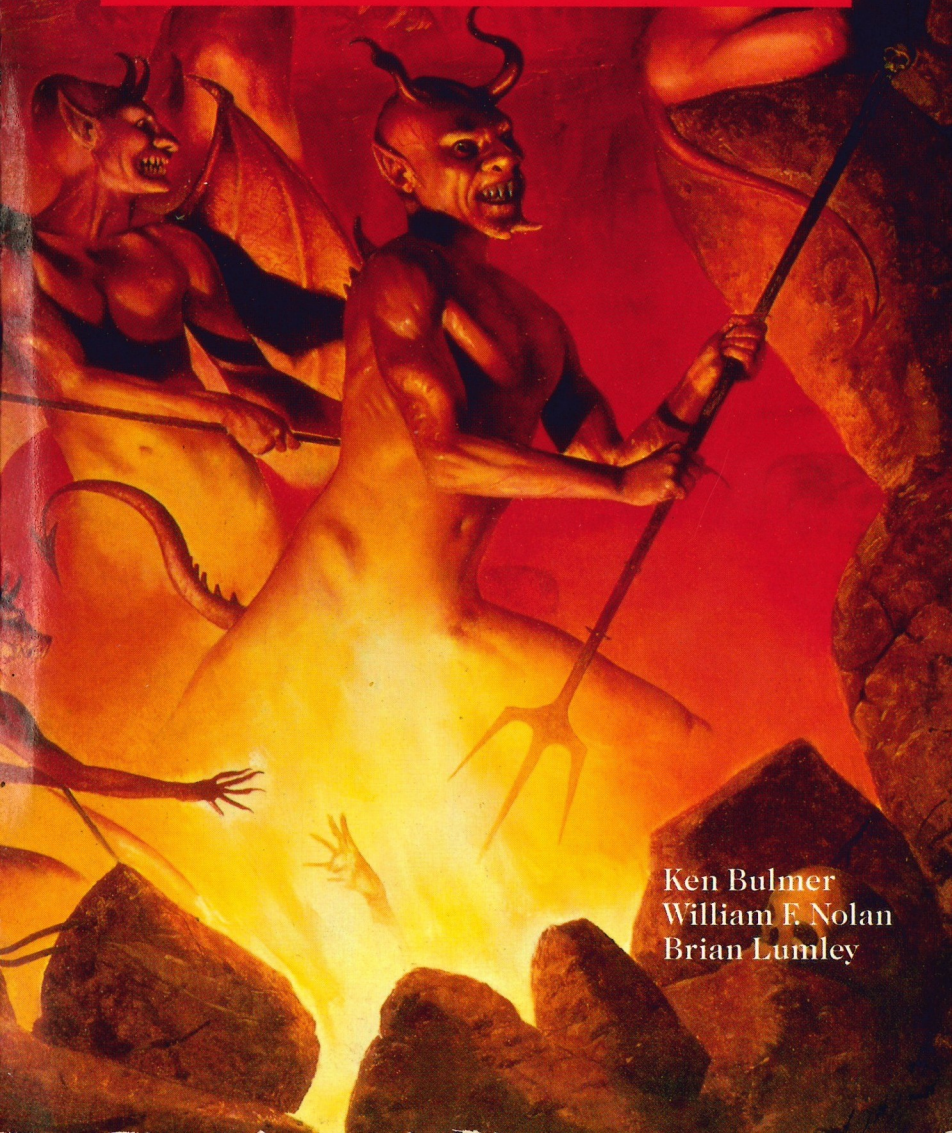


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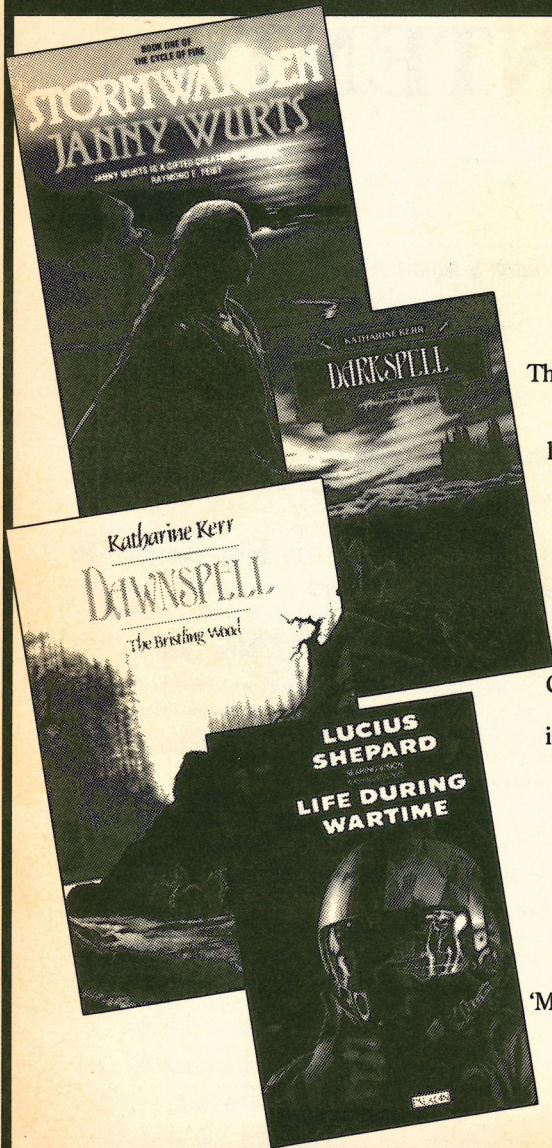
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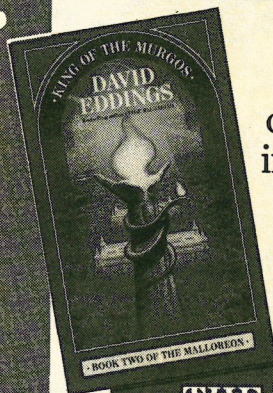
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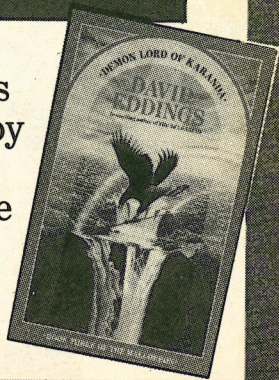
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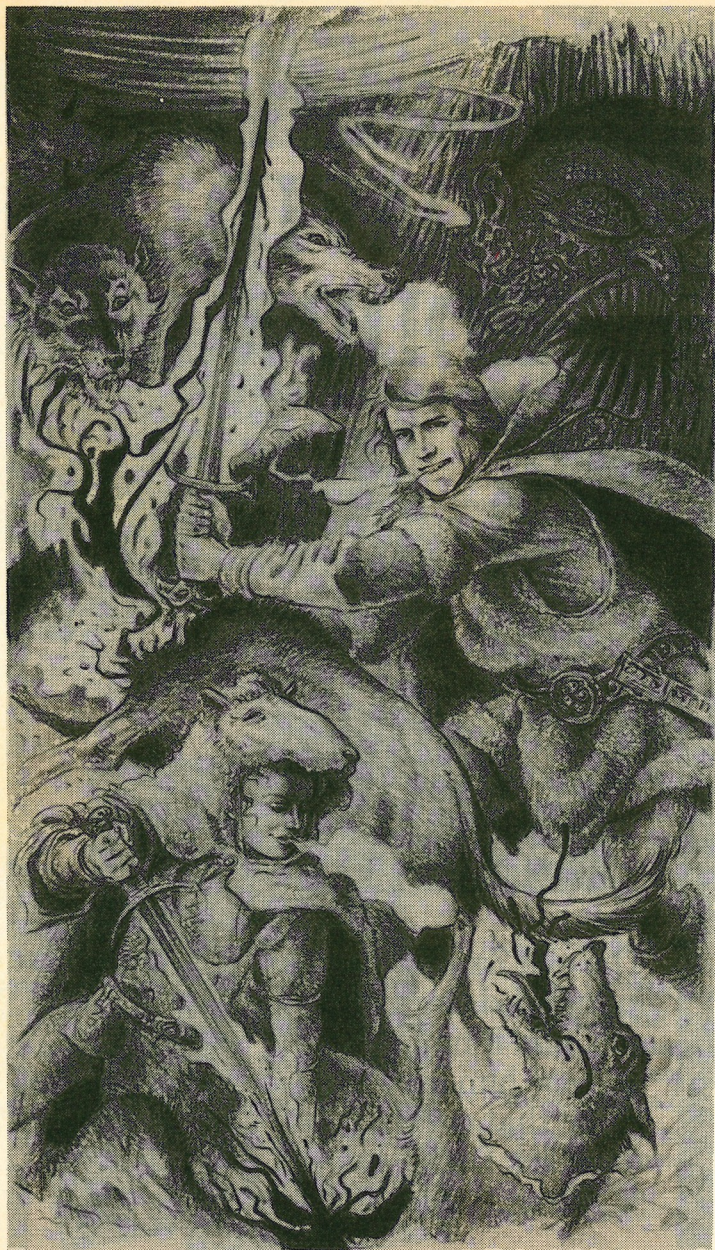
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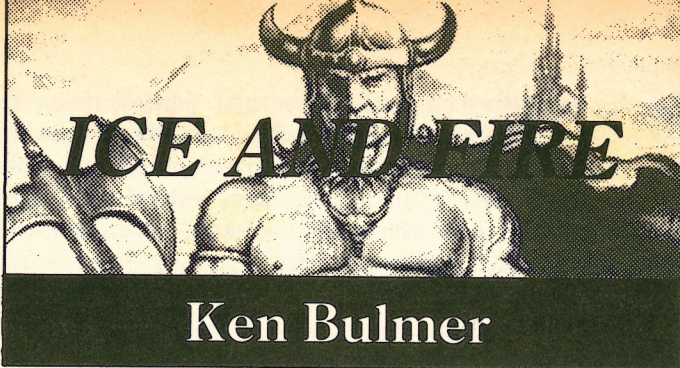


OUT NOW IN PAPERBACK





The wolves howled and screeched and hurled themselves on, lethal grey-white forms of sinew and muscle. (Artist: Russ Nicholson)



(Ken Bulmer is a popular and prolific writer in several genres, which include his pseudonymous 'Strike Force' and 'Fox' series (as Adam Hardy) and the 'Dray Prescott Saga' (as Alan Burt Akers). A long-time science fiction novelist and editor (he compiled the annual New Writings in SF anthology for several years), he still finds time to write the occasional short story. The two characters featured in the 'Vorkunsaga' series first appeared in his sword & sorcery novel Swords of the Barbarians and he subsequently continued their adventures in Naked As a Sword, which we published in the very first issue of Fantasy Tales in 1977. It is therefore with great pleasure that we present another chapter in the exploits of Torr and Tara Vorkun with Ice and Fire.)

“If, brother, I point out that you were singularly unwise to believe the lying tales of that pig of a headman, you will become angry—”

“Probably—”

“Nevertheless, I shall do so.”

Snow like a myriad clammy hands swirled murderously

about the struggling figures of Torr and Tara Vorkun. The snow-veiled mountain flanks, glimmering black with serrated fissures, appeared ready to topple over onto them. "Yes," panted Tara, plunging bodily on through the snow, a white ghost figure with her breath a plume shivering into breaking ice crystals. "I surely shall. You great oaf!"

"I agree it is cold," remarked Torr in a way to infuriate his twin further.

"Cold! You credulous cretin! I am a mere block of ice."

"These mountains do not last for ever. They are short and sharp, not like the mountains of home."

"And cold, dolt. Cold!"

"The village headman said this pass was quick, he did not say a snowstorm would—"

"He also said he wouldn't use this pass."

"But not why—"

"Save your breath for climbing." Tara's words cut as icy and dagger-sharp as the icicles glistening from the overhang. "If we are not over the pass by nightfall—"

"The daylight is going," agreed Torr in his infuriating way.

Tara whooshed a disgusted breath and then closed her mouth. Her slim vigorous figure was muffled under the sheepskin they had bought in the foothill village with one of her bangles. Its fellow rested about her brother's massive shoulders. They bore on, bashing heavily through the drifts, heads down, fighting the snow and the cold. Torr hauled up the flap of sheepskin over his head concealing his soft brown hair that hung straight to his shoulders confined by a strip of good curlish leather. Young, Torr Vorkun of Darkholm and Drugay, powerful and athletic and a swordsman—and now hungry and, most of all, cold.

His lean face was as yet unlined; but that smoothness and the good humour that set a crinkle at the corner of his mouth, were like to be marked and dissipated by this night's folly.

The way trended up, black and shafted with phantom lines of snow. The cliffs with their glistening silver coatings appeared to draw in, tighter and more menacing with every step.

"By Chomath the Defiled," panted Torr, hauling up. "What is that?" His broad hand found and gripped his sister's arm.

Silently, standing together in the driving snow, they stared upon the hideous faces glaring sightlessly upon them.

The two stone monsters flanked the trail. Squamous, squat, sculpted by some long-dead master hand, they crouched balefully upon stone representations of skulls and monsters and the bones and corpses of children. Long-dead evils were manifested in the appearances of these two—devils?—that Torr considered they must be. Their mouths formed triangular gaps of hell, their chins long, their hollowed eye sockets reticulated, and from the stone-parchment of their skins tendrils of slime suggested suppurating poison bursting out from every pore. Above each blasphemous head reared an architrave which shielded the statues. Clearly they crouched upon their rotting corpses, clear and identical and perfectly visible in the lowering gloom of the dying day.

"Guardians," said Torr. "But guardians of what?"

"Lumps of stone chiselled by a diseased mind," snapped his sister. She wrenched her furs around under the sheepskin and felt for the hilt of her sword *Kastrader*. The warmth of her own body reached her questing fingers with a reassurance she recognised and welcomed. "Come on, loon. I'm frozen. Let us reach the top of this *Amadis-forsaken* pass."

The wind hissed and the snow skittered about them. The eternal long-drawn ululation of the wind echoed as Tara spoke, echoed with another and spine-tingling howl.

Now Torr felt under his furs, gripping onto the hilt of his sword *Lycheaper*. He turned a frowning face back down the trail. "That's all we need now." He made his voice firm yet light. "You are right. Let us push on."

Even in this weather, in this wilderness of mountain and ice, the wolves were slinking along the backtrail, following them.

"If, brother," said Tara, paying him back in his own coin. "They are mere wolves."

A score of paces up the trail a second pair of obscene statues stood lowering in the lines of driven snow. This time they faced inwards. Torr and Tara passed between without a second glance. Through the keening of the wind blustering the snow about their ears the sharper hunting calls of the wolves struck ominous warnings.

Once they had fought their way over these hills the plains lay open before them, the plains and the unending vistas of grass of which they had heard, with cities and rivers and forests and all the wonders of the world. They struggled on and upwards and the enclosing mountains rang with the roar of the wind and the savage howls of the pursuing wolves.

Two more leering statues were passed, and then two more. The crags grew cruel underfoot and snow splayed whitely away in drifts across the black ground. Despite their exertions both Torr and Tara shivered and their teeth chattered. Cold like this belonged to the unlettered hells of myth. Soon Torr came to the grim and unwelcome conclusion that they might not reach the top of the pass, and no thanks to the wolves for that.

"Keep going," he grunted, and plunged on. Step for step Tara slogged on with him. The waning light threw oddly-shaped shadows in the whirl of whiteness all about. A mass lofted ahead almost at the head of the pass. A black mass, foreboding, forbidding, leaning over the lines of snow. The westering light threw all the face of the rock into deepest darkness. The craggy outcrop squatted in the pass like a fist in the mouth.

"No—" said Tara, and she halted, and stared up, and shivered.

Torr shouldered on, feeling the murderous rage in him.

The pass was open, the village headman had said. Choking with the bitter anger in him Torr pounded through the clinging whiteness, feeling the ground hard and icy underfoot, brought up face to face with the crag. He saw the trail, climbing by a series of ice-slimed hand and footholds. The breath gushed from him in a geyser of relief. The way was difficult and painful; but there was a way.

He turned to beckon on Tara and saw his sister withdraw her blade from the body of a wolf.

With a murderous snarl Torr ripped his blade free and plunged thigh deep back down the trail. Snow spouted away from him. He flung himself forward.

Lycheaper flamed.

The wolf that would have leaped full on Tara's back and knocked her headlong for the others to tear out her throat

and guts, screeched his own agony. The long grey-white form span away with the force of the blow, the cruel-jawed head slopping to the left as the body toppled to the right.

But there were others, many others, and they ranged up the trail like grey-white ghosts.

Their eyes sparked ruby fires through the lines of falling snow. The wind was caught and cupped here in the lee of the stoppering crag. The footholds were treacherous, the light deceptive. But Tara and Torr Vorkun were mistress and master of the arts of the sword. The wolves howled and screeched and hurled themselves on, lethal grey-white forms of sinew and muscle. Kastrader and Lycheaper bit. The snow wolves died.

Working together, as they had so often fought the man-hunting predators of the mountains of home, the twins sliced and hacked and step by step drew back nearer to that stoppering crag. The cold and the bewildering snow flurries did not hamper the wolves. This was their hunting ground.

"Ware fallen rocks," spat out Torr.

"Your left, brother—"

Torr had time to fling his fur-swathed left arm up across his face and so bash clumsily into the side of the leaping wolf's head. The beast yowled as it toppled away, and Lycheaper slashed down in a blurred crimson streak. Torr backed off, Tara at his side, their weapons glistening slickly before them, twin brands of destruction. Now into the frigid air smells rose, the raw stink of spilled blood, the smoking stench of scattered entrails.

Some rupture of the earth's surface had tumbled down this mass, and chips and sherds of stone lay haphazardly. The twins skipped nimbly over the detritus following where Torr has already gone lumbering on in fury. Further in the snow had been swept away as though by a supernal broom wielded by the Witch of the Storm. The snow wolves, bellies low, eyes afire, crept up the trail after them.

"That cleft," said Torr, pointing with his sword. The wedge-shaped opening at the side of the trail was formed of two fallen boulders of immense size, leaning against each other.

"Shelter and a defence for our backs," said Tara.

The dead wolves had already been eaten down to their backbones. More grey-white forms crept slinking up the trail

and pairs of ruby eyes pitted the backtrail with dots of fire. Brother and sister recognised the end of that road out in the snow; they also recognised that to enter the cave, although finding shelter and protection, meant they might never leave.

Together, shoulder to shoulder, they made for the wedge-shaped opening.

The ground folded inwards under their feet. In a falling smother of rocks and ice they pitched heavily downwards.

They hit together on a loose gravelly slope and in a wild avalanche of chips of ice and sharp-edged stones skidded down for a dozen feet, cursing and flailing to keep their balance. The noise of the fall bounced around in splintering echoes. Darkness enfolded them as the sliding mass rumbled to a stop.

Torr scrambled up. "It's as black as a devil's armpit. May Valkur aid us now."

"Aye. But there is a light ahead—I think."

Peering this way and that, Torr grunted. "Yes. I think you may be right. Did any wolves fall with us?"

"I do not know. D'you hear any, brother?"

"No," said Torr aware of the stupidity of his question.

They moved on, swords thrust ahead in the supple fighting grip, their left hands guarding their heads against the roof. But the tripling echoes told them this place must be an extensive cavern under the mountain, its roof broken through in the landslide thus fabricating the perfect mantrap for them to stumble into like rabbits into a snare. Torr made up his mind that was the truth; he sensed this was not a man or devil-made trap. But he did not mention either belief to Tara.

Of bruises and cuts and abrasions there was no time to take stock. Of such things was the tough life of the wanderer after truth composed. As they inched along, Torr bethought himself of their quest to discover the truths of their parentage and the secret of their lives from Jaran the All-Seeing. He, they had been told, knew the answers. So the Vorkuns sought him. This messy business of the snow and the wolves and now this dolorous underground system were a mere hindrance.

"Yes, brother. A light, I am sure. And now, for the sweet sake of Amadis herself, let us get on."

"I see it. Valkur has us in his keeping."

The light glowed palely, a sickly fungus-green radiance, far and far away. It emanated. There was no defined locus. As they traversed the cavern the light increased in size but little in brilliance so that by imperceptible stages they found themselves walking craggy passageways festooned with green lych-light, fungus-glowing clumps splotching the black walls.

The light glowed uneasily as they entered a shadowed cavern whose roof remained obscured. High thin twitterings told of bats suspended there—bats or the spirits of the undead.

Tara shivered.

"The cold seems even worse down here," remarked Torr, seeing that betraying shiver and not liking it. The cold cut in like the flaying knives of Lohri tanners. In this intensity of chill seethed a deeper cold than the freezing breath of ice or snow. Their teeth were chattering now and they slapped their arms about, trying to stir the sluggish blood. Tips of fingers and toes and noses grew numb. Their breath ghosted like ectoplasm. Firmly, shoulder to shoulder, they stepped into the cave.

Ranked along both sides and in columned aisles, cruelly carved in solid splintering blows of chisels, statues gazed blankly upon them. Warriors in harness, fighting men in strained attitudes of battle, the idols ranged about them, grim of face and damned to the crack of doom.

Torr eyed the over life-size statues with a hostility he could not fathom. Tara kept her gaze fixed on the splodge of brighter light at the far end of the cavern.

"I think," she said, speaking with a gasping effort, her jaws stiff. "I think we are going in the right direction."

"Through the hill," agreed Torr. "Towards the west. You are right."

"If there is an opening, we can emerge on the other side of the pass."

"Pray Valkur and Amadis and all the gods."

The high twitterings of the bat-things increased.

With the suddenness of a winter blast cascading the last leaves from a dying tree a flurry of harsh leathery wings blustered about them. The air filled with darting grey forms, crook-winged, diamond-eyed, their red triangular mouths gappy with glinting fangs. The flittering bats surrounded them like a

swarm of stinging insects. Flailing arms and swords, they ducked their heads and tried to run.

Tara cried out—once, a shocked surprised note of pain, instantly suppressed.

The bat-things swirled upwards like driven smoke. Funneling in a streamer of whirring wings they cavorted through the green lych-light, breaking into a thousand separate forms, spreading, settling in a great rustling upon the heads of the statues.

Torr grabbed for his sister.

On her cheek, vivid, obscene against the whiteness of her skin, two punctures . . . Blood oozed, dark in that weird light. She put a hand to her face and then looked at her finger tips.

"It stung," she said.

Torr looked back. Low, crouching grey-white forms moved slinking into the green light. The snow-wolves had scented them and followed, their hunger driving them relentlessly on. The mountain goats must be nimble in these parts to avoid complete destruction. The wolves advanced, bellies low, their fur all a-bristle. Torr Vorkun of Darkholm gripped onto the hilt of Lycheaper and scraped a space for firm footwork.

Always, for as long as he could remember, there had been Tara. It seemed to him a mere matter of course that her welfare was in his keeping, as, he knew, his was with her. He knew, also, that his feelings went far deeper than mere affection. They were twins and could in moments of stress share their thoughts; but no amount of fine feeling could gloss his own passionate conviction, his own complete dedication to Tara. She was, herself, supremely worthy of the best in him. And this was not because she was his sister. She was a real person, a person in whom he could take joy and pride and relish every moment of her company, a person in her own right. Torr Vorkun had examined his own motives, suspecting the pressure of brotherly and sisterly love and well-knowing of the detestation that often unhappily subsists between siblings. He had found only a deep and abiding love and joy for Tara. He welcomed completely and without reserve their comradeship in times of merriment and times of travail.

Welcomed? As he planted his feet and gripped the hilt of Lycheaper ready to deal with the first of the snow-wolves,

he knew that welcome was far too pale a word. Without Tara there was nothing.

"And, brother, do you give me no room to swing Kast-rader?"

Her voice came low, muffled. Torr twisted to stare at her. Her face was blue. Her eyes, brilliant, gazed with frightening fixity. She shivered. The slick swordblade trembled.

"The bat bite—"

"Torr! See! The statues—the wolves—Amadis . . ."

Torr swung back to glare madly into the cavern. A wolf shrieked. It had been cut through by the forequarters, cut through backbone and ribs, chopped in half. The separated legs twitched, the blood ran and smoked, and the stone statue lifted its sword to strike again.

"Valkur!" breathed Torr.

The statues sprang to life, one by one, and as they moved stiffly forward, so the bat-things perched on their heads clawed into the stone, lowering their leathery wings about the helmets. Torr understood that the spirits animating the bats conveyed pseudo-life to the idols. Rock-thewed arms lifted steel swords and the malicious bat-animated warriors surged forward.

"By the swag belly of Obese Rumphaldi Himself!" Torr had command of himself now and used that oath deliberately, for the situation roared red madness into his brain and tasted already of the hell that awaited. This cavern's ancient evil had arisen to strike them down. Stone feet rang against the stone underfoot. The clang of steel weapons struck a macabre note of reality into the madness. Statues, carved with demon faces, armoured in stone, plunging on with drawn weapons against the Vorkuns.

The snow-wolves were cut down almost out of hand. Each blow that scattered blood drops shining blackly in the green fungus light left the swords unmarked. No blood stained those edged weapons. The bat-driven statues advanced. Their stone mailed feet cracked against the floor. A long-drawn groan as stone moved against stone filled the cavern with eerie sounds as of demons tormenting lesser demons.

A wolf flung himself against a stone warrior. Sharp fangs clenched about an arm and the wolf shook his savage head. The fangs did not bite, did not penetrate. The petrified fighting

man simply brushed the wolf away and the sword descended bright and shining and lifted from the cleft carcase as bright and shining as before.

Death advanced on stone feet towards Torr and Tara Vorkun.

"Go," said Torr, firmly. "Go, sister."

"And leave you?"

"I will carve myself a little masonry, and then follow."

The splodge of brighter light in the far wall shone through an opening fashioned into the likeness of a demon's mouth, a mouth twin to the triangular mouths of the statues flanking the high pass. The mouth gaped an invitation. Stalagmites and stalactites, almost meeting for the fusion that remained their reason for being, barred the man-high opening like rotting teeth.

"Break a way through, Tara—hurry!"

"Now you speak more sensibly." Tara spoke in a drugged, slurred way that filled Torr with a foreboding he would not acknowledge. He would fight and Tara would find the way and they would win free . . . They would!

She ran to the wall and started to smash the stalagmites away from the floor. The depending tips of the matching stalactites oozing their pearly grue would afford space enough for a person doubled over to scramble through below. The way of escape was barred and Tara through the daze and pain of the poison flooding her body forced herself to break the bars. "Cold," she panted as she struck. "It is so cold here."

"Strike hard, my sister!"

The rending smashings sounded bluff and hearty in that cavern of nameless horror—for Torr could put no name to the bat-things and their stone warrior statues driven on with evil intent to slaughter all who entered here. Tara's exertions might, Torr hoped, bring warmth to her body; but the very weirdness of that awful cold was made more clear by the slow, aeons-old drip of the stalactites. For the air within the caverns rasped dryly on the tongue, and dust lay heaped in corners, undisturbed by a single footprint. The ice and snow piled above and heaped among the jumbled mountains, the frigid wastes of the world outside, appeared not only remote from here in the horrors of the caverns but almost enticing. So Tara smote the stalagmite teeth of a demon's mouth

and Torr lifted his brand against the stone fighting men manipulated by their bat spirits.

That smother of dust worried Torr.

The bat-things, the blasphemous pseudo-living warriors of hewn stone, the deadly cold—yes, these worried him. But the dust . . .

At the first crossing of blades Torr Vorkun understood the power pitted against him.

Insensate rocky thews drove the steel brands against him in immense scything blows that would have cleft him asunder. His blade sang and screeched under the blows. With deft and cunning turns he deflected the attacks, sliding them, letting them slice air. All his cunning, all his skill, all his experience as a master swordsman surged up hotly in the gelid atmosphere, sending the blood singing around his body, impelling his own muscles and flesh and blood to oppose these mindless horrors.

“Torr!”

“Break the teeth, Tara. Hurry!”

The scrape of steel on steel and the sound of steel against stalagmite chimed uncannily. The bats blasphemously perched atop each stone warrior head hissed. The bat-like twitterings changed to long-drawn hisses as of serpents, susurations from Hell, chilling the blood. The idols advanced ponderously. Torr fronted them, his brand a blaze of silver, and ever and anon that blade rang against stone, and rebounded, jarring his arm and wrenching his shoulder.

Fight on! Fight on! He curled the blade around an out-thrust weapon and used the old up and under and the rocky warrior’s sword did not fly from feebly clutching fingers. It remained firmly fixed. It drove in for Torr’s breast.

With an oath he leaped back.

“They cannot be slain, brother! To me!”

Tara had broken a pathway.

Nimble, Torr slashed a last slicing stroke that swept away three blades raking for him, turned, leaped, bundled through the jagged gap broken in the teeth after Tara. He more sensed than saw the last sword stroke smash into the stalagmite stump that had cost Tara such effort to break. Shards span past, glinting. Then he was through and into the passageway and running on,

pushing Tara, half-blinded by the dust, the infernal dust, puffing up underfoot.

Giant smashings and crackings from the rear told of the manic efforts of the stone warriors to break through after them. The twins ran. Panting they skidded out from the tunnel. It narrowed near the exit and the ceiling pressed down with sharp serrations. They burst out into a chamber glowing with green fungus light, with many ranked biers, and, despite all, despite their own high courage, a groan of despair broke from them both.

The chamber ringed them in, packed with coffins, without break or doorway, and they saw they were trapped.

"No!" shouted Torr. "No!" He felt suffused with venomous passion. This was not the end for the Vorkuns! "There has to be a way!" He leaped for the far wall, facing west, and began to hurl coffins aside. Frenzy drove him on. Coffins crashed and split and mummies tumbled out, sere and brown, wrapped against the centuries.

"There!" he shrieked. A black opening, narrow, less than a hand's width, yet a gap in the rock . . . He stared through and felt the clog in his throat as he saw the high distant glitter of stars in the night sky. A constellation hung there, remote but real, beckoning them out to the far side of the mountains. He saw Tara, saw the way she staggered. He saw her face. Blue, pinched, drawn, her face attempted a smile and the lips froze and the grimace reminded him of those unholy leering faces of the idols of the high pass.

"Tara!"

"The bite—the Amadis-forsaken bat bite . . ."

"Tara—we will break out—"

He swung around like a maniac and began to smash Lycheaper against the rocky wall. He tried to break away the edges of rock from the narrow opening and succeeded only in numbing his arm. He panted. His hair fell forward over his face, the curlish band gone, the sheepskin tangled around his neck. He bashed and smashed, and Lycheaper rang and sang in protest.

"You—will—break your sword—"

"Better that than—" The hard sounds of stone feet from the tunnel told them the lych-life warriors were being hurled on by

their bat-thing masters, hurled insensately against the constricting walls.

Frenziedly he swung back and smashed again at the opening.

"This is a natural split in the mountain made when the underground forces toppled the boulders in the pass."

"Yes, Torr. And the walls are virgin rock."

They were. The sword made no impression. Still Torr hacked and hewed, and then, a little sense returning, prying with Lycheaper's point, trying to work away a chip of stone at a time.

He heard the long shuddering gasp from Tara.

He whirled.

Tara had thrown off her sheepskin, was unlatching the thongs of her furs. Torr saw her long throat, the tan showing as a surface film against the whiteness of her skin, her shoulders, her upper arms, the beginning swells of her breasts—

"No!" bellowed Torr. He leaped at her, roughly bundled the furs around her body, feeling the cold eating into her flesh. She trembled. Her teeth shook in her head. Her eyes glazed.

"I must, brother. I can only perform my small spells when—"

"I know, I know. But to strip naked in this cold—"

"But I must—"

"It will kill you—"

"Yes—but, you—"

"No!"

The strength of the cold froze reason. Numbness ate up his legs. He could not feel his feet. He caught up the sheepskin and wrapped it about his sister. He chafed her hands and rubbed the small of her back vigorously. He made her walk up and down, and bend and straighten, and saw the purple-blotched horror where the bat-thing had struck growing on her cheek.

All the time the manic sounds of stone against rock from the tunnel gonged and echoed about them.

"There is no time, Torr." She spoke with a fierce effort, her face glazed with frozen sweat. Her lips made Torr's agonised feelings tear him afresh. Beautiful, his sister Tara, perfect, a queen

among women, and now a shaking bundle withdrawn into furs and sheepskin, blue-faced, bloodless and cold!

"I will, Torr—I can spell you in time—"

"And you?"

"That is not—"

"It is a long spell?"

"Yes—no. Only to make it last."

Torr held her trembling body and rubbed her hands and felt her body shaking against his. The bat poison worked subtly upon her, reducing her resistance to the cold. To strip now would kill her surely—either before or after she spelled him. And either before or after was not good enough for Torr Vorkun.

He walked Tara up and down between the ranked biers with their freight of petrified corpses. They lay there, rank on rank, hands crossed on breasts, clad in robes of magnificence, held undecaying by cold and dryness, eternal through time. The lesser confined bodies he had tumbled away were provided for the service of these great ones. Kings? Emperors? Princesses? It did not matter now. They were dead. But their descendants had thought fit to place them here for their eternal rest and set stone warriors to stand guard over them. Perhaps their spirits informed the bat-things. Perhaps it was the detached spirit of each mummified corpse that sought to bring destruction upon the Vorkuns.

"By Valkur! If these corpses' spirits do infest the bats they are only half dead, and that does not seem just. Better for them to rest in peace through eternity than squall and shriek for a blasphemous half life."

"What do you say, brother?"

Tara's blind eyes gazed upon him. She was very weak. Their time was almost run.

"Or," said Torr Vorkun of Darkholm of Drugay, "since I am a fair man, I will admit that a half life may be better than none." He felt with his left hand under his furs seeking the belt pouch. "But when I weigh in the balances of morality the half life of these mummified unknowns and their foul stone warriors, and the life or death of my sister Tara, the balances tilt one way."

Tara slid down against him. She could no longer stand. The effect of their breaths breaking into ice crystals and settling upon the floor and the corpses, might of itself destroy the aeons-old

mummification. But that was in the past, now, for Torr produced the fire-lighter and placing Lycheaper against a handy corner of the nearest bier, he struck and struck again.

Sparks spat. The tump did not ignite. "Come on! Come on!" He struck again with savage intensity, skilfully, and the tinder caught. A red eye winked genially at him. With distended cheeks and pursed mouth he blew, gently, gently. Then: "By the bottle nose of Obese Rumphaldi Himself! We have flame!"

As though in a trance, Tara mumbled: "We have nothing to burn."

Torr did not answer in words. He hauled a mummy from its bier, ignoring the woman's painted features, thumped it on the floor, pulled another alongside, and two more across to make the foundations. He set flame to the ornate garments. Tinder dry, they blazed up.

The first flicker of flame blazed and died to a somber spreading orange. The fire burned dully at the start. Small blue flames in ranked lines burning across the corpses consumed each separate layer of clothing. Torr cursed and blew mightily; the flames gyrated and swayed and ate away, remorselessly and at their own pace, slowly.

Frenziedly he tore down more mummies and hurled them like ossified logs onto the fire. Their garments flared up, caught the fire, burned and then settled to the orange glow with the blue marching flames licking away each layer of clothing.

"Sorcerer's work!" panted Torr.

He seized on the next tier of mummies, hauling them off the biers and seeing the ancient dust puffing and limbs and heads breaking free from yellow bones and caring not one whit.

"Brother," wheezed Tara, ashen blue, shaking. "You cannot in all mercy burn people—"

"People dead beyond the mists of the past. People who should be content to lie in death's sleep, not urging on devil bats and stone idols to take an honest man's life." He hurled another corpse onto the fire, then looked at Tara. "Or a man's sister, for whom the whole world might burn if it brought her goodness."

Gems span and winked upon the floor, catching the green light, sparkling. A priceless treasury spilled free as Torr Vorkun madly heaped the lyches upon the flames.

With the cunning of his savage childhood he built the fire between the tunnel and Tara. It might offer some small protection. Out there in the tunnel they were wielding sledges fashioned from monstrous chunks of jagged rock, slashing and smashing at the walls to enlarge the opening. The noise reverberated in the chamber of corpses. Dust billowed in the draught. The fire caught. As though awaiting some final combustible substance it whooshed up, roaring, immense, fiery, smothering sparks into the gelid air. Torr stepped back, panting.

He passed a hand across his brow. He began to sweat. He could feel the heat of the fire beating upon him. His lips widened.

"Warmth!" he shouted. "By Valkur! I never thought to feel my blood warm again." He sprang towards his sister. "Now, Tara, and be quick. They'll be through soon."

"I am ready." She struggled to her feet and pushed away his supporting arm. "You will not be beat, will you, brother?"

"Not with such a prize at risk. No."

No pride entered his words, for he was old enough to value that commodity at its true worth. He made it a plain statement.

Deliberately, not hurrying enough to make her hands tremble more than they already did, Tara Vorkun began to take off her clothes.

Torr opened his mouth and then, considering, closed it. She would not forget their clothes. She would not spell them too far . . .

The sheepskin fell to the floor. The furs, rich glossy brown furs, dropped away from Tara's shoulders. Her skin gleamed in the mingled light, the tanned whiteness rounding to orange light and ruddy shadows. As though this revelation of throat-clogging loveliness renewed their old comradeship and love of laughter, Torr felt the deep joyousness lifting in him. They'd had a damned miserable time of it since they'd stumbled up these icy mountains, by Valkur! But now—now Tara Vorkun let the last of the furs drop away. Daintily, she removed the linen shift. Completely naked, gleaming with lush rounded voluptuousness, she stood forth against the firelight.

"But you must be quick, sister."

"Aye, we are both ready—but I feel—weak—"

"You are Tara Vorkun."

"And that is enough?"

"If you believe it."

From the bat-things crouched over the helmets of the petrified yet inhumanly active warriors the serpent-hissings increased. Perhaps the spirits of the mummies yet unburned recognised what was to come, and raged against fate, and sought even at the last to break through and wreak their revenge. For the tunnel opening had been squeezed into a narrow gap by the subterranean forces that had distorted the mountain. The fires of the depths had both trapped the Vorkuns here and given them a breathing space and half chance of escape.

In these last few moments as Tara mentally prepared herself, struggling against the bat poison, Torr threw more corpses on the fire. They crackled and ignited at once, long dead flesh crisping and bubbling away from yellowed bones that blackened into ashes. There was no smell of burning flesh. Diamonds vanished in the blaze, sumptuous clothing flamed into smokey ash. Swiftly Torr scooped up a rolling tiara, fallen from a skull in which the white hair frizzled and blackened and whiffed to ashy nothingness. He set the gemmed circlet upon the pile of Tara's clothes. He smiled encouragingly.

"A small payment for our pains."

She did not reply, locked in the mazy thaumaturgy in her mind.

The fire burned brightly. The smoke lifted like beseeching arms, entwining, coiling, and thickened and flattened and grew into a rounded column of darkness. So Torr Vorkun of Darkholm saw the meaning of the dust. He swung towards his sister, jaws locked, Lycheaper a brilliant brand of running crimson. She closed her eyes.

The column of smoke swayed like a giant serpent.

The dust littering the floor puffed as though blown by a supernal unfelt wind. It gathered, heaping, glittering, lifting, roiling up to subsume its myriad disparate parts in the serpent column of smoke.

Outside, the thunderous smashings of rocky sledges blended with the demonic hissing of the bats.



From the spatulate head the smoke formed twin fangs, twin daggers of sorcery-hardened dust. (Artist: Russ Nicholson)

The smokey cobra-head towered. It swayed back, rearing. From the spatulate head the smoke formed twin fangs, twin daggers of sorcery-hardened dust. The head swayed, drawn back, ready to strike. Immense, it lifted in the chamber, and the corpse-fled flames glistened and glittered scintillant reflections from the smoke-borne dust.

The abrupt sensation of brilliant heat and slaking cold enveloped Torr with the welcome of the hearth fire after the storm. A flash of witching potency he sensed only by feelings outside the five senses known by the corporeal body told him Tara had worked her spell.

Her clothes whisked through the narrow handsbreadth gap as though whisked through on a fishing line. He felt his ribs crack. He felt his body contract. He felt no pain, only a weird infolding sensation as though his body had become pastrydough rolled out by a lord's castle cook. He narrowed. On spider-thin legs he seized the wafer thin body of Tara and bundled her towards the gap.

The cobra head of dust-glinting smoke struck.

The horror of the moment snapped as the Vorkuns catapulted headlong into the cleft. The twin fangs struck viciously, one each side of the opening. The solid dust rang gong-like against the stone.

The cold bit fiercely in. Their breaths steamed. They forced their sorcery-shrunken bodies through the cleft and tumbled out onto a snow-covered scree. Instantly Torr was up, snatching his sister's garments, flinging them around her body, enclosing that still lush magnificence in furs and sheepskin.

She shivered and gasped. The ghastly purple blotch vanished from her cheek. She trembled and laughed.

"For the sweet sake of Amadis, Torr! I am old enough to dress myself!"

"Do so—and fast!"

With a bubbling sensation of indigestion—an anticlimax of sorcery—their bodies resumed their normal shapes.

Contemptuous of the baffled necromancy within that doomed chamber of evil, Torr stared back through the cleft. The fire burned ruddily. The towering cobra-head shifted erratically, this way and that, idly, shrinking, collapsing, tumbling down

into a pile of pitiful dust. The shrill hissings dwindled. The mummies burned.

"Now let them rest in the eternal sleep of oblivion."

"If they can—if they do not walk the lethe paths of eternal damnation."

"We are through the mountains. Our way lies downhill. Come on, Tara. It is time we left this evil place."

"You feel no—sorrow—for them?"

"Aye. But life is for the living. Easy words. But a trick not easy to accomplish."

He saw the black and ashy ring against the snow and he sighed. Bending, he picked up the charred tiara. She laughed at him.

"You will have to think again about making our fortunes, brother mine."

"Greed," he said, and tossed the charred circlet away, philosophically. "Their gift turned to ashes, as did they. Well, greed brings its own rewards."

Together, shoulder to shoulder, Torr and Tara Vorkun of Darkholm of Drugay, turned their faces down the mountainside. Together, bound by indissoluble ties, they went forward on their quest towards the wide plains of the westward.



THE CURE

William F. Nolan

(We have been pleased to publish stories by William F. Nolan twice before in Fantasy Tales (issues 13 and 17), a mere drop in the ocean of a prodigious output of some fifty books and six hundred short stories and articles. Although still best remembered as the co-author of the bestselling Logan's Run, much of his work has been in the field of Dark Fantasy and in addition he has worked on a number of film and television scripts, most recently for the NBC-TV "Movie of the Week", Programmed for Terror. New collections of his horror fiction are Things Beyond Midnight (Scream/Press) and Nightshapes (Avon Books), and Avon are also the publishers of his latest novel, Helltracks. Bill Nolan is currently working on How to Write Horror Fiction for Writer's Digest, while a bibliography of the author's credits, The Work of William F. Nolan by R. Reginald, is available from Borgo Press. The Cure first appeared in a special William F. Nolan issue of The Horror Show (Summer, 1988).)

The minute I opened my eyes in bed this morning I promised myself that I wouldn't kill anybody else for a month.

Made me feel great! Kind of reborn. All charged up with good intentions, you know. It's a vow, so I can't break it. Sacred and all. Going to be tough on me though—like when I first gave up smoking Camels for a month. (I'd never smoked another brand. Guess you could say I was loyal to Camels.) It was hell, with me a chain smoker and wanting a cigarette every day, sometimes every hour. I'm proud to say I don't smoke at all now and I think the start of my cure, of being able to quit the way I did, was the sacred vow I made about no cigs for a month. That helped me have the strength of character to do it. (My pop used to say that strength of character is all that really counts in life.) Smoking is just a habit.

Same with murder. With some people (like me!) it just gets to be a habit. After the first couple of them, if you've really enjoyed them like I did, it gets easy. Then, later, you find you're addicted to doing it. Murdering. It sort of sneaks up on you. You get to like it, and then you get to need it.

And, let's face it, right now I *need* to kill.

Which is why I'm writing in this notebook, to keep track of how I do on my vow and also just to put down some of what I think about on paper. I do a lot of thinking and I'm not married or anything so usually there's nobody to talk to. This is going to help, being able to write things in a notebook.

I don't know if anybody will ever see all this. Maybe after I'm dead somebody will find this notebook and read what I say and if they do I guess they'll judge me as some kind of crazy man who goes around killing innocent people.

Well, first of all, nobody is innocent. (Except maybe babies, and I don't kill babies or children. Never have. Never will.) We are born many times, live many lives like Shirley MacLaine (spelling ??) says we do—and we carry our old sins around with us from all these other lives. So no man or woman is innocent in this world today.

And we *all* have to die, right? So when I strangle somebody it's not so terrible because that person is going to be dead anyway and maybe I've saved them from getting cancer or AIDS or having a whole series of painful heart attacks. Or from having a stroke. (Did you ever see pictures of people in iron lungs where only their eyes move? How would you like to be stuck there in some iron lung with only your eyes moving? That happens sometimes after a stroke.)



He was sitting in there watching one of those big green Gila monsters crawl over his leg like it was a pet kitty. (Artist: Martin McKenna)

Now, I am not a violent person. I've never fired a gun in my life, not even a target pistol, and I'm almost thirty years old. (I will be in five months and two days.) And I *hate* knives. They give me the shivers. I'd never use one. I use my hands because it's pure to do it that way, and you are making direct personal contact with the one you're killing. Like an act of communion between me and the one I strangle. A pure act is the way I think of it.

Another thing, I don't just go around killing everybody I meet or going on some kind of blood rampage like that Speck guy did that killed all those nurses, or the nut in Texas who climbed up on a tower and shot all those students. Or Charlie Manson, having his "family" go into Sharon Tate's home and butcher whoever they could find in there like hogs in a slaughterhouse. Boy, I think that's *sick!* I would never do any of those things. When you strangle a person there's no blood or any mess to clean up. (Except for the dead body and undertakers get paid for taking care of dead bodies, right?)

There was one weirdo I read about, I think Garcia was his last name—no, it was Corona, who chopped up maybe fifty or more fruit pickers in an orchard with his machete. Ugh! And you take those guys who butchered the Clutter family in Kansas—

I didn't mean to get started on all this today but I do want to tell whoever reads this about meeting Truman Capote. (You pronounce it Ka-pote-tey.) He was the funny-looking little guy who wrote that book about those two sicko punks who killed the Clutters. *In Cold Blood* it was called. He went to Kansas and lived there for maybe three years or so and talked to everybody and finally met the two punks after the cops grabbed them and fell in love with the one named Perry. Capote was a homosexual by nature, and he just ended up in love with this weirdo Perry. Cried like a baby when they executed him. Claimed it was the worst day of his life. You'd think it was his mother!

Anyhow, I met Truman Capote the same year he died, 1984, out in California where I'm going next again. (I mean, I plan to hitch there next week. It's getting onto winter here in the midwest where I've been for the last six months and I need me a dose of California sunshine!)

What I wrote above about the year he died is meant to be the year *Capote* died, not the Perry guy. I keep getting sidetracked because I'm not used to writing in a notebook and the words kind of

run off by themselves down the page. Like a cat named Milhous I used to have (named after Nixon who was terrific in foreign policy). Always running off.

So anyhow I was in San Francisco in 1984 and read about Truman Capote giving a lecture over in Berkeley for five dollars so I went to it and met him after. (Frankly, to be honest, I don't know why anybody would pay him to talk because he had this little high squeaky kind of voice like Mickey Mouse, but that's not my business, hiring people to talk and I guess if you're famous, like he was, they don't care *how* you sound.)

I walked up to him when he was signing his books at a table and said I'd read his *Cold Blood* book in a library and I don't read a whole lot of books by anybody but I read his about the Clutter killings. He asked me if I liked it and I laughed and said it made me kind of sick but it was all good except about his falling for that Perry creep. Well, he got all upset when I said this and used the "f" word on me. "F" you, he said. I don't use words like the "f" word (you won't find any in this notebook) so I was shocked, but I just shrugged my shoulders and walked out of there. I held my temper, but I don't like anybody using the "f" word on me and that's a fact.

So that's how I met Truman Capote.

It is a week later. I'm really disgusted with myself. Only one week passes and I've broken my vow already. Here is what happened—

I met this biker. A heavy-set character with long stringy blond hair with curls in it and fancy boots made out of dead snakes with caked mud on the soles. Had on dirty brown Army pants and lots of Nazi crosses on his jacket and a big chain around his waist. On the back of the jacket it said *Hail, the Hellriders!* With a skull and crossed swords under it. His hands were covered with matted red hair and looked like a couple of tarantulas. (I guess he was a natural redhead and dyed his hair blond.)

I was chowing down a burger and fries in a fast food joint in Topeka, Kansas, when he came in looking steamed for some girlfriend of his. She was across the room on the other side of the counter from where I sat and she saw him coming and split for the back door but he grabbed her and slammed her against the Coke machine, yelling and cursing like a madman. Then he dragged her

outside and nobody tried to stop him. Me, I just sat there chewing my burger (well done, I hate them rare like you're eating raw animal flesh) and watching him through the greasy plate-glass window.

Outside, in the parking lot, he gave her a whack or two and she climbed on his bike behind him and he took off. He had an unmuffled exhaust because it sounded like firecrackers going off when he peeled out of the gravel parking lot.

She was a good looking young lady in a kind of a cheap way. I didn't personally find her all that attractive, but I keep telling myself I'm too particular when it comes to young ladies which is maybe why I don't have many.

Two days later I saw him again, the biker. I'd hitched a ride into Lawton, a little teeny runt of a town about 100 miles west of Topeka and I had just taken a piss at the local gas station, an Exxon, when I heard his cycle pulling in. (No mistaking the sound of that exhaust!) He was alone and was drinking from a wine bottle in a wrinkled paper sack. He passed me on the way to the Men's, swigging from the bottle. (I don't know what happened to the girl, but that doesn't matter.)

I followed him inside—the place stank of urine and feces—and hit him from behind with a tire iron I'd picked up outside in the garage part of the station.

Then I strangled him.

It was all very fast and nobody was around to see anything. The Exxon guy was out by the pumps around the other side gassing an orange Ford pickup so I just climbed on this creep's motorcycle and buzzed off. Ditched it in a field later that night.

I was in a rotten mood after that. Breaking a sacred vow to myself is a terrible thing. But when that biker walked past me I felt this compulsion kind of wash over me like a big wave at the beach. And once the compulsion hits things always seem to end up with me killing somebody and the biker was the one in Lawton. It could have been the guy who ran the station because the old compulsion just hits me and, blam, that's all she wrote!

So that's why I'm so disgusted with myself. I guess when a habit has a hold on you the way this one has on me there's no easy way to break free of it. Vows don't help much. (Easier to quit smoking Camels, take my word.)

Well, that's enough this time for the notebook. I really am feeling low. Just don't feel like putting down any more words right now. Okay?

I killed another one today.

A bald-headed businessman with pink jowls and a big gold ring I'm wearing now. Flashy. (I also have a thousand dollars cash from his wallet and nobody with any sense in his head should carry that much cash with him on the road. Just not a wise policy.)

He picked me up when I was hitching out of Jefferson City. That wasn't very smart of him to begin with since I read somewhere that 80% of all hitchhikers have served time in jail. (I never have, by the way. What I do is considered wrong by society rules I know, but no policeman has ever arrested me for anything not even for an unpaid parking ticket or jaywalking. My record is spotless and that's nothing to be ashamed of.)

So what I'm saying is it's dangerous to pick up some guy you've never met who's got his thumb stuck out for a ride. But he stopped for me, this bald gentleman in his big chromed white Buick. It was one of the older models, long and roomy, and in perfect shape. I don't know the year, even though I'm something of a nut for cars. (I don't want to diverge from my topic here but I was driving the family car when I was 12 and I owned my first car—a used Chevy—when I was 16 and I ended up racing it in a stock car event in my town and came in third. At 16. So you know I like cars.)

The minute I got into the Buick ole Baldy started talking a blue streak, about how he was coming home from some kind of farm equipment convention and how he'd had this buxom prostitute up to his hotel room and how she did all these kinky sexual things to satisfy him.

I didn't enjoy his dirty mouth. I don't happen to believe in pornography in any form, whether it's in a book or coming out of somebody's dirty mouth, so I just sat there not saying anything back to him. (Pop drank a lot but he never talked dirty. Never once.) Then he got around to asking me how far I was going. I said far enough. He kind of smiled but I could tell he didn't like my short answer. I was not feeling very friendly at the moment, although I'm generally a good-natured sort of person. I just don't like having to sit and listen to filth.

About an hour later, when the road was deserted, I asked him to stop the car. I'll get out here, I said, and he said fine and pulled over on the shoulder of the highway which is where I strangled him.

He had a beefy red neck and his eyes popped and I have to laugh when I think about it because he looked like a circus clown. He thrashed around in the seat quite a bit but I didn't have any real problem with him because I'm a very strong individual. I don't think I've written about that before—about how strong an individual I am. I used to work out with weights and I still do pushups every night before I go to sleep to maintain muscle tone. It's a real shame the way most people let their muscles go to slack as they get older. Fact is, I could be a gym instructor if I wanted to work at a steady job. But jobs hedge you in and I like to stay loose and go where the wind blows. I still remember that old Western with Greg Peck, *The Big Country* was the title, and it's sure true this is a mighty big country and I don't fancy living with a fence around me. (Ever hear that ole song, *Don't Fence Me In*? Looks like I'm full of nostalgia, huh? And me not yet thirty!)

Anyway, after I did in this businessman I stuffed him into the trunk of the Buick. There was plenty of room for him and I think it's great the way those old Buick trunks were so roomy. Trunks are a lot smaller these days, even on Caddies, and I just think it's all part of the erosion of our culture, but I don't want to get into that right now.

I drove the car into some woods and got rid of the body. Dug a shallow grave so he wouldn't be found right away. I wanted to borrow his car for awhile.

It drove really well. The seats were soft, but with plenty of back support, and it had a nice heater.

That was about six days ago. I drove the Buick all the way to California after switching plates in New Mexico just to be on the safe side. Had a kind of funny thing happen on the freeway. (An expressway is called a freeway in California because you don't have to pay a toll to use them which I think is very fair.)

I was driving along feeling a little tired and I saw this cloud formation that looked exactly like a giant eagle in the sky about a thousand times bigger than any real eagle you'd see. It got me to use my imagination and I thought, hey, what if a giant eagle swooped

down from the sky and just picked up my car off the freeway in its claws and flew away with me up to a really high mountain. He drops the car into a huge nest he's got up there full of unhatched eagle eggs. Then he flies off to take a crap or whatever. (By way, I don't think crap and piss are like "f" word and I feel justified in using them without apology as modern examples of our slang and not words of filth. Crap is okay, but s—t is not. I will never write the word s—t in this notebook.)

With the eagle gone I open the door of the Buick and jump out. Then I start to climb down the mountain, being careful not to slip, and feeling very worried about the eagle coming back before I can reach the bottom. And, sure enough, here he comes swooping down at me and he just sinks those big claws into my flesh and carries me back to the nest for food. Which is when I decided to quit imagining about the huge eagle because it was making me nervous and affecting my driving. For one thing, I didn't want to think about being eaten alive.

So I just quit thinking about the eagle.

Hey, I'm glad to be back in sunny California! I ditched the white Buick in the underground parking area of one of those big shopping malls they have so many of here in L.A. Just left it there, threw away the key, and walked out into some glorious sunshine.

If I ever do decide to settle down somewhere it'll probably be right here in the City of Angels. Smog doesn't bother me as much as cold and snow and little icicles inside your nose where the hairs get frozen. (In Chicago, it's that way, cold enough to freeze the tail off a brass monkey!)

This afternoon, at another shopping mall, I bought a paperback from a Crown Books (discount prices) about the Boston Strangler. And wow, but he was one twisted dude. See, each time he strangled a woman he was *really* strangling his own crippled daughter whose name was Judy DeSalvo. He was Albert. Also, he had sex with all of these women, something I've never done and which frankly turns my stomach. Then he used silk stockings to do the killing with, instead of his bare hands and that's an impure way to do it and I have no respect for someone who would use such a method. I just cannot identify with DeSalvo at all, despite what you might think we have in common. For one thing, I would say he was

most likely insane and, despite my habit, I'm a very rational person with a higher-than-average I.Q. (I know, because I took the test they gave once in *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine, and I really scored high. Surprised myself. Before this test, and it was long—two full pages in the issue—I had considered myself as having an average mind, but the results showed I was far above what is called “the norm.” An awful lot of people in this country today are not even literate let alone above average, so I guess I've got a lot to be proud of in the brains department.)

But that Al DeSalvo was a prime nutcase if you ask me.

For most of last night I had a real good restful sleep at a Traveler's Delight motel but near morning, just before it got light outside, I had some bad dreams about killing my father, and I blame that Boston Strangler book for them. Because in that book it told about DeSalvo's father beating up his mother and knocking all of her teeth out when he was seven. Now, my Pop belted Mom around some (I guess that's normal in any marriage, right?) but he never knocked a single one of her teeth out, but DeSalvo hated him for doing that to his Mom and wanted to kill him. So that's how I figure I had this dream about killing Pop when the truth is he died a natural death. I mean, what kind of a son would I be if I did a thing like killing my own father? He drank too much (I never touch alcohol myself) and he was a little rough with me and sis but I never hated him, really, and never wanted to kill him. Oh, well, I wish I'd never read that dumb book about Albert DeSalvo because books like that put crazy things in your head at night. Today I ripped that book into shreds and threw it in the trash.

People have to be careful about what they read.

This afternoon, at one of those Multi-Plex Movie places where they have five or six movies all going at once, I saw a Steve Martin comedy just to get that bad dream about Pop out of my head. Steve was his usual funny self. He played a trans-sexual (does it have a hyphen in it ??), a guy who was once a cheerleader in high school with ample breasts and a nice little behind on her in those tight satin pants they wear when they jump around at the games. Steve had this sex change into a taxi driver who smoked cigars and here the cheerleader's old boyfriend from high school shows up to marry her except now she's Steve Martin with a cigar and it was all

pretty funny. Still, I have to admit I didn't think it was in very good taste. Why is everything you see in movies and TV these days all sex, sex, and more sex? I'm no prude and I'm sure not a Jesus freak or anything like that but dirt can get into your soul. It eats at your moral fiber. So who needs it? Frankly, I wish they'd do more Westerns these days, like *The Big Country*. Big, clean outdoor stories—but you just can't find Westerns on the screen hardly ever anymore. A good Western is like a tonic. I always feel great after seeing a good Western.

I killed a woman today. (You know, people often call a woman a girl but when a girl is out of her teens you should call her a woman out of basic respect, or common courtesy, and this one I'll tell you about had to be 25 at least.)

She worked at one of those all-night 7-11s (or however you spell them) and when she got off work I followed her to where she lived in this big apartment complex where there were a lot of dark paths and trees. I think it's on VanAlden or some such street. Kind of a spooky place at night. Made me nervous following her in there because I don't like being trapped in the dark.

When I knocked on her door I said I was Sergeant Hooker of the L.A.P.D. (got the name from Bill Shatner's TV series which I don't think is still on). I've noticed that people always open up fast for the police. They don't question you, they just open the door. Inside, they expect you to flash some I.D. but I didn't show any I.D. to this woman I just buried my thumbs in her neck and choked all the life right out. She made some funny gargling sounds, like a lot of them do, and peed her pants, then just went limp as an old dishrag and I knew she was dead.

It wasn't difficult. It never is for me and I've got to tell you, in all honesty, that there's something funny (humorous, that is) about how loose and floppy they get after I've done it.

Well, I took the money she had in her purse and whatever cash I could find around her place. She had a few twenty-dollar bills stuck in a desk drawer. Then I turned out the lights (no use wasting electricity because *somebody* will have to pay the bill) and left her there lying on her back in the middle of the living room on a quite attractive little throw rug. (Her apartment was, for the most

part, very tastefully decorated. Not overdone. I appreciate things like that. It was probably a talent she had.)

I felt all light and airy going back to my motel. I always feel that way after I get rid of the compulsion. As if I'm just sort of floating along the street.

It's a good feeling.

I just read over what I wrote in the notebook last night and it sickens me. How can I feel *good* about giving in to this lousy habit of mine? Does an overweight person feel good about pigging out on a box of fudge bars? Does an alcoholic feel good about putting away six martinis at lunch? Well, if they do there's something *wrong* with them. They need to fight their compulsions not give in to them and then end up feeling great about what is basically a self-destructive act.

At least I know my own weakness, and owning up to what's wrong in your personality means you're halfway home in finding a cure. I never want to delude myself. I believe in being totally honest about whatever failings I may or may not have. I know I am far from perfect. But I keep trying to improve myself and I don't give in to self-deception. That's the only true path to a healthy life.

Today I decided to take a bus to Palm Springs which is about 120 miles from L.A. out in the low desert. I have a real passion about dry, clean desert country and I just got this sudden yearning to stand under a wide blue desert sky and let the sun bake out the poisons in my system. (We all have these poisons which clog our bloodstream and only hot, raw sun can leech them out. It's personal therapy and we owe it to ourselves to allow our systems to undergo such a cleansing process. And the temple of the body shall be cleansed. I think that's from the Bible, but I'm not sure. It might be from a self-health book I read once that was worth ten times what I paid for it.)

I'd been to Palm Springs before—the same year I met Truman Capote—and I liked the town. (Fact is, I'm told Capote used to own a house there.) Everything is neat and cheerful in Palm Springs. All the buildings look fresh-scoured and the sidewalks are spotless.

It took me longer to get there on the bus than I'd figured, and it was almost dark when I stepped out onto the main drag and

took in a deep lungful of smogless desert air. It smelled crisp and new-minted. (They should bottle it for Easterners!)

I needed a place for the night and already had one picked out. It was a house owned by a newspaper columnist for the *L.A. Times*. His name was Ray Spaulding. He lived all week in an apartment in L.A. and came out here on Saturdays and Sundays. (Today's Friday.) A bachelor, and I counted on his coming out alone.

I'd read a profile on him they had in the *Times* (in the "Who's Behind the Desk?" feature on Sundays) but it naturally didn't give the address of his house. I got that from finding out his license number and going to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Anyhow, tonight I went out there to this columnist's house and figured out how his alarm system worked and put it out of action. Then I forced a back patio door and got inside with no trouble. I'm pretty clever when it comes to getting into places. Should be by now, since I've had so much practice.

The house was kind of small, just a one-story job, but it was neatly kept up. The yard was trimmed and he had some lovely flowers along the front walk. Inside, it was all pink and blue with dozens of bookcases, but I didn't feel like reading. When I do read I mostly enjoy true crime books, but I just was tired and not in the mood at Ray Spaulding's house, even if he had any true crime there. I didn't bother to look. I just flopped down on his bed for some heavy sacktime. Knowing the guy would show up the next morning. Which he did.

And he was alone. He came in the front door, whistling some tune I didn't know (I'm not much for popular tunes and I never whistle) not knowing I was in there waiting for him, all refreshed after a good night's shuteye. (And no bad dreams!) I grabbed him by the throat and it went fast, like always. Well, not *that* fast because he was a big guy and he tried to put up a fight so it took a little extra effort on my part to kill him. No real problem though.

I got an expensive gold watch off his left wrist (always nice to come up with a bonus!) and a fair amount of cash. (He didn't keep any in the house.) I found me a big panama hat in his front closet to shade me from the desert sun and before I left I took a swim in his heated pool outside the patio. It was quite relaxing. I just let the water rock me like a babe. There's an art in knowing how to release tension from your body. You just shut your mind down like turning

off the engine of a car—and you kind of drift out of yourself. So it was a really nice swim.

Then I walked out to the highway and hitched a ride to Indio.

There's a lot of untamed desert between Palm Springs and Indio. Off the main highway, I mean. Walk out away from the road for a mile or two and you might as well be on the moon. It's okay by day—I don't mind the dry heat—but it's kind of creepy at night with the cactus looking like people standing there watching you. (I used to dream about people standing around my bed in a row, just staring at me back when I was a kid. They never *did* anything, just stared. But it was creepy.)

I wouldn't want to live out here all alone like McGrath does. Let me tell you, in detail, about McGrath because he is worth writing about, believe me.

First, I was off the bus before it got to Indio. I just decided what the hay let's do some walking. I get urges like that sometimes—so I just left the bus at the next stop and put on Ray Spaulding's big panama hat and walked away from the highway into the sand. (I'd been looking at the back of a young man's neck on the bus, at the way the sunlight lit up the little gold fuzz on his skin, and thinking I might want to kill him later if the chance afforded itself but after I got off the bus I forgot about him. And there was no real compulsion.)

I didn't have any goal in mind, walking. I just wanted to enjoy the pure air and the clean scrubbed smell of the sand. Somebody told me that all this sand was once glass that got ground up by the sea but that's hard to accept and I told this person, look, I'll have to check this out with a scientist. But I never did that.

I scooped up some sand and let it run through my fingers. I have big hands. strong fingers and thumbs, and I'd be awfully good at hand wrestling if I ever went for that sport. (I didn't see that Stallone film, *Over the Top*, but I heard it stinks so I guess I didn't miss much. It was about hand wrestling.)

I wore high-sided Army shoes since you've got to be careful of snakes out here. Rattlers. I also wore some good-fitting designer jeans I took off a guy just my size that I killed outside a bar in St. Louis and a nice blue sports shirt with one of those classy little alligators sewed on the pocket. And my panama hat

with sunglasses. I looked sharp and felt pretty contented, all things considered.

None of my old buddies live in California and I don't have a girlfriend right now but that's okay, they get to thinking they own you and start ordering you around and I don't let anybody do that. Even as a schoolkid back in Ohio I used to just get up from my desk and split when some teacher tried to manipulate my mind and free will. That's all any of us have, our free will, and nobody's got the right to mess with your free will. It's in the Constitution for every citizen.

Anyhow, I don't mind being on my own but it gets a little lonesome sometimes, with nobody to talk to. So I guess you could say this notebook was my only friend.

Until I met McGrath.

He lives out here in the middle of the desert, in a tin-and-tarpaper shack he built himself. Understand me, he built it solid. Has to be, because the winds whip through here with terrific force. He's got wooden cross-bracing on it and it's a pretty snug little shack, a lot stronger that you'd think just by looking at it.

I'd been walking for about an hour by then and was getting thirsty when I saw McGrath's place and decided to stop and ask for some water. McGrath was inside and when I knocked on the door he yelled come in and I did. He was sitting in there watching one of those big green Gila monsters crawl over his leg like it was a pet kitty. Geez! I don't like scaly green lizards and this sucker was one of the biggest I've ever seen.

McGrath looked up at me and brushed the thing off his leg and I said hi, I need some water. Oh sure says McGrath. This here is Barney, he said, pointing to the lizard and I just nodded. He went over to a home-made sink and got me some water. It tasted great going down. Revived my spirits.

I thanked him and started out but he invited me to sit "and jabber some." That was how he put it. He said it gets dead boring out here in the middle of the sand and he always enjoys seeing a stranger. Right away, I don't know how, but I sensed we were going to become friends. Destiny.

McGrath had on worn strap sandals and I could see where one of his big toes (left foot) was missing. Just a stub, real short. He told me he got it snakebit and when it got infected he just severed

it and cauterized it. He also had this one eye, on the right. Wore a black leather patch over the left one like a pirate would. He was thick bearded like a pirate, too, and his mouth had three teeth missing in the front. He said he lost the eye in World War Two fighting the "yella Japs" in the Phillipines. That was his term for the Japanese and I don't happen to appreciate racial slurs. But I didn't say anything as he was the host.

McGrath also told me that he had a steel plate in his right leg from the war (a land mine exploded) which replaced most of his kneecap. So he had a lot of parts missing, beginning with the toe.

His voice was soft as a woman's, which surprised me since it didn't go with the rest of him. And, another surprise, he smelled like fresh soap. You'd think otherwise, with him out here alone in the wild, but he was obviously a very clean individual, which pleased me. I hate body odours on people.

I asked him how he made enough to live on and he said it didn't take much, living like he did, and besides he had his war pension and a little money from his daughter who lived in another part of the State. She'd send checks from time to time.

How long had he lived out here, I asked, and he said about 15 to 20 years, he'd lost count. He didn't have any calendars or buy newspapers and he'd never owned a TV set in his life. He said the past has no meaning, only the present counts, and that's a pretty sound attitude. He'd once been a doctor in a small village in Rhode Island but gave up doctoring after the war. And he didn't know how old he was, or care.

We talked about vitamins. I guess *argued* is a better term. Me, I take a little packet of vitamins every day, seven in all, which you get in health stores and is called a Varsity Pack. Has everything you need to maintain a proper body balance. Then, once in a while, I take some organic zinc and bee pollen—and, after a meal, I chew a couple of Super Papaya Enzyme tablets which aid the digestion. McGrath snorted like a horse at all this, said he prefers jackrabbit stew and that you get all the vitamins you need in a good jackrabbit stew.

It was getting late by then. The sun drops away fast in the desert and the dark can take you by surprise. Light one minute, dark the next. I was a long way from the main road and didn't know if I could find my way back at night. McGrath said he'd be pleased to have me stay over and I said great, I'd appreciate the courtesy.

When I woke up McGrath was standing in the doorway with a rifle in his hand. Scared me. I don't like firearms around me—but he smiled and said he'd just shot our breakfast. And he held up a dead jackrabbit.

I'd never had jackrabbit for breakfast, but McGrath was a good cook and it tasted a lot better than I thought it would. (Better than awful is the way I'd describe it.)

I trusted McGrath. Don't know why, but I had this real calm deep feeling of basic trust regarding him. Which is rare for me. I don't usually trust people, but somehow McGrath was different.

I found myself telling him about my habit and how I wished to God I could find a cure for it. I just want to stop killing people, I told him. The way I stopped smoking. Only it's a lot harder to do. Good intentions don't seem to mean much. I told him about the biker in Lawton, and the bald businessman, and the girl from 7-11, and Ray Spaulding. I even told him about looking at that kid's neck on the bus. Not a kid, actually, but younger than any of the others.

He seemed very interested in what I had to say about the compulsion and how it just swept over me and I'd killed these various individuals in various cities over the last decade. It took me a long time to tell it all and I felt exhausted and wrung out after I'd finished. It was as if I'd emptied myself of all emotion.

McGrath sat there for about a full minute without a word when I was done, and then he stood up and slapped his hands together (big, meaty hands) and said he could cure me of the habit. For good and forever. He told me that if I co-operated with his cure he plain guaranteed me I'd never strangle another man or woman.

What you gonna do, shoot me, I asked, only half kidding. Maybe I'd said too much. Maybe he thought I was some kind of a monster with no more right to live than those desert Jacks he went after.

He smiled and said to trust him and I'd be fine. Well, let me tell you, I was excited. I felt like the Cosmos had something vital to do with all this, that I'd been Cosmically directed to get off that Indio bus when I did and walk out here to meet McGrath and get cured forever. I'm not a bad fellow, really, and I think the Universe was giving me some personal help when I needed it most. That's my theory about McGrath.

I felt kind of feverish, floaty and light-headed and I could feel

my heart thumping. I'll do it, I told McGrath, I'll do whatever it takes to kick the habit.

So we shook hands on it.

The cure has been going on now for weeks. And it's rough. Rougher than I'd ever imagined—but I'm going to continue to the end because it's the only way I'll ever stop what I've been doing.

I'm not writing these words. McGrath is taking them down for me, so it's his handwriting in the notebook. He's doing a lot of other things for me, too, like Mom used to do back in Ohio. Sometimes McGrath makes me feel like a baby but he says I'll get over that feeling once the cure is done. He's terribly kind and caring and I've never met anyone like him.

McGrath has become the best friend I've ever had. Goodness just radiates out of him like sunshine spilling from a wall crack. You know the halos they paint on those robed Saints in the art gallery. Well, he's got one.

This is the last entry for the notebook. There's no need for more. I'm going to have a fine life from now on, out here under this clean desert sky.

McGrath and me, we're not alone any more. We have each other, like brothers in blood. Close, like two brothers from the same womb.

The cure is almost complete. He took the last one yesterday and it's fine. He's an expert and I don't have any worries. I'll never kill again, just like McGrath promised, no matter if I get the compulsion or not because you can't strangle anybody without fingers and thumbs.

And I don't have any more of those.



THE DISPOSSESSED

Joel Lane

(Joel Lane has published stories in a variety of small press magazines such as Dark Dreams, Aklo, Dark Horizons and Winter Chills 3, while his poetry has appeared in Argo, Oxford Poetry and elsewhere. A major critical study of author Ramsey Campbell appeared in the prestigious science fiction journal, Foundation, and one of his stories of dark, brooding urban horror, The Foggy, Foggy Dew, was published as a booklet and subsequently reprinted by Karl Edward Wagner in The Year's Best Horror Stories XV. We think you'll agree that The Dispossessed strengthens Joel's reputation as one of the new voices of horror fiction for the 1990s . . .)

I am the carcinoma of God . . . I see myself striking the nerve in God's body with such accuracy and force that He, too, cannot sleep at night, and tosses around in His bed, screaming and wailing.

Fritz Zorn, *Mars*

1. Portrait of the Autist

It was in autumn, the first season that he spent away from home, that Mark Carver began seeing Marian. Employed by a chemical industry in suburban Cheshire, he travelled for the first time north of the Midlands, to a district partly wild and partly derelict—built to accommodate the overflow of workers from Manchester, and avoided by the more affluent commuters whose sleek cars and Southern accents graced the region's more authentically rural settlements. The scarcity of cheap lodgings forced him into a minimally furnished room let in a house occupied by a man perfectly suited to these ambiguous surroundings.

The first thing that one noticed about Mr. Snell's house was its inferiority in appearance to the rest of the street. The house was gaunt and discoloured; its facade wore a flaking skin composed of greyish paint, lichen and brick-dust. The windows were cloudy, and those of the living-room bore sagging beige curtains that were rarely opened. Only a burglar with suicidal tendencies would have risked his weight on the steep roof, whose black slate tiles were crowded in disarray, many broken or missing. In the next road, just past the corner, stood several empty houses, their shattered windows sealed by darkness. One was half-demolished; interior wallpaper, a faded pink, made it resemble an abscessed tooth. Further on the road led narrowly down a steep hill, overhung by oaks; from here paths led out into fields and woodland, and an attenuated river struggled under the low bridge of the road.

Mr. Snell was the house's only permanent occupant. He was aged about forty, and though of average height, was so round-shouldered as to appear shrunken; his lean body, though muscular, never betrayed any sign of strength, its weakness lying in a lack of nervous health. His round face was extremely pale, contrasting strangely with the solid blackness of his hair and eyes, and of the clothes which he usually wore. When he talked, which was often, his large hands twisted restlessly in the air; and his teeth, which were very bright, flashed like a pair of scissor-blades. When excited, he had a way of nodding repeatedly, by moving the whole of his upper torso, that made him appear like a Jack-in-the-box.



Hair withered to fluid knots and bones melted like ice. (Artist: Dave Carson)

Mark's territorial rights were confined to the squalid kitchen (dominated by a back-garden view of tall brambles, like coiled barbed wire) and the small bedroom, which was devoid of features either positive or negative. When Mark had unpacked his luggage the room seemed smaller still. Of the other rooms, one upper bedroom and a lower room were rented by Snell's other tenant, a quietly cheerful man approaching middle age who spent the weekends with relatives in Manchester, and whom Mark rarely saw. "Keep away from 'im," he advised Mark with regard to the landlord; "e'll drive yer mad . . . In a little world of 'is own. Once 'e starts on at yer 'e'll never stop." The living-room was occupied exclusively and all but continuously by the landlord and a large black-and-white television set; the floor was covered by an erratically ordered collection of books, periodicals, newspaper cuttings and writing materials.

All of the lights in the house bore heavy shades over pink sixty-watt bulbs; Snell's eyes were intolerant of bright light. When he first entered Mark's newly-arranged room he flung up a hand to ward off the glare of the desk-lamp. With brief jerks of his head he inspected the posters on the walls, the books in boxes or transient heaps, the records and record-player in a far corner. "You don't take drugs, do you?" Mark, who had already promised not to smoke or store drink, answered in the negative. "Good," said Snell. "So many young people do these days." He had a way of uttering a cliché as though it were an original piece of wisdom. "And then they talk about soft drugs and hard drugs and all the rest of it. I think it's better to give the whole thing a miss." Then his questing eyes lighted on one of the books scattered on the three-legged coffee table, which was designed to be supported by four legs. "Are you in the occult?" he enquired.

Mark considered the question. "I read things, that's all."

"But you don't know anything that matters. The secrets of power. Do you? Do the people who write these books know them?" At Mark's vague reply he continued: "Don't you think someone who could use magic wouldn't need to write books to make a living? Or to convince people he was telling the truth?"

"I don't think magic is practical in that way. It's more inward."

"Well, you can theorise all you want to. But how do you know whether the theory has anything to do with reality?—If you look

at the world of today, you'll realise that a hell of a lot of things need putting straight. If this magic is real"—Snell tapped the book—"the author should be able to change it all. Unless he has a reason for not changing anything, and for keeping his mouth shut."

"About what?"

"About where the true power lies."

Circuitous discussions of this kind began to occur frequently between the two; Snell would appear in the hall, or in the kitchen when Mark was attempting to cook, and take up a subject without warning, often resuming a conversation after several days' lapse. Otherwise the landlord's time was occupied in various activities conducted in the curtained inviolability of his study; though he alluded to his "work" in the most darkly solemn terms, the only pastimes which he discussed were crossword puzzles and other open competitions (for which he seemed to possess little aptitude), the study of gambling and the stock market, and the pursuit of horror films. On the latter subject he had views: no film made after 1967 was of acceptable standard. (He never stated why it was that year in particular.) "After that the industry went up the spout. No technique, no proper care, scripts a child could have written. And then blood and gore and all the rest of it." He often rhapsodised in a highly didactic manner over the "classic" Dracula movies of the 1930s; aware of his own distinct resemblance to Lugosi, he exaggerated it in voice and movement, at the least expected moments assuming a guttural accent utterly different from his usual anxious tone.

Perhaps Snell's sense of humour typified his isolation. He rarely went out of doors save for local shopping, and preferred to badger the patient keeper of the nearest grocery store for items beyond his usual stock rather than venture to the district's centre. However, he assured Mark that he had travelled; lived everywhere; knew what really went on in the world. He would remain at his desk until far into the night, sleeping then until midday. He usually received several letters or small parcels each day, some stamped by Governmental bodies or by legal firms. From the other tenant Mark learned that the landlord was involved in a series of legal battles with relatives over a disputed inheritance. In the meantime Snell possessed nothing but the house; he lived in cramping poverty. He had never been employed in his life.

To call Snell unbalanced would have been to miss the point: his nature was perversely complete, lacking any of the contradictions inherent to normalcy. "I know exactly where I'm going," he once informed the young tenant. He seemed to function as a lens that focused every oddity of life into brilliant coherence. Mark began to recognise that the landlord was a distorted but none the less unbroken reflection of himself.

2. "What Tune the Enchantress Plays"

One of Mark's favourite walks led beyond the end of an uphill-sloping park through which the river cut a narrow descending course, into wooded hills that were National Trust property. It was easier to follow footpaths, even when circuitous and muddy, than to edge along the unpaved roads where traffic speeded past between the tangled hedges. The denser parts of the forest were dank and subdued, blotched in autumn by glistening fungi and sloughs of dead leaves. Ravens crouched like spiders in intricate webs of twigs. In round hollows preserved by concrete borders, black pools nourished a warty green skin over which swarms of gnats kept up a perpetual St. Vitus' dance.

The largest of these pools could be called a lake; it was shaped like an eye, fringed by black birches. At its centre a mound rose above the surface; a vivid clump of weeds burst from it. Passing the lake when nightfall was linking up the areas of shadow, Mark paused to stare at the green island. A thin shape that was blue-grey, like smoke, hung above the reeds. A few steps closer it was still less clearly defined. As he was climbing away from the lake, he realised that the vision had resembled a woman standing with her arms crossed over her chest; but when he looked back nothing of the kind was discernible.

Distracted, Mark strayed from the indistinct footpath, and so came upon a little building concealed by a V-shaped group of trees on the hillside. It had, apparently, once been a bungalow; now, unroofed save for an ivy-twisted wooden spine and with one wall entirely vanished, it closed off a spectral garden. Dead, white grass, shedding frosty seeds, lay there as though thrown down in handfuls, interspersed with various turgid fungi. The window-frames bore only odd teeth of black glass; the walls were white,

sickly flesh veined by grey or yellow ivy. Mark entered through a gap that had jagged hinges but no door; the sketch of a path lost itself on the hillside behind him. There was a faint trace of some pink floral pattern on scabs of wallpaper inside the house. It was growing dark, but something shone dully in the middle of the floor. Among the levelled rubble of wood and brick a small circle had been cleared for a fire. In the heap of charcoal and moist ashes, on which nothing had yet begun to grow, were several smashed bottles. There was at least one cracked syringe, its bent needle bloody with rust, and a strange cold smell which Mark could not quite recognise. By an odd coincidence, he noticed as he stood by the dead fire, it was possible to see via the doorway through a series of gaps in the trees that framed the centre of the lake in the valley. The photographic precision of the view fascinated him; then, without warning, he saw the figure of the woman there on the island. Her body shone with a blue glow tinged with gold about the head; she was smiling. Abruptly the dusk rose up from the trees and settled about Mark; when he recovered, swaying, from this near-faint, the lake was merely a dismal blur of fallen night. Walking home he could not distinguish the sounds of the birds from those released mechanically within his head.

After that Mark found the strange presence to be somehow imprinted on his world; though he "saw" her, as a distinct entity, only through an effort of will. Sometimes visual details could evoke the image: red-gold crowns of leaves in the wind; steam touching a window-pane; the jagged neck of a chimney against the sunset. But certain scenes were in a less definable way associated with her. There was a crowded graveyard where squirrels ran incessantly up and down the scarred trunks; and the steep valley through which the grey river signed its name. Webbed or mosaic patterns held Mark's attention with an obscure promise; he spent hours in drawing them on paper, as though by defining the veil he could remove it. A faded photograph of a girl whom Mark had once known took on different proportions when he looked at it in very dim light.

The house where he lodged never held any hint of the woman; it and its owner seemed to belong in a black-and-white world, while Marian was never evoked in the absence of colour. Mark could never remember when he first gave her that name in his thoughts. There were always chains of words clicking through his

mind, half at random. Once he wrote down, on impulse, the words *She turns the dew to diamonds*, and only realised their sense a few days later, when the sun briefly lit up streets alive with falling rain. The ticking of raindrops was a pattern to which everyone insensibly reacted; Mark felt that it was Marian's voice or the sound of her heart. He sometimes listened for hours to music, trying to catch the elusive offbeat form.

Occasionally, without knowing how, he succeeded in conjuring up the complete image within his mind. The price of this success was an increasing tendency to moods of aimless and frightened introspection, in which he felt sure that the things he glimpsed were only tolerable among these shades of grey. His mind closed in. He got used to these trapdoors of unease that could drop him from company and conversation into a strange labyrinth of whose walls only he was aware. Each time that the pale, gentle feature clarified, the smile that responded to his demand spread into a crack over the face; the vision broke up like a jigsaw. Over a period of time he would draw the elements back into himself and reunite them.

He was sitting at his desk, in darkness, one evening in winter when the face dissolved to expose, not further darkness, but something pale that moved. Before he could open his eyes, he saw a small cave hollowed from the wall, and occupied by a white, dwarfish figure that was dancing spastically. Its bald head was half turned away, but he could glimpse in that awful moment the embryonic eyes and teeth that bulged under an unbroken skin. Stripes of yellow lamplight distorted the shapes in posters on the walls of his room; as he jerked his head around in a circle, trying to look away, the clammy smell was wrapped around him. This time he recognised it: the odour of a healing wound.

A dream, in either winter or early spring, brought Marian to him in all but tangible form. Trembling slightly with the breathing of sleep, she lay beside him in the bed; her slack body was lukewarm, its texture smooth and yielding like an air-filled plastic bag. Mark's arms went around her and met in the deep groove of her back; there were no knobs to her spine. His head balanced, trembling, in between her breasts, where he heard only the distant muttering of the sea. Or water dripping in a forest after the rain had ceased. The sound grew to fill the cave of the bedclothes. Was its source moving? Mark's hand passed over a foamlike breast,

searching pointlessly for ribs—and slipped with appalling ease into the flesh, tearing open a wide gap that exposed a chest cavity filled by a nest of woodlice. Minute crustacean feet swarmed over his hand and arm. He heard a steady, growing beat: not her heart, nor his own, but the footsteps of her jealous guardian on the road outside. A huge, spindly, stooping figure, the avenger stalked toward the house, his swinging hands smashing the street-lamps on either side as he passed. Shattered glass fell into darkness like dust in the sunrise, counterfeit jewels rejected at once. It might have helped if Mark had awoken at this point; but instead he sank into deeper and less troubled sleep, and was unsure in the morning of where the dream had ended.

On another night, or perhaps the same one, Marian's face floated shimmering above his own. It seemed no more than a brittle mask. He was terrified that it might shatter with his eyes so close. The sockets of her eyes were empty except for swirls of blue-glowing smoke. When these dissolved, he could see through into a colossal hall filled with a vague pink light; it was a library, its huge wooden shelves stocked with dusty leather-bound volumes. *Her eyes are full of tiers.* Stunted, naked imps scuttled busily back and forth between the shelves, bearing books almost too large for their tiny hands to grasp. Mark awoke laughing, though his hands, possessed of some secret emotion of their own, brushed at the sheets violently as though to rid them of many insects.

3. The Hate That Dares Not Speak

It was on an evening in November that Mark began to resolve the enigma of his landlord. A remark of the younger man's about a recent General Election led Snell to declare excitedly: "Yes, you're absolutely right. All of the established parties represent the same system. How can you imagine that they're really in opposition? I'll tell you how to recognise the real opposition. They are the most condemned." He paused for effect, smiling, then went on. "You see, you have to get beyond all the whitewash and all the pathological lies; clear all that crap away before you can even begin to get near the basic reality underneath."

"Can't you see falsehood directly? I mean, injustice is most obvious close up."

"That's just where you're wrong." Snell's eyes lit; his flabby hands throttled the air. "You see, you don't have my experience of the realities of power. I've been in politics for twenty years. Ten years ago I began to see the truth. Since then I've investigated and double-checked; you can't say I'm not sure of my facts. The banking system. The arms trade."

Mark was out of his depth. "Do you need research to arrive at principles? The same facts could be used to support completely different views."

"Aha, yes! How do you *know* that what you call principles aren't just a screen to hide what's really going on? You see, those in power are not going to own up to what they're doing. Oh no." Mark found this obscure mode of argument both comic and unnerving. The same, he suspected, would apply to whatever Snell was concealing. "I'll lend you a book," the landlord said after some further discussion. "That will enlighten you without being too hard to understand. The author has researched what is really happening. I'm not saying every detail is correct, there are bound to be some mistakes when you're dealing with so many lies; but this book gives you the real story."

Snell produced a slim hard-backed volume and a magazine which he handed over with the injunction: "Keep them in good condition." As an initiation they were not revelatory. The book, titled *The Masters of Money*, read like a poor espionage novel tinged with occultism. Modern history was retold, blandly enough; but behind every figure stood a shadow, behind every shadow a hand of "the global puppet-masters". Reducing the author's rather vicious arguments to abstract terms made them more tolerable to Mark, who none the less imagined that some complex natural form might underlie coincidence; whereas the author assumed that destiny implied a controlling hand. Magic could be the work only of a deliberate magician. There was only the one reality; there was thus no spontaneous change, no magic of nature.

The journal was published by the organisation to which Snell apparently belonged. Mark found its articles and letters easier to reject than the book had been: they were blunt, virulent and generally ill-written, septic with open prejudice. Here there were fewer recondite allusions to "nameless cabals" and "hegemonistic fate-weavers": the talk was tersely of "corruption", "scum" and

"blasphemy", while the targets of revilement were predictable in race and creed. Mark wondered about the modern sorcery of names. Renaming an entity subtly altered its nature. The use of quotation marks or the omission of capital lettering could distort or discredit the subject. At the end of the magazine was a list of sensational titles produced by those within the party who had "researched" the "ugly truth" of the dark maze that they claimed was the world.

In its essence, this literature was pornography—or it did for anger what pornography did for love. And whereas variations of desire were limited in their goal, these perversions of the will amounted to global violations. Behind every minor outrage that the reader endured, there loomed a great denial, a refusal of being.

"Well, it might look that way to you," said Snell in their next discussion. "But you have to realise that these people have a basis of fact for their emotions. You don't; neither did I, when I was your age—so I found these ideas offensive as well. But it's only the truth that's disgusting."

"The truth depends on your point of view. You see only what you're prepared to see—and then construct your philosophy to explain it."

"Ah—that's quite true for phoney beliefs. But when you get down to the *reality of power*"—Snell stabbed the words into two invisible eyes—"you leave points of view behind you. That's enlightenment."

"No, you can't say that. Enlightenment depends on admitting that nothing is absolute."

Snell grinned and shook his head. The argument drifted on over the domain of history; Mark reminded himself that Snell's party and its like were not incapable of influencing the people. Indeed, he felt cornered, undermined by Snell's assumption of superiority. "What makes you believe people of this sort ought to be in control?" he demanded, searching for a way forward. "These people you follow are frustrated, swollen up with hate. Wouldn't they deflate once they had the task of ruling?" A legendary image rose in his mind: Hitler manipulating himself while addressing a crowd of adoring youths. (Of course, Snell's party passionately condemned "the unnatural", in spite of certain rumours concerning its leadership that were merely "Establishment smears and distortions".)

"There's an answer to that question," Snell answered after a pause, "but to understand it you'd have to know a great deal more than you do at this moment. The Establishment has conspiracies within conspiracies, lies within lies. We have got a truth. Not even all of our members know about the inner group. Hitler had such a group, but you won't find it mentioned in the history books. What people can't destroy, they pretend doesn't exist. So I'm only telling you what it can't do any harm for you to know." He lifted a finger slowly in front of his face; Mark's eyes fixed upon the space between it and its double in his unfocused vision.

"The world is corrupt," said Snell in a flat voice. "The flesh of lies is dripping off the empty skulls of the spiders, the money-spinners. They have an old alien way of power, but our power of the white flame is older; and it will triumph. Out of the decaying cultures the hunger of the white flame will grow and consume the dead wood." He sounded as though he were trying to chant, without rhythm. "But I won't say any more. You won't see until your own eyes change."

A few days later Mark found a small heap of torn pages on his desk, evidently placed there by the landlord. They had been extracted from some digest-sized magazine, printed in very small, very black letters on paper so white that it seemed luminous. Their contents amounted to three items. There was a short story, *The White People* by Arthur Machen; it hardly seemed a piece of "secret lore", but Mark knew how keenly Snell read disguised meanings into harmless-seeming literature. A long essay, *The Enlightened*, Mark found incomprehensible. Its apparent aim was to explain the rituals through which an "all-dissolving" revelation could be achieved; great importance was attached to the names of certain beings, and to the consequences of changing those names. It too implied that a foreign, tyrannical magic was to be overthrown by "the innermost race". One of the author's phrases, featuring in the random-seeming incantatory final paragraph, stuck in Mark's mind: *the inborn authority of beauty, the inaccessible touchstone*. It linked into his network of Marian-thoughts.

The third item was simply a pattern of runic symbols reproduced on a single sheet of paper. They were small, crabbed in style, suggesting some concentrated effort of calligraphy. There was an irritatingly minute precision about them, as there was about

the words at the top of the page where the landlord had written in pencil: *Do not return this until you can understand it. Then you won't be able to return it.*

Mark gave the first two items back to Snell with an unconsciously imitative twitch of the shoulders. "Doesn't make any sense to me." He wanted to make light of the matter. But Snell was perversely insistent.

"You're quite content to go on accepting the usual views? I've given you a glimpse of the reality. You want to turn your back on it, like all the others." There was a mocking edge in his tone.

"It all depends on perspective, doesn't it?" Mark was tense with anger, or fright. "Once you lose sight of what normal life consists of—once you lose all sensible values—"

"What do you call reality then?" Snell crowed. "Your fantasy? Your occult books?"

Fuck you! "I don't think you can . . ."

"My magic works," said the elder man simply.

"Maybe it does. Machines work. Guns work. Trains work. There are all kinds of magic, working in different ways."

"False magic, or else black magic. Mine is the white magic."

"Black or white, what does it matter?—It's all the same, it's dead, it's got no fucking colours in it!" As Mark burst away and escaped by the front door, slamming it behind him, the landlord began to laugh quietly, in his guttural Lugosi impression.

In the weeks that followed, the young tenant from time to time picked up the sheet of paper covered with cramped black runes, and endeavoured to detect some familiar element, some relationship in the repetition of symbols or in the spacing of groups to a language that he could recognise. But no aspect of the inscription evoked any response in him, though the symbols soon began to trace themselves over any pale and flat surface which he saw. Intensely, he willed the latent evil that he imagined was concealed in the message to draw itself together and emerge, so that he could crush it like a beetle to the paper. He might have studied the dead alphabets to which the inscription could belong; but he avoided libraries, which had recently started to unnerve him.

On the back of an envelope at work he wrote: *Why not have more than one dream at a time? Why not possess many separate identities?*

That seemed quite reasonable to him. Snell has got it all wrong, he thought, and felt the crisis approaching.

4. Reciprocity

The suicide rate is highest in spring, that most difficult of seasons for people who do not feel in themselves the quiet surge of renewal that flows through the natural world. When everything seems on the move, your own sense of stasis can become unbearable, and the flux of life makes cracks and hollows into which you can suddenly fall, unknown. Mark found that he dreamt repeatedly of bereavement, though never of death. Generally he would receive notice, by an unsigned letter or an interrupted phone call, of the death of a relative or friend. Then, lost and embarrassed, he wandered alone through rain-transfigured streets in search of the missing one's home. Once a small boy with an adult face led him by the hand through a crowded underground shopping arcade, with the warning: *If you meet anyone you know, pretend not to notice.* Once he stood on a misty plain where the air was chilly and sour; he knew that Marian was there, but could not see her because there were coins on his eyes. Behind him, the boatman started to laugh.

The links which he held with other people grew warped under the pressure which he exerted on them. What he wanted was quite ordinary to others, perhaps, but not accessible to him. He developed a reverence for the beautiful based on a kind of dismal envy. He lived on the outside of wonder. And the more desperate he became to grasp these human patterns, the more the same despair left him countermanded and hollow, with nothing to offer.

It became clearer to Mark that the comforts of his solitary life—such as reading all night long, or listening to music in the enclosed darkness of his room—were a return to the habitual sensations of his childhood. More alarmingly, they were the only stimuli that he could rely upon. The strategies that maintained his life also enclosed it. It was no longer possible to claim that he was simply one certain type of person, unless one wrote off the type as invalid, a denial. Every attempt to break free cheated him; it was like moving on a narrow ledge, where to uncrouch exposed you to the wind. One friend to whom he offered some of these jagged thoughts told him not to "take life so seriously. If you weren't so obsessed you'd

have no problem. But you're pulling yourself down into real trouble. Why?" It was true, Mark realised; but such truth, though visible, was beyond his ability to touch—or perhaps he was too insensitive now to feel it. He had followed the path of least resistance for so long that it was easier to follow it into loss than to turn back; like a burrowing animal, its spine paralysed by the suffocating collapse of the tunnel it had dug.

On some evenings he used alcohol as a blanket against the barbed wire of knowledge that coiled around him. Then he would awake before dawn, with sobriety like a cold razor tickling at his throat, and endure tantalising inner visions—swirling colours, blue and gold. Watching the sunrise was like feeling himself go mad. *The terrible thing is that I am free.* Snell's answer, the absolute, nagged at him; he ignored it, bitterly.

On the evening of the last day of April, Mark was standing outside a country pub a couple of miles from his lodgings. The group of friends had dispersed with farewells abruptly gulped by the stillness and chill of the road. He had refused a lift home; he wanted some exercise. Music filtered tenderly through the doorway from a jukebox. It was a slow, subdued tune that he could not recognise, though every note was painfully familiar. It belonged to another life. He attuned himself to the music until he could not distinguish its continuing piano note from the half-echoes and false variations inside his head. Though the near-seeming sky was clouded, a few pale stars glimmered like illusions of the dark-adjusted eye.

The dark made the stars brighter. The quiet made the music clear. In turn, these fragments of light and sound organised the vast absences and made them more nearly accessible to feeling. As he stood, swaying slightly, Mark recalled a line of poetry: *The eternal reciprocity of tears.* On cue, it began to rain lightly. Indifferent, Mark strolled at the edge of the unpaved road. Cars rushed jarringly past, brief explosions of noise and colour. Advancing white headlights captured fine sprays of glass atoms, cruelly perfect and pure.

She was waiting, a grey cloak about her thin shoulders, in the penumbra of a streetlamp a little way ahead. When he recognised her Mark quickened his pace. The sound of his feet on the wet road was strangely irregular. She turned and moved with effortless pace away and down a narrow side road. Soon Mark was sprinting to keep her in sight; the blue glow of

her erect figure threatened at any instant to merge with the night sky.

Three tiers of a dozen or so earthen steps, framed by cut logs, led him up and across the side of the hill into the forest. Winded, he slowed on the unreliable path. Under the trees the rain was slower but its drops were heavier. Flickering between trunks, Marian remained just in sight ahead of him. Mark struggled with an impression that he had just climbed the staircase of his lodging-house and was now advancing down the hallway.

When he came out into the open, he saw the fugitive quite near, shining faintly against a background whose uniform dullness he was at first at a loss to interpret. Then a thin, acrid smell betrayed the nearness of the small lake. Unsure of its borders, he advanced hesitantly toward the vision. *Marian? You have guided me through the maze to this centre. What home have you brought me to?* He answered himself: *a vacant possession; nobody at home.*

Is this your final mirror? She was not smiling; her vaguely pink mouth was a short line of fear. Her hands clutched her shoulders, stirring the lace. As Mark approached her, she retreated by near-stumbling steps toward one of the large trees that ringed the lake. At last, her arms still folded, she stood with her back pressed against a wall of black bark; her eyes were closed. The body was blue, save for the rose-gold aura of hair wreathing the still face. The colours seemed to flow through her as through a glass sculpture. Marian was a being of pure energy, a focus.

Though he could see the dense blurs moving erratically over the tree-trunk, Mark put his hands upon her shoulders. Once more the flesh was cool and yielding; the bark behind was a mass of broken tissue. Raindrops crawled down his cheeks. He was unable to move away when Marian's face began to crumble. Her body sagged, revealing a scar of fungus in the black tree. Mark turned away, but not quickly enough to avoid seeing the little pale figure that struggled through a growing rupture in the deflated skin, which still glowed faintly blue. He thought that he could hear its footsteps dancing after him up the hillside; but perhaps it was only the rain.

There was one place that might offer some kind of sanctuary. As he stumbled through the blank doorway he saw that there was a gap in the ring of figures squatting around the little fire. He knelt in the empty space and panted to recover his breath, rubbing his hands in

the warmth to remove the nerves' memory of what he had touched. Inexplicably, it was not raining in here; and overhead, through the skeletal roof, he could see a full constellation of stars in a clear sky. The stars had the pattern of the runes.

A bottle was passed toward him from the right; the companion who passed it lifted his own face to the firelight, and Mark recognised the landlord. Fumbling its warm slippery glass, Mark tilted the bottle to his lips. Its taste and scent pierced him, invaded his throat with a cold white blaze. The liquor had a repulsive sweet tang, like aniseed. He settled himself in a squatting posture, the half-full bottle cradled in his hands, and waited. Soon the white imp appeared in the doorway, its capering gait curbed in servility, and stepped forward to deposit an armful of shrivelled and discoloured skin, wrapped like a parcel in strands of red-gold hair, on the embers of the fire. The servant retreated, and the fire flared up in a moment of ironic glory; then the flames clenched back down into the tight heart of white-glowing wood. Mark recalled the saying: *the slower the fire, the better the charcoal*. His had not been such a slow fire; perhaps there was hope after all.

The bottle was passed around the ring of nine celebrants a few more times, each of the group taking a single swallow. Then Snell leant forward and shook the dregs of the bottle over the dim fire. Immediately the trees around the house seemed to lean forward, flickering. Among their branches, the ravens were like clots in a network of veins.

The white heart in its charcoal rib-cage began to pulse and swell, then to split. A spear of flame like forked lightning stabbed upward; others followed. A nimbus of light, its terrible radiance unrelieved by any trace of smoke, took shape in the air. Agonised motes of ash twisted inside it, rising or falling. The ashes had the form of the runes.

The nimbus became a cone, then a column that revolved and tied itself up in ropes of flame. Mark saw the movement of thin limbs against a crusted lake. The column became a fountain from which the nine watchers shrank back. Mark glanced around the circle, dazzled; the others avoided the touch of the fire as though more than physically afraid of it. He stood up. Eight pairs of eyes reflected the light weakly back toward him, as, biting his lip, he plunged both hands among the sticks and tore free a thick, viciously blazing brand.

Pale hands fluttered like moths in helpless flight. The roar and crackle of the fire in Mark's head drowned his own cry of laughter. He swept the torch in an arc before him, up and around again. The skins of the faces and hands caught fire almost instantly, cracked and creased; hair withered to fluid knots and bones melted like ice. As the trees shuddered, flocks of ravens spiralled downward in clouds, landing spiderlike on their targets. Snell was the last of the victims. His eyes took up the fire before the rest of his face, and there was no trace of fear in them; his teeth lit up in a smile before they ran back into his throat.

The vandal stood troubled and uncertain, watching the moist white goblins being torn to glistening shreds by the jerking beaks of the ravens. Nothing but soft whiteness seemed to exist inside these small bodies. As the fire died back to an impure smouldering, the wood in Mark's hands flared up suddenly and disintegrated. Flame bathed his hands, making them translucent. He felt the white run over him, slick, rather chilly. His flesh dissolved easily, and as the smoke, or birds, or blindness flapped down from overhead to envelop him, he felt the first panicky stirrings of the vulnerable shape inside him.

5. Scar Tissue

He was sober, with that jagged sobriety that was as unnatural as drunkenness. Clouds massed over the wooded horizon, refusing to separate from the ground. Could the creeping radiance be sunlight? Its touch repelled him, but he was too tired to stand up and draw the curtains to.

Had he been sitting like this, slumped over his desk, the whole night? He stretched; his clothes felt loose and misshapen. The daylight hurt his eyes. As he tried to recover the night's events, the chase and the celebration, the final reversal, he was unable to control the images. It was too much like an old, stagy horror movie, filmed in black and white, full of flickers and twitches. There was no doubt that it had happened to some part of himself. He could no longer be sure about time or identity. Infants knew that all mind was universal.

The paper with the runes lay in front of him, no longer useful. He had read it over so many times in the last few hours

that he knew its message by heart. He wondered why he he had ever bothered to read anything else. His hands on the paper were shrunken and translucent.

He turned to look at the mirror on the wall. His reflection cowered from itself, weak and deformed. It looked as though his entire skin were being replaced by smooth plastic. Only his eyes appeared unchanged. Perhaps they were all that had changed. There was a second, taller figure behind his reflection. It was smiling.

"I've come for the rent."

The rent in the veil? "Would it help," asked the tenant slowly, "if I was to destroy this paper?"

"I wouldn't try it if I were you. There's nothing else left." Something on the horizon caught Mark's eye. He moved to the window. On a glass path between the treetops, Marian was walking slowly toward him from a long way away. Her figure was blurred, but he could see that the hands were half-outstretched. His own hands pressed the clammy pane near to the breaking point of something. She gave up moving while still beyond the range of clear sight; perhaps mist had gathered over the rooftops. Mark felt himself begin to shake from within. How could his indifference to humanity amount to the same as Snell's hatred?

"Never mind," said Snell. "You'll find another Marie."

"Marian." *How did you know?* "So tell me. What now?"

"There's plenty to be done. The enlightened are gathering. Our inheritance must be prepared."

"I'd love to unstitch your eyelids." Mark gouged the pane. "Have you ever had a victory that wasn't petty? You're beyond resistance, all right. You don't even need shells. But whatever you can grab now, you are the inheritors of poverty. You are the endarkened.

"You know, there was a part of me I couldn't even get at. The unbroken mirror, the free will. She's up there—look. Can you see? It's not me down here any more." His voice, a murmur, faded.

"Where is it?" Snell jeered. "I don't see her." *Stop smiling, fuck you.* Had Marian vanished now, among the grey mountains of the sky? No, there she was, at the limit of the horizon, suddenly magnified, turning to wave goodbye. Her hair writhed in the winds of the upper air. There were tears on her face, or else minute raindrops on the pane. *She might as well cry.* He couldn't imagine the scope

of her loss. He had never been able to feel anybody's loss but his own. Mark watched the climbing figure until it was indistinguishable from sun-streaked cloud. An intolerable sense of tiredness blurred his vision, and his hands on the glass were numb. It didn't even matter; that was the real horror. Snell's cool, amused gaze irked the back of his neck. Slowly, after a long pause, he turned around to meet the landlord's eyes.

Only the names have been changed.



THE MAN WHO FELT PAIN

Brian Lumley

*(Brian Lumley has been writing horror and fantasy fiction for the past twenty-one years, although fans of his work will note that the science fictional elements of *The Man Who Felt Pain* marks it as something of a departure in theme for the author. Influenced initially by the cosmic terror tales of H.P. Lovecraft, he wrote many short stories and novels in the "Cthulhu Mythos" tradition, such as *The Caller of the Black*, *Beneath the Moors* and *The Burrowers Beneath*. His short stories have appeared widely, in such magazines as *Weirdbook*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Etchings & Odysseys*, *Whispers*, *Weird Tales* and in several earlier issues of *Fantasy Tales* during its small press days. More recently he has branched out into mainline genre novels. The three books in the "Necroscope" trilogy—*Necroscope*, *Wamphyri!* and *The Source*—(published by Grafton in the UK and Tor Books in America) have been making a big impact, and his fantasy trilogy *Hero of Dreams* will be on the racks from Headline Books this year.)*



A huge cloud of desiccated, exhausted migratory butterflies spiralled down out of the aching Mediterranean sky to drown in the tideless sea. (Artist: Jim Pitts)

But, you would ask, don't we all?

Yes, I would answer, we all feel pain—our own, and perhaps a little of those who are closest to us—but rarely anyone else's. We don't physically feel *everyone* else's pain. My twin brother Andrew felt everyone's pain, or would have if he'd been able to bear it, but of course he couldn't and in the end it killed him. Yes, and now it would kill me, too, except I intend to put myself way, way beyond it.

So what do I mean, he could feel everyone's pain? Do I mean he was a man of God, who felt *for* people? A man who agonized over all the world's strife and turmoil, who felt the folly and frustration of men maiming and killing each other in their petty squabbles and wars? Well it's true he did, to a certain extent, but not that isn't what I mean.

I mean that he was the next leap forward in the evolution of the human race. I mean that he was a member of time's tiny fraternity of genuine geniuses, *sui generis* in fact, until the day he died. If he had happened on the shores of some primal ocean, then he could have been the Missing Link; or five million years ago he might have been the first ape-man to use a branch to lever rocks down in an avalanche upon his next meal; or a million years later employed fire to cook that meal; or just two million years ago used the first log "wheels" to roll a megalith boulder to and fro across the entrance to his cave. They were all steps forward, and so was Andrew, except he was a leap.

For if we *all* felt everyone's pain, why, then there'd be no more wars or cruelties or hurtfulness of any sort and we could get on with the real business of our being here—which is to question *why* we're here, and to care for each other, and to go on . . . wherever.

I've thought about it a lot up here, where there's plenty of space and time to think, and my thoughts have been diverse.

There are these green bushes (I forget their name) which have oval leaves in tight, mathematically precise rows down their stems, and if you hold a burning match under one of them they *all* close up! And not only on that bush but on every other bush of that species in the vicinity! An intricate trigger mechanism created by Nature—or God if you're a believer—and transmitted through sap and fiber, branch, twig, root and perhaps even soil;

intricate and yet simple, if you know how. A card up the sleeve of . . . of a bush?

In the ocean there are polyps—organisms, occasionally huge, made up of tiny single individual units each with lives of their own—which, when the predator fish bites one, the *entire colony* retracts into the safety of its alveolate rock or anchorage. Nature has allowed each to feel the agony of the others—for self-preservation. But to give such a gift to . . . a coral? A jellyfish? A polyp? If it could be done for such lowly creatures as these, why then create Man and simply leave him to his own devices? Surely that were to ask for trouble!

And so Andrew was the next step forward, for when he was born Nature also gave the gift to him. Except that I saw it in action and know that in fact it was a curse.

Now from up here I look down on the world revolving far below—at the beautiful green and blue planet Earth, which is slowly but surely destroying me—and while I remember almost exactly how it began, I daren't even think how it will end . . .

Our mother was American, our father English, and we were born in August 2027 at Lyon, France, where at that time could be found the Headquarters of ESP, the European Space Programme. Our parents worked on the Programme: she was and still is a computer technician, and he a PTI and instructor astronaut. He had journeyed into space many times during that decade in which we were born, but was forced to give it up when the technology got beyond him. A pity he never had Mother's mental wizardry, her computer-oriented brain. Anyway he has a desk job now, from which he'll retire, but reluctantly, in another five or six years' time.

I suppose it was only natural that Andrew and I should want to be astronauts: by the time Dad was finishing up we were already cramming math and computer studies, aviation and astronautics, spaceflight subjects across the board. And like the twins we were—like peas in a pod—we paralleled each other in performance. If I was top of the class one term, Andrew would pip me the next, and vice versa. At nineteen we flew the ESP shuttles (pilot and/or co-pilot, whichever task suited us at the time, or simply as crew-members) and at twenty-one we'd been to Moonbase and back. Always together.

The trouble started at Cannes, South of France, in the summer of 2049, when we were resting up after a month-long series of shuttle runs to destroy a lot of outdated space debris: sputs and sats and bits of old rockets lodged in their many, often dangerous orbits up there far outside Earth's envelope. I won't go into details for any ten-year-old kid knows them: it was just a matter of giving these odd piles of free-wheeling, obsolete junk a little shove in the right direction at the right time, to send them tumbling sadly and yet somehow grandly out and away and down into the hot heart of Sol.

But we were very young men and space is a lonely place, and so when we had our feet on the ground we liked to look for company. Nothing permanent, for we didn't lead the sort of life that makes for lasting relationships, but if you're an astronaut and can't find a little female company on a beach in Cannes . . . then it has to be time to see a plastic surgeon! On this occasion, however, we were on our own, just lying there on our towels on the beach and absorbing the heat of that especially hot summer, when it happened. I say "it" for at first we didn't know what it was. Not for quite some little time, in fact.

"Aaaah-ow!" said Andrew, abruptly sitting up and rapidly blinking his eyes, staring out across an entirely placid ocean. And though there was a twinge of pain in his voice he wasn't holding himself; he'd simply gone a little pale and shuddery, as if he had stomach cramp or something.

"Ow?" I repeated him, but not quite, because the sound he'd made hadn't really been repeatable: more an animal cry than a word proper. "You were stung?"

He frowned, looked at the sand all about, shook his head. "I . . . I don't think so," he finally, uncertainly said.

I look at him—at the physical fact and presence of my brother—in admiration, which was nice because I was looking at a better than mirror image of myself! Andrew, with his mass of gleaming black hair, blue eyes and clean, strong features, and his athlete's body. How many times had I wondered: *do I really look as good as this?*

But . . . a few minutes later and his stab of unknown pain was forgotten, and a spear-fisherman came out of the sea with a silver-glistening fish, shot through the head, stone dead on his spear. He took off his swimfins and marched proudly off up

the beach with his catch. And Andrew's eyes following him, still frowning. That was all there was to it, that first time.

After that the pains came thick and fast: big hurts and small ones, pains that made him burn or ache or sometimes simply cramped him, but occasionally agonies that doubled him over and caused him to throw up on the floor. None of them coming for any good reason that we could think of, and not a one from any visible cause or having any viable cure.

The Programme medics all agreed that there was nothing wrong with Andrew, at least not with his body, and they were the best in the world and should know. But he and I, we knew that there was something desperately wrong with him. He was feeling pain, and feeling it when in fact he was in the peak of condition and nothing, absolutely *nothing*, should hurt.

I remember a fight in a night-club in Paris; though we weren't involved personally, still I had to carry Andrew to our car and drive him to a friend's house. It was as though he was the one who took the hammering—and not a mark on him, and anyway the scrap had taken place on the other side of the room. But he'd certainly jerked upright out of his seat, grunting and yelling and slamming this way and that as the shouting and sounds of fists striking flesh reached us! And he'd just as surely crashed over onto his back on the floor, groggy as a punch-drunk ex-boxer, as the fight came to a close.

I remember the night in Lyon when he woke up hoarsely screaming his agony and clawing at his face. We were sleeping on the base at the time and there'd been some party or other we hadn't attended. But I'd heard the crash outside at the same time time Andrew started yelling, and when I looked out of the window there was this accident down there, where a once-pretty girl has been tossed through a windshield on to the hood of the second car, her face shattered and bloody. Andrew sat on his bed and moaned and shuddered and held his face together (which *was* together, you understand) until an ambulance came and took the injured girl away . . .

And that was when it finally began to dawn on us just what was wrong, and what was rapidly getting worse; so that it's hardly surprising he had his breakdown. He had it because he'd begun to realize that nothing and no one could ever put his problem

right, and that from now on he was subject to anyone else's, everyone else's pain.

For that was the simple fact of it: that he felt pain. From the pinprick stings of small, damaged or dying creatures to the screaming agonies of hideous human death. But once we knew what it was, at least we could tell the doctors.

It didn't take them long to check it out, and after they did . . . I've never seen so many intelligent down-to-earth men looking so downright shocked and disbelieving and lost for answers. And lost is the only word for it, for how can you treat someone for the aches and pains and bumps and cuts and bruises of someone else? How can you treat—or begin treating—the agony of a broken leg when the leg plainly isn't broken?

Non-addictive painkillers, obviously . . .

. . . Oh, really?

For in fact it did no good to give painkillers to Andrew. The pain wasn't actually in him; its source or sources were beyond his mind and body, coming from outside of him; there was nothing they could put *inside* of him that would help. Worse, it didn't even bring relief when they gave the pills to the ones actually suffering from the pain! They only *thought* the pain had gone away, because it had been blocked. But the cause of the hurting was still there and Andrew could feel it . . .

The thing's progress was rapid; it precisely paralleled Andrew's deterioration. Obviously, he wasn't going out into space anymore . . .

. . . Or *was* he?

Once they'd accepted this new thing—Andrew's . . . disease?—the ESP medics were amenable to an idea of mine. And they backed us on it. For seven years we'd been using one-man weather sats for accurate forecasting. The robot sats had been fine in their day, but nothing was as clear-sighted as human eyes and nothing so observant as an alert human brain. And what with the extensive damage to the ozone layer—the constant fluctuation of its tears and holes—computer probability was at best mechanical guesswork anyway.

So . . . my idea was simple and I don't think I need to restate it. It would mean Andrew would be completely isolated for two months at a stretch, which isn't good for anyone, but at

least it would give him time to get himself back together again before they brought him down for his periodic visits in hell. And it would also give the medics time to try to find a new angle of approach. Because if this was a disease connected with or perhaps even springing from space, then it was something they were going to have to take a crack at.

It took some haggling, (the Programme Chiefs like to have 100% fit men up there,) but between the medics, myself and my parents we convinced the upper echelon that Andrew should become WWO&A, a World Weather Observer & Adviser. And he and I spent another three months getting him back on his feet again, mentally and physically. Which wasn't easy.

It meant spending a lot of time in the loneliest places in the world: in deserts, on frozen ocean strands, in the wilds of Canada and blustery Scottish highlands, finally on the uninhabited beaches of Cyprus, which the deteriorating ozone layer had put paid to as far back as 2006. There weren't a hell of a lot of Venuses on half-shells floating ashore at Paphos this time around.

We talked and trained, and Andrew got himself together and faced up to it, and away from all the pains of men he gradually improved and became fit again. But at the same time he'd been growing ever more aware of a very worrying thing: the PE was wearing down. PE was our jargon for the ratio between a person in pain and his distance from Andrew, the receiver. The Proximity Effect. Previously, the source had needed to be pretty close. But now . . . all the world's pain, however muted, was getting there, was getting through to him. He felt it like you might hear the sea in a shell: as a distant tumult. A roaring which was gradually creeping up on him.

Nor was that the whole thing; for he'd also become more sensitive to the agonies of the smaller creatures, whose myriad ravages were grown that much more sharp to him. A huge cloud of desiccated, exhausted migratory butterflies spiralled down out of the aching Mediterranean sky to drown in the tideless sea, and Andrew gaped and gasped and began to turn blue before the last of them had expired. He felt the dull shuddering of the tiny clam devoured by the starfish, and the intolerable burning of the stranded man-o'-war evaporating on the sand. And now he couldn't get back into space fast enough.

Except . . . he never made it.

It was on every Vidscreen in the world and dominated every newscast for a month: the blow-up at Fatu Hiva in the Marquesas.

There were two launches scheduled for that day. The first was a French relief team going up to Luna Orbital Station, and the second was supposed to be Andrew shuttling up to W-Sat III. But the French team never got off the pad, which meant that Andrew never got *on* it. We were only a mile away from that mess, waiting out the countdown when it fireballed—and my twin bother felt every poor sod of them frying! If they'd all gone up at once in the bang it would have been bad enough—but three of them, blazing, managed to eject. And Andrew blazed with them.

The medics took him back then, and called in the shrinks, too, and I found myself excluded. Now it had to be up to the specialists, because I couldn't reach him anymore. He'd gone "inside" and wasn't coming out for a while.

We were twins and I loved him; I might easily have gone to pieces myself, if the Old Folks had let me. But they didn't. "You've earned a lot of money, son, you and Andrew," my father told me. "Which is just as well because your brother is going to need it. Oh, I know, there are a lot of good people working on him for free—but there are other specialists who haven't even seen him yet, and they cost money. Money doesn't last for ever, Ray—it comes and it goes. If you want to do something for Andrew, want to take care of his future, then the best thing would be to get yourself back on out into space. Let me and your mother look after this end a while."

Andrew's future! It hadn't even got through to the Old Folks that he didn't have one. It was something they couldn't allow themselves to believe, and so they didn't. But at least their advice was good and kept me together. I went back into space, and up there where I could look down and see everything clearly (so clearly that I used to believe it allowed me to think more clearly, too) I'd sometimes wonder: *why him and not me? We're twins, so how come it skipped me?* But even in space there was no answer to that. Not then . . .

I did two months on W-Sat III standing in for Andrew, and almost without pause a further three months on the vast, incredible wheel which was Luna Orbital, watching the EV engineers laboriously putting together the miracle that would one day become Titan Station. And finally it was back to Earth.

Meanwhile, I hadn't been out of touch: I got coded radio mail which my personal receiver unscrambled onto discs for me. The Old Folks kept me in the picture regards Andrew.

"We found a specializing chemist who designed a drug for him," my mother told me, her languid American drawl still very much in evidence for all that she'd been expatriate for thirty years. "It has side-effects—makes his whole skin itch and upsets his balance a little—but it does cut down on the pain. And it's non-addictive!" Fine for anyone else; but my brother, my double, the athlete who was my twin? In private I cried about it.

"He's out of dock," the Old Man's gravelly English tones cheerfully informed me towards the end of one message, "house-hunting off Land's End!"

That last had me stumped. What the hell was "off" Land's End? I called up the Atlas on my computer and got the answer: the Isles of Scilly. But it was the wrong answer. There were also several lighthouses.

When I got back down I had three months accumulated R and R and plenty to do with it, but first the Programme Officer I/C wanted to see me. In Lyon I went up to Jean-Pierre Durant's office and was ushered in. Durant was a short, sturdy man in his fifties, wide as a door, short-cropped greying hair, big hard hands, very powerful looking. And he *was* powerful in every way; but big-hearted with it, a man who loved his fellow men. Right then, however, I had a down on ESP because of Andrew (to me, they'd seemed too eager to write him off) and possibly it showed in my face. Also, I was in a hurry to get across the Channel to England, and down to Land's End, and out to see my brother in the old deserted lighthouse he'd made his home. So Durant was the Big Boss—so what? I considered this an intrusion into my time. And perhaps that showed, too.

"Sit down, Ray," Durant invited, smiling, waving me into a chair. He spoke English which his accent made warm and compassionate, salving a little of the anger and frustration out of



My twin brother felt every poor sod of them frying. (Artist: Jim Pitts)

me. "And don't worry," he continued, "I don't intend to waste your time. I'll get right down to it: we think there's maybe something we can do for Andrew—if it's at all possible."

My heart gave a leap and I started to my feet again. "The medics have come up with something?"

Durant shook his head, pointed at the chair. Frowning, I sat. "The psychoanalysts!" I burst out again, leaning forward. "It was psychosomatic, right? Some kind of mental allergy?"

"Ray," he said, again shaking his head, "they're working on those things—and getting nowhere fast. And Andrew isn't helping by making it hard for anyone to see him. So . . . we're not making much progress. Not along those lines, anyway."

I was still frowning. "So how can you help him?"

Durant looked tugged two ways; he sighed, shrugged, stroked his chin. "Personally, I think he should go back out into space again."

I stared at him for a moment, then slumped. "We tried that," I said, disappointed.

He ignored my expression and my answer, and said: "Way out in space." But it was *how* he said it. This time there was no way I could remain seated; I jumped up, leaned forward across his desk. If Durant meant what I thought he meant . . . it had always been our wildest dream!

"Titan?" I finally got it out.

He nodded, and: "*Way* out!" repeated himself. "Far beyond the influence of whatever it is that's killing him. If we can get him up to Moonbase for a year . . . we think we may have the Titan hardware ready by then. You've been up on the Luna Orbiter and know how hard they're all working up there. The Titan wheel was going to be unmanned at first, as you know, with its life-supports on green just waiting for a crew when we were ready to send them. However—" And he smiled again, and shrugged.

I took a pace back, collapsed into my chair, dazedly shook my head as a mixture of emotions flooded through me. "But . . . why tell me? I mean, haven't you told Andrew?"

Now the smile, a worried one at best, left his face. "I told him last week—by letter, special delivery, a jet-copter—and his answer . . . wasn't satisfactory. I told him yesterday, and when he could bring himself to answer the phone I got the same response.

And I've tried to tell him again this morning, but apparently he's not taking calls. So maybe you'd better tell him for me."

"Unsatisfactory?" Over everything else he'd said that one word had stuck in my mind. "His answer was unsatisfactory? In what way?"

"Ray," Durant looked straight into my eyes, "your brother is convinced he's going to die—of other people's pain. He says he's given it plenty of thought and knows there's no way of stopping it. And he says that since it's coming, he'd prefer it came here on Earth than out there. Going out into space would only delay it anyway, he says. So you're his last chance. Possibly he's already too far gone physically for the job, in which case you'll not only have to talk him into accepting it, but also get him back up on his feet one last time. You did it before, between you, so maybe you can do it again. That's the whole thing, and that's why I sent for you . . ."

"Do my parents—?" I started, but he cut me off.

"Your parents are your parents, Ray. I know them almost as well as you do. In some respects I know them better. Andrew has forbidden them to visit him, says not to baby him and that he's doing fine, and when he's ready to see them he'll turn up on their doorstep. Do you think it's likely—or even right—that I should tell them he's going downhill? But I have told them we *might* send him out to Saturn if he wants it, and that it's up to him. Though in fact it now looks like it's up to you. When are you seeing him?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "As soon as I can get there. Right now, if there was any quick way."

"There is," he told me. "Get your things together, whatever you want to take with you, and be at the helipad in one hour. I'll clear it and see that you're jet-coptered over. Two and a half hours and you're there, OK?"

And of course I said yes, that was OK . . .

I didn't try to call Andrew first; it was to be a surprise, and it was. But on the way across I talked to my pilot, the one who'd taken Durant's letter to Andrew on Perring's Rock. "How did he look to you?" I asked him.

Josh Bertin was a Belgian and had been a jet-copter pilot for ESP as long as I'd been around; I knew him personally and he knew our history. "Andrew . . . wasn't his brightest," he answered,

carefully. And before I could quizz him further: "You know why he bought the Rock, of course?"

"Oh, yes," I nodded. "Miles out to sea. No people. No pain. Not so much, anyway."

Josh glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Yes . . . and no," he said. "Oh, that's the reason he settled there, for sure, but—"

When his pause threatened to go on indefinitely, I prompted him: "But?"

"He mentioned something you and he call the PE? Something to do with how close people were to him? Well, he told me it's breaking down. All the way down."

"Josh," I was really alarmed now, "I think you'd better tell me—"

"—*But*," he broke in on me, "he's coping with it—so far. Learning to live with it. All he has to do is keep telling himself it's not real, that's all—that the pain belongs to someone else—and then he'll be OK. As long as nothing big happens. But right out there in the sea? Well, he's not expecting any disasters, you know? And Ray, that's it. No good asking me any more, 'cos that's all he told me."

I said nothing but simply turned over what he'd said in my mind. And while I was still turning it over; that's when the pain hit me. Andrew's pain—and I knew it!

It came from outside of me, slamming into me like an explosive shell and fragmenting deep inside. It was like a tankful of pain had overflowed into my guts. Someone was crushing my heart, yanking it this way and that, trying to tear it out of me. I had thought I knew what pain was, but I hadn't. *This* was pain! Big Pain!

It would have driven me surging to my feet, but I was strapped in. I cried out, or gurgled, and then I must have blacked out . . .

When I came to Josh had slapped an oxygen mask over my nose and mouth and was shaking me. He'd switched the jet-copter to automatic pilot, and he was white as death. But as soon as I opened my eyes, dragged the masks off my face and let it fall, then he took a deep breath and climbed down a little. "Are you OK?" he said. And: "Jesus, Ray—what was all *that*?"

At that time I'd known what it was, but now I couldn't be sure, didn't want to be sure. I had thought it was Andrew, something

from him that couldn't be contained, overflowing into me. But . . . I didn't even know if that was possible. Being a twin I knew all about the so-called "Corsican Brothers" cases, but nothing like that had ever happened to me (to us?) before. So . . . maybe it was just me. My heart? Had I been pushing it too hard?

"I don't know what it was," I finally answered Josh. "I'm too scared to *think* what it was. I only know it was pain, and that it's gone now."

But I didn't tell him that something else had gone, too, something which I hadn't even been aware until suddenly—right there and then—I no longer had it. It had been a warm feeling, that's all. A feeling that there was something out there other than what I could see, feel and touch. A sure knowledge that the universe was bigger than me. Now that I'd lost it I knew that it had been something greater than merely "I think, therefore I am." Perhaps it had been "*we* think . . ." But now there was just an emptiness, with nothing out there at all except the world and all of space and all the other stars and worlds in it. And for the first time in my life I experienced loneliness. Even with someone right there beside me, I was lonely . . .

It was mid-September, still warm but very soggy, and fog lay like a milky shroud on the ocean where Perring's Rock stuck up like a partly clenched fist from the grey-surfing water, its lighthouse index finger pointing at the leaden sky. Perring's Rock was the sloping acre and a half plateau of some drowned mountain, rising seventy or eighty feet out of the sea and having the lighthouse built at the highest point of the slope. There was something of a tiny scalloped bay and beach to the west, away from our approach path, and a flat area on our side of the lighthouse picked out with typical helipad patterns.

Like ninety percent of all lighthouses the rock had been abandoned since before the turn of the century, when super high-tech Radar, Skyspy and the W-sats had put them out of business for good. But the way they'd built it, the sea wasn't going to claim this one for a long time still to come. And desolate? The place looked about as lonely as I now felt. Except as we landed I saw that it wasn't, or saw something which caused me to think that it wasn't.

It was Andrew himself!—leaning over the rail of the light-house's circular balcony or platform, waving to us through the blast from our fans as we came down. Then I was free of my straps and sliding the cabin door open, out of my seat and down under the rotors before they'd even nearly stopped turning, and running up the rock-carved steps to pause at the foot of the tower. And there was my brother up top, still leaning on the rail high overhead, his shirt-sleeves flapping in a breeze sprung up off the sea. Except . . . he wasn't looking down at me at all but at something else. And he was so still, so very still there at the rail. Not so much leaning on it, I now saw, as propped up by it.

I was inside and up the steps three at a time; and no need to worry now about the state of my heart for I was galvanized, my actions electric, supercharged! Yanked aloft by a fear and a pain beyond physical pain, I *hurtled* up those steps, while from behind and below me Josh Bertin's cry followed despairingly from the well of the corkscrew:

"Ray! . . . Ray . . .!"

Up to the old lamp room I swept, and on up its iron ladder and through the open trapdoor onto the flat, circular roof. And there was Andrew clinging to the iron three-bar safety rail—or rather hanging on it. One foot had slipped through and jammed there, dangling in space, and the other leg was bent at the knee, propping him against an upright. His left arm lay loosely along the top rail, while his opposite shoulder and arm lolled stiffly across it, supporting his weight. With his shirt-sleeves flapping like that and his head on one side, he looked like . . . like a sorry scarecrow fallen from its cross. And I saw that I was right and he hadn't in fact been looking at us as we came in but at something else, down on the beach—as he'd blindly stared at it ever since his final, killing pain had reached out to me and knocked me out during the flight.

The mist had curled away a little and now I too could see it there on the narrow shingle strand. A beached whale, with three great, deep crimson slashes across its spine where some liner's screw had broken its broad back!

The blood was still pumping, though very sluggishly now, sporadically; overhead the gulls wheeled and cried their excitement, like vultures waiting for the last spark to flicker low and expire; out at sea a cow and her calf stood off and spouted, and

it seemed to me that over and above my own pain I could feel something of theirs, too.

. . . Until, like ice-water down my back, there dawned the realization that *I could actually feel it*, and finally I knew that I was compensating for Andrew's loss . . .

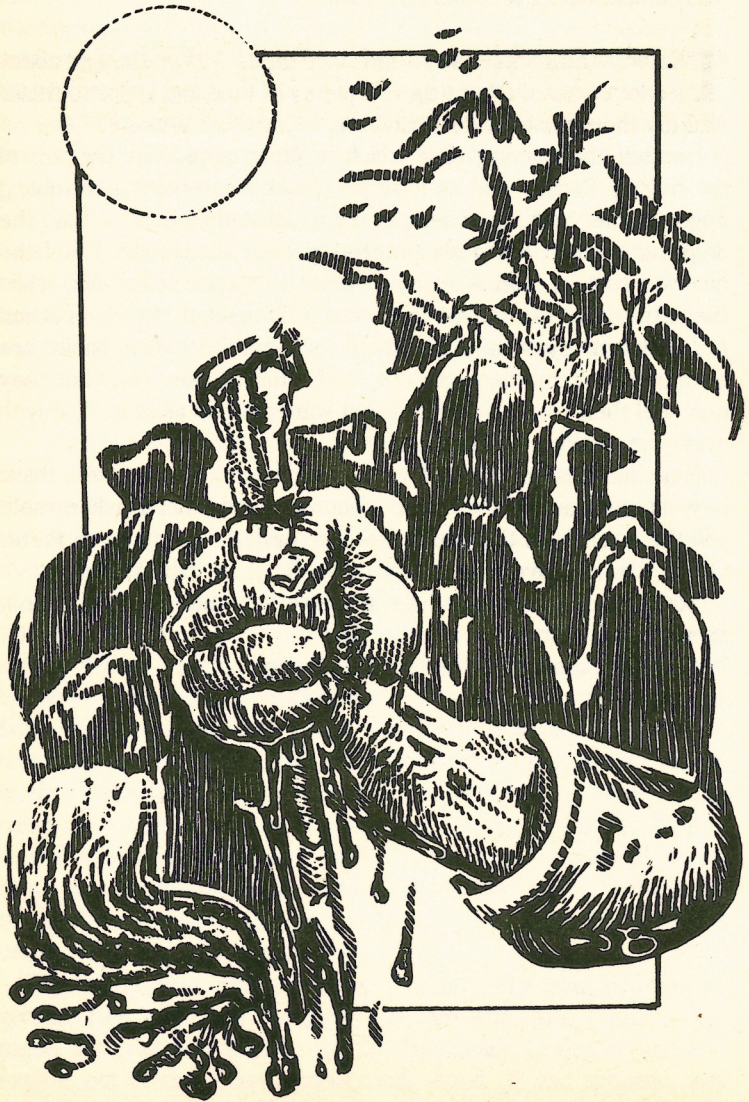
That was three months ago and since then . . . I've thought about it a lot up here, where there's plenty of time and space to think. And my thoughts have been diverse.

I watch the curving reef which is Japan appear at the rim of the mighty Pacific, and as it slides closer I can point a trembling finger at the very bay where in these same moments of time the dolphins are *still* being slaughtered in their thousands. I feel the outward rush of human agony as bombs explode in Zambia, while the African Continent slips by so distantly beneath my observation ports that my eyes see nothing but its beauty. A million babies are born and their mothers cry out, and a million men die—but they only feel their own pain while I feel something of all of it. And with every revolution I feel more.

Nine months to go, and Saturn is waiting for me out there beyond the pain of the world. But now and then I ask myself: will the wash from the world one day reach out to me even there. Or will I have moved on, outwards to the stars, before then?

Sometimes I wonder: are there other men or beings out there, in the stars?

. . . And sometimes I pray there are not . . .





VAMPIRE SESTINA

Neil Gaiman

I wait here at the boundaries of dream,
I all shadow-wrapped. The dark air tastes of night,
so cold and crisp, and I wait for my love.
The moon has bleached the colour from her stone.
She'll come, and then we'll stalk this petty world
alive to darkness and the tang of blood.

It is a lonely game, the quest for blood,
but still, a body's got the right to dream
and I'd not give it up for all the world.
The moon has leached the darkness from the night.
I stand in shadows, staring at her stone:
Undead, my lover . . . O, undead my love?

I dreamt you while I slept today and love
meant more to me than life—meant more than blood!
The sunlight sought me, deep beneath my stone,
more dead than any corpse but still a-dream
until I woke as vapour into night
and sunset forced me out into the world.

For many centuries I've walked the world
dispensing something that resembled love—
a stolen kiss, then back into the night
contented by the life and by the blood.
And come the morning I was just a dream,
cold body chilling underneath a stone.

I said I would not hurt you. Am I stone
to leave you prey to time and to the world?
I offered you a truth beyond your dreams
while all *you* had to offer was your love.
I told you not to worry, and that blood
tastes sweeter on the wing and late at night.

Sometimes my lovers rise to walk the night . . .
Sometimes they lie, a corpse beneath a stone,
and never know the joys of bed and blood
of walking through the shadows of the world;
instead they rot to maggots. O my love
they whispered you had risen, in my dream.

I've waited by your stone for half the night
but you won't leave your dream to hunt for blood.
Goodnight, my love. I offered you the world.



STEPPING OUT

Will Johnson

(We are often accused of not publishing enough fantasy in Fantasy Tales (see this issue's The Cauldron), so we are pleased to present the debut of Will Johnson in these pages with Stepping Out, an adroit insight into demon morality . . .)

The demon Meztadik leaned solemnly against a jagged pillar of grey stone, at home in the gloomy, mephitic realm that he alone occupied. His scaly reptilian sinews were tense, his lidless yellow eyes unfocused, long jaded to the familiar sights before them.

Restlessly he stood and left the ruins of his ancestors, staring at the parched earth and billowing, purple void beyond. In this sombre, weatherless setting only the size of his domain changed. At times he could walk for days without stopping, the cloudlike horizon drifting farther and farther away as he approached. But on other occasions, as this, he could almost reach out and brush the void with the tips of his fingers, so close and tangible was it, and he could travel no farther than the small, waterless moat encircling his lair. Boundaries were a problem for Meztadik. Clearly defined yet always shifting, they dominated him.

While bending over and picking up a black pebble he was summoned.

The force of the spell thrust him violently through a succession of mazelike dimensions and eldritch spheres before hurtling him onto a cold stone floor. The brief journey left him dazed and nauseous.

Awareness returning, his nostrils flared at the unbroken diagrams of blue and yellow chalk that contained him; he knew their meaning all too well. A pungent cloud of incense hovered lethargically about him. Peering through its gauzy fabric Meztadik snarled fiercely, recognizing his captor. It was Sardos.

The sorcerer sat in an ornately carved wooden chair, calmly stroking the raven hair of a naked beauty who knelt silently beside him. The girl shook visibly as she stared at the demon and Sardos, amused, mockingly attempted to console her.

"My dear," he began theatrically, "I would like you to meet a very old and highly cherished friend of mine, a most loyal and obedient servant, the good demon Meztadik."

Hearing this the girl shook more intensely than before.

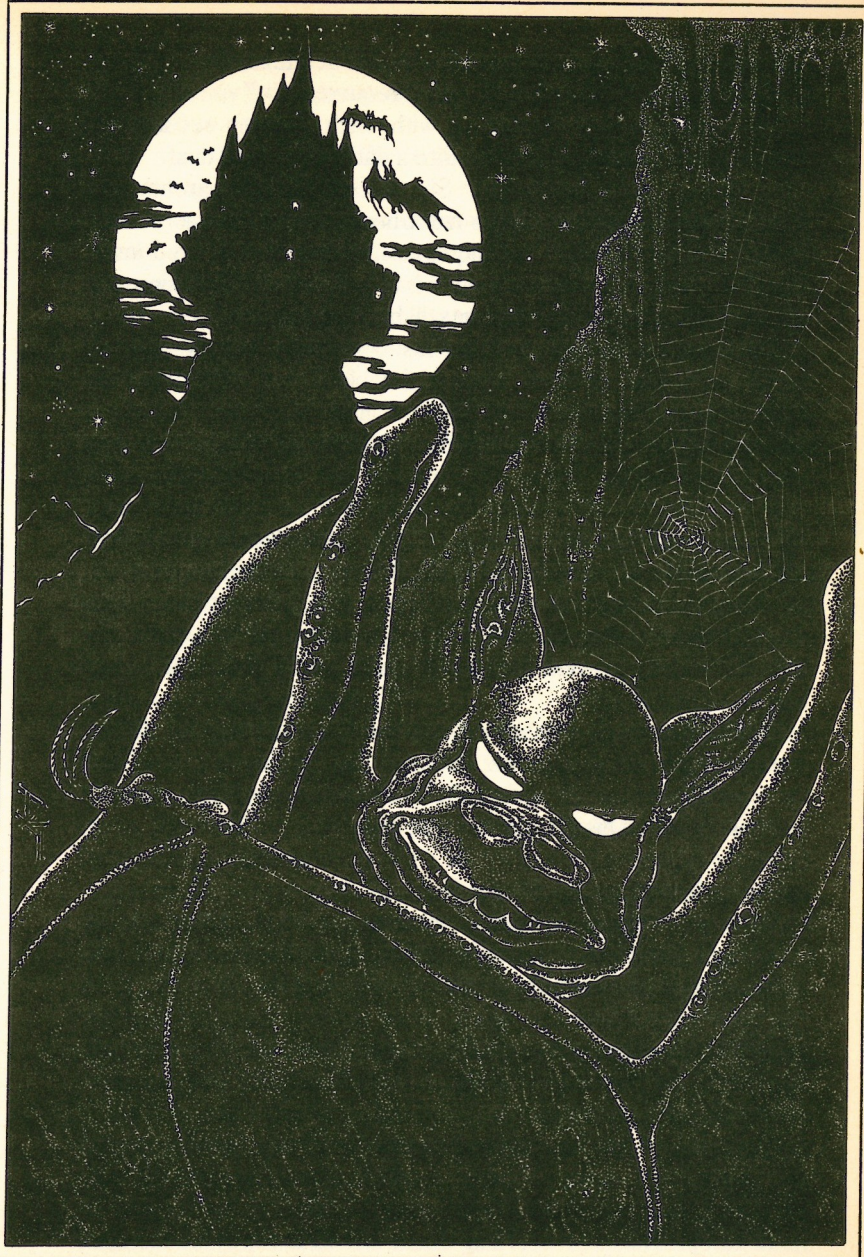
Her reaction puzzled Meztadik, as did human behaviour in general. Though he had dealt with their kind for centuries, he had never met a human whose concerns weren't petty and annoying. Blindly, they blundered from one experience to another, seldom attempting to see anything beyond the bland tapestry of their lives, having less purpose than himself. And yet it was they who controlled him, this insignificant, stupid species who sometimes had access to a power out-weighting his own.

"Firstly," said Sardos, pacing the floor with his head tilted down in a meditative pose, "we'll need a nice, warm fire to take the chill from this cold, damp night."

One blazed to magical life in the room's great hearth. The girl stared at its dancing flames in awe, her fear forgotten, but Sardos didn't so much as turn his head to acknowledge the miracle; this was one task he could have performed as easily himself.

"Secondly," continued the sorcerer, "a feast. And don't skimp on the details, Meztadik."

Anger rising from his bowels, the demon complied. Suddenly the table before the fire was exquisitely set, and on it was cast a sumptuous array of meats and cheeses, nuts and wines, chocolates and fruits, such that no earthly produce could attempt to rival.



Restlessly he stood and left the ruins of his ancestors. (Artist: Dallas Goffin)

As the couple sat to dine Sardos gazed at Meztadik with dead, lustreless eyes. "There is yet a third request. . . ."

The demon's rage increased with each passing second. He squeezed the pebble in his hand into a dark, scintillate dust.

"A girl. A very pretty girl. She lives with her parents in a small cottage about two miles from here on the road to Nibet." Sardos paused, his face an iniquitous portrait of depraved lusts. "You'll know her by her spun gold hair and ivory complexion, the sweet, tender blossoms that are still budding breasts."

The sorcerer turned to face his companion as she gnawed ferally on a joint of beef, ripping the blood red meat from the bone in large chunks and oblivious to all but the banquet laid out before her. "You see, Meztadik, fire and wine aren't the only heat we require tonight."

Temporarily free of Sardos' tight grip, Meztadik slumped before a cumulus of odd-angled bones. Mother, father, grandfather, all were here, their remains intertwined like different pieces of a single, bizarre sculpture. It would be finished when Meztadik, the last of his kind, crawled to the top of the pile. For now it served him as a place to think.

Futility had wrapped itself around him like a shroud. He did not want to serve as a pawn for madmen like Sardos but could find no way to break their malefic hold. Was there a way? The question had been stale on his grandfather's breath, thought Meztadik, could he really expect to answer it? Or did it even matter, he wondered cynically, knowing full well that it did.

Still, one item gave him a glimmer of hope. Long ago he had heard his parents speak of demons similar to himself who were beyond sorcerous control. These, considered a threat by the men who would use them, were seldom summoned. They probably possessed some special power which made them partially immune to the workings of magic, mused Meztadik. Even so, their existence comforted him.

Wearying of his thoughts, he stretched out on the ground and cupped his hands to make a pillow. Soon, he told himself, he would escape from the tainted game of sorcery, but for now he must sleep. The chorus of his words halted abruptly as his eyes became glazed and blank.

“Bring her back.” The unwelcome voice was Sardos’. It called faintly from across some vast chasm Meztadik had not yet managed to cross.

“I want her now!” The voice surged into a colossal wave, demanding and persistent.

A moment before the demon had been dreaming. In his dream he had plunged through pocket after pocket of inimical alien space. Wakefulness, or a spurious semblance of it, had come rudely when he struck the cold, unyielding floor of Sardos’ cellar.

“Damn you,” hissed the disembodied voice, “you’d better do as I say!”

A pair of bracketed torches dimly illuminated the dank room. From their dull light Meztadik at last made out the shadowlike form of the sorcerer. He stood on the far side of a crude altar about ten feet away; only the pallid hands and face were visible, the rest swallowed by a massive crimson robe.

Sardos chuckled sardonically, hostility evident behind his tight drawn lips. “Are you blind, Meztadik? Must I point her out for you?” He gestured emphatically to indicate a limp figure sprawled on top of the altar. “Then look here, if your feeble eyes have not failed you entirely!”

The demon lowered his head and saw the badly mutilated body of the young girl he had kidnapped the night before. Though severely battered and bruised, her sun-tinted hair had been brushed to sickening perfection, offering a lurid contrast to the pulpy flesh.

Meztadik shuddered. He had to do something, but what? It was all too obvious that whatever sanity the sorcerer had possessed had been traded for more madness. He looked down at the binding lines of chalk; there were no breaks in the ancient designs.

As if reading his thoughts, Sardos laughed loudly. “Going somewhere, Meztadik? No, I didn’t think so,” he giped. “At least not until I dismiss you. In the meantime do your magic and stop annoying me. I have no patience at present to indulge your obstreperous behaviour.”

Regardless of the consequences, the demon swore to himself not to revive the dead girl. He sympathised with her

fully despite his inborn hatred of human beings. After all, they had both suffered abuse from Sardos, and he would probably be dead as well were it not for his usefulness to the sorcerer and the limitations of the other's power.

For an instant panic almost mastered him as he realised that he must act quickly. What could he do? He felt impotent, the butt of a cosmic joke. Suddenly, without pausing to consider the outcome of his action, he pushed an arm toward the unseen wall that had always restrained him and reached tentatively beyond it. . . .

Whatever horror he might have anticipated didn't happen. Nothing happened. He opened and closed his outstretched hand several times in disbelief, testily clutching the empty air. Again, nothing. Had fear alone stood vigil beside his tiny cage all these years? Cautiously, he stepped out of it, smearing the garish chalk accidentally with the heel of his right foot in passing.

Dying cells prickled with new life as he stood outside his prison for the first time. Excitement, the current of a swiftly flowing river, coursed through him, flooding him. He had acted wilfully, breaking a pattern of obsequiousness generations old, and his reward was freedom!

The significance of the event was not lost on Sardos. "Get back, Meztadik. I-I have potions," he stammered, but the words were no more convincing to himself than to the approaching demon.

As he neared Sardos, Meztadik considered torturing him, making him scream and plead for death as he had no doubt forced the girl to do. Instead he broke the sorcerer's neck with a quick snap, deriving no pleasure from the deed, and set his remains on fire with a muttered incantation. The magician crumbled and burned like old parchment, leaving behind a trail of dry ash.

With Sardos out of his way the demon contemplated what to do next. Although he had stepped beyond the chalk barrier and slain the sorcerer, he did not know the extent of his freedom. Could more potent spells continue to bind him? Had he, a slave, simply earned a longer leash? The thought depressed him, angered him. Impulsively he walked up to a dusty cabinet and slammed his fist into it.

Books thudded heavily. Scrolls spiraled off their shelves, rolled across the rough-hewn floor. Phials containing coloured

powders clattered noisily, some toppling over, spilling their contents and breaking into a thousand tiny shards. Meztadik gazed at the slivers of glass intently while trying to formulate a plan. Something resembling a smile creased his face when one came to him.

He leafed anxiously through several grimoires, eyes riveted to the strange runes, until he found a mouldering tome with characters he recognized. These were written in the language of his race and Meztadik had learned them as a child, his father repeating the many laws and glamours he was required to memorize while pointing to the large menhirs on which they were carved. Carefully, so as not to damage it, he set the book aside.

Again he rummaged through the decaying manuscripts, searching frantically for the volume he needed. It had to be there! The demon exhaled sharply when he clasped the dictionary that would enable him to translate several obscure languages into his own. A thick sheaf of ragged paper, it was his only key to the arcane texts stored in Sardos' library.

Although he loathed black sorcery, Meztadik was prepared to devote himself to its study. Using the dark art he would call more demons from their hellish pits and unite them into an unbeatable army. Together they would crush their common foe, the men who had enslaved and exploited them. The plan thrilled Meztadik, and its irony pleased him. He had a single obligation to fulfill before implementing it.

The girl settled gently onto the dais of bones, creating a niche for herself as she sank, and the demon thought how much she belonged here, on this desolate tract bordering oblivion, nestled in with the skeletal remains of his family. Though a stranger, her senseless death had somehow incited him to revolt, and his eyes glistened slightly as he touched her ruined cheek.

Without warning, something wet and foreign splattered against his arm and neck. Unprecedented in this grim place, rain had begun to fall.



Fantasy (phantasy, *n.*, & *v.t.* 1. *n.*) image-inventing faculty, esp. when extravagant or visionary; mental image, day-dream; fantastic invention or composition, fantasia; whimsical speculation. (2. *v.t.*) imagine in visionary manner. (ME, f OF *fantasie* f. L f. Gk *phantasia* appearance).

This is how *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word “fantasy”. As you will discover from some of the letters that follow, our first issue of the “new-look” *Fantasy Tales* met with a mixed response. One of your most recurrent criticisms was that you thought the title was misleading, so we’ve decided that it’s time for a brief policy statement. As far as we are concerned, fantasy includes all types of imaginative fiction, from the quests of J.R.R. Tolkein to the other-world terrors of H.P. Lovecraft; from the mighty-thewed barbarians of Robert E. Howard to the psychological nightmares of Ramsey Campbell.

Our aim with *Fantasy Tales* is to present you with a varied, exciting, and well-crafted selection of some of the best fantastic stories being written today, from authors both old and new. We can’t please everybody, we know, but we hope you find the range of fiction stimulating. That’s why in this issue you’ll discover tales of heroic fantasy, psychological chills, science fiction, arcane sorcery and traditional terror—a mixed bag, we think you’ll agree.



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We have also had a number of comments about the look of the new-style magazine. We trust you've noticed the improvements with this number and ask you to bear with us—we are still experimenting with the design in each issue.

Last October, our hardcover anthology was launched at London's Forbidden Planet bookstore. *The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales* showcases twenty of the best stories and artwork from the magazine's ten years as a small press publication, and during this mammoth autograph session, sixteen of the writer and artist contributors could be found furiously signing numerous copies of the book. We editors were in attendance too, at the somewhat cramped, but fun, three-hour event. Lucky purchasers of the anthology obtained signatures by such writers as Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Charles L. Grant, Brian Lumley and Steve Rasnic Tem and illustrators Chris Achilleos, Andrew Smith, Randy Broecker and Dave Carson, amongst others. (*The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales* is still available, price £11.95 plus £1.50 postage, from Robinson Publishing, 11 Shepherd House, Shepherd Street, London W1Y 7LD, UK, or—as they say in the ads—from all good bookshops).

The above-mentioned autograph party also marked the official opening of the World Fantasy Convention, held for the first time in Britain. Over four days at the Hallowe'en weekend last October, more than six hundred devotees of dark fantasy, sword & sorcery and science fiction congregated at the Ramada Inn, West London, to meet writers, artists and publishers and enjoy a varied programme of talks, panel discussions, movies, readings, sample the delights of the extensive book dealers room and the stunning art show, and hear the guest of honour, best-selling author James Herbert, who was attending his first-ever convention.

It proved to be a fantastic weekend, during which several publishers launched a number of major new fantasy titles including, of course, Robinson's *Fantasy Tales* magazine and anthology. Readers of *FT* will be interested in *Gaslight & Ghosts*, the hardcover convention book edited by Stephen Jones and Jo Fletcher. The 270-page volume includes stories and articles by Clive Barker, James Herbert, Brian Aldiss, Charles L. Grant, Robert Holdstock, Brian Lumley, Terry Pratchett and Karl Edward Wagner, amongst others, as well as a selection of black and

white and colour artwork. Copies of this limited edition are still available for £9.95 (post free) from 130 Park View, Wembley, Middx HA9 6JU, UK. Make cheques out to "The 1988 World Fantasy Convention".

Fantasy Tales had the honour of being nominated for *both* the annual British Fantasy Award and World Fantasy Award at last year's convention. Having been nominees and winners in previous years, we would like to mention and congratulate winners Carl Ford, editor of *Dagon*, for winning the BFA in the Best Small Press category, and Robert and Nancy Garcia for *American Fantasy* and David B. Silva for *The Horror Show*, who tied in the Special Award—Non-professional category of the WFA. Like many such publications, the skill, talent, professionalism and hard work put into small press magazines is often overlooked by readers and the publishing world at large.

Finally, before we get on to your letters of comment, we'd like to congratulate one of the world's finest genre writers and *Fantasy Tales* contributor, Dennis Etchison. Wedding bells chimed in London on 12 November for Californians Dennis and Kristina Anderson. Writer Karl Edward Wagner was on hand to play Best Man and a convenient stretch limo parked outside the imposing marble halls of the register office provided a bizarre photographic moment. Your ubiquitous editors will fondly remember the small reception that followed, although mostly through an alcoholic haze!

WHERE'S THE LOGO?

Regular Fantasy Tales author Brian Lumley writes from Brixham, in Devon: "So what happened? Here's Steve Jones and Dave Sutton been doing *FT* for—oh, a couple of centuries now—and never once cocked-up. As a "fan" magazine it was tops, the best, a multiple award winner. Just about everybody who was anybody had stories at one time or another in *FT*. Likewise for artists. Covers by Fabian, interiors by Carson, to name just two giants. And not only the magazine won awards but many contributors too. The logo was known and loved, interior layout was a labour of love, contents page and headings were—redolent?—of one of the greatest pulp magazines of yesteryear, *Weird Tales* itself.

Then . . . What happened?

You went pro.

So we expected *FT* much as it had been, but with good distribution, availability in all the shops, perhaps a price-hike but worth it for "professional" quality. That's what we *expected*. Sadly, we didn't get it.

At first glance the magazine is very nice . . . but after looking at the title a while you ask yourself: "Where's the logo? Is that the logo? And the same goes for the headings to the stories. I mean, nothing wrong with the cover artwork (who would complain about a cover by Chris Achilleos?) and many of the interiors are top-notch (take the Pitts on page 65, for example), but where's the layout? Who dreamed up these awful boxed headings? What are these gloomy "grey" adverts at the beginning and end of the magazine?

I won't prolong this: I scratched my head, got out a copy of the old magazine, compared the two. What you have done right is to justify the print. I like it when the lines all end at the same place. What you have done wrong is . . . almost everything else! The old copy I looked at was for Winter 1985. The difference is enormous! The *size* was right! Twin columns of print to a page was right. Nothing was grey; everything was stark, sharp, black and white. It had been put together thoughtfully, with tender loving care and an eye to making an impact on the reader. The headings were . . . beautiful! Someone had *edited* this thing!

Let me make a few suggestions: bring back the old-style headings at leasts (even if we can't have double columns on pages as narrow as this), and get someone to start editing it again. Do these things, and I for one will buy it. And I guess there's more than a few more like me out there . . ."

MOST IMPRESSED

Sue Beasley, from Cleethorpes, South Humberside, is one of our many new readers: "No. 1 is the first *Fantasy Tales* I have seen and I really am most impressed. Further more it is the first short story magazine I have managed to read from cover to cover. This is a greater compliment than you know. I almost exclusively read High Fantasy and to date have never found a magazine to match the quality of books. *FT* is it! The only niggle is that the title suggests more fantasy than horror. Even the front cover is an excellent interpretation of *Lord of the Rings*."

I was going to tell you I liked the fantasy stories on principal but

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C. Bruce Hunter's yarn, *The Farmer and the Travelling Salesman's Daughter* lingers in the mind like a Revelation. I fully expected Sandy to be dead in her bed. Though it baffled me as to why she was travelling with her father in the first place.

Second I must pick *The Thievery of Yish*. I have not read Lin Carter before and I thought this tale was well told. It is a pity there can be no more such gems.

I enjoyed *Vampire Village* for the twist. Vampire stories are definitely not my style but I will make an exception for this one. It did not surprise me to find Sabat belongs to a series. It is obvious that with the ease he moves through the story, Guy N. Smith has a good knowledge of this character. Darrell Schweitzer's *A Vision of Rembathne* was interesting, though I would have preferred it without the story-teller introduction.

The appeal of the tales I have mentioned is in their unexpected endings. To lead a reader in one direction and turn at the end so it does not become disjointed is an admirable quality of any writer. *FT* has picked the cream."

NOT ENOUGH FANTASY?

Stephen Cunningham, from Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, is another new reader, who takes us to task: "This is the first time that I have ever read your magazine and it will not be the last. The first sentence in this letter may have thrown you a little, for I could find little that I truly liked.

My first complaint is about the title of the magazine: *Fantasy Tales*. I'm afraid that, try as I might, I could only find two stories that I would call "fantasy tales". I do not object to a few horror stories in the magazine, but I am afraid that here they are in the majority.

To get down to the actual stories themselves, one stood head and shoulders above the rest and that was Darrell Schweitzer's *A Vision of Rembathne*. Fantasy, in the classic mould, it was a good, exciting read. It had a good storyline, adequate characterisation and a nice twist at the end. I would like to see more by this writer.

Something else that I look for in a short story is invention. It is too easy to re-hash old stories. I am afraid that Lin Carter's story of Yish falls into the the category stamped "total lack of innovation". This story has been told a thousand times.

In Chris Morgan's *Touching* however, you can see how inventiveness enhances a story. It has a freshness about it because Morgan views his subject from a strange angle. We watch a woman's guilty complex get the better of her—from the inside. The idea of the attractiveness and importance of hands is a central theme. This may seem a little over the top, but I think that it is meant to show that the woman in the story was a little unbalanced from the very start. This was a very strong second.

Dave Riley's *Writer's Cramp* gets the vote for third place over C. Bruce Hunter's *The Farmer and the Travelling Salesman's Daughter* simply because it was more frightening.

If there was some kind of message in Charles L. Grant's story I failed to see it, and found the whole thing very, very boring. J.N. Williamson's story is centered on a nice idea and it was worth reading, but the appeal of such an actionless tale is very limited.

Which leaves me with Guy N. Smith. I personally think that Mr. Smith has all the literary talent of a hack tabloid journalist. He has introduced me to some of the shallowest characters that I have ever had the misfortune to meet."

CONGRATS AND BRICKBATS

Brian Mooney from Dover, Kent, also has mixed feelings about our "new look": "It's congratulations and (soft) brickbats time.

Firstly, it's great to see that *Fantasy Tales* has become so highly regarded that a professional publishing house is willing to take it and that the print-run will bring the magazine to a far wider audience. Just don't ever relinquish editorial control, Steve and Dave.

Nice cover again, good internal illustrations. I was showing the magazine to a colleague at work (a potential new buyer) and as I had previously praised Jim Pitts' work to her I went to find an example. At this point I had only just taken *FT* out of its envelope and I wrongly identified two other illos as Jim's work (pages 39 and 55) before checking the artists' names. Perhaps I should apologise to Allen Koszowski and Martin McKenna, but I think I've paid them both a compliment.

No truly special stories this time, although I very much liked Charles L. Grant's *Now and Again in Summer*—nice subtle horror, the way it should be. Dave Riley ran a close second.

Now for the adverse comments. I think that in its new format, *FT* has lost a great deal of its charm. I missed the little filler illos you formerly used and *The Cauldron* didn't look quite the same without the mob-capped maiden at the top. I particularly regret the passing of your old title logo. A casual passer-by, glancing out of the corner of his eye, could be forgiven for thinking that this new magazine was simply called *Fantasy* (you must admit that the word *Tales* is a bit on the small side!) Surely it would not have been difficult for the new publisher to use the time-honoured title?

But whatever, good luck, power to your elbows and great success for the magazine."

LIKED NEW FORMAT

Author Allen Ashley writes from Bow, London: "I really liked the new format—and cheap too!

Best stories? Well, despite a dodgy opening paragraph, I'd go for Chris Morgan's *Touching*—very horribly done. Second place goes to David Riley's *Writer's Cramp*, there were occasionally too many in-jokes, but I was keen to keep reading. Third place is more difficult. I'd probably have to say C. Bruce Hunter's *The Travelling Salesman and the Farmer's Daughter*. Of the others, all were reasonably told. *A Vision of Rembathne* wasn't my flagon of cider, I'm afraid. I liked what J.N. Williamson was attempting in *Fancy That*, but felt he didn't quite pull it off.

The artwork was nicely varied, and Russ Nicholson's illustration was my favourite for its depth and complexity."

YOUR FAVOURITE STORY

Despite a number of complaints about "too much horror" in our first issue, according to your letters Chris Morgan's *Touching* and C. Bruce Hunter's *The Travelling Salesman and the Farmer's Daughter* tied for first place, with David Riley's *Writer's Cramp* coming a close third. Please remember to keep those letters of comment flowing in along with a list of your three favourite stories in this issue.

COVER ARTIST—LES EDWARDS

Les Edwards was born in Walthamstow, part of London's East End, in 1949. He was drawing long before he went to school, and as a teenager in the early 1960s he developed his skills by sketching



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images recalled from films like *Conquest of Space* and Saturday morning serials. It was also around this time that he discovered comics, particularly *Eagle*, and was immediately captivated by Frank Bellamy's strip *Heros of Spartan*, about the adventures of a Roman soldier. "I didn't realise it at the time," he laughs, "but that was probably my first introduction to the sword & sorcery genre."

To his "everlasting regret" he studied graphic design at Hornsey College of Art because it included an illustration course. However, he soon tired of trying to please other people, particularly when his tutors actively "discouraged" his interest in science fiction subjects. "I probably came out knowing less than when I went in!" complains Les.

Upon leaving college he knew nothing about the world of SF fandom but was lucky enough to meet John Spencer who was then setting up an agency called Young Artists. "My first commission was a painting of a lizard crawling out of a skull," he recalls. "It appeared on a book called *The Satanic Omnibus* and was later re-used on the paperback edition of Ramsey Campbell's *Demons By Daylight*." Since then he has contributed the covers to numerous books and magazines, his personal favourites including his jacket for *Chiller* and an unused painting for *The Amulet*.

These days Les' artwork is just as likely to grace magazine advertisements or film posters for *Hawk the Slayer* and John Carpenter's *The Thing*. Some years ago he travelled to Canada for a week to work on the horror film *Incubus*. "It was not a happy experience," he recalls. "They asked me to design the monster, but the director wasn't really interested in my ideas. What they really wanted was something that looked like a book jacket cover I'd done called *The Ghoul*."

Les believes that if he was just starting out now as an artist he would be unlikely to succeed: "The standard is so much higher. There's an awful lot of competition out there these days, and it's getting worse." His own favourite artists include contemporaries Jim Burns, Tony Roberts and Terry Oakes (who he describes as "the best horror artist around").

He admits that he has always wanted to paint horror and SF and is not unduly worried about being 'typed' in one particular genre. "I feel it's my spiritual home," explains Les. "I enjoy reading horror fiction, although there's so muck rubbish being published today. I

enjoy newer writers such as Stephen Gallagher, Stephen Laws and, of course, Clive Barker who I don't even consider being in the same field, he's so far ahead of everyone else."

This year Games Workshop will publish the first, and long overdue, collection of Les Edwards' artwork in book form, entitled *Blood and Iron*. "There's no great statement in my paintings," he confides, "I just want people to enjoy them. If they can make someone stop short and take a closer look, then it's a success;" adding with disarming modesty, "You know, I'm still surprised to discover there are *fans* of my stuff out there . . ."

1989 FANTASY CALENDAR

- May 26-29:** MEXICON III. Focuses on science fiction as a written form. Albany Hotel, Nottingham, UK. £15 attending. Write to: Greg Pickersgill, 7a Lawrence Road, South Ealing, London W5 4XJ.
- Jun 16-18:** ICONOCLASM. Griffin Hotel, Leeds, UK. GoH: Diane Duane, Peter Morwood. £11 attending; £6 supporting. Write to: 16 Aviary Place, Leeds LS12 2NP.
- Aug 9-15:** TYNESIDE INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION FESTIVAL. Write to: 30 Wilkinson Court, Jarrow, NE32 3NQ, UK.
- Aug 11-13:** NICON. Queen's University of Belfast. GoH: Terry Pratchett, Iain Banks. £6 attending; £2 supporting. Write to: 106 Somerton Road, Belfast, BT15 4DG, Northern Ireland.
- Aug 26-27:** HONEY COMB. Dr. Who convention. Wiltshire Hotel, Swindon. £20 attending. Write to: 48 Gurney Drive, London N2 ODE, UK.
- Aug 31-Sep 3:** NOREASCON 3. The 47th World Science Fiction Convention. Sheraton Hotel, Boston, USA. GoH: Ian & Betty Bellantine, Andre Norton. \$80 attending; \$20 supporting. Write to: Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT Branch P.O., Cambridge, MA 02139, USA.

- Sept 7-10:** FRENCH NATIONAL SF CON. Albert Camus Cultural Space, Toulon, France. Write to: Editions Antares, La Malagi, Chemin Calabro, 83160 La Valette-di-Var, France.
- Oct 6-8:** FANTASYCON XIV. Midland Hotel, Birmingham. Details from 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DE, UK.
- Oct 27-29:** WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION 1989. Seattle, Sheraton Hotel & Towers, Seattle, Washington, USA. Honoured Guests: Ursula K. LeGuin, S.P. Somtow, Robert R. McCammon. Toastmaster: Ginjer Buchanan. Membership: \$70 attending (until May 1); \$30 supporting. Details: World Fantasy Convention 1989, P.O. Box 31815, Seattle, WA 98103-1815, USA.

Please remember to enclose a stamped addressed envelope (or two International Reply Coupons from the Post Office) when writing for details about any of the above events.

FUTURE FANTASY

by Mike Ashley

In this column I shall preview forthcoming fantasy and horror books due between now and the next issue of *Fantasy Tales*. Publication dates given may be subject to change. I've used the following abbreviations: hdb for hardback, pdb for paperback and tp for trade paperback.

TOP TIPS

In the fantasy field there are two particular titles I'm keen to see, both are scheduled for April. *The Fortress of the Pearl* (Gollancz hb) is Michael Moorcock's first new Elric novel in quite some years and it's good to see he hasn't completely deserted the field. *The Story of the Stone* (Bantam Press hb) is Barry Hughart's sequel to his brilliant award-winning *Bridge of Birds* which is set in an ancient China that never was and has a wry vein of humour throughout.

If humour is your medicine then you'll need little prompting to take a further dose of Discworld with Terry Pratchett's *Pyramids* (Gollancz hb, May), number seven in the series (Number five, *Sourcery* will also be out in hb from Corgi in June.)

I regarded *Seventh Son* by Orson Scott Card as the best fantasy of 1987. It's being reprinted in pb in June to tie-in with the publication of its sequel, *Red Prophet* (Legend hb) and these magical novels of pioneering America should be required reading.

Runners-up, in my view, as the best fantasies of 1987 were *On Stranger Tides* by Tim Powers and *Land of Dreams* by James Blaylock and both of these will be available in pb in May from Grafton. In hb from Grafton in June comes the first volume in David Eddings' major new Elenium series, *The Diamond Throne*. If you're still trying to keep track of his Mallorean series the third volume, *Demon Lord of Karanda* will be reprinted in tp by Bantam Press in May.

Finally amongst the fantasy headliners, August is Jonathan Carroll month at Legend. Carroll is a one-of-a-kind writer and his new novel *A Child Across the Sky* will be issued in simultaneous hb and tp whilst *Sleeping in Flame*, *Bones of the Moon* and *Land of Laughs* will be reissued in pb.

The horror list is shorter but the main titles pack a punch. April brings Dean R. Koontz's new novel *Midnight* (Headline hb) where terror stalks a coastal town. Here Koontz pulls no punches: "If you don't walk away from some of these scenes with your stomach churning and the hair up on the back of your neck, you need serious psychiatric help," he recently said. The other blockbuster is *The Art* (Collins hc, August) Clive Barker's new leviathan of a novel which he describes as "a big fantasy set in Hollywood about sex, Armageddon and the movies." Watch out too for *Earthbound* by Richard Matheson (Robinson hb, May) which originally appeared under a pseudonym in the US.

KEEPING UP WITH THE SEQUELS

I've already mentioned a number of series which are especially prevalent in the fantasy field so here are a few more to keep track of.

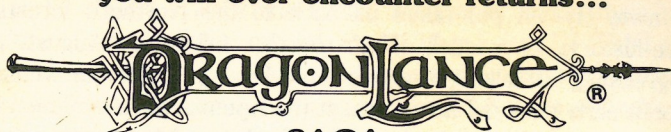
Louise Cooper's ambitious eight-volume Indigo series sees volume 3, *Infanta* in April, and volume 4, *Nocturne* in July, both from Unwin Hyman. *Dawnspell* (Grafton hc/tp, April) is the conclusion of Katharine Kerr's Deverry trilogy. *Phoenix Fire* (Unwin Hyman pb, April) is the latest in Lyndan Darby's Eye of Time series. April also sees Book Three of Michael Scott's *Tales of the Bird* series (Sphere pb); *On the Seas of Destiny* (Headline pb) Book Three of Ru Emerson's Tales of Nedao trilogy; and *Mindbond* (Orbit pb) volume two of Nancy Springer's Sea King trilogy. *A Fall of Princes* (Pan pb, May) is Book Two of Judith Tarr's Avaryan rising series.

If you liked Jonathan Wylie's Servants of the Art trilogy you'll be interested in the follow-on trilogy The Unbalanced Earth which began with *Dreams of Stone* (Corgi pb) in January. Volume Two, *The Lightless Kingdom* follows in July. Those following David Gemmell's latest series will welcome *The Knights of Dark Renown* (Legend hc, May) and fans of Arthurian fiction will be further interested in the final volume of Stephen Lawhead's Pendragon Cycle, *Arthur* (Lion pb, September).

Just to prove that horror writers don't ignore trilogies, Brian Lumley's *Necroscope III: The Source* (Grafton pb, August) takes us to the world of the Wamphyri and the vampire lord Shaithis.

A number of new fantasy series are starting. *Glitterspike Hall* (Collins hb, Autumn) is the first of a new series from Mike Jeffries, author of the Loremasters of Elundium trilogy. *Mother of Storms*

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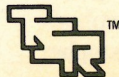
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by Adrian Cole (Unwin Hyman pb, April) is the first volume in his Star Requiem series. In May, *Reindeer People* by Megan Lindholm (Unwin Hyman pb) takes us back to the Northern forests of pre-history; its sequel, *Wolf's Brother* follows in August. And digressing, but talking of novels of pre-history, if you want a chuckle about early man and how Earnest the Apeman gave evolution that much needed boost then try *The Evolution Man* by Roy Lewis (Corgi pb, June). According to Terry Pratchett it's "one of the funniest books of the last 500,000 years."

GHOST STORIES

Fans of the traditional British ghost story are in for a treat this summer and won't have to wait for the dark winter nights. Most are from the new Equation Chillers line at Thorsons who are also issuing the books in hardcover under their newly acquired William Kimber imprint. May sees in hardcover *The Magic Mirror*, lost stories of mystery and the supernatural by Algernon Blackwood, *Stories in the Dark* a new anthology by that master archaeologist of horror Hugh Lamb and a rare treat, the reprinting of E. G. Swain's much sought after 1912 volume of Jamesian stories *The Stoneground Ghost Tales* but now retitled *Bone to His Bone*. All three volumes will be reissued in paperback in July along with the anthology of Jamesian stories *Ghosts and Scholars* edited by Richard Dalby and Rosemary Pardoe and the vampire anthology *Dracula's Brood* edited by Richard Dalby.

For modern ghost stories there is a much welcome collection of tales by Keith Roberts, *Winterwood and Other Hauntings* (Morrigan hb, July) which includes a previously unpublished novella, 'Mrs Cibber'. Also look out for *The Fifth Book of After Midnight Stories* edited by Amy Myers (Kimber hb, September).

Four excellent horror anthologies, all containing new stories (at least new when three of them first appeared in America) are *Night Fears* (headline pb, May) introduced by Clive Barker, *Masques II* (Orbit pb, June) edited by J.N. Williamson, *Prime Evil* (Corgi pb, August) edited by Douglas Winter and the home-grown *Dark Fantasies* edited by Chris Morgan (Legend hb, September). As for single author collections of horror stories try Christopher Fowler's *The Bureau of Lost Souls* (Legend hb/tp, September) or Tom Ligotti's *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (Robinson hb/tp, Aug).

Short stories haven't deserted the fantasy worlds either. New stories of the occult will be found in *Tarot Tales* (Legend hc, August) edited by Rachel Pollack and Caitlin Matthews, whilst there's a mixture of science fiction and fantasy in *Other Edens III* (Orbit pb, September) edited by Robert Holdstock and Christopher Evans. Fans of Tanith Lee should keep an eye out for *Forests of the Night* (Unwin Hyman hb, June) which will include both old and new stories. And, of course, there's Gardner Dozois' *Best New SF3* (Robinson tp, August) which always contains a mix of all genres.

ROUND-UP

If you didn't buy the bumper hardback look out for the pb edition of *The Firebrand* (Sphere, April), Marion Zimmer Bradley's wonderful re-creation of the Trojan War. Jane Yolen is another special writer and her remarkable realistic fantasy *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (Orbit pb, May) is one to watch for. I'm also a fan of Judith Tarr and her new novel, *A Wind in Cairo* in a June Bantam pb. There's also an interesting new title by Adrienne Martinne-Barnes called *The Fire Sword* (Headline pb, June) where a modern woman is cast back 800 years to a medieval England where Darkness and Light are locked in deadly combat.

As for horror, new writer Peter James has his second novel about nightmares due in June called *Dreamer* (Gollancz hb) issued at the same time as his first book, *Possession*, is out in pb from Sphere. Fans of M.R. James should note the paperback edition of *Next, After Lucifer* by Daniel Rhodes (NEL, April) whilst James Herbert's *Haunted* will also be out in pb from NEL in August.

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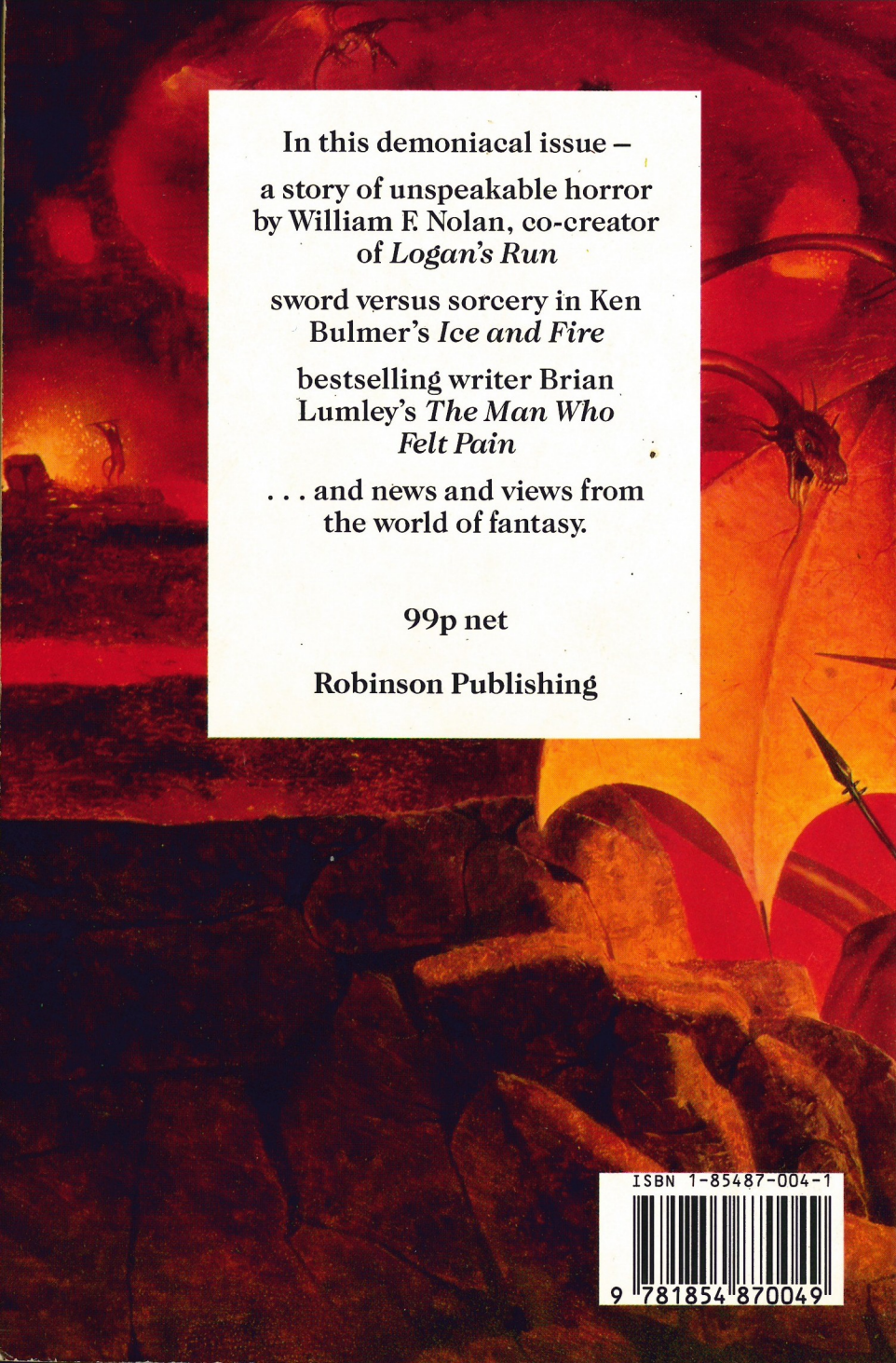
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