

WEIRDBOOK 12



NEW IN THIS ISSUE ----

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
H. WARNER MUNN
EDDY C. BERTIN
BASIL WELLS

VERSE BY
ROBERT E. HOWARD
JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN
BRIAN LUMLEY

PRICE: \$3

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EDITORIAL REMARKS

This issue really pleases us --- with long novelets by L. Sprague de Camp and H. Warner Munn, and a lot of very fine shorter fiction, including two by Eddy C. Bertin (first English appearance of stories that are very popular in their French and Dutch versions), a good story by Basil Wells (torn from the files of the magazine WITCHCRAFT & SORCERY which is dormant if not entirely dead), and appearances by many others whose names should be familiar to you, including Darrell Schweitzer, William Scott Home, Janet Fox, etc etc. And we are also pleased to announce that at long last HOLLOW FACES, MERCILESS MOONS (announced first two years ago) is ready --- the paper cover edition is in print even as I now write, and the hard cover one

should be out several weeks before you are reading these words. The stories are by Scott Home and the illustrations (16 of them, large and small) by Steve Fabian. They are priced at \$5 for the paper cover edition and \$15 for the hard cover edition. The latter is now half sold out (it was issued in only 250 copies) so you ought to inquire quickly if you are interested. CANCEROUS KISSES OF CROCODILES, in this issue, was originally planned for HOLLOW FACES, but was squeezed out by space requirements. The fabulous Fabian drawing for it, though, was put in the booklet as a kind of frontispiece!

Our next "special" venture will be a collection of tales by George T. Wetzel, which Tim Kirk has agreed to illustrate. More on that anon.

Editor's prizes for WEIRDBOOK TEN were voted as follows: best fiction, to Bob Sans Souci for SILVER MIRROR, RED WAR; best artwork, to K. Farrington, for the cover drawing; and best poem, a tie between Walter Shedlofsky (YLALOTHA) and Robert E. Howard (LET THE GODS DIE). One reader wrote in and wondered how I could get the prize money to Howard, if he won, since he has been dead for a generation or more. He must have envisioned a dark room with a glowing brazier over which dollar bills were being burnt to smoke and wafted toward the Elysian fields. A nice picture, but inadequate. No, the U.S. post office does the job; and the money goes to Howard's heirs.

Try not to miss WEIRDBOOK THIRTEEN --- 13 is going to be a lucky number for our readers, for we are celebrating our TENTH YEAR anniversary by putting out a 96 page issue with, we anticipate, quality to match quantity. Send in your subscription or reserve your copy from your favorite fantasy dealer --- today!



The Stone of the Witch-Queen

© 1977 by L. Sprague de Camp

"It was the most comical thing you ever saw. The lion wouldn't eat him; he just came up and sniffed at his leg. Then the beast yawned, lay down, and went to sleep, with Karsakus praying and wailing and the audience shouting encouragement to the lion. So they shooed the lion back into his cage and crucified Karsakus. That is less fun to watch."

The speaker was Plotia, the plumply pretty daughter of Manetius Nisar of Ausonia. She sat on a couch, across a low table from Gezun of Lorsk, who occupied a stool. On the table stood a jug of wine and two silver goblets.

Gezun, who towered over most Ausonians, wore the undress tunic of the captain of Senator Manetius' private guard. The bronzen helmet, with its towering horsehair crest, lay on the floor beside him. His features, with swarthy skin, curly black beard, wide forehead, beetling brows, sharp nose, and massive square jaw, marked him as a native of sinking Pusad in the Western Ocean. Gezun had obtained this post by lying to the senator about his military experience and his swordsmanship. Both were actually negligible.

Gezun smiled as he picked up his goblet. "I fear that was my fault," he said in good Ausonian with hardly a trace of accent.

"How so?"

"I heard they were starving the lion, to give him a good appetite for Karsakus. Feeling sorry for him---"

"Sorry for whom? The lion or the man?"

"The lion. So I smuggled a haunch of beef into the cage---"

"Gezunos, you are the most infuriating man! You care naught for people --- even your Senator's daughter --- but waste affection on dumb brutes--"

"Tis my specialty. I was once assistant beast keeper to the king of Tartessia. And I do indeed care for Manetia Plotia."

"Then why not show it? Come hither!" She patted the couch beside her, and he came. "That's better!"

She caught his right hand and carried it around behind her head and down to her right breast, which had somehow become exposed when she let her subucula slip off her shoulder. She turned up her face to be kissed.

Gezun obliged. When, however, she started to slide a hand under the edge of his kilt, he pushed it away, saying in a voice thick with passion:

"Woman! Would you be my death?"

"Why, Gezunos, what an idea!" She giggled.

"Nobody's ever died of it yet."

"On the contrary, my dear, the late Karsakus did just that. They caught him pleasuring Senator

Fessapinus' daughter --- "

"But who could possibly catch you? Father's away, and you've commanded the rest of the staff to leave us alone."

Gezun flushed and shuddered with the effort of self-control. "Darling, having been chased out of two cities for getting with child a female of rank---"

"But there's only one chance in a hundred of that, and I shall pray to Silvana to prevent---"

"And it's not as if I were unwilling lawfully to wed them, but their families would not hear of a mere foreign freedman --- "

"Will you stop talking and get to business? If you tease me, when Father returns to Aenarium, I'll say you raped me---"

"Who's teasing whom now? In that case, I had better pack and be on my way *instantly*. 'Tis a shame to be chased out a third time without even enjoying---"

"You wouldn't leave me!" she cried. "I know what. Wait."

"What do you?" said Gezun in alarm. "Summon the watch?"

"Nay; I go to fetch the Potent Peridot. Father left it when he went fishing, but I know where. Then we shall see how far that mighty spear---"

She ran out of the richly furnished chamber but was back in a trice with an ornate broach, such as was used by men of rank in Ausonia to fasten their cloaks. In it was set a large greenish-yellow stone, polished but uncut, which gleamed in its silver setting.

"What's that?" asked Gezun.

"The Potent Peridot, stupid. 'Tis said to give the wearer power to make anyone of the other sex obey. I'll --- "

"Where did your father get it?"

"It belonged to the queen of the Phaiaxians. Last year, the Maxians and the Phaiaxians warred over fishing rights on the Thrinaxian Sea. A band of Maxians raided deep into Phaiaxia and looted the capital, whilst the king and queen were elsewhere.

"The raiders were caught on their retreat and scattered, losing most of their booty. The raider with the Peridot must have escaped with it, for the Phaiaxians never recovered it. It came to Ausonia in the pack of a peddler, who I suppose had bought it from the raider for a small part of its value. Father got it as a bauble and had it reset to his taste.

"Anon, he learned of the gem's powers from our high priest. The holy Father Portunio told us it was first enchanted by the wizard Nichok for King Asizhen III of Tartessia. Portunio wanted it for

his temple, but Father withheld it. Father also learned that Queen Bathyllis of Phaiaxia has offered a roomful of gold for the gem's return, but Father will not consider the offer. 'Twere unpatriotic, he says, to let so dire a weapon into foreign hands."

"How does he employ its powers?"

"He makes but little use of it. Says he has all the wealth and power he needs. Since my mother died, he says, he's too old to wish to bend more women to his will, albeit 'twould have been handy whilst she lived. My mother was a woman of strong character."

"How does it work?"

"I'll show you." She clapped the broach in both hands and stared fixedly at Gezun. Then she gazed into the depths of the gem, murmuring: "Gezunus cannot resist me. He is mad with passion for me. He shall consummate our love forthwith. He shall leap upon me to slake his passion...."

Gezun's defences crumbled. With a little sigh, he began to undo the frogs of his tunic.

* * *

"Well," said Plotia, "that was not bad, was it?"

"That was magnificent," said Gezun.

"Let's do it again! I should just adore---"

"Have mercy, my lady! Give me a moment to recover." For a little while he sat breathing heavily. Then he said: "I'm still curious about that gem. I do not really believe it caused me to take you. Your beauty alone would have captivated me."

"Go on with you! Had I made the opposite request, your lance had been but a rope of sand."

"Well," said Gezun, "there's no way to prove that just now. I shall believe in the gem's powers when I've proved them myself."

"Nay, I should not let it out of my hands. Father would be furious."

"Suit yourself, but I shan't believe otherwise."

"All right, then!" Plotia passed the broach to Gezun. "See for yourself. What's your command?"

"I'll not tell you, lest you obey it just to prove your point, be the gem never so powerless." He stared at Plotia as he had seen her do. Then he looked into the gem, murmuring: "Sleep, Plotia; sleep deeply...."

The half-clad Plotia lay upon the couch, snoring gently. Gezun adjusted his clothing, slung over his head the baldric supporting his bronze-bladed Ausonian sword, and put on his helm. The broach he slipped into the purse at his belt before he tiptoed out.

An hour later, Gezun appeared at the South Gate of Aenarium. He rode his stallion Sancheth and led his old mule Dostaen, laden with his belongings. The gate had closed for the night, but Gezun explained:

"I have a message for my master, Senator Manetius Nisar. He is fishing with cronies on the Thrinaxian Sea, and I must needs get word to him."

Since Gezun was well known in Aenarium and was not unpopular, the guards opened the groaning gate and waved him through.

* * *

Gezun did not take the road to the nearest Thrinaxian port. Instead, he traveled south, on a road that paralleled the curve of the sea and passed through Maxian land before turning westwards toward Phaiaxia.

As he trotted along, he revolved schemes for getting that roomful of gold from Queen Bathyllis. He had no qualms about stealing the gem, since the senator had obtained it as loot in the first place. If Plotia had any sense, she would say nothing about the recent episode, letting her father think that Gezun had taken the broach entirely on his own. Gezun doubted if Plotia had that much sense, but that was her problem.

While Gezun's pay was reasonable and he rather liked the old magnate, his post with Manetius bored him with its monotony. Besides, Plotia had put him in a position where he had to do something drastic to avoid Karsakus' fate. She was a hot little piece with a passion for Gezun. She would want to be fluttered at every opportunity, until they were caught in the act or she became pregnant. Then it would be the lion or the cross for Gezun.

Gezun was a lusty young man with few inhibitions. For entertainment, however, he preferred whores and low-class girls who would not make trouble afterwards. His experiences with high-class women, attracted by his stature and rugged handsomeness, had made him wary.

He thought he might have liked one, especially one with property, as a wife. In the lands he had seen, however, such a mating would, for a foreign freedman, be out of the question. The slave brand on Gezun's hand could still be seen, and he preferred to take a bold, defiant attitude towards his servile period rather than trying to hide it.

If he could get his roomful of gold, his origin would not much matter against such wealth. Then, he sometimes thought, he could settle down and live the good life, instead of being harried hither and yon by angry rivals and impatient creditors.

On the other hand, he was not sure he was ready to cease his wandering. He had an itching foot, and there were many lands he had not yet seen. His main hope was to effect one grand coup, which would make him so rich that he could choose or change his way of life as he pleased.

* * *

The town of Samron was recovering from a raid by the Laistrugonians, who dwelt far to eastward beyond the Tyrsian Lake. Another town, through which Gezun had earlier passed, had been so devastated by the giant savages that it was now an abandoned ruin.

Having stabled his animals and rented a room, Gezun entered a tavern, which smelt of fresh

plaster. Outside, the racket of saw and hammer came to his ears. Gezun said to the taverner:

"You people are certainly active in rebuilding your town. Were you here when the Laistrugons came?"

"Aye," said the taverner. "We tried to form a line of spears, but they were upon us too soon. Someone started to fly, and then all broke. They chased us across the plain, smashing our skulls like eggs. A mob of eight-foot, naked savages brandishing clubs is a sight to daunt the stoutest."

"I should think so!"

"Had the cavalry not come from Maxus to aid us, we had been utterly destroyed. What will ye have?"

"Beer. Have you victuals in your larder?"

"I can broil you a rib of pork, with bread and cabbage."

"That will suit."

The taverner added: "I must ask Your Excellency to leave your sword with me. Rules of the house. Sometimes the boys get excited in an argument, and I would not have my shop closed because of some carving."

Gezun hoisted his baldric over his head and took his flagon to a vacant seat. He shared a table with another man, who was writing. The writer was a spare man of medium height, with a neat gray beard.

"Good even, sir," said this one. "I perceive that you come from Ausonia, albeit you are not native to that land. What betides in those parts?"

Gezun gaped. He was plainly clad, his Ausonian finery being packed away. "How knew you that?"

"Simple, my boy. Imprimus, your speech with Master Gorbates, our host, marked you as no local; I did not recognize the accent, save that it was not Ausonian. Secundus, you are covered with the dark-brown dust and mud of the roads from the northeast. Tertius, that sword you gave Gorbates is of Ausonian pattern. And quartus, your stature and features mark you as a native of none of the neighboring nations. Therefore I deduce that you came originally from some region farther north or west --- belike from the shores of the Western Ocean."

"Clever," said Gezun. "To whom owe I this shrewd analysis?"

"Aristax of Pylon, in Yavan, at your service. I am a poor philosopher, traveling in search of knowledge. And you, sir?"

"Suffice it to say that I left my last abode in haste."

"A feud or a fatal brawl?"

"Neither; a wench with a hot twat and highborn kin. Are you writing a letter?"

"Aye, to my colleague Giterros in Torrutseish."

"I know Torrutseish," said Gezun. "How will you get the missive to him?"

"The letter-carrying firm of Pheromas and Glix has an office in Kolovra."

"Writing must be useful."

"Do you not know the art, then?"

"Not really, Master Aristax. When I was a boy

in Lorsk --- "

"Where?"

"Lorsk, a kingdom of Pusâd. I studied Pusadian characters as a boy but have forgotten them. Then I was apprenticed to a magician in Gadaira. He taught me some symbols of Euskerian, but I never mastered the written form."

"One can hardly be a wizard without literacy."

"Perhaps. There was a cannibal savage from Hercynia who could cast a right deadly spell; and I know a cantrip or two. I have led a wandering life, never settling long enough for serious study. Luckily, I pick up spoken tongues easily."

"So you come from the fabled isle of Pusâd?" mused Aristax. "In Yavan, we argue whether it be a real place or a mythical."

"'Tis real, albeit wise men say it may not always be. It sinks, they say, foot by foot, and in a thousand years may be no more than a sea-washed skerry."

Aristax ordered a second round. "Tell me of Pusâd, pray."

Gezun started to talk of the bison-swarming plains of windy Lorsk when a big, burly man, with mud on his face, came in.

"Wine, Gorbates!" roared the newcomer. "And yarely!"

The taverner reached for a jug, saying: "Ye gods, Yonas, what's befallen you?"

"None of your business," growled the big man, "but my god-detested mule threw me. I beat the stupid beast into a jelly to teach it a lesson. Where's something to wipe off this muck?"

Glaring about the crowded common room, the man spied the parchment on which Aristax was writing. "Give me that!" he said. Crossing the room, he snatched the parchment and began to wipe the mud off his face.

Half rising, Aristax cried: "Look here, fellow, you had no right! Parchment is costly. Give it back!"

With a sinister smile, Yonas turned his melon-like head. "Well, little man, and what be ye going to do about it?"

Although Gezun usually kept his nose out of others' business, this, he thought, was an exception. He rose, taller than Yonas although not so massive. "Give the man back his parchment."

"Futter you!" said Yonas, and swung.

Gezun avoided the blow and rocked Yonas back with a return punch. They grappled. Gezun hooked an arm about Yonas' thick neck and rained punches. Yonas snapped an elbow into Gezun's midriff, causing him to lose his hold, coughing and gasping.

Yonas aimed a kick at Gezun's crotch. Gezun again swayed aside and caught Yonas' foot in his hands. He raised the foot until Yonas crashed to the floor. When Yonas started to rise, Gezun knocked him down again and kicked him in the ribs with a heavy boot. Something cracked, and Yonas groaned. Gezun hauled Yonas to the door and threw him into the street.

There was a burst of laughter and applause. A man called: "We have been waiting for that!"

Another said: "What's your name, stranger? Let me buy you a drink."

Gezun bowed. Forgetting caution, he replied: "I am Gezun of Lorsk, and I accept your kind offer."

Gezun left Aristax to smooth out his parchment and repair the places where his writing had been smudged, while he joined the other customers in drinking and song. Gorbates appeared with dinners for Gezun and Aristax.

"Gezun of Lorsk, eh?" said Aristax between mouthfuls. "A year or two ago, there was a man named Gezun in Maxus --- a young foreigner of about your age. I believe he departed in haste because of some scandal --- an affair with Queen Hippazé or the like. Would that have any connection with you, young sir?"

Gezun shook his head. "The name is common in Tartessia, and 'tis not my name anyway. The Tartessians so mangled my Lorskan name in speaking it that I chose this easier cognomen. Whither are you bound?"

"To Huperea and Torrutseish, but leisurely, observing and gathering data. What of you?"

"I have business in Phaiaxia --- or rather, with a Phaiaxian. It were better to chaffer from inside Maxia, where my Phaiaxian could not make trouble for me."

"Will you proceed to the capital?"

"N-no, Maxus were out of my way. Kolovra, near the border, would suit."

Aristax smiled. "Perchance my guess about Queen Hippazé were not so wide of the mark; but that is your affair. Since we are bound in the same direction, would you care to travel with me? Two are more than twice as safe as one."

"I might," said Gezun, "at least to Kolovra."

"Excellent! In Kolovra, I anticipate a visit to a priest of Aphradexa, who has a famous collection of rarities and antiquities."

"Done! Let us shake on it. In Kolovra, you might be so kind as to write a letter for me."

* * *

Gezun was sleeping soundly when Aristax shook him awake. An altercation was audible from elsewhere in the building.

"Someone is asking for you in front," said Aristax.

Gezun rose, pulled on his tunic, and went to see. At the second-story window overlooking the front gate, he found Gorbates, holding a lamp, shouting down to someone standing below. The taverner said:

"I give not a curse whom ye seek; we are closed for the night. Come back anon."

Gezun risked a look over Gorbates' shoulder. Below, in a semicircle, stood eight armed men. Behind them was Yonas the bully, also looking up.

"We know Gezun of Lorsk is with you," said the leader of the eight, who carried a lantern. "Master Yonas, here, says so. Give him to us, or we will burn your tavern about your ears."

By accent and garb, Gezun identified the newcomers as Ausonians. He whispered to Gorbates:

"Tell them I have fled to Maxus, for fear of Yonas."

"He went off on the road to Maxus this even,"

called Gorbates, "fearing the vengeance of Yonas' friends."

"He had better fear it," growled Yonas. "If my rib were healed, I'd hang him up by the balls."

The eight strangers conferred. The leader spoke: "We go to Maxus, but two shall stay here, in case you lie. If you do, you shall rue it. Come on, boys."

Six of the eight disappeared into the dark. So did Yonas, moving slowly and painfully. There was a diminishing sound of hoofbeats.

The two remaining Ausonians stood leaning on their bowstaves. Gorbates withdrew from the window, grumbling:

"What's all this, Master Gezun? I like not having my quiet trade disturbed by fugitives and their pursuers."

"Right sorry am I to cause you trouble," said Gezun. "We shall be gone in the morning, if we can get past those two man-hunters. One I might undertake to fight, but two...." He looked at Aristax in the dimness.

"Ask me not to bear a sword against those bravoos," said the philosopher. "I am too old for such brabblement, nor was I ever very dextrous with my hands. Who are they? Friends of your mistress with the --- as you so quaintly express it --- the hot twat?"

"Bullies hired by her sire, more likely. But how to get out? Our animals are around to the rear, and there's no way out of the stable save the alley beside the tavern."

"Let me think," said Aristax. "Gorbates, could you sell us a jug of good, strong wine and a length of cord?"

Some time later, Aristax opened the shutter and looked out. The guards were still there. One had curled up with his back to the front of the tavern and slept, while the other stood.

"Pst!" said the philosopher. "You down there!"

"Aye?" said the standing man.

"Standing guard all night must be a dreary business."

"What is that to you?"

"I -- ah -- I thought I might ease your discomfort a trifle." Aristax held the wine jar out the window. "For a consideration, naturally."

"Why are you doing this?"

"For a modest profit. This jar cost me five grains of copper; I will let you have it for ten. You cannot buy a drink elsewhere in Samron at this time of night."

The Ausonian grumbled about profiteering but accepted the offer. Aristax dropped the man a piece of cloth. The man tied the trade metal in the cloth and threw the bundle up to Aristax. Then Aristax lowered the jug on the end of the cord. He reeled in his cord and turned to Gezun and Gorbates.

"I am not such a skinflint," he murmured, "but yonder jackleg would have suspected a trap, had I simply given him the stuff. If I mistake not, the rising sun will see both him and his fellow sound asleep, and we can slip past them. Come, Gezun; we must get what sleep we can and begone ere daybreak."

* * *

Aristax rode a big white ass. While the animal was docile enough, Gezun would get the philosopher talking of things of long ago and far away. Then Aristax made such animated gestures that he twice threw himself out of the saddle. In a stirrupless age, this was all too easy.

Gezun said: "I see, Master Aristax, that distance lends enchantment, as they say in Torrut-seish. To you, Pusâd is a land of monsters and magic; whereas to me, born there, it is simple, rustic, and dull. To me, the sunrise lands of Yavan and Kheru seem mysterious, but I suppose to you they are but the humdrum, everyday world, eh?"

"True, Master Gezun. Think you not we should soon halt?"

Gezun peered at the heavens, in which the sun was sinking behind a band of scarlet cloud in the west. "You may be right. Let us camp at the first water." He turned in his saddle to peer back. "No sign of the Ausonians."

"Think you they are still on the road to Maxus?"

"Belike; but do not expect them to give up the chase so easily. They know they won't collect their pay until they bring back my head."

"Do you know any spells to throw them off?"

"Nought useful. I should need a proper oratory and some ingredients I lack. I am but a fribbling wizard, with neither mighty talismans nor obedient spirits at my beck."

An hour later, they dismounted by a small stream. Gezun had found his companion a willing but awkward helper with the camp chores. So inept was he that Gezun preferred to do most of the work himself.

"Start a blaze," he said, "whilst I gather fuel."

Soon Gezun came back with an armful of firewood, to find Aristax vainly trying to work Gezun's fire piston.

"Here, give me that!" said Gezun. "One must really smite it, thus!"

Gezun brought his large, knobby fist down upon the knob atop the piston. Then he took the piston out of its cylinder and poured a pinch of blazing tinder into a little pile of twigs, which caught and crackled.

"Now," said Gezun, picking up a dead branch, "we shall---"

"Oï!" cried Aristax. He struck at something clinging to the log near Gezun's hand.

Gezun jumped back with an oath. Aristax had knocked from the log a huge reddish-brown scorpion. The creature began to scuttle away, its tail raised defiantly, when Gezun stamped it into the dirt.

"They grow scorpions the size of lobsters here," said Gezun. "Why, Master Aristax, what ails you? Did the vermin sting you?"

Aristax held one hand in the other. "'Tis but a prick; see there!"

"Curse this failing light! Even a small prick is no jest. We had best make torches and push on to Aulum."

Two hours later, under the wheeling stars, they approached the village of Aulum. Aristax

rode slumped in the saddle.

In the dirty little inn, Gezun took the only private bed-chamber. He helped Aristax off his ass and into the single bed. Aristax mumbled about scorpions crawling over him.

"Pray do not leave me, Gezun!" he murmured.

"Have no fear, sir. While no demigod of virtue, I have never left a comrade in the lurch."

* * *

Three days later, Aristax was still delirious and feverish. Gezun was killing time in the public room when a travel-stained man asked the taverner:

"Good my sir, have you seen or heard aught of one Aristax, a philosopher from Yavan?"

"I am with Aristax," said Gezun. "What is it, pray?"

"Know, sir, that I am Lefkar of Maxus, a courier for Pheromas and Glix, Tireless Messenger Service. I have a letter for Master Aristax. He was expected in Kolovra. When I failed to meet him there, I cast eastwards in hope of finding him on the road. Where be he?"

"In the room above, sick from a scorpion's sting. I'll accept the letter for him."

Receiving confirmation from the taverner, the messenger handed Gezun the scroll. Gezun paid off the courier with trade metal borrowed from Aristax's purse.

After the messenger had left, Gezun looked at the letter. The waxen seal was cracked, so that a slight tug opened the missive. The writing, however, meant nothing to Gezun. After puzzling over the Tartessian glyphs, he gave up, rolled up the letter, and thrust it into his belt.

When Gezun next went up to the bedchamber and found Aristax still asleep, he tucked the letter into one of his saddle bags. Back in the public room, he ordered a beer.

"Tell me, Master Nathren," he asked the taverner, "how go things in Phaiaxia these days? I passed through there a few years ago."

Nathren shook his head. "Travelers tell of broils and intrigues. 'Tis a quarrel of the worst kind, to wit: within the same family. King Zarion is at outs with his queen, Bathyllis. He's banished her from the palace and makes merry with concubines --- and him such a mild man before, under his wife's thumb. So the state goes to ruin with none to grasp the steering oar."

"When did this happen?"

The taverner drummed on the wine counter.

"'Twas last year, after the Maxian raid. Zarion was a feeble sort of king, noted for little but his avarice. 'Twas said he left decisions of state to his wife, a reputed witch. Of a sudden, Zarion bestirred himself, took to warlike exercises with his troops, and told Bathyllis to tend the royal children and cease meddling in the affairs of men. When she refused and defied him, he cast her out of the palace."

Suspecting that Queen Bathyllis' loss of the magical gem had wrought the change, Gezun asked: "How go things there now?"

"Ill indeed, they say. Bathyllis is an

ambitious and gifted woman; and Zarion, 'tis said, is not the ninny some thought. Either alone might make an adequate monarch; but the feuding pair, whose partisans prowl the streets at night for a chance to stab one another, be worse than one lackwit on whom all agree."

* * *

Two days later, Aristax was lucid and able to take a few steps. Nursing his friend, Gezun cudgeled his brain for a foolproof way to sell the Potent Peridot back to Queen Bathyllis without risk of being murdered. At last he confided in Aristax.

"I suspected some such maneuver," chuckled the philosopher. "Meseems we should proceed to Kolovra and conceal ourselves there. Thence we will dispatch a message to this queen, that she can have her bauble back for a consideration. She would not likely send a gang to take the gem by force, since Kolovra is sufficiently near to Maxus for King Vryxes to hear of such brigandage and pounce upon the gem himself."

"Such considerations haven't stopped Senator Manetius from sending a band for my head," said Gezun. "If I know Ausonians, they'll still be sniffing on our trail."

Aristax shrugged. "If you can devise a better scheme, by all means do so."

* * *

Three days after Gezun's confession, they were on the road again. The land west of Aulum was open, rolling meadowland. Since Aristax was still weak, they jogged along slowly. They passed an occasional herd of cattle or flock of sheep, guarded by a suspicious Maxian herder on horseback, with spear and dog.

As they rode, they cast and recast the proposed letter to Queen Bathyllis. Aristax explained:

"It should be so vague and ambiguous that, to an outsider, it were meaningless. But it must be sufficiently explicit so that the queen shall instantly grasp its purport."

"We can manage that part," said Gezun, "but who shall bear the message? I dare not set foot in Huperea during these chafferings. Could you be messenger?"

"Ah me! Twenty years ago, I might have undertaken the task, for a share of the usufruct; but I am too old and creaky for such forays. 'Twere better to hire a carrier from Pheromas and Glix."

"How should the queen's messenger be identified?"

"We might put a code word for him in the letter."

"Not good enough," said Gezun. "He might get drunk and babble, or he might merely have a loose tongue. If two claimants show up at once, each with the password, how shall we choose between them?.... I have it!"

Gezun plunged his hand into his scrip and brought out a piece of trade metal, a slender bar of copper the length of a finger. Taking a firm grip, he bent it this way and that, until the bar

broke with a sharp little sound. Gezun held up the two pieces, showing how they fitted.

"We'll give the messenger one piece and keep the other," he said. "When a man comes from the queen, we'll ask him to match the pieces."

"Excellent! I think it expedient, howsomever, to include a password, in case your copper bar be lost or stolen. What price to you propose to demand?"

"Bathyllis is said to have offered a roomful of gold."

"How large a room?"

"Let's assume one the size of a palace chamber of audience --- six paces by eight, perchance --- filled to the ceiling. I'll give you a share --- why, what are you laughing at, Master Aristax?"

Aristax wiped his eyes. "My dear boy, what on earth would you do with so vast a quantity of gold --- assuming the royal treasury of Huperea contains so much? It would require a caravan of camels or a train of ox carts to move it and an army to protect it."

Gezun sighed. "I had not thought. What, then?"

"The wise course were to invest in land, as I have done --- either good farmland or lots in a growing city like Kolovra. Naturally, I must sometimes return home to replenish my purse and oversee my overseer. As we say in Yavan, the master's eye feeds the horse."

"Or as they say in Ausonia, who shall watch the watchmen? Freeholding may suit you, learned sir, but I'm not fain to be tethered to one place. Nor would I be entangled in a land deal, with puzzling questions of title and boundaries and taxes and rights of access, whereof I am ignorant. I want wealth I can carry. How much would ten thousand ounces of gold come to?"

Aristax reached into his saddle bag and brought out an abacus. After clicking its beads, he announced: "'Tis more than thrice the weight of Gezun of Lorsk. You would still need, say, a brace of camels or half a dozen asses."

"To the nine hells with it! Let's make it a thousand ounces."

"That alone is one man-load. You could neither fight nor flee with such a fardel."

"Five hundred, then. I can carry that on my saddle and, if some thief filch it not, 'twill keep me in food and drink, for myself and my animals, for years."

"Not to mention female companionship," said Aristax.

* * *

Kolovra, with its frowning wall and lofty towers, stood at the head of navigation on the river Magrath. Upstream the river descended in boiling rapids and white cataracts from the green Kolovar hills.

Gezun and Aristax rented a room in a former mansion, on a crooked street in the old section. This house had been subdivided by partitions to make a rooming house, and the former owner's grand parlor converted into a tavern.

After a much-needed visit to the bath house, Aristax, in consultation with Gezun, wrote the letter to Queen Bathyllis. Then they sought the

the office of Pheromas and Glix. After an hour's bargaining, a courier was dispatched with Aristax' letter and half of Gezun's copper bar.

"Now," said Aristax, "I must needs wait upon my correspondent, the priest Theoro. You are welcome to come."

Aristax led the way through the teeming, bustling streets to the temple of Aphradexa. Gezun had seen the mother temple of this goddess in Huperea; this fane was equally splendid, with marble columns and the reliefs on its entablature painted in blue, scarlet, and gold.

"Pray tell Father Theoro," said Aristax to the doorkeeper, "that Aristax of Pylion would pay his respects."

Soon a stout, bald, elderly man appeared, crying: "My dear Aristax! You look just as I pictured you."

Aristax presented Gezun, who followed the pair into the temple. The priest treated them to wine and showed his cabinet of curiosities, including the false teeth of King Ikusiven II of Tartessia and a staff said to have belonged to the wizard Kurtevan.

A sumptuous dinner, served by acolytes, followed. Then Theoro and Aristax relaxed on their couches. They fell into discussion of such questions as whether atoms existed, and whether all the gods were but different aspects of one divine substance or entity.

Gezun found the talk far over his head. After politely smothering his yawns, he said:

"Your pardon, learned sirs, but I hope you will excuse me--- "

"Yea, yea, we understand," said Theoro. "Dear me! Youth ever finds pleasure otherwise than in plumbing the secrets of the cosmos. The gods preserve you!"

Gezun took his leave and returned to his domicile, hoping that the landlord could tell him how to find a willing wench. He had been continent since leaving Aenarium, which to his mind was entirely too long.

Upon his arrival, the taverner approached him, saying: "Master Gezun, a man called with a message for you."

"Aye, Master Simus?"

"He said that, if ye would learn somewhat to your advantage, go to the house of Laila the Seeress."

"Where's that?"

"Cobbler Street near the South Gate."

"Have you a small lanthorn I could borrow?"

"I have one ye may rent for the evening. One grain of copper."

"Very well." Gezun paid the small fee, took the lanthorn, and got further directions.

Since the evening was young, with an afterglow in the western sky, enough pedestrians still walked the streets to answer questions. Later, all honest folk would shut themselves behind barred door, leaving the dark streets to robbers and to a few rich men with body-guards. Gezun knew this, but in view of his size and his sword, he did not worry. Robbers preferred such easy prey as the very young, the very old, the small, the fat, the crippled, and women.

After thrice losing his way in the tangle of crooked streets of the Old Town and being nearly run down by a magnate's chariot, Gezun found himself on Cobbler Street. He discovered Laila's sanctum among the shoemakers' stalls. A blazing cresset over the door cast light on a painting of a woman reading a crystal ball. A pair of guards with swords and halberds stood beside the door. To one of these, Gezun said his name, adding:

"I am told your mistress would see me."

One guard pulled a cord, which hung from a hole in the wall. Something jangled inside. The door opened, and a third servitor, clad like the others, said:

"Come, Master Gezun."

Gezun entered. The guard shot the bolts back into place and led Gezun along a dark, narrow corridor, smelling of incense, to a room where several oil lamps cast a cheerful golden glow. Here were another doorway and a window, both curtained, and a woman seated in a chair. She rose.

"Be seated, sir," she said, indicating a settle. "Do you like wine?"

"Certes, Mistress Laila."

In the lamplight, Gezun saw that Laila was a slight, olive-skinned woman, well formed, with black hair piled in an elaborate coiffure. She was, he guessed, a few years older than he. She moved in a swirl of filmy garments of shimmery blues and purples, retained by a jeweled headband and girdle.

She poured and handed him a silver goblet. Gezun raised the goblet, then said: "Not that I mistrust you, Madam, but would you mind trading goblets with me?"

Laila gave a tinkling laugh. "You have learned caution early," she said, setting her tumbler on the taboret before Gezun and picking up Gezun's.

"Not enough, I fear," Gezun smiled; the glimpses of Laila's flesh through the draperies began to make his pulses pound. "You have a handsome place. Do you dwell alone but for the three servants?"

"Not quite." She pulled a bell cord and called: "Ranga!"

A sound came from outside the room, and the curtain over the door was whisked aside. In stepped a being, at sight of which Gezun started. Wine splashed from his cup.

"Fear not; he is docile," said Laila. "He comes from Blackland, where they call his kind the *gorilla*."

The ape had entered on all fours, walking on the knuckles of its hands. It turned and rose on its hindlegs, towering over Gezun. The young man sat still, not daring to move and wondering if this was a plot to have him torn limb from limb. The ape glowered at Gezun from small, dark eyes under massive, shaggy brow ridges.

"A new client, Master Gezun of Lorsk," said Laila.

The ape made a sketchy bow.

"Does --- does he understand human speech?" said Gezun.

"Certes. The secret is that the mind of this beast is not that of a mere ape. It is that of my familiar spirit, quite as intelligent in its

way as yourself. But, because of the form of the ape's vocal organs, it cannot speak but must communicate by signs. Ranga! This wine has grown warm whilst awaiting Master Gezun's call. Take it out, put it in the cooling cistern, and fetch a cooler flask."

The ape picked up the flask, dexterously inserted the stopper, and went out.

"Now then, madam," said Gezun, "you sent word that I should learn something to my benefit."

Laila smiled. "Know, then, that I am Queen Bathyllis' emissary. She has followed your progress by her magical arts and knows you have come hither to sell her the Potent Peridot. Have you the bauble with you?"

Gezun smiled in his turn. "Suffice it to say that I can produce it on short notice. What price offers your queen? I heard rumors of a roomful of gold."

Laila gave a small laugh. "How tales do grow in the telling! First, I must ask you to put away your sword. I do not care to bargain with one who, if he dislikes my terms, might swap off my head."

After Gezun had laid aside his baldric, she continued: "Her Majesty had in mind something like ten ounces of gold. This were a generous price for a mere semi-precious gem. If you doubt me, go scout Lapidary Street on the morrow."

"I had in mind something more like ten thousand ounces," said Gezun steadily.

"What? Ridiculous!"

"So, with due respect, madam, is your offer for a gem of such magical power...."

For an hour they chattered. When the first goblets were drunk, Ranga the gorilla appeared with a cooled flask and refilled them.

At last the bargainers agreed on five hundred ounces. Gezun felt pleased with himself for getting the price he had already decided upon.

"And now," said Laila, "let us see your gem. I am sure you have it on your person, as being safer than in the custody of Master Simus."

"Then let's see your gold."

"Shall we make it simultaneous, as when boys play odds-and-evens?"

"Aye."

In response to a command, Ranga went out and returned with a stout leathern sack. Gezun felt the pocket on the inner side of his belt and teased out the broach. The gorilla set up a balance scale on which to weigh the gold. Laila placed a set of weights on one pan and began taking bricks, disks, and wedges of gold out of the sack and putting them on the other pan.

Gezun hefted a couple of the weights. They at least seemed honest.

"These weights were approved by the inspector of markets three days since," said Laila.

Gezun said: "First, let's try the quality of your gold. A piece, if you please?"

Laila handed a wedge to Gezun. "Now the gem," she said.

Gezun placed the broach on the taboret. From his wallet he brought out a touchstone, against which he gently scraped the point of the wedge. The gold left a yellow streak.

"It looks genuine," said Gezun, "but --- "

He broke off, staring. As he watched, the wedge lost its yellow color and turned to the dull gray of lead.

"Ha!" he cried, snatching another wedge. The same treatment produced the same result. "So, you thought to trapan the simple bumpkin by alchemical tricks, eh? We'll see --- "

Gezun snatched out his dagger, but Laila shrieked a command. The gorilla seized Gezun's knife wrist. The ape's other arm swept around Gezun and began to draw his head towards its maw.

Although he struggled mightily, Gezun was like a child in the monster's grip. Closer and closer came his face to the huge brown teeth gaping before him.

Inch by inch....

Then Gezun became aware that someone else had entered the room. A vaguely familiar voice cried: "Gezun! Hold your breath! Hold your breath!"

A cloud of dusty particles enveloped his and the gorilla's heads. Gezun restrained his breathing; the gorilla sneezed, uttered a hoarse shriek, and loosed its hold on Gezun. The latter tore loose and staggered back.

Still erect, the gorilla reeled about, coughing and sputtering. Then it fell supine with a crash.

Gezun turned to see that Aristax and the priest Theoro had entered the room. The latter was lowering a small tube of parchment from his lips.

Laila muttered a spell and made gestures. Misty, flickering forms began to appear in the chamber.

"Give me the gem, ere I set my demons upon you!" she shrieked.

Smiling, Theoro produced a small flask from his robe and shook it. The liquid inside it fizzed. With his finger over the spout, the priest sent a fine spray at the flickering forms. They vanished. Then he directed the spray at Laila, who was still performing her incantations.

At once, Laila changed from a small brunette into a large blonde of entirely different aspect. The filmy garments, which had been loose on Laila, were now tight to bursting.

"Queen Bathyllis!" cried Theoro. "Seize her! King Vryxes would love to get his hands on her!"

Before the others could obey, the tall blonde woman shouted another incantation. A fence of fire sprang up across the chamber. The heat made Gezun throw up his hand to shield his face.

With a few quick motions, the woman tore off her garments, until she stood naked.

"An illusion!" cried Theoro. "Plunge boldly through it!"

The priest strode ponderously towards the flame. Gezun was so winded and battered that he could scarcely move; nonetheless, he staggered forward.

As he crossed the fiery barrier, the heat ceased. Another change took place in Bathyllis. She shrank, became stooped, and grew feathers. In a few heartbeats, she had turned into a huge eagle.

With a piercing scream, the bird leaped to the window and ripped away the curtain with its talons. Theoro and Aristax, plunging toward the entity, careened into each other and nearly fell. Stumbling ahead, Gezun grabbed. Then the eagle

was gone into the night with a thunder of wings, leaving two plumes from its tail feathers in Gezun's hand.

"How --- how ---" gasped Gezun, "how did you get in? Whence came you?"

"Simus told me you had gone to this witch's lair," replied Aristax. "I fetched Theoro."

"What of the guards at the door?"

"The three would have excluded us, but Theoro blew a soporific powder at them. Now they slumber at the entrance. One of the trio had a key to the witch's door upon him."

Recovering his breath, Gezun looked down at the motionless ape. "How overcame you the great ape so easily?"

Theoro said: "The same powder wherewith I stunned the witch's henchmen. We priests must be prepared to defend the goddess' treasures against villains of all kinds. I know not why the silly woman felt she had to cheat you; she could well afford the price. Sheer covetousness, I suppose. And speaking of treasures, where is the bauble?"

They looked around the room. The taboret had been overset in the struggle between Gezun and the ape, sending the broach bouncing across the floor; but now there was no sign of it.

"You have not pocketed it, Master Gezun, have you?" said Theoro with a piercing glance.

"Nay, sir. Nor have you, I trust?"

"Nay, albeit it belongs in the treasury of Aphradexa. It is too dangerous for an unscrupulous woman like Bathyllis to get her hands on. Perchance it is under the ape."

"Let's see," said Gezun. He tried to move the huge carcass. The ape, however, had thrice the weight of a large man. In his exhausted state, Gezun could not move it or even roll it over. Theoro and Aristax tried to help but succeeded mostly in getting in each other's way, nor were they strong enough to add much muscle to the task.

Theoro said: "We had better leave this place forthwith, for the powder of the dragon poppy brings but a brief swoon. Come quickly, ere the witch's men awaken!"

At the entrance, the three manservants still lay in the street with no signs of life. Four other men, one of whom bore a lanthorn, appeared swords in hands out of the darkness. He of the lanthorn pointed and cried in Ausonian:

"There he is, men! Slay him!"

Despite his aches and bruises, Gezun had begun to recover from his fight with the gorilla. He drew faster than he had ever done in his life. As the first sword came within reach, he swung with both hands and knocked the weapon out of the swordsman's hand. The sword spun away into the darkness and fell with a clatter.

Gezun tried to follow up the blow with a killing passado but had to leap back to avoid the attack of the others. He backed into Aristax, who in turn bumped into Theoro, emerging from the door. The two older men scrambled back inside. The man with the lanthorn stood back barking commands, while the Ausonian whom Gezun had disarmed went off to hunt for his sword.

Holding off his attackers with two-handed

swings, Gezun in turn backed through the door. Although at best a mediocre swordsman, in facing the smaller Ausonians he made up for lack of skill by reach and brawn.

Back in the passage, Gezun slammed the door. One of his pursuers' swords came snaking in and was caught in the door jamb. Hurling his shoulder against the door, Gezun forced it all the way shut and shot the bolt. The bronzen blade, caught in the jamb, stuck a span's length into the hall and moved as its owner tried to tug it loose.

"Have you more of that dragon-poppy stuff, Father?" asked Gezun.

"Alas, no! The blast at the ape used up the last of it."

"Have you no other magical tricks? How about that bubbly liquid, which you sprayed at Laila?"

"Holy water from the spring of Khulu," said Theoro. "A sure spirit-repellant and spell-dispellant but of no avail against mortal men. Nay, I have nought else."

Heavy blows resounded against the door. Gezun said: "They'll chop their way in with the guard's halberds. Two must have lingered in Maxus --- By Asterio's arse, it just struck me! If your powder causes but a short swoon, then the ape, too, will shortly come to life. We shall be caught betwixt it and our foes without! Will it be animated by Laila's familiar, or will it be a simple ape?"

"I know not," said Theoro. "Dear me, this is most distressing. Where is the watch? They are never around when one needs them."

"Then I must go back and slay the creature ere it awakens!"

"Wait!" said Aristax. "I have a better idea. If you kill the ape, that still leaves your Ausonian friends to dispose of. See you this door?"

The philosopher pushed open a door opening into the dark hall. Beyond it was a room with three unmade beds, lit by a single lamp. It was evidently the quarters of Queen Bathyllis' guards.

"Now," said Aristax, "you, Theoro, shall return to the witch's sanctum and watch the ape. You, Gezun, shall stand by the door with your hand on the bolt. When Theoro sees the ape reviving, he shall call out and hasten back here. Then I will call to Gezun, who shall unbar the door and run back to join us in this chamber. This door has a stout bolt. The encounter between our two hostile parties should be most interesting. I regret I shall be unable to witness it through this door."

Gezun and Theoro followed directions. At the outer door, Gezun found that the panels were beginning to splinter under the assault. Gleams of light came through the cracks.

When Theoro called out and lumbered down the hall to the room where Aristax waited, Gezun, choosing a lull in the attack on the door, drew back the bolt and then ran to the chamber. When that door was shut and bolted, the three listened.

The cries of the Ausonians came suddenly louder as the door flew open under their next attack. The hall was filled with the tramp of feet.

Then came a new burst of cries. The tramping stopped. Gezun heard a hoarse scream and a drumming, as of someone beating his chest with the

palms of his hands. With a clatter of dropped weapons, the Ausonians stampeded out the hall. The screams of the gorilla followed them.

Gezun reached the street to see the four men running madly off into the darkness, while after them loped the gorilla. The three manservants were sitting up in bewilderment.

"What --- what has befallen?" said one.

Aristax replied: "Your mistress has gone back to whence she came. You fellows had better start looking for new jobs." He glanced around. "Where is Father Theoro?"

"Here I am," said the fat priest, emerging from the door. "I stepped back into the sanctum to search anew for the broach."

"Did you find it?" asked Gezun.

"Nay, my son. The ape must have carried it off --- unless Bathyllis in her eagle form bore it away in her beak. I do not think she did, or I should have seen her pick it up. But come, my sons, let us back to Master Simus' and ease our aches and pains with a strong draft."

Gezun suspected the priest of lying; Theoro could easily have concealed the ornament in his voluminous clothing. He was not, however, ruthless enough to compel the priest to strip at sword's point, especially before Aristax and the witch-queen's former servants. He silently followed the others, who were already deep in an argument as to whether Bathyllis could have magicked away the broach by a teleportation spell.

* * *

After they had bid Theoro good-night, Gezun and Aristax sat down again for one last drink. Aristax said:

"I regret that you wasted your metal on that messenger to Huperea, since Bathyllis had already

come hither in disguise. Theoro told me the so-called Laila had set up shop and hired her retainers only a fortnight or two before our arrival. No epistle was required --- why, Gezun, what is the matter?"

Gezun had clapped a hand to his forehead. "By Tandyla's third eye! Your mention of that letter reminded me. Wait --- no, you go. I'm too stiff and sore. In my saddle bag, in the corner of our chamber, you'll find a letter addressed to you..."

Gezun explained how he had received the letter in Aulum. Aristax fetched the letter, which he held up to a lamp to read. He explained:

"It is from my colleague Giterros in Torrut-seish. I had written him that I planned to pass through Phaiaxia, so he favors me with gossip about that kingdom. This part concerns us: 'It is said that Queen Bathyllis has vanished from her mansion in Huperea. She may have departed Phaiaxia altogether, on who knows what sorcerous errand. She is said to be a shape-changer, the most dangerous kind of witch...' He then goes on to other topics, but that gives you the idea."

"You mean," said Gezun, "that if I could have read that letter, we might have guessed that she was lying in wait in Kolovra?"

"Why, yes. I do not blame you --- "

"What an ass I was to forget the letter! Look, Aristax, would you teach me to read and write? I'll pay what I can--- "

"Asterio bless you, my boy; I would not accept pay. Master Simus, may we borrow your waxen tally tablets and a stylus? And bring us another round. Now look, Gezun. This first character in the Maxian signary is this, denoting the syllable *ba*...."

WHITE LILLILLAYA

There she lies in the tapered hall
on the midnight mound in the teak box
brighter than clouds in whiteness;
Lillillaya's lips held only in white shadow;
her hair the black from good earth
her brown eyes lidded with silence
all the dancer in her gone.

All the flesh still there
though worms know better,
where the Secrets are kept.
Where the Spirit goes
only ghosts may know;
Lillillaya is my love;
Lillillaya in white is queen of my shadows.

-- Billy Wolfenbarger



Behind the White Wall

by Eddy C. Bertin

When he saw his own hand crawling across the table to the telephone, its fingers lazily moving like the feet of a fat fleshy spider, and forming a number he didn't recognize, he knew that something was very, very wrong.

He hadn't ordered his hand to dial a number. A good ordinary hand didn't do such things, except upon the specific instructions of its owner. And his hand *had* to be a good hand, because he, the owner, knew himself to be a good person. So it *had* to be wrong that a good hand, owned by a good man, dialed a telephone number all by itself. Now wasn't that very logically reasoned? Notice how logical he thought, stating the facts, and then drawing the correct conclusions from them. If he could only *reason* with *them* like this, they would have to believe that he was sane, and let him out. Only he never could, whenever they were near, it was as if unseen clamps shut his mouth, and he couldn't bring a word out which made sense.

Still full of angry surprise, he kept on staring at the moving fingers. It *was* his own hand, wasn't it? Of course it was; not only was the hand attached to his own arm, and he himself to that arm (how logical! how reasonably thought through!), but the left little finger wore his own signet-ring with his initials engraved in it. Now the rebelling hand took up the receiver, which it had deposited on the table, and raised it to his ear. Now he couldn't see the hand any more, as it was beside his eyes. He became rigid, with the receiver very cold against his ear and cheek.

"Hello," the voice on the other end of the line said, "who's speaking, please?"

It was a woman's voice, soft, friendly. But it wasn't that which had shocked him so much. His throat felt very dry, and he wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue. He desperately tried to speak, but his tongue wouldn't form the words, and his mouth refused to utter them.

"Hello?" the voice repeated, "hello? Who's there?" Then came the clicking sound, which cut the connection. He stood there for five full long minutes, time slowly ticking by, but his eyes stayed fixed on the empty air, staring into nothingness. It had been the voice of his wife, speaking on the other end of the telephone. But something wasn't right with *that* statement, it couldn't be. Because his wife had been dead and buried for four years.

The shrill sound of the dinner bell disturbed his racing thoughts, and he had to leave the room and the telephone. He could hardly wait till dinner was over. Even the white walls couldn't

calm him. He was so nervous and on edge that he spilled part of his soup, and even the male nurse of his wing noticed it and asked him if something was wrong. Nothing was wrong, of course, he had just been a bit clumsy. Afterwards there was an annoying hour of mutual recreation and intermingling with the other patients in the sports hall, an hour which seemed to go on for an eternity. But it was over at last, and he could return to his own room.

Hurriedly he closed the door after him and ran to the table with the telephone, but once his hand (now acting upon his orders) rested upon the receiver, he hesitated. His lips felt dry again and grainy. He tried his voice, and it was hoarse and faint. Ice water seemed to drip through his veins, instead of warm blood. There was something... something at the back of his mind, behind the white wall that was there, something which he should remember, but couldn't. It was something very important, he felt that, but it stayed safely hidden behind the white wall in his mind, and wouldn't come out. Then, slowly, deliberately, he took up the receiver, and his hand crawled to the dial and began to form a number.

"Hello? Who's speaking?" the voice said at his ear. A quiver ran uncontrollably through his body, and suddenly he felt very weak and vulnerable and had to sit down, before his knees changed into protoplasm under him. There couldn't be the slightest doubt now; he knew his wife's voice too well. That special intonation on the first tones, that slight accent, understandable even through the telephone. She was the one, all right!

"Hello?" the voice asked again, impatient, slightly angered.

"Martha?" His voice sounded strange even in his own ears, as he hesitatingly spoke her name.

"Who is this?" she asked, "Who's speaking?"

"Martha love, it's me," he said.

"I'm sorry, but you've dialled the wrong number," she said coldly.

"Wait, wait! Please, don't hang up. I've got the correct line. You are... you *are* Martha, aren't you? Martha Verviers?"

"Yes, that's me," she said.

"Don't you recognize me, Martha? Don't you?"

"No, I don't recognize your voice, which is fortunate for you, whoever you are. If this is your idea of a good joke, forget it. I don't find it funny. Who are you anyway, and what exactly do you want?"

"But... but you *must* recognize me, Martha. It's me, Paul, your husband."

"Listen, funny guy, if it is of any interest to you, Paul is sitting in the next room here, reading the newspaper. So will you please go play your jokes on someone else?"

Click!

He kept on staring at the telephone, listening to the no-connection signal. Then he dialled the number, and again, and again. But no one picked up the receiver at the other end of the line.

He waited two full days before he dared phone again. By that time, he couldn't hold onto himself any longer. He hadn't stopped thinking about Martha during those two days and two sleepless nights. He could remember her eyes, her figure with the small waist and the strong breasts, and the way her hair kept on falling before her eyes, half hiding them. He could even recall the ringing sound of her laughter, and he remembered many other small things from their life together, things seemingly unimportant which had given full meaning to their married life. Their walks together through autumn parks, with the brown and golden leaves falling around them, and their voyages to Switzerland during the winter sports season, where he had once broken a leg when he had tried to ski. He relived their two weeks in Spain with the sun burning on their browned bodies, and their summer nights full of passionate love and the hope for the child that never came. And then, near the end, there was the white wall in the back of his mind, cutting the shards of memories from another earlier world, before he had been put here. The wall was there every time he tried to think of her death and burial. How did she die? Where was she buried? Or wasn't she really dead, and was it something which they had invented to keep him still so he wouldn't keep on asking for her? How else would he be able to speak to her now on the telephone?

But the white wall stayed in his brain, hiding part of it from him, impenetrable no matter what he tried.

Slowly he dialled the number, enjoying the burring tone.

"Hello?" he said himself, speaking first now.

"You again," she said. "Listen, Mr. Nobody, this nonsense has to stop. I don't like these anonymous calls, and neither will Paul."

"But I am Paul; *I am Paul!*"

"If these insane calls don't stop, I shall complain to the police. So you are warned, Mr. Nobody. Stop calling me."

Her voice, which had been swirling through his mind during those two days and two nights of nightmarish sleepless thinking, like a leaf caught in a stormwind. How desperately he wanted to see her again, to really speak to her. She couldn't stop that, she couldn't.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

"Martha... I love you."

Click

Six hours later, after the evening meal, he called again. While his fingers automatically turned the dial, he looked at the small window, into the starlit night, with the full moon a white eye in the black sky. The moon was deadly white, as white as the walls of his room, as white as the wall in his mind.

Connection.

"Martha, my dear, it's me. I love you."

"Who's there?" a hard cruel voice barked. That voice, he recognized *that* voice also. He recognized and he knew, *he knew*. The voice came from behind the white wall, there were cracks in the wall, now tears, and pieces started falling downwards in his tortured mind, and there were holes

now, big black holes like empty eye sockets, and through the holes he could look into his own mind and back in time. The receiver slipped from his grip and fell on the table.

"No," he shrieked, "*stop him. Stop me. I... we are going to kill her!*"

That week with Martha in their new apartment, when the mysterious phone calls started coming, he remembered it all now, in all its ugliness, her shyness, her evading answers whenever he asked who had called, and then the suspicion growing in him, brooding, forming ugly patterns in his mind every time the telephone rang. He remembered the coldness of the receiver, that evening when he had taken up the telephone himself, and the man's voice, strangely familiar, who said, "Martha, my dear, it's me. I love you."

The white wall broke apart, opening the back of his mind completely, and he saw himself and the telephone, and the knife which he took from the kitchen, and the blood on the walls and the table and the telephone.

"*I'm going to kill her,*" he shrieked into the gasping abyss which opened its jaws before him, "*I killed her. I killed her.*"

He thought he heard her screaming through the receiver, just before he brought his feet down upon it, smashing it into a pulp of broken plastic shards, but it could have been his own shrieks that came to him from all the white walls around him and inside him. Then the white coated men came and took him, and brought him to the rubber padded room, as they had to do every night of the full moon during the four years since he had cut his wife to pieces.

Later one of the men came back and swept up the jagged bits of the smashed toy telephone.



Htaroo

by Basil Wells

It was in the middle years of World War II that I first saw the ancient forgotten city of Htaroo. Htaroo is the name that the hairy Erns, who dwell inside the dead crater's shadowed bowl, give to the disintegrating massive ruins --- and to the mysterious aquatic dwellers in the lake as well.

More than thirty years have passed. Yet even as I type these words my mouth grows dry and the flesh grows taut across my skull and jaws. Htaroo the hateful!

We fought them off at last, downing two of the six, winged, enemy assassin fighters before they ran low on fuel and turned back. By that time the ship was one of those dying splintered nightmares that concentrated firepower so often produced.

The ship could only climb or descend. Our course was unalterably fixed. There was a storm behind us. The ground was obscured. The left engine was firing erratically and losing power. Jamison and Collins had died in the first few moments of that continuing deadly hail of fire. Smitty had ceased his feeble movements at last, mercifully.

The radio and the instrument panels were a ruined hash of glass, wires, and splinters of metal and insulation.

The ship was heading away from any possible airfield down into the shunned dead interior of that section of Africa. I was helpless to change the course of the airplane. Our route was as rigidly fixed as the flight of an arrow.

Long minutes --- or hours --- later, the clouds thinned below the craft. I could see the ragged teeth of barren ridges and sharp-worn crags close to the ship's tortured belly. I forced the reluctant plane higher and tried to identify the locale. Without instruments this was not possible. It was Africa. It was a desolate, arid wasteland, much of it on edge.

The desert grew yet more sinister. No longer was there sand or rocky levels. Only a splintered hell of volcanic rock spread below there like a storm-whipped sea of blackness. The terrain reared upward in great knife-edged wedges and spires. Nowhere was there any place to set the crippled craft down, nor was there any tuft of green to mark an oasis of life even had this been possible.

I kept the ship boring onward, hoping that eventually some water-blessed valley, or knot of palm trees, might appear.

With the tanks nearing emptiness and the left

engine firing its last we came to a series of ancient volcanic cones lifted above ridged lava beds. Two more craters, larger than the first hollow pits, I passed over, and then I sighted a muddy patch of water in a third larger crater's depths.

I caught a glimpse of gnarled grotesque-hued trees along the lake's muddy rim, and among them the thatched roofs of native huts. Here was water and shelter --- and food as a matter of course. There was a washboard of flinty lava flow alongside the crater's outer rim. I chose to attempt a landing there rather than risk bailing out. I was exhausted. Weak.

One wing crumpled and dissolved against a jut of stony blackness. The ship slewed about and came apart and twisted.

I climbed free from the debris, dazed and unhurt. Three long shuddering breaths. Then I went back for a couple of grenades and with my service automatic at my side I set out toward a ragged notch in the crater's rim.

Two hours later I stood upon a ledge overlooking the shrunken, mud-rimmed lake. The sun blistered my exposed face and blinded my slitted eyes. I was caked with dried salty dust and filth. My lips were cracked and dead.

Below me a dozen brush-and-grass huts were huddled. Their owners were naked hairy creatures, their shambling bowlegged gait and general appearance akin to that of an anthropoid ape. Yet they had a measure of intelligence. The huts attested that.

I started down a rocky slope toward their encampment.

Some sound must have reached their brutish ears. Silently they watched my approach. There was no excited jabbering nor any reaching for weapons of wood or stone. I sensed something ominous and inhuman about the apathy of these half-human beings. Panic made me want to retrace my steps --- to return to the waterless wastelands --- and then reason triumphed.

Without water I was a dead man. I had no choice.

It was then that I saw a huge, black-skinned man emerging from the ragged black mouth of a tunnel near the water's edge. A clumsy wooden yoke was across his thick shoulders, a yoke padded with the skins of small rodents, and depending from the leather straps at either end of the wooden beam were two large earthenware jars.

At the black man's heels shambled a long file of the hairy beast men. They too bore wooden yokes on their sloping shoulders. They marched wearily along a sunken trail to the water's edge, a trough worn a foot deep by the scuffing bare feet of countless generations of the crater dwellers.

Beside the lake they halted. The giant black man put down his jars and outstretched his aching arms. After a moment he turned to the jars --- and emptied them both into the lake!

I saw that the hairy men were doing as he had

done. It was a mystery. Why had they carried clean water from some hidden underground source, and then spilled it into the stinking, tepid soup of the muddy lake?

The listless group of yoked men turned about and headed back toward the gaping opening in the crater's side. It was then that the black man saw me.

"Hello, white man," he called. His words had the familiar softness and accents of my homeland. Here in this desolate hellhole I had come across another of my countrymen.

I hurried down to where he waited. The beast men went past him, not even turning their piggy eyes to look at me. They seemed to move automatically as though in a stupor or a trance.

"From America?" I demanded. "What state?"

"New York," he said. "Harlem. But my people all come from Georgia."

"I was sure of it. I'm Neal Crane. From Cleveland, Ohio."

He laughed. "I was so tickled to hear English," he said quickly, "I forgot to tell you. I'm Solomon Moss."

He paused expectantly. I shook my head. He shrugged.

"Shouldn't have expected it," he agreed. "I was one of the American blacks who volunteered to fly in Ethiopia for the King of Kings. Never got a crack at Mussolini though. Old freighter I was flying to Addis Abbaba crashed near here."

"You've lived here with these --- apes, since then?"

"There is food," said Solomon Moss, his voice gone lifeless. "There is no escape from the Water People. No place to go where they cannot find you."

His voice cut off and his eyes seemed to glaze over. Like some controlled robot he turned toward the dark hole leading underground and started walking. His hands controlled the twin jars' swing at his hips.

Shouting into his ears brought no response. A strange chill, despite the sweltering heat, permeated my body. The sunken little world within the crater swam before my eyes.

When once again the crazy world turned normal again I found that I too bore a yoke across my shoulders, and beside my waist there hung two empty jars.

I was entering the ragged mouth of the cave where Solomon Moss and the beastmen had vanished. Nor could I turn my feet from their relentless forward shuffle.

Some mighty mental power had taken control of my body!

The tunnel went downward eternally into darkness. The trough worn deep into the soft rock of the floor guided my sightless feet. I came up with the others after a time. The stench of their unwashed bodies was strong in the stale air.

Something happened up ahead and I rammed against the black.

"Careful, Mr. Crane," he said. Only later was

he to shed that old taboo about my white man's first name. "Them Water People don't like these jars get smashed."

"What do you mean by the Water People? Why do you do this?"

"I expect you felt them old wet things ordering you about," chuckled the black man. "You sure are carrying jars just like me."

"You mean the apes, the hairy people, do that?"

"Not them. The Water People, the Htaroo, live down in that old lake. Can't say what they look like. But they got scales on part of them, and some sort of hands, and feelers like snakes on their heads --- if that's what it is I saw."

"It must be some sort of telepathy or mind control."

"That is the word," Solomon agreed. "Control."

"What is this water-carrying bit? Do you know?"

"According to the Erns, that's the hairy ones, this crater was once full to the brim. That was centuries ago. If it wasn't for them bringing up the water this would be just desert."

"And it's a losing fight. A lot of their city is open to the air. When the water is not too clouded you can make out the outlines of the lower levels."

Solomon spoke a word of caution and they stopped. A soft rushing sound came from somewhere ahead. The natives were grunting to one another.

"It is the river," he told me. "Drink from it and fill your jars."

The clammy rock walls ended. I groped down along a right hand trough at Solomon's heels. I jostled a hairy body. The man snarled at me as might a wolf and his teeth snapped. I backed away.

"Nice people, these Erns," I said shakily.

"They are short-tempered," he agreed. "I'll help you fill your jars. The Water People send the *pains* if we are slow."

"I have pains enough already," I told him.

"Show me."

The river was cold and swift. I drank my fill and then Solomon showed me how to wade out until the water laved my knees before filling the water vessels. We emerged together, the padded yoke cutting deeply into my shoulders with the increased weight, and went staggering upward through the darkness again.

Every upward step was torment. Somehow I kept going.

The murky lake lay silent under the light of a thin rind of a moon. Night had come while we were far underground. The grotesque shadows of the gnarled trees rooted along the marshy rim of the foul-scented lake blended with the dim, sharply-broken shadows from the crater's broken rim.

Yet, after the Stygian gloom and unutterable thickness of the underworld's atmosphere, this seemed to me a most wonderful, well-lighted and beautiful world.

We went to the water's edge and emptied our jars of water into the slime. About us the hairy Erns stood motionless, once this had been accom-

plished --- waiting for I knew not what. I touched Solomon's arm.

"What...?"

"Food," said the black man. "Now we eat. Sleep. Then we eat again and return to our water-carrying."

"That is it? Nothing but carrying water --- for them?"

"Six times we carry the water. It is so every day. The women carry smaller jars while we sleep. Four times. In darkness."

I was about to speak again when I saw a swirling in the dark-shadowed waters before us. From the lake there rained a shower of parcels. I saw thick formless limbs that hurled the bundles. I cannot describe them. They were like the flippers of seals, or a sea monster's tentacles, and yet not at all like anything familiar. It was very dark.

The hairy men --- although I hesitate to name those grotesque brutes as being men despite their rude tribal life --- yelped hungrily and fell upon the bundles.

I retrieved two of the packages. A large sheet of rubbery material that tore easily, after the tough strands of fiber binding it together were removed, covered the contents.

"Come with me to my hut," said Solomon.

As we walked together we met the group of ten or twelve females starting their nightly task. They were a silent, shambling crew. No chattering or small talk. The Erns were a glum, foul-tempered breed. I am sure, but for the control exerted over them by the Htaroo, they would have torn Solomon and myself to pieces when we first arrived.

I opened the smaller parcel once we reached his low-roofed shelter. A bloody half of fish, uncooked and slimy, was inside. I opened the larger packet to find a quantity of crisp, delicious weed inside. It tasted like the finest head lettuce. I ate a handful hungrily as we seated ourselves with our backs against the outer wall.

"Where do we cook the fish?" I asked.

Solomon chuckled. I heard bones snap between his busy teeth.

"We don't. You'll eat raw fish or starve, my friend."

"I won't be here that long, Solomon. Once I've rested and collected some water and food, I'll be leaving."

"Don't try it," he warned me soberly. "I tried. After a day of wandering about I could no longer fight them off. They directed me back. And the Erns beat me --- as they were ordered to do --- but not enough to cripple me."

"I've got to get back," I insisted. "Every flier is needed if we are going to win the war."

"Are Italy and Ethiopia still fighting?"

I laughed. "This is the fourth year of World War Two. Japan attacked us in '41. We're in it up to our necks."

"In that case," cried Solomon, "I'm with you. We try it."

"You know the ropes here," I said. "Now I must sleep."

One look inside the hut that we were to share with a half dozen young Erns made me decide to sleep outside. How any creature, human or otherwise, could exist in that fetid, grease-laden stench for any length of time I could not begin to comprehend. Solomon was already curled up against the outer wall, the extended thatch of the roof offering a measure of shelter, and I lay down nearby.

From out across the lake a mournful skrawl of sound drifted. I felt the invisible hackles, inherited from some ancient ancestor, strive to raise along my spine. I felt my lips draw back from my teeth in a snarl.

Then there was silence save for the grunting sounds of the Neanderthal-like natives sleeping within.

It seemed that only a moment had passed, once my eyes closed and oblivion engulfed me. I was drifting lazily above a massive, stone-walled and domed city. The stones of the wall were massive blocks of black lava. The doors and windows were alike --- oblong slits in the sides of the buildings.

I dropped lower. I was swimming with my stubby, seven-digit flipper-like members. I knew that I was one of the Water People returning from a circling of the lake to Htaroo.

Through a low rounded slot I drove, and along a wide corridor. The ceiling, walls, and the floor were nowhere less than ten feet apart. Often the corridors widened into great halls. I passed many other Htaroo as I progressed deeper into the great pile, and we greeted one another with the formal salutation that has endured since a vast sea once spread across all this sun-blistered waste.

I came at last into the great chamber where the wise ones, male and female alike, were gathered. I joined them, linking my brain with theirs in contemplation. Our combined minds evoked great panoramas of the ancient days as well as consideration in depth of the evil days that had befallen us.

Time was as nothing. A thousand eras merged and emerged and were adapted to our overpowering, despairing search for a solution --- but without result. It was an unending bitter quest.

I saw great city states flourishing beneath the dull green ceiling of a vast sea. Commerce flowed between the cities. The streets were crowded and the ocean floor and the levels above it were cultivated and richly productive. The Htaroo, millions of them, lived in peace with one another and with that other intelligent race, the multi-limbed Sruul.

Then came the series of cataclysms that ripped great mountain chains apart and went the waters surging out over dry land. The ocean floors buckled and surged upward. Vast mudflats lay exposed to a hot young sun. The Water People died in the millions.

A few thousands may have escaped to the new shrunken seas that we call the Atlantic and the

Pacific oceans, but the majority clung to the shrinking inland seas yet covering their native cities. But the seas became lakes and many of them dried away completely. Sand and dust came and covered them.

Only this tiny crater lake, so far as we knew, remained. It, too, was dwindling and being sucked dry by the relentless sun. Our numbers dwindled also. We discovered a subterranean river many hundreds of feet below the city, but we could not live for long there although hundreds of us tried.

After that we used our mental powers to enslave a wandering tribe of hairy monsters who lived among the crater's stunted trees. Water from the depths was transported by these brainless beasts to swell the lake's diminishing volume. But the Erns did not thrive. Their numbers diminished. The Water People sought for more carriers of water with their powerful mental vision, and many a hapless desert wanderer was lured toward the cone --- most of them dying enroute.

A thought came to my mind, my man's mind. Why did not the Htaroo build flying vehicles, water-filled, and fly to the great oceans where other Htaroo might yet dwell? The answer came quickly. The Water People had never used machines, and they were forced to control land animals.

I sensed a curious sudden awakening of the floating beings about me. They understood my thoughts. Their attitude was now a mixture of doubt and uncertain respect. In a limited way I could reason, and I had access to such an airborne craft --- crippled though it was. I could be used to transport some of them --- I caught the thought --- when the ship was repaired.

I tried to project the thought of fuel, of repair parts, that were unobtainable. Their thoughts were insistent...

"It is time," a voice roared in my ear. I opened my eyes. Dawn, and Solomon Moss' friendly black face, were there.

We took up our jars and our yokes again.

I dreamed no more after that. Day after day I trudged along the endless treadmill that carried water from the dark river to the thickening fluid of the dying lake. We stored food: edible roots and dried bits of fish and rodent flesh. We made bags of scraped uncured skin, from the rodents we caught, for carrying precious water. Most important of all we stored our strength against the day of escape.

It took many days --- too many --- but at last we were ready. We had the supplies stored along our escape route. Fortunately the Htaroo had not disarmed me. We had the grenades and the automatic securely hidden there too.

And one night, the moon thin and weak above us, we slipped away from the huddled huts toward freedom. We retrieved our supplies and the weapons and had almost reached the pathway upward from the crater. It was then that the mental commands of the Water People staggered us.

Solomon had warned me of this. But the days of servitude must have toughened our resistance. Neither of us was completely dominated. We had built up an immunity that helped. And we fought

back, blocking their commands with all our will power.

We moved ahead sluggishly and awkwardly. It was as though we were men of seventy or eighty walking through a tarry morass. And now the Erns came swarming up along the ledge behind us, teeth bared and arms outthrust --- in complete silence.

Solomon was falling behind as we reached the dusty notch where the ledge ended. I waited and pulled him up to my side. He was holding one of the grenades in his right hand and peering down at the climbing beast men. A dozen feet below us one of the Erns, Omg, was far in advance of the others.

I drew my service automatic but I hesitated to use it. The Erns could not help themselves, I knew. There was a quantity of loose rocky debris, even a few small boulders, nearby. We could drive Omg back and choke the narrow slot at the ledge's outlet with this. It was like a short chimney. I lifted a rock.

Solomon grinned and put away the grenade. We started heaving the rocks. Omg was knocked down and crawled backward out of the way. We jammed the exit with debris. It would take a long time to clear it again --- time enough for us to be far out into the waterless wastes. I turned away, heading toward the lava slopes descending again.

"That'll hold you!" I heard Solomon shouting, and I felt the intensity of the Htaroo assault on my mind increase.

Seconds later I heard him scream. I turned. Solomon was down on his hands and knees. The "pains" that he had warned me would come had struck him down. Suddenly the full fury of the Htaroo attack struck me also, and blindness briefly claimed me.

When I could see again, from where I crouched, huddled and trembling from the throbbing headache tearing at my skull, Solomon was on his feet again and climbing toward me. Anger was flooding my brain --- hatred for the entire dying race of aquatic entities attempting to control us. Anger was pushing away that insidious domination.

And there were two of us to master. Alone, either of us must have lapsed into unconsciousness or helplessness. But we were splitting their forces, and our rage and our past resistance to their directives turned the scales in our favor.

Woodenly I moved to Solomon's aid. He was still gripping the grenade. I tried lobbing a fist-sized rock fragment down at the huts and at the tunnel entrance. It fell short. But a second and a third try assured me that I had the range. I took the grenade from his trembling fingers.

Momentarily my eyes were blinded as the Htaroo's massed mental force lashed out at me. They suspected something but exactly what they could not possibly have comprehended. This allowed Solomon to move freely again and he scooped up another rock.

We threw together, both missiles striking within the ragged wideness of the tunnel opening. Suddenly the dim moonlight was shattered and made bright by the explosion of the grenade.

The tension was gone, instantly, from my head and body. I saw the Erns come streaming from the

huts and down from the pathway to tear madly at the rocky debris blocking the tunnel entrance. Solomon and I were forgotten.

So we left Htaroo behind --- Htaroo and the domesticated, hairy sub-men of the Water People --- and we went pushing out into the glassy black hell of the surrounding desert.

I remember the days of staggering northward after our water was gone. I remember brazen sunlight and the rattle of sand on dessicated flesh, and finally of being carried, and dragged slowly along, by Solomon. They told me at the isolated mission hospital, where we both recuperated, that the last few miles Solomon was carrying me.

Good fortune sent a party of the light-skinned natives through the rocky valley where he had at last fallen. But for that chance our bones would be lying bleached and white there today.

Believe me when I say that somewhere in the lost lands of Africa there is a hollowed-out volcanic cone with a shrinking, dust-clogged lake at its heart. And beneath that muddy soup there lies the massive walls and domes of an ancient city that has never felt the hot blast of sunlight.

The records of that once-powerful aquatic race, the Htaroo, may be cut into the ooze-slimed walls and columns of the city that year after

year lies more exposed to the corrosive oxygen of the atmosphere. History of that bygone culture may be slowly being wiped away as the scummed surface drops lower and lower.

Undoubtedly there are valuable stores of artifacts and precious gems that might mean great fame and fortune to the exploiters of that lost world.

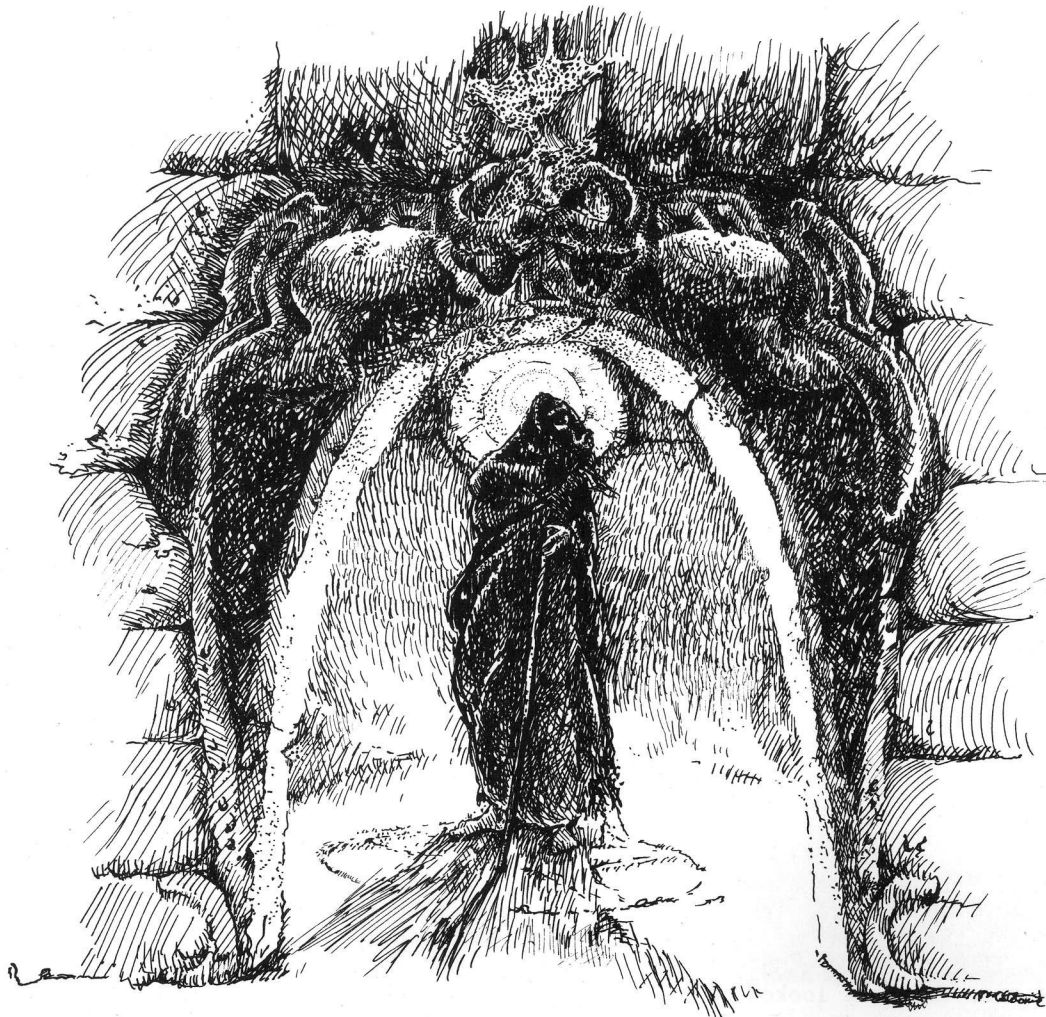
Of course the unequal battle against the thirsty sun may have been lost by now. The end could have come quickly. Perhaps the tunnel into the depths was never re-opened. The water dwellers of Htaroo and the brutish Erns may all be dead.

But this I know.

There is nothing --- money, prestige, love, hunger, --- nothing --- that could persuade me to return again to the waterless hell that guards the crater's foul depths. For even yet, when darkness comes and I should be deep in sleep, I feel the loathsome mental touch of the Htaroo commanding me to come to them again, and to obey, obey, obey!

Nightmare or no, Solomon, who lives in a nearby city east of Cleveland, tells me that he too "hears" their commands.

Should I go near them again there would be no second escape from their mental web. Of this I am sure. The vengeance they would exact would be harsh and intolerable...



The Soul of the Poet

by Darrell Schweitzer

It was not long ago that there dwelt a poet in one of our great cities, who wrote not of asphalt and super-sonic transports, but of olden things. People knew him not, for his poems were never printed, and editors mocked him with slips of paper with messages printed on them, and beneath the printing they would sometimes scrawl, "What kind of nonsense is this?" or, "Try something relevant for a change."

But the poet went on dreaming and writing of olden things, and receiving these slips in the mail; and no one knew him. He lived in an apartment building which towered high above the streets, so that he could see the stars, and the lights of the city which from a distance looked like stars, and he wrote of this, saying: "There is a vast sea, black and deep and mysterious, which washes onto the shores of Fancy, and in it are the stars." Yet no one heard him.

Then one night this sea came to him, and the city was gone. He had been up late, and had fallen asleep at his desk, and in the middle of the night he looked up, and lo! the sea was before him. It stretched endless and misty before him, its black waters lapping against the sides of his dwelling, its mists pouring over the windowsill, filling the room. And on this sea there was a golden ship, which drew near him, with the oarsmen on one side rowing, and those on the other side holding their oars straight up, so that the side of the vessel came to rest against the wall of the poet's room, the gunwhale just below the window.

In this ship there was a maiden, whose beauty was beyond even the poet's ability to describe, yet in a way she seemed familiar to him, as if he had glimpsed her far off a long time before. Said she:

"I am the Ideal. This night I am leaving the earth forever, since no men but you worship me any longer. In gratitude for your devotion I have come to visit you this last time, and bid you sail with me a ways, as far as your soul can go in an earthly dream, so that you might remember me. Come, step aboard my ship."

Then without fear or doubt the poet stepped out of his window, which no longer was high above a paved street, but level with a mystic sea, and he boarded the vessel of the maiden, and the oarsmen who had been holding their oars upright lowered them, and pushed off from the house. The poet sat beside the maiden at the stern of the ship, and he watched as the sailors raised their sail, white with a red dragon on it, while the helmsman steered into the wide sea, and all the others rowed with their oars.

Thus they sailed over the midnight sea beneath the moon, and once the poet looked up and saw in

the sky the face of a great lady, who was beautiful and stately, yet at the same time weary and sad.

"That is the goddess Night," said the maiden, who sat still next to the poet. "Of old she wore the stars in her hair, which was long and black and flowing, and her face would drift across the sky like a cloud, while she sent peaceful dreams into the sleep of the men who honored her. But men no longer honor her, and she too is leaving the earth. Henceforth the evening shall bring only darkness."

And again they sailed for a time, until they spied other ships far off, keeping pace with them. "Those ships," said the maiden, "contain all the olden things, all the creatures of all the myths that were once known to men. They are going away on this sea as I am, for it shall recede this night and never again touch the shores of earth, because men have forgotten it."

They sailed on yet a ways more, and they came to an island, whereon was a great city. All the people of this place did not rise to greet the ships, for it was not their nature to rise at all. As the vessel drew near, the poet could see the bodies of the inhabitants of this isle as they lay on couches, tended by gnome-like servants. Only their heads moved about, lifted on large wing-like ears, so that they flitted about, in flocks like birds. Now and then one flock would dash itself against another, and all the heads would cry, "You are wrong! You are wrong!" All this while the gnomes took care of their bodies, spooning food into the headless necks.

Now around this island there was a wall, in which there was only one gate, and the maiden held the key to it. "The people of this place think but they do not dream," she said. "They ponder all things but perceive no beauty. Yet they are better than the men of earth because they do this much. I could give you the key to their city, and put you ashore here, so that you might return to the island in your slumber. This I will do in gratitude for your devotion."

"No," said the poet. "I want to go on."

So they sailed ever onward over that dark and misty sea, and the face of the goddess Night retreated before them, her long beautiful hair streaming like the tail of a comet, her tears falling into the waters, burning meteors on the descent. The sailors still rowed silently, and the other ships maintained their pace.

At length they came to another island and drew closer to its shores, and the poet could see that the people of this country were all tall and strong, and they bore hammers and chisels and saws, and they climbed mountains and penetrated forests, everywhere striking down what was and rebuilding it after their own designs.

Again the maiden held the key to the single gate in the wall that surrounded the entire island. "The people here are peaceful and they work hard," she said. "In this way they are better than the men of earth. You would be happy among them."

"No," said the poet. "I want to go on."

So they sailed yet again over the sea, follow-

ing the goddess of Night as she floated across the sky, and all the ships containing all the myths of men sailed with them. Winds blew over the waters, yet the waves remained gentle, and the sailors rowed on.

Then they came to another island, where there was much buying and selling going on. "The people are thrifty here, and they conduct their business honorably. They are better than the people of earth."

"No, I want to go on," he said.

And when they came to yet another island, where warriors in bright armor paraded and prepared for battle, he replied again that he wanted to go on, even though the men of that place were heroic, and they righted wrongs, and thus were better than the men of earth.

So they went on past many islands, and only once did the poet hesitate, and that was where men sat around and sang little songs. But when he saw those songs would always remain little, and that the people would never plumb the depths of the wonder called Imagination, he said, as he had said so many times before, "I want to go on."

Thus the ship travelled through the night and over the nighted sea, never stopping, and after a while seldom even pausing, for the sailors learned that each time they came to an island the poet would say "I want to go on," and their mistress would bid them row again.

Finally the face of Night faded before them, and the sky began to lighten. Soft fire spread over the stars and hid them, and the sea and the ships grew faint and difficult to see. Then the maiden turned to the poet and said to him, "You have come as far as an earthly dream may carry you, and since you have chosen no island, you shall have to return to earth."

"No," replied the poet. "I want to go on."

"Then there is only one thing you can do. Your soul alone can pass east of the dawn, and it must be severed from your body forever. Never again shall you see the earth, or touch the shores that men touch."

And for the very last time the poet said, "I want to go on."

Then the maiden cast the keys to all the cities on all the islands over the side of her ship, and spoke a word which no man may hear, and the soul of the poet was separated irrevocably from his body. In the form of a spirit he remained with her, and with the Ideal beside him he sailed east of the sunrise, and came again to a darkness, where the midnight sea and the goddess Night dwell forever away from the earth, and in that sea there is an island, and in the middle of that island there is a crater, from the bottom of which there rises a great column of stone, whereon stands a city inaccessible by all means except dreams, and lighted only by the light from the face of the goddess, who peers over the rocky rim. In this city the soul of the poet dwells with the maiden, and they live surrounded by all the olden things which have fled the earth, and they hold all the dreams that men once dreamed in a golden box, and occasionally they open that box and gaze upon those dreams, admiring the

things wrought by the men of years long past.

But what of the body of the poet? Well may you ask this. The body of the poet died recently, but for many years it walked among men, lacking a soul as did all those around it, and thinking nothing of this. And this body continued to be a poet after a fashion, for writing verses was the only trade it knew. On the morning after the soul departed, the body awoke at the desk by the window, and read what was written on a piece of paper before it, and asked aloud, "What kind of nonsense is this?" Quickly it put this paper into a drawer and got out a fresh one, and began to write once more. What it wrote this time made an editor at a large publishing house smile and say, "Better, much better." After that many books bearing the name of the poet were published, and became bestsellers. Everywhere people proclaimed the genius of these works, saying "He is as great as Ron McCute!" while others cautioned, "He is fine indeed, but not *that* good." Thus the body lived out the rest of its life showered in praise and fortune.

As for the poems the poet had written before, they were collected into a volume entitled *Early Works* and stored safely away on a library shelf where no one read them.



Cancerous Kisses of Crocodiles

BY WILLIAM SCOTT HOME

It was one of those quiet evenings, licked by steady waves, when the breeze billows around you like polished silk, makes you feel as if you are lying on cool grass. Towelling myself with it --- and letting the emergency bell ring until I knew Mrs. Cayetano had time to answer it --- I prospected the west's raw pigments: an industry of sulphurs and violets had been squeezed out of the clenching sky onto the horizon. On the face of the deep opposite, grey sails merged with grey minutes, triangular teeth closed over by a tortoise-shell lip.

I put a sour cherry pastille on my tongue, but the combination jarred. A meaty, protein taste was called for. With a cool skin, sticky sweet fragrance in the nostrils, the aleatory drip of timeless water echoing in your ears, a limbo beyond the muscle spindles ... you become a spiced mummy in a cool chamber beneath the Nile. This salt-surfeited breeze tingling every corpuscle of my skin set me adrift on a cool back eddy near a basser sea... but the wavelap and sibilance of the palm leaves was like the rustle of a costly veil... in what exotic world did a vortex of primary colours drain into the eyes?... did it all make me a taffeted plankter drinking substance from the spectrum of a fractured sun?

"Dr. Williams." My speculative environment shattered; the sensory switchboard of the grosser plane automatically reconnected itself and I went wordlessly into the examining room. Mrs. Cayetano was an excellent nurse and on slow nights like this referred to me only in genuine need. A boy of fifteen or sixteen was stretched out on the table, eyes shut, rubbing his torso and moaning. His shirt was already off, but he was very black and I could not make out any wounds or sores when I pulled his hands away. He was stocky, able to resist my normal grip, but not convulsive.

Another boy of about the same age had drawn away with uncertain eyes as I came up. When the patient did not register my voice I turned to him.

"He Godwin Lambey, sir. The two of we from Seine Bight; we m' get upon the *Maya Prince* for go for Belize, but once we get off Godwin say he only feel funny. Afterwards he start

for get terrible pains. Seem all over. Sometime he hold he belly, so. Sometime --- he crotch, sir. Start for moan. Then start for howl. By time we pass by Commerce Bight Mr. Tillett m' say Godwin have for left the boat inna Stann Creek and come by the hospital. Godwin so terrible bad I have for help he left the boat --- 'e can't walk, come all double up on we way here. Can't talk again. I no do know what do happen, sir."

"Who are you?"

"Sears Norales, sir."

"From Seine Bight? Santos Norales' son?"

"Yes, sir." Santos had studied with me at U.W.I. and was doing graduate work in Canada. I could count on knowledge and understanding in his son.

I tried speaking to Godwin, but, cocooned in his suffering, he gave no response. Mrs. Cayetano's softer and more motherly voice continued to settle around him; despite sudden spasms he grew a little quieter. There was no swelling or discoloration at the sites he clutched; but after the coolness I had chorded with my fingertips the heat of his skin there seemed unnaturally high. I took advantage of this passing sensitivity to trace out two circular areas of painful tissue on his torso; each touch there elicited a twitch and moan. It was evident that his groin was also affected, but after Mrs. Cayetano removed the rest of his clothes we still found no visible pathology.

"He'd been swimming before you left?" I asked Sears.

"Swimming? No, sir. Not all day."

"Can't be jellyfish then. Poisonbark?" But there would have been a blistering or a peeling. "Allergy? Yet so localised... Did he have any idea, while he was still conscious, what the reason might be?"

There was a faint hesitation. which might have been for mnemonic review. "No sir."

"Who's waiting for him in Belize?"

The same hesitation. "He --- he going to stay with we, sir. I live by my sister. She waiting for we."

"And his parents are still in Seine Bight?"

"I no do know what part do he father now, sir. He mother gone to the States."

"So he lives with you." He did not argue

and I went on, "Well, if you don't want to miss the boat you'd better go on. We'll take care of Godwin and he can come up by truck when he's better --- or somebody can take him back to Seine Bight." There was a start of alarm in Sears' face. "Anyway you can pass word to his people and they can send a message. Do you have his clothes?"

He indicated a slack market bag in the outer room, and glanced back and forth between Mrs. Cayetano and myself --- she was busy getting Godwin's pyjamas on him --- and once she nodded to him briefly he went slowly out.

I examined Godwin's shirt and other clothes without finding signs of leaking serum, burning, or urtication. Whatever afflicted him nibbled the underside of his skin. Grinding his teeth suddenly he twisted and clutched himself more tightly, then threw up his hands as if shocked by the resultant pain. I sketched out the sores again with my fingertips and found that either they were larger than I had first thought, or else the adjacent regions were being sensitised by the pain of the bruises themselves. Yet the affected parts seemed not to have deep roots.

Through the seaward window I saw the light-speckled *Maya Prince* sink into the sea-night like a phosphorescent carcass, and wondered if Sears had made it back in time. It was hot under the lights in the examining room; some of the boy's fever had seeped up my arms and settled in my chest. It gave me a weary weakness.

He smiled some torn words through his grinding teeth.

"*Shúti agáre... shúlumutína agáre! Shúlumutína... aiii!*"

"What is he saying, Mrs. Cayetano?"

"The poor boy no do know what he do talk about, sir," she answered compassionately. But he repeated them distinctly; bold ridges of alarm lifted on her statuesque face. The years were long past when Carib men and women spoke different languages; it was the women's which had endured and prevailed. Both the physics and mythology of the Carib world were now delineated at the level of household exchange, and there was no eventuality beyond her grasp.

I do not know much Carib and can not enter a conversation, but I know that word *agáre* is incorporated into their language from the Spanish *lagarto* as is our *alligator*. (Since in fact there are no alligators left in British Honduras it only applies to crocodiles.) I supposed that, being one of a particularly poetic and inventive people, he was reaching for a saurian metaphor for his pain; but when I suggested this Mrs. Cayetano's eyes stayed me like blunt probes.

"You want me for give he one opiate, Doctor?" It was a natural suggestion, but was made too hastily, to divert my attention. I was about to remind her that we still did not know the nature of his problem when I was shocked to find myself facing that chiselled mask with which Caribs who --- their "convenient creek" of exile still on a lost horizon --- having learned to live in this loveless world the hard way, face all strangers and foreign situations. It meant there was something she was not going to tell me; therefore it was not medical in nature, because her standard of ethics was unusually high. Nothing in normal practice could have evoked it, and so I began to understand.

There is an almost schizophrenic separation of selves in the minds of those who must live both in their hereditary and adopted spheres. A British friend of mine had once been critically shocked to hear a Carib man on the dock in Barranco greet him pleasantly and then say immediately to my friend's companion in their own language, "What are you doing with this *thing*?" He said he had never realised that Caribs --- who never make the show of friendliness automatic with other British Hondurans except after acquaintance --- were such hypocrites. What he had failed to realise was that both the friendliness and the contempt were unfeigned, each coming from a different self. The radically different languages knead thoughts in polar dimensions; only those are still whole who must pause to think before each English sentence, translating from their sea-rippling, vowel-coloured own. Mrs. Cayetano was not one of those.

But only an hour or two before, I had heard her discussing, in English, the case of the man Sanchez whose body had been found charred to a crisp in an unscorched bed on which the plasma of his seared flesh had leaked --- in common with most of these impecunious people he did not smoke --- and had had the supposed cause of it all, the regent of Carib witch-women, pointed out to me, circuitously as always, in the streets of Stann Creek and even Belize. Less homicidally this woman had once caused an offensive customer, who had sought her services but not her debit, to walk through the streets of town dropping his pants at every corner --- a rather more severe chastisement among this contained and puritanical people than it might seem. While her operations were confined to Barranco and Stann Creek, between which she commuted in a flying eggshell, every village had its own conjuror, an exploiter not only of the pitiful universal longing for the vanished loved --- or an expert in pacifying the hungry dead which lounge restlessly around every household --- but also of

the lust for retaliation, the flowering of malice.

"So that's what it is, Mrs. Cayetano."

"What is, sir?"

"*Abúyeihany...*" The Carib word carried more force with her than its equivalent (*obeah*) and registered at once. Dignity forced her to return my look, the stricken boy's moans sprouting up between us. She knew, of course, that the seances of the buyeys were carefully staged hoaxes. While the patient was left on a couch in a room full of images and potions, the buyey appeared to go into a trance; herbs were administered; and in a short time the voices of the ever-watchful dead were heard wanly in the air, conversing and disputing among themselves and with the buyey. The cause of the current affliction was disclosed, appeasement offered the offended revenant, and the buyey rose and presented his bill... But such mummeries were not enacted inside the urban confines of Stann Creek; the younger members of this skeptical generation had learned long ago to sneak outside the hut and shine a torch across the roof, exposing the wife, daughter, or sister of the shaman, doing the dead in different voices.

But in Seine Bight the old traditions survive unchallenged. A boy of sixteen would not necessarily have shaken the convictions of his ancient, jungle-wise culture.

"Isn't it?"

Unwilling to prevaricate, she merely shrugged. She would not deign to argue with me --- me, an embodiment of all the learning which flouted her ancestral beliefs --- even a competitor of the buyeys, whose income derives largely from healing; would not relax that secondary personality which had been created only latterly by education.

"Then possibly there is something we can do after all. Otherwise Godwin may die of pain or the certainty of death. If we give him any opiates he won't be conscious of what's happening, and we'll get nowhere. I am guessing from *your* reaction --- that he's come foul of some threat or warning of magical injury, or thinks a spirit is on him. So the only thing that will ward it off is magical cure, right? His mind won't accept any other and that's enough to kill him. So we fight fire with fire --- perform some *real* psychic surgery. The first scientifically controlled exorcism of a curse --- "

"You still do one doctor, sir?" It was one of those ironic questions conveying the speaker's conviction of the opposite.

"What belief can do, Mrs. Cayetano, belief can undo. Thoughts of an emergency can quicken your pulse, can't they? But the automatic system, too, does work under active, unconscious

control. You know fears of death and curses can make agony of soul. It's been proved before now that they can make agony of body too. People have gone blind, lame, stigmatic, willing themselves so in fact, thinking they were in turn so willed. So a healer can will them back to normal. I don't scoff at your buyeys' healings; I know they work as often as not. Not much less often than my own..."

"But he sore spots, sir. Surely on salve..." Naturally she doubted. She was a nurse; she knew certain effects inexorably follow certain causes. She was also a Carib; she knew and had known from childhood the fact that many effects followed causes encysted in the fathomless gulf of men's minds, toyed with in the cold fingers of the vigilant dead; that there were those who worked effects from sheer will, good or evil... that from wishes incubated like maggots in the brains of malign men and women, results sometimes surfaced in the sun-lanced air. My pleasurable game of separating sensations from perceptions did not exist for her. She was thoroughly at home in the world of English, hygiene, physiology, and therapeutics; and no less in that of Carib, spirits, phantom organs, spiritists, and the clustering, meddling dead. Her Carib response, in a Carib context, was not so much in fear of the buyey's power as in disinclination to tamper, within hospital walls, with powers the limits and bonds of which she readily admitted she knew nothing.

"I can't see any other course. If we relieve his pain medically now, it means he will only wake into it later--- if I'm right, of course; that sometime sooner or later the intent which is burrowing into him will home in on his heart. The cerebrum doesn't stop working because a few lines are shut down; it may even open a few new ones to compensate. That we must avoid. No, without striking directly at the cause of trouble we can't hope for a cure... and the cause --- " I touched Godwin's forehead, and Mrs. Cayetano, ready to differ, closed her mouth. She simply could not understand my arguments and was thereby defeated.

"You want me to send for one buyey, sir?" It was the last thrust of irony.

"Is there one in town?"

"I no do know so, unless someone do visit..."

"We can't wait. Anyone will do who knows the language and the ritual --- a jar will spoil the whole effect --- and I need you for assistance --- your presence is a comfort to Godwin too; so if we can enlist someone for the outside role... anyone leaning over the rail of the veranda above my office could be heard, even in a loud whisper, on an evening like this... and there's no one in the nurses'

room to wonder or hinder.

"The only problem then is the voice..." And the best, because the only, candidate then was Philippa Tijo, a bent old woman who scrubbed the floors nights and could barely understand a word of English; her withered face was a suggestive proxy of the world beyond the worm. "Can you get Philippa, explain the situation, tell her to counsel Godwin to cast off his lesions because his grandfather --- better make it his great-grandfather --- is being washed and fed and is satisfied; and promise her five dollars. Then come back here before I move Godwin so he doesn't notice too much at once. Won't that meet all the requirements?"

She looked at me steadily, mask maintained. Then she went out. When she came back, still silent, she helped me to carry the now continually writhing boy into the office. The three outbreaks --- covering, between them, most of the left thorax and all the upper abdomen and groin --- were undoubtedly growing larger, and had begun to show an inflamed rugosity. A spattering of pustules had become visible, all aligned in the same direction in the various lesions. Each bruise was divided by a median line almost into a pattern of leaf-veins. Faint pinkish markings had spread over them which I had attributed to Godwin's fingernails until I noticed that they were clipped off blunt. He still muttered, his words now scored into my mind by repetition: "*Shúlumutína agáre! Busuwentína hamúga --- busuwe ---*"

It did go against the grain to stand there without lifting a hand to relieve such misery, but I could shut it off in an instant if this treatment failed. I doubted it would --- even though it had never been done before. I have a great, if unmedical, respect for that formless knot of neurones which wriggles inside the skull, and for that radiate entity of engram and energy it conceals.

It had long since grown completely dark, and when I shut off the lights, except for the feeble night light at my desk, we were swaddled immediately in the silent obscurity, provident of uncertainties, which is the element of magicians; except for the small humping lizards darting in and out the windowsill the only noise was that of the lapping waves and sweeping palm fronds; the groans of our patient, even, seemed more remote --- as if this world were fading slowly from my strictly scientific sensors. It put me at the threshold of that secondary, Carib world; Lambey forgotten, Mrs. Cayetano stood at the alert of a person who, alone in a dark empty room, has just heard a cough at her elbow.

It was a fit introduction to a ritual rooted

in the stale mouth of the Amazon forests, hatched from ovules of ape-recusant forebodings deposited in that avaricious night. The mime forthcoming would lock up the threatening prodigies of evanescent dreams into dirigible flesh. As a musty pinch of fungus stirs a canopy orchid to burst into glittering flower, a burl of fear behind the eyes of the shadow-dwellers sparked gorgeous petals of poetry and ceremony no less exquisite for being night-purple and plicate; the symbiosis was as uniquely New World as vampires, cacti, and hallucinogens.

My skin prickled --- preparing for the onset of the feeblest of gods, the petulant dead --- my ears sieved whispers out of the silence, and a saline taste --- blood perhaps --- idled on my tongue. For a moment I wondered if I were tied into the sensation game again, but it led to no other images than the present.

All of this prior to Philippa's voice filtering in from the spire of the night --- which at first deflated my brooding expectation. Instead of the verbal scree or syllabic tetany I had always associated with psychic ministries --- merely a sonorous focus for the attention of the distracted victim --- she unreeled a long, steadily cadenced sentence so faintly I was sure Lambey would never hear it, nor did he stop threshing for a while. But Mrs. Cayetano's feral trepidation --- her eyes, flickering white like the phantom-seers, kept rising toward the ceiling --- left no doubt that this was the ordinary course of such extraordinary operations.

But soon the haptic, hoarsely insistent whisper worked itself into the fabric of sighs which curtained the room, and began brushing that tortured skin --- the vocal rebellion against which had consumed all Godwin's other feelings. His moans dropped to a low steady level --- to the threshold of suffering beneath which he could not sink --- while he curled into an embryonic position as if to haul every cell nearer his ears, to speed the diffusion of the relieving incantation.

I could not, of course, make out very much of what was being said; my attention was fastened on Godwin and I was trying to scribble notes, graphing his physical changes against time, without being too obtrusive about it. Mrs. Cayetano left the room abruptly --- before I could look up --- I supposed she was answering an emergency bell unheard by me --- but the click of the closing door, like a blade slipped into a hilt, cut for a hollow moment Godwin's mollified whine, my own horrified absorption, and the unction of slithering words from above.

That mechanical rasp then opened another door. The voice which resumed was not the one which had broken off; that one was crafted and

spineless, the new one, shedding the skin of pacification and reassurance, compressed its ripple of words into furious rapids of meaning. Grating and guttural it flailed in the sticky silence of the room --- "Shúti agáre! Hóti agáre! --- shúti agáre! Yudúbitu úmon bónwen!"

At the change of tone Godwin's ears picked up --- though his eyes were still clenched --- and his moans faded. But as soon as the last fierce nasals were sprung into that spongy darkness his lacerated voice poured not only from his throat but out of every tissue in his tortured body. While the black empty windows gaped like skull-orbits his wracked body was bounced back and forth by stupendous idiot hands, rhythmic rocking shrieks wrung from him at each jolt.

Blood began to ooze from the wounds sprawling across him now in hibiscus colours from thigh to armpit --- long nodular ridges meeting across his sides and stomach. His arms clutched these eruptions as if they were red-hot, swept outward in hopeless submission, clutched again, spread. The lesions turned raw; livid; and --- without any help from him --- gaped suddenly into commissures.

Then that last scream was squeezed out of him serially, feet to mouth, and with it each segment of his body went limp as if pulverised, lolled at different angles from the next. Eyes blank as porcelain, he exuded all the liquors of dissolution, lay like a shark-worried carcass freshly fetched from the sea. I did not have to feel for the pulse.

I was stupefied. The death of any patient is a harrowing experience to which doctors eventually become accustomed, but there was something ultimate about this, like the moment you suddenly realise you have lost your soul. I had known it was a risk --- but my gamble was between ten minutes and a night.

The screams had been audible everywhere; the triggering voice, having fired, had gone. Mrs. Cayetano stepped inside the door again --- I did not look around --- and stood there silently.

"Mrs. Cayetano," I said dully, "a murderer is prowling around this hospital."

"He no do prowl, sir," she answered flatly. "He do sit." Going out again she left a silhouette of emptiness to accompany me.

Gnawing my lips and shredding all my notes, I spent the next hours breasting the night in three elements: the sculpted darkness of flesh shed by the sun, cold and rigid now with desertion --- the bitter black chaos flushing and frothing in my skull --- the amorphous pitchblende of air and shrugging sea transacting across the sill. I no longer played with the difference between illusion

and perception. Both were garrotting me. I simply could not take it. All my hedonistic props and pretences belonged to a son of the rationality those Europeans in their obsessive fear of death, and therefore of all mystery, had rolled roughshod over the world because it denied the possibility of mystery. If there were no mystery, they had taught us, there could be no questioning of self --- no teeth to death --- no terror --- and no God.

Now I was as hopelessly divided as Mrs. Cayetano and the rest, but only one side of me had a soul. The other was a blank... a clean slate --- or a veiled image...

When I tried futilely to wash off the crying blood that the dawn was dribbling on my hands, I became aware slowly that a bulky living body had filled that reproachful simulacrum I had spent the night with. I did not want to see anyone, and I certainly did not want to see Ralston Arzu, head of the hospital and my own relentless mentor. Himself a Carib and the most confirmed of skeptics --- though he acknowledged, when pressed, that there was an alien part of him dwindled now as his childhood thymus --- he never failed to pick out every false step and every flaw I had, not to mention a few I suspect were either atrophied, phantom, or still to come. For all his sympathy and humanity he knew best of any man how to bring the world's harshness to bear on one who would have to wield it.

Even after he had heard my dishevelled story he did not look at the corpse I had finally managed to blanket. His face was rigid, but with habit, not Carib catatonia.

"Three mistakes, my friend," he said when I had finished --- sitting on the windowsill to blot the accusatory light from my eyes. "Perhaps more, such as doubting your textbooks. But the major one, as you should have guessed, was that no outsider could activate, invoke, or command any entity living only in a Carib context. The devils of any demesne not your own will always prove stronger than you are; your ignorance of them is their fuel. If we Caribs can't even claim acquaintance with all of our own imps what could you manage? Even the devils you know may be none too gelatinous.

"Thereby your fatal error: you did not know the radical difference between *abúyeihany* --- obeah --- and *abiñarahany* --- real black magic --- devil-traffic --- the machine of revenge. The buyey you thought you knew is just a spiritist --- a medium, counsellor, healer --- who keeps a handful of holy pictures and flowers heisted from the church --- a graft of simple faith on animistic traditions. Buyeys can't kill or consciously harm the living or the dead; to do so would cost them their healing powers. They are the tap which is

twisted to restore harmony between the two worlds, thus to the whole universe. After all, they all get together every year during Holy Week and travel to Esquipulas and that's hardly the vacation a criminal would take.

"But the *gabinarahatu* is a different sort. The buyey might at times work against him, but usually he can only counsel that one is at work. And another won't likely fight the first... there are plenty of sodalities cemented with spite. You can't deal with such people gently. In the house of the sorcerer you see no holy items, but hideous things --- skeletons, deformities, snakes..."

"And crocodiles?"

"And crocodiles, no doubt. You got the word. He was moaning 'the crocodile is kissing me,' and she swore at the end --- 'the crocodile kisses --- the crocodile eats! You are going to die!' And so, of course, thanks to Delmas Williams' carefully arranged tableau --- "

"She? Philippa's voice died away. It was another that pronounced his sentence."

Ralston settled down at my desk and studied his hands for a long time as though his cues were written there. Best as it might be for me that he took this detached professorial tone, I was so tormented by the lack of even academic sympathy that I was near stalking out. He sensed as much.

"Philippa... was hardly a blind actor in this business, but you couldn't have known that either... Do you know that *wuribany*, the Carib word for evil, means literally *woman-ness*, in the men's language?... I know of more than one spiritual camel carrying around a steadily secreted reservoir of malevolence which can be leaked out in large or small doses on demand. There are bearers of physical and emotional pain among us just like carriers of typhoid... but all that is speculation by the board.

"Philippa Tijo comes from Seine Bight too and in Seine Bight lives Mafiomama, one of the few *gabinarahatu* left in British Honduras. Possibly Philippa appreciates evil the way you do a fine jade carving; or had just as much interest in furthering the curse as you did in stopping it. There may even be a bond of blood, quick or spilled, between her and Mafiomama... and then the real problem with the work of Satan is that the wages are low. Mafiomama herself has to turn her hand to labour now and again, and doubtless Philippa will get a better bribe than what you offered ...

"I've seen things, Delmas... all your intellectualising about demons of neuroplasm and cerebellum has its place... and maybe that's the right terminology in the end --- but I've

seen... and if you go on living here you'll see, in time --- other vehicles and modes of deviltry.

"Of course Philippa could manage two voices. Can't you do a pretty mean imitation of senile old Father Qurles yourself now and again? Who, incidentally, is one of the most evil human beings I know. It doesn't have to be intentional."

"What else could I have done?"

"Nothing, naturally. Absolutely nothing. But your age and generation can't stand the suggestion of impotence, resourcelessness. It's a threat to self-esteem. That's why you'll come to lose confidence in tangibles and get overbearingly dogmatic once you reach my age --- because none of us can stand to live in an indefinable universe. You'll spend your life chalking up walls and structures where none exist... to ward off the vertigo. I'm telling you what I know, Delmas, what I've lived."

We were silent a long time. I could bear the light now, but my muscles were red sponges. I did not want him to pull any more props from under me, but the worst question still had to come.

"Who would put such a horror on a young boy? Why?"

"Who can see intentions in the dark? I've spent a lifetime trying, learned only that in blackness we're all blind. If his groin was the focus of his pain it suggests somebody was after him for getting his or her daughter in trouble. That sort of thing is not taken as lightly among us as among you Creoles; and Norales' words, and the scanty packing, suggest that he decided to take off very suddenly.

"His family doesn't live in Seine Bight; he's a loose boy, probably wild, cheeky, getting into no telling what... Then again that may have had nothing to do with it. The crocodile notion probably owes to the fact that a hide or a skull, even a stuffed animal, was visible in the shadows of the *gabinarahatu*'s house... if he knew it... or perhaps someone just remembered the old adage, 'Never call alligator big mouth till you done cross the river.'"

I thought of my aunt telling of going by boat to Manatee in the years past, when crocodiles rolled off the lagoon banks "just like in the movies," came nosing alongside the boats, gross scaly spindles waked by the gentle pats of the oars to that musky random hunger which was as readily enticed by the pulse of the warm as by the effluvium of the rotten... devouring every category of flesh in every stage of being, without even gratitude, like the grave... a metaphor of time, life...

"... so again --- remember the pants-dropping? --- even the most diabolical shaman may have a spiteful sense of humour."

"And for that I wear his blood on my hands."

"Nothing like that, Delmas. It's no different than a slip with the right pill --- a moment's delay in surgery --- a faulty diagnosis... Your intentions were correct, your treatment the only possible one, and if you hadn't been born of another people you might even have succeeded..."

Was the ulcer-coloured brain in his head, and in Mrs. Cayetano's head, really so foreign a thing? Could it synthesise molecules mine could not? Entertain thoughts I could not house? Did it swallow messages from the same sun and air and spread commands in return along nerves I did not have? Was one of us made of different flesh? Was I a man-shape among masks --- or a mask among men?

But this long glowing mound between us would not go away. And it had been fatally clipped by a blade which had passed through me like a weakened X-ray. I was adrift in an invisible world which was perfectly perceptible to these two, and others...

"Mrs. Cayetano was as overwrought as you, of course. She was ignorant of what you really chanced until too late; then she left. You won't hear an apology, but she'll make it up somehow."

"As for Philippa, can you give this as a reason to fire her from the char squad? This is a small country; you have to share the streets with the slanderers and gougers."

"Dealing with people, Delmas, is just like walking on soft, cool sand in a few feet of water, and having a buried stingaree whip its poison barb right up your foot."

"Dealing with the universe... well. Every language has a word for treachery. Given your conclusions--- and I won't argue them now --- the only thing that could have saved your boy --- " whose quiet form lay like a molten boulder in the bilious fumarole of light tearing at us --- "was a commodity far more rare and elusive in this world than your kind like to think --- disbelief."

"But sooner or later you still have to ask --- how did Philippa know about the crocodile?"



The Woman as Object

by J. R. Christopher

*oh i watched my true-love go a-riding
go riding oer the fields so green
i watched his hounds go bounding bounding
so lank cadaverous and lean*

The girl was not quite beautiful. I decided it was her face that disturbed me. Her brown eyes were large and just a bit further apart than most eyes. Other than for that, she was, as my inane friend phrased it, a knock-out. She was a small, thin-boned, delicate creature with light brown hair that swirled to her shoulders.

*my true-love carried his long bent bow
and his laugh rang loud and free
so i stood and sped him on his way
i threw him my kisses three*

*one it was for the love i bore him
two it was the love the same
three it was a charm spread oer him
to bring him the best of game*

I wondered why she was making records for a small and second-rate company like my friend's. He seemed to guess what I was thinking and shrugged. "We won't hold her long," he said. "As soon as a few of her records come out, she'll be signed by a major company."

I nodded. He couldn't afford to turn down a good offer on her contract --- even though he might make more by keeping her in the long run. Like most of the businesses which sprang up in southern California right after World War Two, he couldn't afford a long range view. Hope springs eternal, I thought bitterly, but at least he's managed to stay in business --- which is more than most of them have done. (His business closed soon after; by 1950 at least; but that is a different story.)

*but when he and his hounds were gone from sight
i felt a spreading ecstasy
dropt off the clothes that bound me tight
and in the breeze leapt free*

the change that came full oft before ---

I missed the rest of the verse as he added, "She just wandered in one day and said she could sing. Came from the country --- she was lucky not to be born in this goddam stinking city." There are a lot of them who talk that way about the city, but I notice that they never try to move away. Who was it that said something about a bitch-goddess? He was going on, complaining about the jobbers.

*i leapt i ran oer the fields so green
i bounded the brook murmuring low
i danced in the meadow the ecstasy
and heard them cry a doe a doe*

She was in the recording room, singing into an old, second-hand microphone. A young man with a blond crew-cut was sitting in a chair beside her and playing his guitar softly; I'd seen him around the studio before. I watched her through the double-glass: her movements as she sang were as natural as some animal's. She felt the music flowing through her, and responded without thinking about it. Yes, I thought, she could go far in the music field. I'm sorry for what I must do.

*i fled the hounds and i fled the men
i fled through the thickets wild
i fled the hounds and i fled again
i led them a race so wild*

I watched her movements again. I wished for a moment that I could turn off the speaker that was bringing us her words and only watch; but her voice was beautiful too, and I instantly regretted my wish --- it would be like looking at Cranach's Venus in a black and white reproduction.

*i stopped when my true-love rode into sight
and pierced my side and pierced my heart
with an arrow from his long bent bow
an arrow an ash-wood dart*

My friend was gone to attend to some business of his --- to check some invoice or to jury-rig some turntable. I had only nodded at him when he left, for my attention was on the girl. She had the markings --- all of them. It had been a long time since I'd seen such a perfect specimen. It was the eyes which gave it away, although there were other, subtler signs. And it was only one chance in a thousand that I should find her, I thought. Especially like this --- before she's used to the wolves the city breeds. I smiled.

*i leapt my last and then lay still
and felt the draining ecstasy
i heard a far-off robin trill
and saw my true-love bend oer me.*

The song was over, and she'd soon be free. I walked over to the door. My friend's budget wouldn't allow any re-takes of a recording as fine as she had just sung. It probably would have been acceptable to any of the major companies also. She was good.

"Hello," I said, as she stepped out of the glass room. "You don't know me, Miss Wilson, but after hearing you sing just now, I've become one of your ardent admirers."

She laughed prettily. "Why, thank you, Mr.--ah?"

"Volk," I told her. "Matthew Volk."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Volk." She politely inquired, "Is your name German?"

"No, it's originally Russian --- my family fled

at the time of the overthrow of the Czar. That, however, was a different generation. I was wondering, Miss Wilson, if you have no other plans, if I could take you to lunch? But wait!" I held up my hand in a quick but quiet movement before she could say anything. "I'm not quite as brash as I know this sounds --- I can produce some credentials."

"Jake!" I called across the room to where my friend was talking with his managing engineer. "Jake, is there anything wrong with me taking Miss Wilson out to lunch?"

He of course said there wasn't, since he was trying to get me to put some money into his business. Perhaps it wasn't quite a credential, but the fact that I knew her boss reassured her, and I took the girl to lunch. I also have the feeling that she didn't quite know how to go about saying no --- not yet --- after her boss said it was okay. And I was counting on that when I asked him.

Later, while she was nibbling one of the *croissants sables* we had for dessert, she looked up abruptly as if she suddenly realized how much interest she had given to the food and how little to me. "These are awfully good cookies, Mr. Volk," she said. "The whole meal has been just wonderful."

I repressed my desire to correct her *awfully good and just wonderful*. I'm not puritanical in my English, but some things annoy me. "Please," I said, "call me Matthew. *Mister* makes me sound a really old Volk."

She smiled to acknowledge the pun. "Oh, you're not old at all... Matthew," she said. It was the standard phrase and the standard lie, I thought. *How old is she? Seventeen? To her, a man in his thirties or older must seem ancient; however, there is no way for me to escape playing the lover this time, I'm afraid. It's a worthy cause.* I smiled, but turned it into a polite smile. "Thank you, Miss Wilson," I said --- and added, after only a second's pause, "or may I call you Gerry?"

She could find no way to deny me that, either, if she had any desire to. I remembered there was some rhyme that my nurse, when I was a child, had sung to me --- something about a spider and a fly. It ended badly, or so I had always thought. The fly got away.

During the weeks that followed, I kept in touch with my fly. (Really, that maligns her, comparing her to an insect. Perhaps I should say that I was a hunter and she was... my dear --- a suitable ironic pun for even a Housman's taste.) I took her to the theatre-in-the-round where was playing a translation of Fonseca's *Don Juan Redivivo*, to two art galleries, and to a number of choice eating establishments. I felt the least I could do would be to feed her well during our strange courtship. Young singers are often hungry and thin. She responded miraculously to my attention. I believe she tried to look upon me as a foster uncle, one who spent his time showing her the culture and the good living for which she'd come to the city. She was as excited as a child with a kaleidoscope---

if I am not out of date, and children still receive such toys. However, I didn't let her consider me only as an uncle; I pressed my courtship steadily although not strenuously. I kissed her good night at her door, although I could tell from the way she grew quiet each time as I drove her home that she did not look forward to this part of the evening. I am afraid, also, that she was worried about my intentions; but, of course, I had to keep them ambiguous. I sent her many flowers, especially forget-me-nots. It amused me to see them in her apartment when I called to pick her up.

I discovered the most about her while we were at the galleries, naturally. She tried to keep interested in the paintings and statues --- I believe she felt it an obligation to become cultured as quickly as possible --- but soon her mind would become glutted with the art and she'd talk to me of her hopes and dreams, of her background, of her present situation. I learned she wasn't writing regularly to her parents, which pleased me. But she was such a child! She knew nothing of the ways of the city: she only talked of its size and the many, many people she wanted to become friends with. She was so innocent that she gave no thought to the important people --- she was only interested in having great numbers of friends. Really, I believe that if she had not been such a perfect specimen I would have become sentimental about her and let her go --- but, of course, cases what they were --- perfect specimens so rare --- that was impossible.

It was at the second gallery when I first thought of her as a butterfly. She was hurrying from picture to picture, to get them all in, and the analogy came to me suddenly. She was a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower; but finally I, the spider, would invite her to my parlor for a meal, and that would be the end of the pantomime. (I reminded myself to re-read Spenser's *Muiopotomos*.) I played with the idea off and on for several days, but finally decided the image of the hunter and his deer was a better one, although even it was not perfect.

And during these weeks I told her a little about myself. I wandered in the quiet by-paths of my memories, speaking of Europe before the recent war, of the restaurants of New Orleans, of the fine collection of Chinese porcelain I had once owned in New York. Sometimes, to keep her amused, I spoke of the people in show business, relating time-worn anecdotes, all of which she found fresh and fascinating. She would laugh at them or sigh at them, as if the stories held truth of some inherent interest. I was bored, of course, but I tried not to show it; and really, there were many times when I was with her that she did hold my interest. *Such praise*, I thought once, *I have for no man*.

It was at the Johanas Milo collection when I asked her about the song I had heard her singing the first time I'd seen her. I felt sure, but I like to check on details --- I remember once or twice in my life when they have been vitally necessary.

We were looking at a floor-mosaic, probably made in some colony of Rome's, which was a rough depiction of Romulus, Remus, and their foster-mother. "Gerry," I asked her, "where did you come across that ballad about the maiden who changed into a doe, and was then shot by her true-love --- the one you were singing the day I met you at the studio "

She glanced at me with her big eyes. She smiled and said, "Why that was a song I talked Mr. Carrol into letting me do. It's a song I've known all my life --- I first heard it from my grandmother, I do believe."

And I was satisfied.

It was twenty-three days after I first met the girl that I drove by for her for a picnic late one Saturday morning. I had told her the night before that a friend of mine had a beautiful country estate only a thirty-minute drive from the city, and that he had told me to use it whenever I wanted to. That was not quite true, but as I thought at the time, it was near enough to the truth to be forgiven by almost any human.

She was wearing a light blue summer frock that day, and her hair was gathered behind her head into what is called a pony tail. She was quite happy --- I had been overdoing the emphasis on culture --- at something that was simple and that she was used to, like this picnic. She chattered all the way on the drive out. She talked about the weather, about her first record which had been doing quite well on the market --- she of course said it had been doing "awfully good" --- about the chicken she had cooked (and I had bought) for our meal.

It *was* a beautiful day. The clouds were small and white and fluffy. The sky was a clear blue. It was very early summer and the grass was just becoming dark green after its light color in the spring. The birds were back --- but their spring songs were over and they were building nests. *Even without the songs, it's a fine day*, I thought. *I suppose it's the animal part of me that enjoys nature this much.* I smiled to myself.

"What are you smiling about?" she demanded immediately. *Curiosity killed the kitten*, I thought with just a light trace of my usual bitterness. I don't know when I've been so happy --- perhaps it was the day, perhaps it was the way my plans were working out.

"The beautiful day and my beautiful companion overcame me," I told her. She was satisfied, and wriggled a bit to get comfortable on the car seat to show it. "Here's the place," I added, pulling off the road. "The house is about a mile on up the road, but I thought you'd enjoy this less cultivated part of the estate."

While we were getting our picnic paraphernalia out of the car, two men drove by in an old Ford. It surprised me since I had purposely picked a seldom-used road in a deserted area, but I decided they were hunters --- though they did not hunt what I was after --- and properly forgot about them, since they did not stop within sight. Perhaps at other times they might have interested me. We carried our equipage into the woods: she had the two army blankets and the thermos full of

water, I had the food basket and the bucket of liquors I had iced down. We found a small meadow a little ways in; she spread the blankets and we put the rest of the things on them.

"Do you want to eat?"

"It's only eleven," I said. I hunted a couple of bottles of sweet wine in the bucket, found them, and gave the girl one. She didn't care for dry wine --- as she'd found when I'd ordered her some one night in a restaurant. I would have liked to hand her something stronger, but not even this girl was quite that innocent.

I kept her drinking fairly steadily and kept up a stream of idle chatter on my part to keep her from spending her time talking. Unfortunately, when I had been rambling on for about an hour, I ran out of light subjects and somehow got off on mistresses --- I think I was talking about Dickens at the time. Anyway, she became nervous --- I think the idea itself was repugnant to her --- and said, "Matthew, let's eat. I'm afraid I'm getting a bit woozy from this wine, and I'd like to have some solid food." I silently cursed myself for disturbing her. *You have to act now*, I told myself. I didn't want to eat, for a meal of chicken would still my appetite for other things....

I had been playing with her hair as I talked. Now I drew her close and kissed her. I took the bottle of wine from her unresisting hands, and stuck it back in the bucket of ice. I didn't want her to upset it, and so interrupt my love-making. I smiled at her. I also laughed inwardly.

I pulled her to me and began slowly to caress her body. "Matthew," she whispered, "don't, please don't." When they say *please*, it usually means they can't stop you themselves. I smiled even as I was kissing her.

Soon I was touching her erotic zones --- what was it that Chaucer wrote? "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte?" I was working analytically. There is a connection between both ecstasies, between the stimulation I was applying and the result I wished to obtain. Things were going fast now; my hands and forehead were sweaty. Her breath was coming faster and faster. And suddenly the change started. I had thought it would take longer. She cried out in the agony of it, and broke away from me. *She'll hear me cry, "A doe, a doe,"* I thought.

Her metamorphosis was quick and soon her change was complete. *She is a beautiful deer*, I thought--- and smiled again at the simple pun. *Some poor fools do not believe the old tales, and yet there she is!* Her beauty now sang along my blood. She was trying to run, but she was hampered by the clothes she didn't get off before her change.

Slowly I undressed. Mentally I applied the stimulation to myself that made me change. The moment of ecstasy in the change was sharp and quick. I knew she was watching me, and when she saw what happened she fled from me --- yet awkwardly, restricted by her human clothing.

I would have no trouble running her down. I loped down the trail after her. Suddenly the fever of the hunt came upon me, and I howled. It had been such a long time since I had fed the right way.

The Test

by Paul Collins

The first man wore black. From a pocket he withdrew a cross; the latter being placed over the sign of the devil. With ease he leaped the towering fence and crossed the main courtyard to the main door.

The resting place of Seamar of the land of no name was hewn of rock and timber. The sign of the man's family had long since been forgotten and lay in ruins upon the terraced steps. The man in black wasted no time for pity.

He jumped to one side as instinct warned him. He paused --- nothing happened. He remained still for yet another while --- until the hand of the giant swept down upon the space which had just been vacated. The swishing sound of the giant's hand ceased, as the man in black's sword pierced its forefinger.

Over the hand he leapt. He was inside now. He observed, but only momentarily, the cold dampness of the dwelling. He shivered ever so slightly. From his pocket, he now withdrew a rope --- the stairs being far too dangerous. The rope curled upwards and tied itself to a banister. The man in black tested its strength before ascending.

He had now reached the huge mahogany door. He strode several paces back to the banisters and ran with all his might towards the door. The creatures inside had a moment of surprise before the man in black was upon them. A shrill voice echoed back down the stairs as a sword whistled through the air. There were three left. The second and third were slain with ease, but the fourth, a creature with the head of a man and the body of a rat, said:

"Advance no further, oh stranger. And who defies the curse of Seamar? Who embarks upon the impossible?"

The man in black raised his sword and threw it with every ounce of strength left in his weakening body, but now the creature was standing behind him. "Leave this place of darkness, stranger. You have wreaked havoc here this day, but your goal is empty. Go, before the curse slays you as it has so many others."

The man in black strained to withdraw the sword from the wood in which it was embedded.

"Oh, such an amateur," mocked the creature. But the mocking ceased as the man in black's amulet shone into its eyes and blinded its whole being. The creature was as good as dead. The energy sapped from its body, it fell lifeless to the floor. The man in black paused to wonder at such strength from such a small being.

It was nearly over. The chest containing the fabled secrets of the universe lay within a hand's reach. The man in black lifted the lid away from

the chest and dust caused a slight cough.

He had one moment's surprise as an explosion echoed within the small room, and washed down the stairs.

The second man wore grey. He wasted no time wondering which fool had hung a cross over the sign of the devil, as he was no longer mortal. Over the wall he leapt, and across the courtyard. Here he stood in wonderment at the giant hand which had been pierced through the forefinger. This place would hold no unforeseen booby traps, he thought. His eyes searched hurriedly through the darkening twilight. No signs of vampires, witches, and the like --- just as well for them, he afforded a jest.

This man in grey cared nothing for the stairs. He swaggered upwards until the amulet glowed. He placed it upon the step before him and elevated over it. Upon reaching the next step, he reached forward for the amulet. Even as he did so, there was an almighty explosion and the man in grey was no more....

* * *

Sherra crossed the stream to the sound of bay-ing hounds. She cursed profoundly as her foot dislodged a slippery stone which sent her splashing along with the current. She had crossed this stream fourfold already and the hounds had sensed her trickery and had followed her with even more zest.

She cleared the stream and continued towards the forest. She reached her goal and began foraging further and further into the foliage. At last, in desperation, she pulled the amulet from her neck and sang:

*Away, away, the forest path shall go,
The holder of the amulet has been made to go
slow.*

The path cleared momentarily and even as she pressed on, the path closed. The hounds were within a bowshot, now; the rasping barks were close to their victim. The hounds' baying seemed to cluster for mere seconds as in a state of mild surprise, but this soon ceased. They too had cleared the barrier of foliage and Sherra could plainly see them fluttering across the horizon. She cursed once again as she realized they were not made of flesh and bone --- more the making of some bastard.

The amulet needed to be charged. She felt her legs sagging and her stomach pumping and she knew this was to be the end. To recharge the amulet she would have to sap her own energy, which would leave her easy prey for days, or she would have to kill one of the hounds --- a feat near impossible.

The hounds were upon her. She screamed at the first bite, but felt no more.

Sherra's eyes flickered and she saw a wooden goblet pressing hard to her mouth. The wine tasted sour and she spat and pushed the goblet away. She fought to clear her eyes and when this was done, she could see two old folk grinning and

nudging one another. A third person, a little girl, shared in their reverie.

"She's a pretty wench," said the child, but was hushed by one of the elders.

The elders offered more wine but Sherra held her hand in defiance.

"Where am I? And who are you?"

The old man was first to speak. "We are servants of the same Lord, sister."

"No. You speak heresy. No man who serves the Lord may live as long as you have."

"But sister, have you not heard of the test? We are two of the few who have passed all three of the great tests."

"Besides, sister," said the woman, "we're not *that* old," and this was followed by a peevish grin. And the old man echoed, "We've retired, now," and this was followed by a wobbling of the head.

Sherra felt for her amulet and upon feeling its smooth surface, smiled.

"You will have to go hunting, Sherra of Normansk. The energy from both of our amulets is no longer chargeable and we used what was left to rescue you from the hounds."

"The Lord ordered you to?"

There was a deathly silence. "He also ordered us to deliver your next mission --- the Mansion of Seamar of the land of no name awaits you."

Sherra felt sudden pain sweep her body. "But no man has survived that dreaded place."

"Come, now," said the old lady, "we---"

And then a voice interjected, "*Quiet, old one. And you, Sherra of Normansk, you question the Lord's orders?*" And the voice laughed. "*You, a mere servant, and not of the first order,*" and the laughter returned, which faded into a chuckle, which finally ceased. "*Insolence is a sin, Sherra of Normansk. But we need you for your next mission. Aim your amulet at the vase upon the second shelf from the door.*"

Sherra and the three shuddered as the lightning flash swept the room. Sherra could feel the energy surge into the amulet.

"And now, Sherra of Normansk, go and uncover the secrets of the Seamar Mansion. And harken the motto:

*Use your strength, cunning and wit,
Before resorting to the Lord's weapon."*

And then the voice was gone. Save for the hushings of the mother to her daughter, silence reigned. And then Sherra disappeared also.

And so ended her first meeting with the Lord.

Sherra wore cream. She was in a forest. It was early morning and the birds and other creatures welcomed her--- save the firer of the arrow which spun past her head and drove into a redwood beside her.

Sherra was down on all fours instantly. From her pouch she withdrew a disc. It was round, sharp-edged and lethal. This she cast into the bushes. Nothing stirred. Three more times a disc was thrown into the bushes, and upon the fourth, a muffled cry escaped something's lips, and a body fell to the ground.

And then another arrow thumped into another tree, mere inches from her head. But this time, the firer was more confident as he ran towards her whilst nocking another arrow. He was dressed in strange garb, such as Sherra had never seen. But this meant nothing to her. Another disc was thrown, and the man stumbled to a halt, fell to the ground, and lay still.

And then Sherra was gone. She had reached a tree and had climbed its heights. From aloft she could see one other strangely garbed man, but he was running through the foliage as fast as his legs would take him. Sherra could kill the man with ease, but didn't. Her task lay before her and rogue ambushers such as these deserved no more of her time.

Through the forest she went, and the day grew shorter. The shadows lengthened and she knew soon it would be dark. She hastened her pace, for she had no wish to attempt entrance of the Seamar Mansion in the dark. And besides, these woods were somehow different. Eyes seemed to peer out of nowhere at her, and the sinister atmosphere hastened her footsteps even more.

The Seamar Mansion was before her. It was as she imagined it. A dark, unfriendly, and down-trodden place. The grass grew long and she stirred with unease. Any number of traps could be hidden within the walls and below the carpet of long grass. She stopped at the sign of the devil. One of her predecessors had left it behind, or was his body within? More likely the latter, she surmised. A bat came shrieking above and Sherra eyed the creature suspiciously. Her suspicion was well founded, for the bat landed beside her and grew and grew until it towered above her. No disc would fell this creature. She leapt over the wall and the creature merely stepped over it. And here, within the confines of the mansion, they confronted one another.

"There is no escape from these dwellings," said the creature, who looked huge and forbidding. A third eye twinkled from his head, and then another, and another, until his entire face was pock-holed with eyes. At Sherra's amazement, he laughed. He could read minds! What trickery was this? Sherra would have tried to blind the beast--- but which eyes were his own?

And then the creature waved his wings in a circular motion and a field of invisible energy glistened around him, and again he laughed as Sherra's miniature disc bounded off the shield and missed her by a hair's breadth. And then the creature turned into an ordinary bat again, and was gone.

Sherra fled the courtyard and stumbled into the giant hand which blocked the doorway --- another trap which had been placed and disarmed. She climbed over this and felt her way into the dark Mansion. An owl hooted from outside, and a mouse screamed as the bird's flight interrupted the smaller creature's pillaging. She hastened inside. It was then, upon looking back at her last encounter, she formed a plan. If the giant creature could make dozens of eyes, so could she! For wasn't she Sherra of Normansk --- witch of the highest degree? And hadn't the Lord, himself,

renewed her to full energy? And then her body became two, and three, and four fold, and eight fold, and her numbers grew until she was ten. Standing one beside the other, and not standing still for one moment, she whisked up the stairs in the same manner.

Her second body was blown to smithereens by a blast which shook the Mansion. Her third body was cut in half by a laser affair, her fifth body disappeared for no reason at all, and her sixth body ceased to exist as the same giant from her first encounter appeared and devoured it.

"So you are a parasite witch?" mocked the giant. "Leave well enough alone, Sherra of Normansk, and leave this place."

But Sherra's remaining bodies continued the climb. And then, one by one, the amulet from around their necks was ripped from them and their heads were severed in the same manner.

"Leave, foolish servant, before the curse of Seamar severs you."

But Sherra had already taken flight. The door to the chest-room lay on the floor (a predecessor, thought Sherra).

The chest, before which lay a decomposing body,

had already been opened --- and Sherra could plainly see the papers within.

A sudden movement from the dark recesses of the room made her startle. She threw a disc into the corner and the giant's body shook and heaved. He had turned into a rat, and the disc had severed its head.

And as Sherra reached down for the papers, she heard a voice --- the Lord's.

And the second meeting with the Lord was almost concluded.

"You have done well, Sherra of Normansk. Many have failed their first test by using the amulet without just cause. But harken, fair witch, your second test lies within your home country, where witches are plentiful and dangers also. There, and only there, will your second test take place."

And so ended Sherra's second meeting with the Lord, and her first test.

ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

As the sun fades, I hurry to my home along darkened streets.
I take the Ephemeris from the science shelf of my bookcase.
Outside the groan of rising winds grows louder.
Banks of grey clouds fly to conceal the stars.
With trembling fingers I light a taper to see by.
The epoch of New Moon is past.
An eclipse of the sun is impossible!

Next I draw a worm-chewed volume from my *other* science shelf.
Frantically I peruse the subject headings in the ancient script.
I am hunting for a ritual that might apply.
But I find none.

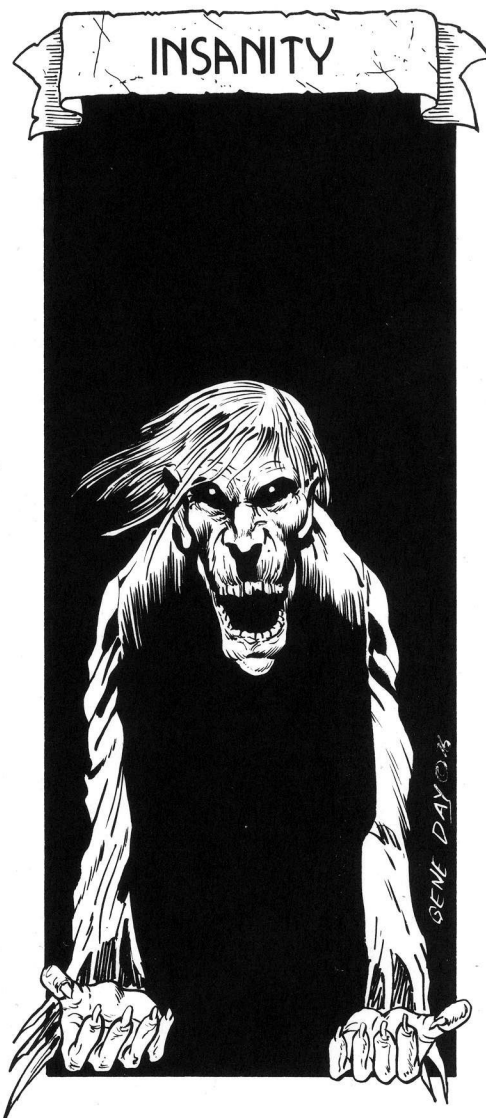
These invocations make extensive use of
 horn of unicorn
 hearts of butterfly
 eggs of cockerel
 blood of virgins

and other such items.

I happen not to have these supplies available at the moment.

I close the musty book and return it to its place.
Civilization has infiltrated humanity like a disease.
But in certain crannies of the globe, I know,---
A few old cultures, primitive and savage, linger.
I pray fervently that in one of these, at least,
Some posturing shaman still knows how to call back the sun.

--- A. Arthur Griffin



Along for the Ride

by James William Hjort

Laura the cashier and Tom the bartender leaned together over the lavish, fifty foot bar in secret conversation.

"She's a strange sort, that's for sure," Laura whispered, her eyes regarding at whiles a lone girl who sat near the circular stone fireplace. "Last week she came here. Then last night, and again tonight. She seems so sad, so brooding. As if she were waiting for something." Laura tapped her lip with a long, slender finger.

"Maybe she's being stood up," Tom offered, half unconcernedly, but willing to talk all the same. He dried a whiskey glass, replacing it afterward in its precise spot on a shelf of glass, backed by a wall of gold-veined mirror tiles. "Or maybe it's the same old story of a lost love, reliving memories by returning to familiar places."

Laura kept her eyes on the girl. "I feel so sorry for her. She looks so sad, unaware of everything around her. She's gazing so distantly, as if miles away."

The straight-faced bartender broke with a hint of a smile. "Maybe she *is*."

"No. She's not high. She's melancholy. That's the word. Melancholy. Like in the old movies."

"World's full of sad cases. If they get to you, this isn't the place to be working," Tom observed, not cynically, or harshly, but matter-of-factly. "Maybe she'll meet someone, and live happily ever after. Or for the time being, anyway."

"I don't know. Several have offered to buy her drinks, tried to make a pass, but she doesn't hear. She just stares into that brandy glass, stirring it with her straw. In a while they give up."

Tom shrugged, as duty beckoned his attending to a businessman and his young lady who had just seated themselves at the far end of the mahogany and leather bar.

In the soft-lit club, where the music flowed as an undercurrent for the conversation and mating rituals of twentieth century bacchanalia, the hours fell with their incessant regularity. And one by one the number of reflections cast in the wall of mirrors decreased, till only three remained.

Methodically, systematically, Tom beset to placing the chairs on their tables, in preparation for the janitor's morning vacuuming. On the carpet, discarded napkins and straws and plastic stirring rods floated like flotsam on a crimson sea.

He drew near to the girl, who still remained in her black-cushioned chair, staring into the ever constant but ever changing flames. Her drink was untouched, untasted.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Tom asked,

with some of the cashier's concern now evident in his voice. "Please don't get the wrong idea, but would you like me to take you somewhere? Drive you home?"

"Home?" She looked up, still gazing distantly, as if distracted by faraway music, sad and haunting.

"Don't you have a place to stay?"

"A place? Yes. But it's not home." The girl glanced up at Tom, smiling quietly, politely. "Forgive me, I'm forgetting my manners. I appreciate your concern, Mr...?"

"Walters. Tom Walters."

"My name's Crysalis." Her eyes wandered about the deserted nightclub. Laura was just leaving through the front door. Seemingly for the first time, she became aware of the lateness of the hour. "I'm in your way. I'll be leaving. I'm sorry to be such a bother. It's just that I'm a little disoriented. You see, this week sometime, I'm not sure just when, my 25th birthday will come. And I'm..."

"You're all alone," Tom interrupted. "I know the feeling, believe me. Why don't you let me drive you home. How about it?"

"Oh, it's not far. I'll walk."

"Then let me escort you. It's late. And this city can be a treacherous place at night. You never can tell what might happen."

"All right, although I don't mean to be a bother..."

"Oh, it's no bother. Just let me finish up, won't take a minute."

Tom emptied the register, placing the money and the receipts in their respective bags, and secreting both in the steel floor safe. Crysalis stood by the front door, with its thick wood inlaid with stained glass and a clear oval pane in the center. Her gaze passed beyond, into the night without.

"Soon," she muttered, half to herself. "I can feel it. Soon the cycles will come around. And it will be time."

"Time?" Tom asked, as his fingers tapped the proper breakers, extinguishing the blue and red lights with greater ease than blowing out candleflames.

"Time for my change. I have no other word for it."

"For your birthday, you mean?"

"Yes."

"She *was* strange, Tom thought, but lovely. Not a ravishing beauty, but pleasant, with a subtle touch of strangeness to her features. Perhaps it had something to do with her hair. It was thick, layered, parted in the middle, with wisps that curled outward and upward from her face like a hint of horns. Or like tufts of feathers on a white owl. Now that it occurred to him, her gaze was imbued with the same fathomless, wisdom-saturated, and yet distant expression as that of an owl. He found it unusually attractive. And as she turned to him, he fancied that her face would have been perfect for wearing a tiara, or a thin circlet or gold crown, like a priestess of ancient rites. The barkeep smiled suddenly at himself, for such thoughts rarely visited his realist's

mind.

Soon they left the club, where trappings of wood and crystal and tufted leather prevailed, stepping out into the night where a full moon reigned resplendent.

"Tell me," Tom said as he walked beside her, "how is it that you're not sure when your birth-day comes?"

Crysalis gazed off into the night, speaking as much to the wind and to herself as him.

"I have no birth records. I was separated from my people as a child. I was taken away. Something happened there, in my hometown. Something no one will speak about. Something awful. There was a carnival, a wandering, visiting carnival, across the river. I wandered off, became separated from the others. Something came out of the sky. I remember people screaming, running, falling. The fire. Most of the people there were killed. When I was found, they didn't know who I belonged to. I was raised in an orphanage. Later a couple adopted me, but when I came of age I left them.

"I've been waiting. Waiting for my 25th year. It's supposed to happen then. My grandmother said so."

"Your grandmother? If you know your grandmother, then why..."

"She died, too, I think. In the disaster, or perhaps just beforehand. I have only faint memories of my childhood. I can't recall my parents at all, but I remember my grandmother, and staying with her in her little house. It was somewhere in the North, around Chippewa Falls or Eau Claire, or Colfax, I think. I never could trace it down for sure, but the names are familiar to me, and when I drive down the streets in those cities, I know I've been there before. And in Colfax, especially, when I asked about the carnival disaster, I got silent, hideous stares, but no information."

Tom was intrigued, caught up with the girl's story like one enthralled by a songstress. "What do you remember about your childhood?"

"Primarily my grandmother. And the feelings of security I felt with her, the warmth in her voice, and the dreamy, sing-song way she spoke. I have the same sort of impressions most people have about their grandparents, memories of stories read, fairy tales, children's books. But while she had books, huge leather bound books, my grandmother did not read to me from them, but spoke from her heart of birds and flying free through the air. Most of what she said was beyond me, at the time. But since then, and more so lately, her words have returned to me through dreams, and I can recall clearly what she told me.

"I would sit cradled in her lap, in a huge rocking chair, with velvet-flowered cushions. Back and forth, back and forth we would sway, while outside the wind roared and whistled and wailed, weaving its way in shrill whispery voices through the attic and timbers of the house. She would close her eyes; and the soft sound of her voice, like sighing, would mingle with that of the wind: 'Don't fear, my child. It is only the wind, singing its lullaby to rock you to sleep. For you are a child of the wind, as was your grandfather.

Listen. Listen closely and quietly. For it speaks to you. It speaks of the vast distances its journey has taken it, speaks of places where it blows around the black windowless towers, and beneath rune-covered archways, and spires and pillars. Far away Irem, and the City of Pillars knows its touch, as does Kadath, when it blows, tinged with ice and hoarfrost. And no stranger is it to the southern Isles, where it weaves over vine-covered temples, and ruins waiting to be reborn. Yes. Listen to the wind. And do not fear. For it calls to you. And one day you must answer. One day you will soar, as an eagle unchained in the skies. And boundless freedom shall be yours. Higher and higher and higher you will mount, and roam over the breadth of the land. On currents of air you will travel, and on the zephyr to espy earth's wonders, both secret and known, concealed and revealed.

"And like a hawk you will swoop, accepting their sacrifice and offerings. And their gifts you shall take, with talons like razors, carrying them aloft over frozen wastelands, draining the force and the life and the blood. And you shall know, too, the heat of the stars, and the cold of the spaces between, riding the black velvet heavens as ships the seas and ravens the skies.

"These things and more are yours, my child. Your gift, your heritage, from your Grand Sire..."

Their feet had carried them through a park, so they stood now in open gardens, a refreshing haven in a city of garish lights and shadow-darkened buildings. Tom stared at the moon as she spoke, while over his shoulders, her voice joined softly with the wafting of the wind.

Indeed she was beautiful, he thought, wrapped with moonglow and the night. Beautiful but crazy. In a strange, inexplicable way, though, even her delusion was weirdly attractive to him. And doesn't life drive us all to madness of one sort or another?

When Tom turned Crysalis was gone. And while he spun about, calling her name wildly, the wind snatched his words away, and did not return them even in echoes.

It was then that he heard the flapping sound. And there drifted down to his ears a shrill whine, issuing forth from high above where a white shape rivalled the moon in the sky. There was no time to think, to react. For with all the speed of a hawk's passing shadow it bore down on him and struck. Only briefly did he glimpse the thing, great and birdlike, with albino wings, and dangling protrusions like nothing ever dreamed of. In the muteness of horror, he realized the face sunken in a mass of flesh like feathers and scales--- and like neither--- was the face of a woman, that of the girl, Crysalis.

Talons closed effortlessly on the flesh of his shoulder and side, digging deeply to insure their grasp. In the space of a heart's beat, his feet parted from the ground.

Those few who saw the twin pale shadow drift across the moon blinked their eyes in disbelief, opening them to find the image gone, vanished and lost from sight. While in white clouds of vapor, above vast frozen wastelands, Tom's screams rolled on and on and on.

Fate Dines Out

BY SOL KANEMANN AND WILLIAM TREDINNICK

Wednesday

The body of another woman was found in the park that night. Her short dress was tangled above her waist and her panties were hanging off one ankle. What deeds had been forced upon her before her death the newspapers could not report.

"I've seen a lot of cases of sexual assault," one officer said, "but this, this animal did everything but pull her insides out. If I'd been in the park tonight, I'd've shot that mother dead! If it cost me my badge, I'd still've shot him dead!"

Friday

Crickets chirped and then were quiet, then chirped again as the man moved from one place to another in the shadowed depths of the park, stalking his prey.

A young woman, long hair, long legs, and built big... He licked his dry lips and moved swiftly but quietly in her direction. Fireflies winked on and off around him as he drew his knife and grabbed her from behind, his hand over her mouth and the knife before her eyes. It gleamed dully in the starlight.

"Don't make a sound!" he hissed.

He pushed her against a tree and held her there with the knife pressed to the hollow of her throat.

"Eat me," he grinned, his face next to hers and his breath foul in her nostrils. "You're goin' to eat me!" He chuckled and spittle flecked his lips; the hand holding the knife was unsteady.

"Wait!" a voice said, and such was its power that the woman's attacker obeyed.

An old man stepped from behind the tree, and suddenly Time seemed to flow around them and not touch them.

"You have claimed your last victim," the old man intoned, "you can no longer suspend your fate."

He sighed, more in sorrow than in anger. "The

knowledge of both good and evil is within you, and you have freely chosen to call evil good, and good evil. And you have thus selected your own fate.

"Poe well knew what he wrote. He did not write carelessly, nor thoughtlessly. But you have never read Poe, have never heard:

*They are neither man nor woman,
They are neither brute nor human,
They are ghouls....*

The old man sighed again, and walked away. Time continued.

As if the old man had never appeared, the woman looked at her captor.

"You're right," she said in a husky voice, and for the first time he noticed the fine hairs on her cheeks and the small teeth jutting their points almost invisibly over her lower lip.

Her tongue moistened those teeth with a slow, sensual movement, and the saliva glistened on them. She nipped the hand holding the knife and watched as her saliva entered his bloodstream and took effect.

A scream echoed through the park, and the old man hesitated and looked back, for it had been a scream of pure joy.

The expression of sheer ecstasy on the man's face as he was eaten alive was unbelievable. His exultant screams filled the air. It was a joy greater than that given him by any previous victim.

He knew he would die and wished he could live to experience it again.

The old man walked on, his bent back and bowed head testifying to his burden. He whispered something, but the joyous screams drowned out his words.



T H E S K U L L O F H P L

Temple of Shrieking Fear---
Wherein dead dark Lords
Born of lost dimensions loom,
And great alien shapes leer,
Utterly void of Earth-born words,
From lightless fetor-breathing tomb,

---How is it that such vasty sepulchres of dread,
Brim-filled with nightmares of the unquiet dead,
Were housed... in this one author's head?

Brian Lumley



D E A T H D O G

The Death Dog has luminous eyes;
 I see them shining in the darkness.
 He is running through the birch forest;
 he is howling by the lake.

I barricade my little house,
 stare out over the snows.
 No use. He has broken in.
 He is lying under the bed.

M Y A R M S R E S T

The long search
 has led me only to silence.
 Words are stones
 I threw down a well.
 Do not pity me;
 I no longer carry weights.
 My arms rest
 and I search for nothing,
 having found it.

R E V E L A T I O N

	J	
	O	Revelation arrived
	S	at four o'clock one winter afternoon,
F	E	under empty skies,
I	P	in a stiffened field, scattered with stalks.
V	H	
E		
	P	I suddenly understood
	A	that nothing would ever be knowable,
P	Y	nothing beyond knowledge,
O	N	beyond a mere embroidery of ignorance.
E	E	
M		Tattered leaves, frozen turf,
S	B	taught me wisdom was unreachable,
	R	unless resignation narrowed to wisdom,
	E	unless oblivion finally attained it.
	N	
B	N	Revelation arrived
Y	A	and I knew no more
	N	than fluttering tufts of the grass
		that told their nonsense into the wind.

J U N K Y A R D I N W I N T E R

A junkyard in winter
 ought to look poetic,
 but this death of metal depresses me.
 Ten thousand cars lie mute,
 battered, motionless,
 wrinkled with wreaths of snow.
 In icy moonlight
 flakes of rust scale off.
 A foraging rat, desperate with hunger,
 tests his teeth on torn seat cushions.
 One mildewed cricket
 emits a final chirp
 then freezes to death in a glove compartment.

A B S E N C E

The desolate draws me:
 reed swamps,
 salt flats,
 sand dunes.

I hunger for absence:
 absence of speech,
 of motion,
 of memory.

Arid,
 empty,
 the sea's wet shingle
 totally absorbs me.

Hissing
 of cattail stalks,
 rustle of waves,
 reinforce silence.

THE WITCHLING, THE THIEF,
AND THE DEAD MAN'S SWORD

BY DEIRDRE SIRES

Once Aylan of the Hawk hunted a deer all of a midsummer's night, and on the morrow when he came again to hall and kindred, there was with him a woman of unknown clan, who shared his bed and his lot in all things thereafter. And the wise would give one another knowing looks and affect to see a doe looking out of the stranger's eyes, for all neither she nor Aylan spoke of that night again.

Against all the sayings of these same knowing ones (it being commonly known that shape-shifters and such are not of human stock and hence rarely fruitful with human men) she gave to the Hawk chief a daughter, and thus gained the envy of those who had borne to Aylan naught but sons, for this daughter was the fulfillment of a prophecy and the ending of a curse. And it would be her hand in aftertimes would take up the staff of command that had lain disused for four long lifetimes....

Hulgan wrote these words before my birth and on the strength of them prides himself somewhat on this foreseeing, despite the fact that he claims it to be the opening of a romance. Aylan's and Osca's, he thought at one time; now he is certain that it is mine, and he is waiting for me to write it for him. Unprofitable and foolish, for my tale would never fit the awe and solemnity he demands from the beginning. Awe, yes, I tasted it when first I donned claws and fur and ran on hunting-cat feet to drag down the leaping deer and lap up the warm, flowing blood. But now it is a pleasure such as nothing else has held out to me, and this I tried to paint for Hulgan, giving him the mortal scents of fall when leaves lie thick and food is plentiful and fat, and the sharp, new odors of spring, but he sees it ever in a bard's terms with quaint conceits and twisted phrases that have nothing to do with anything outside of his own songs.

My father is more realistic about my shape-shifting and its uses. He has trained me in battlecraft, and I scout for him and silently pull down sentries to gain him cover in his raids, and through me he has gained a name for woodcraft among our enemies --- for which the Hawks have never lacked.

On a day not far from midsummer, when the Red Hart of Elgin began to walk less softly than his wont and raise his voice louder than before, I was spying out that part of the forest he claims by ancient right. On four feet, I had quartered it and seen no signs of human presence until the clink of metal on stone alerted me to someone ahead.

In a clearing there, on a hillside, was a narrow opening that gave access to a cave, or so I supposed, seeing a man crawling backwards out of

it. In one hand he held a sword of antique make and the other was closed around something I couldn't see. This something he stowed safe in a pocket of his leather jerkin. Then, whistling a snatch of a tune popular among the travelling songsmiths, he stood up and looked carefully about him, a spare man of little height with a thin brown face, and chanced to see me as a cat hunched under the lowest limbs of a pine.

"Ho, cat," he grinned broadly, "don't crouch there so far away. Come and see me close. It's a fine fair day and I'm a lucky man." And he held the sword up for me to see while patting his pocket as one well pleased with some treasure.

Since this was surely none of the Red Hart's men and I felt safe enough, I did as he bade me, first taking on human form, since speaking as a cat is a task beyond even me.

"Sa-sa," he hissed, sloe-dark eyes narrowing, "a shape-shifter, I see."

"What were you doing?" I motioned towards the narrow cave mouth.

"Why, borrowing a few gauds of my grandsire, little witchling," he replied, seeing I topped his height by a good half a head, "he being a sound sleeper and not like to miss them too soon by most reckoning."

"Gravethief!"

"Nothing of the sort!" There was mischief behind his indignation. "Did you not just hear me say I was but borrowing them? And him being the father of my father and dead before I was born, doesn't he owe me a kinsman's keeping?"

"And where are your living kinsmen that you need apply to the dead for what they owe?"

"My mother hailed from a market town --- a place in which, if you've had acquaintance with them, you well know that kinsmen are easy to lose since sickness stalks the narrow streets like robbers (of which there are no lack either) and takes whole families swoopstake. As for my father's family, my mother may have known them," he shrugged. "If so she never mentioned them."

"Then whose grave is this you claim kinright from?"

"Oh," he said carelessly, "old bones, here, is as like to be my grandsire as another --- and more richly laid to rest than many. But this is no place to fare carelessly --- if the old man is much like me, he is apt to be choicy as to who lays hand to the finest sword I've seen in many a year." He patted the antique blade and grinned.

But I felt a small troubling. Or was that only my ears? They have grown quick beyond mortal wont in the years when I have worn the cat skin and relied on them for my life. And now they told me that a mounted company approached, which in this place could only mean the Red Hart and his men.

This I hastily said, adding, "Unless you desire to closet yourself further with old bones ---" I brushed at a large bumbling fly that had flown up to trouble us, "we had best hare for it, my friend. The Red is a quarrelsome fellow who feeds his house thralls on strangers and tres-

passers."

"Well spoke, witchling," he absently knocked the fly aside. "Let us get on with this plaguey business of remaining alive."

He kept on with me for an hour of uneasy running after the Red's pack had picked up our trail, showing himself to be a man of unusual talents in the muddling of a trail. Finally, we stayed a minute beside the narrow stream that flowed westward out of the forest and across the moor. This I advised my companion to wade in, it being shallow and slow running, until he was clear of the forest and the Red's lands, while I confused the trail yet further and made my own escape.

For the effect of surprise I had kept to human form before. Now I dropped to all fours and took on fur and claws again, not staying to see if he did as I suggested. But I heard him call recklessly, "Farewell, witchling," as I bounded away into the thick underbrush that lined the stream.

To tell the truth I remember little enough of what followed, prudently letting the human be submerged in the animal for that which the animal knows best. I have some little recollection of the great bogs, slimy and noisome, where lighter animals such as a hunting cat may win through when a horse and rider will flounder. And stories were indeed heard thereafter of the Red Hart and his company being seen returning in the dusk covered with drying mud rather than glory.

When I came to myself, though, I was out on the moor close on the trail of my companion grave-thief of the afternoon, something nagging at the corners of my mind like a scolding nurse; and I remembered with some uneasiness the glittering fly that had troubled us at the old man's tomb, it being well known that the souls of the dead can take the shapes of winged insects even as I took the shape of the great hunting cat and my mother the semblance of a deer.

The track over the moor --- he had left the stream bed some three miles out of the forest --- was cunningly laid for a man in haste. It was well into the night, making allowance for the catching and devouring of a hare, that saw me finally approaching the place where he had holed up. A growl started deep in my throat and the tip of my tail twitched. He had chosen ill indeed.

Twelve great stones stood in a circle tight around a thirteenth and each two of the twelve was capped with a third, and how this came to be no human knew for it was a deed beyond human reckoning. My own people, we of the shape-shifters I mean, have our legends as my mother has told me, and none of these name this place to any good, but a place where night riders gather and the restless dead do ill deeds on their living kinsmen, all ties of blood being ended with its spilling. This had called me out to the moor when I might even then have rested in my father's hall. What it meant I hardly knew, but the man I had tracked might even now lie dead among those moon shadowed stones.

Warily, I approached, reluctantly skirting in a wide circle around the place, seeing nothing

and becoming ever more certain that if he lived it was among the stones. When finally I did see him he was yet standing. He was between two of the stones and directly under its capstone, facing the inside of the circle as though from that great single stone in the center what peril he feared would come, for peril he certainly feared or I read his face awrong. He hardly seemed to breathe, just stood and stared, some of the hardness and stillness of the stone reflected in his form. In one hand he held the ancient sword, the stolen sword that an angry ghost might destroy a man to reclaim. I approached at an angle, seeing no menace yet strangely uneasy. He could not have failed to see me, yet he still did not move.

"Witchling." It was hardly a thread of sound between dry, almost motionless lips. "The old bones --- are tetchy. Get *away!*" Resistance to stillness seemed suddenly to flow out of him and he spoke no more. I sat down where I was, and waited --- and thought.

I, too, had stood by that tomb and spoken slightly of its occupant. This malignancy that had gripped him for daring to touch tomb treasure I did not doubt would know me as well. I had heard tales --- who has not? --- of the fates that had overcome those who steal accursed treasure, and those who have associated with such thieves are deemed guilty as well by avenging ghosts. But I had spoken with him only in human form. Would the ghost know me in different guise? How to guess? Impossible to know, I yet waited, unsure whether to act or run. Clouds were obscuring the moon as they gathered thick and heavy as curdled milk, yet it seemed to me that the circle of stones was growing lighter. It was the sword he held. A white light softer than fire but still bright had started on its blade, gathering intensity with each passing second, as he stood, his shoulders brushing against the stones on either side of him, his head --- though he stood no more than average height --- nearly touching the capstone. It was a beacon, now, a shining light that seemed to touch even the lowering clouds. Still he did not --- could not --- move. There was a flicker of lightning and an angry growl of thunder. I gathered my muscles to spring, whether towards him and that sword or away I do not know. Then came the bolt of fire and I was precious seconds ahead of it in my leap.

I hit him at the knees with my not inconsiderable weight and we tumbled away together as the lightning struck. For a few seconds it seemed that I was blind and deaf and the whole world was going up in flame and coming down in rock. The capstone had fallen, I realized dully, and, wondering if this was death, I slid into nothingness.

A voice, an anxious voice, calling me something that I knew was not my name, brought me back to myself some minutes later. I was still in the shape of a cat, sprawled in what must have been for him an uncomfortable position, for the man was flat on his back and I atop him. The capstone had been struck by the bolt and had shattered as though it were a pebble struck by an iron maul. Flying chips had struck and bruised us both but the large pieces had mercifully fallen elsewhere.

The sword had been destroyed or dropped and buried under more stone than any man would care to shift in a lifetime. His paralysis broken, the thief was pulling at my ears and rubbing under my chin, plainly glad to see me alive and expressing gratitude as one does toward a cat rather than a

human, with meaningless sounds and touches.

"Witchling," he said thoughtfully, scratching between my ears and staring up into a sky miraculously cleared, "It's a fine night and I swear I'm a lucky man."



Screaming to Get Out

by Janet Fox

The city shone with a gauzy sleazy phosphorescence as things do in the later stages of decay. He could move through it, unthinking, unfeeling, in perfect safety, and though a lot had happened to make him what he was, at this moment he might as well have existed forever in this state, a suspension between blind exaltation and despair. But it must not be imagined that he knew this about himself any more than a rat is aware of its own prowess in the gritty levels just above bare survival. If it paused to consider, it would no longer be a rat.

He cruised in the dark, anonymous car until he felt the hunger come on him. That last one had been good. He remembered her face, ugly even before the tears streaked it and made her eyes red and swollen and her expression, that of an animal suffering and not knowing the reason why.

"You're like the Kleenex I blow my nose into," he had said.

She had pulled a sheet over her nakedness. Her body was ugly, too, bony and underdeveloped. He always chose the ugly ones. They seemed his legitimate prey in a world that worshipped physical beauty. She had started crying then in a satisfying way, the half-repressed, agonized sound of an adult's crying. Her inner self was an unattractive as the rest of her; no resources there, though she had probably been told at some point in her life that plain girls had "character." He had called her a couple of appropriate names and left, whistling down the street past the crumbling façades of buildings, the castoffs of a technological society, the skeleton of a ruined bike, rusty blades of an electric fan, beer cans, and got into the car as one shoulders into a comfortable garment. The torn and sagging seat accommodated itself to his weight and the motor coughed into tenuous life.

He had read about her later in the paper. How she had closed all the windows and doors and turned on the gas. That was icing on the cake to him. The landlady (nosy old bag) had smelled the gas and had gone upstairs just in time to save her. That was even better, he thought. Let her live, that was the ticket. A suicide that failed was even better than one that succeeded. He had felt sated for days after that one, and was almost chary of trying again because the next one might not measure up.

Even though with each encounter it seemed he carried something away, it must not be thought that he did what he did with any malice. That it was something he could do and so did was all the explanation there was.

He drove up to a drive-in restaurant and watched the car hops go in and out with clockwork pre-

cision, parading their majorette legs in white short-shorts. They were safe from him and showed little interest in waiting on him, choosing instead the cars that spilled over with wise-cracking, rude-talking boys. He left the car and went inside and sat at a table where he ordered a coffee and drank it in measured sips. No one noticed him particularly because he wore that best of all disguises in the city, a face like everyone else's. Only the expressions moving quickly across his face at times insinuated a deformity of the spirit.

He looked around the room. Even though the place had a surface semblance of shining newness, a careful eye could see everywhere the signs of decay and ultimate fall. Corrosion had begun to eat in a circular pattern at the metal feet of the shining pseudo-marble tiles. There were burn scars where someone's cigarette had melted the gleaming black plastic table-top. But he really didn't see these things as individual phenomena, because he himself was a part of the larger phenomenon which was slowly eating the city and all the people, its component parts.

She was behind the counter so that only half her bulk was visible, stomach rising to meet pendulous breasts straining the white fabric of her uniform, chins, stacked one upon the other, sloping downward like tallow melting, features a distorted blur of protruding cheeks, doughy white skin, tiny wise eyes like something peering out, a prisoner beneath the weight of all that gross flesh. What was it they always said about a thin person screaming to get out? He ran his tongue rapidly across his lips. She moved serenely like some huge sea beast, and she had deft, seemingly boneless white hands that worked swiftly, almost with a life of their own.

Like him, she too was able to be what she was without thinking about it. As she worked, her white hands lifted toward her face french fries dripping with oil, sandwiches oozing mayonnaise, candy bars richly coated with chocolate, hiding in their centers crunchy, oily nuts. Although she did not bother to wonder why she was allowed to eat up this much of the profits, the manager was able to figure up how much he made on a worker who was never sick, never late, never complained and who worked untiringly at substandard wages. She did not wonder about it because she did not realize she was eating all these things. She lived almost every waking minute with a hunger that was a dull ache inside her and seemed to have nothing whatever to do with the rich foods her hands were continually putting into her mouth. Sometimes she tried to think about herself, who she was, but she could only feel herself as a mouth, empty and salivating for something, she didn't know what.

He studied her heavy body as she moved back and forth behind the counter. What must she look like naked: and outré buddha, shaped by dirty hands from a wad of dough, then allowed to rise ... and rise. He smiled at the thought, and she orbited toward him, greasy patches shining on forehead and cheeks.

"D'you want it warmed up?"

"What?"

"Your coffee."

"Oh. Yeah. Business slow tonight?"

And she started, all the way through the layers of fat, as though she wasn't used to having anyone notice that she was human, let alone address a remark to her, let alone a man!

"Yeah, yeah, it is," she said in a small, strangely unresonant voice. They looked at each other, each seeming to awaken from a sleep. There was a meeting here, as of two large though dormant powers, testing strength, then each subsided and for the moment slept again.

He toyed with the coffee cup, playing at self-consciousness. "What time do you get off work? I suppose it's late."

"About twelve."

"Is it... all right if I pick you up? It's just that I... get lonely sometimes. You know how it is." And he knew that she did know.

"Okay."

He put a quarter on the table and left hastily, not sure that he would be back. He sensed a strength in her where there should be nothing but weakness. Well, he didn't have to come back, not if he didn't want to.

She allowed her hands to attend unerringly to her tasks, unaware of everything except the hunger that now seemed to intensify. She never understood it, and tried to appease it by eating, but it rarely went away.

Rain began to tap insistent fingernails against the plate glass. The car hops squealed and ran for cover, and since it was getting late, the manager let them go home. They laughed and chattered among themselves, then scattered into the wet night. To her they were alien creatures. She could not imagine their lives, and she couldn't remember ever having been as young as they were. She didn't try very hard to recall. There was a dim memory of a damp, dark, closed-in space. She stopped trying to remember and thought instead of the nice young man. Her mind spiraled out into the rainy night as though willing him to come back.

The windshield wipers worked violently against the torrent of wind-driven rain. Not even rain could cleanse the city; the stuff in the air polluted the rain, giving it a chemical smell; the water in the gutters was brown, yearning toward sewers that underlay the city in myriad dark channels. He eased the car into one of the parking stalls before the deserted drive-in. The place looked haunted with its girls departed, its neons blinked out. He thought for a moment that she hadn't waited, then he saw the bulk of her outlined in the dim glow from a street lamp.

The rain didn't matter to her; she walked toward him placidly as if she didn't feel it. Her ponderous form was grotesque, draped in a wrinkled tan raincoat and her sparse hair hung around her face in limp strands. Then she was inside the car. He felt the seat go down to the extremity of its springs. She brought with her the smell of wet hair, wet clothing and some other scent, not really unpleasant, not perfume. He was

suddenly comfortable in her presence, as though her size was something to lean against.

"A good thing I came back for you. You'd get soaked walking home. You need someone to take care of you." That line always appealed to them. "What's your address?"

"415 Fenwick."

"That's quite a ways. Do you walk every night after dark?"

"Yeah."

"I'd think you'd be afraid."

"I'm not." A statement of fact.

The car was one of the few on the rainblack street. Water was dashed across the windshield and hissed under the tires. She didn't speak further but sat, imposing and imperturbable. It should have made him nervous, but somehow it didn't. For all her weight she didn't seem quite real. It was as though he might look away for a moment and look back to find her gone.

He entered her street. The buildings sagged subtly one against the other, their facades crumbling off in layers. Gaping stars in windowpanes attested to emptiness. "Have you lived in this neighborhood long?"

She stopped and tried to think. "I've lived here... all my life," she said, surprised to realize that it was true. White bodies writhing and the beginning of the hunger.

"The city's funny," he said. "You think of it as civilized, and maybe some parts of it are nice and safe, but there are back alleys, deserted buildings, cellars, perfect hiding places for ---" He stopped himself, his imagination straining but not quite able to conclude something that had been clear at the beginning. He slipped his arm around her, hoping to offer reassurance, but she only looked at him in an odd way, so he removed his arm, and was glad of it. The wet raincoat had a clinging, yeasty quality. Perhaps she was one of the ugly ones who had come to terms with herself as she was. These were not vulnerable to him, but (his hunger prompted him) this one did not really have that feel.

He pulled the car into a parking space beside many other empty spaces before a building as anonymous as others along this street. The rain washed in rhythmic waves across the roof. He got out and went around to open her door. She would not run and he did not have the strength to compel her. The rain pelted them as they walked from the car to the door of her building.

A flight of stairs carpeted with a threadbare, colorless runner, squeaked, he supposed, familiarly under her weight. The staircase and hallway were dimly lit by flyspecked light fixtures of antique design. The walls displayed their many coats of paint in peeling layers, green, cream, blue, green again. Someone had scrawled obscenities in a childish hand. The hallway was littered, broken toys, bits of mold-colored organic matter.

Someone who was not what he was would have felt pity to see the squalor in which she lived, but he was pleased. That would make it easier for him.

She opened the door. The apartment seemed only

a continuation of the corridor. Mildew had added subliminal designs to the cheap flower-printed wall paper. The furniture was that predictable collection of odds and ends that inevitably ends up in a furnished room. There were no pictures, pillows, rugs or books to show that someone had even attempted to make a home here. He was discomfited. That was wrong; they all had the nesting instinct; he depended upon it. Sometimes he promised marriage first and saw the ghosts of suburban ranch houses and magazine-ad children flicker in their eyes.

"I'll put on some dry clothes. I'll bring you a blanket. No, don't turn on the lights. At work my eyes get kind of tired."

He imagined her night after night groping about the darkness like some huge blind grub in its burrow. Why wasn't she being giggly and coy about the changing of clothes? She tossed in a blanket and he undressed and wrapped himself in it.

She came in carrying two jelly glasses with wine in them, her massiveness enhanced by a shapeless bright pink house coat with ruffles at neck and sleeves. It was odd how he was surprised by her bulk each time he saw her. She sat down on the couch, causing him to slide down the slippery cushion until he was pressed against her in the hollow formed by broken springs. Her bloated face swam before him, the image in a bad dream, indistinct in the dimness. There was

only the insistence of the rain against the windows. He took her hand or did she take his, and her skin was moist, faintly adhesive. She squirmed out of the robe, her body immense and white, the flesh bulging and folding upon itself. As she put her arms around him, he had the dream-like sensation of warm water lapping gently against his body. At first her largeness was comforting, a great warm wall of flesh, then he felt himself falling... into? it? Her body became liquescent and began to engulf him. Darkness surrounded him and when he attempted to scream, his mouth was filled and he gagged. He struggled as the corrosive acids in her body began to digest the outer layers of his skin. As she lolled back she remembered briefly the dark underground place where she had, as one pale larva among dozens, burst from the egg and how she had grown to resemble, through protective mimicry, the occupants of these structures.

By morning her body would eject those indigestible parts, the teeth, the hardest parts of the largest bones, and she would carry them down into the burrow and place them beside the several dozen eggs that she had deposited there. She lay, sated, on the sofa, what looked like a huge woman in a dainty pink house coat. She had assuaged the hunger this way before but she didn't know how many times. It was hard for her to remember. In the morning she might even wonder what had happened to the kind young man who had driven her home.

DANCE MACABRE

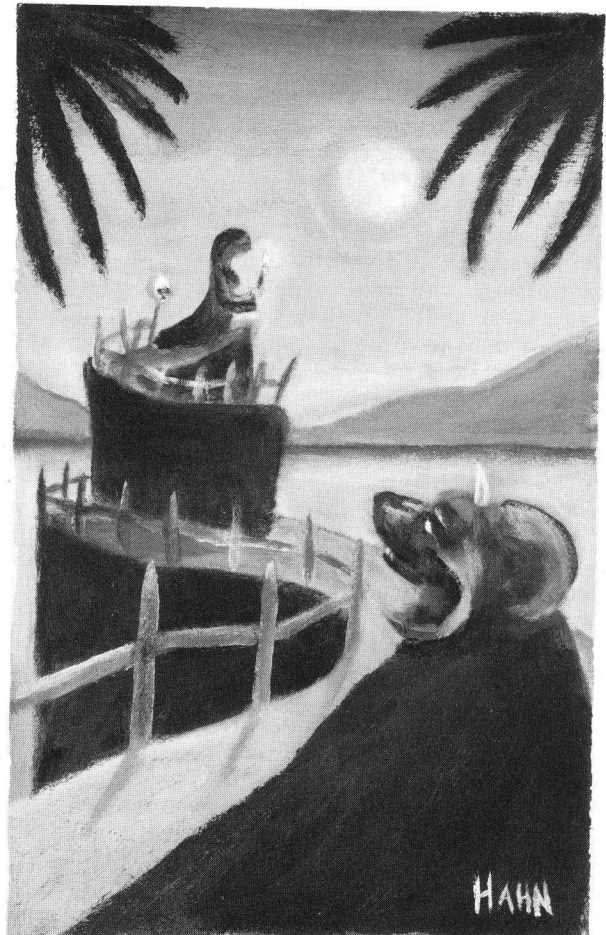
I saw the grass on the hillside bend
Beneath no mortal shoon;
A demon ran where the sward began
And capered in the moon.

Black as Nubia was his skin,
Naked as night he stood,
And he danced to a hidden violin
Deep in the still black wood.

On the swarded hill he leaped and sprang,
Where the brooding nightwinds pass,
As if he would tread the stars down
And trample them in the grass.

He trod a measure dark and strange,
It was old when Time began,
In darksome glory he stepped the story
That vaunted the fall of Man.

--Robert E. Howard



I Hate You

by Eddy C. Bertin

I wake up. The awakening is the worst of all, because it doesn't come slowly, but instantly. Suddenly you know that you *are*; your ego regains consciousness, recognizes itself. Immediately you see the environment, and you know down to the smallest details what is going to come now.

I am standing in a living-room. My eyes are open, and looking around. I do not own my body, and though I can feel every movement of its muscles, my brain interpreting every impulse the senses emit to it, I don't think consciously about it. I stopped thinking about that a long time ago. My body is acting as a mechanism, a robot. I send my thought impulses out to Emma, and as always I find her in the sleeping-room in a locked embrace with her lover. They still seem vague and unreal, they haven't obtained their full bodies yet. At the moment they are still no more than disembodied aimlessly-drifting egos, hopelessly dreaming and hating, just as I hate.

"Again?" her lover's ego whispers. He has no name, because the script has preferred to mention him only as 'The Lover.' His ego is crude, ill-defined and animal-flavoured. I don't especially like him, but neither can I hate him as strongly, as deeply, as I hate The Others. He hasn't become himself either. His body will be making love to Emma's, but it leaves me indifferent, because that's after all the way the script wants it, and they too are only acting as wired puppets, machines obeying their orders. My body moves towards the door now; there it bends and looks through the small key-hole. At that exact moment, Emma and her Lover's ego obtain their bodies, crushing together in an instantaneous orgasm. As always my eyes are watching the same scene on the disorderly bed in the room. When I get up from my bending position and look around, turning my face towards The Others, a smothering hatred lies burning in my glances. But this time my ego is also hating Them. God, how I wish that only *once* one of them would notice the real cause of the hatred, the devouring, burning hatred against Them, in my eyes. But they never notice *that*.

"Again..." Emma's ego whispers. There is horror in her whispering, and an abominable fear of what is going to come, petrifying terror, too, because she knows that it is inevitable, there's no way to escape. I am afraid too, but I also know that we cannot avoid it in any manner. My mechanical hand takes the heavy weapon out of the desk. Its weight makes it feel like a cannon, though in fact it is small. I don't know how to handle a gun, but my hand knows.

How desperately I wish I could close my eyes during what is going to come now... but I never

can. The script says that I must hate and kill. My body hates and kills... but I hate differently.

As I am prowling towards the door, my back turned to The Others, my ego is shivering and whimpering like a small animal being whipped. It is a psychic torture, and the words to describe it don't exist. Then as always I throw open the door, at the same second opening fire at the two naked bodies on the bed. I feel the momentary near-insane terror, the searing pain in Emma's body as the bullets tear it apart. I sense the shuddering, the last fear-impulses of every nerve, the final movements of every muscle. The same, always the same. Then it is over, I close the door and my face is again watching The Others. Emma's ego can go back to sleep now. Her part in the game is finished. A grim satisfaction is marked on my features, but behind it lies my uncontrollable hatred of The Others. Now I am running. Suddenly, without a transition period, I am in a forest, hunted by policeman. I can't feel their egos yet, they are still asleep though I know they are there already. Then one comes into my view, and in a flash his ego springs into existence. His hand rises with the gun, spitting fire and thunder in my direction. The bullet hits me in the right leg; I stumble and fall as he approaches. In the meantime our egos exchange a few friendly words. He too hates The Others.

We *all* hate Them, but there's nothing, absolutely *nothing*, we can do against Them; we're completely powerless.

Everything continues in the usual ritual. I am arrested and put on trial.

In between there are several periods in which my ego gets a few minutes of sleep, when I'm not in straight view of the white-covered wall. But soon again I'm being absorbed by the eternally continuing perpetuum-mobilum nightmare, into which I have been unwillingly born and in which I would desperately like to perish as soon as possible, *if* it were possible. And all the time, The Others are watching. Sometimes, when my face is turned towards Them, I see Them clearly in Their dark cubic box, of which the open side is staring at me like a rotten open stomach. There They are, sitting, watching, gaping, sleeping, eating, necking, talking, fornicating. All those eyes, those cursed-wide-open eyes, staring, zombielike, hypnotizing. Oh, if I only could vomit straight into Their faces, suffocate Them with the power of my hatred, even if I only could *tell* Them how much I hate and loathe Them. But even that is denied me, I am only an ego, possessing and automating a robot-body during exactly ninety-six minutes and twenty-four seconds, no more.

The time is gone. I'm sitting in the electric chair now, the electrodes feel cold on my temples. I feel the blindly destroying energy racing through my body, burning it. The body is shaking all over, arching itself in spasms... it is hell. Then my head slumps forwards, and I savour a blessed rest during the final seconds, while the coroner examines the body and pronounces it dead, just before my pseudo-life fades away.

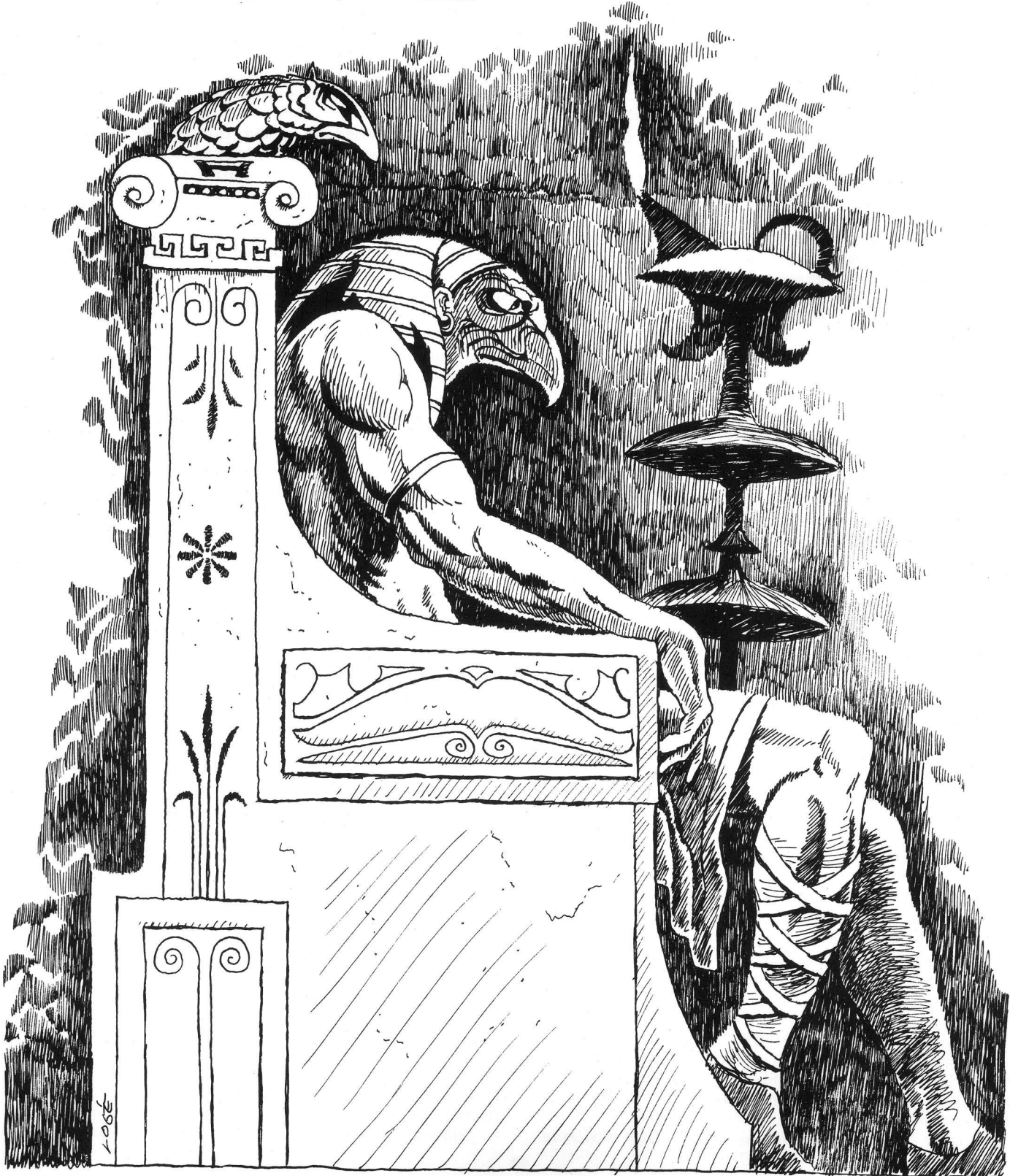
Through my closed eye-lids, through the enormous signs **END THE** drifting before me in the

air, I see Them getting up in the now fully lighted box. And in a climax of hatred, I move my body. I taste an endless feeling of triumph. One of Them has seen it, and a strange sensation of undefined fear crosses his face for a shard of a second. He turns his face again at me, then shakes his head, not understanding, maybe not *wanting* to understand, what he has seen.

I hate you, Spectator, I hate you and loathe

you and curse you! This time I could move very slightly only, but next time maybe it will be a bit more, until my own volition, my own power, will be strong enough. Then I will come to you, in your closed black watching-box where you feel so safe and secure, and then you'll really feel the strength of my hatred!

Everything extinguishes, fades away. Sleep.



The Merlin Stone

by H. Warner Munn

Sometimes there are too many beginnings to a story. I have tried to start this one before and have given up. How to tell it? So it can be believed?

Yet, Shiela says, so often, that it is my duty to make the danger known by publicizing it --- even though it be considered fantasy --- that I have become at last convinced. For it is by no means certain that although one menace has been removed there may not be another --- or others. There are many secret places yet, under earth and under sea.

Thinking back, it may be that the first hint of horror was largely ignored. Long before I was born, in 1836 to be exact, some boys were searching for rabbits' warrens in the side of a cliff near Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh. They found, instead, some thin sheets of slate which covered a little crypt.

In it were seventeen tiny coffins, each three or four inches long. There were two tiers of eight each and a third begun, with one coffin. Inside were miniature wooden figures, dressed differently both in style and material.

Obviously, these had been deposited singly at intervals of many years. In the bottom tier, the coffins were falling apart. The wrappings were moldered almost away. In the second tier, everything was in much better condition. The top coffin seemed almost new.

There is an account of this find in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland. Three of these coffins, and their contents, are pictured. The tiny effigies certainly look human.

Knowing what I know now, these are probably the oldest. I feel that the other fourteen, taken in order, were disposed of for a very good reason. Did they show decadence? A departure from the norm? Did the last few bring dismay to the finders because of indications hard to explain?

For example, an appearance more batrachian? Scaly, perhaps? Gills? Did the destroyers shudder as wooden horrors were committed to the fire?

It would be interesting to know. But not having more facts, I suppose I should really begin my personal story with the fiery cross which was sent to my father last year, for that is where the affair of Pixy Glen began for me.

I am Hugh Lamont, biologist and antiquarian. I inherit these interests from my father, Alastair Irving Lamont, so well known in the fields of micro and molecular biology that I shall be forever overshadowed by his fame.

He came bustling into my study that October

morning --- a small man, for neither of us is large, --- his face animated, his busy gray hair awry--- he had the habit in moments of excitement of clutching it in both hands and teasing it out in all directions.

At this moment he had a firm grip on a forelock and was tugging madly with one hand, while he held out to me an envelope and a tiny cross made apparently of a couple of toothpicks.

He laid it on my desk. "Hugh, what do you think of this?"

I inspected it. The four ends had been burned and dipped in some rusty looking residue. It flaked off at the touch of my fingernail. I examined it under my microscope. "Blood. Human, of course."

My father nodded. "And this?" He took a tiny packet, wrapped in glassine, from out the folds of a letter. "Put a bit on a slide and tell me what you think? Algae?"

I did so, but it was hardly necessary. So easily was it identifiable with the naked eye that I knew he could not have been deceived for a moment and this was only preamble to some point he wished to make, as professor to student.

"Algae, no. Not with even one of those diatoms. Plankton, of course," I answered, with some annoyance. "Come to the point, Dad. Where did you get it?"

"Not from any seashore. Rather far inland, in fact. It was scraped off a rock, on a mountainside, well in the interior of Scotland, miles from the sea."

I looked up from the eyepiece with such incredulity that, overwrought as he was, he laughed.

"No. I haven't lost my senses, Son. So Sandy Gowlie says and I believe him. Truly there is not plant life alone in this specimen he scraped from the base of the Druid's Thumb, but plant and animal --- in a word, Plankton - Something, with sea-slime on its body; something that tears the throat out of dogs, or shoots them with elf-stones; something that abducts girls --- maybe --- has been climbing around Ben Havis and rubbing itself against the stones. This is what it left behind, perhaps like other animals, to leave a territorial mark."

I seized on the one thing I could understand. "You spoke of elf-stones. You mean some of the pigmy flints have been found?"

"Hard to miss them, Hugh. This one was cut out of the heart of Gowlie's sheltie pony, where it was killed in his own paddock and a whole hind-quarter taken away. Handle it carefully. Poison."

I took up the little ancient artifact with forceps. Ancient? No! The edges, where they were not stained, were sharp and fresh. I smelled it cautiously. New enough, even overlain by blood and the mysterious green, for me to detect the characteristic odor of raw flint.

It was an exquisitely minute arrowhead, the chipping so tiny that the flint-knapper must have worked the stone under a powerful glass --- at least that was the way I explained it to myself. I could well believe that it might bring sudden death.

"Horse and hattock! In the Devil's Name!"

"No, Hugh," my father shook his head. "No witch flicked this off her thumbnail, at a doomed Christian under the dark of the moon. This hunt was for a more prosaic reason. Food."

I set it carefully down, closed the book I had been reading and laid it on the papers I pushed aside.

"Too many hints, Dad. Too much mystery. Tell me. What is it all about? Who is Alexander Gowlie? What is he to you? And where is the Druid's Thumb?"

"Well, first your questions. Then, in a bit I will read you his letter and we can decide better what we should do about it.

"It came to me from a man in the North, whom I first met when we were both little lads. Every year my father used to take me to Glen Havis for the salmon. I made friends with all the boys I could find, but none so close and true as Alexander Gowlie.

"He was son of a shepherd who had a small holding in the Glen. It was a poor stony croft and Sandy had little time for play, but he had a keen mind and a great curiosity and interest in everything. A great reader and self-educated. I was hard put to keep up with his thought.

"We spent most of his free time together, fishing, climbing, or just rambling. The land goes into the sea there like fingers. Between those high ridges are deep firths which sometimes run back into the land quite far, as dry or marshy glens, where at one end are fishing villages, and at the other, some sparse pasture for sheep on the uplands.

"Glen Havis is such a one. Separated from this, by a high rise, the next glen is fully as desirable to look upon, but vacant of people or beasts. Pixy Glen is wasteland only. It can be entered by rounding the headland by boat, or crossing the intervening ridge by a rough climb. It was then --- and I doubt not still is --- unused, untilled, uninhabited, in fact, shunned.

"Sandy was afraid to go near it after dark, though we often hunted eggs on the cliffs and fished in the burn during the day. When I asked him why, he said it had a bad reputation thereabouts.

"He was evasive about details, but did say that up to 1873, it had been used as pasturage for sheep. At that time a few crofters lived at the end of the firth. That year there was a minor earthquake and immediately after, strange things began to happen.

"Sheep died or could not be found. Dogs barked unaccountably at all hours of the night. Several little girls disappeared.

"A tourist and his young wife were lost in the hills and when they were found, he had cut her throat with his pocket knife and was crouching over her like a wolf --- snapping and scratching at the men who tried to get him away. Later he died mad --- his only coherent words being --- 'The Dark People!' which phrase always threw him into hours of frenzy, from which he collapsed into stupor.

"Gypsies vehemently denied any knowledge of the tragedy. Indeed, none had been seen close,

and for a long time after they shunned that locality.

"Sheep raising became unprofitable, so heavy were the losses. Most of the folk moved away. A few die-hards remained, who pastured near home or lived off the sea. One day a fishing vessel came in for water and meat.

"None of the folk of Pixy Glen met it on the pier, which the crew thought strange...Queerer still, when they found no one at all in any of the houses. No sheep were in the paddocks, no hens in the yards --- nor any dog to bark.

"There was naught but the sun shining down on an empty valley, in which nothing moved, but the whaups and corbie crows above the heather stirred by the winds and dappled with the shadows of the clouds which hang low over the ridges.

"Since then, no one has ever dwelt in Pixy Glen and few, no matter what the weather or their weariness, have ventured to spend the night in any of the ruined houses or along the stony beach.

"There is a rough track over the mount and at the top of the separating ridge, one lone pinnacle of rock, sheer, unclimbable, without even a fingerhold for many feet. It is high, as a light-house is high. It dominates both valleys.

"The people of Glen Havis call it the Druid's Thumb and say that Merlin, Arthur's friend, who was both Mage and tutor, is associated with it in some benign way.

"This letter explains that odd belief further. I may as well skip the salutation and let Sandy speak for himself:"

You'll be remembering how we used to rest near the base of the Druid's Thumb and crack a bit before going on down into Pixy Glen? We wadna do it now. It is a chancy place. Not a body goes there more, nor even where we had our light-some times. Pixy Glen is cursed from long since and the weirdies that blighted it then are loosened far and farther yet to go and none knows where the end will be.

The same things that happened there are happening now in Glen Havis. Shiela, my own poor lassie, has been taken --- where or why, only God knows for certain and I can no more than guess.

Her blue ribbon was found where we used to sit and look out over the sea. There it is that I am bound, when I end the writing. Maybe they will be wanting me too.

I am taking something with me that is better than dirk or gun. The magic charm the Mighty Enchanter set to protect poor human sorrowers from fear of evil and the Power of the Dog.

You should be knowing that there was one farm in Glen Havis that slept soundly than many another these last late years, while all its neighbors were disturbed. This farm is just at the foot of the path which straggles o'er the ridge from Pixy Glen and anything which comes along that path must leave it to make a wide circle if it would avoid the farm.

You would think the people there would be the first to be oppressed, were bogles a-wandering, would you no, old friend? So I thought and I

wondered why not? So I went to visit and while I was there I became athirst and I drew a pail of water from the well for drink.

I leaned over to watch the bucket rise dripping from the well. It was only after a moment that I began to realize that something extremely wrong was happening to me.

While one hand, resting on the well-curb, was hardly conscious of any temperature, for the stones were sun warmed to blood heat, the other had become chilled to the bone. Really, so! My right hand ached with the cold and the strangest throbbing pain was creeping up my wrist to the elbow.

Yet both rocks lay in the hot sun, scarce thirty inches apart.

I snatched my paining fingers away. It was as though I had laid them on a hot stove, and indeed the difference between great heat and great cold is not so easy to be sure about at the first touch. My thought was that in some way I had been burned.

I ran the tips of the fingers of my left hand over that queer surface. It was not canny, at all. It was smooth, not slippery, and felt the most like soapstone, but it was jet black, not gray. On it was the outline of my sore hand in fog, like to the aura which forms if you put your hand against a windowpane on a frosty day.

My testing fingers began to prick, but on the angles, the edges of the stone, I had felt certain roughnesses along all, too regular to be accidental. I bent over to examine what I thought might be an inscription. This brought my head and upper part of my chest in close nearness to it, when a most peculiar faint and repellant feeling came upon me.

I would not say, exactly, a feeling of disgust, although there was a certain definite swimminess in the head and my eyes blurred. I could feel a slowing of my heart. It seemed that I was being pushed away.

I did not *want* to be near the stone. It was like the pressure of facing a heavy wind, without the sensation of anything touching or blowing past me. I knew it to be menacing, threatening, as dangerous to life as a bare copper wire carrying a heavy charge, invisible but deadly.

Still, it was a force I felt not directed personally at me, or any poor special body. It was not even something weird. It was created by man and controlled from the beginning, by man.

This all happened in the blink of an eye. I straightened up. I had come hard against a mystery, but I had the explanation for it all firm in my mind. I had seen what I had hoped to see.

The texture of the stone was that of meteoric iron. What used to be called a thunderstone. I had no doubt, were it sliced and polished, that those crystalline lines and angles, which are so like city plans as seen from the air, would show clearly to prove its far birth.

And the cold of it! Could it be the cold of the space between the worlds, preserved by magic, or science no living man has any way to handle today, to hold it in, to let it leak forth slowly to serve as a source of power?

I had felt that power. Why it was preserved, against whom it had been directed, I did not yet know, but I was beginning to suspect and I felt I could guess who had cast the spell, created the cold wonder and placed it on the Druid's Thumb.

Someone who was good; someone who hated evil and cared for the warm-hearted folk of the two Glens, and who knew well what to do to help and protect the ones he loved and those who would come after them.

You'll be remembering now our secret writings, with the cuttings and the chippings of the pebbles? The nicks we made to talk to each other so none else but we could read? How we learned the Old Language between us?

Drops of water ran down the side of the pail on the curb of the well and all along the markings. They were deep and cut by hand. I recognized the scratches --- the letters of the old alphabet called Ogham, written you'll mind, not on the flat surface of any stone, but cut into its angles.

All the old legends came true for me. I asked the farmer how it came to be there. To him it was just an ordinary stone. He was a poor clod and felt nothing. For once I was glad that I am fey.

Still, even to him, it had a story. It seems that when his grandfather was stoning up the well, at the time of the earthquake, it came to him by itself. It rolled down the mountain right into his yard. Being the right size, the right shape and square cut already, the old mason worked it right into the well rim.

Now I wanted it. Until I had it out of its bed of mortar and could translate the inscription, I was all on edge. I knew what I had. I had read the two letters I saw side by side. A definitely clear MY--- then a space blurred by dirt --- a good D and four other letters badly worn and obscured. The count was right. The letters were in the right places. They had to be the basic letters of the word MYRDHINN, Cymric form of the name familiar to us as MERLIN!

Merlin, the Druid, the mighty Enchanter. Not the pontifical Merlin of Malory; the doting gray-beard of Tennyson, or the half-witted spouter of mumbo-jumbo that Mark Twain saw as foil for Sir Boss!

Oh, no! Mighty Merlin --- Myrdhinn, of the ancient lore! Powerful Myrdhinn of the Triads; courageous champion of White Magic versus the Dark; strong warrior Merlin, who loved peace, but of whom it is written that he led the charge of a forlorn hope against the Saxons and won, upon a day when Arthur, the Valiant, was not ashamed to seek shelter in the bushes!

And I had the treasure he had handled --- the Merlin Stone.

I hinted to the farmer that he had a gravemarker of the Elder Race, build into the well curb. He was horrified. After, he was glad to get rid of it, for there is no luck in using a stone for the dead for any other purpose, and he believed me --- but I had to buy it at no bargain, all the same.

I had no true thought then of why I wanted to

own the Stone. Some angel must have whispered in my ear. I picked away the mortar with great care. The letters are Ogham, but the words are Latin. Here is what I saw:

Father passed over a piece of paper to me. I examined it and shook my head. "It is only scratches to me," I admitted. "I would have to take your word that it represents language of any kind."

Father's tone took on a schoolmasterish sound. "You will note," he said, "that the markings are arranged in a series of four lines. Each line represents one of the four long edges of the block."

"The short markings, according to the letters of the alphabet which they represent, are straight, ending at the long line for ten of these letters, either above or below the line."

"The short ones are, in each case, grouped from one to five in number. The letters thus are H-D-T-C-Q and B-L-V-S-N."

"Five other letters slant to the right --- again from one to five markings, but *these* use both sides of the long line and represent M-G-, the sound Ng-F (or Z) and R."

"The last authentic letters are represented by *straight* lines, which again continue across the long line of the stone's angle, as before numbered from one to five. These are the vowels, but in the order of A,O,U,E, and I."

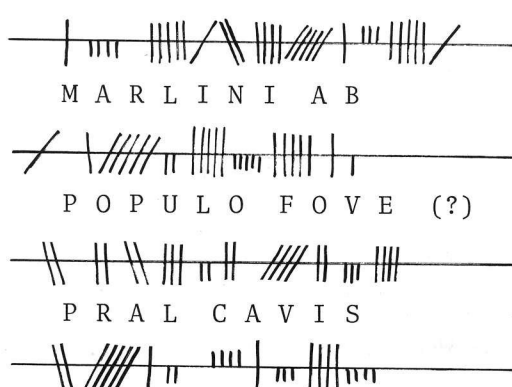
"Ogham which dates from the 5th and 6th centuries --- which places it around the estimated time of Merlin and King Arthur and the dark, uncertain gap in British history--was not originally intended for use in writing."

"The groupings range from one to five, because we have five digits on each hand. By holding the fingers at various angles, either straight or bent, perhaps grasping a staff, or even strumming a harp, or holding a sword handle --- secret messages could be passed from one adept to another."

"Later, as the language required more letters, the sounds of K, P, and W were added, by the groupings of one, two and three marks which slanted to the left. Some scholars deny this and deem them apocryphal."

"Anyway, here is the message, as you can see."

A S I M P E R A T I M
 M A R L I N I A B
 P O P U L O F O V E (?)
 P R A L C A V I S



"Says Sandy, ... "

This is what I spelled out into Latin --- and here is how I read it into the English: 'At Merlin's behest, I _____ the People of the Pit.'

One word is obscure. There is also space for another word, or maybe two. I do not know whether it should be 'protect' or 'guard against,' but I should think the latter.

The meaning seems clear enough. I can only guess in the light of what has actually happened. I have found tracks around the Druid's Thumb and streaks of slime from top to bottom of it.

I send you some of the scrapings. Perhaps you can tell by them, *what* it is that goes up and down, where no Christian man can climb.

I believe it was from the top of the Druid's Thumb that the Merlin Stone fell, shaken down by that earthquake, to let loose the terror which the Mage had sealed by it.

I am going to take that Stone back to its old setting, from whence it rolled and bounded into Farmer Lachlan's yard, And I conjure you to come and help me find my lassie, even if you have to go up to go down --- by the memory of that which wept in Pixy Water and that which wailed in Pixy Glen.

It was for this, I am thinking now, that we shared the bannock and the cup of red and went under the sod together.

"What did he mean by all that?"

Father colored. He coughed, a little uncomfortably. "Well, that was a trifle of romanticism, I suppose you might say."

"I suppose to you it's but an outdated fancy, a silly relic of the past and a laugh to your generation, but you must remember that in my day we young lads were maybe more impressionable."

"Our heads were crammed with great noble thoughts."

"The time came, long ago, when we remembered that bond. It was before you were born."

My father smiled wryly. "I was somewhat of a wild one in those days," he confessed, which was news to me but endeared him even more to my heart. It lent a touch of humanness which I did not often see.

"There was a combination of a fast car, a slippery road --- and fog. I needed a blood transfusion and there was no near donor. I remembered that Sandy and I had each given blood, back in '39, and we felt even closer when we discovered that we had the same type --- AB Negative --- the rarest known."

"A hurry call brought him all the way to London. He donated and saved my life. Not until afterward did I know at what sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" I was learning a lot.

"Truly. The news that I might be dying and was needed by him immediately came to him in the kirk. He was getting married at the time! He kissed his bride and left her there."

"A car took him to the nearby landing field. A pilot friend of mine was waiting to pick him up and, as you see, he arrived in time. In the wedding gift I sent, I included a souvenir."

He held up the little cross. "Now it has returned to me and it is my turn to answer a call for help.

"You can laugh if you like, Hugh, but the fact of the matter is --- I've got to go, even if it should mean my death. I have been packing. So --- it seems, Son, that it will be you for a while to keep all steady here by your lone."

I sensed an unspoken plea for understanding and maybe more. I said, "When do we start?" And knew I was right, when my father grinned and held out his hand.

"Then it's us for a long holiday in Pixy Glen, it seems." He paused for a moment and sat down, folding his hands pensively.

"We were always close. We had done a lot of reading together, you mind, and had come across an account of the rites of blood brotherhood as practiced by the ancient peoples. We wanted to be closer.

"We cut our fingers and exchanged a drop, as the red men used to do, but it didn't seem quite enough. We broke bread and shared salt, but we wanted more to tie ourselves in an unbreakable bond.

"Then we came upon this custom --- bless me if I can remember where --- and it seemed just what we lacked. So we cut a long, wide strip out of the turf and carefully raised and propped it up, so that it remained attached to the ground at either end and was not broken anywhere and then we crawled from one side, under it to the other and went through and let it down again, still unbroken, and healed the wound in Mother Earth by hiding the cut with a trickle of loam.

"You see, Hugh, it was all a foolishness. We thought it a symbol of being born again as brothers and, swearing brotherhood to the death, we swore to come to the aid of the other from the very ends of the earth if need be.

"Oh, it was all very silly, but glorious at the time, and we took it quite seriously."

"Dad, I wish I could have done the same! I never knew.

"Really! How close you must have been. Still are, after so many years! I am proud of you. Foolishness? Not in my mind.

"Your brother --- friend says something I don't understand. What did he mean by 'That which wept in Pixy Water and that which wailed in Pixy Moss?'"

"Ah, that brings back the wild memories! We had gone after the trout in Pixy Glen and taken the day to it. Just us two wee lads on holiday. Working up the stream, we had passed all the deserted tumbledown houses without giving a thought why. We stopped for a bite and a gab when we came to the steep and that took a while --- and all the time the day was going. Then there was more working of the pools and before we realized it, we had come all the way to the head of the Glen.

"The muttering of Pixy Water gliddering down its chute and tumbling into its bit of pool was in our ears. The early gloom of evening was lying over us in the deep notch, though bright still

lay bloody on the Druid's Thumb. It was all eerie and lone.

"Then, just as we raised our eyes toward the comfort of sunshine on the heights, there was a lonesome little cry, full of pain and alarm, and a tiny blackish sort of thing, all sleek and hairless, came tumbling down the fall and plopped into the foam.

"Under it went and up again and came drifting in, clawing at the pebbles, half stunned and wriggling only a little.

"'A baby otter,' cried Sandy. 'Let's take it home!' He teased it closer with his rod, so he could make a grab for it. And then we saw that, whatever it might be, it was no otter. For, as Sandy grabbed its leg, it opened its eyes --- and they had a human look.

"And it put up its little hands to push him away, for it was in mortal fear of us, and such a look of terror came on its small face that he let go, when he felt the slippery webbed fingers of it clawing at his wrist.

"Then I snatched and held it, before it could get back into the water, and knowing itself to be captive, great tears came into the creature's eyes. It cried out for help --- a dreadful, creaking --- *lost* --- cry --- and we knew it was only a baby thing. Not an animal. Not a human baby either, for the flesh of it was cold and hard and strong and a mite scaly, too.

"And then we heard a long wailing up yonder, above us in the moss hags! Ah, the misery of it! The loss, the bereftness, in that seeking, questing call, which no human throat could have made!

"When our wee prisoner heard, its courage came back, or the shock of the blow it took in the tumble had maybe worn away. It answered whatever was calling. It hissed at me like a reptile and tried to bite me. I saw its teeth, pointed like fangs and curved inward.

"It ripped the sleeve of my wind-cheater. The stout leather tore like paper --- and, thinking back, this was well, for those teeth were green as moss and likely poisonous had they scratched my skin. It twisted strongly away, for it was suddenly full of fury that my hands should be upon it, and so fell out of my grasp and into the pool.

"And then we heard another wailing above, this time loaded with anger and menace and it was close and coming closer in that sudden closing in of mountain shadow and there was more than one as we could easily tell by the great amount of splashing and we felt that whatever was coming to the rescue of its baby was unfriendly and not afraid of us at all --- and so we turned and ran down the Glen and night went home with us and we were bitterly in terror until we saw the lights of Glen Havis."

He shivered, recalling that dread afternoon. I laid my hand upon my father's gnarled and heavily veined one, feeling the involuntary twitching of poorly controlled emotion.

Neither of us spoke. There was nothing further to say concerning the past. An hour later we were on the road North.

Twilight, the next day, found us in Glen Havis. After a twenty mile coasting in choppy waves, complicated by a running tide and raw wind, it was good to disembark at the small pier which served the fishermen of the village. One of these, idling there, removed his pipe from bearded lips in greeting.

"Sandy Gowlie? Hech, man, ye're lang late! His sheiling has been toom the fortnicht. 'Tis said aboot that he went daft after his blithe lassie ran off wi' yon gypsies."

"Ran off, you'll be telling me?" said Father. "Are you sure? Where did he go?"

The oldster shrugged. "Who kens? Speir young Tammas at the sweet shop. He minds the beasts at Gowlie's byre. But I'm thinking ye'll no find Gowlie mair. Dinna fash yersel'. He's likely drooned."

"Hewalked the shore, grating and graning and gi'ing out wi' skellochs fit to fright the gulls --- then up the hills he'd scowp, fast as any stag, all by his leesome lane, till there was no wind left in his thrapple. Then down again, hirpling alang by the water, his face gash and glunching, his talk doited and havoring and no sense in it at all."

"What did he say?"

"Losh! What not? And all eldritch. Wanting us to hunt for piggies that live in the sithbruth-ach!" He gestured scornfully up at the ridge where the Druid's Thumb loomed darkly ominous, bloodily tinged by sunset sky behind it.

"The Fairy Hill? Why that name?"

The fisherman puffed strongly and out of a cloud of evil smelling smoke muttered, "Enough talk of puir daft Gowlie and nane at all of the Sidhe. I'm no believer, ye'll ken, but there's nae luck in gaffing aboot chancy things. See young Tammas."

He drew in his line, coiled it and walked rapidly away. Over his shoulder he flung a parting word. "Maybe he'll fly kites wi' ye for luck, like he did wi' Sandy."

We picked up our bags and sought out the sweet shop. With the lad, Thomas, who kept the shop with his widowed mother, we walked up the steep single street to Gowlie's deserted and lonely sheiling. The cottage was small and neatly kept, as we found when entering, for it was not locked.

The rooms showed a woman's touch. Dishes had been washed and put away. Bright copper pans gleamed near the old stove of heavy iron, well blacked and shiny with nickel trim. A red and white checkered cloth covered the kitchen table and a cruet upon it, holding flagons of oil, vinegar and peppersauce, with shakers of pepper and salt, was its only embellishment --- but it was of heavy silver, obviously a prized possession. It cast back soft reflections--- firstly of the kerosene lamp in a bracket over the sink and then from the glowing teeth of the grate.

A fire had been laid, waiting Gowlie's return, with shavings, lightwood kindling and scraps of heavy brown paper. The woodbox was full. It was

hard to believe, while tea water was heating and the boy had gone back to the village with money for some bread and beef, that it had been left thus by a man driven mad by grief, who left it only to walk into the sea, never to return.

Tammas shook his head in quick denial, while supper was cooking. He willingly told what he knew. We were pleased to find him more readily understandable, his speech almost entirely free from dialect. He had evidently profited by what little schooling had been afforded him.

"Those people!" He scowled. "Mr. Gowlie was as hard-headed as my Mom. He'd never drown himself. Not if he knew Shiela had run away."

He got up from the table and went into the next room. "Look." He picked a picture off the bureau and held it up to us. We had followed him to the door. "Isn't she sweet? Isn't she lovely? Isn't she just the dearest one you ever saw?"

She was indeed. With lips parted as though she was about to speak, her face was full of happiness. It was hard to believe that she ever might have frowned in all her twenty years.

When I looked upon that picture, I felt my heart go out to the missing girl. I secretly thanked whoever invented color film.

Her cheeks were flushed with delicate pink that never came from a jar. Her long dark hair flowed with natural grace, unbound, over each shoulder of the white, embroidered blouse she wore. Her hazel eyes looked directly into mine and followed me around the room as I moved. I knew instinctively, even then, that they could be warm and loving for those who loved her and could flash like steel if necessity arose.

I studied the photograph only for a few seconds, but that was enough. Certainly, this was no lass to give her heart lightly to a passing transient, nor to desert an aging man for whom she held affection.

When Tammas turned it in his hands to gaze upon it himself, I saw his face twist and his throat contract in a stifled sob.

Father said, "No, lad, whatever happened to that gentle young girl, it could not have been of her own doing. If you know anything at all of where her father went seeking for her, tell us."

"We are their friends. We will believe you and do what we can to help. That is why we came."

Tammas set the picture back in its place. While his back was turned, I saw him rub his sleeve across his eyes. They were dry when he turned back and sat down to his tea, but his voice was unsteady. His mug spilled when he lifted it.

"You said it well. She was douce and brawly trim, too. She could have had any of the lads hereabouts, but she wouldna leave her old Dad. She used to say she was waiting for me to grow up --- "

He choked and could not go on. Then he said, so lowly that we could hardly hear, "Isn't it truly grim to be born too early or too late? When you know for sure that there is only one you want?"

Father put his hand gently on the boy's arm. "It happens to most of us, lad. A sad law of life. God knows what is best for us. We have to believe that, or there is nothing at all to believe."

"Where do you think Sandy went? Where did he seek her?"

"Where? Why, where she was taken. To bring her back, of course. I saw him go. He went up and he never came down!"

Tammas pushed back his chair against a rocking table and a clatter of dishes. It toppled over and fell. He snatched up his cap and jerked open the door. His eyes were wild and his face distraught.

"Up there!" He pointed at the heights of the ridge. "Up, where we flew the kites! But she is gone and they will never come back. If you want to see, I will take you so far as I dare --- but you will never come back, either!"

The slam of the door shook the house. As we heard his running brogues on the gravel path, we also heard his uncontrollable sobs.

Sleep came slowly to me that night. Lying in the girl's bed, the door open for warmth, I heard Father get up from the creaking old rocker several times to replenish the fire. Each time I thought he would blow out the lamp and go into his friend's room to sleep. Each time, I heard a heavy sigh of resignation and despond as he sank back to read again in the worn Bible of Alexander Gowlie's faith --- searching for comfort? For advice?

When I finally fell asleep, pondering on this question, the light in the kitchen still shone.

In the morning, however, Father looked as bright and cheerful as though he was without worry or had never been perplexed.

Bacon was frying, golden centred eggs looking up at me, coffee sending out a wakeful aroma, and I was greeted with a cheery smile.

"Come, Son, we'll go and get Tammas and have a holiday together. I have already hired a boat to carry us around the headland. We'll take a hamper and visit Pixy Glen for lunch."

The sun was high when we three left the beach at the foot of Pixy Glen. Following the long reach of the water course, we passed by abandoned houses, somewhat vandalized, but not so much as I would have ordinarily expected. It was obviously a shunned place. Those who avoided it had not done so out of sympathy for the people who had lived there and deserted their property.

Glass in the windows was mostly broken, but that could have been from wind and weather. Some doors were gone and a drift of leaves were rotting inside, underneath sticks of furniture, wet and moldy where rain had entered through roofs which had fallen in, but I could see useful things still intact and undisturbed.

"As though there was a curse on the place," I said, looking around as we climbed the slope of the single street.

"There is," said Tammas. "No one comes here now. Why didn't we go up from Glen Havis?"

Father said --- partly in answer --- "I want to feel as I once felt, go where I used to go, as though Sandy was with me. Perhaps I can think as he thought, if he came this road to the place we are going now, as we went when we were lads together. Maybe then I will know best how to help him, if he still needs help."

We said no more. At the end of the houses, the climb steepened and there was no breath for idle talk.

In about an hour, we came to the head of the Glen. I noticed that it was considerably less in length than Glen Havis and this seemed strange, for usually declinations on either side of a ridge such as this are more uniform.

All along, the water of the burn had bubbled and chattered over the stones, but here it poured over a slightly receding escarpment in one glidery stream, narrow and fast, compressed along a slippery shute of rock. It curved almost without ripples --- a smooth, glassy dark peat-colored surface streaked with long streamers of foam.

We stood at the foot of the falls, measuring the height of it with our eyes.

Father said, "As a boy, I often thought this cliff had the look of a frowning fortress wall. To a child, such fancies come readily and abide. They lie sleeping, apparently forgotten, overlain by a drifting litter of other thoughts through the years."

"Then, as now, a return to old haunts brings them up to the surface of the mind. All the way up here, dread and remembrance have come closer. I think I suspected long ago that I must come back, knowing what I would some day find."

He pulled away some vines near the waterfall and bared the naked rock, where spring freshets had widened the natural channel. Plain to the sight of the three of us, a thin seam ran horizontally into the earth along the face of the rise. We dug and pulled away moss and weeds that filled it, until another streak was uncovered. This rose vertically and at right angles to the one we had bared.

"You see?" Father turned triumphantly. "A giant block. Dressed stone! You couldn't slip a knife blade into that joint!"

"This is a wall. Cyclopean masonry! Look at the size of it. Three tons at least."

"No wonder the Glen looks short. No wonder the marsh is higher than the rest of the valley. The whole upper end of the Glen has been walled off!"

"But why?" I said. "Could it have been a fortress wall? One of the old vitrified forts?"

"I would say not. It would have been even steeper. Vertical. Unclimbable. Not with even this slight slope, so it could be covered with dirt and sod and seeded down, perhaps, to hide better whatever lies behind."

"It must have been tended. I think it still is --- or the rock would lie bare after these many years since the wall was built."

"Hugh, I am only a dabbler as an antiquarian, but even an amateur can see that this type of

construction precedes the Roman occupation. Can it be that the tribes of the North fought so bitterly to protect secrets like this, that against them the Wall of Hadrian had to be built and manned?"

We looked up the incline with new eyes. Knowing now for what we searched, the artificiality of the Glen ending was apparent. Like the overhanging treads and risers of a giant's stairway, terraces were washed by the waterfall which alone hid the bare joints beneath. Only on either side, where greensward curved into the rugged and natural slope of the hills which formed the Glen, was there anything but sheep paths. One was climbable.

Soon, we looked out over Pixy Moss. It seemed poisonously unhealthy, its level expanse a mask of riotous green above deadly unknown deeps of black muck beneath. It was a meadow no man might tread, except by leaping dangerously from one tussock to another, mossbags which might roll and throw him into the quaking quag.

We recognized the whole to be what no hunter or shepherd had realized before. This could have once been the surface of an artificial lake.

"A tremendous dam!" I breathed.

"Yes," Father agreed. "Built before the dawn of history? Well, maybe not. Later than Stonehenge, probably, but why?"

"Not for power. Those builders, whoever they were, could have had no machines. No need for power. A reservoir? Perhaps, but most unlikely. No ruins exist to hint at a population which could require such a water supply.

"A fortress wall? Possibly. But built in the Stone or Bronze Age? It could be, but to protect whom, against what enemy? And if a fortress, later filled in with detritus washed down by freshets --- then why did the builders set three ton blocks together with watertight joints?"

"I cannot imagine. It is incredible. I would say impossible, but I am standing on it and still I can't believe it. There is nothing in the British Isles to compare with this for ancient mystery, except Stonehenge and Avebury --- but those sites were religious and this most certainly is not.

"There are just too many questions. From whence the people who built it? Who were they and where did they go? Why are there no records of them? No mention of this? Where, when they lived here, did they dwell and till the soil? There are no village outlines in the valley --- no tumuli --- no barrows for their dead!

"No tombs for their kings ---" And then I looked at my father and knew what we both remembered; what we both were thinking.

The tiny wooden effigies, in the minute wooden coffins, hidden far away, so carefully far away, lest someone should suspect and come to this place --- this ---- and Father spoke my thought aloud:

"Hugh, lad, you have guessed it without knowing. Put all your clues together. It was --- it must have been --- it *is* a hiding place. Not a reservoir, perhaps once a defensible fortress, but no longer.

"Call it instead --- a refuge --- a redoubt --- a titantic building, upon whose parapet we stand gazing out across its submerged roof.

"A dwelling place built before the Romans. These walls were never breached, because they were never attacked. They are still kept intact, covered with turf, even to this day, protecting those who live within it, keeping it in repair and hiding the ravages of nature.

"By heaven, Hugh! I know now what Sandy meant, when he wrote, 'To go down, ye must first go up.'"

"Up there, lad! Up, at the top of the Druid's Thumb, is the entrance to Pixy Moss. Unclimbable, doomful Druid's Thumb, from which fell into Glen Havis, the Merlin Stone, partially protecting it until Pixy Glen had been completely ravaged by the People of the Pit, who were thus freed to loose nightly horror."

Now we knew why Alexander Gowlie had constructed and flown the kites which had caused his friends to consider him daft.

They were not available for purchase in the several shops which served the austere needs of Glen Havis. A combination greengrocer-butcher shop eked out the staple fish diet. A tiny ship candler's kept the little fleet serviced. The sweet shop was the only concession to the luxuries and made up the list.

Glen Havis and Pixy Glen are the equivalent of islands and the inhabitants, like other islanders, nearly self-sufficient and of insular minds.

Life was a little too stern for idle play, for any child old enough to take a hand in the maintenance of a family. We no longer needed Tammas as a guide, or wanted him with us. I think he was pleased.

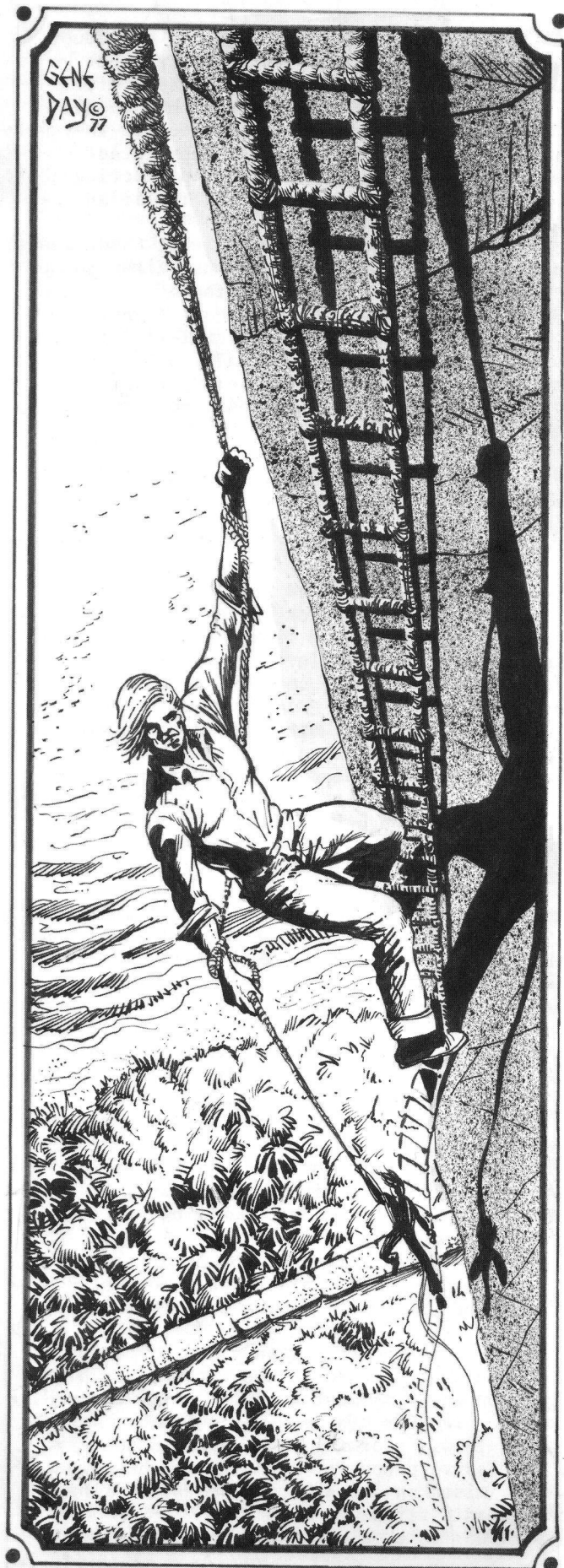
During the night we made ready with what was available. We worked through most of those hours with limber withes and the same sort of heavy brown wrapping paper which had furnished the scraps laid for the fire we had enjoyed on that first night.

Morning dawned bright and fair, with the usual wind whipping the heights inland from the sea, as the ground, warmed by the sun, sent a broad thermal column toward the sky where questing sea birds wheeled on motionless wings.

To stand on the top of Ben Havis is to look down into both glens, with a hawk's eye. To the North, the distant Hebrides, invisible that morning because of miles and mist; to the South, the far glisten of the waters of the Great Rift --- that slash of a giant's axe which almost bisects Scotland and of which nearby Loch Ness is but the lesser part.

Across from Ben Havis stands its companion mount, Ben Mhor, joined by the intervening high ridge upon which, almost mathematically centred, looms the high tor of the Druid's Thumb. It was wreathed in wisps of fog, and we could see why the impressive pinnacle, seen from either glen, could be mistaken for a huge chimney, smoking from volcanic fires.

Brush was thick along the path we took and



something in the brooding wildness of the place seemed to say, "I can overpower you when I am ready. You are here only on sufferance. I am your enemy and I bide my time."

Maybe I am a little more impressionable than Father. I think I felt the menace more strongly. I know my shudder, as I drew my wind-cheater tight, was not entirely due to the raw wind. But we were glad for the strength of it.

The kite which Alexander Gowlie must have used in the manner we now proposed to do, in order to scale the Druid's Thumb, was no longer to be found on the ridge. It could have blown into the sea, of course, but although the matter had not been discussed between us, I believe we each suppressed a more ominous explanation, lest the other be disturbed. For, if the kite had been lost to the winds, should not the cord it carried up still be hanging from some projection on that pinnacle?

Thinking of this, perhaps more silent than we otherwise would have been, we carried the kite to the ridge, and gave it to the air. It dipped, swooped and circled, a creature of the wind, tugging strongly to be free. It rose steadily, up and up. It was a condor --- a falcon --- a sparrow. As a midge, it crossed the top of the tor and disappeared behind it, but the cord continued to slip through Father's strong fingers as --- now claimed by earth's gravity --- it fell slowly through small eddies of almost quiet air on the other side of the Druid's Thumb.

Here I was waiting. Down it came, slatting crisply against the smooth stone with a rustle of paper, a scratching of wood, until at last I held it in my hands and gave the cord the three strong tugs we had agreed upon.

I detached the cord and began to haul it in. It grew heavier, slipping easily over the top of the tor, until it briefly caught.

I tugged harder, swaying the cord from side to side until it came free. Then, over the edge, the end of the rope which Father had attached came snaking down to me --- to be seized with thankfulness, hauled upon with greater strength and finally attached below.

Father did the same at his end. We sat, resting, listening to the wind thrum the taut line like an Aeolian harp. It sang an eerie threnody, suitable to the locale, and we did not remain long.

Back in the village, we purchased enough nylon cord to make a strong rope ladder. With this, bundled in two sections which we packed to later join, we returned to the ridge, just as the long twilight of that latitude and time of year was setting in.

It was a short labor to raise the hooked end of the ladder to the heights and to drag the grapnel back and forth until, when the ladder was hauled upon by both of us, we were sure it would not give.

Thus, leaving nothing unnecessarily to chance, we again made the anchoring rope fast and did the same with the lower end of the ladder. We checked dirks and our Webleys, fastened our torches securely after once more testing the batteries and

I, being the more agile, essayed first the two hundred foot climb.

An experienced mountaineer, no doubt, would have pounded in pitons wherever there was an opportunity and run a safety cord through. We had neither, for we had improvised. However, knowing little of such precautions, we hazarded the dangerous ascent without mishap.

We found we need not have dreaded the loosening of the rope. The grapnel had sunk into a secure lodging place on the edge of a square cut hole, possibly natural once, but long since shaped by man.

The top of the tor, some thirty feet across, had been artificially flattened and smoothed, perhaps by stone mauls and much pounding, as had been trimmed the standing stones of Callenish, the Scottish Stonehenge.

It was dotted with the droppings of birds and streaked with dried slime around the edges of the hole. It was easy to recognize.

"Plankton --- what else?" I went to the opening and looked down. Warm air was rising. It smelled nauseatingly of fish. It came into the outer spaces as a fog, shredded and tattered by the gusts.

Steps, smooth and polished by many feet through many years --- centuries? Millenia? There was no way to determine. They led down into darkness. Upon the top step was one large loose rock, some forty pounds in weight, Father judged, by lifting it in his gloved hands.

A moment later, he was glad it had not touched his bare skin. Sharp cold struck in. He replaced it, with an exclamation, but not before we had both seen the grooves on each of the four long sides.

The Merlin Stone! Clear evidence that we followed in the footsteps of Alexander Gowlie bent on avenging the loss of his daughter.

Both must still be below, for neither had returned. Somehow, with grim determination, he had scaled that height, probably by a knotted rope, hand over hand, with the Merlin Stone slung on his back, to make sure that --- as the Enchanter had written --- it should "Guard against the People of the Pit!"

Once more, it did guard, but not from its original place. On the side of the tor, we saw from whence it had been dislodged by that earthquake long ago. When the hollow monolith had been shaken, the Stone had been ripped from an oblong edging of decayed mortar, still plainly delineated, and tumbled into Glen Havis.

We looked down into the dark pit. Into ominous night, the stairs descended, streaked with dry slime. Obscurity hid what lay below and no sound rose. From Glen Havis, the Stone had returned.

Whatever it might be to whoever dwelt below, it was no deterrent to us.

All around, the pleasant countryside stretched under God's sun. Glen Havis to the left, with its tight, weatherbeaten houses, and its sheepcotes. A dog saluted the dawn. Blue reek rose from the low stone lums, kitchen breakfast fires sending up a mist of homely protective magic.

To the right, uninhabited Pixy Glen, where the shadow of the Druid's Thumb lay like a shroud, with only a wild whaup calling across dull lead-colored Pixy Water.

To the North --- the sparkle of little waves in the Firth --- the glint of a white sail crossing on a long tack, catching the sunlight. No more. We went down the slippery stairs into night.

The steps jutted outward from the wall, sinking in steep descent without railing, the risers short, the treads narrow. As others had before us, we leaned against the wall, as spirally we left the light of the upper air. Looking into the depths of the central shaft, we could see nothing but rising fog.

I switched on my torch. The circle spot showed nothing but misty distance, though it gleamed reflectively upon the slimy stairs. The wall was polished with rubbing. Whatever used this shaft went up and down it with caution, pressing hard against the sides. The more polished strip existed as a long ribbon about three feet upward from the steps. Higher, the rock was more in its naturally rough state, though obviously it had been chipped somewhat. I had an intuitive feeling that the tools might have pre-dated the use of iron --- perhaps by ages.

I mentally reviewed these findings. If the height of the rubbings indicated the height of shoulders which had pressed against the wall, as mine was doing, then the people who had created this retreat could not have been very tall.

A race of short people? Dwarfs? Pygmies? Was there truth, after all, in the persistent legends of trolls, goblins, kobolds --- so much stronger in the North countries than in the gentler South? Something malevolent --- manlike, but not man --- which had an appetite for mischief at the very best --- and cold evil at the worst?

Creatures living underground, which issued forth to plague the upper world? Which changed babies in the cradle? That stole young girls? That held rites, sacred to themselves and damnable to those they preyed upon?

Ah, yes! Every step lower served to confirm my suspicions. I whispered them to Father and saw him nod. At this time we must have descended halfway down the inside of the tor and still the light of our torches met only the rising mist. It seemed colder as it swept by, reeking strongly of fish and mud. Now a ranker smell --- almost reptilian --- was added, but no sounds whispered up.

Daunted by our surroundings, neither of us spoke again. Only the sucking sound of the soles of our boots in the green slime which was thicker on the shallow steps as we went lower, was to be heard. We went on into mystery.

What could have survived from past ages, I wondered? Father says he was likewise following the same line of thought which was tormenting me. But I think he was already close to the answer.

I realized that, in secret places of the earth, several creatures had only recently been discover-

ed. The coelacanth. The okapi. The forest gorilla. The tree-climbing kangaroo.

What remained? Maybe the sirrush --- the strange lizard-like monster depicted in such exact detail on the uncovered Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon. Possibly the yeti--- Bigfoot, of the American Northwest --- Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas. Some day, the sea-serpent so many sailor tales had described --- to be so disbelieved.

Closer home --- Nessie, of the Loch which lay so near --- and certainly *something* unusual, doubtless dangerous, toward which each descending step was bringing us closer.

I took out my Webley and quietly snicked off the safety. The slight sound was almost imperceptible. I looked back and grinned, tight-lipped. Father had already done so. I was late with the thought.

I wished I had counted the steps. However, I was almost certain that we had reached the bottom of the shaft which was the secret core of the Druid's Thumb. The passageway still sloped down, but it was no longer spiral. Sometimes steps were interrupted by a slight gradient down which we slipped and slid.

Slime was much thicker now. At least an inch of it lay under foot. The smell was nauseating. It gleamed palely phosphorescent and seemed to ripple gently toward the light of the torches.

Watching this apparent motion, somewhat nervously, toward the rays directed only a few inches in front of my feet, I was not at once aware that the passageway had opened into broadness, until the feeling of an open space caused me to look up and flash my torch around.

I could not see the boundaries of the giant room we had entered, although the floor of it shone like moving fox-fire.

The reptilian odor was strong and disgusting. The rank air seemed denser than before and heavy mist soaked up the rays of the torches before the opposite wall could be reached by them. Pillars of cut stone were visible, extending upward toward the roof of the chamber from which came down a sprinkle of drops, either from condensation, for the temperature was not too chill, or from seepage.

I had no doubt that we now stood directly beneath Pixy Moss, that deep marsh of muck and peat which clothed the ancient workings from the sight of man.

I swung my investigating cone of light to left and right. On one side there were openings in the walls which looked like cave mouths. Entrances to primeval dwelling places? I took a step in that direction.

Before me stood an immense block of stone which could be nothing else than an altar, waist high, its surface channeled with surrounding grooves ending in a lip extending outward for a drain. Beneath this an array of cups and shells.

I suspected their grim purpose. The partaking of blood has been a ritual in most religions, either symbolical or actual.

I walked a little closer and could see, beyond, what I took to be a large pile of brushwood.

A bale-fire? Perhaps, I thought.

Between altar and pile an amorphous sound of something dark and indefinite lay in the shimmering filth just at the edge of vision. It quivered. It moved clumsily, bulking higher, and a moan came from it --- a subdued whimper, which even in its distress sounded musical to my ears. Then, two words only, in a deep man's voice. Comforting words, "Courage, Shiela!"

We were overjoyed. Then, all around the circumference of the chamber, as we started toward the prisoners, we saw --- lit by reflection of our torches --- a multitude of green, almost luminescent lights wink into being, arranged in pairs and low to the floor, and heard hissing, like that of a thousand enraged snakes.

In a moment, both of us were overwhelmed by a rush of cold, slippery bodies and almost suffocated from the reek which issued from them, as well as being nauseated by it to the point of vomiting.

The attackers were sinewy and strong, covered with slime like the protective coating of fish. Resistance was impossible. Father let of two shots, the sound amplified by the rocky walls. Echoes proved that the size of the chamber was indeed Cyclopean. Something fell, rather far away, dislodged from the roof by the vibration and under it something screamed --- a long, ululating yell like nothing human, so that I did not know whether pain distorted the voice, or if it had issued from a throat little resembling the human.

They understood weapons. Our handguns were struck out of our grasp. Quick, nimble, scratching fingers drew our dirks. Our wrists were held by sharp claws and finger pads which seemed to be cupped like the suckers of octopi.

The torches, still lit, rolled about under the squirming mass, illuminating a scene which Doré or Breughel might have done better justice. Hairless carapaces, bony and steeply slanting backward, nostrils barely projecting from faces --- or muzzles --- clothed in sharp edged scales like those which cover the cheeks of snakes --- and which constantly flexed and closed tightly as do the nostrils of seals.

But there was nothing amiable about those faces, as there is of the friendly dogs of the sea. No! The open jaws were curved in a built-in grin, like that of the Samoyed, but the shark also possesses the semblance of a smile and so does the crocodile.

Of the three, these small attackers who had rushed out of their dwelling places, seemed more kin to the latter, an impression emphasized by the rows of tiny fangs which snapped hungrily at us. I hoped my flesh would not be touched. They were green and looked as though, like the sharps, they would be replaced by row behind row, pushed forward when those in front were worn down or lost. The little hard tongue was sharply pointed and black.

They were not quite reptile, for they talked and hissed. They were not quite human, for their flesh was cold. They were not beasts, or piscatorial, for they had unblinking eyes, which, although quite round instead of oval, had a nictating

membrane that intermittently flicked across their large dark pupils like those of birds.

Altogether, they were hard to classify. One thing was certain. Their genitalia were that of primates --- not ophidian or avian --- as could be clearly seen, for all were naked, clothed only in their scales, except that most wore belts, in which was slung either a daintily chipped flint axe or knife. And, on the perimeter of the struggle stood a few individuals --- sleek with oolitic ooze --- whose scales glittered gorgeously in the wavering light, for they were edged with crimson and jet.

These leaned, languid and aloof, upon lances tipped with the small flints called elf-stones, which for centuries have been found above ground.

We were flung heavily down, at their direction, unable to grapple or resist. In moments our wrists and ankles were pinioned, bound with cords which seemed rubbery as kelp. Then we were pushed and rolled to the side of the other prisoners.

The torches were left lit and unheeded, to lie waning on the cold floor. Around each, a pool of lambent light was absorbed. It enlarged, to spread and join, until much of the expanse was shining brighter than the natural glowing we had seen when entering the chamber.

The crowd dissipated until only a few remained. These, mostly of the lance-bearers, stood silently staring. From time to time, one would turn to another and converse in long drawn out sibilants, in which no word could be recognized by either of us. Once they seemed to be arguing. Voices were raised in anger, heads turned toward the altar, or the brushwood pile, and once one of the creatures raised his lance and pointed directly at me.

Another, obviously in authority, struck it down with his own. The first, with quite a human petulant gesture, shrugged, let it lay where it had fallen, and walked away into fog and distance.

After he was out of sight, his foot prints still shone as widening blots against the glowing ooze --- the nearest clearly showing the separate talon points which had ripped our clothing and scratched our skin.

Eventually the others followed. The sucking sounds of their feet could no longer be heard departing and all four of us were left alone.

I lay between my father on the one side and the two we had come to rescue. I could feel the warmth of a slender body, shaken with sobs, on the other. I cast about for something to say to comfort her, but Alexander Gowlie was the first to speak.

"Hush, my precious one, hush. God knows we are here. He will not abandon us."

This only brought on a fresh accession of weeping. I felt my heart go out to her misery and fear and wished that I had the right and privilege and ability to put my arms about her in some sort of soothing way.

Father rolled closer to his old friend. "Sandy --- are you and Shiela all right?"

"Aye. If you mean --- have we been harmed. We have not. Not yet. We live. We have not been abused. We have been fed ---"

The girl shuddered against my back. " --- we

have been given water and what we need to keep us in health. The time has not yet come for the ceremonies."

There was a brief pause. I leaned closer to her, to render what human touch of warmth I could provide. It was little enough comfort, but she seemed to accept it gratefully. I felt her relax.

"What ceremony?" my father asked. "Is it---"

"Beltane? I thought you would know. The uncanny time of year."

"But this is May," I said. "Not November. You mean --- burning?"

"Aye. The second Beltane. You remember well. The Dark-Of-The-Moon Beltane, when those of the old religion sacrificed to Baal.

"It is all that is left to these --- these devils."

Father muttered, almost to himself, "The day when the world is given over to its ancient prince."

Again I felt Shiela's trembling. I twisted until our hands touched seeking her fingers and felt them entwine with mine. Once more, in increased measure, came that sudden relaxation of tension.

"And this is the day," said Alexander Gowlie, grimly. "The very day. The nearness of the hour is upon us. I ken it well. When warlocks and carlines have special dispensation to do evil between twelve and one.

"But my God sees and knows our peril. He has sent you and he will no' be mocked by his old enemy. He will smite them in the hour of our need as the Amalekites were smitten."

He laughed, a wild sound in that place of cold terror. It was laughter which had in it the irony of hate. So, a dour prophet of old time might have laughed to see his doomful prophecies fulfilled, before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah --- or just before going under the last wave as the Ark floated free.

It chilled my blood. This time it was my turn to quiver. Father's friend was quite mad. As the certainty came upon me, I felt the fingers in my grasp curl tighter. A little squeeze of understanding, as though she understood that it was me who now needed comfort which only she could give.

This was an act of the sympathy and intuition that has softened life for man through all the ages and can so seldom be returned in equal measure to the one who gives it. Not a great thing in itself, but the basis of friendship, the burgeoning of human communion --- from which the tenderness of love can spring.

Just the warm clasping of two hands. And these hands were tied. I felt a terrible surge of resentment. I let go the clasp. I strained with all my strength at the cords. They did not seem to be of fiber. They stretched and slipped and gave a little.

Then I remembered the lance which had been dropped. It still lay there in the glowing formiferous, gelatinous ooze. It was tipped with sharp flint. The tiny elf-stone, fit to pierce flesh, to cut arteries --- or bonding cords!

I rolled over, contorting myself to swing in the direction of the lance, feeling the ooze move

against my body. At the disturbance of it, the glowing increased in intensity. A pallid cylinder of living light, I turned and twisted, covered with the protoplasmic substance which stank and shone. I raised myself in determined struggle and brought my bound hands down upon the lance point.

It was hard to jam those rubbery bonds down upon the flint. Not until I managed to finally turn the elf-stone sideways, with the edge upward, holding the shaft firmly with the weight of my back and buttocks upon it, could I rub my hands along the edge.

It was indeed as sharp as I had expected. It gave and slipped like a living thing, until finally, when I was close to despair, one strand parted, uncoiled and stretched and fell away.

Instantly I rolled off the lance, seized it up, and, now that I could see what I was doing, cut the bonds on my ankles with ease. It was the work of a few moments to free the others.

We all stood up, rubbing our arms in relief. Now we could see, in the light of our recovered torches, the two we had come to find. Both looked haggard and drawn of face. Their clothes were ragged and streaked with glowing slime.

Shiela, tightly held in the comfort of her father's arms, felt our gaze upon her. She self-consciously tried to push back her hair. Her fingers dripped and glowed. She turned away from us in embarrassment and for a moment I thought she was going to cry.

There was no need. I would have recognized her in a moment from the picture I had seen and what I saw now was beautiful. There was no time for idle talk or foolish shyness.

Torchlight pointed out the stair, but before we could reach it, a rush of small bodies, croaking and hissing, came upon us. I felt myself seized. I swung in that sucking, clawing grasp. I dashed the torch into the creature's face, feeling small brittle fangs crumble before the terrible blow which anger and fury made lethal. It was then that I saw the gills.

There was a three and a half inch pinkish streak in the middle of each side of the neck. It ran ventrally from the sterno-cleidomastoid muscle. It could be the start of branchia, I thought, but then it flared broadly as the creature gasped in its death throes, and I saw the crinkling of convoluted tissue under sharp edged scales which protected the vulnerable opening.

Gills they could only be. An assurance that whatever these dark denizens were, they were amphibian, as all other indications had hinted. Yet their semblance to human shape could not be denied.

Striking out bitterly with torches and fists, we won to the foot of the stair. Father reached it first. I pushed the girl ahead of me onto the first steps and followed. At last, her father came--- powerful, bearded giant, outlined with shimmering liquid, armed with the lance, striking, forking away small bodies which shrieked and clacked and hissed, which bled and fell and died and were replaced by the seemingly endless hordes who trampled the victims underfoot.

But the stair was narrow. We three were upon it and climbing, when Gowlie turned back, kicking with his heavy boots, pounding faces with his work-hardened hands which he used like mauls.

Two supporting pillars stood close at the foot of the stairs. His face wild and stern, like that of an enraged Old Testament prophet, he set his hands against each as he stood between and bowed his back.

The creatures were all around him. Many had pushed by and were climbing the stair, striking down at his back.

"Strengthen my arm, Oh, my Lord!" he roared, straining until his muscles creaked against the old stone columns. Something moved above in the high dark.

Shiela screamed and tried to come down. I pushed her forward. He did not relax his efforts. A sprinkle of gritty crumbs fell and a quick drop of water. It increased to a trickle. Gowlie groaned. His face was a tortured mask. Veins stood out upon his forehead like great twisted worms. We were trapped in a group of the creatures upon the stair and could move neither way. He pushed and strained, his breath coming in gusty gasps.

A chunk of stone fell. Suddenly a dark stream of water and mud cascaded down. A lance flew and struck with a sodden thud. Gowlie, hit hard and high in the right side, gave out an explosive sigh. As though the sudden pain had given him an added last burst of strength, he flung his whole weight against the right-hand pillar, raising his legs against the left one, arching his back and straining mightily. The lance hung from his flesh like the barb set into a tortured bull by a picador. He disdained it. His might prevailed. He pressed and panted.

Shiela fought to get through and come to his help. Father and I struck out against our attackers. Father seized her, swung her up off her feet, and spun about. The knot of snapping creatures fell away, struck by her flying arms and legs. He rushed through and hurried up the stair, while I, behind them and still holding the torchlight upon the giant, saw a dozen talon tipped hands reaching for me to rip me to pieces. I could stay no longer. I struck out and tore free. The torch slipped from my hand and was lost.

I heard it strike. I heard the little monsters hiss in unison. I stumbled up the steps, with many little feet plashing behind. And I heard Alexander Gowlie roaring, above the grating rumble of the falling pillar he had at last dislodged.

"Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight. Bow thy heavens, o Lord, and come down; touch the mountains and they shall smoke.

"Cast forth lightnings and scatter them; shoot out thy arrows and destroy them. Send thine hand from above; rid me, and deliver me by great waters, from the hand of strange children!"

There was a deafening crash and a pouring behind us who fled; an eerie wailing from below, like nothing human. Pursuers were close behind

us on the stair, crying in fear, but climbing fast.

Then above the tumult, the uprush of wind that hurried by us all, one terrible shout, in which there was exultation and a query and a prayer, more to be sensed in the tone than in the words:

"Lord, what *is* Man, that thou takest knowledge of him?" And nothing more to follow, except the torrentuous sound which Alexander Gowlie had begged of the God he loved and trusted for aid in his extremity.... the falling of great waters into the pit!

So little left to tell. How we reached the top of the Druid's Thumb, fearing to be overtaken and were not, although the scrambling and scratching was close behind. How I fell exhausted beside fainting Shiela upon that flat surface, unable to move, but seeing my father lift the Merlin Stone high above his head and send it bouncing down the steps to smash, with all its ancient protective magic still potent within it, into the evil faces of the small band of survivors below, so anxious for our deaths.

"I guard against the People of the Pit." So mighty Merlin had painstakingly carved upon it. It still so guards, but I think no danger remains in that place any more.

Pixy Moss is no longer there. Where it steamed and bubbled and lay secretive under the wandering Will-of-the-Wisps, hiding that ancient refuge, a placid peaceful loch lies blue, under the shadow of Ben Havis. It is the grave place where Alexander Gowlie rests forever. I hope it is the tomb of the People.

Pixy Glen is no longer accursed and folk are returning--- slowly, of course, for old fears are not soon forgotten, but where land is for the taking, there will always be some who will dare to take.

Shiela and I sat quietly together the other night--- she with her knitting of a tiny bootee --- I watching her fingers ply the needles --- an act of which I never seem to tire --- listening to my father telling the story to a new friend who dropped in and occasionally looking over to us sitting so closely, bathing us both with affectionate glances, which were clearly envious.

Father always ends in the same way. Sometimes I think he regrets the extinction of that odd species. Fear and pain, thank God, slip easily from the mind.

"The creatures we destroyed," he explains to anyone who will listen, "were once human. They were driven underground by taller, stronger enemies with superior weapons. Perhaps others still dwell in even more hidden places. We are not apt to find them until they are ready to be found.

"Legend points to barrows and tumuli as entrances to their magic lands and casts a mystical glamour over harsh reality.

"A real people. Small, dark, rather horrid in some of their practices. In the beginning they sneaked out of their caves in the hills,



into our spine-chilling memories. Atavistic beings, already on the way back, who for many years carried on a guerrilla war --- a true Underground Fifth Column, striking in the night against invaders.

"First they warred against the Scoti, who came overseas from Eire to dispossess them; then, against the Britons --- finally the Romans, who saw them crawl out of their low barrows on all fours to give battle and nicknamed them the Worms of the Earth.

"By the time the Romans had gone, they were mostly gone, too, or had *changed*.

"The People of the Pit decided deliberately to go back to another way of life --- not by Nature's evolution, which is so slow, but by devolving past the shambling, heavy-jawed, bandy-legged club wielders --- back beyond the trees from which man descended --- and to slither into that ocean where finned and scaled progenitors of ours once swam.

"Was it they who sometimes took a baby from the unguarded crib, or cradle, and in it --- through some perverted sense of fairness, of honest exchange --- left one of their own for the oppressing conquerors of their lost land to rear? Changelings?

"I think so. By the time of Arthur and Merlin, they were already far down the ladder of life --- no longer what we may call human.

"Their plans? I wonder. Perhaps to create a super-being, if not a super-man. What else would a true amphibian, with great intelligence, be?

"We know, from that overwhelming amount of cultivated plankton which they nurtured into strange food, that there was a subterranean connection to the sea. When they found themselves sealed, by the Merlin Stone, into the refuge they had so laboriously created and their land egress blocked, they set about fitting their bodies for an undersea life.

"I suppose they had scientists, in a way of speaking. Biologists, perhaps. Doctors, of course, magic, certainly. For what is magic, but something which one does not understand yet and can't explain? All those ancient peoples were closer to magic than ourselves. We, with our cynicism, our machines, have grown away from the old lore, somewhat to our loss.

"The fruits of progress must be bought dearly. So it was with the People. Devolving was at a bitter cost. They halted the process of gestation at the period of growth when, human in aspect, the foetus retains its ancient heritage of gills.

"Probably the young child was carried to its full term. However, it developed little. Hair did not appear. Finger nails became claws. The hands and feet became webbed, though fingers and toes markedly resembled those of the tree-toad, thus enabling them to climb up and down almost perpendicularly smooth surfaces --- such as, for instance, the outside of the Druid's Thumb after the Merlin Stone had fallen off.

"I noticed that in some few of those we saw, particularly the leaders, vestigial tails could

be seen. This seemed to set them apart from the others. It may indicate that, if the race had persisted longer, legs would have atrophied, absorption followed and something like the giant newt could have swarmed the oceans in the far future.

"It would appear that, over the centuries, a genetic pattern developed which became stable and bred true. Casualties must have been frightful while the race was being molded to fit its new environment. Somehow it survived, retaining intelligence, although retreating farther and farther away from our conception of Man.

"I presume that contempt and hatred for Man grew, as the People diverged from Man's norm. I can imagine that, as the seas became free to them, they roamed about, not much hindered by shipping in those days. Mermaids! Mermen!

"I know such tales were prevalent from even more early times, but wouldn't it be interesting to know when Scottish kelpies were first mentioned?

"Modern geneticists, by scientific back breeding, have reproduced the auroch, otherwise extinct since Caesar's time. I understand that someone expects soon to be able to display a specimen of the dire wolf --- four feet high at the shoulder --- bred backward from the dog. I have seen an atavistic rabbit, in which a strain of ferocity has been nurtured, snap and scar the bars of its metal cage.

"Man is the only animal which is bred at random, with no ultimate goal and without plan for a directed result. The People had both in mind. What a pity that the end they desired could not have been reached without a corresponding loss.

"It must be that a devolving of the body also implies a retrogression of mind quality and a stultifying of the soul. They became savages in the most horrible and explicit meaning of the word. Creatures to frighten daylight.

"Yet, once in a while, one not so far gone as the rest may have quitted the sea because of a longing for the land and sun --- even married again into humanity. There are some strange tales.

"Even the ugliest of women can find a mate --- the most backward of men gratify himself, even if it must be by force.

"Legends hint at odd results; the Merovingian kings traced their line back to a mermaid who came up from the sea. It is easy to conceive of sea enchantresses of great charm --- throwbacks to the People before the Change --- who might have been cast out as unwanted by the new race. The idea is a wistful one.

"Not all is nostalgia or accidental beauty. There is also horror. Consider the water-bulls; the fierce water-horses. These fill the tales of Scottish folklore. In the Hebrides, folk still speak in whispers of the siren singing of the seals --- and the terrible Blue Men of the Minch.

"We saw the People at their worst. Men --- in a sense --- who loved the dark, and hated, maybe feared, the light and all that trod the earth under the light.

"They understood that they could not survive

without either. So, girls were abducted to keep the strain of the race strong, lest it die out from inbreeding. Others, like Shiela, perhaps not desirable --- for beauty is not the same to all eyes --- for sacrifice to most ancient gods.

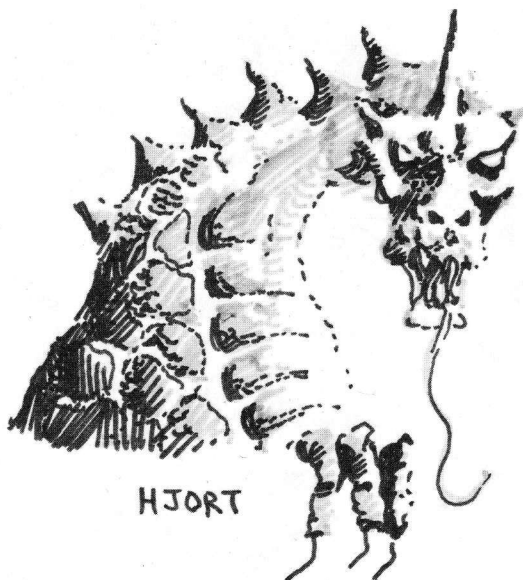
"And, from the far places --- possibly even from colonies established in the great deeps --- they returned to their racial cradle for their festivals --- back to Pixy Glen. Here, their Mecca, their Canterbury, their Rome. Their retreat beneath the roof they had constructed above their valley --- the lake of old time which had been filled in through the ages by detritus washed down from the mountainsides until it was no more than a marsh, fifty feet deep in muck and mud.

"Here, in dark seclusion, they observed their holy days, marking them with sacrifices in honor of the sun, at the lesser Beltane.

"What more fitting than these sacrifices be drawn from members of the ancient enemies who today pollute their refuge with oil, chemicals, torpedoes, and bombs? Who drag and drill and dredge their bathybian plains --- driving them anew as once they were driven by weapons of bronze?

"If, as I am sure, there are colonies lost to sunlight and the fair green surface of the land --- let us hope for their own sake, and ours, that all are gone into whatever peacefulness comes to those who perish --- for, in such colonies, how they must dream of dreadful vengeance!

"Do they breed --- and wait --- and dream? How sad that our minds could not have contacted theirs in a friendly spirit. What they could have told us of the deeps! We might have worked together, uncovered the secrets of the lands and oceans --- explored where no bathyscaphe can go --- handled artifacts from drowned Atlantis, brought to us in trade by the People, to exchange for things we count as little.



"We saw them as Man's decadent, devolved cousins --- fighting for their lives, their culture and the perpetuation of their kind.

"How did they see us, I wonder? Our warm bodies repulsive to their touch, shaggy with hair, handicapped by having little freedom in the element they had come to love? More monstrous to them than the ape?

"I am sure they sensed ancient values --- had vestiges of qualities we lack --- perhaps some memories and skills by which we could have profited. To themselves, no doubt, how beautiful their bodies! Sleek, streamlined, efficient in ways that we can only imagine.

"Yes, there may be others who will erupt upon us in some unfortunate, bloody day to come. Are they evolving sciences arcane to us, against which we will have small defense? What are their numbers, if those we saw were emissaries only from some undersea multitudes?

"There must be others. Those little coffins, containing effigies of their kings. What pilgrims, mourning and weary, carried them to the crypt in the place they had chosen as holy? It does not seem that all came from the original community in Pixy Glen.

"As to those we saw --- unless a few survived by means of estivation, I think the glen will not more be troubled. It would not seem that estivation is possible.

"What a brave experiment in survival to end in tragedy!

"Poor little Picts of Pixy Glen! They could breathe in air. They taught themselves to breathe in water. No life we know of can breathe in mud."

M I D N I G H T I N A T L A N T I S

The air carries sounds like water
and my half-sleeping mind
absorbs them, fish into a sponge
that tickle me to waking
sodden with dreams of colonies,
of clear sand-bottom peace.

Now I can't remember
if the voices crying together
belonged to cats or children
or a chorus of drowning men
singing their wild anthems
to the inversion of their moon.

-- *Alixandra Lee*



DRUID'S THUMB

GENE
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