the manual work would be therapeutic. Incidentally, Daloway repeatedly refused my offers of a small loan.

Then one evening I dropped over to find the car gone and

Daloway just returned from a long, half hitch-hiked trudge and pitifully strained and shaky. It seemed he'd been driving the car along the San Bernadino Freeway when a huge kerosene truck just ahead of him had jackknifed in an underpass and split its tank and spilled its load and caught afire. I'd heard about the accident on the radio a few hours earlier—it tied up the freeway for almost half a day. Daloway had managed to bring his car to a swerving stop in the swift-shooting oil. Two other cars, also skidding askew, crashed him lightly from behind, preventing his car's escape. He managed to leap out and run away before the fire got to it—the truck driver escaped too, miraculously—but Daloway's car, uninsured of course, was burned to a shriveled black ruin along with several others.

Daloway never admitted to me straight out that he had been escaping from Venice and LA, leaving them for good, when that catastrophe on the San Bernadino Freeway thwarted him. I suppose he was ashamed to admit he would go away without telling me his plans or even saying goodby. (I would have understood, I think: some partings have to be made with ruthless suddenness, before the fire of decision burns out.) But a big old suitcase that had used to stand inside the door of the trailer was gone and I imagine it burned with the car.

Later the police neatly turned all this into an argument for their theory that Daloway's ultimate departure from Venice was voluntary. He'd once started to leave without informing me, they pointed out—and would have, except for the accident. His money was running out. (There was a month's rent owing on the trailer at the end.) He had a history of briefly-held jobs alternating with periods of roving or dropping out of sight—or so they claimed. What more natural than that he should have seized on some sudden opportunity or inspiration to decamp?

I had to admit they had a point, of sorts. It turned out that

the police had an old grudge against Daloway: they'd once suspected him of being mixed up in the marijuana traffic. Well, that may have been true, I suppose; he admitted to me having smoked hemp a few times, years before.

I used to carp at horror stories in which the protagonist could at any time have departed from the focus of horror—generally some lonely dismal spot, like Daloway's trailer—but instead insisted on staying there, though shaking with fear, until he was engulfed. Since my experience with Daloway, I've changed my mind. Daloway did try to leave. He made that one big effort with the car and it was foiled. He lacked the energy to make another. He became fatalistic. And perhaps the urge to stay and see what would happen—always strong, I imagine, curiosity being a fundamental human trait—at that point became somewhat stronger than the opposing urge to flee.

That evening after the freeway accident I stayed with him a long time, trying to cheer him up and get him to look at the accident as a chance occurrence, not some cat-and-mousing malignancy aimed directly and solely at him. After a while I thought I was succeeding.

"You know, I hung back of that truck for fully ten minutes, afraid to pass, though I had enough speed," he admitted. "I kept thinking something would happen while I was passing it."

"You see," I said. "If you'd passed it right off, you wouldn't have been involved in the accident. You courted danger by sticking close behind a vehicle that you probably knew, at least subconsciously, was behaving dangerously. We can all have accidents that way."

"No," Daloway replied, shaking his head. "Then the accident would have come earlier. Don't you understand?—it was an *oil* truck! And if I had got by it, the oil would have stopped me some way, I'm convinced of that now—even if it had had to burst

out in a spontaneous gusher beside the highway and skid my car into a wreck! Remember how the oil burst out of Signal Hill in the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and flowed inches thick down the streets?"

"Well, at any rate you escaped with your life," I pointed out, trying to salvage a little of my imagined advantage.

"It didn't want to kill me there," Daloway countered gloomily. "It just wanted to herd me back. It's got something else in store for me."

"Now look here, Daloway," I burst out, a little angry and trying to sound more so, "if we all argued that way, there wouldn't be any trifling mischance that couldn't be twisted into a murder-attempt by some weird power. Just this morning I found a little gas-leak in my kitchen. Am I to suppose—?"

"It's after you too now!" he interrupted me, paling and starting to his feet. "Natural gas—petroleum—the same thing—siblings. Keep off me, it's not safe! I've warned you before. You better get out now."

I wouldn't agree to that, of course, but the couple hours more I stayed with Daloway didn't improve his mood, or mine either. He set himself to analyzing last year's Los Angeles catastrophe, when a three hundred million gallon water reservoir broke its thick earthen wall in the Baldwin Hills and did tens of millions of dollars worth of damage, floating and tumbling cars and flooding thousands of homes and smashing hundreds of buildings with a deluge of water and mud—though only a few lives were lost because of efficient warning by motorcycle police and a helicopter cruising with a bullhorn.

"There were oil wells by the reservoir," he said. "Even the purblind officials admit that soil subsidence from oil drilling may have started the leaks. But do you remember the east-west bounds of the flood? From La Brea to La Ciénega—the tar to the

swamp! And what was the substance lining the reservoir? What was the stuff that craftily weakened from point to point and then gave way at the crucial moment, triggering the thing? Asphalt!"

"Men did the drilling, Daloway," I argued wearily. "Asphalt is inert . . ."

"Inert!" he almost snarled back at me. "Yes, like the uranium atom! What moves the dowsers' wands? Do you still think that men run things up here?"

By the time I left I was glad to be gone and disgusted with myself for wasting too much time, and very irked at Daloway too and glad I had an engagement the next evening that would prevent me from visiting him.

For the first time in weeks, going home that night, I wondered if Daloway mightn't be an all-out psychopath. At the same time I found myself so nervous about the very faint stench of oil in my car that I opened all the windows, though there was a chilly fog, and even then I kept worrying about the motor and the oil in it, as it heated. Damn it, the man was poisoning my life with his paranoid suspicions and dreads! He was right, I'd better keep off him.

But the next night a thunderstroke woke me about two, there was rain sizzling and rattling on the roof and gurgling loudly in the resonating metal drain pipes, and right away I was thinking how much louder it must be pounding on Daloway's trailer and wondering how apt lightning striking an oil well was to cause a fire—things like that. It was our first big downpour of the season, rather early in the fall too, and it kept on and on, a regular cloudburst, and the lightning too. I must have listened to them for a couple of hours, thinking about Daloway and his wild ideas, which didn't seem so wild now with the storm going, and picturing Venice with its canals filling fast and with its low crowded houses and oil wells and derricks under the fist of the rain and the lightning's shining spear.

I think it was chiefly the thought of the canals being full that finally got me up and dressed around five and off in the dark to see how Daloway was faring. The rain had stopped by now and of course the thunder too, but there were signs of the storm everywhere—my headlights showed me falling branches, fans of eroded mud and gravel crossing the street, gutters still brimming, a few intersections still shallowly flooded, and a couple of wide buttons of water still pouring up from manholes whose heavy tops had been displaced by the pressure from brim-filled flumes.

Hardly any private automobiles were abroad yet, but I met a couple of fire trucks and light-and-power trucks and cars off on emergency errands, and when I got to Venice, Daloway's end was dark—there'd evidently been a major power failure there. I kept on, a bit cautious now that my headlights were just about the only illumination there was. Venice seemed like a battered city of the dead—a storm-bombed ruin—I hardly saw a soul or a light, only a candle back of a window here and there. But the streets weren't flooded too deep anywhere along my usual route and just as I sensed the eastern sky paling a little I crossed the narrow high-humped bridge—no need to tap my horn this time!—and swung into my usual parking place and stopped my car and switched off the lights and got out.

I must be very careful to get things right now.

My first impression, which the motor of my car had masked up to now, was of the great general silence. All the sounds of the storm were gone except for the tiny occasional drip of the last drop off a leaf or a roof.

The oil well by Daloway's trailer was still pumping, though. But there was an odd wheezy hiss in it I'd never heard before, and after each hiss a faint tinkly spatter, as of drops hitting sheet metal.

I walked over to the edge of the canal. There was just enough

light for me to manage that safely. I stooped beside it. Just as I'd imagined, it was full to the brim.

Then I heard the other sounds: a faint rythmic swish and, spaced about three seconds apart, the faint muffled thuds that would be made by a gondolier's pole.

I stared down the black canal, my heart suddenly pounding and my neck cold. For a moment I thought I saw, in murkiest silhouette, the outlines of a gondola, with gondoliers and passenger, going away from me, but I simply couldn't be sure.

Fences blocked the canal for me that way, even if I'd had the courage to follow, and I ran back to my car for my flashlight. Halfway back with it, I hesitated, wondering if I shouldn't drive the car to the canal edge and use my high headlight beams, but I wasn't sure I could position it right.

I kept onto the canal and directed my flashlight beam down it.

In the first flare of light and vision, I again thought I saw the Black Gondola, much smaller now, near the turn into the Grand Canal.

But the beam wavered and when I got it properly directed again—a matter of a fraction of a second—the canal seemed empty. I kept swinging my flashlight a little, up and down, side to side, for quite a few seconds and studying the canal, but it stayed empty.

I was half inclined to jump into my car and take the long swing around to the road paralleling the Grand Canal. I did do that, somewhat later on, but now I decided to go to the trailer first. After all, I hadn't made any noise to speak of and Daloway might well be there asleep—it would take only seconds to check. Everything I had heard and seen so far might conceivably be imagination, the auditory and visual impressions had both been very faint, though they still seemed damnably real.

There was a hint of pink in the east now. I heard again that

unfamiliar hissing wheeze from the oil well, with subsequent faint splatter, and I paused to direct my light at it and then, after a bit, at the wall of Daloway's trailer.

Something had gone wrong with the pump so that it had sprung a leak and with every groaning stroke a narrow stream of petroleum was sprayed against the wall of Daloway's trailer, blotching it darkly, and through the little window, which stood open.

It was never afterwards established whether a lightning stroke had something to do with this failure of the valves of the pump, though several people living around there later assured me that two of the lightning strokes had been terrific, seeming to hit their roofs. Personally I've always had the feeling that the lightning unlocked *something*.

The door to the trailer was shut, but not locked. I opened it and flashed my light around the walls. Daloway wasn't anywhere there, nobody was.

The first thing I flashed my light steadily on was Daloway's bunk under the little open window. At that moment there came the hissing wheeze and oil rattled against the wall of the trailer and some came through the window, pattering softly on the rough brown blankets, adding a little to the great black stain on them. The oil stank.

Then I directed my flashlight another way . . . . and was frozen by horror.

What I'd heard and seen by the bank of the canal might have been imagination. One has to admit he can always be fooled along the faint borderlines of sensation.

But this that I saw now was starkly and incontrovertible real and material.

The accident to the oil pump, no matter how sardonically grim and suggestive in view of Daloway's theories, could be . . . merely an accident.

But this that I saw now could be no accident. It was either evidence of a premeditated supernormal malignancy, or—as the police insist—of a carefully planned and executed hoax. Incidentally, the police looked at me speculatively as they made this last suggestion.

After a while I got control of myself to the point where I could trace what I saw to its ending and then back again, still using my flashlight to supplement the gathering dawn.

A little later I made the round-about car trip I mentioned earlier to the Grand Canal and searched furiously along it, running down to its bank at several spots and venturing out on a couple of the ruined bridges.

I saw no signs of any boat or body at all, or of any oil either, for that matter, though the odor is always strong there.

Then I went to the police. Almost at once, a little to my shame, I found myself resorting to the subterfuge of emphasizing the one point that my friend Daloway had an almost crazily obsessive fear of drowning in the Grand Canal and that this might be a clue to his disappearance.

I guess I had to take that line. The police were at least willing to give some serious attention of the possibility of a demented suicide, whereas they could hardly have been expected to give any to the hypothesis of a black, inanimate, ancient, almost ubiquitous liquid engineering a diabolical kidnapping.

Later they assured me that they had inspected the canal and found no evidence of bodies or sunken boats in it. They didn't drag it, at least not all of it.

That ended the investigation for them. As for the real and material evidence back at the trailer, well, as I've said at least twice before, the police insist that was a hoax, perpetuated either by Daloway or myself.

And now the investigation is ended for me too. I dare not torture my mind any longer with a theory that endows with pur-

poseful life the deepest buried darkness, that makes man and his most vaunted technological achievements the sardonic whim of that darkness and invests it with a hellish light visible only to its servitors, or to those about to become its slaves. No, I dare no longer think in this direction, no matter how conclusive the evidence I saw with my own eyes. I almost flipped when I saw it, and I *will* flip if I go on thinking about it.

What that evidence was—what I saw back at the trailer when I directed my flash another way, froze in horror, and later traced the thing from end to end—was simply this: a yard-long black straight indentation in the bank of the canal by Daloway's trailer, as if cut by one end of the keel of an oil-drenched boat, and then, leading from that point to Daloway's oil-soaked bunk and back again—a little wider and more closely spaced on the way back, as if something were being carried—*the long narrow sharply pointed footprints, marked in blackest thickest oil, of the Black Gondolier.*

J. VERNON SHEA (1912-) is the son of a professional magician. Though he was born in Kentucky, he has spent most of his life in Pennsylvania and Ohio. He was in the Army Medical Corps in World War II, and is currently employed in Cleveland, Ohio. He began to write at 14, and has edited two anthologies in the domain of the macabre—*Strange Desires* and *Strange Barriers.*

The Old Lady's Room

J. VERNON SHEA

It was after midnight when Roger Crell returned to his rooming house. On the landing he observed that there was still a light in the Herseys' kitchen—the Herseys were his landlords—and he climbed the stairs with elaborate caution, for he didn't want them to know that he had been drinking again.

Nevertheless, he stumbled on the top step and had his usual difficulty in finding the keyhole. When were they ever going to get a larger bulb for that dimly lit hallway? The door finally swung open; he switched on the light and was starting to unzip his jacket when he stopped dead still.

There was someone in his room. Seated in his chair by the window was an old lady of about seventy. Her gray hair was

swept up into an old-fashioned bun, and her eyes through thick glasses were intent upon the crotcheting in her lap. She wore a lavender dress that reached almost to the floor and a startlingly white cardigan was gathered together by a large red cameo at her neck.

She did not look up as he entered but continued her crotcheting with practiced fingers. Roger Crell leaned heavily against the door frame and rubbed his eyes as if to dislodge the unexpected sight. His head was swimming. "What are you doing here? Who are you?" he tried to say, but nothing came out but a series of grunts.

He turned and hurried down the stairs. He rapped heavily upon the Herseys' door.

After a moment he could hear someone approaching the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me. Roger—Roger Crell."

"Oh, Mr. Crell!" The door was opened, and Mrs. Hersey, drawing a robe closer to her, looked at him inquisitively.

"Who is she?" Roger Crell demanded. "What's that old woman doing in my room?"

"What old woman? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You mean you didn't let her into my room?"

"What's this all about?" Mr. Hersey appeared in the doorway beside his wife. He surveyed Crell coldly. "Mr. Crell, I thought I warned you that we don't tolerate drinking here."

"Who's drunk? I just had one drink. . . . What are you going to do about that old woman in my room?"

"Now, Mr. Crell, be reasonable. You know we never permit any one to go into our roomers' rooms. Certainly not at this hour of the night. There couldn't be an old lady in your room."

"I know you think I'm drunk, but I saw her as plainly as I'm seeing you. There she was, sitting in the chair by the window,

with some needles in her hand, an old woman in a white sweater with some kind of brooch at her neck."

The Herseys exchanged glances. Did he imagine it, or was there was a touch of fear in their look?

"There's only one way to settle this," said Mr. Hersey. "We'll go upstairs and see if we can find an old woman."

Mr. Hersey led the way up the stairs, with Crell at his heels, and Mrs. Hersey following them with what seemed to Crell like reluctance.

The light was still on in Crell's room. The chair by the window was empty.

"See, what did I tell you? Where's your old woman? Is she in the chair? On the bed? Or is she in the clothes closet?" Mr. Hersey walked about the room with heavy irony. "Do you see anyone? Mr. Crell, you've got to cut down on your drinking or we'll have to ask you to leave."

"I don't know where she went to, but she was here," Crell insisted doggedly. He had observed that Mrs. Hersey was leaning against the wall with her hand to her head. She had looked about the room when she had first entered with an expression half of expectancy, half of fear, and her look now was one of relief.

"She was here, all right."

Nothing untoward happened in the next few weeks. Roger Crell, his drinking curtailed, was beginning to accept Mr. Hersey's version of the matter. He *had* been drinking much too heavily for weeks, and it was possible that what he had seen was but an hallucination or the beginning of *delirium tremens*. Certainly the old woman had done or said nothing. Was it reasonable to assume that she would be sitting in the *dark*—for there had been no light in the room until he had entered and switched the light on-—in a stranger's room at that hour? She was no one he had ever seen before in his life. He had inquired among the

other roomers, and no one had seen such a visitor or heard anything unusual in his room. How could she possibly have got in without a key?

But his equanimity was shattered one evening when he came home and detected an unusual odor in the room. It was faint, but it seemed to pervade the room: not unpleasant, a kind of perfume. He was reminded of the smell he had known as a boy in his grandmother's house, from the sachets she kept in her bureau drawers.

"Mrs. Hersey, did you spill some perfume in my room—or put some there for some reason?" he asked his landlady.

"Of course not, Mr. Crell. Why would I do that?"

"Come upstairs and see if you can't smell something."

"Really, Mr. Crell. You get some of the strangest ideas."

But she permitted him to lead her upstairs. The odor, if anything, was stronger now. Mrs. Hersey sniffed deeply. He thought that apprehension flashed across her face.

"I don't smell a thing, Mr. Crell." But she crossed the room and threw open the window. "Here, this room needs airing. How you men can stay in a room with the windows down!"

It was about a week later that Roger Crell found the cardigan. It was flung across the back of the chair by the window as if someone had left it there hurriedly upon hearing his step upon the stairs. He recognized it immediately. It needed only a deep red brooch to complement its startling white.

He examined his room carefully and opened his door to see if he could see a retreating figure in the hallway or upon the stairs. There was, of course, no one to be seen.

No need to call Mrs. Hersey. She would deny having put the cardigan there and would probably accuse him of having purchased it himself to collaborate his story. On an impulse, he put

the cardigan upon a hanger in his clothes closet. Perhaps it would give Mrs. Hersey a turn when she came into his room to clean.

The next day the cardigan was missing from the closet and Mrs. Hersey made no mention of it whatsoever.

Roger Crell awoke from a deep sleep with a feeling of unease. He looked at the alarm clock on his bedside table and saw that the luminous hands registered 12:32. Something had awakened him, of that he was sure. He looked about him, listened apprehensively. After a while he became aware of an unusual sound, something heard barely above the level of consciousness. A very faint sound, not far away from him. He listened acutely. A clicking sound, somehow hollow, somehow wooden.

A faint light came from the window, and with its aid he thought he discerned a misty figure in the chair. The figure sat stiffly, but its hands were busily engaged with something. Something long and white extended from the lap of the figure, something the hands were worrying, and now he saw the busy, busy needles.

He got up slowly from the bed, his throat suddenly dry, and switched on the light.

The old lady sat there as he had seen her before. He approached her slowly, forcing his feet along. He felt zero at the bone. He approached her slowly, for he knew what she was.

And now she turned to look at him. He wished that she hadn't, for part of her face was missing. Where her right cheek should have been, he looked down into bone. The eyes behind the thick glasses blazed with malignancy.

He approached her slowly. He had been sober for weeks now, and he was filled with a cold desperation. He wasn't going to allow an old woman, or what had been an old woman, to drive him from his room. He reached out to touch her.

She vanished. Suddenly, completely, she was gone from the chair. Only the crotcheting remained, in a sickly white bundle at his feet.

He didn't tell the Herseys. They wouldn't have believed him. He started drinking again, anything to still his shaking hands. He could scarcely believe now that he had summoned up enough courage to approach the figure. It was an unrecognizable Roger Crell, like the vigorous daredevil of his youth. He felt safe now, here in the obscurity of bars, safe from the past, safe from the harpy who had divorced him. Here no one could make demands upon him.

He had flung down a challenge to the old lady, tacitly recognized. Therefore he was not surprised in the subsequent weeks to find that challenge accepted. Now he was continually finding the old lady's effects in his drawers or scattered about the room: balls of thread, needles, a button hook, sachets of perfume, a pin cushion with a faded legend (*Souvenir of Niagara Falls*), a small purse with a few old-sized large dollar bills, bits of lace, worthless mementoes. Sometimes he would even find some of her old clothing hanging in the closet, and he would throw it out immediately.

When the cardigan reappeared, this time in the clothes closet, with the cameo brooch still attached to one side, he took it down to Mrs. Hersey, half expecting it to disappear along the way.

"Tell me, who was she?" he asked.

At sight of the brooch Mrs. Hersey looked suddenly ill. She sat down heavily in the kitchen chair and the color drained from her face.

"Where did you get that?" she breathed.

"Where I've been getting all the old woman's clothes—scattered all over my room. There's no use denying it now. Who was she?"

"She was my husband's mother, and that was her room."

"She's dead now?"

Mrs. Hersey nodded. "She died over a year ago. We've been having trouble renting her room ever since. You're not the first one who's complained of seeing her. She just won't leave! She never would let go of anything."

"You didn't like her?"

"I hated her." Mrs. Hersey spoke matter-of-factly. "She tried to run everything. Nothing I could ever do would please her. She never let go of Jim—Mr. Hersey."

"Was this her house?"

"No! It was Jim's—paid for out of his hard-earned money. But her room, when Jim brought her here to live with us, she thought was hers. She wouldn't let me near it, not even to clean. I wasn't good enough for her Jim, she thought. She tried to separate us, so she could have Jim all to herself."

"And Jim—Mr. Hersey—put up with this?"

"You didn't know her! She dominated Jim; she dominated everyone she could. I fought her as best I could. But she always had her way with Jim."

"How did she die?"

"Her face was bashed in." She offered no further explanation. "But I suppose you'll be moving out. Or perhaps I could fix you up another room?"

"No, I want to stay where I am." He surprised himself by saying it.

"But, Mr. Crell! Everyone—everyone else was afraid of her."

"So am I, to a certain extent. But she's not going to get the best of me. I pay for my room, so she'll just have to vacate."

The jaunty tone sounded hollow even to himself. But the words seemed to steady him, to steel his determination. After all, what could an old lady—even a dead old lady, especially a dead old lady—*do?*

The showdown came less than a week later. When he returned to his room one night, Roger Crell realized that the old lady had taken over. Never had he been so conscious of her influence. His nostrils were besieged by the familiar trace of perfume, now heavier than ever. The room itself had undergone a change: it no longer reflected a masculine tenant, but was completely effeminized. Upon the dresser was a lace spread holding the faded pincushion and the crotcheting paraphernalia; the chair by the window now bore an antimacassar; there was a crazyquilt upon the bed, faded photographs upon the wall (in one of them, standing with ramrod stiffness, was a wedding couple, and in the young bride clutching the arm of her groom with simulated coyness but actual possessiveness he could discern traces of the old-lady-to-be), and a profusion of pink bows.

Crell set to work immediately upon a campaign of destruction, ripping the quilt from the bed, taking the photographs from the wall and placing them in the hallway, sweeping the crotcheting paraphernalia into the wastebasket. It was not until he had almost finished that he saw that he had overlooked the clothes closet. All his clothing had been removed; hanging there in their stead was a line of women's dresses long out of fashion.

"Damn!" he said, and went to the closet.

He reached in to remove the white cardigan. In the crepuscular gloom of the closet the deep red brooch gleamed high on the collar.

As he was busy with the cardigan, a pair of long bloodless hands emerged from the closet. The knotted veins on their backs stood out prominently as the hands found Roger Crell's neck, found it and pressed and pressed. Roger Crell's hands sought to dislodge their iron clasp but were powerless to do so, and now his hands were clutching convulsively only at air.

Downstairs Mrs. Hersey heard Roger Crell's body falling heavily. *Drinking again. This time he's gone too far. He won't be around here much longer.*

Joseph Payne Brennan (1918-) was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and reared in New Haven, where he still lives and works at the Yale Library. A onetime member of the staff of *Theatre News,* he now edits *Essence,* a magazine of poetry, and *Macabre,* one devoted to prose and verse indicated by its title. His work has been widely published, in magazines ranging from *The American Scholar, Coronet,* and *The Chicago Review* to *Weird Tales* and *Esquire.* He is the author of three collections of macabre tales—*Nine Horrors and a Dream, The Dark Returners, Scream at Midnight*—and of four volumes of verse—*Heart of Earth, The Humming Stair, The Wind of Time,* and *Nightmare Need.*

The North Knoll

Joseph Payne Brennan

When I received a message from my Uncle Ira, revealing that he was desperately ill, I packed a suitcase at once and started for the ancestral farm near the village of Juniper Hill in northern Connecticut. I had not seen Uncle Ira in years, and there was no particular attachment between us, but I found it impossible to ignore his note. He was alone and sick; he needed help—that was enough.

I found him already hovering near death. Wasted and wan, he lay unattended on a cot in the littered farmhouse kitchen. I

changed his bed linen, fed him the little soup he could eat, cleaned up the kitchen, and called a doctor, who could do no more than confirm my own forebodings when he had completed his examination of my uncle.

"He may live two days—or maybe just two hours," he said. "There's no hope now. I'm sorry."

That same night Uncle Ira lapsed into delirium. I sat at his bedside while he babbled of his boyhood and youth. His mutterings were disjointed and irrational. Sometimes he talked of events of his childhood; occasionally he recalled scenes of the nearer past; once he started up with a rather wild look and murmured fearfully about "the fourth knoll."

His feverish ramblings recalled to me the happier days of my own boyhood, when I had spent long summers at the farm with Uncle Ira and my two maiden aunts. Almost every day during the summer, weather permitting, Aunt Hess and Aunt Minerva would take me with them on blueberrying expeditions. Although Uncle Ira's land included large swamp areas and was much overrun by brush and saplings, it grew a rich blueberry crop.

There were many knolls—small rounded hillocks, sometimes rising to plateaus of land lifting above the surround terrain—which yielded blueberries by the bucketful. These sunny knolls were my aunts' favorite picking areas. Some knolls, of course, bore little more than juniper brush and ground lichen, but it was always pleasant to come upon these gently rising areas in either the deep woods or the desolate marshland.

I remembered, too, if vaguely, that there was some kind of forbidding mystery connected with one particular knoll; but so many years had passed that the details now eluded me.

I was still reminiscing, only half awake in the early morning hours, when Uncle Ira began to sink rapidly. Toward the very end he rallied a bit, recognized me, and nodded with seeming

satisfaction. Perhaps he was grateful that he was not destined to die alone in the house. Presently he fell into a peaceful sleep from which he never awakened.

After the obsequies, I learned that I had inherited the farm. My first impulse was to offer it for sale, but, on reflection, I changed my mind. City life had begun to depress me, and it was no difficult task to give up my urban apartment and move back to the ancestral homestead, where I immediately began to renovate the house before I resumed my writing.

Ordinarily, I wrote mornings and then, if the weather was favorable, I strolled about the farm for a good part of the afternoon. There were over eighty acres of woodland, swamp and meadow, offering me a satisfying variety of terrain to explore. I wandered about leisurely, taking stock, as it were, of my property, and undisturbed by the fact that birch saplings had carried a field by storm, or that a scattered stone wall no longer separated pasture from overgrown orchard. The wild aspect of the place I had inherited had a distinct appeal for me.

One blistering August afternoon, when the sun was merciless in the open fields, I made for the relative coolness of the woods, and found myself presently at the fringe of a rather gloomy swamp area. Thinking that lowland ought to be cooler than upland woods, I slipped into the area, confident that it did not extend for any great distance. I could find no path, and had to watch my footing as I advanced. I sprang from tussock to tussock, from root cluster to sand bank. Cattails, rank bog grasses, and a great tangle of creeper-laden trees extended on all sides.

The morass did seem cooler, but I began to feel a faint sense of uneasiness as I struggled ahead. The swamp was apparently larger and more dense than I had realized. But it was not primarily this that troubled me, for I had a good sense of direction

and I was not easily fatigued. Perhaps it lay in the awareness of a diminution of bird and insect life. Standing to listen, I heard nothing but the trickle of dark water, the suck of wet earth at my shoes. The swamp was unnaturally still, though customarily it was the haunt of many birds and insects, as well as of frogs and other small animal life.

Though I told myself that silence in the depths of any swamp was not unusual—more wild life showing a preference for the edges of marshland and bog—my uneasiness persisted and did not diminish even when I found myself emerging from the pines and moving up the slope of a large knoll, at the near end of which a cluster of big quartz boulders gleamed whitely in the afternoon sunlight.

I could not immediately recall having been at this place before, and I looked all around. Near the center of the knoll was a slight depression in which stood all that remained of an old wild crab-apple tree. Beyond it lay a sizable plateau, consisting almost entirely of a thickly massed carpet of dry, dead-looking, grey-white lichen which had the appearance of having accumulated undisturbed for decades. Over all the knoll hung the heavy August heat in an intense, shimmering haze. The marsh had made few inroads on the knoll; it had sent a few creepers up the slopes, but these stopped abruptly where the flat carpet of lichen began.

I was conscious of a curious sense of *antiquity*. It was as if the quartz boulders, the rotting crabapple tree, and the deep growth of dense lichen had remained undistrubed for centuries. Even the oppressive August heat and the queer dancing haze seemed somehow timeless. The silence of the knoll only augmented the sense of age. There was no evidence of animal, bird or insect life. Not even a sulphur butterfly or an industrious bee was to be seen, and, though it was cicada time, I listened in vain for the harsh, steel-coil sound of a cicada. I heard nothing at all.

My uneasiness grew. Though I wanted to believe that the isolation of the slope in the surrounding swamp area accounted for the lack of any life, I could not bring myself to believe it. I moved past the quartz boulders in a curiously chary mood. I crossed through the depression where the crabapple's trunk stood, and went on until my feet crunched into the dried-out lichen which completely covered the rest of the knoll. I sank into it almost half way to my knees; it must have been growing there for untold years.

Slowly, insidiously, uneasiness gave way to apprehension. As I advanced, ever more hesitantly, my eyes were dazzled by the shimmering heat waves which were almost palpable. I paused presently and stood in the lichen with the heat pressing in upon me like a wall, and as I stood there, a memory grew in some far corner of my mind, a memory from far in the past . . .

I was a child, out blueberrying with Aunt Minerva and Aunt Hess. It was a hot afternoon and my aunts had not picked many blueberries because the late summer crop had finally become scant and scattered. In an impulsive moment Aunt Minerva had suggested that we look for berries on the north knoll. I remembered Aunt Hess staring at her, as if she had suddenly said something terribly wrong. "Minerva Searles!" she had cried. "Have you lost your mind?" And both of them had looked at me, exchanged glances, and said no more. Later, when they thought me out of earshot, I had heard Minerva murmur something about "it" all being years ago and "it might have gone by now."

This was the place—the north knoll! The forbidden place of my childhood! I recalled an elderly neighboring farmer's describing it to me years later, even to the quartz boulders and the crabapple tree, but he had said nothing of its mystery, telling me only to avoid it, saying "something's not right there," hinting at fearful things. But he had only echoed a frequently repeated

warning from my aunts, who had often made me promise never to go near the north knoll.

And, of course, it was the north knoll—not the "fourth knoll"—my Uncle Ira, dying, had risen in his bed to mutter about, fear of it still in his eyes!

Standing there, I groped backward into memory, trying to recall what I should be on guard against. But there had never been anything definite—only vagueness, fear, warnings, promises—quick looks, furtive, lowered voices, always the hints of something unnamable and wholly malignant.

Nothing came out of the past, but something pressed in upon me where I stood, something more than the oppressive heat. I felt it beyond reason. I looked down at the carpet of dead lichen; it gave back nothing but its grey deadness. I stared across its flat expanse, all my senses aware of some alien *awareness,* some lethal *thing* watching me as a great predator watches its prey.

I looked quickly up and around. My eyes strained through the wavering layers of August heat that hung over the knoll.

And I saw it—half way across the expanse of lichen, shambling and writhing in the heat waves, bearing down upon me. For a frozen moment I stood and stared at it, unable to move. If it had solidity, I could not say what it was. It looked like a concentration of the heat waves themselves. Its color was like the lichen, a dead grey-white. Its shape was ever-changing, prancing, twisting—now like a whirlwind, now like a goatlike creature, now like a repellent anthropoid being, apelike, but with appendages, coiling in and whipping the hot summer air. Now it was but inches above the ground, now looming tall, alternately solid and sentient and tenuous as wind. And from it radiated evil—and *hunger.* I knew that *it ate.* I knew that I was its prey!

In an access of terror, I broke and ran. I leaped into the depression, I raced past the broken crabapple tree, I bounded to-

ward the quartz boulders and the pine slope up which I had come but minutes before.

I did not dare turn, but I felt the thing behind me, twisting and turning in its attempt to fasten upon me even as its forward movement through the hot dead air was inhibited by its indescribable convolutions. Terror and physical loathing encompassed me. I felt that everything nauseous and obscene that could be concentrated in so little a place as the north knoll was at my back.

Crazed with fear, I rushed forward.

In my haste, I misjudged my direction when I reached the quartz boulders, ran into one of them, severely gashing my leg, and fell prone. And at that moment I felt rather than saw my pursuer pass by, I felt that its avenue to me was through the funnel of my own fear. The gash in my leg briefly broke the psychic connection of fear.

Even as the thing was reforming above me, I twisted and rolled down the slope away from the north knoll, into the marshland that now seemed like a haven, while behind me the spiraling thing leveled into heat waves.

Somehow I reached the house. Somewhere along the way I paused long enough to apply a handkerchief tourniquet to my bleeding leg. But there was nothing I could apply to the shock of horror I felt.

In time, I carried on my own inquiry. I inspected ancient town records, tattered diaries of early Juniper Hill residents, crumbling newspaper files. I listened to the disjointed anecdotes of a Juniper Hill centenarian, and at last I pieced together a sketchy history of the north knoll.

Legend had it that an indescribable malignance had inhabited the knoll since the first white settlers came to Juniper Hill. The

Pequot Indians of an earlier time had bound prisoners of war and left them on the knoll as sacrifice to some baleful presence, and there was a tale that a poacher, only a few decades before, had chased a deer onto the knoll and come away babbling with terror.

No sure explanation of the loathsome thing on the knoll could be found. Perhaps it was some monstrous sort of surviving elemental spawned when nature was experimenting with early life forms. Perhaps it was what the ancients called a *genius loci,* an entity, often malevolent, which has attached itself to a specified limited area of landscape.

Though years have passed since that day, there are still times on hot August afternoons, when heat waves shimmer visibly above the fields, that I feel again the chill of that brief horror.

I have never gone back to the north knoll.

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN (1921-) is an Alabaman. She has contributed prose and poetry to many magazines, including *The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, The Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Weird Tales,* etc. Her work has appeared in many anthologies.

The Huaco of Señor Peréz

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Standing beside the ancient fountain in the square, letting his shrewd eyes wander over the peaceful scene, Joe Conti thought: Excellent place to find artifacts, relics—antiques to be bought for a song! His alert gaze missed nothing.

Stone block buildings with red tile roofs huddled close to the narrow streets, where a scattering of Spanish-Indian inhabitants moved with slow deliberation about their morning tasks. Beyond the town, one could see little terraced farms clinging to this bleak slope of the Andes, with here and there a herd of llamas or alpacas like long-necked sheep. Those low, thatch-roofed stone huts had housed these highlanders for centuries—cold, cramped abodes with no more modern conveniences than their grandsires had possessed.

There was a timeless quality about the scene that vaguely disturbed Conti. That temple-to-the-sun, for instance—those mortarless granite blocks must have been put together by man-power as early as 1200 A.D. Wind-gnawed, sun-bleached, crumbling before the onslaughts of time and weather, the old ruins yet seemed to defy destruction. Even the smells—damp wool, bird guano, quinoa grain—had probably changed little since the time of Francisco Pizarro!

Conti had a perverse desire to toss a grenade into the center of that temple courtyard, if only to see these stolid Peruvians jolted out of their granite serenity. Contentment irritated him. How could one make a sharp trade with a man who desired nothing more than this?

A thin piping caught his ear above the murmur in the square. As he glanced toward the sound, an old *mestizo* came trudging along the worn street, playing a folktune on his *queña* and driving before him two bony, over-burdened llamas. The pack-animals veered to drink at the fountain, and the Spanish-Indian followed suit, sweeping off his round-crowned, broad-brimmed hat to splash water over his white hair.

The rising sun was beginning to beat down with a vengeance. He grinned at Conti wilting in his immaculate grey flannels and gasping a bit from *soroche,* the altitude-sickness that always affected foreign visitors at more than thirteen thousand feet above sea-level.

"Buenos dias," Conti greeted, because it was expected.

"Ah, Senor tourist! *Buenos dias!*" The Peruvian bowed politely. "It is very hot today, no? I, whose family have lived here in Sinchi Rocca for many centuries, even I am melting like the snows on the crest of old Huascarán!"

"Yes. Very hot." Conti suppressed an amused smile at the flowery manner of speech these South Americans used, even for

remarks about the weather. Brushing aside further amenities, he came straight to the point of his visit. "*Amigo mio,* do you know where I can buy any—old things? Family heirlooms? I'm Joseph Conti, purchasing agent for the Hanover Museum in New York. Private collection. Not open to the public except for charity exhibits or—"

He broke off, telling himself that this ignorant half-breed would have no idea what he was talking about in his careful textbook Spanish.

But the bright black eyes set high in the narrow swarthy face were regarding him with unusual intelligence.

"Antiques?" The old man nodded knowingly. "Ah, yes. Always the North American tourists wish to buy the mementoes of our historic past—for reasons unknown to me! Inca relics? Gold ornaments? Feather-work? Or—" His voice turned faintly harsh and bitter—"perhaps some trifle discarded by the *Conquistadores,* when they came here seeking power over our ancient people. And gold! Always more and more gold!"

He lapsed abruptly into Quichua, the Indian language. Conti caught a few words he knew, and they were certainly not very complimentary to the Spanish invaders. The old *mestizo* spat with such venom that one of his llamas shied nervously.

The North American smiled. "But you are half-Spanish yourself, are you not?" he taunted. "At least one of your Inca ancestors made peace with the Conquistadors! No?"

The old man's pleasant expression faded.

"One must live," he murmured in coldly formal Spanish that made Conti abruptly change his tack, with the psychology of the clever trader.

"How true! I, too, am half-Indian," he lied skillfully. "Spanish and Comanche." Actually he was a Sicilian immigrant, but he had long ago learned to identify himself with the ethnic back-

ground of a possible sucker. "The Spanish invaders overran our continent also, you know. Greedy for land and gold! In this, we are brothers, Senor . . .?"

"Peréz. Juan Proaña Cusi y Perez. Your servant!"

The old man, ludicrously shabby in his peasant garb, made a low bow, and rewarded Conti with a smile of total acceptance. He knelt beside his llamas to adjust the woven straps that held their baskets of vicuña wool in place.

Then, bending over the fountain, he thrust a native drinking-bottle under the thin trickle, piped long ago from some icy spring far up the mountainside. Patiently he held the double-flask until one of them brimmed over. Conti watched idly—

And then, suddenly, he came to a point like a birddog scenting game.

The bottle was handsomely cast of bronze, its dual flagons joined at neck and bottom by two thin pipes that allowed their contents to flow from one to the other. Each flask was molded in the likeness of an Inca face—one calmly smiling, the other scowling in fierce anger, much like the two masks of Comedy and Tragedy in Greek drama. The mouths of the flasks, corked with ornate metalwork, sprouted up from each head like a feather headdress. In the center of each forehead was a medallion in the likeness of the rising sun.

Conti ran his tongue over dry lips. The bottle was pre-Columbian, and therefore very valuable. The workmanship was early Inca, perhaps 1000 A.D. if he had learned anything while working as a guide for the Metropolitan. The molded hair was long and straight in the Indian style, the slightly almond-shaped eyes set high in the long-nosed, large-eared faces. Not peasant faces, but those of the *Orejones*—Great Ears; the Inca nobility.

Conti leaned closer. On the thin bronze pipe that joined the two bottlenecks there was some sort of inscription—not Inca, cer-

tainly, since they had no written language of any kind. He tried to make out the words, worn almost away by years of handling.

"What does it say there?" he asked casually as the *mestizo* glanced up and noted his interest. "That drinking-bottle . . . It looks as though it might be a *huaco*—a holy object found in some Inca tomb. But, the inscription! Spanish words on an Inca relic? Er . . . May I . . .?"

With native courtesy the Peruvian handed him the half-filled bottle.

"Si," he nodded reverently. "It is indeed a *huaco,* senor—our Quichua word, spelled many ways by the Spanish. It once belonged to an ancestor of mine. The Inca—the word originally meant *ruler*—of this village, in fact. A cousin of the Great One, Atahualpa—descendant of all the great Incas as far back as Manco Capac, he who led our people out of the south into the rising sun . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course . . ."

Conti was peering at the inscription, trying hard to hide the glint of cupidity in his eyes.

"Bébaselo con inocencia," he read with difficulty, then translated: *"Drink up . . . with . . . innocence?* Of what, Senor Perez?" he laughed. "The misery of *la perseguidora*—hang-over? This *is* a drinking-bottle, is it not? Used at banquets?" He winked broadly. "I've heard your Inca grandees really lived it up! Carousing and making love to the Chosen Ones, the temple virgins. Some of those figures on Inca pottery are so frank, they can't be exhibited to the public! . . . Servant!" he called in mocking mimicry.

"More *chicha*—at once!"

Rakishly he placed the mouth of the empty flask to his lips and blew into it, to make the whistling sound with which Inca revelers once signaled for a refill of the strong native beer brewed from sprouted maize. The old *mestizo* nodded, with a slight smile

acknowledging the foreigner's uncommon erudition about Peruvian customs. But his eyes registered disapproval of Conti's flippant manner.

"*En verdad!* Just so did my ancestors call for more wine at feasts. But the Old Ones were beyond sin, senor." His tone of reproof matched his eyes. "They were gods—children of the Sun, our ancient deity . . ."

He took back the *huaco* gently but firmly, as one might remove a crucifix from profane hands.

"But the inscription?" Conti insisted. "Isn't it a kind of toast? An invitation to drink and be merry, with no . . . qualms of conscience?"

"Perhaps it has a deeper meaning," the Peruvian suggested humbly. "I am not a man of letters, but . . . Perhaps it means: *Drink with . . . an innocent heart?* Innocent of treachery, of greed?"

The purchasing agent squirmed, eyeing him narrowly. But there was no hidden look of accusation in the stolid half-Indian face.

"With an innocent heart, eh? Peace, good will toward men . . .?"

"*Si!*" The old man nodded, with the quick smile of a child. "As Christians take Communion. Even as the Disciples drank wine together at the Last Supper—so drank the ancient ones of my people as they dined together in harmony. Besides," his voice sank to a near-whisper, "that meaning would bear out the . . . the legend!"

"Legend?" Conti stiffened. "There's some sort of legend connected with your *huaco* there?"

He lowered his gaze to the bottle in the *mestizo's* hand as he held the empty flask at the fountain to fill it also. Like any experienced dealer in antiques, the agent knew well how a story attached to some relic could zoom its value to buyers. Even an

undocumented story—since one could always forge proof by some obscure authority.

"Not a story recorded in writing by the Spanish," the old man deprecated. "Only by word-of-mouth among my people, the Quichua. The bottle is cursed, senor! For this reason I have not given it to the museum at Sucré, where other such *huacos* are kept safe from . . ."

"Oh, I see!" Conti peered at him sharply. Perhaps the old half-breed was not as naive as he seemed! Was this only a clever pitch to raise the price? But, again, as he looked into the direct dark eyes, he saw no trace of the hidden deception in his own.

"It is dangerous," the Peruvian explained. "Many have died because of its power. Many! This is why I can not bring myself to sell it. Only a simple man, like myself, could use it, drink from it daily, without . . . consequences."

"Consequences?" The purchasing agent struggled to make his tone casual. "What sort of—?"

"Death, senor! Death by thirst, a slow and painful one! As I said, the bottle once belonged to my ancestor, Titu Cusi, Inca of this village in the time of Atahualpa. He whom the invaders . . ."

"Yes, yes; I know about Atahualpa," Conti cut him short, unable to curb his impatience. "How Pizarro captured him at Cuzco, and imprisoned him in a room about fifteen feet square. How he promised to fill that room with gold, if they would release him. Gold to the height of a man's head—imagine!" The agent's eyes glittered. "Literally a king's ransom!"

"*Correcto!* And he paid that ransom, as promised! But—" The old man's face went hard as the crumbling granite wall behind him. "Pizarro killed him anyway! *El alevoso*—the treacherous one! He feared Atahualpa's power! And even a roomful of gold was not enough for those greedy ones. After his murder, the *Conquistadores* came even to this village, seeking the source of

the gold! My ancestor had sent seven llamas loaded with it, to help raise the ransom. They captured him, our Titu Cusi, and staked him out on the mountainside . . ."

"No!" Conti pretended shocked sympathy. "They tortured him?"

"Si!" The *mestizo's* voice was a harsh whisper, like the sound of a chill wind blowing down the narrow street. "They tortured him, senor, beyond belief! First, they fed him over-salted meat. Then, they . . . they staked him out, face up to the blazing sun! His eyelid muscles were cut, you understand, so that he could not close his eyes; could not even blink. He lay thus for endless days of thirst and heat. It shriveled his skin! Blackened his parched tongue! Baked his eyeballs until they were as rotten grapes! At last thirst closed his throat, like a hand . . . choking . . .!" The dark eyes narrowed with hate. "A refinement of cruelty that only the Spanish could have conceived, senor—to torture an Inca with *sunlight!*"

Involuntarily Conti gulped, his own throat gone dry. He tried to shake off the spell of the old man's story. But the harsh whisper went on and on:

"*Si,* senor! And above Cusi's head they tied his drinking-bottle, this *huaco,* so that its contents dripped out, inches from his parched lips! Drop by drop . . . Driving him mad with thirst! When it hung empty, the soldiers blew into it to make it whistle for a refill—as you yourself did just now, with unintended sacrilege. Mocking our ancient custom! For, it is actually a prayer to the Sun, our deity; a plea to fill our need, whatever it may be. Warmth. Food. Or, in the case of my brave ancestor, only a swallow of water! Or—merciful death!"

"But, the inscription?" Conti reminded. "You haven't . . ."

"Ah!" The old man nodded. "It was then that it appeared on

that metal pipe. A warning! In Spanish, so that the greedy ones might have their last fair chance to . . . No one knows who inscribed it there. Perhaps the spirit of Athualpa? Perhaps even great Manco Capac himself! Or—" The *mestizo* smiled blandly. "Perhaps there is no inscription, but only some corrosion on the bronze . . .? *Es posible.* The words are faint.

"For seven days they tortured my ancestor. But Cusi would not tell the secret of our village gold! Alas for our people, it died with him, there on that mountainside. Then they came to bury him, breaking pottery and killing many beasts and tearing much woven cloth—a funeral custom of the Quicua, senor, so that the dead may carry their possessions with them to the spirit world . . . They were about to smash this bottle, too, for his use. But a soldier named Perez," the old man spat out the name like a bad taste, "took a fancy to it. He stole it—along with my ancestor's young daughter, a temple virgin! He took them, and drained them both, and tossed them aside, that evil one, when he had had his fill!"

"*El perro*—the dog!" Conti murmured. But his lips twitched with covert amusement at this old fool's vehemence about something that had happened so long ago. "So he was the *Conquistadore* who . . .?"

"A conquered people," the mestizo nodded bitterly, "must bear the features of the conqueror, along with his yoke! But, he was punished, that one!" The Indian eyes gleamed with triumph. "Oh, yes! He died even as my ancestor died—screaming in a delirium of thirst! Begging for a drink!"

Conti grinned openly. "An alcoholic, was he? Yes, I don't suppose the Spanish could handle your native *chicha!*" he agreed lightly. "Ah well, it served him right. A wonderful tale of poetic justice!" he murmured, casually fingering the *huaco* hanging now

from the llama's pack. "A very interesting relic. My directors might be pursuaded to pay you—" The agent moved in smoothly —"say, fifty *sols* for it?"

"Oh no." The Peruvian smiled politely, but shook his head. "I dare not, senor! What if others like that Spanish soldier should drink from it, without heeding the inscription? Many have done so . . . and died as he died! And who, in these days of avarice and deception, can truly be said to have an innocent heart? A heart like those of . . . the Children of the Sun?"

Once more Conti threw him a sharp look, trying to read that stolid Indian face. But there seemed to be no double-meaning to the old man's words. What nonsense! Though the Peruvian obviously believed it. If he was to obtain that valuable relic—

"You are right!" the purchasing agent agreed skillfully. "The curse is dangerous! Therefore—would it not be safer, Senor Perez, for this *huaco* to be placed in a sealed showcase? In a museum, where no one at all would ever drink from it again? With, beside it," Conti pursued, "a printed account of the legend, so that all men may learn the wisdom of your ancient people? What a gift to the modern world!" he gestured dramatically. "And what a fitting tribute to your unfortunate ancestor—the Inca, Cusi, who died a noble death . . .!"

He kept his gaze on the *huaco,* watching Perez from the corner of his hard eyes. Conti's lips twitched as he saw the shabby old half-breed draw himself up with a lost pride. His stolid face was alight with something that poverty and toil had all but worn away, like the altar stone of the temple ruins behind him.

"Did I say fifty *sols?*" Conti murmured. "Perhaps my directors would make it a hundred. Not for the value of the *huaco,*" he shrugged, "for it has none. An old bottle? But—as a gesture of good will, senor, from my America to yours? The money, of course, will be put in your trust. For those of your village who

may be in need of . . . oh, some little *bonita* such as your ancestor might bestow on the poor." Conti pretended not to notice the old man's worn poncho, his ragged blue pants, his bare feet. "An extra ration of *chicha?* Or . . . *coca?*"

The native beamed, drawing himself up still further with a pathetic dignity.

"*Coca?*"

For the first time Conti noticed an old Quichua woman, hovering in the background with a stairstep flock of children. She edged forward—evidently the old man's wife. Her calloused fingers still moved, ceaselessly spinning alpaca wool in the old way on two rough spindles. One of the thin children was fondling a *cuy,* the domesticated rat of the Indians, raised as pets—and, eventually, food. The boy spoke eagerly, but the old woman silenced him with a gesture. Conti noted the avid way she was clutching a small bag of the narcotic leaves, chewed by the Indians as their only bulwark against disease and exhaustion and the rigors of their daily life.

"*Coca—si, mucha coca!*" the agent promised enticingly.

To clinch the sale, he pulled from his pockets all the small change and American bills he had on him—about fourteen dollars. With a flourish he tossed it into one of the pack-baskets of *vicuña* wool, cannily aware of how little cash this poverty-stricken family must have seen in their entire lifetime.

The old man gasped. His wife crowded closer, the children clustering about them with excited questions about the money.

"*Madre de Dios!*" The *mestizo* touched it with one finger, fumbling for his *quipu,* that small cluster of colored strings with which the natives keep accounts. "How many *sols* is that? Fifty?"

"Enough to serve you until I can send more," Conti evaded. "Well? A bargain?"

He reached out gently, with a great show of reverence, and

untied the *huaco* from the pack-animal. The old man lifted his hand, hesitant, then shrugged and let it fall.

"So be it," he murmured. "For the honor of my ancestor. And the welfare of our village poor!"

He was trying to count the money, waving back his eager family with stern gestures. Conti tucked the drinking-bottle under his coat, and bowed farewell before the Peruvian could change his mind.

"*Vaya con Dios,* Senor Perez! I will guard your *huaco* with my life!"

"*Con Dios . . .*"

The purchasing agent moved away quickly. Dazzled by the sight of the cash, the Indian had not even asked him for a receipt with statement of balance due!

Then—Conti's eyes narrowed suddenly. In that case, why should he turn over this costly relic to the Hanover Museum for a mere commission? Why not smuggle it through customs, by methods he had used before, and sell it himself in New York for a small fortune? Conti grinned as he ducked into the doorway of a nearby *tambo.* What collector would not pay well for such a find? And then? Wine and women for Joe Conti, he exulted, the like of which no Inca had ever enjoyed!

He glanced back at the little group by the fountain, still in an excited huddle, their faces transfigured like those of slum children promised their first Christmas Tree. The agent watched them as they moved out of sight down the hilly, cobble-stone street. The thin piping of the old man's flute drifted back to him—

Or—Was that eerie whistling sound coming from the drinking-bottle hidden under his coat? Conti shook his head sharply; slapped his temple. Confound this rarified atmosphere! There was a ringing in his ears. The *soroche* made him feel light and queer, strangely nervous and uneasy.

He strode out into the street, headed for the airport. The sooner he got out of South America with this contraband historical relic, the better! Three bronze axes and a *champi*—an Indian crowbar—which he had purchased last week in Cuzco would satisfy the Hanover board-of-directors. Once back in New York, he would sell this *huaco,* under the counter, to—Conti grinned. Perhaps he would even sell it back to the Archaeological Museum in Sucré, where it rightfully belonged!

As for sending Señor Peréz the rest of the promised hundred *sols*—Conti laughed shortly. What man needed to remain poor? *Do others before they do you,* was his Golden Rule, since his parents had abandoned him on a church doorstep!

Chuckling, he hurried toward the Sinchi Rocca airport, where a light plane was about to take off for Lima.

A week later he was aboard an airliner out of Rio, headed for New York. The *huaco,* gaudily painted with a removable water-paint to resemble some cheap souvenir, he carried with him, wrapped in brown paper like a last-minute gift for someone back home. The customs officer waved it by with scarcely a glance—a quarter of a million dollars worth of pre-Columbian artifact which was not supposed to leave the country.

Vastly pleased with himself, Joe Conti dozed in his plane seat. When a pretty stewardess offered hot coffee, he leered at her with appreciation and shook his head.

"No, thanks, beautiful! I brought my lunch!" He winked and patted the half-wrapped bottle, which passengers often carried aboard filled with rum punch for the journey.

The stewardess raised her brows, and dodged his caressive hand.

It was at that moment that the big plane lurched and slid sidewise. It lost altitude quickly. The warning sign—*Fasten Seat Belts*—flashed on, and the copilot spoke soothingly over the intercom. *There was no real danger, if everyone would keep calm—*

life-jackets under the seats, with instructions for inflating—life-rafts to accommodate everyone.

In twenty minutes, incredulous and badly shaken, Joe Conti found himself huddled in a bouncing rubber raft with nine more of the sunken plane's passengers. His luggage was gone, along with the relics he had purchased in Cuzco. But he was still clutching the *huaco*—its camouflage paint washing off in spots as a breaker rolled over them. Two of the women were sobbing hysterically, and an elderly gentleman was threatening to sue the airline.

As the morning sun rose higher, blue water stretched out around them, melting into the horizon. The sea was calm enough, but the sun beat down, unmercifully hot. By noon the passengers in Conti's raft had drunk up half the emergency water-ration. One of the women noticed his drinking-bottle, from which he kept taking covert sips. Her whimpering child reached for it, but Conti shrugged and shook his head.

"Rum and cola," he lied quickly.

It was lucky he had forgotten to empty the twin-flasks since buying it from Senor Perez. The water from that Sinchi Rocca fountain tasted stale and faintly brackish, but it might save his life. And why share it with strangers who meant nothing to him?

The purchasing agent tilted the *huaco* to his lips again. How hot and dry he felt! His mouth seemed to be filled with sand. And his eyes! He found himself staring up at that bronze disk of of sun, unable to look away, unable to blink—Conti laughed at himself uneasily. That little horror-tale of the old *mestizo's* had been a trifle too vivid!

By sundown the rescue planes still had not located their position. Night fell like a sooty lid clapped over the cauldron of the Atlantic. A few stars twinkled overhead, like holes in the sooty lid, but there was no moon. A wind sprang up, blowing them

further from the crash area. And when morning came, the sun beat down again as though determined to bake them alive.

Thirst was plaguing all those huddled in the raft. But, Conti noted with irritation, he himself seemed to be suffering most, despite his covert pulls at the double-bottle. By noon he had drained the last drop from both flasks, but his mouth seemed stuffed with cotton. His skin had shriveled. His lips were cracked and swollen. By three o'clock he lay panting in the bottom of the raft, his tongue protruding from his mouth.

"Water!" Conti gasped as a crewman bent over him. "For God's sake, give me—a drink!"

"You should know better than to keep swigging that rum punch!" the man snapped. He took the *huaco* from Conti's limp hand, and sniffed, then tasted the contents. His face changed. "Water? You had more—?" His stern look softened at sight of Conti's tortured face. "What's wrong with you, fella? Some kind of fever? You've had more liquid than any five of us! And yet . . . You look as if you'd been adrift for two weeks instead of two days! Hang-over, maybe?"

"No!" Conti rasped. "I just . . . need a *drink!* Please! *Please!* These other people can spare . . ."

By five o'clock he had lapsed into delirium. The frightened women hunched as far from him as they could get, listening to him rave—first in English and Spanish, then in Quichua. . . . He seemed to be cursing and praying both at once—cursing that blazing ball of fire overhead, and the next moment praying to it as though it could hear!

As dusk fell, the rescue plane located them. Joseph Conti, agent for the Hanover Museum, was the first passenger to be lifted aboard and given aid. The medic took one look at him and frowned in bewilderment.

"1000 cc's of glucose for this one!" he snapped. "And another

thousand of normal saline solution. He may not make it to the hospital! Only two day's exposure? Why, I never saw such a case of dehydration!"

Conti opened his eyes briefly—shriveled, bloodshot orbs that shocked even the medic.

"*Water!*" he whispered feebly, and lapsed again into delirium.

Distorted shapes moved about him. At first he thought he was lying in a hospital bed, with a worried-looking intern bending over him on one side, an elderly resident doctor on the other. A subdued light shone down from the ceiling—

Then the figures changed. The intern's face took on the thin, cruel features of a Spanish soldier in the ornate armor of Pizarro's men. The resident—a bearded *Conquistadore!* There was a pointed stiletto in his hand, flashing in the blazing sun that shone overhead. With its sharp point he jabbed at Conti's upper arm, demanding again and again in an echoing yammer: "*Where is the gold? The gold? The gold? Where . . .?*"

Conti's vision cleared. The resident stepped back, hypodermic in hand.

"That's his third thousand cc's of glucose," he grunted to the young intern on Conti's left. "But he's not responding! I don't understand . . ." He shook the agent gently. "Where did you get the water in that souvenir bottle, man? You may have been poisoned!"

"P-poisoned?" Conti rallied briefly to scowl up at them. "Yes! That's it! That damned *mestizo!* He was afraid I'd want my money back, that lousy fourteen dollars I . . ."

He turned his head weakly on the pillow, nodding toward the *huaco* on the bedside table with his watch and wallet. His bloodshot eyes rolled toward the intern, who caught his meaning. He shrugged.

"Oh yes, of course. We've already analyzed the contents. Noth-

ing! Pure spring water. There may be something in the metal. To test it," he smiled, "we would have to melt it down. Is it worth anything? The way you hung onto it, even half-conscious . . .!"

"*No!* No, no, you—musn't destroy it! Sentimental value—"

Conti shook his head violently, reaching for his prize. His hand fell limply. He stared at it, stunned by the sight of his dessicated flesh. Like a mummy's hand! Like a sere leaf from which the sap has drained away! His dry tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. The intern bent over him with a glass of water, but Conti could not seem to swallow.

"We've been pouring liquids into you on the half-hour," the resident said grimly. "We've tried everything! What is it, man? Something chronic? Have you ever before . . .?"

"N-no . . ."

Conti stared up at him. His eyes wandered from the grave bearded face to the splotchily painted drinking-bottle on the table. The smiling features of the left-hand flask were obscured by paint. But the angry one glowered at him accusingly. The almond eyes and sad mouth reminded him of someone. Where had he seen such a face? On a shabby old Peruvian native, driving two over-burdened llamas to market for a few *sols* to feed his half-starved family? The bronze eyes seemed to bore into his fevered brain. The bronze lips whispered something. "*Bébaselo con . . .!*"

Conti pointed frantically toward his possessions on the table. The intern bent close to catch his faint whisper.

"My wallet! Hundred dollars . . . inside. Wire at once to . . ."

He whispered a name and the address of a little village high in the Andes. The intern wrote it down, nodding.

"Last request, I suppose," he murmured, aside to the resident. "Poor devil! I guess he knows he's dying . . . Confound it!" the young man exploded. "Why can't we do something for him?"

The older medic pursed his lips thoughtfully, and picked up the *huaco*. He turned it around and around in his hands.

"Maybe there's some kind of secret compartment for poison. Like those Borgia wine goblets; you know? With a cache inside, to dissolve and poison their enemies at banquets? Or . . . Maybe the metal is toxic. If he'd only let us test it! Surely, to save his life . . .!"

He glanced at Conti, who had overheard. The mummy-face on the pillow was contorted with some emotional conflict—greed, vying with fear. But there was no kindness, no remorse, no feeling for anyone but himself in Conti's look. He glared up at the two doctors.

"Allright!" The purchasing agent nodded weakly. "Melt it down! Test it! But—" His cracked lips curled in a sneer. "Never mind wiring that . . . that money! The telegram to Sinchi Rocca—cancel it!"

The intern glanced around suddenly. There was a faint, shrill *whistling sound* in the quiet room. It seemed to be coming from that curious double-bottle in the resident's hands, like air escaping from a balloon. Or, no—not coming from it, but entering into it, as if some eerie force of wind were blowing into the uncorked mouth, as hillbilly musicians blow into a jug.

At the sound, Joseph Conti began to choke. . . .

Turning swiftly, the resident strode out into the hospital corridor, heading for the laboratory. He thrust his patient's drinking-bottle into the technician's hands.

"Take this thing apart like a dollar watch. Examine every crack! Test the metal for anything toxic. Arsenic; something of the kind. But—make it fast!"

He hurried back to Conti's room, where the intern was inserting a glucose tube in the agent's nose. He was about to inject an-

other normal saline solution into his veins, when Conti sat erect with a strangled cry, clawing at his throat and gagging.

"Water!" he rasped. *"Aqua!"*

His shriveled eyes bulged as he gasped for breath. Frantically he pointed to his wallet on the bedside table; struggled to speak. But only a dry rattle came from his closing throat. He fell back, dead.

Minutes later, as the intern was pulling the sheet up over Conti's face, the lab technician burst into the room. In his hands were twisted bits of bronze that had once been molded into two Inca faces, now quite unrecognizable. He held them out to the resident, who was writing on the chart at the foot of Conti's bed.

"Good thing this wasn't valùable," the technician began. "We tested every square inch of it, just as you . . . Oh!" he broke off and shook his head ruefully. "Too late, huh? Well," he shrugged, "we didn't find a thing, anyhow. Just an old bronze bottle, with a drop or two of water still in that little connecting pipe. I analyzed it. Pure water. With a slight metallic sediment, non-toxic . . ."

Moving together, the three stared down at Conti's body—more mummy-like than ever under the sheet. The resident flipped back a corner of it briefly, frowning at the desiccated face. The mouth, in rigor mortis, had taken on a weirdly ironic grin, as if the dead man had just caught the point of some macabre joke. The resident laid the remnants of the *huaco* on the table beside Conti's wallet.

"Death by . . . thirst? It's incredible! Didn't the ancient Peruvians bury broken household objects with their dead?" he commented wryly. "Pots, tools, weapons? Our patient will at least have a drinking-bottle to take with him—wherever he's going!"

The intern grunted in response to the mirthless jest.

"Strange case, all right," he murmured. "Could his condition

have been psychosomatic? He kept muttering something about a . . . a curse! Every time he lapsed into delirium . . ."

"Your guess is as good as mine!" the resident admitted. "There was nothing organic to cause a condition like that, absolutely nothing! By the way," he turned to the lab man, "you mentioned some non-toxic sediment in the water. Metallic . . .?"

"Yes. Gold dust," the technician shrugged. "Quite a lot of it! It had settled in that little connecting pipe between the flasks. You say the bottle was filled at a fountain in Sinchi Rocca? Probably flows from a spring high in the mountains above town. Smack through the middle of a gold mine, from the looks of it! If a man were to trace that stream," he laughed lightly, "he could make himself as rich as one of those Inca kings!"

David A. Johnstone (1937-) is a British writer who lives in Liverpool, where he works in a "wine and spirits" store. This is one of his first published stories.

Mr. Alucard

David A. Johnstone

The grandfather clock chimed seven as Mrs. Grimm drew the heavy brocade curtains across the window. Her last glimpse into the dusk outside was of the rear lights of the coach disappearing among the trees. Another day was over, and the old lady sighed wearily. There was still a great deal of cleaning up to do before she could sit down by the fire and watch her favorite television programs.

Since moving into the castle, Mrs. Grimm had ordered the electricity company to wire up only her small kitchen. The rest of the castle remained dark. Nobody ever came after sunset. If they did, there were three oil lanterns and plenty of candles available.

She walked slowly along the hall, noticing with annoyance the marks of greasy fingers on the suits of armor. On reaching the

main entrance, she turned the huge key stiffly in its lock. "Ah," she murmured, "now I feel better." Yet somehow Mrs. Grimm never could get used to the stillness when evening came—no screams or shouts from cheeky children, no exclamations of surprise or wonder from their parents. Gone was the clicking of high heels in the corridors, gone the flapping of sandals on the wooden stairs.

The castle was quiet now. Bats fluttered outside the windows, and an owl hooted somewhere in the woods. Mrs. Grimm shivered in the cold of the hall. Soon it would be the end of the season, the dying of the year, and the end of the coach parties from London. Winter would be lonely without the tourists—and whatever would poor Mr. Alucard do?

The thought of Mr. Alucard brought her abruptly out of her daydreaming. She hurried down the passage toward the cellar door where the candlestick stood waiting. She fumbled with the matches, breaking two in her haste, before she managed to light the candle.

Mrs. Grimm pulled open the heavy door and descended the stone steps. A coffin stood in the center of the cellar. She went up to it, and rapped sharply on the lid.

The sound echoed around the cellar as another sound came from inside the coffin. Mrs. Grimm pushed back the creaking lid, her face wrinkling painfully as the hinges squealed.

"Going to be a nice evening, Mr. Alucard," she said.

Mr. Alucard sat up in his coffin, blinking in the candlelight. "Good evening, Mrs. Grimm," he said. "What sort of day have you had?"

"Well, the usual, luv, quite a good crowd in this afternoon, though, from the married quarters at the American Air Force Base. The kiddies were very well behaved, really."

"Ah, yes! The 'Yanks,' as the village people call them," said Mr. Alucard.

He got carefully out of the coffin and brushed himself. Some particles of soil clung to his back, but Mrs. Grimm, seeing them, brushed them off. He took the candle from her and started toward the stairs. "I only hope they were a little tidier than those Londoners the other day," he added, over his shoulder.

"Well, not much to choose between them—still the same amount of sweet papers, empty cigarette packets and Coca-Cola bottles. But not, I'm glad to say, any winkle shells or Guinness cans."

Mr. Alucard laughed as they climbed the steps. The two figures, one throwing a weird dancing shadow on the opposite wall, crossed the hall, leaving the cellar door open, because, as Mrs. Grimm explained, "We'll leave in some fresh air."

She threw open her kitchen door and stood back. "Come in for a moment, Mr. Alucard. I'll make us a nice cup of tea."

Although Mr. Alucard had been working now for over four months in the castle, he had never before entered Mrs. Grimm's sanctuary. He bent his tallness a little and walked into the room. The electric light was so bright as to be painful to his eyes; he blinked rapidly, feeling tears pricking the corners.

"Sit down, Mr. Alucard. Sit down, do," cried Mrs. Grimm, bustling around to sweep magazines from the armchairs.

A large orange cat, which had been washing itself by the glowing bars of the fireplace, stiffened and arched its back as Mr. Alucard approached.

"Now, Sheba, don't start spitting," said Mrs. Grimm. "It's only Mr. Alucard come in to have a nice cup of tea with us."

The cat, however, backed away and retreated under a chair.

Mrs. Grimm poured the boiling water into the teapot. "Take no notice of her, the old silly," she said. "Funny thing, though—

she never spits at anyone but you."

Mr. Alucard said mildly, "That's quite all right."

"How do you like my kitchen?" asked Mrs. Grimm.

"Very charming, indeed."

"You must come in more often of an evening and have tea with me. Heaven knows you could probably do with a cup after being down there all day long in that cold old coffin." She paused to pass him his cup, which he took but did not raise to his lips. "But I'll say this—I've been very grateful to you for that idea. It's worked like a charm. I've never taken in so much money before. *See the Vampire Sleeping in Its Coffin—5/- extra!*—they can't resist it. The half crowns tumbled out of their pockets and purses so fast it fair takes my breath away. I never realized people were so morbid. Still, not everyone would take on a job like that, Mr. Alucard."

"My dear lady, I love my job. Why, sleeping in the daytime has always been easy for me—and then, of course, I have my other job at night."

Mrs. Grimm wanted to ask what his other work was, but politeness forbade such intrusion into his private affairs.

"Well, it takes all sorts to make a world," she said kindly, dipping a biscuit into her tea. "Come along, you're not drinking your tea, Mr. Alucard. It'll get cold." She pushed the plate of biscuits toward him. "No need to be shy."

"It's not shyness," said Mr. Alucard, "and I don't wish to be rude, but I never touch tea."

"Oh," was all that Mrs. Grimm could say. It seemed incredible to her that people who didn't drink tea existed.

Mr. Alucard stood up suddenly, causing Sheba, who had ventured out to lap up some milk from a saucer Mrs. Grimm had put down, to fly back under the chair once more.

"I must be off now," he said.

"Oh, so soon?" cried Mrs. Grimm, who had had visions of a long talk with Mr. Alucard. "I wanted to tell you about one of the American boys today—he almost fainted when he touched your face; he said you were so cold you must be dead. I'd only just pushed back the lid slightly when he put out his hand, shouting to his sister, 'Hey, Sis, look! I'm going to wake up the Vampire!'"

Mr. Álucard smiled. "Cheeky youngsters these days. Still, no harm done, as long as they don't want to bring wooden stakes in with them."

All the questions Mrs. Grimm thought she might ask faded within her—about his job by night, about the source of the old coffin he had brought to the castle the night he came. Perhaps there would be another time before the season ended.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Grimm," he said from the threshold, showing his long white teeth in a pleasant smile.

When he was gone, Mrs. Grimm locked the door once more and sat down again. Sheba jumped on to her lap. "You've been very rude to Mr. Alucard," she said, stroking the warm orange fur. "He's a very kind man and we owe him a great deal. It if weren't for his idea we shouldn't have taken half the money I need to run this big old castle."

She took a swallow of tea and set about totting up the day's receipts.

JOHN POCSIK (1943-) is a young devotee of the macabre who lives and writes in Kansas City, where he has just been graduated from college. This is his first published story.

Casting the Stone

JOHN POCSIK

I had just finished my second year at Lacombe University and was resigning myself to another tiresome summer at the Records Bureau when Dr. Wallace, head of the Classics department, brought the advertisement to my attention. Even for the *Star*'s classified section, it was somewhat out of the ordinary:

"Desire young man—white, unmarried—to serve as housekeeper and secretary for the summer. Must be proficient in the Classical languages and have some knowledge of French and German. For information, contact: Sebastian Quarry, Lairneth Hall."

Since it was obvious that a translator of sorts was wanted, Wallace advised me to apply at once, thinking it would be a perfect opportunity for me to gain experience in my chosen field. I really did not need any further urging though: relief from the monotonous routine of filing was reason enough in itself for me to seek

the job. Too, there was something about the ad—even today I cannot put my finger on it—which intrigued me and drew me on.

When I asked him what he knew of this man Quarry, all Wallace could tell me was that he was reputedly a very wealthy man of culture who kept to himself and expected, indeed commanded, that others do the same. For more than two years he had been living, a semi-recluse, at Lairneth, a rambling, pseudo-Gothic structure located out in the marshlands ten miles south of Newark. Quarry, I learned, had once been an explorer and anthropologist of some note until the ill-fated Cordelle expedition. Something had happened to him in that desolate region west of Shire Nor to make him withdraw from public life when he returned to the States; but no one knew what that something was. All attempts to draw him out, to get him to tell the reason for his retirement, had been in vain and after a time people simply ceased to wonder. To Wallace it was surprising that he should now want to throw off his cloaking solitude to receive an absolute stranger.

I was more than ever intrigued. It was evident that Quarry was probably engaged in some sort of research dealing with the ancient civilizations and needed someone to correlate the vast amount of information that invariably piles up in such pursuits. Perhaps it might even have something to do with the Cordelle expedition . . . for a moment I gave way to my vice of daydreaming as I pictured sunburnt men in the thin, cold air beneath a high, waferlike sun, unearthing Grecian artifacts from the Chinese sands. And to think I might play a part in such a discovery! . . . The bubble popped and I snapped back to reality. Wallace was glad to hear I was going to apply early the next morning and, before leaving, gave me directions to the Hall and a short letter of recommendation.

The country through which I drove the next day was profoundly depressing. Beyond Newark, the marshes held sway and stretched away in all directions like a great canvas done in sickly browns and grays. Only occasionally was the scene's dreariness broken by the lonely pools that gleamed dully amid the sedges and the clumps of bobbing cat-tails. The Hall itself—a grim, gaunt building flanked on one side by a cohort of black pines and on the other by the lapping waters of a green-scummed pool—did little to raise my spirits when I finally came to it. Here and there mullioned windows peeped forth slyly through the tangle of dead vines that snaked up the stone walls. Beneath the dun sky, the gray waste of the slate roof with its steep peaks, ornate gables, and rusted guttering had a peculiarly melancholy effect on me.

I parked my car in front of the arched entrance and got out. An unseasonably chill wind had sprung up, whirling clouds of dust and pine needles down the weed-grown drive, so that I turned my collar up as I mounted the cracked steps. An iron knocker, wrought in the likeness of a faintly impish cherub, produced a sepulchral noise that echoed hollowly.

I waited for about five minutes without getting an answer. Then, just as I was getting ready to go around the house in search of another entrance, the oak door swung silently open. Framed in the doorway stood a tall man, well past middle age. His massive, leonine head, with its blazing eyes and mane of unkempt hair, perched precariously upon his lean frame. We stared at each other for a moment before I spoke.

"Mr. Quarry? My name is Gerald Nadan. I came to apply for the secretarial job, if it's still available." He did not take the hand I held out to him.

His luminous eyes looked me up and down. A guttural voice forced itself out from deep within his throat. "It's still available, Mr. Nadan. I presume you've brought credentials of some kind.

Good, let me see them." Having glanced at Wallace's letter, he looked up. "Lacombe University thinks highly of you. Tell me, precisely, what language experience do you have? Give me an outline of the courses you've taken and also say a few words about yourself."

I gave him the information he requested and awaited the verdict, shivering a little in the cold. At last, he spoke. "I think you'll do, Mr. Nadan; I don't imagine there'll be any other replies to my advertisement anyway. How soon can you begin work here?"

I told him I could begin my duties as soon as I made arrangements in town and packed my things. Receiving his grunted approval, I drove back to Newark, mulling over the impressions I had formed. That night I returned.

My initial duties were not very exacting: I was to prepare the meals, keep the house and adjacent grounds in order, and generally be at Quarry's disposal. For the first few days I kept busy, getting accustomed to the new routine and my employer.

Sebastian Quarry was a solitary, preoccupied person who rarely, if ever, spoke to me and then only to issue some curt order. Sometimes I would not see him for hours at a stretch as I moved through the lonely house; at other times I might unexpectedly come upon him in one of the dark halls or musty rooms which he haunted like an antique spectre. It was in the library, a large room on the second story, where he was usually to be found, poring over one of the archaic volumes that filled the place or jotting down notations in his crabbed script or, once in awhile, merely sitting there with a drugged look in his eyes. We came to the subject of my secretarial duties after my first week.

Summoning me one day to the gloom-filled chamber, he gestured to the booklined walls and said, "You'll be spending most of your time here in the library. I want you to make a detailed list of every volume in this room and an accurate cross-index of

each. Since many are Latin and Greek works, you'll probably have to do a good deal of reading, which I'm sure will pose no problem to a man of your capability. Let it be said now that I'm paying you highly for this work and expect maximum efficiency. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mr. Quarry," I replied.

"One thing more. The bulk of this library deals with the occult, a subject which has been of great interest to me for many years. If I may say so, I believe that I have the third largest collection of books on the subject in the United States. I trust the fact that you'll be examining some fairly—ah—lurid works won't bother you?"

I assured him that it would not.

"Very well. Here's the desk you can work at and there's all the material you'll need. Start with the shelf next to the west window and work your way counter-clockwise around the room. If you run into any volumes you can't deal with, set them aside for me to check." He left me with instructions as to the exact form I was to follow and an admonition to be careful when handling the old manuscripts.

So began the second phase of my work. Every morning, after attending to my other duties, I would retire to the library to spend the day glancing over each book, typing the desired information, and then filing it away in a large cabinet set up for the purpose. It was a good thing I had developed a keen interest for books and languages early in life, else the tedium of translating and indexing might soon have gotten wearisome. As the work slowly progressed, I would often wonder what Quarry's reason was in having this job done.

As he had said, the majority of his collection dealt with the occult in a variety of aspects, all equally interesting. Rare books, whose existence I had only heard vague rumors of, and ancient

brass-bound tomes lay open beneath my questing eye, their age-stained pages covered with strange drawings, diagrams, and even stranger text. Besides such modern works as Pursuivant's *Vampyricon,* Thunstone's *Myth Patterns of the Shonokins,* and Spence's *Encyclopaedia of Occultism,* there were older, darker, and more fabulous volumes, like Nathaniel Crouch's *Kingdom of Darkness,* d'Erlette's unexpurgated *Cultes des Goules,* and even a battered copy of Eibon's *Book* in the Norman-French edition. I became so engrossed in my work that the long summer days began to pass without my least notice. At times, certain hints which I gleaned in my study would trouble me when I thought I detected veiled patterns and significances underlying the books' apparent meanings; but at first this was rare.

That Quarry was more than a mere addict, that he was an ardent believer in the occult I had no doubt for often I would find certain objects around the house which I recognized at once from my readings: things like flannel "hands" and cunningly fashioned talismans of gold, copper, and silver—all charms of a protective nature. Even the library in which I worked offered proof of my observation: worked into the parquet flooring in gilt was the Seal of Solomon which a large Hebrew pentacle of the Tozgrec type encircled; at each corner of the room was drawn Silurses' Diamond of Evocation; and in a cupboard in the shadows at the room's far end, over which brooded the massive statue of a Greek athlete carved from a large piece of porphyry, I discovered such items as the Globe, the Ring of Gyges, the Trident, and the almond-wood Wand—instruments which had a deep meaning for me. The tenuous wisp of suspicion which I had repressed for its absurdity grew into a definite feeling of unease, coupled with the obscure repulsion I had begun to feel towards Quarry himself.

The first definite proof that all was not as it should be at the

Hall occurred about two weeks after my arrival. It had been difficult the first few nights to get used to the different moods of the marshland. One night the silence might be so absolute that I would lie awake for hours, listening for the faint droning of insects or the distant calls of night-birds; the next, a storm might keep me awake as the wind hushed through the dripping branches and hurled fitful gusts of rain against the panes.

The night in question was overcast, very warm, and humid. Not a breath of air came through the open window; a shroud-like silence lay over all. It seemed I had been tossing and turning for ages, trying to find the coolest spot on the bed, when I became aware of dim, muffled music coming from directly outside the south window. Getting out of bed, I groped my way over to the french doors and unlatched them.

Yes, it was music, organ music, which came from the yellow square of a window a floor below and to my right. Leaning out and listening intently, I decided that it sounded like a Bach fugue, though somehow subtly distorted to give one a tingling sensation of evil. The fact struck me that Quarry had not once shown any enthusiasm for music since I had come to Lairneth; but then the man would always be a mystery to me.

Suddenly, far out in the midnight darkness of the marsh, in the general location where I knew a large mere lay, I saw a light shine forth and begin to weave slowly in intricate patterns, almost as if keeping time to the beat of the music. Simultaneously, a stridently metallic voice—Quarry's—murmured forth into the night in a language that was either so mumbled as to be unintelligible or entirely foreign. The light (I saw now that it resembled a small globe of radiant blue fire) shot toward the house as Quarry stopped speaking and disappeared around the southwest corner. All sound ceased immediately thereafter. I was left in the stillness to ponder, fruitlessly, what I had just seen.

The rest of the night passed like the previous ones, save that I had an odd dream in which I seemed to be running down a long, tiled passage with a black, loping creature—known to me as the Shifony—in pursuit and I ran and ran until I came to a triangular bronze door with a fiery sign emblazoned on it and I could go no farther and the Shifony was right on top of me, its Darkness of a Face bending towards mine, and the tunnel began to reverberate with hysterical screaming . . . I found myself sitting up in bed, shivering, my pajamas damp with sweat. For a moment I could have sworn that the screaming of my dream still rang in my ears, but when I saw the gray light of dawn creeping in through the window I realized that the cry of some nocturnal bird must have awakened me and perhaps caused the dream-cries. I lay back, but was not able to fall asleep again.

That morning, as I passed the library on my way to fix breakfast, I happened to glance in; what I saw there brought me up short. The room was a shambles: books had been hurled from the shelves and lay like birds amid fragments of broken phonograph records; the big mahogany table had been overturned; and the south window—framework and all—was completely shattered. The air reeked with incense—a pungent, cinnamon-cedar odor. Quarry slouched in a chair, unmoving, ignoring my entrance. He was clad in a robe of black velvet girt with a belt of lead. There was a haunted look in his eyes as he gazed in fascination at the pedestal where the Greek statue had been, but now was not.

His eyes, mute with terrible fear, sought mine; his hands shook. Glass crunched beneath my feet as I knelt beside him. "What happened, Mr. Quarry?" I asked, helping him to his feet. "Was it a burglar?"

"No, I don't know . . ." he mumbled drunkenly. "No, not that, it wasn't that at all. Nothing really to worry about at all!" He almost shrieked as if he were trying to impress the fact upon the

universe. "I'm just a little tired, Nadan. Help me to my room."

"But something happened here, Mr. Quarry. I . . ."

He regained a bit of his formidable composure. "Mr. Nadan, what I do within the realm of my house is my concern, not yours. You know your duties and you know your privileges. Don't meddle in my affairs unless I ask you to."

It took me most of the day to get the library in order and have the window repaired, during which time Quarry remained out of sight. What little I saw of him made me begin to fear for his sanity. He shunned the library entirely and took to flitting through the dark corridors, restlessly, like some colossal bat lost in the shadows. He trembled constantly and twice I caught him with his head cocked curiously to one side as if he were listening for something. Toward dusk, having searched all over the house for him, I found him down in the subcellar, making cryptic passes before a clay tablet which he ceased as I came through the archway.

As I was on my way to my room that night, a furtive whisper came from the shadows that clustered in the hall. It was Quarry, a radically changed Quarry.

"Listen to me, Nadan," he choked out. "You've got to do what I tell you, no matter how eccentric or, yes, insane my orders appear. I want you to lock me in my room tonight. If you have any regard for me, do this and *don't unlock the door until morning,* no matter what further commands you may receive. Indeed, it might be well for you also to retire to your room as soon as possible—for your security of mind."

"All right, Mr. Quarry," I said. "I'll do as you say. But tell me," I added (for I had to find out the cause of his extreme fear), "that statue is gone from the library. That's what's disturbing you, isn't it?"

Whatever reaction I expected, it certainly was not what I got.

Sebastian Quarry, explorer of savage wastelands, whirled without a word and fled down the hall in a flutter of velvet. I followed more slowly and did as he told me.

Contrary to his implied command, I did not go to bed at once, but returned to the library to puzzle over the growing mystery. Something was wrong here, something, the non-skeptical part of my mind kept insisting, that had its roots in the not-so-common-place. Of course, there might be some natural explanation for all that was going on—Quarry could have come upon thieves as they were removing the statue, a valuable piece, no doubt; there might have been a struggle that had left him in shock; for all I knew, he might be suffering from some obscure mental disease—but each theory offered seemed more ridiculous than the first. I had a feeling, call it intuition, that the real solution to the problem lay in the supernormal since all of the partial evidence suggested it: what I had seen and heard the night before, what I had found in the library this morning, and what I knew of Quarry's own character. It only required the final proof—the manifestation itself—to thoroughly convince me. I suppose I was trying to balance myself on the barrier that divides the real world from the dark borderlands.

Casting around for something to take my mind off the problem, I picked up the Middenbourne edition of Alibeck's *The True Grimoire* which I had started that afternoon and began to thumb idly through it. I came across a curious passage entitled "Stone-Casting" that was annotated in Quarry's almost indecipherable handwriting. My interest rose as I read on, for one paragraph in particular seemed especially pertinent:

"For it is given to the Wizard who holds the Keys of Power to control all manner of spirits, whether they inhabit the high-most pinnacles of Paradise or the nethermost abysses of Gehenna. Let the Adept who reads understand these Keys, but let him also beware, lest he call up

One who has a Greater Power than he . . . To summon the Dead, a Stone is needful, that the immaterial may assume the corporeal, that the Essence may clothe itself in a material BEING. Chant thrice the Litany of Shaizar while drawing the Pentacle of Vau widdershins about the Stone. Then recite the Unsaid Words of Kolomedes and by the Wand cast the Spirit into the Stone, that it may be confined and be a pleasing vehicle for the Mage's pleasure."

Along the margin, Quarry had written: "Substitute Seven Words of Evocation and employ when Saturn is in the Eighth House and Mars in Sectile. Calconix shall not triumph."

My reverie was shattered suddenly by a resounding crash that came thundering down the corridor outside in a great wave of sound. Wondering what new mischief was up, I sprang to my feet as another crash boomed, and dashed up the stairs to Quarry's room. I unlocked the door, but it would not budge when I tried to open it: he had barred it from the inside. Nor were my attempts to rouse him by shouting any more successful. The man must have drugged himself not to hear such a racket, I thought; or perhaps he was awake, but afraid to answer. All the while the heavy pounding noises continued, growing in intensity and coming from directly overhead.

Deciding not to waste any more time, I ran down the hall to the circular staircase that led to the attics. The wooden steps clattered beneath my feet as I mounted them at breakneck speed, cursing my rashness for not bringing a light or a weapon with which to meet the intruder, though I hesitated to imagine what kind of intruder could be causing such mighty blows.

I emerged into the warm darkness of the main attic and paused for a moment to get my sense of direction. The pounding noises had given way to the sound of splintering wood and slate which abruptly stopped. Straining my ears, I thought I could hear a soft bumping and rasping on the roof, which at this point

of the house was not too steep. I crept slowly through the darkness toward these sounds, pushing aside cobweb blankets and ducking the dust-furred beams. It took me some time, for the floor was littered with a hodgepodge of rubbish; crates and articles of furniture hulked on all sides. So quiet had it become that my heartbeats were clearly audible.

I realized there was someone in the attic with me when I heard the floor creak slightly a few yards to my left. "Who's there?" I whispered, rather pointlessly. The only answer I received was another footfall, nearer, accompanied by sharp crunching noises.

What happened after that is a confused blur. I remember noticing for the first time in that nighted chamber the two emberlike eyes that floated before mine—inhuman, cold eyes in which I glimpsed a universe of hate and malignity. Beneath the hypnotic effect of those orbs, I was literally rooted to the spot; my legs seemed drained of all feeling and coordination. Then a sudden flood of pain swept over my brain as something terrifically hard smashed into my chest, knocking me backward. I caromed off a chest of some sort, struck my head on a rafter, and fell to the floor in a choking cloud of dust. As unconsciousness engulfed me, I recall trying to utter the protective word I had seen so often . . .

I awoke on my own bed. Quarry was patting my face with a wet cloth. I groaned and started to sit up, but dizziness overwhelmed me, the room seeming to spin in four directions at once.

"Just lie back for a while," he said. "You'll be all right. There are no bones broken, though your chest has been bruised badly. It's a miracle you weren't killed."

"What happened?" I asked.

His eyes glittered; his hands writhed nervously, but his voice had that old steadiness when he spoke. "It was the wind, you

know. Apparently it tore that -uh- statue on the peak loose from its fastenings and sent it crashing through into the attic—the roof's quite weak there. You were directly beneath, I guess, and it caught you a glancing blow, fortunately nothing serious. The sound of the impact woke me and when I came up to investigate there you were, all huddled up in a corner with that monstrosity nearby. Tomorrow morning I'm calling a contractor out from town to repair the damage and haul the cursed thing away."

I was about to tell him of the continuous pounding that had sent me up there and to point out that there had been no wind blowing, but as quickly decided not to. He would explain it away, saying that what I had seen was only an hallucination born of the darkness and the forms my overstimulated mind peopled it with or simply telling me to mind my business as he had done previously. So I kept my mouth shut and nodded in agreement. It was now plainly obvious that he was hiding something that was somehow connected with his occult practices. No explanation, however far-fetched, could explain what had just happened. I resolved to find out what that something was.

The next day dawned bleak and forbidding, with a milky haze enveloping everything so that the Hall appeared to be suspended in a gray void at the world's end. Quarry did not touch his plate at breakfast and I saw that he had lost some of his newly found confidence of the night before. As the hours crawled by without any sign of the contractor he had summoned, he became visibly worried, chafing with impatience.

In the meantime, curbing a strong desire to visit the attic and its "accidental" occupant, I began to surreptitiously examine his numerous journals and notebooks in the hope they might contain some clue to the mystery, but I found nothing out of the ordinary. Most had been written about five years prior to the Cordelle expedition and were detailed accounts of Quarry's ear-

lier journies to the Peruvian jungles and the mountainous highlands of New Zealand. Facts, figures, dates, and sketches—all commonplace.

It occurred to me that I might find something of value in his room; but just then the contractor, a birdlike man named Grately, arrived, and so we all trooped up to the attics. What we saw there seemed to confirm Quarry's explanation—at least on the surface. A large hole had been torn through the roof, admitting the wan daylight. Amid the debris of shattered slate, twisted copper-sheeting, and roofing material lay the thing that confirmed my fears and suspicions beyond a possible doubt: the missing statue from the library. There was no mistaking those haughty features, that rippling muscular perfection. It lay supine on the planks before us, the whole position of its body *changed* from what it was originally. Whereas the figure had been stooping forward as if at the beginning of a race, knees bent and hands lightly touching the pedestal, *now it was fully erect, its limbs rigid pillars; the hands were balled into fists and the right arm jutted up into the air like a sable tower.* For some reason I could not force myself to look closely at its face and blindly staring eyes. I shuddered with mind whirling as I helped the contractor carry the heavy thing down the stairs and out to his station wagon. Then, while he returned to put a temporary canvas patch over the hole, I sought Quarry out in his study.

"What are you going to have done with the statue?"

The frightened look rose to the surface in the dark pools of his eyes. "Have it destroyed," he replied curtly. "It's a menace to all concerned."

"Funny. I never noticed it on the roof before," I said deliberately and left the room.

Shortly after Grately's departure, Quarry came into the library, sat down at his desk, and began writing. Deciding to take

a chance and use this opportunity, I complained of a headache and asked if I might lie down until I got over it. A few moments later I was in his bedroom, hurriedly searching for I knew not what. There was not anything out of the way in his closet or dressers and the bookshelves only contained some harmless theosophical works. I was ready to give up when I remembered I had forgotten his bedside table. At first glance, its drawer held only a few blank note-pads and a box of pencils; but hidden beneath the tablets I found a small red book whose pages bore Quarry's unmistakable script: a diary! Elated, I shoved the drawer back in place and rushed to my room where, lying on the bed, I began to read the short, tersely written entries—all dated for this year:

"Jan. 8. *He* has come, as indeed he promised he would so many months ago. And how changed he is—gone that other-worldly aura, that frightening, godlike aspect I came to know so well in the Caverns of the Shid—so that now he may move freely among men; he looks no different than any mortal. Cordelle and the rest must have thought me mad when they found me afterward, delirious and withered, babbling of dark-shining suns and the bloated things I saw in the Deeps. But I was not mad: I had the knowledge and had found Him whom the Shid call Chiancungi, the Man with Night in his heart. While the rest had given me up for lost, I was seeing the wonders of the ages, learning the lore of the Elder Days. And when he sent me forth, it was with the Promise which now he has fulfilled . . . He came in the night in a cone of black flame and, though exhausted by the dangerous journey through the Planes, celebrated the First Rites with me to initiate the Undertaking. Having bound ourselves to each other by the drinking of the blood, we have taken new names: he, Calconix; I, Sonneilion. Together, we shall grow in the wisdom of the Outer Arts. The stars will hide their faces from us in

fear and the very earth groan beneath our feet. And I shall have power."

The entries went on like this for some time, Quarry at first writing in an assured manner, praising the attributes of the man known as Calconix and repetitiously emphasizing his hopes for gaining magical potencies under the latter's tutelage. Oddly enough, little was said of their activities during this period, but I gathered it was a time of trips to various parts of the world for certain objects Calconix said were necessary. As the entries went on, Quarry's increasingly scrawled handwriting indicated that he had become highly agitated, though what the cause of this strain was I did not learn until I came to the passage for March 21:

"I begin to fear for my sanity. To what depths have I degraded myself? And for what purpose? Where is the power Calconix promised me, where the glory, the splendor? I move in realms of decay, through regions of rust and ashes. Shadows surround me, haunt my dreams. I carry out ceremonies, but do not comprehend their meanings. When I ask him why, I receive no answer. And doubts assail me. Last evening we were transported in the usual manner to a darkly wooded region somewhere in Massachusetts. The domed hills with their peculiar stone rings were the only witnesses to our sombre wizardry as we chanted the Old Song and lit the tapers. Then, when all was prepared, Calconix made the motions and cursed the village. The forest seemed to bend and writhe and moan beneath the awesome spell while I stood nearby, cowering . . . Today I learn that all the inhabitants of a certain northern Massachusetts township have vanished during the night, beyond the ken of man, beyond the light. I fear not only his ruthlessness, but also his attitude towards me for he battens on me like a parasite, draining me of my knowledge while giving nothing in return. A lethargy has snared my

mind and I find I am by degrees becoming his slave. I cannot face him anymore without drowning in the glittering suns of his eyes . . ."

Thereafter the entries became periodic, illegible, and all but incoherent. In the last pages, though, Quarry seemed to have acquired some sort of inner courage as events moved toward their climax.

"April 9. Surely it is Hell I move about in or else I am mad. I dare not write of what I saw in the vault beneath the lake—*He* might find this and . . . I had never dreamt the People could be here in this country, down there in their musky night, hissing before those slablike altars. I was afraid to descend, but Calconix gripped my hand and made me follow as he moved among those loathsome, crawling shapes with his rod of crystal lighting our way. And by its glow I could tell that some of them were once human, though changed and still changing. He revealed all to me in the tunnels and his words yet sear my brain like fire. He is preparing a primal ritual awesome beyond compare to open a Gateway in space, to unseal a Crack in time for certain . . . Things. I pale before this insane plot: the utter destruction of the human race for the glorification of alien gods and their minions. Now I understand the part I have played and have yet to play. But I cannot do the unspeakable deed he wishes; I will not. I know what I must do: it will have to be soon and done while he is off guard. Meanwhile I must rally my powers and, above all, block my true thoughts from his all-seeing mind.

"April 19. Horror pervades the house. The Gap widens in the subcellar and Calconix remains at the top of that yawning abyss night and day. A chill breeze has begun to whistle up out of the gulf; at times I think I hear a mad tittering, far down, that pains my ears. I am going to kill him now, while his soul is abroad,

feasting. With his death, the curse will be ended and I shall be free. My arthame lies at hand, triply consecrated; I fear, but I must go before my courage wanes and the chance be lost.

"April 20. It is done. God, the color of his blood! The Gap has disappeared, the menace is gone. I feel such peace of mind as I had not thought possible a few weeks ago. I think I shall take a trip, leave this place of foulness . . ."

That was all, but it was enough. I lay back, analyzing what I now knew. Sebastian Quarry was a sorcerer—no doubting it, though he had kept this impossible fact well concealed from outsiders. He had joined the Cordelle expedition not out of any scientific interest, but because it gave him a chance to seek out the Greater Adept known as Chiancungi. Apparently he had disappeared from the group for a good length of time: to them he was lost, presumed dead, until he turned up in a terrible physical shape. But during that time he had found the Chinese necromancer and they had formed a pact whereby the Chinese would come to the States at some future date and use Quarry's house as a base of operation, Quarry being induced by his promises of power. This was the reason for his retirement: he had been awaiting the other's coming. But Calconix was the stronger of the two, in mind and influence, and used Quarry like a tool until the frightfulness of what he was doing had struck home to the American. And so he had killed the Chinese and foiled the plot.

Or had he?

How did this tie in with the business about the statue? What was the reason for my presence here in this abode of mystery? Now that I had one part of the answer, I was going to get the other from Quarry himself.

It was growing dark when I left my room with the diary. As I descended the stairs, I heard the hall phone jangling. Picking it up, I inquired who was calling.

"This is Sheriff Hillen, Benson county. May I speak to Mr. Quarry?"

Quarry had come out of the darkened library and took the receiver from me. After listening for a few minutes, all the color drained from his face and he started to tremble violently. Choking out a few words of agreement, he dropped the receiver on the hook and fell against the wall, eyes glaring madly.

"My God!" he gasped. "Oh, my good God! He's coming back for me, Nadan. He's coming back to get me!"

"Calconix?" I ventured as a hideous realization struck me.

He started and for a minute I thought he was going to have a heart attack. I gripped him by the arms and guided him to a nearby divan. All the while he kept muttering beneath his breath and I could only catch snatches of what he was saying: "Shouldn't have tried it, especially using *his* soul . . . *aron ozinomas te* . . . thought I could control him after all this time . . . he must have been waiting for such a chance, Nadan, out there under the ooze, waiting . . . help me, ai, help me," I shook him roughly until his white mane tossed like a flurry of snowflakes.

"Get hold of yourself, Quarry. For your own good, you've got to tell me what you've done if I'm to know what to do. Here," I said, pouring a tumbler of brandy. "Drink this and calm down."

He gulped the drink down frantically and lay back, panting like a hunted beast. However, that look of insane fear was gone, at least for the present. Soon his eyes fixed on mine.

"What do you know?"

"I know about Calconix, about what he planned to do. And I know you killed him with the enchanted blade. I think I can guess the rest, but you'd better tell me. What about the statue?"

He sighed. "You know about Calconix, eh? Yes, I slew him and sank his weighted body out there in the mere. With him

dead, I thought the matter ended. That was foolish, of course—fatally foolish. I didn't reckon with his superior abilities and it was only a few days later that I began to be haunted by his . . . by his soul! I'd made the mistake of attacking him while his soul was separated from his body. When that soul returned and found the flesh untenable, submerged beneath mire and water, such was its rage that it rose to avenge itself upon me. At first his shade could do me no ill, but gradually it began to take on a semblance of half-life and conjure against me. I've been besieged, as it were, these past weeks by his magic which has been growing steadily stronger, with only my hasty charms warding off destruction."

He paused to see if I were following him, then went on. "The night before last I thought I would try to end it all with one bold stroke: I planned to draw his earthbound spirit here and shackle it in the statue of the athlete, to cast the stone." (I recalled what I had read in *The True Grimoire* and knew that my guess was correct.) "But even in this he thwarted me for though I imprisoned him within the rock, yet he nullified the spell's potency by animating the statue and broke out of the Pentacle. Had I not uttered the Word he might have slain me on the spot. As it was, the living statue hurled itself through the window and was lost in the darkness. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," I answered. "And last night? Calconix was trying to get at you, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and he would have too if you hadn't somehow rendered him powerless. I thought that if I could have Grately completely destroy the figure before nightfall, perhaps I might beat *Him* even yet. But that call just now . . . a patrol car just found the station wagon about two miles west of here. Grately's body was pulped almost beyond recognition and the car was *empty*." He clutched at my arm.

"Nadan, my power has waned; I'm helpless. But you . . . you've learnt much during your work here: that was the reason I advertised for someone like you. Since you are a virgin in the lore, your first magic must be infinitely more powerful than all of Calconix'. I tried to keep all the facts from you as long as I could for I felt that if you learned what was going on before I told you, you might leave and my last defense vanish. If you have any regard for me, please, help me."

Looking at this weeping old man, I could not help but feel compassion for him. "What can I do?" I asked.

The words spilled forth in an excited torrent. "He cannot enter the house—for I've charmed each room—save through the roof and attics as he attempted last night. Once he's within the house, though, nothing may hinder him. I know he'll return tonight, most likely making for that hole above my room. You'll be hiding near it on the roof. When you see the statue you must make Alibeck's Eight Dispersion Gestures—a simple spell, but one which must be recited while the statue is in motion on pain of your life. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Quarry," I said evenly. He took hope at that and told me what I was to do in greater detail. As he talked, a doubt, a vague suspicion rose in me for he was too anxious to get me on the roof: the fear that I might refuse was plainly manifest on his taut face, in his nervously darting eyes. I felt that he was holding something back, but knew the senselessness of trying to find out what. He gave me a copy of the incantation I was to employ and a flashlight; then, asking me to lock his door as I passed by, he turned to leave. When I inquired why, all he gave me in answer was a sad smile.

I lingered in the library for a few minutes, meditating on what I had undertaken. It was all so strange. I was not afraid, but was prey to an almost indescribable feeling—like that of a

man who, once a skeptic, has come face to face with all the horrors he has denied. Here I was, setting out to do battle with a creature of arcane lore with only a scrap of paper and a frightened man's faith. I would never be the same again, knowing what I had seen and read and now was going to do . . . I collected my material and went up the stairs toward the attics. As I passed by Quarry's door, I fumbled in my pocket for the key, but found that in my preoccupation I had forgotten it. I did not think it mattered, though, for once again he had bolted it on the inside.

Having clambered through the trap door out onto the vast slope of the roof, I stopped for a moment to gaze at the northernmost roof-ridge where I thought I saw something looming blackly against the convoluted storm clouds. I blinked my eyes, trying to focus them in the dimness, but, when I looked again, there was not anything. The wind whipped and plucked at me as I half-slid, half-crawled down the slate incline to a point near the patched hole. This was on a slighter incline than the slope I had just left and was a relatively blind area, only the western peak being in sight.

I laid out my flashlight and the notebook in which the spell was written—though I already had it memorized—and settled down for my lonely vigil. The pallid, half-light waned and the deeper shades of evening began to close down about me. A fine rain started to trickle down, making the slates damp and even more uncomfortable. The heavens rumbled distantly to the piping of the wind.

The first warning I had that something was approaching came when several pieces of slate came rattling down out of the darkness to land at my feet. I leaped up, peering into the rain-swept gloom. There, about five feet away, I made out a mantislike figure moving slowly toward me. Groping for the flash, I began to

make the preliminary signs while the words poured forth almost of their own volition:

"Palas aron ozinomas, baske bantu tudan donas . . ."

My fingers tore at the button and the light shone forth, full into the face of . . . Quarry! His hair dripped with moisture. His eyes were dull, vacant. He shuffled toward me queerly.

"Quarry!" I shouted above the wind and rain that had begun to stream down. "What are you doing here? Get back, man; it's about time!"

"Yes," he repeated tonelessly. "It is time. Time I made recompense for my deed. Calconix summons me now as he has summoned before. I must go. But before I go unto the Master, I must destroy you, who endangers his power." And with that he lashed out at me with the poker he had been holding behind his back.

Fire exploded in my left hand as the iron smashed against it and sent the flash spinning off into the night like an errant star. I sprang back, staggering on the slippery slates. The poker hissed past my face and my blood turned to ice. I could just make out the dim figure with its arm held high for another blow. Hurling myself at him, I grabbed at his arm and smashed my fist into that leonine face. With a snarl he stumbled and we both fell to the slates, rolling over and over toward the roof's edge. I heard the poker go clanging off into the wet darkness. Quarry began beating my head furiously against the slates. My hands clutched at his scrawny throat; my fingers sank deep. He started to wheeze, but his struggles only increased in ferocity, so that even then I had to marvel at the man's strength.

Then there occurred that which is graven deeply on my brain, the thing I will never be able to forget. A massive shadow loomed over Quarry. A glistening ebon arm curled itself around his neck and jerked him with a strangled cry off my chest.

Though glinting spirals of light spun before my eyes—the results of Quarry's blows—I was still able to see the two figures locked in mortal combat at the roofedge: Quarry, whose terror-stricken face and attitude of hopeless despair haunt me yet, and the ebon giant, the living statue animated by a dead necromancer, with its serene countenance twisted in a livid expression of hate, the eyes pinpoints of golden flame. Before I could move or utter a word, they hurtled off into space; for the rest of the night I think I just crouched there, weeping . . .

Little more remains to be said. I found Quarry's broken body and the statue where they lay on the walk in front of the house the next morning. Quarry's body I buried in an unmarked grave east of the Hall. I destroyed all the pieces of the statue in the proper manner—all the pieces, that is, save the right hand. This I hunted for in the weeds and bushes that bordered the house and beneath the sinister pines, but could not find anywhere. Then, on a sudden hunch, I ran into the house and up to the library where I found the missing object. It lay on the desk near the doorway with my pen clutched in its tapering fingers. On a sheet of typing paper in a spidery script was written a grotesque, but fitting epitaph:

"Who killed me, killed himself."

MICHAEL BAILEY (1944-) is a young Wisconsin writer, attending the University of Wisconsin. This is his first published story.

Aneanoshian

MICHAEL BAILEY

Only now, months after the events which brought me to the threshold of death, can I bear to set down the sequence of happenings leading up to that fateful occurrence in northern Wisconsin, where I had grown accustomed to vacationing at an isolated cabin in well forested country which abounded in fresh streams among which I spent many hours with my books as my only companions. It was there one day last June that I set off shortly before noon for the rest of the day in the woods—a day of gentle breezes and warming sun, following hours of rain the previous day.

I made my way towards a hill beyond a pond where the frogs were celebrating yesterday's rainfall. What drew me to that goal was an ancient edifice in the very center of the immense forest overwhelming the hilltop. When first I had bought my cabin three summers before, I had discovered the structure, which

seemed to be akin to a temple, when I ventured into the forest along a trail so completely over-run and arbored over that only a dim, perpetual twilight managed to reach the ground. The trail, practically invisible from more than a few feet away, had evidently not been used for decades, perhaps centuries; it was directly opposite the side from which I first entered upon the scene. At that time, after walking two miles through the forest, I came into a clearing over two hundred yards in diameter. This clearing, strewn with fallen trees, crowned the hill, and the ancient edifice lay at its heart.

The building had no design, only size; still, judging by its structure, it seemed to be some kind of temple. It was almost a perfect cube, fifty feet wide on every side. I found no distinguishing characteristics which would help to identify it, though every side was broken by a twenty-five-foot wide flight of hewn steps that met at the top, allowing a square summit of ten-foot sides. It seemed to be hewn out of a solid stone. No subsequent search through such archeological references as I had at hand offered me a clue to its origin; nor did a team of archaeologists I persuaded to examine the temple reach any conclusion about it. In spite of hundreds of small pits sunk around the edifice in an attempt to find artifacts, nothing except a few human bones could be found. By radio-carbon dating, their ages were determined as between eight and ten thousand years. No association could be established between ancestors of the Algonquin Indians, which were native to that place, and the curious temple-structure, but it did play a role in their legendry, which had it that the edifice had been constructed by an obscure people in worship of a being called Aneanoshian. There was no key to what Aneanoshian represented, if an ancient deity.

On that eventful June morning, as the hour approached noon, I reached the structure in the clearing, where I had frequently

paused to read before. I walked up the uneven steps, and, reaching the top, took a small pillow and blanket out of my satchel, put them down on the rough stone, and lay there to read. There I read for perhaps two hours, broken by lunch, before I fell asleep under the relaxing summer sun.

When I awoke, darkness had fallen. But it could not have been long dark, for the full moon rode just above the eastern horizon, and a faint afterglow still lingered in the west. Darkness did not disturb me; I could find my way back, I was confident, though I had never left the area so late before. I anticipated the slow walk back to my cabin among the flutings and croakings of frogs and the occasional crying of nocturnal birds.

I was just about to start down the temple toward the path beyond the clearing when I was aware of a curious apprehension in the conviction that I was being watched. I had felt it hunting cougars in the western states; the feeling was unmistakable. I whirled to face what I was certain was a predatory animal crouched directly behind me on the edge of the temple's summit. Nothing was there. Yet I was reluctant to believe that no animal lurked nearby, however absurd the idea would have seemed by day.

Carefully avoiding all movement, I sat quietly, attempting to hear the betraying scuffing of an animal's padded feet. I strained to the utmost before I heard it rising. It came of a sudden, as if the beast had waited in ambush and then begun its charge, rampaging across the clearing and up the stone steps. I had nothing with which to defend myself, but turned nevertheless, prepared to do battle with my bare hands. Once again nothing but empty space was there. And, hard upon my turning, again came a rush from behind, from a new direction. And again, nothing!

Apprehension burgeoned into fear. By the light of the full moon, I surveyed the clearing. No animal could be seen. Yet the

gathering, the rapid rush, the sudden retreat—all were unmistakable. There was no place for any sizable animal to hide between the forest and the structure on which I stood.

Gathering my courage, I raced down the temple steps, and stopped there to build a small fire, out of which I made a torch of several branches in agonizing haste, for I was never unconscious of being watched. With the torch, I ran towards the path. As I burst into the pathway, my torch light penetrated the blackness to the first turn. I expected to see eyes glaring at me from there. I saw nothing. And then the rush came upon me down the tunnel behind!

I turned, holding the torch high. Once more the retreat was audible, and once more nothing was visible. I wheeled and began to run with every ounce of energy I could summon towards the end of the tunnel-like path, while the forest, now suddenly hideous with menace, pushed in upon me from all sides. All along the course I took, I was conscious of the rushing in and the retreating of some great invisible beast I could hear but could not see.

After an hour of breathless flight, stumbling over fallen boles and limbs, I had not reached the safety of the opening from the forest. I pushed on, less certainly, doubting my senses, in an agony of fear, while my torch burned low, and the nerve-rending rushes toward me continued—and came suddenly once again upon the edifice in the clearing. I had run almost across the clearing before I realized what had happened.

And I had entered from the west, though the clearing never had more than the one path from the east! What blasphemy was this? I stood for a moment trying to understand; I could not. Nor could I again enter the forest, certain as I was that the same maze would engulf me again. I gathered an armful of dead wood from the fallen trees lying about the structure and carried it to

the top. Back and forth I went until I had a pile of firewood that would be enough to keep a fire burning many hours.

Conscious of the thing's lying waiting just out of the moonlight somewhere, I started the fire. As the warm rays of heat slowly increased, my fear diminished a little—but only for a little while, for once again came that frightening rush. Yet this time I seemed to detect even more hesitation than I had noticed before, and it occurred to me that the creature, whatever it was, disliked the fire. Thankfully, I went as close to the flames as I could before turning to face the foe who must surely be lurking at the base of the stone structure which had now become my refuge.

And then I saw the trees—the trees and the forest pushing in and the horrible, groping tendrils slithering through the moonlight toward the temple. Before me rose an immense wall which resembled a school of octopi writhing blindly. Impulsively, I bent, grasped a burning branch, and flung it down the steps at the advancing tendrils.

Instantly the mass of malevolent feelers exploded backwards. The beast must have had a fear of fire as of something mortal. Intoxicated by this discovery, I threw brand after brand at the writhing mass, and each time the trees drew back, ever farther. But I forgot to cover my rear, and did not notice the malign advance of the trees from that quarter until they were almost upon me, turning only just in time to throw a piece of burning wood at the tendrils and limbs closing down upon me.

I saw now that the wall of trees was advancing from all sides, and that no matter how much I fed the fire I had started, I would run out of wood before the sun rose to immobilize the trees. And my shoulders already ached, while every nerve in my blistered hands shrieked for respite.

Then it occurred to me that somehow I must fire the wood lying at the base of the temple. Most of the brands I had previ-

ously thrown had landed on the bare soil beyond the wood, but now I saw that in one or two places where the brands had fallen short, flames were already licking up in the wood lying there. I threw more fiery pieces down among the wood, and presently saw that the flames were rising gratifyingly in several places. I managed at last—between throwing firebrands at the looming forest—to fire a circle of wood about the temple.

The forest retreated. For a little while I felt comparatively safe. Yet the hour was now almost three o'clock in the morning, and there was not enough wood left on the top of the temple to see me through until morning. And, because I had fired what lay immediately adjacent to the temple, there was no more to be had within ready reach. Moreover, I was now virtually exhausted, and as I contemplated the monstrous size of the beast that was Aneanoshian, waiting to claim another victim as others must have died centuries before when the temple was erected for its worship, I knew I must break and run.

I snatched up two long flaming branches and ran down the steps. I raced through the burning wood and directly toward the waiting forest, whose breathing I could hear like that of a lurking animal, a hush and susurrus, as of wind in the pines. I felt the forest move toward me, move back—but somehow one of the branches I carried reached to the coniferous limbs, and the forest caught fire. I heard its voice in one great agonizing scream and jumped back, panic-stricken, dropping the burning branches I carried. I bounded back to the temple and up the steps, where I fell upon the stone, my heart pounding like a drum in my temples.

The fire leapt from treetop to treetop, all around the forest which was even now pressing in toward me. I think I screamed. I no longer remember. I know only that as the flaming trees bent toward me, I was aware of their agony, as keenly as if it were my

own, and, as the flaming branches fell on all sides of me, I collapsed into unconsciousness, even as the flaming tentacles of Aneanoshian were climbing up the sides of the temple in a final effort to reach me.

When I finally regained consciousness, the forest lay in ruins beneath the phantom moonlight and the iridescence of the dawn. Only a few wisps of smoke curled into the sky from the smouldering remains of trees and great trunks. Perhaps the fire had burned the lurking beast and its malignance forever. I could not know. I know only that I was found by the fire-fighters who had come to fight the spreading flames, and that nothing could ever induce me to return again to the temple on the hill.

JOHN RAMSEY CAMPBELL (1946-) lives in Liverpool, England. He is one of the youngest—and most promising—of the recruits to the Cthulhu Mythos. Not surprisingly, H. P. Lovecraft was one of his earliest literary idols, though he is alive to every aspect of creativity today, from Henry Miller to Ingmar Bergman. He began to write at seven, and has worked patiently at the construction of a financial British milieu that is a reflection of the Arkham-Innsmouth-Dunwich country. His first book, *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Less Welcome Tenants,* was published this year by Arkham House.

The Stone on the Island

J. RAMSEY CAMPBELL

Arriving home that night, Michael Nash thought at first that his father was asleep.

Dr. Stanley Nash, his father, was lying back in an armchair in the living-room. On the table beside him stood an empty glass, propping up a sealed envelope, and near these lay a library book. It was all quite ordinary, and Michael only glanced at him before entering the kitchen in search of coffee. Fifteen minutes later he tried to wake his father, and realized what the contents of the glass must have been.

Nash sensed the events of the next few days with numbed nerves. While he realized that any further evidence he might give would be disbelieved, he heard the words "suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed" with a feeling of guilt; he fingered that envelope in his pocket, but forced himself to keep it there. After that arrived those people who saw their admiration of Nash's medical ability as a pretext for taking a half-day off work; then the largely incomprehensible funeral service, the rattle of earth on wood, and the faster journey home.

Various duties prevented Michael Nash from examining his father's papers until October 27, 1962. He might not have plunged into them even then, but for the explicit injunction in his father's final note. Thus it was that as the sun flamed redly on the windows of Gladstone Place, Nash sat in the study of No. 6, with the envelope open before him on the desk and the enclosed sheet spread out for reading.

"My recent research" (Michael read) "has pried into regions whose danger I did not realize. You know enough of these hidden forces which I have attempted to destroy to see that, in certain cases, death is the only way out. Something has fastened itself upon me, but I will suicide before its highest pitch of potency is reached. It has to do with the island beyond Severnford, and my notes and diary will furnish more details than I have time to give. If you want to carry on my work, confine yourself to other powers—and take my case as a warning not to go too far."

That was all; and no doubt many people would have torn up the letter. But Michael Nash knew enough of the basis of his father's beliefs not to treat them lightly; indeed, he held the same creeds. From an early age he had read his father's secret library of rare books, and from these had acquired an awareness which the majority of people never possess. Even in the modern office

building where he worked or in the crowded streets of central Brichester, he could sense things drifting invisibly whose existence the crowd never suspected; and he knew very well of the hidden forces which clustered about a house in Victoria Road, a demolished wall at the bottom of Mercy Hill, and such towns as Clotton, Temphill and Goatswood. So he did not scoff at his father's last note, but only turned to the private papers kept in the study.

In the desk drawer he found the relevant documents, inside a file cover covertly removed from his office building. The file contained a photograph of the island beyond Severnford by daylight, snapped from the Severn bank and hence undetailed; another photograph, taken by a member of the Society for Psychical Research, of the island with dim white ovals floating above it, more likely reflexions on the camera lens than psychic manifestations, but inexplicable enough to be reported in the *Brichester Weekly News;* and several sheets of notepaper inscribed in various colored inks. To these pages Michael turned.

The writing consisted of a description of the island and a chronology of various events connected with it. "Approx. 200 ft. across, roughly circular. Little vegetation except short grass. Ruins of Roman temple to unnamed deity at center of island (top of slight hill). Opp. side of hill from Severnford, about 35 ft. down, artificial hollow extending back 10 ft. and containing stone.

"Island continuously site of place of worship. Poss. pre-Roman nature deity (stone predates Roman occupation); then Roman temple built. In medieval times witch supposed to live on island. In 17th cent. witchcult met there and invoked water elementals. *In all cases stone avoided.* Circa 1790 witch-cult disbanded, but stray believers continued to visit.

"1803: Joseph Norton to island to worship. Found soon after in Severnford, mutilated and raving about 'going too near to stone'. Died same day.

"1804: Recurring stories of pale object floating over island. Vaguely globular and inexplicably disturbing.

"1827: Nevill Rayner, clergyman at Severnford, to island ('I must rid my flock of this evil'). Found in church the day after, alive but mutilated.

"1856: Attempt by unknown tramp to steal boat and spend night on island. Returns frantically to Severnford, but will only say that something had 'fluttered at him' as he grounded the boat.

"1866: Prostitute strangled and dumped on island, but regains consciousness. Taken off by party of dockside workers and transported to Brichester Central Hospital. Two days later found horribly mutilated in hospital ward. Attacker never discovered.

"1870: onward: Recrudescence of rumors about pale globes on island.

"1890: Alan Thorpe, investigating local customs, visits island. Removes stone and takes it to London. Three days later is found wounded horribly—and stone is back on island.

"1930: Brichester University students visit island. One is stranded by others as joke. Taken off in morning hysterical condition over something he has seen. Four days later runs screaming from Mercy Hill Hospital, and is run over. Mutilations not all accounted for by car accident.

"To date no more visits to island—generally shunned."

So much for the historical data; now Nash hunted for the diary to clarify this synopsis. But the diary was not to be found in the study, nor indeed in the house, and he had learned very little about the island. But what he had learned did not seem particularly frightening. After all, perhaps his father had 'gone too near the stone', whatever that meant, which he was not go-

ing to do; further, he would take some of the five-pointed stones from the study cupboard; and there was always the Saaamaaa Ritual if things got too dangerous. He most certainly must go, for this thing on the island had driven his father to poison himself, and might do worse if not stopped. It was dark now, and he did not intend to make a nocturnal trip; but tomorrow, Sunday, he would hire a boat and visit the island.

On the edge of the docks next day he found a small hut ("Hire a boat and see the Severn at its best!") where he paid 7/6 and was helped into a rather wet, rather unpainted motor-boat. He spun the wheel and hissed through the water. Upriver the island climbed into view and rushed at him. At the top of its hill stood an isolated fragment of temple wall, but otherwise it was only a green dome round which water rippled, with faint connotations of a woman in the bath. He twisted the wheel and the island hurried to one side. The boat rounded the verdant tip; he switched off the motor, pulled the boat inshore and grounded it; he looked up, and there, glimmering faintly from the shadowy hollow, was the stone.

It was carved of some white rock, in the shape of a globe supported by a small pillar. Nash noticed at once its vaguely luminous quality; it seemed to flicker dimly, almost as if continually appearing and vanishing. And it looked very harmless and purposeless. Further up the hill he momentarily thought something pale wavered; but his sharp glance caught nothing.

His hand closed on the five-pointed star he carried, but he did not draw it out. Instead, a sudden feeling engulfed him that he could not approach that stone, that he was physically incapable of doing so. He could not move his foot—but, with a great effort, he managed to lift it and take a step forward. He forced himself toward the stone, and succeeded in pushing himself within a foot of it. However, while he might have reached it, he was unable to

touch it. His hand could not reach out—but he strained it out trembling, and one finger poked the hard surface. A shiver of cold ran up his arm, and that was all.

Immediately he knew that he had done the wrong thing. The whole place seemed to grow dark and cold, and somewhere there was a faint shifting noise. Without knowing why, Nash threw himself back from the stone and stumbled down the hill to the boat. He started the motor, slammed the wheel left and cut away through the water—and not until the island had dropped out of sight did he begin to approach the bank.

"You didn't have to come back to work so soon, you know."

"I know," Nash said, "but I think I'll feel better here," and he crossed to his desk. The post had mounted up, he noted disgustedly, though there were few enough pieces to suggest that someone had tried to help him out—Gloria, probably. He began to sort the bits of paper into order; Ambrose Dickens, F. M. Donnelly, H. Dyck, Ernest Earl—and having married the post with the relevant files, he sat down again. The first one only required issue of a form, but one of which he had no stock.

"Baal," he remarked to some perverse deity, and immediately afterward discovered that Gloria also lacked the form. A search around the office gained him five or six, but these would not last long.

"I think this calls for a trip downstairs," he remarked to Gloria.

"Not today," she informed him. "Since you've . . . been away, they've brought in a new arrangement—everybody makes out a list of what they want, and on Wednesdays one person goes down and gets the lot. The rest of the time the storeroom is locked."

"Great," said Nash resignedly, "so we have to hang on for three days. . . . What else has happened?"

"Well, you've noticed the new arrival over there—her name's

Jackie—and there's someone new on the third floor too. Don't know his name, but he likes foreign films, so John got talking to him at once, of course. . . ."

"Jackie—" he mused. ". . . Oh hell, that reminds me! I'm supposed to be calling on Jack Purvis today where he works in Camside, to collect some money he owes me!"

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Take the afternoon off, maybe—" and he began to fill in his leave sheet. He passed the new girl's desk, where John was unsuccessfully attempting to discover any interest in Continental films ("No, Ing*mar*") and continued to a slight argument with Mr. Faber over his projected leave, finally granted because of his recent bereavement.

That afternoon he collected the debt in Camside and caught the bus home. It was dark by the time the vehicle drew up at the bottom of Mercy Hill, and the streets were almost deserted. As he climbed the hill his footsteps clattered back from the three-storey walls, and he slipped on the frost which was beginning to glisten in the pavement's pores. Lunar sickles echoed from Gladstone Place's windows and slid from the panes of the front door as he opened it. He hung up his coat, gathered the envelopes from the doormat and, peeling one open, entered the living-room and switched on the light.

He saw immediately the face watching him between the curtains.

For a minute Nash considered the courses open to him. He could turn and run from the house, but the intruder would then be free in the building—and besides he did not like to turn his back. The telephone was in the study, and hence inaccessible. He saw the one remaining course in detail, came out of his trance and, grabbing a poker from the fireplace, slowly approached the curtains, staring into the other's eyes.

"Come out," he said, "or I'll split your head with this. I mean that."

The eyes watched him unmoving, and there was no motion under the curtain.

"If you don't come out now—" Nash warned again.

He waited for some movement, then swung the poker at the point behind the curtain where he judged the man's stomach to be. There was no response from the face, but a tinkle of glass sounded. Confused, Nash poised the poker again and, with his other hand, wrenched the curtains apart.

Then he screamed.

The face hung there for a moment, then fluttered out through the broken pane.

Next morning, after a sleepless and hermetic night, Nash decided to go to the office.

On the bus, after a jolt of memory caused by the conductor's pale reflexion, he could not avoid thoughts of last night's events. That they were connected with the island beyond Severnford he did not doubt; he had acted unwisely there, but now he knew to be wary. He must take every precaution, and that was why he was working today; to barricade his sanity against the interloper. He carried a five-pointed star in his pocket, and clutched it as he left the bus.

The lift caught him up and raised him to the fourth floor. He returned greetings automatically as he passed desks, but his face stiffened any attempted smile, and he was sure that everybody wondered "What's wrong with Mike this morning?" Hanging up his coat, he glanced at the teapot, and remembered that he and Gloria were to make it that week.

Many of the files on his desk, he saw bitterly, related to cases needing that elusive form. He wandered down to the third floor,

borrowed a few copies, and on the way out noticed someone's back view which seemed unfamiliar—the new arrival, he realized, and headed for the lift.

"Well," Gloria broke in some time later, "I'd better collect the cups."

Nash collected the teapot and followed her out. In a room at the end of the passage water bubbled in a heater, and the room's doorway gaped lightlessly. His thoughts turned to his pocket as he switched on the light. They filled up the pot and transferred the tea to the cups.

"I'll take our end of the office," he remarked, and balanced the tray into the office.

Two faces were pressed against the window, staring in at him.

He managed to save the tray, but one cup toppled and inundated Mr. Faber's desk. "Sorry—I'm sorry—here, let me mop it up, quick," he said hurriedly, and the faces rippled horribly in a stray breeze. Thinking in a muddled way of the things outside the window, the pentacle in his pocket, and the disgust of Mr. Faber's client on receiving teastained correspondence, he splashed the tray to the remaining desks and positioned his and Gloria's cups atop their beermats.

He glared for a minute into the bizarrely-set eyes beyond the pane, noticed a pigeon perched on the opposite roof, and turned to Gloria. "What's wrong with that pigeon?" he inquired, pointing with an unsteady finger. The faces must block any view of the bird from her desk.

"What, that one over there? I don't see anything wrong with it," she replied, looking straight through the faces.

"Oh, I . . . just thought it was injured," answered Nash, unable to frame any further remark (*Am I going mad or what?*)—and the telephone rang. Gloria glanced at him questioningly, then lifted the receiver. "Good morning, can I help you?" she asked,

and scribbled on a scrap of paper. "And your initials? Yes, hold on a minute, please. . . . G. F. E. Dickman's one of yours, isn't it, Mike?"

"What? . . . Oh, yes," and he extracted the file and, one eye on the silent watchers outside, returned to his desk. (For God's sake, they're only looking—not *doing* anything!) "Hello—Mr. Dickman?"

". . . My . . . married recently . . ." filtered through office murmur and client's mumble.

"Would you like to speak up, please? I'm afraid I can't hear you." The faces wavered toward the point where his gaze was resolutely fixed.

"My son Da— . . ."

"Could you repeat your son's name, please?" The faces followed his fugitive glance.

"What d'ya say?"

"Could you *repeat* that, please!" (Leave me alone, you bastards!)

"My son *David,* I said! If I'd known this was all I'd get, I'd of come round meself!"

"Well, I might suggest that the next time you call, you take a few elocution lessons first!—Hello?" . . . He let the receiver click back listlessly, and the faces were caught by the wind and flapped away over the rooftops.

Gloria said: "Oh, Mike, what did you do?"

The rest of the morning passed quickly and unpleasantly. Mr. Faber became emphatic over the correct way to treat clients, and several other people stopped in passing to remark that they wished they had the courage to answer calls that way ("Everyone seems to have forgotten about your father," said Gloria.) But one o'clock arrived at last, and Nash left for the canteen. He still looked round sharply at every reflexion in a plate-glass window,

but managed to forget temporarily in a search around the book-shops for the new Lawrence Durrell, with the awareness of his pocket's contents comforting him.

At two o'clock he returned to the office. At three he managed to transport the tray without mishap; at four, unknown to Nash, a still enraged G. F. E. Dickman arrived, and at four-thirty left, a little mollified. A few minutes later came a phone message from Mr. Miller.

"Well, Mr. Nash," said Mr. Miller, sitting back in his chair, "I believe you had a little trouble this morning. With a Mr. Dickman, I think. I hear you got a bit impatient with him."

"I'm afraid that's true," Nash agreed. "You see, he was mumbling so much I couldn't make it out, and he got disagreeable when I asked him to speak up."

"Ah . . . yes, I know," Mr. Miller interrupted, "but I think you said a little more to him than that. Er—abusive language. Well, now, I know I feel myself like saying a few things to some of the people who phone, but I feel this isn't the way. . . . Is something the matter?" He followed Nash's gaze to the window and turned back to him. "Anything wrong?"

"No . . . no, nothing at all." (*Three* now? God, how many of them are there?)

"Well, as I was saying, there's a right and a wrong way to handle clients. I know 'the customer is always right' is a stock phrase—it often isn't true here anyway, as you know—but we must try and avoid any direct offence. That only leads to ill feeling, and that won't do anybody any good. Now, I had Mr. Dickman round here this afternoon, and I found it quite hard to smooth him down. I hope I won't have to do it again."

"Yes, I realize how you feel," Nash answered, peering frantically at the window, "but you must understand my situation."

"What situation is that?"

"Well, since my father died . . . That is, the way he died—"

"Oh, of course I realize that, but really you can't make it the excuse for everything."

"Well, if that's your stupid opinion—!"

Mr. Miller looked up, but said nothing.

"All right," Nash said wearily. "I'm sorry, but—you know—"

"Of course," Mr. Miller replied coldly. "But I would ask you to use a little more tact in future."

Something white bobbed outside the pane and disappeared in the distance.

That night, despite the strain of the day, Nash slept. He woke frequently from odd dreams of the stone and of his father with some mutilation he could never remember on waking. But when he boarded the bus the next day he felt few qualms when he remembered the haunters; he was more disturbed by the tensions he was building up in the office. After all, if the faces were confining themselves to mental torture, he was growing almost used to them by now. Their alienness repulsed him, but he could bear to look at them; and if they could attack him physically, surely they would already have done so.

The lift hummed sixty feet. Nash reached his desk via the cloak-room, found the Dickman file still lying before him and slung it viciously out of his way. He stared at the heap of files awaiting forms to be issued, then involuntarily glanced out of the window.

"Never mind," Gloria remarked, her back to the radiator. "You'll be able to stock up on those forms today."

At ten o'clock Mr. Faber looked up over the tea-tray: "I wonder if you'd mind going down for the stock today?"

At 10:10, after spending ten minutes over his own cup, Nash rose with a wry grin at Gloria and sank in the lift. The storeroom seemed deserted, brooding silently, but as the door was open he

entered and began to search for items on the list. He dragged a stepladder into one of the aisles and climbed to reach stocks of the elusive forms. He leaned over, looked down, and saw the fourth face staring up at him from the darkness of the other aisle.

He withdrew his hand from the shelf and stared at the pale visage. For a moment there was total silence—then the thing's lips twitched and the mouth began to open.

He knew he would not be able to bear the thing's voice—and what it might say. He drew back his foot and kicked the watcher in the eye, drew it back and kicked again. The face fell out of the orifice and Nash heard a thud on the other side of the shelves.

A faint unease overtook Nash. He clattered down the ladder, turned into the next aisle and pulled the hanging light cord. For a moment he glared at the man's body lying on the floor, at the burst eyeball and the general appearance which too late he vaguely recognized, and remembered Gloria's remark: "There's somebody new on the third floor"—and then he fled. He threw open the door at the far end of the room, reeled down the back stairs and out the rear entrance, and jumped aboard the first bus out of Brichester. He should have hidden the body—he realized that as soon as he had paid his fare, for someone (please, not Gloria!) would soon go to the storeroom in search of Nash or the other, and make a discovery—but it was too late now. All he could do was get out at the terminus and hide there. He looked back as if to glimpse the situation in the office building, and saw the four faces straggling whitely after him over the metal bus-roofs.

The bus, he realized on reaching the terminus, went as far as Severnford.

Though it lost him all sharp outlines, he removed his spectacles and strolled with stiff facial muscles for some time. On the theory that anything in plain sight is invisible to the searcher, he explored bookshops and at twelve o'clock headed for the Har-

rison Hotel at the edge of dockland. Three-and-a-half hours went quickly by, broken only by a near-argument with a darts-player seeking a partner and unable to understand Nash's inability to see the board. Nash reminded himself not to draw attention in any circumstances, and left.

A cinema across the road caught his eye, and he fumbled with his wallet. It should be safe to don his glasses now, he thought, put them on—and threw himself back out of sight of the policeman talking at the paybox.

Where was there left to hide? (And what about tomorrow . . . ?) He hurried away from the cinema and searched for another bookshop, a library even—and two streets away discovered a grimy library, entered and browsed ticketless. How long, he wondered, before the librarian approached with a "can I be of any assistance?" and acquired an impression which he might later transmit to the police? But five-thirty arrived and no help had been offered; even though he had a grim few minutes as he passed the librarian who, seeing him leave with no book apparent, might have suspected him of removing a volume under cover of his coat.

He continued his journey in the same direction, and the lampposts moved further apart, the streets narrowed and the roadways grew rougher. Nearby ships blared out of the night, and somewhere above him a child was crying. Nobody passed him, though occasionally someone peered languidly from a doorway or street-corner.

The houses clustered closer, more narrow arched passages appeared between them, more lampposts were twisted or lightless, and still he went on—until he realized with a start, on reaching a hill and viewing the way ahead, that the streets soon gave out. He could not bring himself to cross open country at night just yet, and turned to an alley on the left—and was confronted with

red-glowing miniature fires and dull black-leather shadows. No, that was not the way. He struck off through another alley, past two high-set gas lamps and was suddenly on the bank of the Severn.

A wind blew icily over the water, rippling it and stirring the weeds. A light went out somewhere behind him, the water splashed nearby, and five faces rose from the river.

They fluttered toward him on a glacial breeze. He stood and watched as they approached, spreading in a semicircle, a circle, closing the circle, rustling pallidly. He threw out his arms to ward them off, and touched one with his left hand. It was cold and wet—the sensations of the grave. He screamed and hit out, but the faces still approached, one settling over his face, the other following, and a clammy film choked his mouth and nose so that he had no chance to scream, even to breathe until they had finished.

When the Severnford police found him, he could do nothing but scream. They did not connect him at first with the murderer for whom the Brichester constabulary were searching; and when the latter identified him he could not of course be prosecuted.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Inspector Daniels from Brichester.

"Well, we try to keep these dockside gangs under control," said Inspector Blackwood of Severnford, "but people get beaten up now and then—nothing like this though . . . But you can be sure we'll find the attacker, even so."

They have not yet found the attacker. Inspector Blackwood suspected homicidal mania at first, but there was no similar crime. But he does not like to think that even Severnford's gangs would be capable of such a crime. It would, he contends, take a very confirmed and accomplished sadist to remove, cleanly in one piece, the skin of a man's face.

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