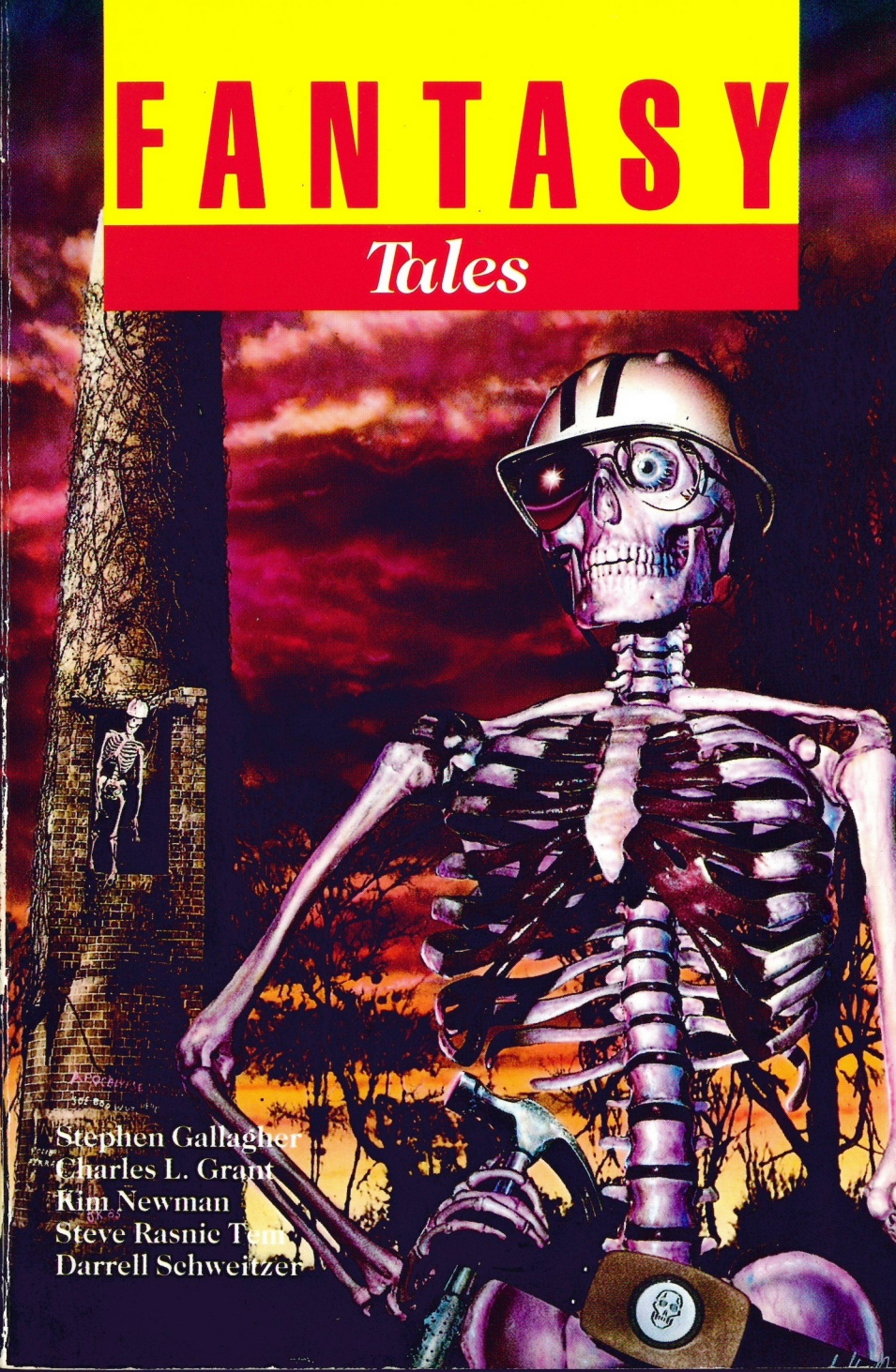


# FANTASY

## *Tales*



Stephen Gallagher  
Charles L. Grant  
Kim Newman  
Steve Rasnic Tem  
Darrell Schweitzer

In this fright-filled issue of *Fantasy Tales* you will discover:

Stephen Gallagher takes us on a subterranean journey in pursuit of treasure in his new novella *The Drain*.

The dark side of love is explored by award-winning author Charles L. Grant in the subtle terrors of *Alice Smiling*

A knight's quest leads to Hell and a confrontation with the Lord of Death in Darrell Schweitzer's magical *Into the Dark Land*

Plus fiction, verse and art by Kim Newman, Steve Rasnic Tem, C. Bruce Hunter, Don Webb, Steve Eng and Clive Barker, and *The Cauldron* featuring news and views from the world of fantasy.

# FANTASY

## *Tales*



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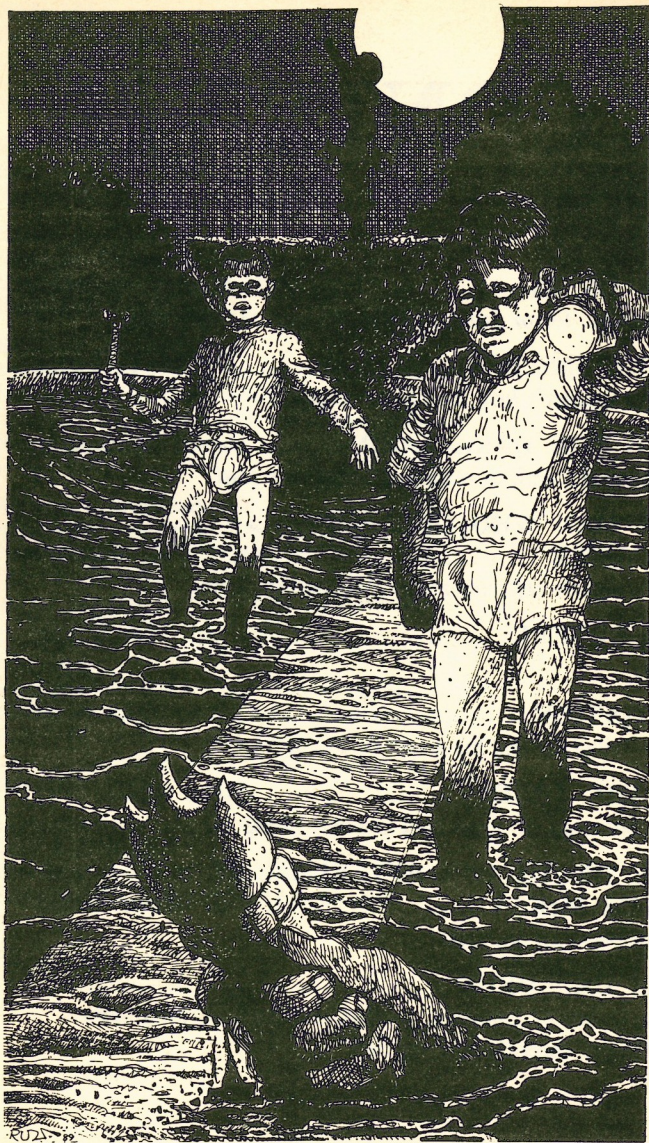
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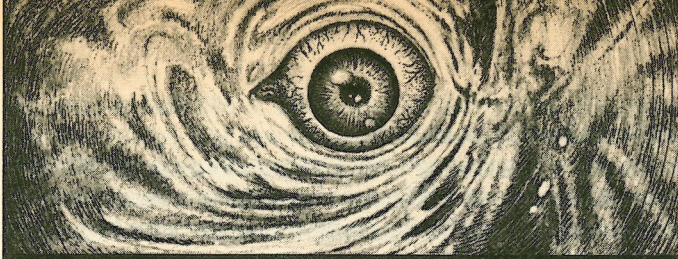
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*I'd picked it up in the beam. . . even before I'd gone half way. (Artist: Russ Nicholson)*



Stephen Gallagher

## *THE DRAIN*

*(Stephen Gallagher's career began as a researcher for Yorkshire Televisions' documentary programmes and he started writing in 1977, initially selling a number of radio scripts. He subsequently scripted two Doctor Who stories, Warrior's Gate and Terminus (1981 and 1984 respectively), and more recently also wrote Moving Targets (1988) for the BBC. Early novels include The Last Rose of Summer, Dying of Paradise, The Ice Belt and the novelisation of Saturn 3, while his popularity in the field of fantasy and terror has been reinforced by such acclaimed novels as Chimera, Valley of Lights,, Oktober and Down River. The first of that quartet will become a four-part TV movie, and the other three novels are all optioned for filming. Steve has produced numerous short stories, which have appeared in such anthologies and magazines as Ripper! , Shadows and Winter Chills. He has also written non-fiction studies on Stephen King, John Farris and Joseph Payne Brennan. This spring sees the publication of his latest novel in hardcover, Rain, and the paperback edition of Down River. Forthcoming are The Boat House and The Unforgiven. The novella that leads off this issue of FT is the first of Steve's writing to appear in the magazine. We think you'll agree it's a powerful tale of psychological terror . . .)*

Sometimes I still think about it.

I know it was a long time ago, but you don't forget a night like that; not when it shaped you a little and changed you a lot and then took someone away. It was also the scariest thing that ever happened to me, and that's how I'd like it to stay.

I'm damned sure I wouldn't want to go through anything worse.

It began, I suppose, when I met up with Spike outside the gates of the city park just after dusk. There were supposed to be three of us, me, Spike, and Michael, but Michael was late as always and so we moved down to the corner away from the road to wait for him. We felt that somebody might get suspicious if they saw us hanging around. Two dirt-poor kids with no elbows in their sweaters and the backsides worn out of their trousers; latchkey children out after dark, what could they be wanting but trouble?

Spike showed me his hammer.

"I got it out of the shed," he explained. "I'll put it back later, and no-one'll know. What about a torch?"

I showed him my father's cycle lamp. "It's nearly new," I warned him. "If I lose this, I'm dead."

That wasn't all of it. Spike had scrounged up a bottle of Cream Soda and I'd made some paste sandwiches. They were a little grey from handling and I'd skipped on refinements like butter on the bread but please, you've got to make allowances, I was eleven years old at the time. As far as anybody at home knew I'd gone to the fair, which was midway though its once-yearly stopover on some rough ground at the far end of town.

Later on I was going to be wishing that we'd all done exactly that.

Michael arrived after about another ten minutes. We could see him standing by the gates, bewildered and looking around like some abandoned thing, but then Spike gave him a whistle and he came down out of the streetlighted area to join us. He'd brought a carrier bag that hung like a bowling ball in a sling and banged against his legs as he moved.

"I had to walk it," he said morosely. "Bastard conductor wouldn't let me on the bus."

Of any of us, Michael lived the furthest out. His house was in a cramped terrace and beyond it was marshland with distant power



lines and, arched like a silver bow in the far, far distance, the motorway bridge that ran on over into the next county. On foot, it would have taken him nearly an hour to get in from there. A while ago he'd hit upon the trick of boarding the bus with no money and sitting as far away from the conductor as he could get, so that by the time he was thrown off he'd already have covered a good part of the journey. Tonight he'd obviously been remembered, but he seemed to feel that he'd somehow been cheated of a right. That was Michael all over—just enough imagination to think up the scheme, but not enough to realise that it wasn't going to work every time or forever.

We both ribbed him a little and he got hot and angry, and then we got down to business.

"First we check all the torches," Spike said and he tested his own, which was an old rubber-coated thing that looked as if it had been around since wartime, and then I did the same with the cycle lamp, and then Michael reached down into his carrier bag and brought out the biggest, ugliest-looking flashlight that I'd ever seen. It was made out of tin that had been plated to look like silver and it had three sliding buttons on the handle. These operated filters that would change the colour of the beam. Everything about it screamed *piece of junk*, but Michael showed it like it was his grandfather's watch or something.

Then he switched it on. The bulb gave off a weak, urine-coloured glow which faded to nothing in less than five seconds.

"Oh, great," Spike said sarcastically and Michael, immediately on the defensive, said "It's not my fault."

"Of course it isn't," Spike said reasonably, and then he took the flashlight from Michael's hands and lobbed it as high and as hard as he could over the park wall and into the darkness. It flew like one of those German grenades, tumbling end over end, and I heard it come down in bushes quite some way inside. Michael gawped at Spike in disbelief, and even I felt that he'd overstepped some invisible mark.

"You rotten sod!" Michael said.

And Spike said, "Shut up."

"You can come back and find that, tomorrow!"

"You'll be able to buy a hundred like it by then," Spike told him.

"And with decent batteries, as well."

Everything went quiet.

Michael wasn't exactly mollified, but stopped his protesting. I expect that the prospect of such riches was enough to distract and entrance him for a while. I have to admit, I found it pretty overwhelming myself. Spike looked at Michael, and then from Michael to me. In that moment we were as aligned in our thinking as compass needles. We were a team, we had a purpose.

In stealth, we scrambled over the low wall and entered the park.

I went back and took a look at the park again a couple of years ago. The gateway's still there, a big triple archway of sandstone in the Victorian style, but these days it doesn't seem quite so monumental as it did then. There's a carved plaque above the middle entrance to commemorate the fact that the ornamental fountains were presented by the mayor of the borough in 1857. The gates lead through onto a broad central walkway of dull red tarmac, powdered along its edges by fallen debris from the overhanging tree branches. The walkway climbs gently into the heart of the parkland.

I should imagine there's something like it in nearly every Northern industrial town; some long-ago civic gift from a factory owner or a mine boss, tamed and decorous and mostly deserted. I'd guess that this one had perhaps once been a streambed and valley that had been tidied up and transformed, the stream culverted and the contours of the land flattened out to accommodate a bowling green, a big old conservatory, an ugly playground, some red shale tennis courts, and enough rolling landscape to lose them all in. You could stand in the middle and believe you were in another country, anchored only by the sounds of traffic coming from the road as if from some near-distant amphitheatre.

Back when the park had first been laid out, it had been surrounded by a low wall topped by some elaborate cast-iron railings. But the railings had gone for the war effort leaving only faint, well-worn stumps in the stonework, and making a boundary that didn't even slow us that night. I expect Michael snagged his pants. I don't remember for sure, but it was the kind of thing that he was always doing.

And I think there was probably a moon. I remember that we were following the main walkway and that there was stuff in the asphalt that glittered like pantomime dust. Nobody was saying much at that

stage. Spike was carrying his hammer and I had the cycle lamp at the ready, but I wasn't using it. We didn't need it yet, and we didn't want to risk being seen so early in the expedition. Michael was grousing a little at the rear, but mostly under his breath.

A couple of hundred yards up the walkway, we came to the first of the ponds.

At a guess, these had been created as a system to deal with the original drainage from when the land had been open fields, or woodland, or whatever. The lower pond was the smaller of two, and it was a mess; stagnant greenish-brown water with a few branches sticking up out of it like the ribs of drowned ships. Low railings enclosed it, although there was nothing inside them to spoil. Until a short time before it had been fed by a steady trickle from a brick-lined shaft that ran under the path. Now nothing came through, and the level of the pond was dropping.

We went on by. We were heading for something bigger.

The upper pond was almost a lake, and had been the centre of some intense activity over the past few weeks. Now, as we approached it, I risked the light.

A new fence, probably the first new feature in the park for years, stood before us. It was six feet high, made of chainlink on white concrete posts, and it was topped with three parallel rolls of barbed wire. It looked like something you'd find outside a prison, or surrounding some really grim holiday camp. But what made it unusual was the line that it followed; it seemed to cut across the layout of the park with no logic or reason. It ran through flowerbeds, it took a chunk out of the walkway, it sealed off a complete side-path and then crashed onward through the woodland taking account of nothing. It was like a hasty barrier thrown up around some nuclear accident. Something drawn on a map without too much consideration, and then made real.

We followed it for a while, until a gap in the bushes on the other side gave us a view down onto the lake itself. Here Spike raised his own flashlight, and shone it all the way across to the fountain.

"It's still there," he said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

The beam almost faded to nothing over the distance. But not quite. The fountain was big and ornate, stained green and streaked with rust from the iron fittings that held the stonework together. The bowl was silted up with dead and rotting leaves and above this,

two intertwined serpents raised a cherub on their tails. The cherub held a burning torch; atop the torch, a golden flame.

It *was* gold. Even with the light from so far away, you could see.

Michael said, "How do you know for sure that it's real?"

"It's real," Spike said.

Of course it was real. It was a part of our backstreet mythology, one of those certainties that was handed down and which you never even thought to question. Like, there were king-sized rats in the cellars of the school that had once killed and eaten a caretaker. No-one had ever seen them, but everyone knew of someone who had. Or that a raid on one of the restaurants in town had once turned up the half-butchered carcass of a German Shepherd dog, and then the whole thing had been hushed-up. Or that the man who fixed old refrigerators in a wooden shack down by the railway sidings was a convicted child molester with a special taste for smooth-skinned little boys, and under his coat he carried a fisherman's gaff to hook them and drag them home. Or—well, I could go on, right down to the one about how rubbing the sleep-grains out of the corners of your eyes could make them fall out, but you get the idea. The flame on top of the big fountain in the park was made of solid gold.

And last week, for reasons that I'll tell you about in a minute, they'd drained the lake.

Spike led us on around the perimeter fence, shining his own light along where the wire and the ground met, and as I followed I could feel my heart hammering so hard that I could almost imagine it throwing a piston and blowing out a chunk of my ribs. Getting into the park after hours was no big deal, but entering this inner enclosure would be different. The park was big, it was familiar, there were at least a hundred ways out if you were chased. But on the other side of the wire you could be cornered and, try as I might, I couldn't think of any excuse or explanation that would sound convincing.

Michael, with no light of his own, had to stumble along behind us. I wasn't paying him much attention. Only a few months before, any of us could have crossed the line now marked out by the wire and walked down to the edge of the lake with no problem; but its presence now seemed to have changed the nature of the territory beyond, making it into alien country. I wasn't the only one who felt this way. There were scorched patches of ground on the far side

of the wire, small blackened arcs of a couple of feet or less where kids had reached through and set fire to the grass. Why, I don't know. The blazes must have been small, and had hardly spread. There were other things too, including a traffic cone that had been tossed over to land just inside. All that stuff, it was like, I don't know . . . tributes. As if you couldn't look upon the barrier without feeling something primitive move within you, and you were driven to respond accordingly.

"Here it is," Spike said. "The point of no return."

He'd stopped and was shining his flashlight at the section of fencing that he'd noted the day before. Where the wire met the post, it had been unhooked and peeled back to make a triangular gap of about eighteen inches. Someone of our size or smaller would just about be able to wriggle through. We didn't know who'd done it or why, but we *did* know that they hadn't made it first to the fountain and so it didn't really matter.

We gathered around the gap.

The point of no return.

I heard myself saying, "We could still call it off and go to the fair."

I was half-expecting Spike to jump in and say something scornful. He didn't speak; but Michael did.

He said, "Then we'd never be happy again."

We both looked at him, or what we could see of him in the darkness. He was like a point of stillness, surrounded by night sky and clouds. He went on, "We'd always wonder. There'll be lots of fairs. But there won't be many chances like this."

I didn't know what to say. He was right, of course. Nobody moved for a moment, and then Spike's response was to dive to the ground and squirm his way under the wire. He moved like a weasel, sleek and skinny and infinitely flexible, and he came up on the other side as if on springs. I crawled after, dragging the sandwich bag and my cycle lamp, and as I got to my feet I could see that he was already on his way down the banking.

The grass in here had been neglected, and had grown knee-deep in places. Michael was grunting and squeaking his way through after me as I followed Spike. I saw him stop, his flashlight beam picking up something on the way, and then he went on.

This was a mess. Beyond the grass was a stretch of broken rubble pierced by coarse, springy rushes, and it wasn't easy to keep a footing. As I approached the place where I'd seen Spike hesitate, my beam picked up the sight that must have stopped him. It was a simple wooden sign, a board on a stake that had been driven into the ground, and it read

**DANGER**  
**Explosives**

and I felt the same little kick of fear that Spike must have experienced. But it was nothing that I hadn't known about and so I pressed on, and a minute later caught up with him at the edge of the pond.

Michael took a minute longer to reach us, floundering a little without the help of light so that we could track him in the darkness almost every step of the way.

He said, "You might have waited."

"And your mother might have fucked a chimpanzee," Spike replied, and he turned his flashlight out across the bed of the pond. "Feast your eyes, boys. We're gonna be rich."

Rich.

It's hard to say from here what the word must have meant to me then. Big cars, big houses, servants? Plane rides and casinos? Or simply a weekly comic that no-one else had read before me, and maybe that moonwalker toy in the newsagent's window that I'd been aching over for almost a month? Something somewhere in between, I expect. Or maybe nothing more than an indefinable hunger; we were provincial inner-city kids set to go nowhere and we didn't even know it, but something in us was responding to the call of treasure and it drew us along. The spotlight picked out the golden flame and I swear, dulled and dirty as it was, it seemed to shine back at us with a light of its own.

Moonlight showed up what was left of the pond. It had never seemed like much of a size but now, as a drained basin, it appeared huge. Some water was still pooled at the lowest point. The rest of it was mud and black shale, and showing in just a few places was the exposed masonry of its man-made lining. The water had always been so murky that it had seemed bottomless, but I could now see that in some parts it could never have been more than about three feet deep.

"Look at that," Spike said, indicating the shallows. "We could have walked over any time."

"Yeah," Michael said. "And got blown to pieces."

From here I could see a ring of the danger signs. They were all around the edge of the emptied lake. Most looked as if they'd been knocked and tilted, as if they'd been used by knights on horseback for jousting practice.

About six months before, some boy whose name I forget had cleared a place on his bedroom mantelpiece for his newest find. He'd told his mother that he'd found a "space wocket" in the park and she, in the way of parents everywhere, had said something vaguely encouraging while making no real effort to remember. Two days later, while straightening his room, she'd found herself face-to-face with the wocket and the strange, green-grey corrosive puddle (*like melted brains*, I heard somebody describe it) that had leaked out of its casing. It was a mortar shell, and not exactly a healthy example of its type; it was, in fact, decayed and unstable, and that same afternoon it had exploded scattering thirty pounds of sand, the galvanised metal of the fire bucket that it was standing in, and much of the planking of the stray dog pen in the police station yard where the bucket had been placed to await the arrival of a bomb disposal team.

Patient questioning revealed that the wocket had surfaced in the mud on the edge of the pond, where the banking was at its lowest and a kind of marshy area had formed. They checked it out, they found about a dozen brass cartridge cases of a similar age. They closed the pond, and the army moved in.

The lake, it seemed, had been used as a postwar dumping-ground for the unused munitions of the LDV (the wartime Local Defence Volunteers, civilian part-time soldiers whose initials to just about everybody of my parents' generation meant Look, Duck, and Van-ish). Nobody knew for sure exactly what was involved, or what might still be simmering in the depths; but the safety wire had been hastily erected by council workmen and the bomb disposal men began a thorough sweep of the exposed mudflats.

They'd found some stuff but it wasn't much; certainly nothing as spectacular as that first discovery, and now they'd declared the pond to be probably clear but with no guarantees. The plan now was that it should be filled in, and the surface grassed over.

Just to be certain.

Which meant that anyone hoping for a grab at the golden prize was going to have to do it now, or else find himself staring at the new ground and thinking of all the might-have-beens.

Spike was taking off his shoes.

"Do we all have to go?" Michael said, eyeing the foul-looking mud in the bottom of a basin that resembled a sargasso without wrecks.

Spike said, "You stay here and hold the lights. Otherwise you might get mistaken for a hippo, and shot."

That was fine by me because I didn't much like the look of the mud either. Even though we were a team, I think that any of us would probably have agreed, if pressed, that this was Spike's show. He was the driven one among us, he was the visionary. Michael and I would always be in there with him, but he was the one whose impulses gave us somewhere to go.

Spike was a strange one, in many ways. His father had been in prison, once; nothing glamorous or anything, just a small-time handling offence, but the old man had come home looking as shrunken and as sad as an old shoe. We never talked about it; Spike, I knew, has set up a vision of the world in his own mind where the entire thing had never even happened. But that was Spike all over; sometimes he could see a thing and believe in it so hard that, after a while, you didn't have any choice—you had to believe in it, too. He was tall for his age, skinny and fair, and his hair was like a brush. These days it's fashionable to spend money to look that way, but on Spike it just grew. He had a younger brother called Snotbags. I don't know what his real name was. I think even his parents called him Snotbags, at least some of the time.

After he'd taken off his pants and laid them on his shoes Spike took a first, careful step off the bank, and sank right in to above his knees. We shone the lights on him, almost as if he was in some kind of a circus act. I could see him tense up and stiffen with a sharp indrawing of air, and I knew that the mud had to be even colder than it looked. Then he started to wade out toward the middle, the hammer in his hand, picking his way with care. He was wearing hand-me-down Y-Fronts that hung on him like Ghandi's loincloth.

Progress was slow. I don't know how much help the lights were because he was walking straight out into his own, long shadow.



When he was about halfway, Michael called out in a raised whisper, "Watch out for mines, Spike."

Spike glanced back, his face pale in our lights. "What?"

"They found all sorts in there. Bombs, hand grenades, all kinds of things. There could be other stuff they didn't find."

"Bollocks," Spike said, but he said it without any terrific sense of certainty.

He picked his way onward, more nervously now.

When he reached the podium at the centre, it took him a moment before he was able to get a good grip and hoist himself up; but once clear of the mud, he was in his element. He swarmed up the fountain like a monkey. The overhang of that six-foot bowl was no challenge to him at all; he simply grabbed its edge and swung himself out to dangle in space and then he pulled himself up and over, swinging and kicking all the way. He got to his feet and stood in the bowl, grinned and waved to us with the hammer, and turned his attention to the flame that was now almost within his reach.

"The Golden Fleece," I heard Michael breathe beside me.

And I said, "Yeah." We were all agreed that *Jason and the Argonauts* was the best film ever made, better even than *Hercules Unchained*. Michael didn't have to explain the sense of the moment because I felt it too.

By now Spike had hooked one leg around the serpents and wrapped his free arm around the lower part of the Cherub, so that he could lean out without falling and get a clear swing at the target. It was a stretch, but not impossible. From where we stood it seemed that he merged with the sculpture, flesh and stone intertwined; the question flashed across my mind, what if it couldn't take his weight, what if the whole thing were to come crashing down and bringing Spike with it, and then the thought was forgotten as I saw the hammer flash and make a clean swipe through the air.

He missed. I could hear him cursing, although it was mostly to himself. Spike knew words that I couldn't even imagine meanings for. He repositioned slightly, and tried again.

Sparks flew. The ring of metal on stone was shockingly loud, and the hammer bounced off leaving no apparent damage. But Spike had the range now and he started whacking at it, hard and regular.

Michael said, "Someone's going to hear him."

"No-one's around," I said, but without much certainty; Spike was kicking up a racket like a blacksmith at his forge.

"You could hear that from the road," Michael said.

And then suddenly it stopped, with a crack that was unlike anything that had gone before, and I saw Spike grabbing to keep his balance as he threatened to topple; both lights wavered as Michael and I reacted and when they'd steadied again, I could see that the cherub's entire hand—including the torch and you-know-what—had sheared away completely. The arm was now just a broken stump thrust up into the air, and Spike was cursing again as he scrambled down.

"Anyone see where it went?" he called across to us.

I hadn't, but Michael reckoned that he'd glimpsed it as it flew. He pointed Spike's flashlight toward a particularly unwelcoming area of mud about twenty feet out from the fountain's base. It looked as if it had been heavily trodden and churned-over, probably by army men with metal detectors.

"Oh, great," Spike said wearily, and he dropped from the bowl and started to wade out.

I prised off my shoes and took off my pants. I was thinking that in a way the mess had to be reassuring, because it meant that the area had been thoroughly swept and was unlikely to be dangerous. Trouserless, I felt terribly vulnerable. I stepped out from the bank, slid right in, and felt as if I'd been part-swallowed by some seabed creature of cold and slime. Leaving Michael still struggling with his shoelaces, I slowly headed out for where Spike had already started to search. With no light of his own he had little hope of finding anything, but he was looking all the same.

"Got it," I said.

I'd picked it up in the beam even before I'd gone halfway. It was nowhere near where Michael had indicated, but it had landed and stuck and fortunately hadn't sunk more than halfway in. I reached it first, and dug it out. It was heavier than I'd imagined. As soon as Spike reached me I held it out to him; didn't even think of doing it any other way.

Spike said, "Where's mucous-brain?"

"Still folding his trousers," I said, and I shone the torch toward the bank. There was Michael, doing exactly as I'd guessed, and blinking uncertainly in the beam as it fell upon him.

Spike said, "Look at those drawers. They're holier than the pope."

"With more skidmarks than Brands Hatch," I added.

And Michael scowled and called out, "Spunkface," and then he was about to say something else when the three of us froze.

Car headlights, up on the highest point of the banking.

I killed the cycle lamp and Michael, over on the shore, switched off Spike's flashlight. The car was climbing the access track to the mesh gates that were the only official entrance to the enclosure; we could hear its engine labouring as it bounced up the rough ground, and a few seconds later its headlamps came fully into view. They were like the eyes of a beast, coming up to press its face against the wire.

At the wire, they stopped.

I heard Michael hiss, "It's the police,"

"It isn't the police," Spike said quietly.

The lights raked along the fencing, grew to a peak of intensity, and then faded away. We could still hear the engine, still hear the crunch of tyres upon stones, but now it had the sound of something that was prowling around rather than making a head-on approach. Some security man, at a guess. We knew all about security men. Some of them were fat and few of them were fit, and most of them despised what they'd been hired to protect. Spike had already checked out the site over a couple of nights and had reported that there was no permanent watchman, so this was probably a patrolman from some cheap and corner-cutting firm who'd drop by a couple of times a night to see that the padlock was still on the gate, and otherwise would tend to leave the place alone.

We'd have nothing to fear. Spike touched my elbow, and we started to wade for shore.

The three of us gathered on the banking. Spike wiped the object clean and I wondered with what until I heard Michael muttering *Hey, where's my trousers?* and then we took our first real look at our prize. The cherub's hand had come away in a neat break across the forearm just below the wrist, and the surface of the cut stone was as clean as new concrete. The hand and the base of the torch were weathered and green, pitted by almost a century of soot and air pollution, but the flame. . . the flame, under a surface coat of grime, was of the purest gold.

"It is real," Michael said, as if until this moment he'd been unable quite to believe it.

"Told you it was," Spike said. "Touch it, and see."

"No," Michael said.

I glanced at him then; he was round-eyed and scared-looking, and I remember thinking that he was a peculiar kid in lots of ways, but I didn't think about it any more deeply than that . . . at least, not right away. Spike was about to say something, but it never came out.

Because what we heard instead was a stranger's voice, and it came from somewhere frighteningly close.

It said "*Come on out, boys. I know you're in there.*"

We each looked around sharply, each of us in a different direction. I felt as if I'd swallowed a weight of guilt whole and it had suddenly jammed in my chest. The man, wherever he was, couldn't be much more than forty or fifty yards away. Michael was the worst. I'd never heard anyone fart in terror before. If the man needed a fix on our position, the sound alone was probably enough to give it to him.

But we didn't move, and none of us responded. Except for Spike, who whispered so that only we should hear.

"Don't get rattled," he said. "It's a put-on."

Michael was shaking. "What if it isn't?"

"I know what I'm talking about. Stay calm, and he'll give up and go away. We're winning. We already got what we came for."

And then we heard him again: *Come on, lads, let's have you*, only now he was further away. It seemed that Spike was right. The man, security man or whatever he was, appeared to be walking the outside of the perimeter fence and calling at random. Throwing bait, waiting to see if any fish might rise, moving on, and trying again.

"He knows," Michael insisted.

The man tried again, now even further away.

Spike said, "Even if he does, there's only one of him. He can't be everywhere."

Silently, we dressed. The filth I'd been wading in wasn't going to do the inside of my trousers any good, but at least it wouldn't show when I got home. We dressed by moonlight alone, saving our lights so that the watchman wouldn't see; every now and again we glimpsed his beam, about ten times more powerful than

either of ours, probing the undergrowth in some distant part of the enclosure.

When he'd reached a point that was as far from us as it was possible to be, we started out for the fence.

We moved in single file, Spike leading the way. There was no sense of adventure any more although later, I knew, this would be the high spot of the story that we'd tell. But that's how it is, with stories. Hearing about it and doing it just aren't the same thing. Right then I wanted to be out of it, I wanted to be safe, I didn't even want to *think* of some of the consequences that could lie ahead of us if anything went wrong. We scrambled over the rubbly patch, pushed our way through the waist-high grass, and reached the fence somewhere within a few yards of our point of entry.

Spike shaded his flashlight with his hand, and checked for the position of the gap.

The gap was no longer there.

For the first time that night, I saw that Spike was thrown. He'd come prepared for anything other than this; this was something that defied sense and logic.

"It's here," he said. "It's got to be."

I said, "He came and closed it up."

"How?"

"Wire, something, I don't know."

It would have been straightforward enough, the work of only a few seconds; just roll the wire back down to the ground, hook a couple of loose ends through the adjacent links, and then twist them tight. See the gap one night, bring along the tools the next. It was probably just routine business to the watchman but it meant that we were caught, as surely as if we'd triggered some spring-loaded trap.

"We'll have to climb," Spike said, looking upward and with an edge of desperation in his voice that I wasn't used to hearing.

"I can't," Michael said.

And I was pretty sure that I couldn't either. The fence itself could be managed, but not the wire along the top. Even Spike would have trouble there, and I'd have been prepared to believe that Spike was capable of anything.

I didn't for one moment think that he was afraid. No, his desperation didn't come from fear. I think his apprehension was that the

biggest enterprise of his life—a venture into forbidden territory with a fabulous prize at its end—was suddenly going to end in the cold plunge of mundane reality. We'd grabbed the Golden Fleece, and in doing it we walked the ground of heroes. The prospect of having that taken from us was far worse than that of any material loss. I mean, what you'd never had, you couldn't miss. But this was more like a kind of self-esteem. Lose that, and you'd have a loss that you'd remember forever.

He said, "Wait a minute. I have to think."

So we waited, and after a few moments we again heard the call of the watchman.

He said, *There's no other way out, now, boys. I'm not going to wait all night. Come over to the gate, or I'll have to send in the animal.*

His voice drifted down to us, like something on a night breeze. Then we heard the distinct rattle of a heavy chain, and a shrill, *whup-whup-whup* whistle.

Pretty much the kind of whistle you'd use to call in a dog.

Maybe even a big one.

Michael said, barely audibly, "Throw it back in the lake, Spike."

Spike shot him a look. "It's too late for that," he said.

I didn't have to ask what he meant. It was like the needle in the base of Talos, or the eye of the giant Buddha—you steal one of those suckers and you *know* you're not just facing a slap on the wrist . . . you're drawing the attention of something great and terrible, pulling the plug on hell to let demons come streaming out, and there's no way that you can get away with dropping what you've grabbed and so dodging the consequences.

Michael said, "*Spike . . .*" and Spike said, "Fuck him and his dog, we'll get out through the drain."

"What drain?" I said.

So Spike showed us.

"I won't go down there," Michael said.

The entrance to the drain stood at what had been the water's edge. Its function, as far as I could see, had been to keep the pond level more or less constant by drawing off any overspill. It was flush-fitted into the masonry of the banking, and it was barred by an iron gate. The gate had been thrown open, but I wouldn't exactly have called

it inviting; it looked like the way into the world's smallest, darkest prison.

Spike said, "What's the choice?"

"I won't," Michael said shakily, and I was surprisingly glad that we had him along. Perhaps it occurred to me then that a lot of the time, Michael's fears were pretty much the same as my own; the difference between us was that he frequently saved me from having to express mine, so that I could be scornful along with Spike and seem just as tough.

But this time Spike said, "It's nothing like it looks. It just goes through the bank and under the road and then out into the other pond. It's nothing."

Michael was unconvinced. "What if we get stuck?"

"Look, we'll try it. If it's no go we'll come back out." He lifted the golden flame, which we'd wrapped in Michael's empty carrier bag. I still had the sandwiches, Michael was now carrying the soda. "I'll throw this back into the lake, and we can all go up to the gate and get a leathering."

I couldn't see much of Michael's expression because we weren't using the lights, but I could sense the strange tension between the fears that held him back and the fears that drove him on.

And then somehow, his terror seemed to make a deal with itself.

"I can't go first," he said.

"I'll go first," Spike said, and slapped him on the shoulder as he started to move. If the guard was letting a dog loose into the grounds, there was no time to be debating about it. As Spike went by me, he added in a low voice, "Make sure he follows me."

Spike bent almost double, and went in first. The tunnel fitted him like a sleeve. Michael hesitated at the entrance, and as he stood there looking into darkness I heard the far-off sound of a gate hinge squealing and then a reverberating crash as the gate presumably fell shut again. I gave Michael a hard shove on the rear, and he yelped and pitched forward.

I waited about one second, but there was no way of telling whether or not he'd been heard. So then I put my head down, and followed.

It was a tight fit, all right. I couldn't raise my head even though I was almost squatting, and the walls brushed my shoulders on either

side. Spike had switched on his flashlight so there was a kind of rim of illumination getting back down the tunnel sides ahead of me, but I couldn't see much past Michael. The stonework was dank and slimy, the floor angled downward. We couldn't walk, we couldn't run, all we could manage was a kind of restricted shuffle. I didn't even want to think about how far we had to go. I pretended that the end was in sight, only a few yards ahead.

But I knew that it wasn't so. Try as I might, I couldn't help thinking about the width of the banking and then the rough ground and the grass and only *then* the broad main walkway of the park; and I tried to remember how far down on the opposite side it was to the lower pond, and it seemed like forever. Long enough so that, for a distance somewhere in the middle, we'd have lost sight of the way in and yet still be a long way short of seeing the exit.

I could feel my chest tightening in panic. I felt as if I was in a deep, dark fist somewhere miles under the earth, and the fist was closing. I used to have this nightmare. I was in a big block of concrete and there was just my nose and mouth showing. I couldn't move, I couldn't see, I couldn't hear, but I could breathe and I could scream. In a number of ways this was almost as bad and in one it was worse, because it was real.

Ahead of me, the light opened up. Michael had dropped to a crawl, following Spike who had done the same. What the hell, I thought, and did likewise.

This was better. Now there was space around my head and the feeling of oppression wasn't quite so fierce. The light swung and bobbed as Spike led the way, shadows cast by the uneven stonework zooming back and forth along the walls as the light moved.

"All okay?" I heard Spike gasp, and the two of us grunted in response.

Now that I could I glanced backward, for some reassurance. The entranceway was a small rectangle of moonlight, already impossibly far-off. It was almost as if I was lying in the bottom of a well and looking up at the night sky; it was just faint square of a different kind of darkness, and no reassurance at all.

And then, as I was about to turn away, I saw something move across the rectangle and block out the night sky completely.

"Oh, shit," I said.



"It's all right," Spike whispered, the tunnel echo making the sound almost loud. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Like hell," I said. "There's something in here with us."

We all stopped—yes, I know, but the other two had stopped and I didn't have any choice—and listened, but the three of us were breathing so hard that it was impossible to make out any alien component. So then I switched on the cycle lamp and aimed it back down the length of the tunnel, and that wasn't much use either; I might as well have been aiming it at the stars, for the distance that its now-weakening battery was able to cover.

"Everybody hold their breath," I said, and we listened again.

Now we could hear it.

Panting hard. Gaspings. Grunting.

"It's in," I said. "But it's stuck."

And Michael said, with awe, "How big does that make it?"

Spike said nothing, but turned to go on.

Easy for you, Spike, I thought . . . you ain't the last one in line, here.

I aimed the cycle lamp all the way back again. Did I see eyes there, two dull points of reflection at the furthest extent of the beam, or did I only imagine them?

If it was stuck and it stayed that way, then there was nothing to worry about. But say it wasn't; say it was just a really tight fit, and it was inching forward, and that it would pick up speed as it advanced with the mossy sides of the tunnel greasing it like a piston, accelerating and accelerating to come thundering down on us like an Underground train, jaws opening and spit flying and nowhere for us to dodge or hide; say that happened, then who was going to be first course on the menu?

I scrambled on as fast as I could. And if Michael was going to be too slow then tough shit, I was just going to scramble right on over him.

Everyone ahead of me stopped, and Michael squawked as my head rammed into his behind.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Keep moving!"

"We can't," he said, breathlessly.

I looked around him.

We had a problem.

Just ahead of Spike, the tunnel appeared to divide. A narrow branch—even narrower than the one that we were in—went off to the left, while the main descending shaft went on ahead. Or rather it didn't, because the roof had fallen.

"We're trapped," Michael said.

The blockage was like a jumble of stone that had been tipped from a wheelbarrow. Not a wall but a sloping pile, and a gap at the top that went on into darkness. I could maybe have slid my arm into the gap, but nothing more of me could have followed.

Spike picked off one of the surface chunks and tossed it aside, saying, "Nah, it's just loose stuff. And it can't be solid or we'd be up to our necks in water."

I glanced back. "We can't piss around, Spike," I said. "It's getting closer."

"Wait a minute." He pulled his way up the pile, making a small avalanche of masonry debris, and peered through the space at the top. He pointed his flashlight in and then, with a flick of his wrist, tossed it through. Then he squinted through the gap again.

"It's clear further in," he said. "But there's a lot of stuff to shift."

Michael gave me some support. "He said there isn't time."

Spike looked at us both. Crowded together in a space too small to turn around, I could almost sense what he was thinking; were the loyalties shifting here, was his grip on the troops beginning to slip? We'd always been a balanced threesome but, given sufficient pressure, perhaps that could change.

Nothing happened for a moment.

Then he said, "This way, then. Pass me the lamp."

And he started off down the leftward branch.

I felt my heart sink when I saw how he had to turn his shoulders sideways, simply to be able to get in at all. From here on it wasn't a tunnel, it was hardly more than a slit. Michael followed him almost with eagerness. For a moment my imagination ran a little more freely than I would have wanted it to—I saw this branch leading to a smaller shaft, and on to a smaller, until we were flat on our bellies with the earth pressing down on our backs and we'd come to a dead halt against solid rock and then we'd try to inch back, and there'd be *nowhere to go* . . . no light, no air, no space, just a fit as snug and as close as the grave . . .

"It gets wider," Spike called back.

Just before I entered the branchline, I took a quick look through the gap at the top of the rockfall. It was like looking into a long, deep letterbox. But there was some sense of air and space at the far end, because Spike's flashlight had rolled on through and dropped on the other side to illuminate the open area where the unblocked shaft continued.

Well, it *did* get wider along the branchline. But not by much.

I was consoled by the thought that if the beast behind us was having trouble squeezing itself down the main shaft, then it was going to have no luck at all down here. All we had to do was keep our heads, keep on going, and we'd be all right. I squirmed along, and endured the odd kick from Michael's flailing shoes for the sake of being not one inch further back than I needed to be. Every time he kicked me he said *Sorry*, and every time he said sorry I told him to keep going.

We were ascending again, and quite steeply. That was fine by me, because it meant that we were heading back for the surface. At a guess this channel served some other part of the park, I don't know where, and emptied into the main drain. I tried to visualise where it might lead and I thought, Oh God, I hope it's not the toilets. Anywhere but the toilets. It was bad enough to be crawling in slime, without having to entertain the thought that it might be something worse. And how would we get out? I'd always thought of it strictly as a one-way system. Once the crap was around that U-bend, I didn't want to know.

But I was quickly saved from any further speculation, because we'd gone no more than twenty yards when Spike said, "Dead end."

"What?" I said. "Let me see." And Michael pressed himself against the side so that I could get a look through.

Spike was telling the exact truth. An end could get no deader. I was looking at a wall of bricks, not exactly new but somewhere near as old as the tunnel itself. They'd been sloppily laid, probably from the other side, and the mortar had squeezed out and set around the joints. Nothing short of a pickaxe could have got us through, and there was no room to swing a pickaxe anyway.

Michael said, "Now what?"

And I said, "Well, I don't know about anyone else, but I'm sick of dragging these sandwiches around."

The fact of it was that we were close to exhaustion. We must have travelled something approaching a quarter of a mile underground by now, although it felt like a lot more. We were three blind mice and we'd run about up to our limits, and this brief enforced halt made us realise it.

So we lay there in the darkness, and broke out the picnic.

I can't speak for anyone else, but I was ravenous. I'd guess that the others were the same. Nothing was wasted, anyway. Afterwards I felt faintly sick, as the white bread sat in my stomach like a party guest who won't get the hint and go home. We lay in silence, passed the warm soda back and forth, and listened for the beast.

Being the last in line, I was the one best able to tell how it was going. I didn't much like what I could hear. I couldn't see back to where the tunnel divided, which was fine because it meant that anything standing there wouldn't be able to see me; and there was a distinct possibility, because by the sound of it the beast had worked its way right in and was dangerously close.

Heavy breathing. Panting. A few grunts.

And a persistent, slithering, *sliding* sound.

I tried to tell myself that it couldn't be as near as it seemed, that the echo of the tunnel itself was having a distorting effect both on distance and direction. But then my efforts at self-delusion came to nothing, because the beast started to dig.

Big stones rolled, gravel moved, and I knew that this could only mean one thing; that it had reached the rockfall, and believed that we were on the other side. Big and fierce it might be, but it couldn't be too bright. It was pawing and scratching in high-speed bursts, snuffling, pawing again.

Still, nobody moved. The sound—bounced, amplified, and made hollow—was all around us. Every now and again bricks and stones would fall, filling the tunnel's end with a noise like that of a bowling alley. Michael flinched when it happened, and I suppose I did too. And just a few yards away, our pursuer worked on with a patience and persistence that were almost demonic.

Sometime, we were going to have to emerge from this dead end. Suppose the beast dug onwards, suppose it even broke through. Assuming that its master was waiting back there at the lakeside,

we'd have no way out at all; not forward, not back, not anywhere. The beast would hold one end of the drain, its master would hold the other, and we'd be helpless in the middle.

Face it, we were pretty helpless now.

There was a glimmer of light from down the tunnel. The beast had managed to open up the gap a little, and a faint wash from Spike's abandoned flashlight was leaking through. A long shadow moved on the wall. I heard its breath, rank and heavy and filled with a growing sense of elation.

Behind me, Michael moved. I glanced back, trying to shoot him a look of warning in case he should make any sound, but it was far too dark; I could only sense him rather than see him as he turned his face to the back of our branch tunnel, and what he did then was probably the last thing that I ever would have expected because he stuck his two fingers into the corners of his mouth and emitted the loudest and probably the last *whup-whup-whup* whistle that I ever expected to hear.

He was *calling* the bastard thing to us!

I remember wondering if there would be enough time left for me to get hold of him and strangle him before the beast was upon me, and I expect that Spike was thinking the same; suddenly I had no confidence at all about the narrowness of the drain keeping it out and, anyway, even if it did, now that the beast knew where we were it needed do nothing more than sit tight and starve us out. I could hear it responding, trying to turn in the restricted space, yelping as it stuck; it sounded as if someone had run a charge through it and sent it into overdrive. Stones were kicked, claws scraped . . .

And the beast frantically started to back off down the tunnel, returning tail-first the way it had come.

I couldn't believe it. And I couldn't understand it, not straight away, and when I did it brought a respect for Michael's nerve that I'd never thought I'd have any reason to feel. He'd given the same call that the beast's master had given, back there at the lakeside; and because of the tunnel's acoustics, the beast had failed to realise where it was coming from. Somewhere behind, was all that it knew.

And so, thinking that it was being recalled, back it had gone.

I gave it a while, listening hard. And then, as quietly as I could, I started to shuffle my way back to the main drain.

It was strange, but after the extra confinement of the branchline I came out into the main tunnel with a sense almost of relief. I fought off the fear that it was all a trick, that the beast was playing a sucker game like my father pretending to go downstairs when all he was doing was marking time on the top step, and I'd hold my breath in anticipation until he flung open my bedroom door and shouted *Boo!*—how long ago was *that*, I wonder—and I eased myself around to look back along the drain.

It was gone. I could see clear all the way to the end, the entrance way no bigger than the size of a penny.

With my voice as low as I could keep it, barely more than words and breath, I told the others.

Michael stuck his head out to look for himself. Spike wanted to do the same, but Michael was in the way and I wasn't going to move to let him out, not yet. No way was I going to back off down the tunnel to be last in line again. If we were going to dig through the blockage and go onward, then I'd do the shifting and I'd be the first one through, and let Spike come out last and be the tailgunner for a change. He was the one who'd wanted the flame in the first place, the whole thing had been his idea.

Looking down the tunnel, Michael said, "Remember what he said? He didn't call it a dog. It's something worse than a dog. We called it up when we took the golden flame."

"I'm not giving it back," I heard Spike say from the other side of him.

"We could vote," I suggested.

"No! We're not voting for anything. I didn't come this far for that. You sound like a couple of girls."

Well, it may not sound like much, but there was no better way to close an argument amongst eleven-year-old boys. Tentatively, I switched on my cycle lamp and turned it onto the rockfall to see how we stood. The beam came on with about half of its original power, now, and that was only because the battery had been given the chance to rest for a while. When I looked at the bulb, I could see the glowing shape of the filament wire inside instead of just a brilliant source.

The 'animal', as its unseen master had called it, had barely scratched at the surface of the fall. It had pawed and clawed and opened the gap out a little, but only by taking out the earth and

gravel; the big masonry blocks that had once formed part of the tunnel roof still lay untouched. Paving wouldn't do it; they'd have to be lifted. I set down the lamp somewhere flat, and began to work by its light.

Imagine four bricks together, with slightly more weight; then dusty them up and break off the corners, and you'll have some idea of what I was working with. I couldn't lift the blocks easily, I could only bunny-hop them along in six-inch steps and then, when I had one clear enough, roll it end-over-end to Michael. Michael dragged it through to Spike, and Spike did his best to stack it together with the others in a makeshift wall behind us. There was no way of avoiding noise, but we kept it down as much as we could. I wasn't trying to clear the tunnel completely; I was simply trying to make us a way through, and probably at an inevitable cost of torn clothing and scraped hands and knees. But they were at least of our worries; real ones, to a child, but deferred in the face of other dangers.

It wasn't too bad. The worst that I'd feared—that of hitting a whole chunk of maybe half a dozen blocks still held together with the original mortar, and impossible to shift without a chain and a bulldozer—didn't seem to apply. What seemed to have happened was that the stone lining of the drain had collapsed in on itself but the earth above had kept the tunnel shape, like a mould; all I'd have to do was clean out the gap just a little more, and we'd have a wriggling space.

It wasn't just stones and dirt and gravel that I had to clear. There were weeds and old rubbish as well, washed down from the lake whenever it had overflowed and trapped here as if in a filter. It hardly mattered, I was probably already as filthy as I could get. Just as long as I didn't stick my hand in a dead duck, or anything.

I dug out what had once been an old tin can, and passed it back to Michael. Michael nearly fumbled and dropped it and I felt my heart leap, but he caught it again. We couldn't fool ourselves that we were safe. Whatever patrolled the lake shore, looking for some other trace of our passage, need only hear one brief call to return to the burrow.

I turned back to what I was doing. Something was sticking up out of the debris, and I pulled it clear. When it came out, it was bigger and heavier than I'd expected.

It resembled a toy rocket, a fat little body with tail fins. It was badly corroded, with a surface that looked more like pitted old stone than metal.

I'd found one of the old mortar bombs.

"Look at this!" I whispered, holding it up.

"Put it down," Michael said hoarsely, and I looked at him. "One of them went off already."

I looked at my prize with some curiosity. I'd no sense of danger. It just looked like a really, really neat thing to take home. But I wouldn't, of course, because I knew that Michael was right; so I just held it out to him to pass along with the other debris, and Michael shrank back as if it carried the plague or something.

"Not me," he said, and so Spike reached past him and took it.

Michael hunched further back against the tunnel wall. I heard the crack as his head met the low stone.

"OWWWWWW!" he yelled.

"You fucking idiot," I said, and I gave him a shove on the shoulder, and he cracked his head for a second time and yelled again.

We all froze. Except for Michael, who sat rubbing at his lumps with a scrubbing sound like sandpaper until Spike hissed at him to stop.

We heard it enter the tunnel.

We could hear that it was heading our way.

And it was moving at three times the speed that it had been before.

Spike said, "Is it wide enough yet?" And I said, "It'll have to be." I hauled myself up into the gap and started to force my way through. My chest stuck and I breathed right out and then Michael was behind me pushing, and I started to slide. I got a hold on something, and dragged myself a little further; and then suddenly I was tumbling forward in a shower of debris and I was out into the chamber that had been formed on the other side. I got up to my knees and turned around to face the gap; Michael's hands were already waving around and searching for something to grab, and I caught hold of his wrists and pulled. It wasn't easy, he was heavier than I was. Ever pulled a



tightly-packed duvet out of its box? He came, but it took everything I had.

He came out suddenly and all in a pile, like a foal at its birth, and as he scrambled aside I looked for Spike.

The gap looked impossibly narrow from this side. And Spike wasn't in it.

I called to him. His face appeared at the other end.

"Take this first," he said, and he pushed through the bag containing the golden flame.

He looked like a monk who'd been walled into his cell, passing out some valued relic. I took it and slung it to Michael, and then reached to help Spike through.

He didn't come.

"Spike . . .!" I called, only too aware of what was bearing down on him. Silence wouldn't help us now.

His face reappeared. "Carry on," he said. "I'll catch up with you."

"There isn't time!"

"I've got a plan."

A plan? What was this, *Mission Impossible*? The only worthwhile plan was to move as if our tails were on fire. What did he mean, he had a plan?

"What's he doing?" Michael said from behind me.

"God knows," I said, and I hoisted myself into the gap to take a look.

Even as I was doing this, a sound began to ring out. For a moment I was confused because it was almost exactly the sound that I'd heard when Spike had been up at the top of the fountain, taking shots at the flame with the hammer; a blacksmith at the anvil, beating out a white-hot shoe. Then I got to see.

The cycle lamp was still where I'd set it. By its light, Spike was working. He'd set the mortar bomb between two of the fallen roofstones so that it was held pointing out towards the entrance of the tunnel. With the hammer in his hand, he was pounding away on the rusted nub of the detonator cap.

I got one other brief impression, of the beast that was bearing down on him from the deeper shadows and it was everything we'd feared it might be; the Hydra, the Gorgon, the Big Bad Wolf, a

tunnelful of viciousness thundering toward Spike with the momentum of a train, eyes like baleful headlamps and teeth like knives; and then there was a flash like a photograph that sent me back dazzled, and then a half-second later a bigger, more powerful shockwave that bucked the ground and brought all kinds of shit cascading down from the ceiling while beyond the wall the entire tunnel seemed to be falling in on itself.

And then, after a while, everything settled into silence.

I know what he'd intended. An improvised bazooka, a one-shot launch that would arrow straight into the face of its target and wipe it away. It might have worked for Sean Connery, but it didn't work for Spike; all that he got was a big bang with no particular direction to it and a one-way ticket to wherever. After the dirt had stopped raining down and while my ears were still ringing I tried to scramble back through the gap to see what I could do, but it was useless. We'd been given some protection by the blockage, but on the other side it was almost as if there had never been a tunnel at all. I dug with my hands until my fingers bled and then I dug a while longer, and then finally Michael had to pull me away.

"The batteries are going" he said, wiping the dust from the flashlight's lens. "We have to get out."

At first, I wouldn't leave.

"There's no point," Michael insisted gently. "He's dead."

We crawled out of that brick-sleeved culvert above the lower pond no more than five minutes later, but I felt as if I'd spent a lifetime underground. No bars awaited us, just a flimsy wire grille that was no challenge at all after everything that we'd been through. There was a lot of activity at the upper pond by then, but none as yet down here; we melted off into the night and left the park via the garden of one of the big houses that looked over it.

They say that the explosion sent a column of mud and stones about thirty feet into the air, like a geyser. They sifted through it in daylight and for a while it actually seemed that they were reassembling evidence of some strange mythical beast, until the pieces resolved themselves into the mingled remains of an eleven year old boy and the watchman's Doberman.



*A tunnelful of viciousness thundering towards Spike with the momentum of a train. (Artist: Russ Nicholson)*

That's what they called it, anyway. Personally, I've got my doubts. It may have been a Doberman when it went in, but I know what I saw down there and it was something more.

I arrived home to an empty house. There was no hot water but I sat in the bath and scrubbed myself clean anyway. I hid my ruined clothes, intending to burn them when I could. I lay in bed and heard the rest of them arriving home; in fact, I think I heard every sound in the house that night. I don't think I slept at all.

I don't know the details of how Michael covered himself, but he seemed to get by. They swallowed our story about Spike not having shown up to meet us at the fair, mainly because a few of the stallholders looked at our photographs and said Yeah, they'd seen us hanging around that night. To them, we were probably just two unremarkable faces amongst thousands. Maybe they'd seen us, maybe they hadn't; what did it matter, as long as the police heard what they wanted and left them alone?

We met up again a few days later, down by the canal. Michael had brought the golden flame, wrapped in a piece of crumpled brown paper. Close-up and in daylight, it didn't look like much. Michael scraped at it with his penknife.

Some of the gold paint came off to expose the stone underneath.

We were on a quiet stretch of the canal, where two old barges lay half-sunken in a backwater with rushes growing up through them. It had been one of Spike's favourite places.

So that was where we dropped it in.

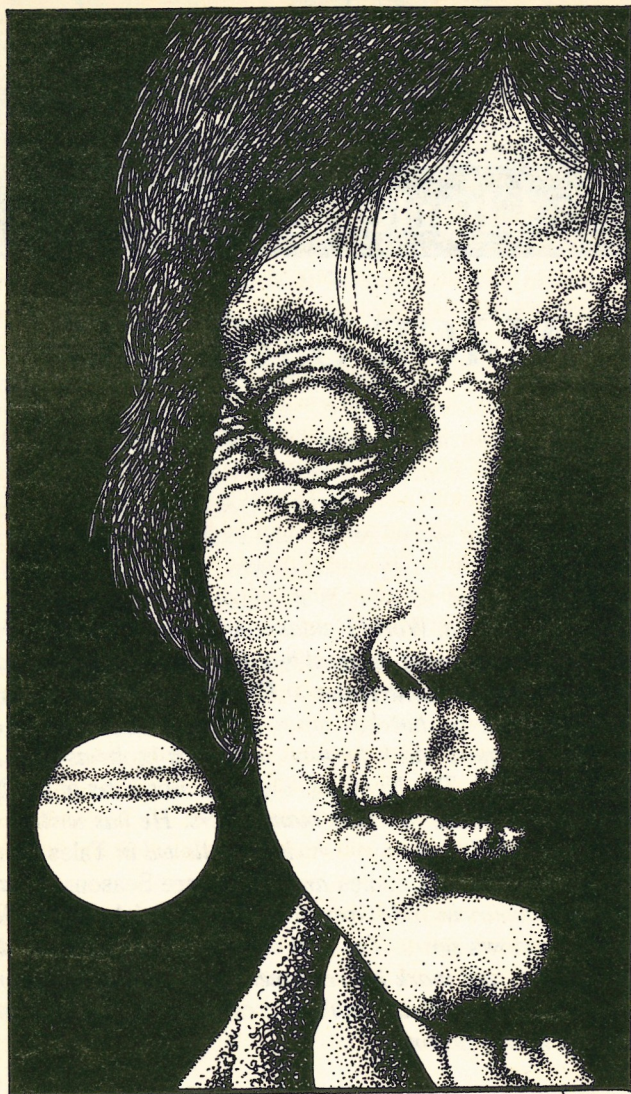


Charles L. Grant

## ALICE SMILING

*(Winner of the Nebula, World Fantasy and British Fantasy Awards, Charles L. Grant is one of the most prolific horror writers and editors around and a regular contributor to FT. He initially began writing science fiction novels, but has since moved on to create his own unique style of "quiet" dark fantasy, with such books as The Hour of the Oxrun Dead, The Nestling, The Pet, For Fear of the Night and In a Dark Dream, amongst many others. He has written more than 100 short stories, many of which are collected in Tales from the Nightside, A Glow of Candles and Nightmare Seasons. Charlie's editorial endeavours include Greystone Bay, Midnight and the highly successful Shadows series. The next volume, Final Shadows, due to appear in 1991, will mark his retirement from editing and promises to be a massive, double-size finale to a consistently excellent annual showcase of horror fiction.)*

Scrubbing the kitchen wasn't so difficult anymore; at least it wasn't as bad as it used to be, what with the new kinds of floors, the sponge mops, the detergents, all the things she used to see in the science fiction movies when she was a girl and no one believed a man who would walk on the moon, not really. Not when there was a living



*There was no sense in her dreaming; it was a luxury she couldn't have,  
a luxury she feared. (Artist: Jeff Salmon)*

to be made, mouths to feed, a husband who took off one summer afternoon to meet his friends in the park and never returned, never wrote, never sent a blessed penny. No, not then. Not when knees were for kneeling while the hot water sloshed and slapped in the metal bucket and suds became grey and hands grew red and hair fell into her eyes and once in a while a child would wander through and ask for help with a button, a clumsy zipper, a problem in arithmetic, a problem with a boy who lived the next block over.

No, not so difficult now, except that she couldn't get out of the habit of getting down close, using her hands, and smiling tolerantly, as always, when Hannah walked in from work, saw her, put her briefcase wearily on the round maple table and said, without much emotion, "Mother, for heaven's sake."

Alice looked up, sat back, used a forearm to knock the grey straggles from her brow. "Was dirty, you know."

Hannah dropped into a chair. "I guess it was, though I don't know how it dared, not with you attacking it all the time."

She laughed silently. "It knows me. It knows."

Her daughter, fine in a fine wine suit, closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. "I'm tired."

"You work too hard."

"I have to. No choice. One second too slow, and I'm out on my ass."

Alice winced at the language but said nothing. The floors were easier, the living wasn't. Not when a woman tried to take the spots that used to belong exclusively to men, like a club, no women around except when invited, thank you very much and close the door behind you when you leave.

In a motion so practised she barely seemed to move at all, she rolled to her feet and pulled down the sleeves of her shapeless brown dress. Bessie said she was dowdy; Alice supposed she was, but neither had she a reason to be otherwise. At least not yet.

"Douglas will be home soon," Hannah said. "I think he's anxious to get on holiday."

He would be, Alice thought with a trace of anger; high and mighty Yeoman snaps his fingers, and Hannah trots behind like one of them trained Russian bears. Suddenly she felt guilty, lifted the bucket, and waddled with it to the back door.

"Mother, just dump it down the sink."

"I just washed it. Don't want to wash it again."

As she opened the door, she heard her daughter chuckling, and the smile came and stayed, even after the bucket was empty, the job done. Then she rode her hands down the front of her floral apron and stepped into the yard, taking a deep breath, closing her eyes, letting the summer scents drive away the stench of soap and sweat and wax and age.

Scrubbing was easier; it didn't mean she'd gotten to like it.

Then she heard a car brake out on the street, and she shook her head as she made her way across the narrow yard. On either side well-tended vines and shrubs grew high and green and thick and bold, hiding the neighbours and their own gardens, creating impressions of privacy on a street where every home shared a wall, every argument had a dozen ears straining for details. At the back she turned and leaned against the brick wall that separated the yard from the tracks down below, the warehouses across the way.

A door slammed.

Hannah's voice drifting through the kitchen window, and Douglas answering, querulous, cranky, and Hannah soon responding in placation.

I could leave them, Alice thought then and not for the first time; I could leave them, go north, go west, leave them alone and wouldn't that stop the fighting, the whispering, the looks her son-in-law gave her, as if it were her fault she'd lost her job at the chemist three months ago.

No, she thought; it would still be the same for her daughter, though without Alice there as a buffer for his demands.

She looked down at her hands and was surprised to see them knotted together. It only happened when she was upset, and that surprised her too, because she hadn't felt disturbed. Every day was virtually the same, and it puzzled her that this day seemed different and she didn't know why.

Then, through a gap in the shrubs to her left she saw her neighbour's back door open, and Bessie Stuart stepped outside with an explosive sigh—slender, quiet red hair, a simple blue dress that showed a figure neither of them had had when they were young. She saw Alice and smiled, and hurried across the grass to her section of the wall, to the gap they used to talk through and visit.

Douglas didn't like her.



Alice grinned, and again fought the straggles of her hair back into place.

"Exiled again, are you?" Bessie said, nodding toward the house.

"Not exactly. I'm not a prisoner, if that's what you're thinking."

"As much as I used to be, and you know it," Bessie told her. "The trouble with you is, you're too nice."

Alice shrugged. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't, but things weren't so bad as all that.

A young man appeared at Bessie's door. "Darling?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You fancy a night out?" Then he waved in Alice's direction.

"Hello, Mrs. Week," he called with a broad smile. "You're looking lovely today."

Alice waved him a *get along with you*, rolled her eyes at her friend, and slipped her hands into her apron pockets. "I'd best get in," she said. "It sounds like his lordship'll be wanting his slop."

"And that's just what you should give him," Bessie told her, following along on the other side of the shrubs. "Alice, for god's sake, you're wasting time."

But she was already at the door, watching through the panes she'd cleaned just that morning as Douglas, tall and darkly handsome with a temper to match, made it clear through his gestures that he was anxious to get away early tomorrow. From the house. The street. His mother-in-law.

That night, in her second storey bedroom, she lay on the bed-clothes and stared at the dark that hung below the beamed ceiling. There was no sense in her dreaming; it was a luxury she couldn't have, a luxury she feared.

The following morning she made breakfast, helped Hannah with the last minute packing, and followed Douglas to the car as he carried out the last suitcase. She tilted her head; she closed one eye. But there was no getting around it—he was a good-looking young man, strong across the shoulders and chest, strong through cheek and chin, a laugh in his eyes that was honey to lonely bees.

It was the sting, though; the sting.

"You'll drive carefully," she said.

He looked at her and nodded solemnly. "I always do, Alice. I'm not anxious to be one of my own statistics." He glanced at his watch, tapped the crystal with one finger, looked up at the window

that marked their bedroom and didn't bother to hide a sigh. "What in god's name takes her so long? It's not like we're going to Downing Street for tea, is it. I mean, we're just riding in the car, for heaven's sake."

Alice touched his wrist with three fingers, covering the time. "You'll live longer if you stop worrying so much."

"It's my job to worry," he answered without looking at her. "And it's her job to make sure I don't worry." He did look then, and shrugged a brief apology. "Sort of. Anyway, you know what I mean."

What she knew was, he didn't know himself what he meant, what he thought. He was a north country boy who had come south with all his schooling, believing that thus and so was the way of it, always was and always would be, and you'd have to be daft or dead to think anything else. By the time he'd been here two years he was married to a young girl whose mother hadn't been able to hold on to her own man. Bessie claimed that Alice hadn't failed at all, not really, because she had been young when it had happened and she was, quite naturally, simply weak and untutored in what the woman called the innocent deceit of compromise—give here, take there, and let others think you were the magician's assistant when, sleight of hand and here comes the rabbit, you were the magician all along.

Poor Hannah had turned out the same way, and Alice knew damned well that the only reason Douglas hadn't vanished too was because he was afraid of her, and of Alice, and the poor sod didn't know why.

Lambs, she thought sadly as she made a vague gesture about fetching the girl straight away, don't get yourself in a dither; they were both lambs, and Alice wasn't going to be around forever to shepherd them through all the storms.

Oh my god, she thought then, what conceit! And who died, Mrs. Week, and left you the Queen, eh?

Hannah finally arrived, and Douglas ducked into the car.

They left in a flurry then. Kisses. Hugs. Checking baggage, checking wallets and purses, making sure Alice had all her medicine, the emergency numbers, Douglas suddenly remembering some work he wanted to take with him, and didn't when Alice shoved him back behind the wheel with a laugh and ordered them gone before the last trump beat them to it.

Then she wandered the house for the rest of the day. Touching things. Remembering things. Eating alone, sitting in front of the television and listening to Bessie and her husband return from another night out. Laughing. Giggling. Slamming the front door.

That night she lay on top of her bedclothes and watched the dark that hung below the ceiling, wishing she were strong enough to sit her children down and tell them how miserable they were making each other.

The next three days she spent cleaning.

It was easier than it used to be.

Bessie didn't do much of her own; Harry helped her when he could, which was as often as Bessie wanted it without making him a slave.

On the fifth night, Bessie came over with a bottle of wine, and they sat on the back stoop, listening to the trains belt past them toward London, belt past them again in the opposite direction. It wasn't quite a soothing sound; it marked the time, like a clock.

"They'll be home day after tomorrow," Bessie said, and covered her mouth to cover a hiccough.

"I know."

They drained a glass, drained another, and Harry came over with another bottle. He stayed for a while, watching the stars fight the city lights, then yawned and shambled home after kissing his wife.

"You're a fool," Bessie said then, a third glass gone and dry, and the air sweet and sour around them as they opened their mouths to gulp the night.

Alice shrugged and pulled her tired cardigan closer about her shoulders.

"You really are."

"I have to think," she said, and stared at the wine, black in the glass, reflecting nothing but the night.

"You know what I used to say about thinking?" Bessie grinned, and giggled, and stamped her foot on the ground. "I used to say it was the devil's way of getting me . . ." she giggled again. "God, I can't say it."

Alice drank.

Bessie laughed.

The trains slammed past, never stopping.

"My Harry now, he's a treasure. It took a bit of doing, but I wouldn't trade him for anything. When I think of the way I used to look at him . . ." Bessie shook her head in mock shame, absently lifted her left hand with her right and placed it in her lap. "It's a wonder, you know, my daughter didn't shoot me the way I flirted. I admit it—I was horrid."

Alice said nothing; Bessie as she'd once known her had had a withered left arm.

A car backfired.

Bessie lay her hand on Alice's knee. "I don't like you like this, love. It isn't right."

Alice drank.

Bessie sobbed.

A nightbird settled in the vines, chattering to itself.

"I'm not drunk enough," Alice said, and drank straight from the bottle, felt the wine soak her chin and drip to her chest. "I don't fancy him, you know."

Bessie turned to stare. "You're not serious."

Alice shrugged. "He's a picture, I don't deny it, but . . . I don't know what I could do."

"Just remember Harry the way he was, dear. And look at him now."

The bottle was empty.

A train.

A shooting star.

Alice hugged her friend goodnight and watched her stagger home, staggered inside herself and almost fell on the stairs. A knife in her right knee made her gasp when it struck the wall; a sudden pressure in her chest made her pray aloud and hold her breath. And in the bathroom upstairs she stood in front of the mirror and took off her clothes.

Oh lord, she thought; oh god, look what's there.

She turned away and gagged, tasted bile and swallowed, told herself it was the drink and Bessie's natter and there was nothing she could do because she loved her daughter too much.

She dreamt that night of making love, the first time in years.

The next morning she dusted, and stopped when she was unable to look away from her shriveling hands; in the afternoon she went shopping, filled her basket, hobbled home, and stood in the kitchen's

centre, trying not to weep. Wiping her dry eyes with her apron when she heard a car park at the curb, heard a loud scolding voice, and heard the front door slam.

Hannah stormed in.

"Darling," Alice said, "you're not to be home until tomorrow."

"Oh really?" her daughter said, searching the cupboards for a bottle she finally found by the oven. "Well, you tell that bastard that, why don't you. You tell him—"

The front door slammed.

"Hannah!"

"Go to hell!"

"Goddamnit, Hannah!" Douglas marched into the kitchen, glared at Alice and dismissed her. "Hannah, I'm talking to you."

Hannah opened the bottle and poured herself a glass of scotch. "So talk."

"You could at least have the courtesy of looking at me."

Hannah laughed once, a dry twig snapping. "Fuck you, Douglas, and the bloody horse you rode in on."

Alice sidled to the back door as Douglas took a step toward her daughter, fists pressed to his thighs, face dangerously flushed and trembling. She watched them exchange glares, watched the temperature rise in their tempers, and couldn't take it one more minute. She left. She walked to the wall. She leaned over to see the tracks, and closed her eyes at the yelling that drifted through the windows.

An hour.

Two.

Hannah finally joined her, a stone in her hand she threw angrily at the rails. "I hate him," she said tightly. "That bastard, I hate him."

Alice flicked dirt off the top of the wall. "If I say something, you'll not hate me?"

"Go ahead, what the hell."

"You're not strong enough, you know."

Hannah laughed again, another twig breaking. "And you were strong enough for Father?"

"Too strong."

Hannah shrieked.

And Alice knew it was no good then, that the woman was bound to be a target all her life. Douglas knew that, and used her, and

Hannah didn't understand. It was why he was afraid of Alice; she wasn't a target at all.

Alice sighed, glanced over to Bessie's and hoped she wasn't watching. Then she turned to her daughter and opened her arms and smiled. "Come to me, dear," she said softly. "Come to mother."

Hannah looked around, eyes red-rimmed and full. She tried to speak and couldn't, tried to refuse and didn't dare, took a long and deep breath and let her mother hold her.

"It's all right," Alice said, nearly crooning. "It's all right, don't you worry."

Hannah sobbed.

"I'll put it right. I promise you. I'll put it right, don't you worry."

Hannah wailed.

And Alice held her, and stroked her back, and stroked her hair, and felt the anger; she rocked her and kissed her and felt the anger turn to fear; she held her, and held her, and held her tighter, and held her tight.

Her eyes closed.

She thought, *Douglas*.

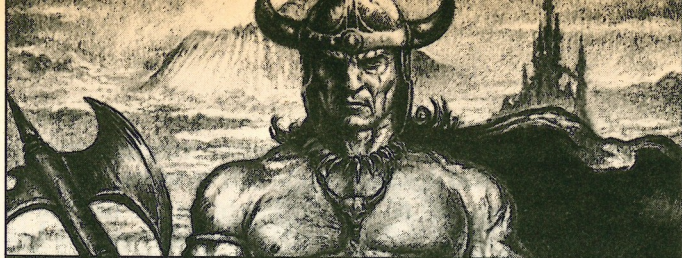
And when the train to London passed, she blinked her eyes open and smoothed the wrinkles from her apron. A glance around the garden—something has to be done, all those weeds—and she walked steadily into the kitchen where she stood at the sink to wash her hands.

Listening, and smiling, and humming to herself.

Until Douglas came in and said, "Hannah?"

And Alice, smiling, turned and said, "I'm here."





Darrell Schweitzer

## INTO THE DARK LAND

*(Darrell Schweitzer is one of the most consistent contributors to Fantasy Tales, his stories appearing in issues 6, 7 and 12 of the semi-professional issues and the first in the new paperback format. Darrell's recent writing includes Pathways to Elfland: the Writings of Lord Dunsany (Owlswick Press), which is the first ever critical work to cover the whole of Dunsany's oeuvre. The author of numerous short stories, critical essays on the fantasy genre and full-length books, his first novel The White Isle (originally published in Fantastic, 1980) has recently been revised and is published by Weird Tales Library. Recent short stories and poems have appeared in Amazing, Pulpouse, Borderlands (edited by Thomas Monteleone, from Avon Books), and Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine. Darrell is the co-editor of the revived Weird Tales magazine and (with George Scithers) Another Round at the Spaceport Bar, a follow-up to their previous anthology, Tales from the Spaceport Bar. One of a number of stories featuring the doomed Knight Julian, Into the Dark Land was first published in Alien Worlds in 1979. We are delighted to give many new FT readers the chance to sample Darrell's distinctive style.)*

For three nights I had dreamed of the lady in white, the hillside, and the hooded rider, and on the third night, at the darkest hour just before dawn, I awoke with the realisation that it was my fate to view all the strange secrets the world kept hidden. And I, who had fled from Christ and all his works, I who had done unholy things, I, Julian, called Apostate, second and lesser of that name, prayed in that darkness to whatever *other* gods might listen, that the veils of life might be parted from me, and a new world revealed. Then I slept and dreamed again, and because I dreamed it the thing happened, and because it happened I dreamed it. Past and future, cause and effect all turned back in confusion, like the serpent swallowing its tail.

On the fourth night, led by my vision, I sat on a grassy hillside watching the rider approach. The sky was unusually bright, a full moon shining through thin clouds, against which the branches of trees stood out like intricate carvings of black jade, each leaf and twig clearly outlined. An owl swooped low over the valley, rising with the slope of a second hill opposite me, searching after mystery.

I saw the horseman coming from a long way off, as I had in my dreams: first a hint of movement in the distance, then a speck, then a shadow, a shape, and the thudding of hooves, all before the man reached me.

"Will you come with me?" he said. "Sir Knight, the tale of your deeds has preceded you. There is need of your peculiar skills in a place beyond the sight of your God. I offer an adventure."

I had no words. In the dream I had spoken none.

"Will you come with me?" he said.

And I mounted my horse and together we rode, overtaking the owl in its flight, at full gallop across the valley and up the other hill. The moon seemed rising to meet us, and a fancy came to me that it was an enormous eye, the iris dilating to the far reaches of the heavens, through which we passed into another existence altogether.

By the light of this moon my shirt of mail, my helmet and scabbard, and the dull bronze cap in which was set the hook where my left hand used to be all shone like purest gold.





*Besides the cape, he wore silver helmet with a visor. (Art: Jim Pitts)*

Atop the ridge we paused and looked down into a second valley, this one filled with mist rolling and glowing below us like some enchanted smoke, as if a sister to the moon were being birthed therein. My companion raised a hand. He spoke a word. I listened, at first hearing the cries of night birds, a dog barking far away, and my own heart. There was no wind. Then out of the mist came a deep sighing which grew into a muted roar like the surf at the edge of an endless ocean. The clouds began to stir in the depths of the valley, and dimly, distantly, I spied rising out of it a dark point, a glistening cone, a cylinder, a sheer tower. Another rose near it, and another, and another. Rooftops broke the surface, then a long line of battlements. A huge, arching gate reared up like a giant's mouth.

I lost all sense of time, but after an interval a city stood before us, gleaming like a sunken hulk dragged up from the bottom of the sea, revealed to the night sky.

"Behold Kelasdrene," said my companion.

"Is this the same of which the poet sang, *Kelasdrene the phantom, more fleeting than the fog?*"

"*More solid than the rock on which the whole world stands,*" he completed the verse. "Yes, it is the same. I am King of this place, and have no name but Kelasdrene for myself. The very soul of this city is the ruler, and of the ruler, the city. Literally. Remember that. It is important."

As we descended the hillside, the King's hood fell back. He wore a crown of silver; his long, thin face was deeply lined, his beard streaked with grey.

The fog enveloped us, no longer glowing as we neared the gate of the city. Chill vapours rose from a river as we clattered over the drawbridge. Here and there exceptionally dense patches hovered, or huddled against the dripping stone walls, like ghosts of the newly drowned, not yet sure where they were supposed to go.

No guards greeted us. No watchmen stood on the walls. The massive gates hung ajar on rusted hinges. Much of the grandeur of the city vanished as we entered it, now replaced by a sombre brooding. There was a feeling of decay over all. The very towers seemed dead. Only at very great intervals was there a light in any window, and these were always very far off.

Somewhere, indefinitely beneath us, a great bell tolled. I felt an unnatural chill pass through my body, as if it were more than an

ordinary sound, and now I was under its spell forever, trapped by venturing close enough to hear it.

At first the city seemed entirely deserted, even if there were a few lights, but then I glimpsed a face in a crack between two shutters, a scurrying form in an alleyway, and heard someone scuffling along the ramparts above us.

And still, from the heart of the city, the bell tolled.

"I have never seen such a place as this," I said at last, and then paused, fearing I had given offence. But the King took none, and spoke:

"Kelasdrene—I, I am Kelasdrene and it is I, and I know—is a ship without anchor, adrift in time and space. This much you must have already surmised. But did you know also that I have been present when the name of Julian was mentioned, when you were a memory, a legend, and then a dream? I have been ahead of you in time. In doing so I have become more like you, you more like me. We share the brotherhood of history's phantoms."

Still without being hailed in any way, we rode into a narrow and especially dark street, and the King dismounted. I could barely see him against the glistening wet pavement as he tethered his horse to a post. I did likewise and followed him on foot. The fog was denser than ever, and by its very grey it relieved the utter blackness. Against it I could dimly make out the form of the man leading me.

I could see nothing on either side or above, but after a time I sensed that the walls were even closer and we were in a tunnel. The stones underfoot were no longer rough, but smooth like polished marble. We walked on. I think we were actually indoors, but the fog was still with us. It seemed that only the two of us existed in all of dim creation. The only other reality was the floor underfoot. The dampness in the air was forgotten.

We resumed our conversation, as if there had been no hiatus.

"Then you must know to what end I will eventually come," I said, intensely excited, since I knew that in this life things are not random, but for a purpose, and surely something was about to be revealed. I felt fear and hope together. Surely I was long since damned by God, but this place was beyond His sight, was it not, outside the universe?

"No, oddly I do not. The ending of the tale is not clear to me. Stories never end, it seems. We wake from them, but they wait

for us, ready to resume when we dream again the dream which is living. Just this morning, if such a term can apply to this place, I looked out my window over the plains of Illium, and Troy still stood. I saw nothing of the conclusion of that story. Another time I came to the shore of an endless grey ocean, a place where bare rock met the unceasing waves, and the sun was red as blood overhead. Again, no ending. I am carried adrift on this stone ship like any other. I am not the teller of the tales."

This struck me as mad, distracted talk, and I wondered if the King's mind were diseased. I asked him a more direct question: "Why have you brought me here?"

"First, to mourn for my daughter, who was to have reigned after me, and taken the soul of the city to be her soul. But before that even, we must sit and eat."

Even as he spoke we came to a table at which two places were set. I was sure we were inside a building now, but the fog continued to hide everything around us.

Places were set, but there was no meat or drink. I looked in askance across the table to my host. He merely pointed to my right.

I turned, and a wine cup floated out of the darkness. I took it, and felt a firm grip released, but saw not the hand that held it. I turned to my left, and glowing against the gloom was a silver plate, on which lay a cooked fish. This also was brought by an invisible bearer. As the King was being served, I thought I spied a black hand and sleeve eclipsing him for an instant as a dish was set before him.

All this did not help my appetite. Was the food unearthly? Would I sleep for a thousand years after a single bite or sip? Or would I be turned to stone?

The King ate without waiting to see if I did or not. Cautiously I joined in, with no ill effect, but not tasting much, considering the darkness, the chill, and the sheer strangeness of the experience.

At last I saw a light approaching from behind the King. A lantern. When it was directly behind him, he turned around in his seat and took it, placing it on the table between us. This time I was sure there had been a black human figure present, and I heard the soft pattering of slipped feet retreating. He was not attended by spirits.

"Ah yes," he said. "You desire more light. So let there be light, as someone else once remarked."

As he spoke, as if by his command, even though his voice had scarcely been above a whisper, more lights appeared around us like stars in a clearing firmament. First two or three, then a dozen, then a hundred.

And all this while the deep-voiced bell tolled beneath us.

Slowly the hall became lighted well enough for me to make out shapes, then details. It was a vast room. I still could not discern the ceiling far above. Here and there between hanging draperies, and in and out of a forest of pillars, faceless men in black went silently, rapidly, tapers in hand, lighting lanterns.

The bell still tolled.

As the light grew stronger I saw that the lanterns hung on the doors of tombs, all of which were open. Dank drafts from within made the flames flicker. A few went out and had to be relit.

And I *knew* my long and dreaded doom had come, and now I sat in the anteroom of Hell.

As it turned out, I was wrong. It was nothing so simple.

The bell tolled.

Now the last part of the dream came to me. Seeming to float on the air, but in truth borne by dark-stained hands, the lady in white, whose form I had scarcely glimpsed before, came out of the distance, until she was scarcely ten cubits from where we sat, and I could tell she was too stiff to be alive, or even a corpse.

"My daughter has arrived," said the King aloud. "Let all lights be lit."

At once the room was ablaze. A thousand lamps flared up. A huge vessel of oil roared into flame. My eyes were dazzled; I covered my face; I thought myself dead in the land of the dead.

When I could see again the fog was entirely gone, and we still sat amongst the tombs, surrounded by hundreds of the folk of Kelasdrene, all of them garbed in black, and also with their hands, faces, and even their teeth painted that colour, so only their eyes were in contrast. Facing us, held upright now in the hands of the multitude, was a crude wooden carving of a woman, garbed in white, and wearing a queen's crown.

I looked in astonishment from face to face, and no one seemed surprised or dismayed. I concluded they were *all* mad. Was this the afterworld of lunatics? No; many were holding back tears. All faces showed resignation, but intense grief also. Even the King's.

"You must understand," said he, "that in Kelasdrene there are no burials and no corpses to be buried, which is why the tombs are empty at our funerals. My daughter, who was the hope of our people, without whom all will surely perish once I am gone, is only *represented* by the statue. In truth we have not even the comfort of her remains to dress and prepare. She has been carried off by Escheoun Vatu."

The name meant nothing to me, but again, as if my thoughts were being read, an explanation came. One whom I took to be a priest, for his robes were more ornate than those of anyone else, and bedecked with black jewels, stepped forward and told a tale of Kelasdrene and Escheoun Vatu. And a lesser priest followed him, and another. And another came, and spoke on, until there had been ten tales and ten tellers. They began with a time shortly after God first opened his eyes to gaze upon the Earth, when the first of all magicians was born in the light of that half-sleeping gaze. This was before the age of Adam and the garden even. The Church tells none of it, and the Jews hint only a little in their secret books. Most of this lore is lost to mankind outside of Kelasdrene. The first magician, whose name was Kelasdrene, took a drop of his heart's blood in his hand, where it dried into a scarlet pearl. From this, using only his fingernails, he carved the city as it once was in its prime, sublime and beautiful. Then, fearing the wrath of the jealous Creator, he masked his work in a golden fog, and placed it in a pocket beyond the universe, where he could rule unopposed as king. From him all the kings of Kelasdrene descended. Out of the breath of his mouth all the folk of that place sprang. It was his soul and his heartbeat which sustained the city, and that of his heirs. And it was a flaw inherent in his scheme of things which caused the coming of Escheoun Vatu.

This spirit was the Lord of Death, who ventured into Kelasdrene from the void beyond the end of the worlds, enshadowing the city from the most ancient times. Perhaps he was admitted at the foolish behest of the people, who wished to worship a god like no other. No one can be sure of this, for it happened very long ago, before there was ever a Redeemer or even an Abraham. It was before any such memories that Escheoun Vatu broke the chain anchoring Kelasdrene to its place in time and space, setting it adrift and even more apart, so he alone could prey off it, summoning the folk into his kingdom with the irresistible tolling



*"My daughter has arrived" said the King aloud, "Let all lights be lit."  
(Art: Jim Pitts)*

of his bell, which rang now for the daughter of the King. His curse was more deeply rooted than any wrought of mere sorcery.

By the last priest a curious thing was mentioned, that those taken by Escheoun Vatu suffered not, but fell into a kind of endless sleep without dreams. Thus there was no true Hell for the subjects of Escheoun Vatu, nor was there any Heaven.

And again I asked, as ideas and possibilities swirled within me, "Why have I been brought here?"

And the King answered, "To be our champion. Your task it is to venture yet living into the land beneath our land, to the place where the great bell rings for our souls, and win back our queen. I think"—and at this he lowered his voice and gazed at me knowingly—"that at the end of the quest you will find your own reward. It is told that such a deed may only be accomplished by *exchange*. One soul taken away, one given in its place."

Deeply I felt within me that this was the part of the dream I had never dreamed before, always interrupted by waking. This was the end of the tale, as had been pre-ordained.

I would make this journey.

The bell of Escheoun Vatu rang on.

## II

Now after many strange prayers were prayed, and the statue of the queen was placed in one of the tombs, and still the tomb was left open, and the deep bell rang throughout the ceremony without pause, slowly, as if the eternal tides of the sea caused the motion, the folk of Kelasdrene began to drift away by one and twos, taking their lanterns with them, until at last the King and I were again alone, and the fog closed in around us. The vessel of oil sputtered as the fuel at the bottom was burned, the dying flames casting huge shadows up the walls.

The King took me by one hand, and led me to the tomb where the statue had been placed.

"You are ready to go now."

And I thought of my weary wanderings through all the lands of the Earth, my sorrows, my wretched, sinful, desperately unavoidable deeds, my anger at the Judge Eternal who made my lot thus, and



condemned to even more when I railed against him, and I said, "Yes."

Then the King spoke four words, and the bell beneath seemed much louder. I remained where I stood, but the cramped space within the tomb seemed distant. I could not see his face clearly, even though now he held both my true hand and my metal hook, and was gazing intently into my eyes.

*"Elam."*

I felt his grip loosen, and then he was no longer with me. At first there was only darkness and fog, as there had been in the city outside. But still his voice was clear.

*"Aelam."*

Now I was falling and twisting through impossible angles, and the bell thundered in my ears. Lights like the lanterns, like the stars viewed from beneath the sea, fled ever downward, leading me on.

*"Olam."* His voice was like the cry of a herald on a distant mountain. Still, as if I were underwater, the mud at my feet sprang up in knee-high clouds at my every footstep, then settled slowly. I was running, without any sense of motion, without any effort, down a barren hillside. The bell was so loud it was the only true thing, all else peripherally imagined, nay, not imagined, but impossibly dreamed. Above me the night sky was clear, and the stars shone brightly, arraigned in constellations I had never seen before, which no man has ever seen while he walks the Earth.

The hillside levelled out. I came to a ruined wall, and a gate, and passed through.

*"Thhoh!"*

This last word was more felt than heard. Silence. Surely the bell still tolled, but where I was no sound travelled.

I was in the kingdom of Escheoun Vatu.

I, Julian, called Apostate after a more distinguished predecessor, had evaded the grasp of my God, and was in the country of Escheoun Vatu. Triumph! Now, since I was not of the blood of Kelasdrene, I could evade Escheoun Vatu too. But before I did, I had a task to perform. In thanks for his boon, I had to fulfill my part of the bargain with the King and his people above.

I wandered across a completely empty landscape until it seemed I knew no other action. So bare was the soil that an occasional stone seemed as rare and as extraordinary as a mountain on the

great Steppes. Somehow I never seemed to tire, but the place was not timeless. There were days and nights of a sort. The sky would turn a dull grey and provide a sort of twilight, then darken again, and strange stars would come out. There didn't seem to be any regular intervals between the two periods. Imagine black butterflies and white ones trapped in a bottle, flapping back and froth, swarming over one another, battering themselves against the glass. These were the days and nights in the land of Escheoun Vatu.

Basically my sojourn below was a long walk. Many poets and painters have depicted the Christian Heaven and Hell in the most elaborate terms, with many levels and stages, with marvels at every hand. Indeed, once I saw the latter in a vision, and I know. Perhaps Escheoun Vatu was less imaginative. Still league followed league of desperate waste. Perhaps his land was as yet so unfilled that nothing more was needed to contain the souls in it. I forgot all dangers and my quest. I tried to make a game of counting paces between those rare rocks at least the size of melons, but lost count. Distance was no more coherent than time in that place. It also occurred to me: the dead of Escheoun Vatu are truly dead, knowing no joy, no pain, no movement. It has always been obvious what hands shaped the towers of Satan's palace of Pandaemonium, what backs carried the stones. Escheoun Vatu simply lacked the labour force.

At last the desert came to an end, and there were sparse grasses over a still, flat, and empty landscape. Then it was no longer empty, I came to a wall of white stone. The quiet of the land seeped into me, and I felt no urgency. I examined the thing at leisure. It was smooth, neither warm nor cold, but solid to the touch. All over it, so that never a span remained bare, were carved stone flowers, and in the middle of each flower was a face. They were not standardised faces like you see on tomb brasses, where the master craftsman commands his apprentices to have three knights, two ladies, and a burger ready by the end of the month. Each of these was an individual, wrought with infinite delicacy and care, so that no two were alike, as no two humans are alike exactly, even twins. One may have a blemish and the other not. One may have eaten more, and grown greater of cheek. And I knew that these were not carvings, but the souls themselves. Each of them slept, their faces utterly blank, without fear or sorrow, or even an awareness of contentment.

In this wall was a plain gate of iron bars, which swung on silent hinges. It was unlocked.

I went in, and found myself in a garden, lushly overgrown with flowers and trees. A placid brook ran through the middle, but the water made no sound. There was absolute silence, utter peace. I wanted nothing more at the first sight of that garden than to lie down and rest, never to reawaken, thus escaping my life and my God. But before I could do this thing I had to remove one last concern from my mind: the queen-to-be of Kelasdrene. I would find her, bring her to the edge of this land, where she could go on to reach her father, then turn back.

I wandered a ways among the trees before I noticed a new wonder. It was like my adventure of the Island of Faces all over again, with shapes of men and women hidden among the leaves, the branches, and swelling with the bark; only there was no pent-up fury here, no suffering. I thought it would not be so terrible a thing to be part of some enormous bough or trunk. Also, unlike the Isle, there was no wind blowing voices through the branches. There was no wind at all.

After the forest ended I entered a field, and here more folk lay. I could tell which had been there the longest. They were slowly turning into beds of flowers, with blossoms growing out of the eyes and mouths, then the whole face, and where they had been thinly spread over the body they became thick, until little of the original form could be seen. Others, newly arrived, seemed at first glance to be just resting among the grasses and flowers, perhaps wearing a garland, but no more.

One of these was the white lady of my dreams, whose image I had seen in the darkened room—the daughter of the King. She was motionless, her face blank, as if her soul had already seeped out into the soil. Flowers were tangled in her hair and the bright faces of them peeked out of her garments, but her face was as yet untouched.

Surely this was the greatest marvel of the realm, that the dream of three nights, obviously a sending of Escheoun Vatu himself, should be so well fulfilled. But there was another astounding thing also. I was at the very centre of the garden, with the lady at my feet, and right before me, swinging back and forth in what seemed to me utter silence, the only moving thing except for myself, was the

great bell I had heard before, mounted between two pillars. There was no bell-ringer. It moved of its own volition, perhaps six feet off the ground.

As if it were whispering to me to lie down and let all things flow from me, the urge to abandon my quest was far greater in the proximity of the bell. All but overwhelming. I actually did go so far as to kneel down, but then my gaze fell on the princess, and I remembered the sorrow of Kelasdrene. It seemed like a vague thing, no more than a whispered summary of a dream, but I remembered it. I have lost all my chivalric ideals over the years except this one: I have never been able to utterly shake my sense of duty. I was on a quest. There was a deed to be done, a promise to be fulfilled.

So, I told myself, I would bear this lady up and carry her to the ruined wall at the edge of the waste. I knelt, and worked both arms under her, careful not to stab her with my hook, all the while using it to break roots, separating her from the ground. I pulled. More roots broke. She was a dead weight, but free.

Then there was a sound. If a pile of bones were tied together into a net or loose drapery, then suddenly lifted and spread out, the bones would rattle. That was the sound I heard. The shock of the noise brought me out of my dreamy stupor. I was alert for danger.

Rising up to one side, farther away from the bell than I, was a thin shape. A man, but so fragile in appearance that beneath his billowing cape—billowing with some wind from within himself—he hardly seemed material.

Besides the cape he wore a silver helmet with a visor. A skeletal hand raised the visor, revealing a faintly sparkling mist within, but no face. Still I sensed there was something there, eyes, a mind, an intelligence. This could be none other than Escheoun Vatu himself. I wondered how many had ever seen him while they yet lived.

The other hand held a long, thin sword, a needle of grey-white bone.

*"Put that one down, and you shall sleep by her side."*

The voice was like rustling leaves, but I did not hear it. It was inside my head, directly in my mind.

"I have sworn to take her away. When I am done I shall leave myself in her place."

*"Why should I accept only one, when I can have two?"*

Neither the King nor I had foreseen that.

And Escheoun Vatu came forward slowly, rattling, billowing, his sword pointing.

I set the lady down and drew my own sword, which was made by mortal hands out of ordinary steel.

Our blades touched, and a numbing shock ran through my arm. My weapon was hurled from my grasp by a mere flick of the other.

I backed away from the death god, toward the bell.

*"Why do you avoid me? What is there to fear? Soon you will be beyond fear."*

Still I backed away. Still he advanced, rattling.

*"Is this not what you truly came for?"*

At that instant time seemed to stop, and I thought more things than a scholar can write in a hundred books. I thought that even rage and pain are true feelings. They are living. To be without them is to be as insubstantial as a puff of steam, rapidly dissipating into nothing. Could I, who had lived so intensely, come to this? I think it was fear and courage working hand in hand which made me realise I really did not want to die, that the very notion was a childish, cowardly recourse. I wanted to go on, no matter what the circumstances. I knew I had to continue my defiance of all things. There was also my duty. I had to accomplish something. I had known for a very long time, since the beginning of my wanderings, that more than anything else I feared dying for nothing in some futile gesture, and leaving great deeds undone. Horatius at the bridge is my idea of martyrdom, not Christians in the lion pit. If I were to touch the tip of the bone-coloured sword just now, the lady would remain where she was, Kelasdrene would pass away, and what would all my previous adventures have amounted to, when weighed together?

Nothing. Meaningless oblivion while still living is far worse than a well-earned death, and that would be what my life would become, even if only in retrospect. The prospect of knowing this appalled me.

Escheoun Vatu slowly approached. I backed under the bell itself, ducking down to avoid the swinging edges.

I was within reach of the death god. He drew his sword back for the final stroke. I caught a subliminal glimpse of the blade flashing my way.

At that very second, almost without knowing what I was doing, I leapt straight up, into the bell. I caught the clapper with my arms and pulled myself up. I slipped my hook through the chain which held it, and clung desperately. I was slammed into the side of the bell by the weight of the clapper, just as Escheoun Vatu's sword passed beneath my feet. Ribs cracked, and all the breath was knocked out of me, but mostly because of the tangled hook I held on. Of course my legs fell limp in my weakness and pain, and my feet hung beneath the edge of the bell. My opponent could have gotten me with a second stroke, and that would have been the end.

But he didn't. I hit first one side of the bell, then the other, and the second time my right elbow smashed into the metal. In a sudden burst of pain I let go, and with the hook only to support me it came loose, and down I tumbled, minus hook, with the stump of the left wrist yanked raw.

Escheoun Vatu stood completely motionless when I landed at his feet. The bell had stopped. I had muffled it with my body. Thus he could no longer call the living into the land of the dead. He was powerless.

### III

I took the lady in my arms and carried her out of the garden and across the waste. As we neared the end of it she began to feel warm, and slightly less limp. Then she stirred. The flowers fell from her hair. I set her down beyond the ruined wall, at the base of the long slope. There she opened her eyes, and sat up.

I was too ecstatic at the wonder of this thing to think of anything else, and thus I was like the hero of the old tale who forgot to change the black sails of mourning for white, and thus brought on tragedy after his triumph.

"Look!" she said, pointing up the hillside. "It's Father!"

Indeed it was. He came lurching stiffly down toward us. I hailed him, but he made no reply. Even when he was very close he stumbled by, taking no notice of us. His face was devoid of any awareness, his eyes turned up so that only the whites showed. His head bobbed loosely on his shoulders. There was a rope around his neck.

When we got back to Kelasdrene we learned, amid weeping at the uselessness of it, what had happened. The King had watched

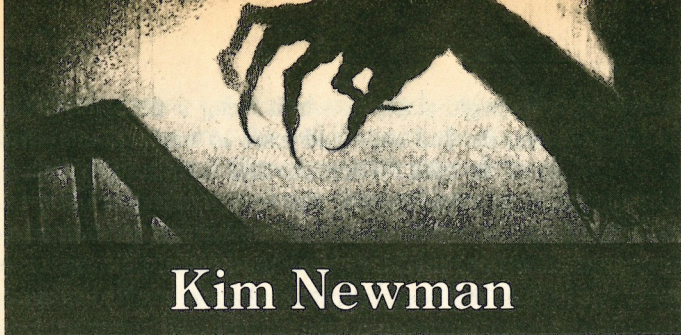
our progress in a magic glass, in which living souls appeared as tiny candle flames. He had expected mine to wink out, and that of his daughter to be relit. When the bell had stopped ringing he had wondered, but not known, the true meaning of it, for he was too distraught with sorrow and the suspense of the venture to think clearly. When he saw both of us beyond the wall, alive, he cried out that he had been betrayed, that we were attempting the impossible and the full wrath of Escheoun Vatu would be upon the city. Therefore he had hanged himself to set things right, to exchange his soul for that of his daughter.

That is exactly how I refused to allow myself to die. But the King's deed took greater courage than I have ever had. He is the true hero of this tale.

Riddle me this, said I to myself, what does it mean? Does it mean anything? I think it is a taunt from on high. No, no, you can't quit the game now. Your very nature won't let you, and by that you are trapped. You'll go on and on. Your life and your sorrows are not over yet. You amuse us too much with your rebellion, Julian, and with your despair. No rest for you.

On and on. Riddle me this: Did I wake or dream when I rode from that timeless city afraid that I might emerge into a world a thousand years beyond my time, only to look over my shoulder as I rode and see beneath the bright midnight sky, beneath the moon, galloping up the slope I was descending, a one-handed knight and a hooded rider?





**Kim Newman**

## **THE MAN WHO COLLECTED BARKER**

*(Kim Newman, regular film reviewer on Channel 4-TV's Box Office, has recently updated his critical history of the horror film from 1968, Nightmare Movies (Bloomsbury/Crown Harmony), first published in 1984. Two novels currently available are The Night Mayor (Simon & Schuster), a solipsist piece of SF set in a 1940s dreamworld, and Drachenfels (GW Books), a hack-and-slash fantasy rewrite of Gold Diggers of 1931, published under his pseudonym 'Jack Yeovil'. Further Yeovil novels are due, in collaboration with Eugene Byrne: Demon Download and Krokodil Tears are already written, about a nun who exorcises computers and a juvenile delinquent messiah respectively. Further titles will include Comeback Tour (about Elvis Presley and the Strategic Defence Initiative) and United States Calvary, the apocalyptic finale to a mega five book sequence! These novels are set in an alternate future and blend high speed car action, Lovecraftian horrors, The Roman Catholic Church, Westerns and lots of sick jokes. . . . Kim's short story Famous Monsters was selected by Gardner Dozois for his annual Best SF collection (Robinson), and non-fiction work includes contributions to The Virgin Film Yearbook and The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Film, plus a follow-up to the aforementioned Nightmare Movies and an as-yet-untitled book on*





*The nose was flattened, the lips and eyelids sewn shut with thick black thread. (Artist: Clive Barker)*

*Western Movies. He is currently working on Jago, a 'really big' horror novel about millennialist panic.)*

Sally Rhodes let Wringhim pick her up in the Dealer's Room, and willingly accompanied him back to the house in Lodovico Street. He matched perfectly the description the Australian's people had given her, down to the sharkskin suit, watery eyes and William Powell moustache. She spotted him straight off, flicking through a stack of *Spicy Mystery Stories* magazines at one of the stalls. She had done enough research in the past week to pass herself off as one of these bizzaros, and engaged him in conversation. He was only too keen to brag. She had the impression he hadn't ever talked with a real, live girl before. That gave her an advantage. He was too pleased with her interest in him to question it. She dropped a few names, and he stooped for them.

"Dennis Etchison? Now, there's a thing. I have every story he ever wrote, in the magazines they originally appeared in. *Men's* magazines, mostly, if you get my drift . . ."

Sally smiled. "That must give you an unbeatable pick-up line." He didn't get it. "You know, 'come up and see my Etchisons'?"

He still didn't get it. She decided to abandon irony as a tool in this case.

Wringhim started to tell her about the three issues of *Vault of the Strangler* missing from his collection. He seemed to take their absence personally. His eyes glowed like neons, and his voice took on the exact lascivious tone of the husband in *Gaslight* talking about the hidden rubies. He recited the names of obscure pulp writers in an unholy litany, "Seabury Quinn, Arthur Leo Zagat, Justin Case, Otis Adelbert Kline, Robert Blake . . ." His long fingers played over the yellowed edges of the stack of pulp magazines in front of him, curving into claws as he flicked an issue open to scan a contents list. He all but slobbered over a faded cover picture of a voluptuous girl, clad in two cobwebs, being consumed whole by a hungry plant. Unmarried, the file had said, no personal ties. It was easy to see how he had sublimated his procreative urges.

Later, in Lodovico Street, Wringhim produced a huge keyring and dealt with the triple locks on the door of the Collection Suite. She expected a dusty morgue with piles of ancient, rotting books, and skeletons of long-missing persons scattered on stone floors.

She got a striplit, modern library, with free-standing shelves of bright-spined paperbacks arranged alphabetically by author, while the more dour hardbacks were behind glass against the walls. Many of the spines had embossed skulls, ghosts, severed hands, full moons behind clouds, bats. Titles were written in dripping blood, or green slime, or monkish gothic script.

"I have every book Arkham House ever put out, all personally signed to me by the authors."

She thought that wasn't possible, but merely nodded, trying to look interested.

"And here, Miss Rhodes, I have a complete set of Ramsey Campbell's works."

"The books look a bit . . . well, scruffy," she said.

"Yes. I've coated them with dirt from the gutters of the streets in Liverpool where Campbell was living when he wrote the books. It's personalised touches like that that make any given item unique. You notice the red smudges on the binding of that American *Incar-nate*?"

Indeed, she had. "Yes, is that . . .?"

"Strawberry jam. Smearred by Tamsin Campbell, the author's own daughter. That would nearly triple the worth of the volume, of course. As I was saying, the personalised touches always add to the value."

"Hmmm, interesting," she murmured. The profile the Australian had put together didn't quite convey how many cowboys short of a posse Wringhim was. He had no record, but that didn't make him clean. He had independent means, which covered a multiplicity of indulgences. She was beginning to get a feeling about this lead. Not a nice feeling, but a useful one. Perhaps she would be able to report back to the Australian tomorrow after all.

"What's through here?" she asked, indicating another multiply-locked door.

"Ah, that's the centrepiece of my collection. That's where I keep my Barkers."

"Clive Barkers?"

"Of course. He's the most collectible of the moderns, you know. There are so many special editions, so many variants . . ."

"And your collection is complete?"

He smiled, and she noticed his ratty little foreteeth poking out from under his double-slash of a moustache. "But of course, Miss Rhodes. You must come and see."

More keys ground, and the door was unsealed. The windowless room beyond lit up automatically, like a fridge. The light was ghostly, slightly glimmering.

"Special conditions operate in here. The lighting is calculated not to fade the dustjackets. All my Barkers are mint, Miss Rhodes, mint."

It was cold. Doubtless, another preservative measure. Three walls were a neutral battleship grey, the fourth consisted of a ceiling-high set of bookshelves. Neon strips hummed on the ceiling. Opposite, the shelves was a divan. She got the impression that he spent a lot of time in the divan, just looking at his collection.

"Come in, come in." She followed him into the Barker room.

He stood by the shelves, and indicated a set of books apart from the rest, on a shelf by themselves.

"Here I have all the editions of the *Books of Blood*. The first three volumes, of course. The others are down there. To a true collector, volumes four to six are immeasurably less interesting. I have them, but they aren't quite the thing . . . aren't quite *special*, if you get my drift. The first three books are where the action is. And I have *all* the action in the field, *all the action*."

He was evidently proud of the accomplishment.

"Surely, there can't be that many," she prompted.

"Ahh, but there are, Miss Rhodes, there certainly are. These are the original 1984 Sphere paperbacks with the twisted photographs on the cover. The first United Kingdom edition. Signed, of course, in red ink, inscribed personally to me, and dated before the official publication. As it happens, these are the first three copies to roll off the press . . ."

Gently, he pulled one off the shelf, and opened it to display the inscription. "To Dave, thanks for your enthusiasm, Clive Barker," it said. There was a picture of a zombie with a pencil moustache and no eyes under it.

"What's the smudge?"

He looked again. "Ahh, an interesting story. When he was signing, Clive used my pen. I have an antique fountain pen, and

the nib slipped a little. He cut his finger and bled onto the page. You've no idea how much more collectible that makes this book. No idea at all."

Sally could have sworn she heard subliminal organ music under the eternal whirring of the extractor fan. This room didn't feel like a tomb, it felt like a morgue. And Wringhim was displaying his books as one necrophile coroner might show off his latest conquest to another, pulling out the gurney and throwing back the stained green sheet with a magician's flourish.

"And here are the reprint paperback editions, with Clive's own covers. And the Sphere library hardbacks, and the Weidenfeld and Nicolson general issue hardback. This is a set of the 1985 Weidenfeld and Nicolson limited edition, boxed and signed naturally. And the American Berkley editions, paperback and hardback, with variant covers. This is the Berkley uncorrected proof of Volume II, with the plain spine, put out in April 1986. This is the 1988 Sphere trade paperback omnibus volume, and the 1988 Ace/Putman American equivalent. These are the two variant cover *Scream/Press* editions, 1985 and 1986. And, of course, there's *Libros Sangrientos* from Spain, *Das Erste, Das Zweite and Das Dritte Buch des Blutes* from Germany, *Tunnel van de Dood* and *Prins van de Duisternis* from Holland, *Livre de Sang*, from France, and the ideographed Japanese editions. The one in the can is a special German edition with a warning sign."

"And those books to one side?"

"Ah-hah, my *special* prizes," his eyes shone again, with all the fervour of a scientologist describing the earthly manifestation of L. Ron Hubbard. "This is the special signed, numbered, limited 1985 *Scream/Press* edition, illustrated by J.K. Potter, bound by Kristina Anderson. Soon after, something horrible happened to the bookbinder and she hasn't been heard from since. The edition is in full leather red Niger Oasis Goatskin and embossed with gold, signed and dated, with zombie doodle and personalised dead baby joke inscription. The underspine is veined manuscript calf vellum from Germany, dyed red. The signatures are sewn in red linen thread. The endpapers are hand-painted with a Roman horse and English carnival motif, the top edge is stained yellow and painted with a *Grand Guignol* clown's head, the endbands are handsewn in red, yellow and black silk on linen cores, there are tissue overlays

on all illustrations, and the title and copyright pages are splatted in human blood and red acrylic paint.”

“Very nice.”

“But there’s more. Look, here . . .”

He pulled out yet another copy of the first *Book of Blood*, also leather bound, also embossed, presumably signed, dated, doodled and dead babied.

“Something must have gone wrong there,” she said. “It looks a little rough.”

“Ah yes,” he said, his eyes shining again, spittle clinging to the ends of his moustache. “This is a *special* special edition. It’s bound in human skin.”

“Human skin? Isn’t that illegal?”

“Not in Tijuana. The publishers found a doctor who could recommend locals who, although young enough to have unblemished skin, were dying of incurable diseases. By offering to pay a sum to the survivors of these poverty-stricken unfortunates, they were able to convince the patients to have the title, author’s name and publication information tattooed on their chests and backs while they were still alive. Then, after the inevitable took its course, the grateful families handed over the corpses for a surgical flaying, and a skilled book-binder was brought in to prepare a special *special* edition of five sets of the *Books of Blood*.”

This was beginning to sound both unhealthy and suggestive. He opened up the book at random, and she saw red printing on thick pages.

“They found several reams of unmarked papyrus from the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo. They were reckoned to come from the tomb of a High Priest of Seth who was expected to write his memoirs in the afterlife. There’s supposed to be a curse on anyone who defiles its whiteness, but Clive Barker is a notorious iconoclast and the reams were used in the preparation of these volumes. The tooling is done in gold melted down from an Aztec sacrificial idol that miraculously survived the *conquistadores*. The top edge is stained with the hymenal blood of an Arab princess kept fresh after her seduction in a phial by Sir Richard Burton, and traced with Blasphemies in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Coptic script and Pig Latin. It’s signed, inscribed, and doodled on, of course . . .”

“For the text, did they use . . .?”

"Human blood? No, it clots too quickly. This, sadly, is just red ink. Although, funnily enough, by some strange coincidence, when he was signing his zombie drawing . . ."

He turned to the page with the picture, and Sally saw the familiar stain.

"Would you care . . .?"

He handed the book to her. Gingerly, feeling it in the soft meat of her fingertips, she took it. The unique binding gave slightly as she squeezed. It was deeply tanned, and she saw a scattering of moles. The title and author's name stood out. She expected it to smell, somehow, but it was perfectly cured.

"The bookbinder unfortunately had his eyes put out shortly before the volumes were complete, and was therefore unable to appreciate the wonder he had created. One of life's tragedies, Miss Rhodes."

"You have all five sets?"

"No," he replied, "only three. The other two are in the hands of . . ." he spat unconsciously, "*another* collector. Thus far, he has resisted all my offers. But I am certain that I shall eventually prevail on him to part with them."

"But I see five sets in that section."

"Ahh, yes. These two are different. An even more special special *special* edition."

She saw now that these two sets, three uniform volumes each, were lighter in colour.

"What could be more special than human skin?"

"Blood, Miss Rhodes, blood . . ."

She remembered her research. "Everybody is a book of blood; wherever we're opened, we're red."

"I beg your pardon?" Wringhim looked astonished.

"The epigraph. The epigraph of the *Book of Blood*. Remember?"

He looked faintly irritated. "Oh, yes, of course, I was forgetting."

"I'd have thought you would have known the books backwards by heart by now."

"No," he said, "sadly not. I have no *reading* copies of the *Books of Blood*. Each of these is unique, a collectible. I couldn't risk reading them, turning the pages, breaking the spines. *Ugh!* I took the books

out of the library once, and read most of the stories. Very good, I thought."

His fingers strayed along the shelves to the lighter volumes.

"Blood," he whispered. "Blood."

Sally was shivering in the cold now. Even the dead skin of the book in her hand had gooseflesh. Being Mexican, the former owner probably wasn't used to the chill. That organ she couldn't hear was playing *Tequila* now.

"This set, Miss Rhodes, is a unique prize, unique by virtue of blood."

"Go on," she said, knowing she couldn't stop him, "tell me about it."

"A cousin of Clive's, a distant connection, of course, but related by blood. I happened upon this fellow in a Cardiff pub one night. Evidently, he was something of a black sheep of the family. Always cadging drinks by the virtue of his name, and trying to impress barmaids with his relationship to a distinguished author. Clyde Barker, he was called. In his cups, he made the mistake of falling from a dock. He drowned."

"Drowned?"

"From my point of view, most fortunate. If he had walked under a bus, he would have been no use at all, don't you see?"

"The skin . . ."

"Would have been irreparably damaged, yes, Clyde Barker died without means, so I took the liberty of arranging for his funeral. I had to settle outstanding bills with several bookmakers and drinking establishments. I saw to it that he went to his grave in as good a suit of clothes he could hope for. Of course, I wanted something in exchange. But the skin is perishable. It goes first. A good suit will outlast the skin in the ground, any week of the year. So, this edition is bound in the skin of a blood relative of the author's, printed on the palimpsest parchment of a twelfth century black magician's grimoire, signed in red ink, with a watercolour self-portrait of the author as a rotting zombie on the inside front cover, personally inscribed to me, an original still-unpublished sixty line poem called 'Rotting Love' scribbled on the title page, endbands handsewn in hemp thread pulled from the noose used in the execution of Dr Crippen, a spine of weapons grade plutonium sealed in lead, a book-lock that was once part of the famous Iron Maiden of



Nuremberg and finally bled on in a Rorschach pattern by Clive Barker himself. The bookbinder accidently had his hands severed in an accident with a printer's guillotine, and will sadly never work again."

Sally had to take charge of the situation now. Wringhim was raving, too far gone for the police to deal with. She produced her licence. "I'm a private investigator," she said. "The Australian hired me. He's expecting four more books and three movies . . ."

Oblivious, he turned at last to the final set of the *Books of Blood*, edged in gold, bound in what she knew to be human skin.

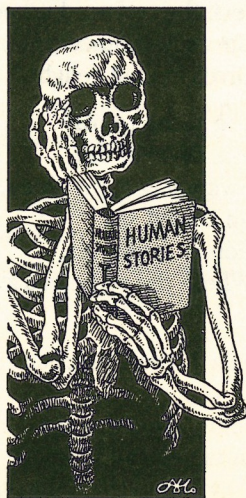
". . . a lot of people want to know where Clive Barker is, Mr Wringhim . . ."

He pulled out the first volume, and presented the cover to her. The nose was flattened, the lips and eyelids sewn shut with thick black thread, but the face was still recognizable.

"And this, is the special special *special* edition of the *Books of Blood*."

She pointed her little ladylike gun at him. He ignored it and opened the book to the redly-blotched title page.

"The hard part, Miss Rhodes," he said, "was getting the author to sign the books after they were bound . . ."





Steve Eng

## *SEA-REVERIE*

**T**ropic islands gleam  
In a glowing dream  
Glimmering pale white,  
Where the mermaid school  
In the rock-rimmed pool  
Dives in mad delight.

There I long to play  
At the close of day,  
Swimming in my sleep,  
In an opaled sea  
Green as gypsy tea,  
Where the sea-elves leap.



Don Webb

## INITIATION

*(Don Webb has had short fiction published in Amazing, Interzone, Back Brain Recluse and numerous other periodicals. His short story Souvenirs from a Damnation was selected by Karl Edward Wagner for The Year's Best Horror Stories XVII (DAW Books), published last year. The unusual fantasy that follows marks Don's debut in FT.)*

I do not like the wind of this place. I do not like the way it howls through the red sandstone columns. I do not like the shapes of the dust devils.

S'drac sent me here, saying that this was a place of testing, a final initiation. It's just an initiation of nerves. It's being a boy again and daring to touch the skirt of the old woman with the evil eye. S'drac is too caught up in ritual. He is like this ruin. I will be a better priest.

What?

Something glinted in the dust devil. I glimpsed brief eyes in its vortex.

Remember the chants, the mantras to block fear. Fear is failure. A priest must accept the unknowable nature of the universe and himself—as a part of the universe, mystery of mysteries. I'll sharpen my khopesh for a while.

The trip to Nalror was easy. The common perils of the Waste—thirst, ghuls, and mirages—were absent. At dawn yesterday—or was it today? S'drac is right, time's more than a little jumbled in the Waste. At dawn a cimet attacked. It floated over the white dune as a curtain of living jewels, each jewel a tiny thirsting mouth. The mantras began automatically, saving me from the fascination of the jewels. I struck swiftly and cleanly into the center of the cimet snagging it like a net.

I swung the khopesh round and around my head. Small cimet jewels flew into the white sand. Soon the centre of the beast hung from my khopesh. I let the bloody mess slide off and squashed it with my boots. I carefully tracked down each jewel and squashed them. Each jewel can grow into a full curtain.

The cimets have gained cunning in my lifetime. Everything tends toward sentience. S'drac says that it is the result of so much magic let loose in the world. The magic keeps forming—building. As even a novice knows, the best way to form is with symbols. The symbols come first. They slowly mold the reality. And for symbols you have to have intelligence. Damn! I'm back to S'drac and his philosophizing.

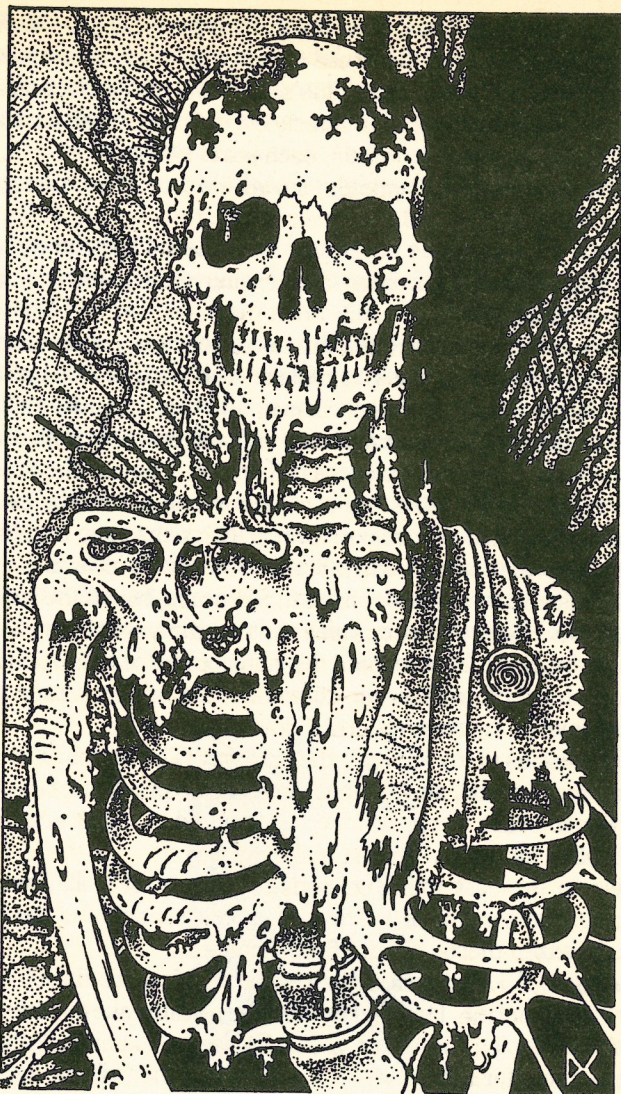
I miss my camel. Initiation rules say that the priest must turn his beast loose when he first spots the ruins of Nalror. Initiation rules say no fire. Initiation rules say do not leave the ruins in the night. I don't know why I'm obeying all of S'drac's rules. Maybe in my heart I believe (or fear) that he's right, the only way to deal with the gods is by very careful ceremony. One wrong step and they'll destroy you. Even the friendly ones.

Dusk will come soon. I must make my way through the labyrinth of falling walls and slanting columns to find the altar of Torsh and offer my evening prayers.

Oh, good. Company. In the first chamber is a pile of bones; bits and pieces of a ceremonial tunic remain. At least I'll have a fellow priest to spend the evening with. The bones are elongated and slightly melted—the work of ghuls. I'll be sure and ask Torsh for the gift of wakefulness.

A cool dry breeze blows in the inner chambers. The sacred paintings are still bright and the walls still stand, albeit at a slight angle.

The gold spiral of Torsh adorns the altar stone. Perhaps the ghuls fear her wrath too much to risk scratching off the gold leaf. I find the inner Silence and then I pray. The four ritual prayers connected with



*Oh, Good. Company. (Artist: Dave Carson)*

the directions come first, then the private personal prayer. At the end of my prayers I pull the circlet of mellar leaves from my forehead and lay it on the centre of the altar stone as a token of humility.

I bow deeply and turn to leave. At the doorway I look back at the altar. The circlet is gone. The initiation has begun.

Suddenly the wind humming through the roof tiles seems very loud.

I make my way to the outer chamber where I'll spend the night. From the nets hanging from my belt I remove the gourds containing the ritual meal.

By the time I've finished the dry cakes and honey and drained the last of my waterskin, dusk has fallen. The wind is stronger now, rising off the Waste as dreams are said to rise from the valleys at nightfall. I sit with my back against a wall and practice quick drawing my khopesh. The wind whispers half-words. I do not like it.

Through a hole in the roof I can see my first star of the evening. It is Aaz, the demon star; not the best of omens. The beginning of fear calls up the mantras and my attention spirals inward.

The wind blows in a sudden gust. Something fell off the roof near my left foot. Before I can examine it, it scuttles over to my foot and bites through the boot leather. I pull the cimet jewel off, hoping I haven't absorbed any poison. I crush its thin, glassy carapace with the pommel of my sword.

The muscles of my left leg begin to relax. The poison. I've got to get up, pace around, stay awake. I think of the priest just beyond the wall whose bones were stretched and melted . . . ghuls can keep a victim alive for hours.

Pace to the east wall, turn, pace to the west wall. Every left footstep leaves a drop of blood. The left leg is numb, but the effects seem localized there.

Pacing to the east wall, I hear someone clear his throat—in the doorway behind me. I turn. In the darkness I can make out the orange of a sacred tunic. The Waste gleams white behind him. Perhaps he too has come for initiation—riding from a further village, unable to reach Nalror by day.

I say, "Greetings in the name of Torsh."

He is silent.

He steps in. Even in the dark I can make out his features. He is I. He wears a glittering cloak of cimet jewels. They feast upon his

back. All I can hear is their noisome sucking of his blood. He raises his khopesh in a gladiatorial stance.

I charge and thrust. He parries. We exchange blows for seconds, minutes, hours . . . as S'drac says, Time is lost here. He is my perfect equal at swordmanship. Neither of us has connected. Something glitters near my feet. It's a cimet jewel. I raise my right foot to crush it. As I shift my balance, he disarms me with a sharp twist. My khopesh flies out the temple door.

It is only four, maybe five feet from the entrance. Surely initiation rules could be bent for four or five feet. If I charge him I should be able to pass on through the door. His cloak is beginning to detach itself from his back. I charge. I glance away from his side, a wave of nausea welling up as I feel several tiny mouths brush my bare arm.

My momentum carries me two feet beyond my sword. I turn and snatch it.

And the Wind snatches me. It's been waiting all this time. As I'm hauled into the air I see the glint of a smile on my opponent's face.

I beat at the Wind with my Khopesh. It's taking me to a great height. It rushes all around me. It rushes inside me. I feel light, tenuous. I am spreading thin, blowing over the dunes of the Waste.

I do not like this place. I am the Wind.





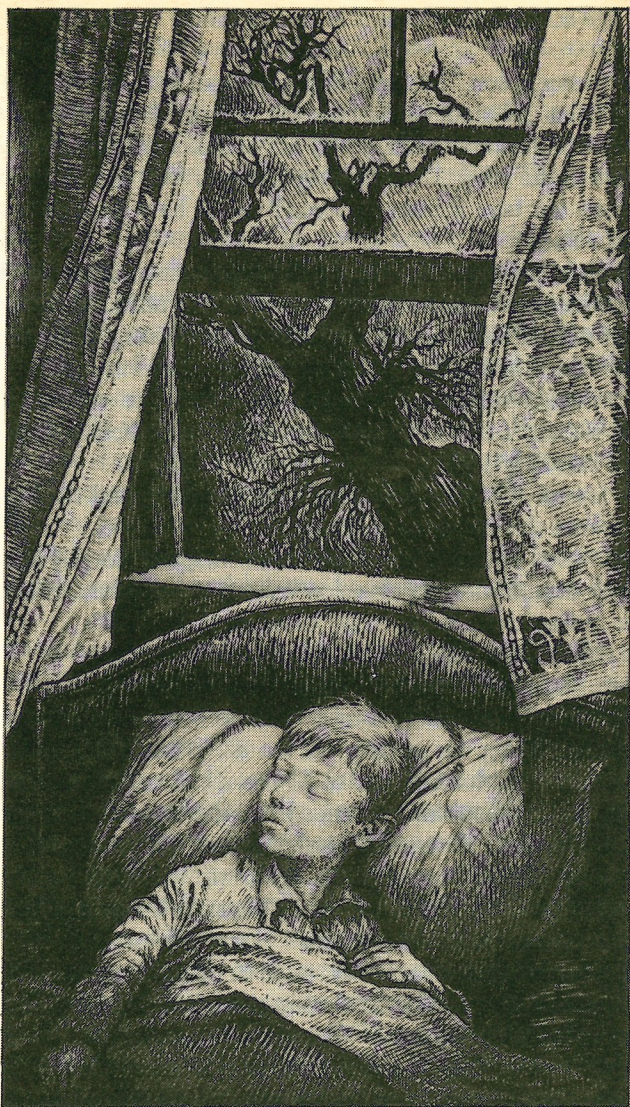
Steve Rasnic Tem

## IN THE TREES

*(Fantasy Tales published Steve Rasnic Tem's short story The Bad People in issue 13 of the semi-professional series, and this story was subsequently showcased in our hardcover anthology The Best Horror From Fantasy Tales (Robinson/Carroll & Graf). Steve's first sale was to Ramsey Campbell's innovative anthology New Terrors (Pan Books, 1980) and in the intervening years he had established himself as one of the best writers of oblique horror around. His short stories and verse have appeared in Rod Serling's Twilight Zone Magazine, Whispers, Weirdbook, Fear, Shadows, Night Visions, Halloween Horrors, The Cutting Edge, Tropical Chills, Tales By Moonlight II, Blood Is Not Enough and Scare Care. More recently the author has had two novels published, The Excavation and Deadfall Hotel, and we are proud to present the following story by one of the horror genre's premier stylists.)*

It was a good climbing tree, a good climbing tree for a good boy. And Will's son was a good boy. A wild boy, sure, but a good boy, a beautiful boy. A boy like Will himself could have been, if only he hadn't had to grow up so quickly. The fact was, Will had never been very good at being a boy. He'd never had the knack. At his





*The Moonlight had planted silver flames in its branches. (Artist: Martin McKenna).*

son's age he'd been cautious and forced, an old man in the soft skin of a boy.

"Go to sleep, son," he said softly, a whisper from the old man he'd always been. He stood in the doorway and gazed at his son's head, small face and soft dark hair barely out of the comforter, sunk to his red ears in the pillow. "You need your rest. You can't understand that now, but take it from me, you'll never have enough rest for what lies ahead."

Will could see past the bed, out the window to where the climbing tree stood, its leaves lighting up with the moonlight. Will took another pull off his beer and wished it were whiskey. The climbing tree was a beautiful thing, standing out from the surrounding trees that formed the edge of "the grove"—more like a forest—that spread out from this edge of town seven miles before farm land started breaking it up.

But few of the trees seemed fit for climbing, and none of the others were this close to the house.

"I'm a good boy, aren't I, Dad?" his son spoke sleepily from his bed. But even in the sleepy voice Will could hear the anxiety that had *no* reason to be there. "I try to be good, don't I?"

"Of course, son. You're a good boy, a *fabulous* boy."

"Then don't make me go to sleep. I *can't* sleep."

Will knew this couldn't be true. This was just the boy's natural excitement talking, his anxiety, all the life in him rising to the top that made it hard for him just to lie down and rest, to permit the night to pass without his presence in it. His son sounded sleepier the more he said. He wouldn't be surprised to hear his snores at any second. He had to go to sleep. Sleep was medicine. And he had to take his medicine. Had to grow up big and strong. And bury his old man someday if it came to that.

Will thought about what to say, tried to think about what his own father would have said, and drank slow and steady from the can, now lukewarm in his sweaty hand. "Tomorrow's another day," he finally managed, feebly. "You're young; you have a whole lifetime ahead. No sense rushing it; that was the mistake I made when I was a boy. I was always rushing things."

The wind picked up. The longest of the leafy branches thrashed the window. His son's dark head began to thrash, too, whipping back and forth across the pillow as if in fever.

"Stay still, son," Will implored, his hands shaking, full of pain. "That's no good. That's no good at all. You have to get your rest!"

"I can't sleep, Daddy! I just can't!"

Will moved to the side of the bed. It was a kid's bed, low and small; Will felt like a giant towering over it. "I'll help you sleep," he said, his own anxiety bubbling up at his throat. "I'll do anything I can."

Awkwardly Will dropped to his knees beside the bed. He put the can down on the rug, but it tipped over. Foam erupted from the opening and dribbled over the edge of the rug onto the wooden floor. But Will couldn't move his hands off his son's comforter. He reached over and stroked the good boy's hair, hair softer than anything in Will's experience. He felt the good boy's forehead for fever—not sure he would know a fever in a boy this small. He stroked the shallow rise of comforter that covered his chest and arms.

"I don't want to go to sleep, Daddy! I'm scared!"

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know," the good boy said, thrashing. "I never know." Will wasn't going to say there was nothing to be afraid of; he knew better.

Will looked around the room, for something, anything, that might calm his son down and let him sleep. And let Will sleep as well, for he knew he couldn't leave the room until a night's rightful relief for his son was well on its way.

A stuffed tiger, a bear, a red truck, a pillow decorated with tiny golden bells. His son barely looked at the toys as Will piled them up around his tiny, soft, thrashing head. "Had your prayers yet?" Will asked the beautiful, anxious boy, as if it was still more medicine he was talking about, still more magic. Will rubbed his hands together, prayerful-like, now desperate for another drink.

"No! I'm not sleeping!" his beautiful son cried, his tiny head red as blood, the wave of black hair across his forehead suddenly so like the greasy wing of a dead bird. Will made his pained hands into fists, not knowing whether he was going to caress or strike the good boy.

Will put his shaking hands together and prayed for his son to go to sleep.

"I want to climb the tree!" the good son suddenly cried.

And Will, who had never before permitted it, said "Tomorrow. I'll let you climb the tree tomorrow."

Will sat on the floor in his son's dark bedroom, drinking a beer. He watched the beautiful face—no longer bright red, or dark, now pale silver in the moonlight that had slipped through the open window—as his son slept, dreaming the dreams all good boys dreamed, but which Will, who had grown up all too quickly, had forgotten.

Behind and above the headboard of the bed was the open window, and the climbing tree beyond. The moonlight had planted silver flames in its branches. The boy's head was perfectly still. The boy's head no longer thrashed, but the climbing tree continued to thrash in the wind, making the silver flames break and spread, shoot higher up the limbs of the tree.

Will watched his beautiful son's face, relieved at its peace, but could see his nervous, living dreams torturing the bright flaming limbs of the climbing tree.

Again, the beer had grown warm in his hand, but he continued to drink. Tomorrow his wife and daughter would be back from their trip. Maybe *she* could get their son to sleep. Maybe *she* could talk him down out of the climbing tree. Will had been crazy to agree to the climb—it wasn't *safe*, it had never been safe. He'd never let his beautiful boy climb the tree before, no matter how much he'd begged. Now he didn't understand how he could have given in so easily. He'd change his mind and tell the boy, but Will had never been able to break a promise to his son before.

The curtains floated up on either side of his son's window, flapping severely as if tearing loose. Will hugged himself and imagined his small, good son hugging him, protecting him from the chill wind of adult pain.

It was a good tree, an outstanding tree. Will drank and watched his beautiful son play in the uppermost branches of the climbing tree.

His son was better at climbing trees than he had ever been. His son braved things that had terrified the young Will, left him motionless and dumb. And old, so old the other young boys were strangers to him, wild beasts scrapping in the trees. His son was a much better boy than Will had been. His son had all the right talents for being a boy.

He was a wild boy, but a good boy. The boy loved it when the branches almost broke, bent so far they threatened to drop him on

his head. The boy *laughed* at terror; it thrilled him. Like other boys Will had known once upon a time, his sweet boy had no sense about danger.

The boy shook the upper branches and made as if to fly off with the tree, laughing. Will imagined the tree up-rooting, then turning sommersaults in the darkening, early evening air.

Behind him, the wife said, "Will, it's getting late. It's time to get him in." Will's wife knew about a boy's safety.

But much to his surprise, Will discovered he didn't want his son to come down just yet. As the sky grew darker and the wind increased Will took pride in the way the boy held fast to the uppermost branches, shaking them like some small, fierce animal, dancing among them like some unnatural spirit. *That's it, son! That's it*, he thought, throwing his head back and permitting the flat beer to gush down his throat. *Don't leave the trees for a life down here on the ground. It happens soon enough—you'll understand that someday.*

A sudden wind caught Will full in the face: his hair stood up and his eyes were forced closed. Another gust knocked the empty can out of his hand. He could almost feel himself up in the tree with his son, just another boy to join that good, wild boy. Will staggered to his feet. The wind took away his lawn chair. He moved forward toward the base of the tree, trying to remember what his clever son had done to begin the climb.

"Daddy, I want to climb, too." Will knew the tug on his pants. He looked down at his little girl, who was using his leg to block the wind.

"You're too small!" Will shouted down. But the wind was dragging his words away.

"You let *him!*" She began to cry.

Will picked his little girl up in his arms. "Too dangerous," he spoke into her ear.

"Will!" His wife's scream beside him warmed his ear. The wind had grown cold; he could feel ice in the wrinkles of his clothes.

He turned. Her face was white, floating in the cold black air. "It's going to be okay!" Will cried against the wind. "He's a *good* boy! A *great* boy! Don't you see? A much better boy than I ever was!"

Will turned back toward the tree, where his son played and laughed, his son's face hot and glorious in the wind, the moon laying shiny streaks into his dark hair. Lightning played in the

distant boughs of the forest, moving toward the house. Will started toward the climbing tree, his wife and daughter clinging to him. But he remembered he no longer knew how to climb, and stopped halfway between the house and the tree.

His beautiful son stopped laughing and stared down at Will. Will brought a nervous hand up to his lips, then realized he had no beer. He felt a sudden panic as he knew his son had seen what life was like back on the ground.

Lightning began to ripple the trees. Up in the highest part of the tree, his beautiful son laughed and started climbing higher.

It was a good climbing tree. A wonderful climbing tree. Will had taught his good son not to be afraid to do things. Will had taught him the lessons Will had never known. Will had taught him not to be afraid to live.

"No!" Will cried out to the trees. "Come back! It's not safe!"

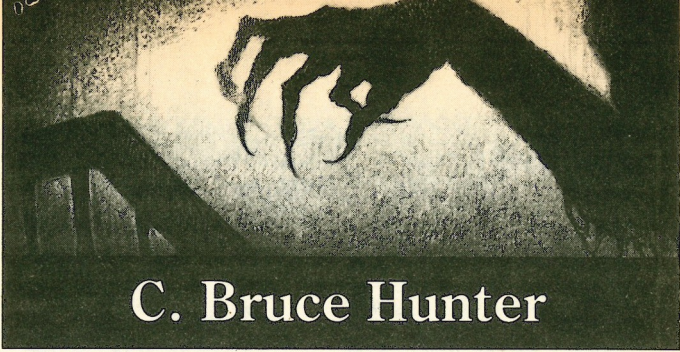
But in the trees there were boys laughing and playing, unafraid and with no sense of danger. Dark hair flew as the boys climbed higher, pushing and wrestling in the weak, thin upper branches of the forest. Lightning bleached their hair. Wind and electricity gave them wings.

"Will! Get him *back!*" his wife screamed.

"He's a good boy, he's a wild boy, he's a beautiful boy!" Will shouted above the wind.

The climbing tree rose up and did a sommersault, the kind Will had always been afraid of doing. The forest floated up out of its roots and shouted. And all the boys in the trees laughed so hard they cried, in love with themselves and in love with each other.

And Will's beautiful son was gone, climbing *so* high, climbing to where Will had always been afraid to go.



C. Bruce Hunter

## THE DEATH AND AFTERLIFE OF SAM MCKAY

*(C. Bruce Hunter is a journalist and educator whose work includes specialty dictionaries, college entrance exams and role playing material. In the fantasy genre Bruce has had stories published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Ellery Queen's Magazine, Whispers and he is a regular contributor to Fantasy Tales. We have featured his stories in issues 11, 12, 14 and 17 of the semi-professional series and the first in paperback format. That tale and issue 17's offering were part of the author's popular "Farmer and Travelling Salesman" series, and FT readers will be pleased to know that the third story in the trilogy is set to appear in the magazine later this year. In the meantime, here is a short tale that should bring a smile to the lips of any writer.)*

Sam McKay was a magazine editor. "Was" is the operative word. You see, one night Sam was sitting in bed—that's where he did most of his work—reading a batch of manuscripts. As he skimmed each submission, he'd toss it onto one of the two piles at the foot of the bed. Manuscripts in the pile on the right merited a second reading. Those on the left would soon be posted with rejection slip attached.



*He recognised the unfortunate souls who were now roasting before his very eyes. (Art: Alan Hunter).*



It was in this manner that he finished a story and tossed it onto the pile on the left. That's when it happened.

Apparently Sam had rejected one manuscript too many, because just as it hit the pile, a demon appeared and rent him asunder. We won't dwell on the details of the rending, as they're rather untidy, and in any event are not essential to the story.

More important are the events that occurred a short but indeterminate time later. When Sam regained consciousness, he discovered that he was being guided through Hell by a demon of unpleasantly reptilian appearance.

Hell was about what he'd expected. The red glow of burning coals cast writhing patterns on the slimy walls of labyrinthine caverns. And the place was honeycombed with chambers from which myriad screams and moans reverberated. It wasn't pretty.

Still, Sam struggled to keep up with his guide. He wasn't eager to reach his final destination. But he imagined that being lost in this place would be even less pleasant than receiving his just desserts.

So he followed the demon as it slithered into a massive chamber whose floor was littered with beds of smoldering brimstone. There, hundreds of poor souls were being roasted on spits by a motley crew of creatures who busied themselves turning the spits and prodding with pitchforks while their victims twisted slowly in the fumes.

As the demon led Sam through the chamber, he experienced a peculiar sensation. This sensation did not relate to the pains of eternal damnation—that would come later. This particular sensation was the feeling that he recognized the unfortunate souls who were now roasting before his very eyes. That is, as much as he could recognize faces that had taken on permanent distortions from endless torments.

Nevertheless, Sam was sure he recognized them. Then it came to him. These unfortunate visages belonged to many of the editors he had seen over the years—some in person and others only in old photographs.

"I know some of these people," he exclaimed, half aloud.

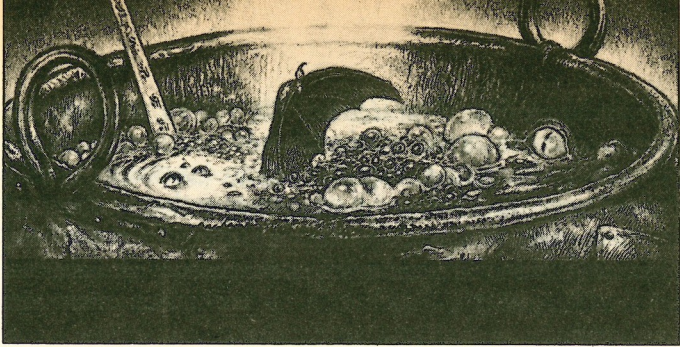
The demon stopped slithering and looked quizzically over what passed for its shoulder.

"I know them," Sam repeated. "Aren't . . . er, weren't some of these people editors?"

"They were," the demon said. "This is our 'editor's suite'."

"You mean, *all* the people here were editors?"

"Only the ones on the spits," the demon said. "The ones doing the turning and prodding were frustrated writers. But don't say anything to them. They think they're in Heaven."



## THE CAULDRON

Last issue in this column we promised to reveal how *Fantasy Tales* would reach an even larger readership in 1990. Well, the plans are now finalised and we can proudly announce the launch of our American edition from publishers Carroll & Graf. In the past, U.S. fans have obtained their copies of *FT* either through subscriptions or the often unreliable specialist outlets. However, from this number onward the magazine will reach a much wider audience across the Atlantic. So watch out for us on the stands from now on!

In previous editions of *The Cauldron* we've been pleased to present the *Future Fantasy* column by the very knowledgeable Mike Ashley, previewing the new and forthcoming fantasy and horror titles, and the *Cover Artist* profile, presenting a biographical sketch of the illustrator gracing the cover of *FT*. These features will continue, of course, along with the popular *Fantasy Calendar*. But we are also adding a new column to our regular line-up: *FT Forum* will allow a professional author or editor the opportunity to speak freely, to be controversial about a particular subject, to make criticisms or sing praises. So get ready for the sparks to start flying in each issue . . .

One half of the *FT* editorial team, Stephen Jones, and premier horror writer Ramsey Campbell have teamed up to produce an

annual anthology, *Best New Horror*. The editors are looking for the cream of horror fiction previously published in any one year. The first book will reprint stories that appeared between December 1988 and December 1989, and if you are an author or editor who thinks there might be something messrs Jones and Campbell could possibly have overlooked, then please send a copy of the manuscript and bibliographic details to 130 Park View, Wembley, Middx HA9 6JU, England.

Did you know that 1990 marks the centenary of famed horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890–1937)? To commemorate this important event, regular *FT* artist Dave Carson has produced a stunning quality T-shirt printed black on white. Sizes are large and extra large and each shirt is only £7.95 (post free in U.K.). The H.P. Lovecraft Centenary design is also available in the form of a superb quality print. Available in a 100 copy Limited Edition signed and numbered by the artist for £3.50 or a Signed Edition at just £2.00, no Lovecraft fan will want to miss these collector's items. All cheques should be made payable to 'D.C. Designs' and sent to: D.C. Designs, Flat 10, Block J, Peabody Estate, Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2EN, England.

## COVER ARTIST

Jeff Potter was born in Riverside, California in 1956. The son of a military father, he grew up in the South. At high school he consciously avoided art classes but developed his own burgeoning skills in line drawing and photography. Upon graduation he worked as a retoucher for a photographic laboratory, using his airbrush to create ever more bizarre advertising images and portraits.

"I eventually grew weary of catering to these weird vanities," he explains, "so I started digging scrap prints of people out of the garbage and I would airbrush their clothes off or give them coneheads."

His first serious attempts at horror illustration appeared in two volumes of *Tales of the Werewolf Clan* by H. Warner Munn (Donal M. Grant, 1979/1980), but it is his work for the Californian specialist publisher Scream/Press that brought him the acclaim he so richly deserves. Starting with the Dennis Etchison collection *The*

*Dark Country* in 1982, Jeff has illustrated such highly collectable *Scream/Press* volumes as Ramsey Campbell's *The Face That Must Die* and *Cold Print*; Stephen King's *Skeleton Crew*; Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*; and Etchison's *Red Dreams* and *The Blood Kiss*.

"I've instinctively gravitated toward the 'weird' for as long as I remember," he says. "I started collecting Arkham House books when I was 13. I was initially attracted to the work of Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith but gradually grew to like a more modern strain of horror."

For Arkham House his distinctive montages have illuminated the tales of Smith, Lucius Shepard and Michael Bishop, while in Britain his work can be found gracing *Who Made Stevie Crye?* by Bishop (Headline, 1987) and Campbell's *Scared Stiff* (Macdonald, 1989). His covers have appeared on a wide range of paperback titles (notably DAW Books' annual *Year's Best Horror Stories* series), he has created a two-volume portfolio and several T-shirt designs for *Scream/Press*, and his work can be found in such magazines as *Twilight Zone*, *Night Cry*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Heavy Metal*, *Horrorstruck* and, of course, *Fantasy Tales*.

"I am largely a cinematically influenced artist," reveals Jeff. "I strive to create a stylized movie still, without the movie. I love photographing people, and I like to look for different emotional perspectives in the facial expressions of my models."

"Many painters paint from photographs, or hire a photographer to create photos that they can paint from. I feel that what I'm doing is the next step toward combining art and photography—a logical progression."

Study our cover image again, and we think you'll agree that J.K. Potter blends dreams and nightmares in a unique and imaginative style that puts him firmly at the forefront of modern fantasy illustrators.

## 1990 FANTASY CALENDAR

**April 13–16: Eastcon.** The UK science fiction event of the year — not to be missed! Held at the Cobden Hotel, Birmingham,

Guests of Honour include acclaimed authors Iain Banks and Nigel Kneale, fan Anne Page and artist SMS. Membership is around £20 attending/£9 supporting, from 15 Maldon Close, London SE5 8DD, England.

**April 13–16: Danse Macabre.** The 29th Australian National SF Convention, held at the Diplomat Motor Inn, St. Kilda, Victoria Australia. Guest of Honour is fantasy/SF author George R.R. Martin (*Fevre Dream*; TV's *Beauty and the Beast* etc.), and you can get more details from Box 273, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia.

**April 19–22: 17th National SF Convention.** How about a weekend break to meet French SF fans? The country's biggest convention is being held at the Jacques Brel Cultural Centre, Thionville, France. Attending membership is 200 FF to: Raymond Milesi, Thionville SF, 8 cours De Latre de Tassigny, 57100 Thionville, France.

**April 28–29: Space City: The Blake's Seven Convention.** Old SF TV shows never die, they continue on as media conventions! Held at the Abbots Well Hotel, Chester, this will cost you £28 for the full weekend or £10 (including T-shirt) supporting from Sue Christian, 14 The Carters, Copy Farm, Netherton, Merseyside, L30 7QW, England.

**May 11–13: Horrorfest '90.** Holiday In, Denver 1–70 East is the location for this gathering of horror fans. Guests of Honour include writers Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Edward Bryant and editor James Van Hise. Membership is \$25 to Horrorfest, Box 7652, Riverdale, IL 60627–7652, U.S.A.

**May 25–26: Fanderson '90.** For everyone interested in unconvincing string puppets and wobbly models, this is a celebration of all Gerry Anderson's work (*Thunderbirds*, *Captain Scarlet* et al) to be held in central London. Attending membership is around £25 and you can get further details from 50 Albion Road, London N16 9PH, England.

## FUTURE FANTASY

by Mike Ashley

With this column we expand our coverage to include forthcoming American books as well as British. Widening our scope doesn't allow much room for chat. I've concentrated on the titles that I think will be of general or specific interest. Even then there's not far short of a hundred to cover. So straight on to the new releases.

As always publication details may be subject to change. Note also that I only detail books released in the period February to May 1990. Some British books may have had prior publication in the United States and *vice versa* but dates are only given if published in this quarter. I've used the abbreviations: hb for hardback, pb for paperback and tp for the large format trade paperback. I've also used a rating system as follows:

- \*\*\*\*\* Essential, don't miss it
- \*\*\*\* Very promising, look out for it
- \*\*\* Worth considering, depends on your taste
- \*\* Not so sure, check it out first
- \* Up to you, I won't bother with it

## SEASON'S SPECIALS

\*\*\*\*\* **The Bad Place** Dean R. Koontz (UK, Headline hb, March). Major new horror novel from one of the field's top talents. Frank Pollard finds when he sleeps his body takes on another life. He hires detectives to help him and they discover the secret of the evil that is threatening Frank.

\*\*\*\*\* **Carrion Comfort** Dan Simmons (UK, Headline tp, April). A monster of a book (800+ pages) where a circle of mind vampires, themselves intent upon evil, find themselves contending all the other evils of the world. Simmons is one of the great new writers. Look out also for his SF horror novels *Hyperion* and its sequel *The Fall of Hyperion* (US, Doubleday Foundation hb, March).

- \*\*\*\*\* **Cambio Bay** Kate Wilhelm (US, St Martin's Press hb, March). Despite winning several awards I don't think Kate Wilhelm has received sufficient recognition for her talents from a wider field of readers. Here she treats us to the strange events in a special Guest House in the mysterious Cambio Bay on the Californian coast which is wrapped deep in the legends of the American Indians.
- \*\*\*\* **The Eye of the World** Robert Jordan (US, Tor Books hb/tp, February). You'd think the last thing we need now is another *Lord of the Rings* clone. But here Robert Jordan, hitherto better known for his Conan books, has launched his new Wheel of Time trilogy with sufficient power, zest and intrigue to thoroughly entertain. I only wish he hadn't called his version of the orcs "trollocs" as I'm sure this will soon become a new fantasy oath!
- \*\*\*\* **Castleview** Gene Wolfe (US, Tor Books hb, April). Hard to think of Gene Wolfe writing an Arthurian novel but needless to say it's different. In the small Illinois town of Castleview the phantom castle that gives the town its name is witnessed on the night of a murder, and the darkening web of Morgan Le Fay is gradually cast.
- \*\*\* **The Stand** Stephen King (UK, Hodder & Stoughton hb, March). Just when you thought you'd read all of King's meganovels, they reappear, only bigger. Here, now, is the original version of *The Stand* with much of the edited text restored and running to 880 pages.
- \*\*\*\* **The Knight and Knave of Swords** Fritz Leiber (US, Ace pb, February; UK, Grafton hb/tp, April). 53 years after Leiber completed his first story about the rogues Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, 'Adept's Gambit', the seventh book appears. Still the most stylish of all the sword & sorcery sub-genre.
- \*\*\* **Princes of Sandastre** Antony Swithin (UK, Fontana tp, May). Being promoted as "the biggest fantasy to come our way since Stephen Donaldson", this first volume in the proposed four-volume series *The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse* holds much promise. Set in an alternate 15th century Britain it follows a family fleeing from the wrath of Henry IV and seeking the lost world of Lyonesse.



## A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT

- \*\*\*\* **The Folk of the Fringe** Orson Scott Card (UK, Legend hb/tp, March). Card is currently on top form. *Folk of the Fringe* is a series of five connected stories set in a post-war American where Mormons (Card's own faith) are hunted down as heretics.
- \*\*\*\* **The Fairy of Ku-She** M. Lucie Chin (UK, Fontana pb, February). A charming Oriental fairy tale which traces the journeys of the Fairy of Ku-She in the world of men and dragons.
- \*\*\*\* **Moonheart** Charles de Lint (UK, Pan pb/Sidgwick hb, April; US, Ace pb, May). One of the launch titles for Pan's new fantasy line from one of the more original and lyrical fantasy talents about.
- \*\*\*\* **Strange Toys** Patricia Geary (UK, Corgi pb, May). This is one of those wonderfully weird works that defies description but demands attention. It deals with a girl growing up amidst the supernatural.
- \*\*\* **The Night of the Moonbow** Thomas Tryon (UK, Hodder & Stoughton hb, February). A novel of gathering evil set in a Bible camp on the shores of Moonbow Lake in 1938 who are joined by a mysterious orphan.
- \*\*\* **Merman's Song** Alida Van Gores (UK, Fontana pb, March). Not often we get a fantasy of ghosts and dragons set entirely under the sea.
- \*\*\* **The Undesired Princess and The Enchanted Bunny** L. Sprague de Camp & David Drake (US, Baen Books pb, May). One of the Camp's great humorous fantasies from the pages of *Unknown* reprinted here along with an all-new homage by David Drake.

## HORRORS

This is a strong season for horror novels, especially in March. Summaries where appropriate.

- \*\*\*\* **Nightlight** Michael Cadnum (US, St Martin's Press hb, February). Len Lewis is an odd child with a penchant for photographing cemeteries – and the living dead.
- \*\*\* **The Axeman Cometh** John Farris (UK, Hodder & Stoughton hb, February). About an axe murderer – even Farris had squeamish moments in writing certain scenes.
- \*\*\*\* **Creed** James Herbert (UK, Hodder & Stoughton hb, March). Each new Herbert book becomes progressively more challenging.
- \*\* **The Supernatural** John G. Jones (UK, Sphere, pb, March). After a drug deal that backfires Lance Sullivan finds himself on the run not just from the hitman but from something rather more ancient and deadly.
- \*\*\* **The Revelation** Bentley Little (US, St Martin's Press hb, February). A rising tide of evil hits a small Arizona town.
- \*\*\* **Deadly Resurrection** John McCarty (US, St Martin's Press pb, March). From the author of *The Official Splatter Movie Guide*. A rising tide of evil hits a small Massachusetts town.
- \*\*\* **The Calling** Richard Sanford (UK, New English Library hb, February). With a cover sporting a Bates-type *Psycho*-house – a rising tide of evil hits a remote mansion in the woods.
- \*\*\* **Flesh** Gus Weill (US, St Martin's Press hb, May). A college student in New England has a wealthy roommate with a rather strange family.

Others briefly listed:

- \*\*\* **The Unseen** John Citro (US, Warner pb, March).
- \*\*\* **Rain** Stephen Gallagher (UK, New English Library hb, February) – always a reliable author.
- \*\*\* **Soulcatchers** Jan Lara (US, Questar pb, March).
- \*\*\* **The Devil's Advocate** Andrew Neiderman (US, Pocket Books pb, March).
- \*\*\* **Lost Angels** David J. Schow (US, NAL/Onyx pb, March).

- \*\*\* **Child of Darkness** David B. Silva (US, Leisure Books pb, March).
- \*\* **The Unseen** Guy N. Smith (UK, Sphere pb, May).

## LIGHTEN THE LOAD

After all those heavy horrors the need for some light relief.

- \*\*\*\* **Here Be Daemons** Esther M. Friesner (UK, Sphere pb, February). Friesner's one of the refreshing new talents about. Here a group of misfit demons end up plaguing an archeological dig in Africa. First in a trilogy. Look out for the second in the series, *Demon Blues*, sure to follow soon, and the latest, *Hooray for Hellywood* (US, Ace pb, February).
- \*\*\* **Bride of the Slime Monster** Craig Shaw Gardner (US, Ace pb/UK, Headline pb, April). Second in Cineverse series of B-movie spoofs.
- \*\*\* **Jason Cosmo** Dan McGirt (UK, Pan pb, April). A spoof in the Terry Pratchett style. A turnip-cutting woodcutter is caught in a struggle between two factions of wizards.
- \*\*\*\*\* **Escape from Kathmandu** Kim Stanley Robinson (UK, Unwin Hyman hb, March). This book has everything from the Abominable Snowman to Jimmy Carter!

## SON OF SEQUELS

The series novels and trilogies continue. Here's an update for those keeping track.

- \*\*\* **Monsters and Magicians** Robert Adams (US, Baen Books pb, February). Book 2 of *Stairway to Forever*.
- \*\*\* **The Man From Mundania** Piers Anthony (UK, New English Library tp, March). Latest in the Xanth series.
- \*\*\* **Warlord of Heaven** Adrian Cole (UK, Unwin Hyman pb, May). Volume 3 of *Star Requiem* in the Edgar Rice Burroughs/*Planet Stories* tradition.

- \*\*\*\* **Dead Brass Shadows** Glen Cook (US, NAL/ROC pb, May). Latest in the fun series about private-eye Garrett in his worlds of fantasy. Earlier titles being reissued in the same month – *Sweet Silver Blues*, *Bitter Gold Hearts*, *Cold Copper Tears* and *Old Tin Sorrows*.
- \*\* **The Wishstone and the Wonderworkers** Hugh Cook (UK, Corgi pb, May). And so the saga continues.
- \*\*\* **Troika** Louise Cooper (UK, Unwin Hyman pb, April). Volume 5 of *Indigo* series from last October. Volume 3, *Infanta* has US release (Tor pb, February).
- \*\*\* **Bloodlist** Patricia Nead Elrod (US, Ace pb, March). First in the Vampire Detective series.
- \*\*\* **Ritnym's Daughter** Sheila Gilluly (UK, Headline tp, March). Sequel to the charming *Greenbriar Queen*.
- \*\* **The Halfling's Gem** R.A. Salvatore and **The Wyvern's Spur** Kate Grubb (US, TSR tp, February & March). Latest in *Forgotten Realms* series.
- \*\*\* **The Dracula Caper** Simon Hawke (UK, Headline pb, February). Volume 8 in the *Time Wars* series wherein vampires and werewolves besiege Victorian London.
- \*\*\*\* **The Southern Sea** Katherine Kerr (UK, Grafton hb/tp, May). Latest in *Dragonspell* series.
- \*\*\* **Firedrake** Richard A. Knaak (UK, Sphere pb, March). First in the Dragonrealm series.
- \*\*\* **The Mad Moon of Dreams** Brian Lumley (UK, Headline pb, April). Third in the H.P. Lovecraft inspired Dreamland series.
- \*\*\*\* **The Rainbow Sword** Adrienne Martine-Barnes (UK, Headline pb, February). Latest in the Four Swords series set in an alternate medieval Europe.
- \*\*\*\* **Renegades of Pern** Anne McCaffrey (UK, Bantam Press hb, April). The dragonriders return.
- \*\*\*\* **Sunrunner's Fire** Melanie Rawn (US, DAW Books pb, February). Book 3 in the bestselling Dragon prince series. Book 1, *The Dragon Prince* will be reprinted in the UK (Pan pb, April) along with the release of Book 2, *Star Scroll* (Pan hb, April).
- \*\* **The Warrior Lives** Joel Rosenberg (US, NAL/ROC pb, April). Lead fantasy title in the launch of Penguin-USA's

new sf/fantasy imprint, Roc. Fifth book in the *Guardians of the Flame* series. First four books being reissued to coincide with the launch.

\*\*\* **Sadar's Keep** Midori Snyder (UK, Unwin Hyman pb, May). Book 2 in the Queen's Quarter trilogy.

\*\*\*\* **The Wild Sea** Keith Taylor (UK, Headline pb, May). *Bard III*.

\*\* **Dragon Wing** Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman (US, Bantam Spectra hb, February). Book 1 in the *Death Gate Cycle*. If you can keep up with Weis & Hickman watch out for the UK release of **Rose of the Prophet** (UK, Bantam pb, April), Book 1 of *The Will of the Wanderer* series.

\*\*\* **The Way Beneath** Angus Wells (UK, Sphere pb, May). Third Book of the Kingdoms. Book 1, *The Wrath of Ashar* has its first US release (Bantam Spectra pb, March).

\*\*\* **Shadowfane** Janny Wurts (UK, Grafton hb/tp, March). Book 3 of the *Cycle of Fire*.

. . . and I left a fair number out. I do wonder who keeps up with all of these series these days and how one can fairly distinguish one from another on the shelves. There will either soon be a need for a major remarketing approach or the trilogy/series bubble will burst.

## SHORT SHOCKS

A few worthy anthologies and single author collections for the *aficionado* of short fiction.

\*\*\*\* **Dark Voices: The Best From the Pan Book of Horror Stories** ed. Stephen Jones and Clarence Paget (UK, Pan hb/pb, April). Big-name reprint anthology to re-launch the best-selling *PBHS* series. 13 stories, selected from thirty years-worth of collections, by Stephen King, Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, John Lennon etc. with original introductions by James Herbert, Clive Barker, Peter Straub, Ramsey Campbell, Shaun Hutson and others.

\*\*\*\* **Night Fears** ed. Clive Barker (UK, Headline pb, May). UK paperback of *Night Visions 4* with twelve powerful stories by Dean Koontz, Ed Bryant and Robert McCammon.

- \*\*\* **Liavek V: Festival Week** ed. Will Shetterly & Emma Bull (US, Ace pb, May). Latest in this shared world anthology series.
- \*\*\* **Sword & Sorceress 5** ed. Marion Zimmer Bradley (UK, Headline pb, February). 22 stories mostly by female fantasists including one with the delightful name of Morning Glory Zell.
- \*\*\*\*\* **Demons & Dreams** ed. Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling (UK, Legend hb/tp, February). The massive selection of the year's best fantasy and horror fiction from 1988. 47 selections totalling over 225,000 words. First class.
- \*\*\* **Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences** Ursula K. LeGuin (UK, Gollancz hb, March). Indefinable, unique, idiosyncratic Le Guin.
- \*\*\* **Vettius and His Friends** David Drake (US, Baen Books pb, March). Magical stories set at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire.

## SALVAGED STARS

It's always good that some classics are not forgotten and wonders never cease.

- \*\*\*\*\* **The Devil's Day** James Blish (US, Baen Books pb, February). Omnibus volume of Blish's irreplaceable black magic books *Black Easter* and *The Day After Judgment*.
- \*\*\*\* **The Complete Compleat Enchanter** L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt (US, Baen Books pb, May). Omnibus of all of the Harold Shea fantastic adventures in worlds of mythology.
- \*\*\*\*\* **Sorcerer's Son** Phyllis Eisenstein (UK, Grafton hb/tp, February). I was enchanted by this novel when I read it as a Del Rey paperback in 1979 and it's lost none of its power. It tells of an enslaved demon who enters the world as a knight to father a son, Cray, who must seek the knight and meet its master, the sorcerer Rezhyk.
- \*\*\*\*\* **Bridge of Birds and The Story of the Stone** Barry Hughart (UK, Corgi pb, March). Now at last both in

paperback in Britain. The most delightful books I've read in recent years. Humorous and intelligent oriental fantasies.

\*\*\* **Empyrion** Stephen Lawhead (UK, Lion pb, February). 914-page omnibus of the Empyrion series.

\*\*\* **Schrodinger's Cat Trilogy** Robert Anthon Wilson (UK, Sphere pb, March). Omnibus volume of original trilogy.

And that's it for this time round.

## FT FORUM

*For our first FT Forum, regular contributor and recent British Fantasy Award-winning author Brian Lumley shares with our readers a very personal horror story:*

A few days ago I read a horror story in *Locus* which puts mine in the shade before it's even written, but I'm prompted to write it anyway. The author is Warren Norwood, and for once in my life I'm glad I come 2nd or 3rd or whatever and don't get to win any award.

Last May 24th was hot down here in Devon, and so was I. I'd been radioactive, almost, for a couple of weeks. I didn't know where the heat was coming from, but I sweated a lot. Sweated? I was like the heart of a rain forest. There's more to that statement than you might think.

We (my wife Dot and I) were going to the Greek Islands at the end of the month, but there had been a couple of mornings when I woke up thinking: "I hope we make it." Some dream or other (a pretty doomful, recurrent sort of thing, I seem to remember) had carried over from sleep so that it's shadow was still on my mind as I got out of bed. And on one of these weird, what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-me? mornings, my left arm was dead. It came back to life in a while, so that I supposed I'd been sleeping on it, but still I would find myself thinking, "I hope we make it to Zante."

I had never had much go wrong with me in my life. Fifty-one years had gone by, twenty-two of them in the Army, and the worst I could remember was a wisdom tooth coming up sideways.

External things had chewed me up now and then, but nothing having its source inside me. I'd been in scraps and scrapes, but nothing I couldn't recover from. I have a fantastic recovery rate; my body has always healed very quickly; even the tragedies and smaller traumas we all suffer from time to time—deaths in the family and such, or the worries when your kids grow up and refuse to do it your way—hadn't scarred me so deep that they wouldn't heal. Most of them, anyway.

But May 24th was different. Nobody else did it to me; I did it to me. This is how I did it:

I was wanting to get these two chapters of *Necroscope V: Deadspawn* finished before the Greek Island trip. But there was so much else going on that I just couldn't seem to get to it, and it worried me. I felt stressed. I was behind in writing, oh, a dozen or more letters. I wanted to get rid of my old car and buy a new one for the trip to Bristol for the outward bound flight. I didn't think the old one could take it any more. (The same could be said for me, but I still didn't know it).

Summer was upon us and the garden still left a hell of a lot wanting, including a greenhouse. That was one job I *had* finished, however, but only just, and in a record time of three hot, hectic, sweaty, swearing days at that. In the garden, hammering away, my left arm had sort of died on me once . . . but it came alive again after I burped once or twice.

Indigestion? Maybe I was eating too much or too fast or both . . . or something.

I had these proofs to correct and must get done with them. Also, a couple of American friends were coming to stay a few days. In fact they were already here, from Tuesday the 23rd. And that same day, in the morning, I'd spent just an hour and a half unloading three point something tons of gravel over a six foot wall with a blunt shovel. Dot said I didn't look too good and I said I'd work it off. But I didn't, I worked it on.

On the 24th we had a barbecue. There were ingredients we needed. I ran down to the shop for them; why take the car when you have good strong legs? Heck, it was only a quarter-mile!

At 10:30 or maybe 11:00 in the evening it was till hot and the patio doors stood open under the stars. I talked with the American indoors and Dot chatted to his lady in the garden. I had looked after



my guests, lighted myself an all too customary cigarette and poured myself a customary large brandy. And Jasper, my cat, was asleep. *He*, at least, gets his priorities right.

And then I laughed about something and . . . there was that indigestion again. But bad. And I went to the loo and tried to squeeze myself. I thought, if I squeeze myself hard enough I'll force a burp out. Well, I very nearly forced all sorts of things, but no burps. I took Alka-Selzer (a good thing as it turned out, because of the aspirin) but no burps. And now this lump in my chest was really hurting – like there was a large wire coat-hanger round me and someone was winding it until it was cutting, but on the inside.

Up in our bedroom I told Dot, "I'll be down shortly. Look after them." And she said:

"What is it?" And I said:

"Indigestion." But inside a voice said *I hope I make it to Greece.*

"Should I call the doctor?"

Doctor? What the hell for? Indigestion?

But half an hour later after I'd tried running up and down the garden to shake it loose or whatever, and when I'd started to rock myself on the bed and the sweat was dripping off me like rain – suddenly I thought of my youngest.

"Dot, nothing is going to happen, believe me . . . but I think maybe you should call the doctor." And while he was on his way. "Listen, in the event that . . . you know . . . I mean, if anything—"

"*What?*" Her face was very tiny and her eyes very big.

"—Pay Julie's mortgage off, that's all."

Finally he arrived (actually, quite quickly; it felt like nine months to a year) and squirted something under my tounge. It didn't do anything for me. But he felt my pulse and listened to my chest, and said, "Yes."

And he called an ambulance.

So in a little while there I was in Intensive Care hooked up to a *bip—bip—bipper*; which, just so long as it didn't *bip—bip—bzzzzzz!* I wouldn't mind. And I lay there thinking about the blokes who'd brought me in: how they'd kept smiling at me and chatting with me in the ambulance (where I was doing my best *not* to go to sleep) and looking at each other out the corners of their eyes when they thought I wasn't looking. And I remembered thinking: *These blokes*

*are hoping I'm going to make it to the hospital!* By which time I'd known we weren't going to make it to Greece.

There in IC, I lay in the night and my chest hurt. My bipper made flashes on the screen like a Dean R. Koontz title – *Lightning!* And I thought: *If I watch that long enough I'll be able to see myself die!* But eventually I went to sleep thinking, *Will my chest always hurt from now on?*

In the morning they woke me up and someone said, "How are you?"

"Chest hurts."

"How long?"

"How long have I been here?"

They put something that melted under my tongue and the pain melted with it. And it didn't come back. I thought I was cured. Comparatively happy, I went to sleep for another thirty-six hours. God, I was *tired!*

And when I woke up they took me to a ward full of rusty, busted or bleeding hearts! Where I belonged. And there, over the next ten days, it got through to me, until finally I knew I'd "had one". And I was *really* pissed off with myself. But at least I was starting to learn a few things.

Like one out of every three who go in like I went in don't come out again. There's a statistic for you. And some clever sod in a white coat asked me: "How long have you smoked?"

"Since I was fourteen."

"Here's the keys to my car. Go switch it on, then run round the back, lie down and suck the exhaust pipe for ten minutes. Get it over with in one big go, why not?"

I might have hit him but didn't have the strength. And anyway he was right. Every doctor, nurse, medical student – you name it – I spoke to from then on told me the same thing. I could have chased all the girls I'd chased, drunk all the booze, done all my carousing, eaten all the bad things, and treated my body real rough, but the one thing I shouldn't have done for thirty-five years and more was smoke!

It wasn't any kind of collusion; they weren't ganging up on me and saying let's scare the shit out of Lumley. No, they knew better; knew that God had already done a pretty good job of that! So . . . I haven't had a cigarette since. I'll admit to a drag

of someone else's, but in twenty or more weeks a dozen drags isn't bad.

I came out of there on a mixture of pills including Warfarin (which is rat poison . . . yes, really!) and small pellets of nitro which, I suppose, kick-start your heart if it should ever need it. And I started going for weekly blood tests – to keep an eye on my cholesterol level, blood pressure and clotting rate, etcetera. But like a fool I wanted to know about the etcetera.

"Well, Mr. Lumley, there's a certain deterioration of your plasma . . ."

"Deterioration?"

"Disintegration."

"I'm breaking up?"

"Your blood *might* be. Er, we call it Myeloma—" (Or a word like that, but close enough that I made the connection) "—just a trace."

"Just a trace of leukaemia?"

"It's not conclusive. It's a trace. We'll know better after all the tests."

They took blood, urine, and could have had a bucket of cold sweat, too, if they'd wanted it . . .

The results took time. I said to Dot: "Book our holiday, right? This time we're going." Which was my first real step towards conquering the heights of Pissedoff Mountain.

But . . . after a week of mental toiling I reached the (almost) Unscalable Crags of Inevitability, and for a while I dropped a couple of gears and rested on a ledge. Everything became a drag. You know the Laughing Policeman? I was the grimacing mortician. My body was half-convinced it was all up. It made no difference that I wasn't smoking, that I was eating only the right things, that I was swimming twenty lengths twice a week in the local pool and that *physically* I felt fine, because my confidence was shaken. If I could have a heart attack, why shouldn't I have blood cancer too? And in the back of my head, always there was this little voice asking, "Hey! Are you *really* going to make it this time?"

. . . It was a huge hot Friday in the middle of August and I was in the garden. Dot must have seen my gloom following me around like a cloud—or maybe a shroud—and came out of the house to me looking worried and close to crying. That did it; I lizzarded up the last

great overhang of Pissedoff Mountain, stood on the cloud-shearing peak and allowed myself my first real bout of anger since the attack. Anger, yes – which all that time I'd been taking pills to control! And when I'd raged a while I promised her:

“On Monday, when I go for those results, this is what will happen:

“The doctor will say, ‘Well, Mr. Lumley . . . your blood pressure and cholesterol level are normal. Everything else looks good. You can throw away your Warfarin and start taking an aspirin a day. We don't want to see you for three months. Oh, and your blood is fine; that trace was a negative. Enjoy your holiday! And whatever it is you're doing, keep doing it, OK?’”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” And I meant it. And when I mean something, I mean it.

Now, at that time I hadn't read Warren Norwood's letter to Locus (he was probably still writing it; synchronicity?) but in fact he talks about psychoneuroimmunology, to explain why a patient's *mental attitude* so radically affects the healing process. What it means basically is that if they say you're ill you have to say balls to that – I'm well! And keep saying it until you've proved them wrong. Alas, it can work both ways: witch-doctors *have* willed people to death (or caused them to will themselves to death!) But me: I'm an argumentative bastard anyway – and this time I'd decided the shaman wasn't going to win! *I* was convinced, but . . .

. . . I had only one weekend to convince my body.

Monday I went for my results:

Blood pressure and cholesterol: normal . . . destroy your Warfarins . . . take an aspirin a day . . . your blood is fine; that trace was a negative . . . have a nice time in the Greek Islands . . . and whatever you're doing, keep doing it.

Early October we attended Fantasycon XIV. Not only that, I was the MC. And I was on a panel called: “How Would You Like to Die?” My answers were mainly facetious, but . . .

. . . At least they didn't have to hold a seance in order to talk to me!

Also, I won the short horror story award. But thank God it wasn't for this one . . .

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