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WEIRDBOOK 19



FICTION

- 3 Stephen King, GRAMMA
 17 Gerald W. Page, SOMETHING ALMOST AS GOOD
 19 Janet Fox, THE GHOST-WINDER
 23 Steve Rasnic Tem, THE END OF THE YARN
 25 Ardath Mayhar, THE FACE IN THE GLASS
 28 Darrell Schweitzer, THAT DEAD MEN RISE UP
 NEVER
 35 Jessica Amanda Salmonson, WITH A BAT
 38 E. S. Faragher, MRS. FINLAY'S CIRCLE
 43 J. N. Williamson, LEITMOTIF
 47 Richard L. Tierney, THE DRAGONS OF MONS
 FRACTUS

ARTWORK

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 42, 57: © 1984 by Jon Bush
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 50: © 1984 by Jim Garrison

POEMS

- 18 John Edward Damon, HYMN TO SALAMANDRA
 22 Joseph Payne Brennan, CITY CEMETERY
 27 Bernadette Lynn Bosky, THE CHANGELING
 42 Alan Ryan, THE PATH
 46 t. Winter-Damon, GOLDEN BOUGH,
 46 Dora Siemel, A FAVOR
 46 H. R. Felgenhauer, SOME WHERE

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FOREWORD by the editor.

In the previous issue I announced that another "special issue" would soon be in print: Brian Lumley's **THE HOUSE OF CTHULHU** and other tales of the primal land, with illustrations by Jim Pitts. Alas, it is still not ready, but I anticipate that it will be soon. The "special issues" are not automatically sent to subscribers and must be ordered separately. If you are interested, please inquire. There will be both a hard cover and a paper cover edition.

I regret to report the recent death of George T. Wetzel, author of **THE GOTHIC HORROR AND OTHER WEIRD TALES** (a Weirdbook Press "special issue"). I have known George since the 50's, when Bob Briney, Al Leverentz and I combined to form SSR Publications and produce (among other things) **THE LOVECRAFT COLLECTORS LIBRARY**, a 7-volume mimeographed collection of articles and bibliographies which was recently reprinted by THE STRANGE COMPANY. George was not only editor of LCL but spent much time at libraries unearthing HPL's small press contributions and is now recognized as an important early contributor to Lovecraft studies. He died on November 4th of a heart attack.



GRAMMA

by STEPHEN KING

George's mother went to the door, came back, and touched George's hair. "I don't want you to worry," she said. "You'll be all right. Gramma, too."

"Sure, I'll be okay. Go on. Tell Buddy to lay chilly."

"Pardon me?"

George smiled. "Tell Buddy to stay cool."

"Oh. Very funny." She smiled a distracted, going-in-six-directions-at-once smile. "George, are you sure—"

"I'll be fine."

Are you sure what? Are you sure you're not scared to be alone with Gramma? Is that what she was going to ask?

If it was, the answer was yes. After all, it wasn't like he was six anymore, when they had first come here to Maine to take care of Gramma, and he had cried with terror whenever Gramma held out her heavy arms toward him from her white vinyl chair that always smelled of the poached eggs she ate and the sweet bland powder George's mom rubbed into her flabby, wrinkled skin; she held out her white-elephant arms, wanting him to come to her and be hugged to that huge and heavy old white-elephant body. Buddy had gone to her, had been enfolded in Gramma's blind embrace, and Buddy had come out alive... but Buddy was two years older.

And now Buddy had broken his leg and was at the CMG Hospital in Lewiston.

"You've got the doctor's number if something **should** go wrong. Which it won't. Right?"

"Sure," he said, and swallowed something dry in his throat. He smiled. Did the smile look okay? Sure. Sure it did. He wasn't scared of Gramma anymore. After all, he wasn't **six** anymore. Mom was going up to the hospital to see George and he was just going to stay here and lay chilly. Hang out with Gramma awhile. No problem.

Mom went to the door again, came back again, smiling that distracted going-six-ways-at-once smile. "If she wakes up and calls for her tea—"

"I know," George said, seeing how scared and worried she was underneath the distracted smile. She was worried about Buddy, Buddy and his dumb **little league**, the coach had called and said Buddy had been hurt in a play at the plate, and the first George had known of it (he was just home from school and sitting at the table eating some cookies and having a glass of Nestle's Quik) was when his mother gave a funny little gasp and said, **Hurt? Buddy? How bad?**

"I know all that stuff, mom. I got it knocked. Negative perspiration. Go on, now."

"You're a good boy, George. Don't be scared. You're not scared of Gramma anymore, are you?"

"Huh-uh," George said. He smiled. The smile felt pretty good; the smile of a fellow who was laying chilly with negative perspiration on his brow, the smile of a fellow who Had It Knocked, the smile

of a fellow who was most definitely not six anymore. He swallowed. It was a great smile, but beyond it, down in the darkness behind his smile, was one very dry throat. It felt as if his throat was lined with mitten-wool. "Tell Buddy I'm sorry he broke his leg."

"I will," she said, and went to the door again. Four o'clock sunshine slanted in through the window. "Thank God we took the sports insurance, Georgie. I don't know what we'd do if we didn't have it."

"Tell him I hope he tagged the sucker out."

She smiled her distracted six-directions-at-once smile, a woman of just past fifty with two late sons, one thirteen, one eleven, and no man. This time she opened the door, and a cool whisper of October air came in through the sheds.

"And remember, Dr. Arlinder—"

"Sure," he said. "You better go or his leg'll be fixed by the time you get there."

"She'll probably sleep the whole time," Mom said. "I love you, Georgie. You're a good son." She closed the door on that.

George went to the window and watched her hurry to the old '69 Dodge that burned too much gas and oil, digging the keys from her purse. Now that she was out of the house and didn't know George was looking at her, the distracted smile fell away and she only looked distracted — distracted and sick with worry about Buddy. George felt bad for her. He didn't waste any similar feelings on Buddy, who liked to get him down and sit on top of him with a knee on each of George's shoulders and tap a spoon in the middle of George's forehead until he just about went crazy (Buddy called it **The Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee** and laughed like a madman and sometimes went on doing it until George cried), Buddy who sometimes gave him the Indian Rope Burn so hard that little drops of blood would appear on George's forearm, sitting on top of the pores like dew on blades of grass at dawn, Buddy who had listened so sympathetically when George had one night whispered in the dark of their bedroom that he liked Heather MacArdle and who the next morning ran across the schoolyard screaming **George and Heather up in a tree, KAY-EYE-ESS-ESS-EYE-EN-GEE —!** First comes love and then comes marritch! Here comes Heather with a baby carritch! like a run-away fire-engine. Broken legs did not keep older brothers like Buddy down for long, but George was rather looking forward to the quiet as long as this one did. **Let's see you give me The Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee with your leg in a cast, Buddy. Sure, kid—EVERY day.**

The Dodge backed out of the driveway and paused while his mother looked both ways, although nothing would be coming; nothing ever was. His mother would have a two-mile ride over washboards and ruts before she even got to tar, and it was a nineteen-mile ride to Lewiston.

She backed all the way out and drove away. For a moment dust hung in the bright October afternoon air, and then began to settle.

He was alone in the house.

With Gramma.

He swallowed.

Hey, negative perspiration. Just lay chilly, right?

"Right," George said in a low voice, and walked

across the small, sunwashed kitchen. He was a tow-headed, good-looking boy of eleven with a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks and a look of good humor in his darkish gray eyes.

Buddy's accident had occurred while he had been playing in the Pony League championship game this October 5th. George's Pee Wee League team, the Tigers, had been knocked out of their tournament on the first day, two Saturdays ago (**What a bunch of babies!** Buddy had exulted as George walked tearfully off the field. **What a bunch of PUSSIES!**)... and now Buddy had broken his leg. If Mom wasn't so worried and scared, George would have been almost happy.

There was a phone on the wall, and next to it was a note-minder board with a grease-pencil hanging beside it. In the upper corner of the board was a cheerful country Gramma, rosy-cheeked, her white hair done in a bun, a cartoon Gramma who was pointing at the board. There was a comic-strip balloon coming out of the cheerful country Gramma's mouth and she was saying, "REMEMBER THIS, SONNY!" Written on the board in his mother's sprawling hand was **Dr. Arlinder, 681-4330**. Mom hadn't written the number there just today, because she had to leave; it had been there almost three weeks, because Gramma was having her "bad spells" again.

George picked up the phone and listened.

"—so I told her, I said, 'Mabel, if he treats you like that—'"

He put it down again. Henrietta Dodd. Henrietta was always on the phone, and if it was in the afternoon you could always hear the soap opera stories going on in the background. One night after she had a glass of wine with Gramma (since she started having the "bad spells" again, Dr. Arlinder said Gramma couldn't have the wine with her supper, so Mom didn't either — George was sorry, because the wine made Mom sort of giggly and she would tell stories about her girlhood), Mom had said that every time Henrietta Dodd opened her mouth, all her guts fell out. Buddy and George laughed wildly, and Mom put a hand to her mouth and said **Don't you EVER tell anyone I said that**, and then she began to laugh too, all three of them sitting at the suppertable laughing, and at last the racket had awakened Gramma, who slept more and more, and she began to cry **Ruth! Ruth! ROO-OOOOTH!!** in that high querulous voice of hers, and Mom had stopped laughing and gone in to her room.

Today Henrietta Dodd could talk all she wanted, as far as George was concerned. He just wanted to make sure the phone was working. Two weeks ago there had been a bad storm, and since then it went out sometimes.

He found himself looking at the cheery cartoon Gramma again, and wondered what it would be like to have a Gramma like that. His Gramma was huge and fat and blind; the hypertension had made her senile as well. Sometimes, when she had her "bad spells," she would (as Mom put it) "act out the Tartar," calling for people who weren't there, holding conversations with the emptiness, mumbling strange words that made no sense. On one occasion when she was doing this last, Mom had turned dead white and had gone in and told her to shut up, shut up,

shut up! George remembered that occasion very well because it was the only time Mom had ever actually yelled at Gramma, and because it was the next day that someone discovered that The Birches cemetery out on the Maple Sugar Road had been vandalized—gravestones knocked over, the old 19th century gates pulled down, and one or two of the graves actually dug up—or something. **Desecrated** was the word Mr. Burdon, the Principal, had used the next day when he convened all eight grades for assembly and lectured the whole school on Malicious Mischief. Going home that night, George had asked Buddy what **desecrated** meant, and Buddy said it meant digging up graves and pissing on the coffins, but George didn't believe that... unless it was late. And dark.

Gramma was noisy when she had her "bad spells," but mostly she just lay in the bed she had taken to three years before, a fat slug wearing rubber pants and diapers under her flannel nightgown, her face runnelled with cracks and wrinkles, her eyes empty and blind—faded blue irises and yellowed corneas.

At first Gramma hadn't been blind. But she had been **going** blind, and she had to have a person at each elbow to help her totter from her white vinyl egg-and-baby-powder-smelling chair to her bed or the bathroom. In those days, five years ago, Gramma had weighed well over two hundred pounds.

She had held out her arms and Buddy, then eight, had gone to her. George had hung back. And cried.

But I'm not scared now, he told himself, moving across the kitchen in his Keds. **Not a bit. She's just an old lady who has "bad spells" sometimes.**

He filled the teapot with water and put it on a cold burner. He got a teacup and put one of Gramma's special herb teabags into it. In case she should wake up and want a cup. He hoped like mad that she wouldn't, because then he would have to crank up the hospital bed and sit next to her and give her the tea a sip at a time, watching the toothless mouth fold itself over the rim of the cup, and listen to the slurping sounds as she took the tea into her dank, dying guts. Sometimes she slipped sideways on the bed and you had to pull her back over and her flesh was **soft**, kind of **jiggly** as if it was filled with hot water, and her blind eyes would look at you...

George licked his lips and walked toward the kitchen table again. His last cookie and half a glass of Quik still stood there, but he didn't want them anymore. He looked at his schoolbooks, covered with Castle Rock Cougars bookcovers, without enthusiasm.

He ought to go in and check on her.

He didn't want to.

He swallowed and his throat still felt as if it was lined with mitten wool.

I'm not afraid of Gramma, he thought. **If she held out her arms I'd go right to her bed and let her hug me because she's just an old lady. She's senile and that's why she has "bad spells." That's all. Let her hug me and not cry. Just like Buddy.**

He crossed the short entryway to Gramma's room, face set as if for bad medicine, lips pressed together so tightly they were white. He looked in, and there lay Gramma, her yellow-white hair spread

around her in a corona, sleeping, her toothless mouth hung open, chest rising under the coverlet so slowly you almost couldn't see it, so slowly that you had to look at her for awhile just to make sure she wasn't dead.

Oh God, what if she dies on me while Mom's up to the hospital?

She won't. She won't.

Yeah, but what if she does?

She won't, so stop being a pussy.

One of Gramma's yellow, melted-looking hands moved slowly on the coverlet; her long nails dragged across the sheet and made a minute scratching sound. George drew back quickly, his heart pounding.

Cool as a moose, numbhead, see? Laying chilly.

He went back into the kitchen to see if his mother had been gone only an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half — if the latter, he could start reasonably waiting for her to come back. He looked at the clock and was astounded to see that not even twenty minutes had passed. Mom wouldn't even be into the city yet, let alone on her way back out of it! He stood still, listening to the silence. Faintly, he could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the electric clock. The snuffle of the afternoon breeze around the corners of the little house. And then — at the very edge of audibility — the faint, rasping sussurrus of skin over cloth... Gramma's wrinkled, tallowy hand moving on the coverlet.

He prayed in a single gust of mental breath:

Please God don't let her wake up until Mom comes home for Jesus's sake Amen.

He sat down and finished his cookie, drank his Quik. He thought of turning on the TV and watching something, but he was afraid the sound would wake up Gramma and that high, querulous, not-to-be-denied voice would begin calling Roo-OOTH! RUTH! BRING ME M'TEA! TEA! ROOO-OOOOOTH!

He slicked his dry tongue over his drier lips and told himself not to be such a pussy. She was an old lady stuck in bed, it wasn't as if she could get up and hurt him, and she was eighty-three years old, she wasn't going to die this afternoon.

George walked over and picked up the phone again.

"— that same day! And she even **knew** he was married! Gorry, I hate these cheap little corner-walkers that think they're so smart! So at Grange I said—"

Henrietta was now on the phone with Cora Simard. At least George **assumed** it was Henrietta Cora was on with, because Henrietta hung on the phone most afternoons from one until six with first **Ryan's Hope** and then **One Life to Live** and then **All My Children** and then **As the World Turns** and then **Search for Tomorrow** and then God knew what other ones playing in the background, and Cora Simard was one of her most faithful telephone correspondents, and a lot of what they talked about was 1.) who was going to be having a Tupperware party or an Amway party and what the refreshments were apt to be, 2.) cheap little corner-walkers and 3.) what they had said to various people at 3-a) the Grange 3-b) the monthly church fair, or 3-c) K of P Hall Beano.

"— that if I ever saw her up that way again, I guess I could be a good citizen and call—"

He put the phone back in its cradle. He and Buddy made fun of Cora when they went past her house just like all the other kids — she was fat and sloppy and gossipy and they would chant, **Cora-Cora from Bora-Bora, ate a turd and wanted more-a!** and Mom would have killed them **both** if she had known that, but now George was glad she and Henrietta Dodd were on the phone. They could talk all afternoon, for all George cared. He didn't mind Cora, anyway. Once he had fallen down in front of her house and scraped his knee — Buddy had been chasing him — and Cora put a Band-Aid on the scrape and gave them each a cookie, talking all the time. George had felt ashamed for all the times he had said the rhyme about the dog-turd and the rest of it.

George crossed to the sideboard and took down his reading book. He held it for a moment, then put it back. He had read all the stories in it already, although school had only been in a month. He read better than Buddy, although Buddy was better at sports. **Won't be better for awhile,** he thought with momentary good cheer, **not with a broken leg.**

He took down his history book, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to read about how Cornwallis had surrendered up his sword at Yorktown. His thoughts wouldn't stay on it. He got up, went through the entryway again. The yellow hand was still. Gramma slept, her face a gray, sagging circle against the pillow, a dying sun surrounded by the wild yellowish-white corona of her hair. To George she didn't look anything like people who were old and getting ready to die were supposed to look. She didn't look peaceful, like a sunset. She looked crazy, and...

(and dangerous)

... yes, okay, and **dangerous** — like an ancient she-bear that might have one more good swipe left in her claws.

George remembered well enough how they had come here to Castle Rock to take care of Gramma when Granpa died. Until then Mom had been working in the Stratford Laundry in Stratford, Connecticut. Granpa was three or four years younger than Gramma, a carpenter by trade, and he had worked right up until the day of his death. It had been a heart-attack.

Even then Gramma had been getting senile, having her "bad spells." She had always been a trial to her family, Gramma had. She was a volcanic woman who had taught school for fifteen years, between having babies and getting in fights with the Congregational Church she and Granpa and their nine children went to. Mom said that Granpa and Gramma quit the Congregational Church in Scarborough at the same time Gramma decided to quit teaching, but once, about a year ago, when Aunt Flo was up for a visit from her home in Salt Lake City, Utah, George and Buddy, listening at the register as Mom and her sister sat up late, talking, heard quite a different story. Granpa and Gramma had been kicked out of the church and Gramma had been fired off her job because she did something wrong. It was something about **books**. Why or how someone could get fired from their job and kicked out of the church just because of **books**, George didn't understand, and

when he and Buddy crawled back into their twin beds under the eave, George asked.

There's all kinds of books, Senor El-Stupido, Buddy whispered.

Yeah, but what kind?

How should I know? Go to sleep!

Silence. George thought it through.

Buddy?

What! An irritated hiss.

Why did Mom tell us Gramma quit the church and her job?

Because it's a skeleton in the closet, that's why! Now go to sleep!

But he hadn't gone to sleep, not for a long time. His eyes kept straying to the closet door, dimly outlined in moonlight, and he kept wondering what he would do if the door swung open, revealing a skeleton inside, all grinning tombstone teeth and cistern eye-sockets and parrot-cage ribs; white moonlight skating delirious and almost blue on whiter bone. Would he scream? What had Buddy meant, a **skeleton in the closet?** What did skeletons have to do with books? At last he had slipped into sleep without even knowing it and had dreamed he was six again, and Gramma was holding out her arms, her blind eyes searching for him; Gramma's reedy, querulous voice was saying, **Where's the little one, Ruth? Why's he crying? I only want to put him in the closet... with the skeleton.**

George had puzzled over these matters long and long, and finally, about a month after Aunt Flo had departed, he went to his mother and told her he had heard her and Aunt Flo talking. He knew what a skeleton in the closet meant by then, because he had asked Mrs. Redenbacher at school. She said it meant having a scandal in the family, and a scandal was something that made people talk a lot. **Like Cora Simard talks a lot?** George had asked Mrs. Redenbacher, and Mrs. Redenbacher's face had worked strangely and her lips had quivered and she had said, **That's not nice, George, but... yes, something like that.**

When he asked Mom, her face had gotten very still, and her hands had paused over the solitaire clockface of cards she had been laying out.

Do you think that's a good thing for you to be doing, Georgie? Do you and your brother make a habit of eavesdropping over the register?

George, then only nine, had hung his head.

We just like Aunt Flo, Mom. We wanted to listen to her a little longer.

That was the truth.

Was it Buddy's idea?

It had been, but George wasn't going to tell her **that.** He didn't want to go walking around with his head on backwards, which might happen if Buddy found out he had tattled.

No, mine.

Mom had sat silent for a long time, and then she slowly began laying her cards out again. **Maybe it's time you did know,** she had said. **Lying's worse than eavesdropping, I guess, and we all lie to our children about Gramma. And we lie to ourselves too, I guess. Most of the time, we do.** And then she spoke with a sudden, vicious bitterness that was like bile squirting out between her front teeth—no, not bile, that was only the yucky stuff you threw up

when you were having the pukes and you didn't have anything left in your stomach to get rid of but that; no this stuff was more dangerous, this stuff squirted out like acid that would have burned his face if he hadn't recoiled: **Except for me. I have to live with her, and I can no longer afford the luxury of lies.**

So his Mom told him that after Granpa and Gramma had gotten married, way back in 1914, they had had a baby that was born dead, and a year later they had another baby, and **that** was born dead too, and a doctor told Gramma she would never be able to carry a child successfully and all she could do was keep on having babies that were dead or babies that died almost as soon as they took their first breaths, and that would go on until one of them died inside her too long before her body could shove it out and it would rot in there and kill her, too.

The doctor told her that.

Not long after, the **books** began.

Books about how to have babies?

But Mom didn't—or wouldn't—say what kind of books they were, or where Gramma got them, or how she **knew** to get them. Gramma got pregnant again, and this time the baby wasn't born dead and the baby didn't die after a breath or two; this time the baby was fine, and that was George's Uncle Larson, who had died just three years ago. And after that, Gramma kept getting pregnant and having babies, and once, Mom said, Granpa had tried to make her get rid of the books to see if they could do it without them (or even if they couldn't, maybe Granpa figured they had enough yowwens by then so it wouldn't matter) and Gramma wouldn't. George asked his mother why and she said: "I think that by then having the books was as important to her as having the babies."

"I don't get it," George said.

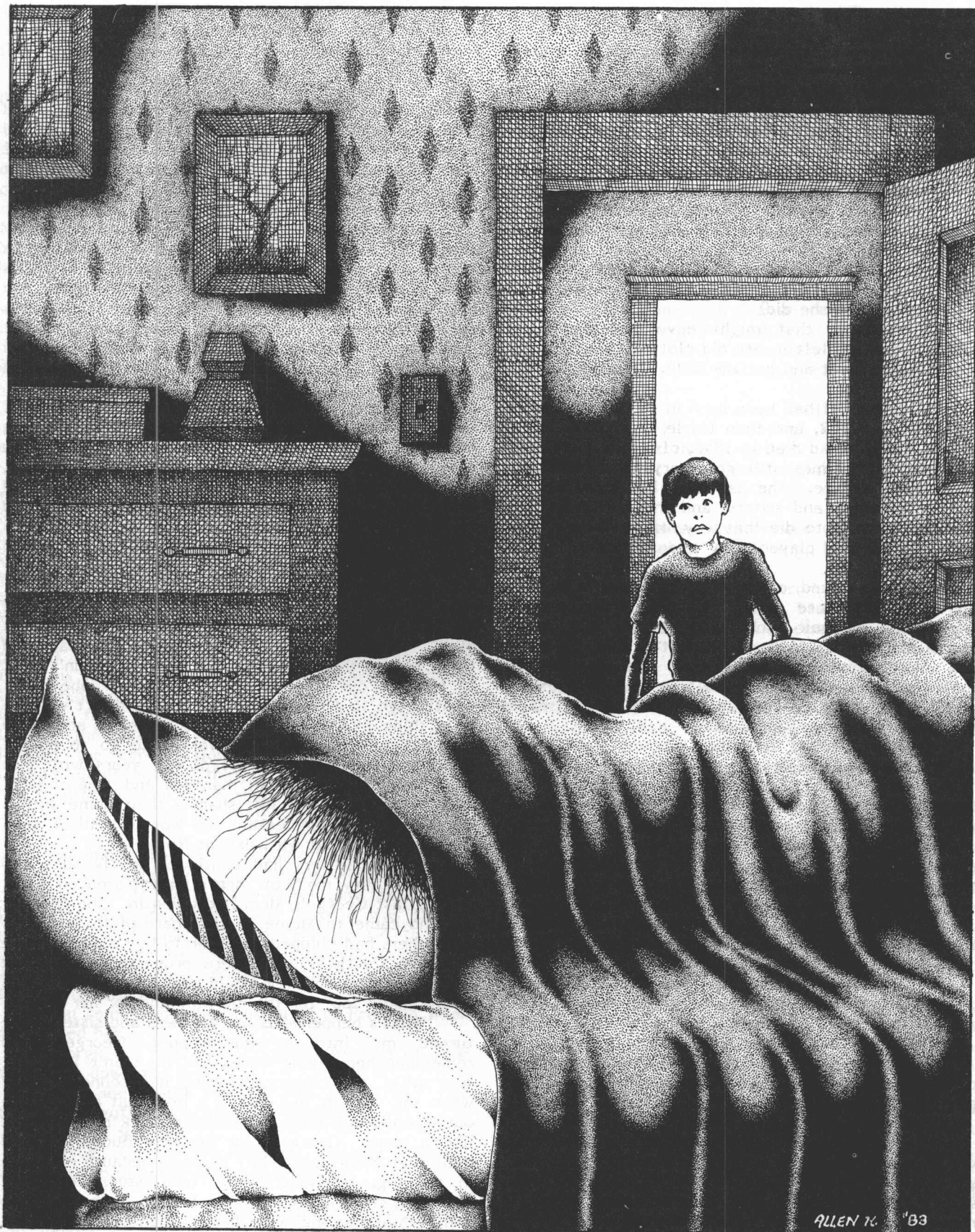
"Well," George's mother said, "I'm not sure I do, either... I was very small, remember. All I know for sure is that those books got a hold over her. She said there would be no more talk about it and there wasn't, either. Because Gramma wore the pants in our family."

* * *

George closed his history book with a snap. He looked at the clock and saw that it was now nearly five o'clock. His stomach was grumbling softly. He realized suddenly, and with something very like horror, that if Mom wasn't home by six o'clock or so, Gramma would wake up and start hollering for her supper. Mom had forgotten to give him instructions about that, probably because she was so upset about Buddy's leg. He supposed he could make Gramma one of the special frozen dinners that didn't have any salt in them. Gramma was on a special salt-free diet, and she had about a thousand different kinds of pills.

As for himself, he could heat up what was left of last night's macaroni and cheese and pour a lot of ketchup in it. That would be pretty good.

He got it out of the fridge, spooned it into a pan, and put the pan on the burner next to the teapot, which was still waiting in case Gramma woke up and wanted what she sometimes called "a cuppa cha." George started to get himself a glass of milk, paused, and picked up the telephone again.



ALLEN K. '83

" — and I couldn't even believe my eyes when..." Henrietta Dodd's voice broke off and then rose shrilly: "Who keeps listening in on this line, I'd like to know!"

George put the phone back on the hook in a hurry, his face burning.

She doesn't know it's you, stupe. There's six parties on the damn line!

All the same, it was wrong to eavesdrop, even if it was just to hear another voice when you were alone in the house, alone except for Gramma, the fat thing sleeping in the hospital bed in the other room; even when it seemed almost **necessary** to hear another human voice because your Mom was in Lewiston and it was going to be dark soon and Gramma was in the other room and Gramma looked like

(yes oh yes she did)

a she-bear that might have just one more murderous swipe left in her old clotted claws.

George went and got the milk.

Mom herself had been born in 1930, followed by Aunt Flo in 1932, and then Uncle Franklin in 1934. Uncle Franklin had died in 1948, of a burst appendix, and Mom sometimes still got teary about that, and carried his picture. She had liked Frank the best of all her brothers and sisters, and she said there was no need for him to die that way, of peritonitis. She said that God had played dirty when He took Frank.

George looked out the window over the sink. The light was more golden now, low over the hill. The shadow of their back shed stretched all the way across the lawn. If Buddy hadn't broken his dumb leg, Mom would be here now, making chili or something (plus Gramma's salt-free dinner), and they would all be talking and laughing and maybe they'd play some gin rummy later on.

George flicked on the kitchen light, even though it really wasn't dark enough for it yet. Then he turned on LO HEAT under his macaroni. His thoughts kept returning to Gramma, sitting in her white vinyl chair like a corpulent spider, her corona of hair every crazy whichway on the shoulders of her pink rayon robe, holding out her arms for him to come, him shrinking back against his Mom, bawling.

Send him to me, Ruth. I want to hug him.

He's a little frightened, momma. He'll come in time. But his mother sounded frightened, too.

Frightened? Mom?

George stopped, thinking. Was that true? Buddy said your memory could play tricks on you. Had she really sounded frightened?

Yes. She had.

Gramma's voice rising peremptorily: **Don't coddle the boy, Ruth! Send him over here; I want to give him a hug.**

No. He's crying.

And as Gramma lowered her heavy arms from which the flesh hung in great, doughlike gobbets, a sly senile smile had overspread her face and she had said: **Does he really look like Franklin, Ruth? I remember you saying he favored Frankie.**

A gasp had torn out of Mom's face, and she had propelled both Buddy and the weeping George out of the room.

Slowly, George stirred the macaroni and cheese and catsup. He hadn't remembered the incident so clearly before. Maybe it was the silence that had made him remember. The silence, and being alone with Gramma.

So Gramma had her babies and taught school, and the doctors were properly dumbfounded, and Granpa carpentered and generally got more and more prosperous, finding work even in the depths of the Depression, and at last people began to talk, Mom said.

What did they say? George asked.

Nothing important, Mom said, but she suddenly swept her cards together. **They said your Gramma and Granpa were too lucky for ordinary folks, that's all.** And it was just after that that the books had been found. Mom wouldn't say more than that, except that the schoolboard had found some and that a hired man had found some more. Then there had been a big scandal and Granpa and Gramma had moved to Buxton and that was the end of it.

The children had grown up and had children of their own, making aunts and uncles of each other; Mom had gotten married and moved to New York with Dad (whom George could not even remember), and Buddy had been born, and then they had moved to Stratford and in 1969 George had been born, and in 1971 Dad had been hit and killed by a car driven by the Drunk Man who Had to Go to Jail. That had been in Bridgeport, where Dad worked for an insurance company.

Gramma had been mostly senile when Granpa had his heart attack; senile and eighty per cent blind. There had been a great many letters back and forth among the aunts and uncles. They didn't want to put the old lady in a nursing home. She didn't want to go to a home, and if Gramma didn't want to do a thing like that, it might be better to accede to her wishes. The old lady wanted to go to one of them and live out the rest of her years with that child. But they were all married, and none of them had spouses who felt like sharing their home with a senile and often unpleasant old woman. All of them were married, that was, except Ruth.

So the letters had continued to fly back and forth, but now most of them concentrated on Ruth. And at last George's Mom had given in. She quit her job and came to Maine to take care of the old lady. The others had chipped together to buy a small house in outer Castle View, where property values were low. Each month they would each send her a check, so she could "do" for the old lady and for her boys.

What's happened is my brothers and sisters have turned me into a sharecropper, George could remember her saying once, and he didn't know for sure what that meant, but she had sounded bitter when she said it, like it was a joke that didn't come out smooth in a laugh but instead stuck in her throat like a bone. George knew (because Buddy had told him) that Mom had finally given in because everyone in the big, far-flung family had assured her that Gramma couldn't possibly last long. She had too many things wrong with her—high blood-pressure, uremic poisoning, obesity, heart palpitations—to last long. It would be eight months, Aunt Flo and Aunt Stephanie and Uncle George (after whom

George had been named) all said; a year at the most. But now it had been five years, and George called that lasting pretty long.

She had lasted pretty long, all right. Like a she-bear in hibernation, waiting for... what?

(you know how to deal with her best, Ruth, you know how to shut her up)

George, on his way to the fridge to check the directions on one of Gramma's special salt-free dinners, stopped. Stopped cold. Where had that come from? That voice speaking inside his head?

Suddenly his belly and chest broke out in goose-flesh. He reached inside his shirt and touched one of his nipples. It was like a little pebble, and he took his finger away in a hurry.

Uncle George. His "namesake uncle," who worked for the Sperry-Rand company in New York. It had been his voice. He had said that when he and his family came up for Christmas two—no, three years ago.

She's more dangerous now that she's senile.

George, be quiet. Buddy and George are around somewhere.

George stood by the refrigerator, one hand on the cold chrome handle, thinking, remembering, looking out into the growing dark. Buddy **hadn't** been around that day. Buddy was already outside, because Buddy had wanted the good sled, that was why; they were going sliding on Joe Camber's hill and the other sled had a buckled runner. So Buddy was outside and here was George, hunting through the boot-and-sock box in the entryway, looking for a pair of heavy socks that matched, and was it **his** fault his mother and Uncle George were talking in the kitchen? George didn't think so. Was it George's fault that God hadn't struck him deaf, or, lacking the extremity of that measure, at least located the conversation elsewhere in the house? George didn't believe that, either. As his mother had pointed out on more than one occasion (usually after a glass of wine or two), God sometimes played dirty.

You know what I mean, Uncle George said.

His wife and his three children—all girls—had gone over to Gates Falls to do some last-minute Christmas shopping, and Uncle George was Drunk, just like The Drunk Man who Had to Go to Jail. George could tell by the way his uncle slurred his words. Uncle George drank too much; everyone in the family said so.

You remember what happened to Franklin when he crossed her.

George, be quiet, or I'll pour the rest of your beer right down the sink!

Well, she didn't really mean to do it. Her tongue just got away from her. Peritonitis—

George, shut up!

Maybe, George remembered thinking vaguely, God isn't the only one who plays dirty.

Now he broke the hold of these old memories and looked in the freezer and took out one of Gramma's special dinners. Veal. With peas on the side. You had to pre-heat the oven and cook it for

forty minutes on bake at 300 degrees. Easy enough. He was all set. The tea was ready on the stove if Gramma wanted that. He was laying chilly. He could make tea, or he could make dinner in short order if Gramma woke up and yelled for it. Tea or dinner, he was a regular two-gun Sam. Dr. Arlinder's number was on the board, in case of an emergency. Everything was cool. So what was he worried about?

He had never been left alone with Gramma, that was what he was worried about.

Send the boy to me, Ruth. Send him over here. No. He's crying.

She's more dangerous now... you know what I mean.

We all lie to our children about Gramma.

Neither he nor Buddy. Neither of them had ever been left alone with Gramma. Until now.

Suddenly George's mouth went dry. He went to the sink and got a drink of water. He felt... funny. All these thoughts. Why was his brain dragging them up now?

He felt as if someone had dumped all the pieces to a puzzle in front of him and that he couldn't quite put them together. And maybe it was **good** he couldn't put them together, because the finished picture might be, well, really nasty. It might—

From the other room, where Gramma lived all her days and nights, a choking, rattling, gargling noise suddenly arose.

A whistling gasp came from George, or was sucked into him as he pulled breath. He turned toward Gramma's room and discovered his feet seemed rooted to the linoleum floor. His heart was spike-iron in his chest. His eyes were wide and bulging. **Go now**, his brain told his feet, and his feet saluted and said **Not at all, Sir!**

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

Gramma had **never** made a noise like that before.

It arose again, a choking sound, first low and then descending lower, becoming an insectile buzz before it died out altogether. For a moment there was utter silence, and then George was able to move at last. As if propelled from outside, he moved toward the entryway that separated the kitchen from Gramma's room. He crossed it and looked inside, his heart slamming. Now his throat was **choked** with wool mittens; it would be impossible to swallow past them.

Gramma was still sleeping and it was all right, that was his first thought; it had only been some weird **sound**, after all; maybe she made it all the time when he and Buddy were in school. Just a snore. Gramma was fine. Sleeping.

That was his first thought. Then he noticed that the yellow hand that had been on the coverlet was now dangling limply over the side of the bed, the long nails almost but not quite touching the floor. And her mouth was open, as wrinkled and caved-in as an orifice dug into a rotten piece of fruit.

Timidly, hesitantly, George approached her.

He stood by her side for a long time, looking

down at her, not daring to touch her. The imperceptible rise and fall of the coverlet appeared to have ceased.

Appeared.

That was the key word. **Appeared.** -

But that's just because you are spooked, Georgie. You're just being Senor El-Stupido, like Buddy says — it's a game. Your brain's playing tricks on your eyes, she's breathing just fine, she's

"Gramma?" he said, and all that came out was a whisper. He cleared his throat and jumped back, frightened of the sound. But his voice was a little louder. "Gramma? You want your tea now? Gramma?"

Nothing.

The hand hung.

The eyes were closed.

The mouth was open.

Outside, the setting sun shone golden-red through the trees.

He saw her in a positive fullness then; saw her with that childish ineluctable apocalyptic and brilliantly unhooded eye of unformed and immature reflection, sitting in the white vinyl chair, holding out her arms, her face somehow stupid and triumphant at the same time. He found himself remembering one of the "bad spells" when Gramma began to shout, as if in a foreign language, and Mom had sent them outside, had screamed "**Just GO!**" at Buddy when Buddy stopped at the box in the entry to hunt for his gloves, and Buddy had looked back over his shoulder, so scared he was walleyed with it because their mom **never** shouted, and they had both gone out and stood in the driveway, not talking, their hands stuffed in their pockets for warmth, wondering what was happening.

Later, Mom had called them in for supper as if nothing had happened. George had not thought of that particular "bad spell" from that day to this. Except now, looking at Gramma, who was sleeping so strangely in her crank-up hospital bed, it occurred to him with dawning horror that it was the next day they had learned that Mrs. Harham, who lived up the road and sometimes visited Gramma, had died in her sleep that night.

Gramma's "bad spells." Everyone in the family talked about them.

Spells.

Witches were supposed to be able to cast spells. That's why they were witches, weren't they? Poisoned apples. Princes into toads. Gingerbread houses. Abracadabra. Presto-chango. **Spells.**

Spilled-out pieces of an unknown puzzle flying together in George's mind, as if by magic.

Magic, George thought, and groaned.

What was the picture? It was Gramma, of course, Gramma and her **books**. Gramma who had been driven out of town, Gramma who hadn't been able to have babies and then had been able to, Gramma who had been driven out of the **church** as well as out of town. The picture was Gramma, yellow and fat and wrinkled and sluglike; her toothless mouth curved into a sunken grin; her faded, blind eyes somehow sly and cunning; and on her head was a black, conical hat sprinkled with silver stars

and glittering Babylonian crescents; at her feet were slinking black cats with eyes as yellow as urine, and the smells were pork and blindness, pork and burning, ancient stars and candles as dark as the earth in which coffins lay; he heard words spoken from ancient books, and each word was like a stone and each sentence like a crypt reared in some stinking boneyard and every paragraph like a nightmare caravan of the plague-dead taken to a place of burning; his eye was the eye of a child and in that moment it opened wide in startled understanding on blackness.

Gramma had been a witch, just like the Wicked Witch in the **Wizard of Oz**. And now she was dead. That gargling sound, George thought with increasing horror. That gargling, snoring sound had been a... a... a "**death rattle.**"

"Gramma?" he whispered, and crazily he thought: **Ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead.**

No response. He held his cupped hand in front of Gramma's mouth. There was no wind, no breeze; inside Gramma it was dead calm and slack sails and no wake widening behind the keel. Some of his fright began to recede now, and George tried to think. He remembered Uncle George showing him how to wet a finger and test the wind, and now he licked his entire palm, wetting it, and held it in front of Gramma's mouth again.

Still nothing.

Gramma was really dead.

He started for the phone to call Dr. Arlinder, and then stopped. Suppose he called the doctor and she really wasn't dead at all. He'd be in dutch for sure with Mom, coming right on top of Buddy breaking his leg.

Take her pulse.

He stopped in the doorway, looking doubtfully back at that dangling hand. The sleeve of Gramma's nightie had pulled up, exposing her wrist. But that was no good. Once, after a visit to the doctor when the nurse had pressed her fingers to his wrist to take his pulse, George had tried it and hadn't been able to find anything. As far as his own unskilled fingers could tell, he was dead.

Besides, he didn't really want to... well... to **touch** Gramma. Even if she was dead. **Especially** if she was dead.

George stood in the entryway, looking from Gramma's still, bedridden form to the phone on the wall beside Dr. Arlinder's number, and back to Gramma again. He would just have to call. He would—

Get a mirror!

His face kindled. When you breathed on a mirror, it got cloudy. He had seen a doctor check an unconscious person that way once in a TV movie. There was a bathroom connecting with Gramma's room and now George hurried back through and got Gramma's vanity mirror. One side of the mirror was regular, and the other side magnified, so you could see to pluck out unwanted hairs and stuff like that.

George took it back to Gramma's bed and held one side of the mirror until it was almost touching Gramma's open, gaping mouth. He held it there while he counted to sixty, watching Gramma the whole time. Nothing changed. He was sure she was dead even before he took the mirror away from her

mouth and observed its surface, which was perfectly clear and unclouded.

Gramma was dead.

George realized with relief and some surprise that he could feel sorry for her now. Maybe she had been a witch. Maybe not. Maybe she had only **thought** she was a witch. Whichever, she was gone now. He realized with an adult's comprehension that questions of concrete reality became not unimportant but less **vital** when they were examined in the mute bland face of mortal remains. He realized this with an adult's comprehension and accepted with an adult's relief. This was a passing footprint, the shape of a shoe, in his mind. So are all the child's adult impressions; it is only in later years that the child realizes that he was being **made; formed;** shaped by random (or not so random) experience; all that remains **in the instant** beyond the footprint is that bitter gunpowder smell which is the ignition of an idea beyond a child's given years.

He put the mirror back in the bathroom and then went back through her room, glancing at the body on his way by. The setting sun had painted the old dead face with barbaric, orange-red colors; Gramma almost seemed to be a Viking ready for some burning funereal ship, and George looked away quickly.

He went through the entry and crossed the kitchen to the telephone, determined to do everything right. Already in his mind he saw a certain advantage over Buddy; whenever Buddy started to tease him, he would simply say: **I was all by myself in the house when Gramma died, and I did everything right.**

Call Dr. Arlinder, that was first. Call him and say, "My Gramma just died. Can you tell me what I should do? Cover her up or something?"

No.

"I think my Gramma just died."

Yes. Yes, that was better. Nobody thought a little kid knew anything anyway, so that was better.

Or how about:

"I'm pretty sure my Gramma just died—"

Sure! That was best of all.

And tell about the mirror and the death-rattle and all. And the doctor would come right away, and when he was done examining Gramma he would say **"I pronounce you dead, Gramma,"** and then say to George, **You layed extremely chilly in a tough situation, George. I want to congratulate you.** And then George would say something appropriately modest.

George looked at Dr. Arlinder's number and took a couple of slow deep breaths before grabbing the phone. His heart was beating fast, but that painful spike-iron thud was gone now. Gramma had died. The worst had happened, and somehow it wasn't as bad as waiting for her to start bellowing for Mom to bring her tea.

The phone was dead.

He listened to the blankness, his mouth still formed around the words **I'm sorry, Missus Dodd, but this is George Bruckner and I have to call the doctor for my Gramma.** And that would be all. He wasn't going to let on to Henrietta or Cora either that Gramma was dead, because they'd have it all over

town within the hour.

The words faded back into his throat unspoken. No voices. No dial tone. Just dead blankness. Like the dead blankness in the bed in there.

Gramma is—

—is—

(oh she is)

Gramma is laying chilly.

Gooseflesh again, painful and marbling. His eyes fixed on the Pyrex teapot on the stove, the cup on the counter with the herbal teabag in it. No more tea for Gramma. Not ever.

(laying so chilly)

George shuddered.

He stuttered his finger up and down on the Princess phone's cutoff button, to no result. The phone was dead. Just as dead as—

(dead as chilly as)

He slammed the handset down hard and the bell tinged faintly inside and he picked it up in a hurry to see if that meant it had magically gone right again. But there was nothing, and this time he put it back slowly.

His heart was thudding harder again.

I'm alone in the house with her dead body.

He crossed the kitchen slowly, stood by the table for a minute, and then turned on the light. It was getting dark in the house.

Wait. That's all I got to do. Just wait until Mom gets back. This is better, really. If the phone went out, it's better that she just died instead of maybe having a fit or something, foaming at the mouth, slamming up and down in bed—

Ah, that was bad. He could have done very nicely without that horse-pucky.

Like being alone in the dark and thinking of dead things that were still lively—seeing shapes in the shadows on the walls and thinking of death, thinking of the dead, those things, the way they would stink and the way they would move toward you in the black: thinking this: thinking that: thinking of bugs turning in flesh: burrowing in flesh: eyes that moved in the dark. Yeah. That most of all. Thinking of eyes that moved in the dark, and the creak of floorboards as something came across the room through the zebra-stripes of shadows from the light outside. Yeah.

In the dark your thoughts had a perfect circularity, and no matter what you tried to think of—flowers or Jesus or baseball or winning the gold in the 440 at the Olympics—it somehow led back to the form in the shadows with the claws and the unblinking eyes.

"Shittabrick!" he hissed, and suddenly slapped his own face. And hard. He was giving himself the whimsies, it was time to stop it. He wasn't six anymore. She was dead, that was all, dead. There wasn't no more thought inside her now than there was in a marble or a floorboard or a doorknob or a radio dial or—

And a strong alien unprepared-for voice, perhaps only the unforgiving unbidden voice of simple survival, inside him cried: **Shut up Georgie and get about your goddam business!**

He went back to the door of her bedroom to make sure.

There lay Gramma, one hand out of bed and touching the floor, her mouth hinged agape. Gramma was part of the furniture now. You could put her hand back in bed or pull her hair or pop a waterglass into her mouth or put earphones on her head and play Chuck Berry into them full-tilt-boogie and it would be all the same to her. Gramma was, as Buddy sometimes said, out of it. Gramma had had the course.

A sudden low and rhythmic thudding noise began, not far to George's left, and he started, a little yipping cry escaping him. It was the storm door, which Buddy had put on just last week; just the storm door, unlatched and thudding back and forth in the freshening breeze.

George opened the inside door, leaned out, and caught the storm door as it swung back. The wind—it wasn't a breeze but a wind—caught his hair and riffled it. He latched the door firmly and wondered where the wind had come from all of a sudden. When Mom left it had been almost dead calm. But when Mom had left it had been bright daylight and now it was dusk.

George glanced in at Gramma again and then went back and tried the phone again. Still dead. He sat down, got up, and began to walk back and forth through the kitchen, pacing, trying to think.

An hour later it was full dark.

The phone was still out. George supposed the wind, which had now risen to a near-gale, had knocked down some of the power-lines, probably out by the Beaver Bog, where the trees grew everywhere in a helter-skelter of deadfalls and swampwater. The phone dinged occasionally, ghostly and far, but the line remained blank. Outside the wind moaned along the eaves of the small house and George reckoned he would have a story to tell at the next Boy Scout Camporee, all right... just sitting in the house alone with his dead Gramma and the phone out and the wind pushing rafts of fresh cloud fast across the sky, clouds that were black on top and the color of dead tallow, the color of Gramma's claw-hands, underneath.

It was, as Buddy also sometimes said, a classic.

He wished he was telling it now, with the actuality of the thing safely behind him. He sat at the kitchen table, his history book open in front of him, jumping at every sound... and now that the wind was up there were a lot of sounds as the house creaked in all its unoled secret forgotten joints.

She'll be home pretty quick. She'll be home and then everything will be okay. Everything.

(you never covered her)

will be all r

(never covered her face)

George jerked as if someone had spoken aloud and stared wide-eyed across the kitchen at the useless telephone. You were supposed to pull the sheet up over the dead person's face. It was in all the movies.

I'm not going in there.

No! No reason why he should!

Mom could cover her face when she got home! Or **Dr. Arlinder** when he came! Or the **undertaker!**

Someone, anyone, but him.

No reason why he should.

It was nothing to him, and nothing to Gramma. Buddy's voice in his head:

Yeah, if you weren't scared, how come you didn't dare to cover her face?

It was nothing to me.

Fraidy cat!

Nothing to Gramma, either.

Chicken-guts fraidy-cat!

Sitting at the table in front of his unread history book, considering it, George began to see that if he **didn't** pull the counterpane up over Gramma's face, he couldn't claim to have done everything right, and thus Buddy would have a leg (no matter how shaky) to stand on.

Now he saw himself telling the spooky story of Gramma's death at the Camporee fire before Taps, just getting to the comforting conclusion where Mom's headlights swept into the driveway—the reappearance of the grownup, both re-establishing and reconfirming the concept of Order—and suddenly, from the shadows, a dark figure arises, and a pine-knot in the fire explodes and George can see it's Buddy there in the shadows, saying: **If you was so brave, chicken-guts, how come you didn't dare to cover up HER FACE?**

George stood up, reminding himself that Gramma was **out of it**, that Gramma was **wasted**, that Gramma was **laying chilly**. He could put her hand back in bed, put her waterglass in her mouth, put on earphones playing Chuck Berry full blast, etc., etc., and none of it would put a buzz under Gramma, because that was what being dead was **about**, nobody could put a buzz under a dead person, a dead person was the ultimate laid-back cool, you could put cigarettes in the ears of a dead person or draw pictures on their eyelids and it wouldn't put a buzz under them because the rest of it was just dreams, ineluctable and apocalyptic and feverish dreams about closet doors swinging open in the dead mouth of midnight, just dreams about moonlight skating a delirious blue on the bones of disinterred skeletons, just—

He whispered, "stop it, can't you? Stop being so—"

(gross)

He steeled himself. He was going to go in there and pull the coverlet up over her face, and take away Buddy's last leg to stand on. He would administer the few simple rituals of Gramma's death perfectly. He would cover her face and then—his face lit at the symbolism of this—he would put away her unused teabag and her unused cup. Yes.

He went in, each step a conscious act. Gramma's room was dark, her body a vague hump in the bed, and he fumbled madly for the light-switch, not finding it for what seemed to be an eternity. At last it clicked up, flooding the room with a low yellow light from the cut-glass fixture overhead.

Gramma lay there, hand dangling, mouth open. George regarded her, dimly aware that little pearls of sweat now clung to his forehead, and wondered if his responsibility in the matter could possibly extend to picking up that cooling hand and putting it back in bed with the rest of Gramma. He decided it did not. Her hand could have fallen out of bed any old time. That was too much. He couldn't touch her. Everything else, but not that.

Slowly, as if moving through some thick fluid instead of air, George approached Gramma. He stood over her, looking down. Gramma was yellow. Part of it was the light, filtered through the old fixture, but not all.

Breathing through his mouth, his breath rasping audibly, George grasped the coverlet and pulled it up over Gramma's face. He let go of it and it slipped just a little, revealing her hairline and the yellow creased parchment of her brow. Steeling himself, he grasped it again, keeping his hands far to one side and the other of her head so he wouldn't have to touch her, even through the cloth, and pulled it up again. This time it stayed. It was satisfactory. Some of the fear went out of George. He had buried her. Yes, that was why you covered the dead person up, and why it was right: it was like burying them. It was a statement.

He looked at the hand dangling down, unburied, and discovered now that he could touch it, he could tuck it under and bury it with the rest of Gramma.

He bent, grasped the cool hand, and lifted it.

The hand twisted in his and clutched his wrist.

George screamed. He staggered backward, screaming in the empty house, screaming against the sound of the wind reaving the eaves, screaming against the sound of the house's creaking joints. He backed away, pulling Gramma's body askew under the coverlet, and the hand thudded back down, twisting, turning, snatching at the air... and then relaxing to limpness again.

I'm all right, it was nothing, it was nothing but a reflex.

George nodded in perfect understanding, and then he remembered how her hand had turned in perfect aliveness, and he shrieked. This reaction, although delayed, was perfectly true; it came from his heart. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His hair stood out, perfectly on end, in a cone. His heart was a runaway stamping-press in his chest. The world tilted crazily, came back to the level, and then just went on moving until it was tilted the other way. Panic lowered over him in a blank cloud. He whirled, wanting only to get out of the room to some other room—or even three or four miles down the road, if that was what it took—where he could get all of this under control. So he whirled and ran full-tilt into the wall, in his utter panic missing the open doorway by a good two feet.

He rebounded and fell to the floor, his head singing with a sharp, cutting pain that sliced keenly through the panic. He touched his nose and his hand came away bloody. Fresh drops spotted his green shirt. He scrambled to his feet and looked around wildly.

The hand dangled against the floor as it had before, but Gramma's body was not askew; it also was as it had been.

He had imagined it.

No.

But the pain had cleared his head. Dead people didn't grab your wrist. Dead was dead. When you were dead they could use you for a hatrack or stuff you in a tractor tire and roll you downhill or anything else. When you were dead you might be acted upon (by, say, little boys trying to put dead dangling hands back into bed), but your days of

acting upon—so to speak—were over.

Unless you're a witch. Unless you pick your time to die when no one's around but one little kid, because it's best that way, you can... can...

Can what?

Nothing. It was stupid. He had imagined the whole thing because he had been scared and that was all there was to it. He wiped his nose with his forearm and winced at the pain. There was a bloody smear on the skin of his inner forearm.

He wasn't going to go near her again, that was all. Reality or hallucination, he wasn't going to mess with Gramma. The bright flare of panic was gone, but he was still miserably scared, near tears, shaky at the sight of his own blood, only wanting his mother to come home and take charge.

George backed out of the room, through the entry, and into the kitchen. He drew a long, shuddery breath and let it out. He wanted a wet rag for his nose, and suddenly he felt like he was going to vomit. He went over to the sink and ran cold water. He bent and got a rag from the basin under the sink—a piece of one of Gramma's old diapers—and ran it under the cold tap, snuffling up blood as he did so. He soaked the old soft cotton diaper-square until his hand was numb, then turned off the tap and wrung it out.

He was putting it to his nose when her voice spoke from the other room.

"Come here, boy," Gramma called, and her voice was dead. "Come in here—**Gramma wants to hug you.**"

George tried to scream and no sound came out. No sound at all. But there were sounds in the other room. Sounds that he heard when Mom was in there, giving Gramma her bed-bath, lifting her bulk, dropping it, turning it, dropping it again.

Only those sounds now seemed to have a slightly different and yet utterly specific meaning—it sounded as though Gramma was trying to... to get out of bed.

"Boy! Come in here, boy! Right NOW! Step to it!"

With horror he saw that his feet were even answering that command. He told them to stop and they just went on, left foot, right foot, hay foot, straw foot, over the linoleum; his brain was a terrified prisoner inside his body—a hostage in a tower.

She IS a witch, she's a witch and she's having one of her "bad spells," oh yeah, it's a "spell" all right, and it's bad, it's REALLY bad, and it's me she wants, oh God oh Jesus help me help me help me—

George walked across the kitchen and through the entryway and into Gramma's room and yes, she hadn't just tried to get out of bed, she was out, she was sitting in the white vinyl chair where she hadn't sat for four years, since she got too heavy to walk and too senile to know where she was, anyway.

But Gramma didn't look senile now.

Her face was sagging and doughy, but the senility was gone—if it had ever really been there at all, and not just a mask she wore to lull small boys and tired husbandless women. Now Gramma's face gleamed with fell intelligence—it gleamed like an old, stinking wax candle. Her eyes drooped in her face, lackluster and dead. Her chest was not

moving. Her nightie had pulled up, exposing elephantine thighs. The coverlet of her deathbed was thrown back.

Gramma held her huge arms out to him.

"I want to hug you, Georgie," that flat and buzzing dead voice said. "Don't be a scared old cry-baby. Let your Gramma hug you."

George cringed back, trying to resist that almost insurmountable pull. Outside, the wind shrieked and roared. George's face was long and twisted with the extremity of his fright; the face of a woodcut caught and shut up in an ancient book.

"Come to me so young and vital, and the years are mine again."

George began to walk toward her. He couldn't help himself. Step by dragging step toward those outstretched arms. **He would show Buddy that he wasn't scared of Gramma, either. He would go to Gramma and be hugged because he wasn't a cry-baby, fraidy-cat. He would go to Gramma now.**

He was almost within the circle of her arms when the window to his left crashed inward and suddenly a wind-blown branch was in the room with them, autumn leaves still clinging to it. The river of wind flooded the room, blowing over Gramma's pictures, whipping her nightgown and her hair.

Now George could scream. He stumbled backwards out of her grip and Gramma made a cheated hissing sound, her lips pulling back over smooth old gums; her thick, wrinkled hands clapped uselessly together on moving air.

George's feet tangled together and he fell down. Gramma began to rise from the white vinyl chair, a tottering pile of flesh; she began to stagger toward him. George found he couldn't get up; the strength had deserted his legs. He began to crawl backward, whimpering. Gramma came on, slowly but relentlessly, dead and yet alive, and suddenly George understood what the hug would mean; the puzzle was complete in his mind and somehow he found his feet just as Gramma's hand closed on his shirt. It ripped up the side, and for one moment he felt her cold flesh against his skin before fleeing into the kitchen again.

He would run into the night. Anything other than being hugged by the witch, his Gramma. Because when his mother came back she would find Gramma dead and George alive, oh yes... but George would have developed a sudden taste for herbal tea.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Gramma's grotesque, misshapen shadow rising on the wall as she came through the entryway.

And at that moment the telephone rang, shrilly and stridently.

George seized it without even thinking and screamed into it; screamed for someone to come, to please come. He screamed these things silently; not a sound escaped his locked throat.

Gramma tottered into the kitchen in her pink nightie. Her whitish-yellow hair blew wildly around her face, and one of her horn combs hung askew against her wrinkled neck.

Gramma was grinning.

"Ruth?" It was Aunt Flo's voice, almost lost in the whistling wind-tunnel of a bad long-distance connection. "Ruth, are you there?" It was Aunt Flo

in Minnesota, over two thousand miles away.

"Help me!" George screamed into the phone, and what came out was a tiny, hissing whistle, as if he had blown into a harmonica full of dead reeds.

Gramma tottered across the linoleum, holding her arms out for him. Her hands snapped shut and then open and then shut again. Gramma wanted her hug; she had been waiting for that hug for five years.

"Ruth, can you hear me? It's been storming here, it just started, and I... I got scared. Ruth, I can't hear you—"

"Gramma," George moaned into the telephone. Now she was almost upon him.

"George?" Aunt Flo's voice suddenly sharpened; became almost a shriek. "George, is that you?"

He began to back away from Gramma, and suddenly realized that he had stupidly backed away from the door and into the corner formed by the kitchen cabinets and the sink. The horror was complete. As her shadow fell over him, the paralysis broke and he screamed into the phone, screamed it over and over again: **"Gramma! Gramma! Gramma!"**

And Gramma's cold hands touched his throat. Her muddy, ancient eyes locked on his, draining his will.

Faintly, dimly, as if across many years as well as many miles, he heard Aunt Flo say: "Tell her to lie down, George, tell her to lie down and be still. Tell her she must do it in your name and the name of her father. The name of her taken father is **Hastur**. His name is power in her ear, George—tell her **Lie down in the Name of Hastur—tell her—**"

The old, wrinkled hand implacably tore the telephone out of George's nerveless grip. There was a taut pop as the cord pulled out of the phone. George collapsed in the corner and Gramma bent down, a huge heap of flesh above him, blotting out the light.

George screamed: **"Lie down! Be still! Hastur's name! Hastur! Lie down! Be still!"**

Her hands, closing around his neck—

"You gotta do it! Aunt Flo said you did! In my name! In your **Father's** name! Lie down! Be still—"
—and squeezed.

* * *

When the lights finally splashed into the driveway an hour later, George was sitting at the table in front of his unread history book. He got up and walked to the back door and opened it. To his left, the Princess phone hung in its cradle, its useless cord looped around it.

His mother came in, a leaf clinging to the collar of her coat. "Such a wind," she said. "Was everything all—George? **George, what happened?**"

The blood fell from Mom's face in a single, shocked rush, turning her a horrible clown-white.

"Gramma," he said. "Gramma died. Gramma died, Mommy." And he began to cry.

She swept him into her arms and then staggered back against the wall, as if this act of hugging had robbed the last of her strength. "Did... did anything happen?" she asked. **"George, did anything else happen?"**

"The wind knocked a tree branch through her window," George said. "And Gramma... Aunt Flo called... Gramma... she was dead, but... Aunt Flo..."



she told me...."

She pushed him away, looked at his shocked, almost dead face for moment, and then rushed, stumbling, into Gramma's room. She was in there for perhaps four minutes. When she came back, she was holding a red tatter of cloth. It was a bit of George's shirt.

"I took this out of her hand," Mom whispered. "George, what happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it," George said. "Call Aunt Flo, if you want. I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

She made as if to stop him, but didn't. He went up to the room he shared with Buddy and opened the hot-air register so he could hear what his mother did next. She wasn't going to talk to Aunt Flo, not tonight because the telephone cord had

pulled out, not tomorrow because shortly before Mom had come home, George had spoken a short series of words, some of them bastardized Latin, some of them only pre-Druidic grunts, and over two thousand miles away Aunt Flo had dropped dead of a massive brain hemorrhage. It was amazing how those words came back. How everything came back.

George undressed and lay down naked on his bed. He put his hands behind his head and looked up into the darkness. Slowly, slowly, a sunken and rather horrible grin surfaced on his face.

Things were going to be different around here from now on.

Very different.

George could hardly wait until Buddy came home from the hospital.

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SOMETHING ALMOST AS GOOD

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The sunlight, passing through the overhead maze of leaves and branches, fell with dappled brightness to the forest floor around the wizard and the man who held the shotgun.

The wizard's hand moved slightly from his side, the fingers spread almost—but not really—imperceptibly. "Don't even bother," the man with the shotgun said. He reached inside the collar of his heavy red and black plaid shirt and pulled out a medallion, hung by a leather thong around his neck. "See? Whatever you think you're going to do, it won't work, not while I'm wearing this. And Arly, my partner, has one just like it."

It was true, the wizard knew. The medallion would protect its wearer against any spell he threw against him. His hand fell limply to his side. The fingers closed. The man with the shotgun—his name was Davey—laughed and said, "Fine. You understand. So come with me, okay? Just do what I tell you to do and everything'll be okay."

"Do what you say? That talisman protects you from me, but it doesn't compel me to do anything."

Davey motioned angrily with the shotgun. "You just listen a minute, Mr. Big Time Conjure-man. Just listen to me. I know everything there is to know about you, me and Arly both do. Maybe I don't scare you, maybe this shotgun don't scare you either, but I advise you to pay close attention." He dug into his pants pocket with his free hand and took something out to show the wizard. It glittered yellow in the sunlight; a bracelet. "You know who this belongs to, don't you?"

"I know," the wizard said.

"Sure you do." He tossed the bracelet into the air, caught it, put it back in his pocket. "You can't hurt me, maybe I can't hurt you. But that kid of yours..."

"If you go near her—"

"There's two of us," Davey said, backing off. "Arly's with her. Don't you forget that. Arly's with her—"

"Your sort's what I came to this forest to get away from."

"If you do what we tell you, you'll be rid of us soon enough."

Thoughts tumbled through the wizard's mind like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope—but with much less form. There was nothing he could do. He nodded. "All right, I'll do what you ask. But she'd better not be hurt."

"That's better. Much better." He laughed and turned his back on the wizard. Not that it mattered. He started walking off through the woods, purposefully. The wizard followed him.

They came to a clearing. The man who waited there might have been a clone of the first except that he carried a rifle instead of a shotgun. Judy sat at the base of a tree, her eyes wide with fear. The fear melted a little as she saw her father, but it didn't vanish. Evidently she knew about the

talismans Davey and Arly wore.

The wizard started across the clearing toward his daughter.

"Not so fast," Arly said.

"You can see about her as soon as we conduct our business," Davey added.

There was no emotion in the wizard's eyes as he looked first at Arly, then at Davey. "What do you want, then?"

Davey laughed. "Listen to that, Arly. What do we want! He wants to know what we want."

"Three wishes," Arly said.

Davey stopped laughing. His eyes were as cold as the wizard's. "There might not be any wishing well in this forest, but there's something just as good, I suspect. You." He pointed toward Judy with his thumb. "Do we get our wishes?"

"In return for our safety."

"That's fine with us," Davey said. "That so, Arly?"

Arly laughed.

The wizard said, "Make your first wish."

"Money," Arly said.

Davey said, "All the money we're ever going to need."

"Done. What's your next wish?"

"What do you mean, 'done?' Where is it?"

"Most of it's in the trunk of your car. But you might want to check your pockets."

Arly yelled as he pulled a wad of fifty-dollar bills out of his right pants pocket. "My God, it's real," he said, showing the money to Davey. "This stuff's real, it's real money. We're rich, Davey!"

"Of course it's real," Davey said, smiling.

"And your next wish?" asked the wizard.

Arly said, "We don't need no more than this."

"Oh, we need a lot more than this," Davey told him. "We got some problems need solving."

"And just what problems would those be," asked the wizard.

"The law. We want protection from the law. No cops, no trials, no tricks. That means no lynch mobs or vigilante posses, if you get my drift."

"All right."

"All right, huh?"

"That leaves you," the wizard pointed out, "with just one more wish."

Davey scowled. "How do we know we got that last one?"

"You have the money you wished for, don't you?"

"Yeah... I guess we'll just have to take your word for it."

"What about your last wish?"

"Last one, huh?" Davey shrugged. "That'll take some time. To tell you the truth—"

"It's not so hard, Davey," said Arly. "Broads. Wish for broads."

"Well now, how could I overlook that? Of course." He glanced at Judy, still seated at the base of the tree. "We want it so women just can't keep away from us."

The wizard said, "Not so fast."

Davey glared at him. "You got to give us that wish."

"Maybe. But not without insisting on a modification."

"Okay. We're easy to get along with. Just make it so no female but your daughter can resist us and we'll be happy." He grinned at Arly. "That okay with you?"

"Sure is."

"Then that's the way it is," the wizard said. "And that makes three. Please leave."

"Be glad to," Davey said. "After all, we got these." He tapped the talisman hung around his neck.

"I won't try to stop you. I can't," the wizard said. "Now go."

Davey and Arly moved off through the woods. The wizard helped his daughter to her feet. "They're getting away," she said. "Do something—"

"There's really nothing I can do," he said. "Besides, it doesn't matter."

A rustling sound grew up in the forest around them. The girl said, "What's that?"

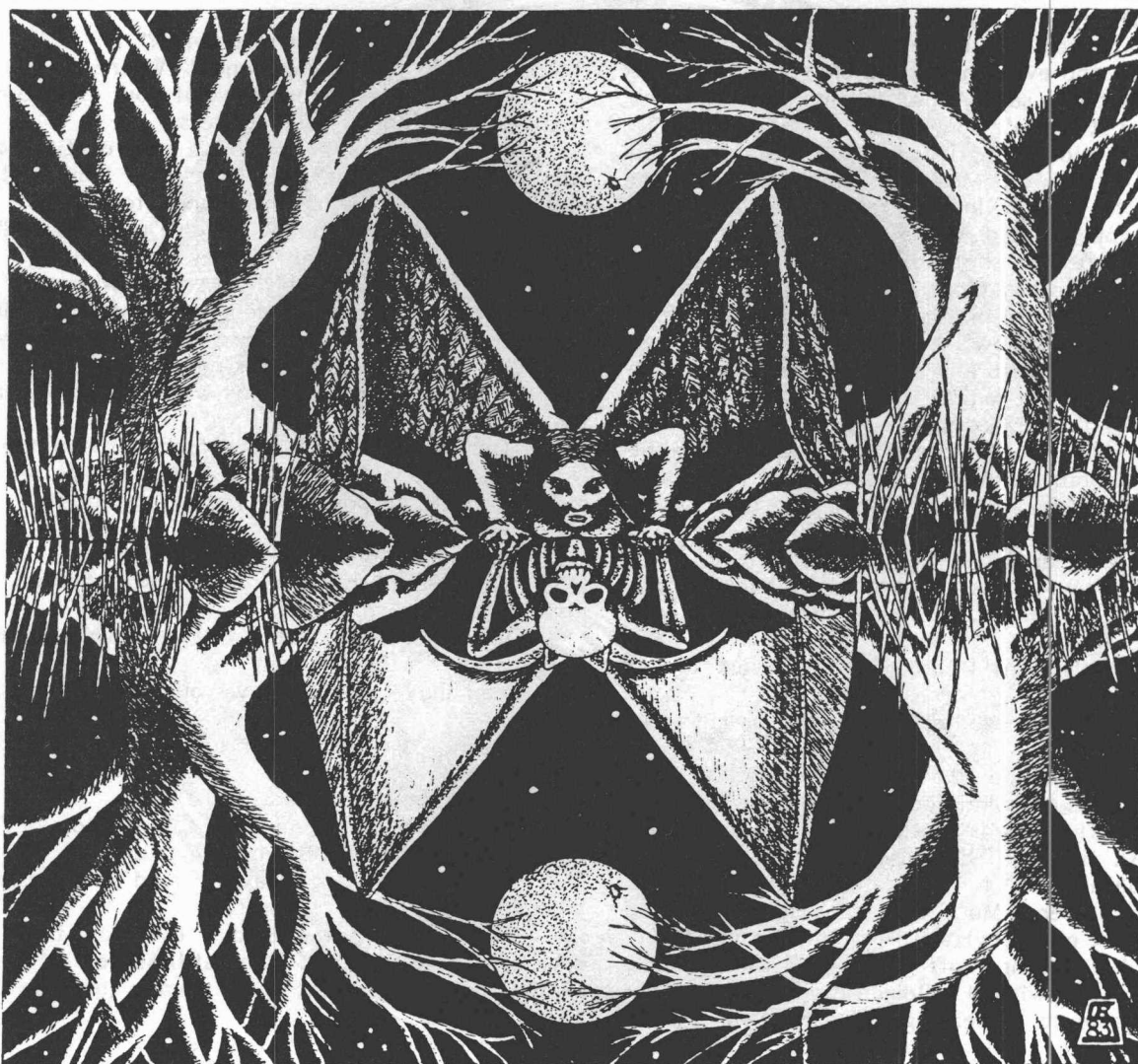
"It has to do with their wishes," the wizard said. "When they made that last one, I'll bet they had no idea the number of black widow spiders in this forest."

HYMN TO SALAMANDRA

O great Salamandra, green-scaled Goddess,
eight-armed, ever-living,
eater of souls,
mother of serpents, granter of the wishes
of the lords of Sissississ,
we sing you praise.
We raise a fire on Your holy altar,
on it we burn
hearts of stalwart men and maidens
torn, still beating, from their ragged chests.

And the flesh of milk-white lambs
brought down this day from high pastures
to die, bleating, in Your dark temple
that on them you might feast
with your tongues of emerald flame.

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THE GHOST-WINDER

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Freda sat in bed among the debris of Sunday funnies, used kleenex and orange peels from her impromptu breakfast. Her Aunt Euxine and Uncle Finley had gone out to church amid a clamor of angry words, most of them belonging to Euxine. Freda had been left alone in the blessedly quiet house, because she was, in the terms of her aunt, "just getting over the sniffles." It was a puzzle to her how the solidly practical and outspoken Euxine had met and married the vague-eyed and frail Finley Cobb. She really didn't know that much about them, as she'd only been here two weeks, on one of the unpredictable and frequent "visits" with relatives or friends that her father sent her on when he didn't want her underfoot at home.

Her welcome hadn't been a warm one, but she knew she didn't make a charming appearance. She had a more-or-less permanent expression of gravity that contrasted oddly with her childish appearance, and her eyes, so intense and dark, seemed somehow wrong for her pale, translucent skin and lank ash blonde hair.

She slipped from the bed, putting on a robe but leaving her feet bare in defiance of the sniffles, and set out to really explore the house in the absence of her uncle and aunt. She found a cozy hiding-place in a cabinet behind a stove in Uncle Finley's small bedroom. There was barely enough space for her to squeeze in along with the shelves of heavy, dark-bound books that he kept there. He stored his pipe tobacco there as well and the closed-in space was filled with that pungent aroma. She sat there for a time just breathing it, then pushed the door open to give herself a wedge of light. Reaching up and nearly braining herself with the heavy volume, she took down a book and opened it in her lap. The words printed at the top were "Psychic Phenomena through the Ages," and she could read the shorter words but not the longer. The warmth, strong smell of tobacco and the hypnotic and mysterious effect of the print itself were lulling her toward sleep, but she shook herself awake and left the cabinet, replacing things carefully.

She peeked into various drawers and cabinets in Euxine's part of the house without finding anything of interest. That was a sort of disappointment, as in her experience, it was the most staid-appearing people who had the most interesting and arcane artifacts hidden away.

The basement door had a padlock on it, so of course that put her mind on keys, and following a hunch, she returned to Uncle Finley's cabinet and on the second shelf, underneath a humidior, she found a tarnished key. She wasn't sure how much time she'd spent on her investigations, yet it didn't seem likely she'd have such a good chance again. Aunt Euxine's opinions of the time Finley spent in the basement hideout were loud and critical, but that never seemed to deter him from creeping down those stairs to do "God knows what" as Aunt Euxy often put it.

Now Freda, as well as God, would know, she thought with a giggle as she removed the padlock. Uncle Finley always replaced it again on the inside, but she carelessly left it hanging and descended the damp concrete stairs, flicking the light switch as she passed it. A fluorescent tube began to flicker, giving a garish and unreal glow to the small damp room and the objects in it.

One of these objects was a worktable with various metal parts and tools scattered about on it, as if someone had been taking clocks apart. On one edge of the table was clamped a cylinder that looked like an oatmeal box with both ends removed. The outside was painted black, the inside covered with silvery foil. Inside the cylinder was an intricate construction containing twisted filaments of wire, tiny wheels and gears. Alongside it was a crude switch. The center of the basement room was bare, but beyond this empty area, exactly in line with the first cylinder was a second one, looking much like it except that the mechanism seemed to be the mirror-image of the other.

The machinery itself was really not so intriguing; it was the tempting switch that drew her. Her fingers twiddled it for a few minutes before temptation overcame her. Simultaneously with the throwing of the switch she heard, from somewhere in the house, Aunt Euxine calling her name.

The jury-rigged machinery inside the tube began to clatter and dance, greenish light beginning to move up and down the filaments, casting weird reflections inside the tube. She would probably have thrown the switch back immediately except for the three white patches that began to form in the air between the cylinders. The top and largest one was like a halloween mask with no eyes behind it; the other two were resolving themselves into hands. It was the image of a woman that finally appeared there, white of face and wearing a dark shapeless dress that dragged the floor. Freda would have thought her real except for the bricks and crumbling mortar of the basement wall that could be seen clearly through her. Her face was that of a young woman, but it was drawn with worry and strain. From time to time her mouth opened but Freda couldn't hear what she was saying. She was oblivious to rasping steps on the stairs behind her until she jumped as a hand was laid on her shoulder.

"What are you doing here, young lady? And in your bare feet?"

She saw Uncle Finley's face, filled with some suppressed horror, appear over Euxy's solid shoulder.

"But look! Look at her," said Freda, just as Finley reached the switch at the other end of the room, and flipped it, with a desperate look at her, she recognized too late, as an appeal for silence.

Aunt Euxy looked where she pointed, but the figure was growing more transparent. "What are you talking about, girl? Do you suppose she's feverish?" She lay a large hand on Freda's forehead. The second cylinder was clicking and glowing, and as it warmed to life, the desperate-looking young woman grew less and less substantial and finally was gone altogether, leaving a clear view of the blank wall.

"You'd better go right to bed."

"She didn't have any right snooping in my workshop," said Finley, turning off the mechanism

once it'd done its job.

"Well, I certainly don't want her down here, either. She might catch some of your foolishness." Euxine began to pull her toward the stairs and at first she hung back, thinking of all the unanswered questions about this place. Finley, with a pained look at her, was making sucking and gasping noises as he lit his pipe. Realizing that he wasn't going to talk about this place with her aunt present, she allowed herself to be led away.



That night she lay awake. A tree branch rubbed and groaned outside her window and every time she peeked out from under the covers she saw a white reflection on the wall that she thought might turn into a mournful face.

In the morning the circles under her eyes and an onset of coughing made Aunt Euxy decide to spare her from school for the day. Ordinarily, a day spent away from school, with only the company of her aunt and uncle, wouldn't have pleased her, but she had her own ideas of what she might do for entertainment. Later that afternoon her aunt gave her the perfect opportunity by leaving to visit friends. She slipped up to the basement door and began to knock at it.

"Euxy, that you?"

She remained silent, certain that he didn't dare tell her to go to hell or anything because it might actually be Euxy. There was the rattle of a key in a lock. "It's only you. Go away. I'm busy."

"You might as well let me in. I saw her. I don't know why Aunt Euxy didn't, but I did."

Finley grudgingly opened the door.

"Play her back again, can you?" begged Freda.

With a casual motion Finley pulled the switch and the dark-clad figure began to form itself. Its expression of distress had not changed. The white hands wove a pattern of futility, as Freda watched with hungry eyes.

"I suppose you think it's only some kind of funny tv set?"

Freda shook her head. "The way she looks at me gives me the shivers. She's not play acting—it's real."

"Real as time... and loss... and death." Abruptly he hit the switch on the opposite machine and the apparition was quickly gone.

"Is she... a ghost?"

"Not a ghost like most people think, like a spook running around under a sheet, popping out on Halloween to say 'boo.' Her name is — was Emily Goode—I looked it up. She had two young children who died of typhoid and two years later she herself died—in an asylum. She hanged herself."

Freda was glad the apparition had gone back into the machine. Uncle Finley's face with its pale, wild eyes, the smoke from his pipe giving it a hazy quality, was pretty frightening in itself.

"The ghost isn't Emily herself—she's dead, but her pain at the death of her children was somehow

recorded on... wore a groove into... what we call reality, I guess and several generations of relatives saw her figure in the family home before I heard of it and with my machine I was able to clear the house of the disturbance."

"But you have her here."

"Yes." He opened a chest near the stairway and in it lay dozens of the cylinders. "I can play back these disturbances any time I wish."

"She looked so sad. Will she feel that way for always?"

"I don't know what these subjects feel, if anything at all. The usual way of it is that these manifestations are generally not of the gentler sort—fear, anger, frustration, not the sort of thing one wants to feel throughout eternity."

"But Aunt Euxy looked right at her without seeing anything at all."

"That's the only hitch that keeps me from being recognized as a genius. It seems that not everyone sees these phenomena, even when broadcast through my mechanism. You noticed that Emily was rather thin and hazy. Somehow they haven't enough vigor to make themselves seen by the more matter-of-fact types like your aunt. I haven't dared to show this to anyone for fear they'll not see the manifestations and say I'm crazy. This wouldn't be the first time my mental stability has been called into question by meddling fools. I've been working on a new device, though. It would work as a kind of amplifier of the psychic forces so that anyone, no matter how dense, would be able to see them."

He stopped talking as they heard a door slam in one of the rooms above. "Go along now. She'll come down here looking for you." He made a shooping motion and Freda ran for the stairs, suddenly eager to be out of that dank, closed-in space.

* * *

Uncle Finley paused in the doorway, a large peeling black suitcase on the floor at his feet. He had the expression of one who has been caught sneaking out of the house, running away from home.

"You'll simply have to take her with you. I have my beauty shop appointment and Rhonda Lee would be upset with me if I brought a kid along. And you know what my hair looks like when she's upset."

"Send her to play with the neighbor kids."

"They're all in bed with colds, and you know she just got over hers this week."

Freda sat on a chair, chin in hands as they argued. She was sort of afraid of Uncle Finley since she'd seen him at his work in the basement, yet he'd been preparing for this trip all week, and she was anxious to find out what he did on these outings. Finley made a gesture of helplessness, and she began shrugging into her jacket.

Outside the wind whined shrill and cold, driving needles of sleet toward their faces. Finley wrestled the suitcase into the back seat with a stifled curse.

"Is that your ghost-winder?"





D. JEAN CORBYN 10-1982

"What a name for it," said Finley, a grudging smile appearing on his thin lips. "I guess that's what it is, all right. We're after a lively one today. It's driven more than one family out of the house, and I promised the owner I'd rid the place of its unwanted tenant this weekend."

They drove for almost an hour and finally swung into a long, winding drive. The house was a large, rambling structure of gray stone with red shutters. Except for a slight aura of abandonment and disrepair, there didn't seem to be a thing wrong with it. As they stepped inside, it was almost as if the family had only just gone out for a moment and would be back at any time. Toys lay scattered on a rug before the fireplace and a child's coat had been left carelessly on the sofa. Cups and saucers sat on the coffee table, a little residue drying in them. "All their stuff's here," said Freda.

Finley nodded. "They left suddenly."

As she looked around the room, Freda saw that a mirror on one wall had been shattered, there was a dark splatter-stain on the floor and one of the drapes had been badly charred. She felt a sudden draft and

looking back, saw that the door was slowly coming open. She ran to close it, but it seemed that the wind held out against her and she had to struggle to get it closed and locked. She called to her uncle but he had gone on into the next room; it sounded as if he were setting up his equipment. Somewhere upstairs there was a rattling sound as if something had fallen. Freda looked up the stairs in time to see something come rolling down them. It dropped from step to step, moving on, even when lack of momentum should have stopped it. It came to rest at her feet, a trophy of some kind, a silver cup, dented where it had struck the floor. As she picked it up, there seemed to be an untoward warmth to the metal. She ran with it into the other room to show her uncle, but he only chuckled.

"Have you ever heard of a poltergeist? Didn't think so." He gave a sudden yell of surprise as a rug slid from beneath his feet, sending him over backwards. The rug kept going, sliding across the dining room floor and fetching up against the wall in a crumpled heap. There was a sudden thump-thump sound as if someone in heavy boots were walking across the floor above. A chandelier swayed dangerously. A folded newspaper on the dining room table began to smoulder and Finley turned his device toward it. "Come to papa, little bastard."

A keening sound as of a restless wind began in one corner of the room and grew louder as it ricocheted from wall to wall. Some tension began to prick the hair at the back of Freda's neck and she began to cry, crouching down to hide behind an antique china cabinet.

The doors of the cabinet came open and a plate whizzed past Uncle Finley's shoulder. He'd grown red in the face and was pointing his device like a weapon. "No you don't—over there now, are you?" The machine seemed almost overtaxed, the light that spiraled there of a searing intensity. A last plate toppled from the cabinet, but lacking force it fell and shattered on the floor. The house was silent.

Finley began to laugh softly to himself. "Full of malice, are you. See how you like your prison. I hope you're not finding it too cramped in there."

Freda wiped at her running nose with her coatsleeve. "I want to go home," she said.

"He gave me quite a tussle. I can't wait to get back and finish work on my augments. This specimen has so much vigor, I'm sure he can make himself known to even the most closed mind."

"Are you going to let him out of there?" asked Freda.

"Of course, just like the others. He'll be under my control."

"I don't think he is... like the others."

"What would a mere child know about it?"

That seemed to answer everything, so they prepared to leave the house.

* * *

It was a lazy Saturday morning. Freda was drowsing and only half heard her aunt say she was going downtown to do the shopping. She awoke more fully an hour or so later to realize that the house was steeped in silence. She began thinking of her Uncle Finley at work in the basement. This was the first time he'd had an opportunity to experiment

freely.

She ran to the door and was surprised to find it open, as if he had been so eager to get down to his work that he had overcome that old habit. He was so intent on his work that he didn't even hear her come down the stairs.

"I think you should stop," she said, causing him to jump and drop the pipe from his mouth. It bounced under a table, trailing sparks.

"There's nothing to be so afraid of, kid. These things are like echoes. Echoes of feelings. Who could be hurt by feelings?"

"I'll tell Aunt Euxine."

"Sure you will, you little snitch, but by the time you tell her, she can see a demonstration of my genius." He turned and pulled the switch. As light spilled from the cylinder the room seemed suddenly filled with a breeze that carried dust and papers about in spiralling currents. A small image was being formed in the space between machines; hazy and indistinct, it moved and stretched like an image on water. It did not quite stand erect but crouched on haunches like an animal. Its body and head were covered thinly with reddish brown hair that grew to a crest that bristled over the top of its head and down its back. As it turned its face toward them, for an instant Freda saw her own pale, pinched features given back to her as if in a mirror and then the thing twisted its lips in a grimace so malicious,

it was no longer recognizable as anything human.

"Now we'll see what happens when I cut in with my augments," said Finley, turning a dial. Freda shrieked because she already knew what would happen. The small thing began to grow.

Freda did not have to guess at the thing's anger; it was her anger—to be pushed and pulled and torn a thousand ways by love or the lack of it—to have the will of those larger, if not wiser, thrust upon you. The poltergeist was the soul of a child, full of tricks and malice, yet a child is usually controllable because of its small size. This thing bumped its shoulders against the roof of the basement; its eyes were terrible, blazing with a feral light.

The glow in both cylinders flickered once, like fretful lightning, then both machines exploded, sending out showers of sparks and melted parts. A pillar of flame rose from the trunk where Finley had kept his collection of ghosts. It was as if a great wind pushed at Freda's back—half lifting her up the stairway till her feet remembered their function. Just as she got outside the door, an aircurrent slammed it shut. She heard the precise click of the padlock.

Freda thought guiltily of how, in her anger, she had once abused a doll of hers, when the screaming began.

CITY CEMETERY

Over the ground on the gravesite
in which I will soon be interred
November winds touch down,
withered grass trembles;
not far away, a dark flying figure,
gasping with idiot glee,
topples a tombstone.

The scene will not change,
I presume,
after the pious procession,
with precise impatience,
puts me under the earth.

Nothing will change.
Winds will scour the dry ground,
brittle bunched weeds
will screen weathered slabs;
like apes out of cages,
mindless intruders
will tip over tombstones.

No matter.
Time, a century hence,
with briars, brindle grass, leaves,
will dignify the dead,
stuff the mouths of hyenas
with long straws of silence.



THE END OF THE YARN

A Halloween Fable

© 1984 by STEVE RASNIC TEM

Grandfather tells this story about the demise of a neighboring town, gone over the space of one Halloween Eve. He says the dead town was close by, but we've never been able to discover any sign, much less the barn in question...

* * *

It was Lorean, the pretty young daughter of the rich dairy farmer Allison, who first discovered the bright red ball of yarn, or so they say. Halloween Eve, and she was on her way to a party in the town, walking the back way off her father's property to get there all the faster, her emerald dress and blue slippers on, all set to catch many a man's eye with her looks and her ways. And knowing she would not settle for just one man.

But then she stumbled over the ball of bright red yarn, sitting out before her father's old dairy barn.

She picked up the yarn, puzzled over it, wondering how such a thing could get down here, where no one but the chickens and the cows traveled. She herself had been here just this once, a pretty young thing on her way to the town. The yarn seemed to glow in the waning light: a wicked red, a magical red, she thought. Then she looked up at her father's vast and empty dairy barn — abandoned when he built the new barn on the other side of the hill. She thought about the creaking rafters and the cracking boards, the chamber abandoned and full of darkness, and had a second thought (the only two she ever had in her short life, grandfather relays with a chuckle). She entered the old barn with the scarlet yarn clutched greedily to her chest.

Now it's an old custom that if a girl throws a ball of yarn over a barn rafter on Halloween, keeping hold of one end of the yarn, then she can learn the name of her future husband. And this is exactly what the Allison girl intended, or so grandfather's story goes.

She crept into the dark, abandoned barn, looking overhead for an appropriate rafter. Almost immediately she found the perfect one: well-illuminated by a single shaft of light coming through a hole between the shingles. She threw the ball as hard as she could, held her breath as it bounced once on top of the rafter, then watched as it fell off the other side, the yarn momentarily jeweled with bright rubies as it caught the light, then she sighed as it dropped into the absolute nightness that lay beyond.

Then she began to wind the yarn, ever so slowly.

The minutes slipped by and still the yarn continued to wind. She was disappointed, and more than a little angry. At any moment she expected to see the free end of the yarn, no husband revealed to her, and on top of that she was already late for the party in town. She lifted her foot to kick at the

dust and straw.

When suddenly the yarn jerked in her hand.

She tottered, gasped, almost pulled off balance. She looked down at her skirt, hoping she hadn't damaged it coming into this dirty place. But then she remembered what she needed to ask. She stared into the darkness before her.

"Who is down there... at the end of my little rope?" She was proud of herself; she remembered the proper wording exactly. Now it was up to her future husband to speak, to give her his name.

The voice broke, like that of a frog. She felt herself pulling away. "Why your own true love, of course..." the voice said. "Yourself!"

And with that the yarn pulled mightily. She tried to step away, but the loose yarn had wrapped around her legs and snared her feet. Suddenly she was flying through the air, diving over the rafter, and plunging into the blackness.

She made no sound when she landed, if land she did.

* * *

"Lorean!" Farmer Allison's call echoed hollowly in the empty barn. When his daughter had not shown up at the party in the town they had sent young Balen out to find her. The brassy ruffian was now in Farmer Allison's house, eating the farmer's dinner, keeping his old wife company. Farmer Allison had gone out to search the grounds, and found Lorean's handkerchief out before the barn.

"Silly wench..." he muttered. And then he saw the red piece of yarn. "What's this?" He examined the loose end, and could see that the yarn hung suspended over a rafter overhead, lit by the final rays of sunlight. The other end disappeared into the shadows.

He began pulling on the yarn, and pulling, and soon determined there was much of it, perhaps an entire ball of it over there in the darkness. He chuckled. He remembered the old fortune telling game from his childhood. **Silly girl... you could have any man for a husband**, he thought. He wondered where she could have wandered off to.

He found the yarn irresistible. He pulled at it, faster and faster, laughing the whole while, watching it gather in bright, blood-red coils at his feet. Then, suddenly, it snagged.

Farmer Allison bellowed a great belly laugh. "Heh!" he shouted, unable to stop his laughter, his breath broken, snagged on his chuckles, the tears rolling down his cheeks. "Who... is down there... at the end... of my... little... rope!" And the laughter seized his lungs until he was coughing and hacking between guffaws.

The voice out of the darkness was just as loud, just as boistrous as his own. And with breath that smelled richly of earth mixed with cow manure. "Why your land... your cattle, of course! What **else** do you love?"

And the farmer flew up over the rafter dragged by the red stream of yarn, just as his daughter had done.

And just as it happened with his daughter, he was pulled into the darkness.

* * *

Young Balen and Mistress Allison entered the barn, together, holding hands. They had searched for Farmer Allison high and low, and were now both satisfied he must have gone into the town. Which pleased them greatly; they had so little time together.

They saw the yarn almost immediately. They both grabbed it, laughing, winding it as fast as they could. When the yarn jerked against them they shouted in unison. Young Balen stopped the Mistress from speaking and said, "Who is down there at the end of my little rope?"

There was no answer.

Mistress Allison laughed and pushed ahead of Balen. She opened her large mouth, winked at the young man, and shouted as loud as she could, "Who is down there at the end of my little rope!"

They both doubled over in laughter at her booming, echoing question, the yarn clutched between them. Then they began to kiss passionately, and the yarn was caught around their wrists, between their legs, and that made them laugh all the more.

Death... the darkness whispered, and dragged them into its silent bosom.

* * *

One by one all the townspeople disappeared, individually and in groups as they journeyed to the Allison farm, searching for their friends, exploring the vast and empty, nightblack barn. Until finally the mayor himself came to investigate, and held the end of the red yarn as so many others had before

him. It was near daybreak, the gloom at the other end of the barn beginning to lighten, the darkness pulling back.

The yarn jerked and pulled, suddenly alive in his hands.

"Who... who is down there... at the end of my little rope?" he asked in a trembling voice.

And it was a chorus of voices that replied, "The town, mayor. It is the town."

And as he was dragged over the beam by the brilliant red yarn, the sun beginning to fill the hole in the roof, he could see them, his citizens, hung by their necks about the side of the enormous barn, faces dark and limbs dangling, miles and miles of blood red yarn festooning the walls like a nest of scarlet serpents.

* * *

"They weren't really such good people, actually, that other town—quite wicked to their neighbors," grandfather always says. "I think we live in a much better place..." And then he continues his knitting and sewing, with yarn he makes himself. All of us, his grandchildren, wear his clothes — they're almost... magical. Sweaters that are toasty in winter, but actually cool you on the hottest summer days. Coveralls that repel dirt and water. Pockets always with good things to eat in them, and sometimes a toy or two.

And all of them the brightest, the most brilliant... red.



THE FACE IN THE GLASS

© 1984 by ARDATH MAYHAR

It wasn't an old house, remember that. It was spanking new... new paint, new wood, new brick, set in a new street in a new subdivision that had sprung up where fields had been planted only five years before. There hadn't even been time for anybody to die in the neighborhood, though a couple of infants had been born there, young couples being what they are.

That's what made it so unsettling. We had bought one of the houses, with the aid of the Savings and Loan, and we thought it very fine, even though its plan and shape were repeated faithfully in every fourth house throughout the whole development. We moved into it in the highest of hopes and spirits. Neither of us was inclined to worry about "things that go bump in the night," seldom even getting up to see what disturbed our dog Fritz, on the infrequent occasions when she barked in the wee hours.

Fritz liked the house, too. The smell of the new paint and the fresh carpeting seemed to delight her, and she'd lie in the entry-hall, breathing deeply, an expression of utmost contentment on her fuzzy terrier face.

As a matter of sober fact, all three of us settled in without a single qualm of anything, even indigestion, and no nightmare warned us of the strange thing that was to come.

The first couple of weeks were spent just as they are spent with anyone after a move. We tried the settee here and the television there. Then we swapped the television here and the settee there. We unpacked boxes and boxes of stuff and wondered how we could possibly have accumulated so much in a brief three years. We lost our keys and our insurance papers and our tempers and found them all again. It was a typical moving-in time, and aside from being bone-weary every night, we were in fine fettle.

We had moved on a Saturday, in order to get a full weekend of settling done before we both returned to work on Monday. The third Saturday down the line found us in really good shape, all our stuff stowed and arranged. We were even beginning to be able to remember where things were in this house, when we thought, instead of in the apartment we had moved out of.

So, on the third Sunday night, when I stood at the sink filling the kettle for a pot of mint tea, I had nothing the least bit frightening on my mind when I glanced out the window. I didn't expect to see anything except my own reflection, for you can't see out when it's pitch-dark outside. Actually, I was surreptitiously checking to see if my hair was really beginning to recede at the temples, as I had begun to suspect. At twenty-seven, that sort of thing bothers you.

But as it turned out, I forgot all about my hairline. For a face was looking back at me, and it wasn't mine.

I stood there, staring, and the kettle ran over,

letting the hot water scald my hand. Without looking down, I shut off the faucet and set the kettle aside. The face was there; it was definitely there, clear and sharp as my own would have been in normal circumstances. It was a yellow face—not Oriental yellow, nor painted yellow. A sort of jaundiced yellow. And twisted or warped so that it looked all askew.

The mouth opened, and words were obviously coming out of it, but no sound came through the glass. The expression was so distressed that I wrenched my eyes away and stepped to the patio door, thinking that some neighbor was trying to get help. There wasn't a soul outside.

I went back and looked at the window, and the face writhed at me, trying to make me hear something that I was certain I didn't want to hear. I felt a chill go marching down my spine.

"Mattie!" I called, forgetting that my wife detested her childhood nickname.

She came pattering into the kitchen barefoot, with her note-pad in her hand. She wore the expression that told me she was still half-submerged in some facet of the case she was researching for the senior partner of her firm. "What's the matter, Jer? You look as if you've seen..."

"A ghost," I finished for her. Her eyes snapped into full attention.

"Stand here, will you Tilde? Look right there."

She looked, and her gasp told me that she saw... if not what I had seen, then something she hadn't expected. "Is somebody out there?" she whispered.

"Not that I can find. You stay right here and watch the face... you do see a yellowish sort of face, don't you?" She nodded. "Then watch it, while I go out and poke around under the window and make certain that nobody's playing a joke on us. I've seen Halloween masks that look a lot like that thing."

There still wasn't a soul there. Or, to be more precise about it, there wasn't a **body** there. I put my own face up against the glass, but when I went back inside Tilde insisted that she hadn't been able to see it. Only that yellowish monstrosity.

Now we belong to a generation that doesn't hold any brief for things occult. We have been conditioned by the Isaac Asimovs and the Carl Sagens and the B. F. Skinners, who devoutly believe that they have pigeonholed the universe, and anything that doesn't fit into the known cannot exist. So we spent the next two hours finding rational reasons for seeing a face in our kitchen window.

We quickly discarded the notion of double hallucination. We held Fritz up to a mirror, and she barked with fierce jealousy at the unknown dog she saw there. Then we held her up to the window. She gave a smothered yowl and cringed back into my arms, shivering pitifully. If there had been a neighbor we had met and come to know, we might well have called him or her into the process, but there wasn't. One can hardly go knocking on doors at ten o'clock at night and ask a stranger to come over and verify the existence of a ghost in your window-glass.

At last, worn out with belaboring our wits, we decided that there must be a unique sort of flaw in the glass itself. One that wasn't apparent by day, for then we could see out into the patio and small

garden quite clearly. We tried to remember if either of us had chanced to look at the window after dark, and we finally concluded that we hadn't. Though the solution satisfied neither of us completely, it was the best we could do, for the moment, and we finally went to bed and fell asleep, exhausted.

The next day I was not at my best. My students got less than the full benefit of my knowledge of stress mechanics, I'm afraid. I cut the last class short and went home by way of the offices of the builders who put up the subdivision. They were having a slow day, for the recession had cut into their business severely. I chanced to find the foreman who had overseen the building of my streetful of houses, and he, having nothing better to do at the moment, consented to come by that evening for a drink and a look at our problem.

Tilde came home early, too, and we sat side by side on our new wicker settee, drinking Scotch on the rocks and waiting for Mackintosh. He knocked, at last, rather late, apologizing that he had run into a prospect and had alerted his employer to the opportunity. But we welcomed the burly redhead with enthusiasm, plied him with Scotch, and all but dragged him into the kitchen.

"Stand right here," I told him, as Tilde switched on the overhead light.

He stood for a moment, staring into the glass much as I must have done. "By... Golly!" he said at last. "That's the queerest thing I've ever seen. Sure there's nobody out there?"

I sighed. "I've gone out and left Tilde in here, and she still sees it even when my own face is up against the glass," I answered. "You want to try?"

"Take your word for it. You can see out all right in daylight, that so? No problem except at night?"

We both nodded solemnly.

"By... golly! I can't see much of anything to do except to change the glass." He leaned over to examine the metal-framed window. "And that's a job and a half. Have to take out the whole thing, and it would tear up the window so you'd have to get another. Those have been discontinued, that's why old Eric put 'em in this tract. Got 'em a lot cheaper. Want to try that?"

We looked at each other, Tilde and I, and we each visualized the state of our finances. The down payment and moving expenses had us on the rocks. We shook our heads.

Mackintosh shook his, too. "Never saw the like of that before," he muttered, finishing his drink in one gulp. "Maybe I can look into things for you. Want me to?"

"How do you mean?" Tilde asked, her lawyer's caution coming to the fore.

"Thought I'd inquire around, very low-key, about the materials, the people who worked with 'em, suchlike. I've heard tales, in my time, that make you think anything is possible. Want me to see what I can find out?"

Well, we had no better solution to offer. However much we might think his inquiries bordered on superstition, we couldn't see any harm coming of it, so we told him to go ahead. We'd welcome him anytime, for dinner or a drink, but if he could come up with anything, he'd be doubly welcome.

We went along for the next few weeks, pretending that nothing was wrong, but we both knew it was only pretense. We'd come in in the evening, now that winter had come, and we'd be careful not to turn on the overhead light in the kitchen as we fixed our supper. The hood light over the cookstove was inadequate, but we weren't about to try anything brighter. For the face was getting clearer and yellower and more anguished every time we saw it. We almost tried to find a lip-reader to decipher the words it was silently yelling at us, but we lost our nerve. We weren't quite certain that we wanted to know what it was saying.

It took the shine right off our delight in our new house. There wasn't a blessed thing wrong with the rest of it, but in the study or the bedroom or the workroom upstairs we could still feel the presence of the face in the glass. Its agony disturbed us badly, though for a long time neither of us would admit it to the other.

We were at our wit's end by Christmas. Fritz wouldn't go into the kitchen at night, even for hamburger with eggs stirred in. We took to cooking mostly on a hot-plate in the upstairs workroom, and our digestions went sour. We couldn't afford to eat out more than once a week, and it was too cold to walk at night, as we tried doing all fall. Winter trapped us in the house at night, and nothing we did eased our distress.

We had a house-warming and invited all the neighbors. They were fairly congenial, all in all, most of them about our age or a bit older, and they seemed friendly. Still, before the evening was over, we both could see them beginning to look around them as if they felt something they couldn't quite define or locate. We went to neighborhood get-togethers once or twice, and it was fine while we were there, but it made going back home all the worse. Just stepping into the front door was becoming difficult.

We were talking about selling, though the interest rates had gone up madly, and we knew that it would be terribly hard to find anyone who could get financing. We had resigned ourselves to the possibility of losing our down-payment, large as it was. We were, in short, ready to throw in the towel when I got a call from Mackintosh.

I had given up on him, actually, for he had been sent East to work on a new Eric Lester Project. Not a word had been heard from him since the night he had come out. But he called me at the University, and the Dean's snotty secretary made the vast concession of calling a lowly instructor to the phone.

"Listen, Jer," he said, "I'm waiting to catch a plane for California, but I've found out something that might make a difference to you. You know that window? I found out who made the glass. Company here in Pennsylvania."

"What difference..." I began, but he cut me off.

"Just wait and listen! They were running a batch of glass, and it would be about far enough back so that yours could have been in the pot. One of the workmen, fellow named Chavez, dived into it. Committed suicide, right there with ten guys looking on, in the worst way I can think of.

"Now I could tell, that night, that you and your missus don't hold with things like this, but it's just

possible that he got stuck, somehow, in a sheet of the glass. Don't ask me how, I'm no preacher. Anyway, **you break that glass!** Gotta go, they're calling my flight. Bye..." and the phone clicked in my ear.

I thought about it all day. According to everything we had ever been taught, it was absurd. I would feel ridiculous about it for the rest of my life. But still... if there was any way I could salvage our house, a broken pane of glass was a small price to pay.

I was a little late getting home that night, and Tilde was already busy over the hotplate upstairs. I smelled hamburger for the umpteenth time, and it settled my resolve. Putting my briefcase and topcoat on the couch, I went straight through to the kitchen. I turned on the light and looked at the face in the glass. It was haggard, hopeless, despairing.

Two antique flat-irons held our collection of cookbooks on the counter. I hefted one, letting the row of books settle sidewise. The face looked at me, its mouth open with surprise. A look of sheer joy began to dawn on it, but I smashed it into slivers with the iron.

There was a moment when I seemed to be inside a vacuum, my ears popping, my whole body sucked outward. There came a slamming sound, as if every door in the house had suddenly blown shut. Then I stood in a puddle of quiet... I mean **quiet**. Not a sound of any kind, as if I were deep underground or out in space. That lasted for no more than a few

heartbeats, then the clock-tick penetrated it, the purr of the refrigerator, and the sound of Tilde's voice as she came down the stairs.

"What happened, Jer? Is everything all right? Where are you?"

I made some sort of sound, and she came into the kitchen, a bit reluctantly.

"Oh, my gosh!" she gasped, looking around her.

The window was now a few shards of glass hanging in a metal frame. The pot-plants had been sucked from their stand and flung on the floor. The cookbooks were scattered around the room as if a tornado had struck. But the room felt right, really right.

She sighed and put her arms around me. I was shaking, but that helped a lot. She didn't ask any questions, and I didn't volunteer any explanations. She knew that things were back in place, and that was enough for us both.

We may have to live this winter with plastic over our window... there just isn't money to put in a new one yet. But we like it, that way. We like it a lot, even if the neighbors do look at it a little oddly. It suits us and Fritz, and, by golly, we're the ones who live here.

THE CHANGELING

We all know the tale of the plight
Of the suffering innocent wight
Lost in faerie lands forlorn,
Seduced by the orient corn:
Fed to hungers fey food supplies,
The mortal portion dies.

But think of the changeling
Who happens our way —
His dancing weighed down
By the bulk of sad clay;
Among us he wanders,
As each mortal day
He's seduced by our pleasures
And trapped by our treasures,
Leaving fey-food to rot,
Gleaming wish-gold forgot.
Chosen blinders of work
Soon shutter his play;
His sweet soul-side return
He'll delay, and delay —

The worst price there is,
As the meat traps its prey,
Is to even lose knowledge
That one has to pay.
The poor wasting wight
Had no horror like this:
Living in terror
And thinking it bliss.

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THAT DEAD MEN RISE UP NEVER

© 1984 by DARRELL SCHWEITZER

In the year of the consuls ? and ? —

No, no, I can't start out my history like that. News from Rome is so sporadic of late that I'm not sure **who** the consuls are anymore. If there are any. Perhaps, in a glorious restoration, in a burst of time flowing backwards against the current of the great river, the consuls are Romulus and Remus. Perhaps, perhaps.

No, I cannot begin like this. I have to tell the truth, even if posterity is to be confused by my failure to date things properly.

I am fifteen years old and I am very frightened. I don't know if I will ever be sixteen and put on the **toga virilis**. I cannot look forward to the time when my first beard will be shaved off with solemn rite and carefully preserved in a casket, like the magical heart of a giant in a story. I can't look forward. I think time is coming to an end. I think I am writing on the last night of the world.

No, no, I cannot begin like this. I hope I will not be thought ignorant or unlettered, if my history is less than formal, more like a diary or a jumble of impressions. It is hard for me to write of these things. The pain is very great. Even now I must pause...

* * *

I am Titus Munatius Rufinus Alexander, the son of the senator Quintus Munatius Rufinus. For most of my life, I've wondered why my father added Alexander to the list of my names. But I shall get to that.

When I was an infant an old man prophesied, "He shall address the centuries," and this was always taken to mean that I would achieve military distinction, the "centuries" being soldiers grouped by the hundreds, but it has not worked out that way. Instead, for all that I may feel that time is at an end, it is for me to gaze into the pool of oncoming years, wait until the waters are still and expectant faces appear, then speak.

I speak... here in our country estate in Cisalpine Gaul, in a loft in a far corner of the house, away from everyone. There are enough servants here to populate a small city, and they raise a terrible clamor sometimes, shouting back and forth in strange languages, but I hide from them here among my books, reading and sometimes writing something. In winter the wind howls through the roof tiles, and I have to wear trousers like a barbarian, not to mention three woolen tunics and a heavy cloak, just to stay unfrozen. Even then my fingers get stiff... in warmer times I tried to write a history of the world when I was ten, an epic in the manner of Virgil a year later—**Immortal Gods!** Let me get on with what I have to say!

I have lived all my life here, never venturing to Rome. My father fled the city before I was born, having incurred the wrath of the Emperor Trebonianus Gallus.

It had something to do with a remark at a dinner party. The Emperor gave a lot of dinner parties in those days, making merry like a ship's captain trying to drink himself into a stupor so that he can forget the raging tempest outside his cabin. A tempest of Germans, yes, waves and waves of them had overwhelmed the previous emperor, Decius. He died a hero's death on the battlefield, lured into a swamp and cut down by the Goths. Just before that, his son had been killed by an arrow, and he hid his grief, saying that the death of an individual did not matter, as long as Rome survived. But it did matter. When Decius was gone, it was as if the very sun had fallen from the sky, leaving the world in darkness. And ugly rumors circulated that Gallus had kept troops in reserve deliberately and just watched Decius die, that he had connived with the enemy.

Those were nervous times. Gallus lived in half-concealed terror. Then, at one of these parties, very late, when everyone had drunk entirely too much, my father rolled over on his couch, rolled his eyes heavenward, and said something to the effect that the golden age of the Antonines and the silver age of the Severi had used up all the precious metal in our history.

Trebonianus Gallus raged, "What? Am I not greater than those pompous asses who declared themselves gods?" He struck father on the forehead with his wine cup—the scar is still there—and ordered him out of his sight. Father sent my mother here, pregnant with me. Then he took the first ship bound for the east, fearful of staying anywhere very long, lest another order from Gallus should catch up with him—the order to open his veins. In sour jest he signed his letters to my mother, "your late husband."

But the legionaries murdered Gallus in one of those inevitable reshufflings of power. Then Father came here, making no attempt to re-enter politics or ingratiate himself with the new emperor, whom he did not expect to last very long. Soon his name was no longer spoken among the best society in Rome, and this is how he wanted it. During his travels he had been initiated into at least three secret Eastern rites, about which he would say nothing at all. But they had clearly changed his perspective. Previously a public man, he now hid away on his estate, engaged in some work about which, also, he would say nothing. A special workshop, or vault, was dug under the house, and once it was in use, only he could enter it. The servants claimed the door was magic and would only open for him, but I knew he had a key which he wore around his neck always.

As a result, we have never been close. I grew up alone, among the servants, hiding much of the time in my Lighthouse of Alexandria, as he called it, while he sojourned in his Underworld. When I wanted to speak to him, when I just wanted to be with him, he was usually there. On the few times he emerged, he was like some ambassador from a fabulous country, ready in his leisure moments to converse brilliantly about the wonders he had seen, or the most complicated problems of philosophy. I have always been a keen listener, having been nowhere and read only the books we have in the house.

My mother died when I was quite small. None

of the slaves or freedmen had anything like my Father's intelligence. There was only him, and he moved among ordinary folk so rarely.

It was on one of these occasions, a day or so before the Kalends of September, when my slave came running...

Kalends? No, the month is divided into weeks now. We are without Kalends, or the Ides, when the divine Julius fell. And I might as well mention that this is not **Cisalpine Gaul**. The region has been part of Italy now for two hundred years. But I revere the old names, the old things. **I want to go back...**

* * *

As I was saying, in the year of the dubious consuls, a day or so before, yes, the **Kalends** of September, Father and I sat in the garden talking, and Nikon came running up to us, all out of breath. Nikon has been my chief tutor since childhood, a eunuch from Thrace. He is tall, stooped, very thin unlike most eunuchs ("I simply have no appetite," he says) and although he is around forty his beardless face gives him the appearance of a youth, unless you look close enough to see the wrinkles around his eyes. He has been my confidant, wise and learned, and a bit ridiculous. When he talks, it is like a duck quacking.

How chaotic my story is! Nikon, I beg you forgive me for forgetting all the rules of composition you painstakingly taught me!

Again a pause. The letters run.

* * *

It was a strange scene, like something out of an old farce. On the day already mentioned, I heard the eunuch's bare feet slapping on the stones. Then he stood before us, panting.

Father and I had been discussing, or rather, I had been listening to him discourse on the problem of whether a man is wholly directed by Fate, or if by his actions he conforms to a fated design.

"Nicon?" he said. "Have you run all the way from Marathon to bring us news?"

"No—Masters!"

"What is the matter, Nicon?" I said.

"Oh Masters, I met a traveller on the road from the river. I was washing my laundry. Along he came. He was a rich man, but his clothing was all soiled and torn, and he was alone, riding on an ass. He had come all the way from Rome in terror. He was a friend of the old emperor, and now they're trying to—"

"Old emperor?" my father said.

It took Nicon's breath away. He opened his mouth but the words did not come. I felt a sinking inside me. I wanted to shout **Not again!** but kept still. Much to my astonishment, Father laughed. It was a bitter laugh, but still it shocked me.

"The Augustus Gallenius—"

"**Murdered!**" Nicon managed to say at last.

"He was a good man. There was hope with him. But now, let us remember, and count the Caesars, who are as changeable as the seasons, who fall as regularly as last year's leaves." He began to count on his fingers all the ones he had known in his lifetime. He was running out of fingers. He turned to Nicon and said sharply, "What's the next joke?"

"**Father!**"

"Masters!" shrilled Nicon (whose name means "victor" — I've always wondered: shall eunuchs inherit the Earth?). "The traveller said more."

"More?" Father's eyes rolled skyward in mock horror. I didn't understand his reaction. I was repelled and appalled.

"Yes!" said Nicon. "Three days ago, on the road from Rome, he came to a temple which had fallen into disrepair. Night was approaching, and it was starting to rain, so he took shelter inside. There he found an **eagle**, dead on the floor before the statues of the gods! The bird was starved and shrivelled, like a starling in winter. And, if that were not enough to make things clear, when he went outside again he chanced to look up, and at that moment the clouds parted, revealing a falling star of exceptional brightness. It broke into pieces as he watched. Now, what can that **possibly** mean, except that the world is coming to an end?"

"Do you **really** want to know?" Father sneered. But before he could go on, I interrupted.

"I've seen terrible signs too. I didn't know what they meant when I saw them, but now the pieces of the puzzle come together. This very morning, down by the grain storehouse, I found the body of a cat, one of the guardians of the place. The rats had devoured it, leaving only bones and bits of fur. And even as I listened, they munched away at the grain."

"Yes, the steward has been telling me we positively **must** get a dog. Or a lion. Do you know where we can get a lion in this part of the world, eh, Nicon?"

The eunuch was too flabbergasted to reply. With great deliberation, I continued.

"Further for the past three nights a comet has been visible just after sunset. Everybody knows what **that** means."

"It means the sky has been clear enough for you to see the stars. Ah yes! The gods be thanked for the weather we've been having!"

I was bewildered. I had never seen him like this. It was as if he knew some great thing hidden even from the gods, something that enabled him to scorn all omens.

"There's more," I said. "A couple days after the Nones of August, early in the evening, I dozed off in my room over that new book—"

"Ah yes, Plotinus. I'm not surprised. He is said to be very wise, but I can't quite make sense out of him."

"—and an owl flew in through the window, alighted on my shoulder, bringing me halfway awake with the thump of its landing, and it screeched in my ear with all its might. I thought the barbarians were here, I was so scared."

"And the next thing you'll be telling me is that thirty-five hedgehogs were found bugging one another in the temple of the Capitoline Venus!"

Nicon giggled, then was instantly ashamed of himself as **I** glared. Father waved his hand, like a Caesar commanding.

"Well, pedantic as you are, son, go on. I see you have more."

"There are other portents," I said, "too obvious to be denied. I was playing dice with one of your

freedmen, and every time I threw, I got dogs. Every time he did, it was Venus. What can that possibly mean, except that the lowly born will triumph?"

"It could mean the rogue loaded the dice."

"Finally — please, Father, do not mock this one — when last I went into the village to consult the seer Gaius Nulus, I found that he had died. His wife told me he'd opened a pigeon, and the entrails were all shrivelled, prophesying no future at all. A fever took him a day later."

"If you keep associating with such people, you'll catch all their diseases."

"But, Father! How can you of all people not believe in signs? What did you study in the East, anyway?"

With that his manner suddenly became serious. He motioned Nikon away, and when he was out of earshot, leaned to me and whispered, "I studied things which make your pigeons and dead cats and sacred chickens look like the childish nonsense they are. I delved into the real mysteries. I **know** much now. Soon I will be able to show you, and your whole outlook will be changed. Now, however, you must excuse me. I have work to do."

He got up and left me without explaining further. Later, because I trusted him to keep quiet, I confided all this to Nikon, who said, "Your father is no fool. But he is like a gambler who is so sure of something that he wagers all he has on a single throw. Surely the outcome will decide everything for us. We can only wait."

* * *

Let us count the Caesars, my father said. They are as changeable as the seasons...

Is there no man alive who loves Rome more than himself? The story of our time is one of unending treachery, succession by murder, the abandonment of duty. The sword rules the state. The army camps are the capital now. All things fine and beautiful will ultimately be trampled beneath the iron-shod feet of the legions.

By beggars and refugees and landless men the news comes to us. I listen to the talk:

Still the armies beat themselves to pieces putting this or that pretender on the throne. It is perilous to travel, for all the outlaws and barbarians you are likely to meet. Our own troops are scarcely less dangerous when improperly fed or paid, which they are most of the time. Meanwhile, enemies have been breaking in all along the frontier. The death of the Roman world goes on. Goths of all shapes and sizes everywhere: Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Invisblegoths... They come from the north, from the shores of the Baltic, spreading through civilized lands like a plague of locusts. The year after it happened, when I was eleven, we heard that the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, one of the wonders of the world described by so many travellers, had been burnt to the ground. Truly the gods have deserted us.

I had a childish nightmare after the news came, which may yet prove prophetic. I dreamed I rose from my bed to the sound of Pan's pipes. Enraptured, I wandered over the fields and into a wood. The moon was extremely bright, and I could see every detail as clearly as by daylight, but with a



difference, for the place was filled with magic, with fleeting faces behind the trees, with spirits shifting with the shadows. I came to a pool, a place I knew to be frequented by nymphs. Then the music stopped. I looked around in alarm. Dread came over me, and I cried out. Suddenly the bushes parted and there stood an unkempt barbarian soldier, grinning obscenely, holding the head of the god on his spear...

* * *

... More. It becomes hard to write as I come to the inner substance of my tale. All the world falls to pieces. We sit and await our doom like hogs in a butcher's yard.

Five days after the Ides my great-grandmother, Valeria Paulina, arrived, accompanied only by a few weobegone slaves. She was fantastically aged, well over a hundred years old, as delicate as a twig, as wrinkled as some mummy of the Egyptians. Yet, feeble as she was, her slaves did not run away when they were alone on the road with her, because they feared what brought her to us as much as anyone else.

Barbarians. Alemanni this time, by the hundreds of thousands pouring through the Alpine passes. They fell on her estate in the foothills of the mountains, only allowing her to escape in the sheer confusion as the looting began.

The six slaves carrying her litter set it down in

our courtyard, then dropped to the ground in sheer exhaustion. I helped her from the litter. Her cane had been lost, and I all but carried her to a bench. She was light and dry, like an empty husk.

I sent some of our slaves for cushions and wine. Hers had to be carried away. She began to ramble about her misfortunes, and I was moved to ask her in all seriousness, "Great-grandmother, is it true that the world is coming to an end?"

She became fully alert, and stated firmly, "Young man, the world came to an end when I was a little girl, the day Marcus Aurelius died. Since then all anyone has known has been the stench of the vast Roman corpse, there not being enough vultures to carry it off.

* * *

If posterity should find my words, and it has been prophesied that it shall, I imagine my posterior readers will wonder how we Romans could sit around and bemoan our lot and do **nothing**. Why were we not like the heroic Greeks who rallied against an infinitely greater host of Persians, and defeated them to gain everlasting glory?

In truth, we **did** do something. Father was doing something **all** along. He had foreseen all our catastrophes, and had taken certain steps.

I am aware that subsequent events have distorted my memories of him, but I think I wrong him when I merely call him an ambassador from a far land. No, he was more like a god from on high, like Mithras clothed in the sun, overwhelming when he deigned to reveal his magnificence. He took mortal, mundane form for the sake of those around him, but always he remained apart, his doings as mysterious and unknowable as only those of a god can be. When he scoffed at the report of the terrified Nikon and at the portents, this shocked me. I did not understand. He seemed wholly strange to me, perhaps even mad. But I came to understand the folly of judging a god by human terms. What went on in his mind, I could never hope to comprehend.

Also, I did not see the climax clearly. I remained a little ways behind, in a sense, and thus can only tell what I saw, which was not everything.

On the evening of Great-grandmother's arrival, we reclined at dinner, eating less than usual, the more elaborate fare having become impossible to obtain. So much for the rustic simplicity preferred by the poets. None of us cared for it.

There was silence at the table for the most part, intermittently broken by such flights of oratory as "Pass the figs." Anxious gloom was on every face except Father's. After a while, Great-grandmother spoke a little about the days of her girlhood. She mentioned another Alexander, Severus Alexander, the Syrian who became emperor of the Romans. She had actually met him once, dined with him. He was a good man, she said. In his time the empire did not seem dead, although in fact it had already died at its heart, and in the end even this Alexander could not stop the spreading decay. Instead, it consumed him.

All the while Father listened politely to this, fidgetting nervously, as if he wanted to shout that none of this mattered, that he knew better than all of us. His face was blank, expressionless. I am sure

he was trying to hold back a smirk. At last, when I could bear it no more, and was about to demand an explanation for his smugness, he seemed to know my thought, and rose from his place.

"Come with me," he said. "There is something you should see."

We went without another word to the stairway leading to his vault. He descended calmly, I with mounting excitement as I entered the forbidden place, ready to uncover its mysteries. At this one time, I think I was wholly convinced that Father was somehow apart from the human race, that he really was a god of some kind, who could open the Earth and reveal wonders.

He took out his key, unlocked the massive door, and motioned for me to follow. The door swung inward on groaning hinges.

We stood in darkness. I heard him blowing on some coals. Then a little flame appeared, and he lit some rushes, and with them several lamps hung about the room. For the first time I saw the inside of this place which had been a stone's throw away from me all my life.

It was a library more massive than seemed possible for so cramped a space. There was barely room for the two of us. Everywhere book satchels were piled in heaps, and a whole wall was devoted to cubbyholes filled with rolled volumes. There was also a stack of baked clay tablets of ancient and barbarous design.

It was also a laboratory. Bottles of colored fluids covered a table. On a stool was a mortar and pestle big enough to grind a melon in. On shelves and on the floor were many objects I could not identify; in the corner, a furnace with bellows.

In addition, the room was, apparently, a place of burial. In the middle of the floor lay a crude wooden box of obvious proportions.

At once my mind was filled with questions, but I could not find any words.

Father waved his hand, indicating everything. "With this the world shall be changed. A new golden age is upon us. You know:

Now the last age is coming

As it was written in the Sibyl's book.

The great circle of the centuries begins again...

... And there must be a war, a final war

With great Achilles storming a last Troy."

Still, I didn't know what to say.

"That's Vergil. You have heard of Vergil?"

"Father, please, I—"

"Never mind." Suddenly his manner became entirely serious, the mockery gone. I could see that he was in earnest, not mad, or else so far gone into madness that he was living in another world. He pointed to the box.

"The core of my project is here," he said, and he bade me remove the lid. With much trepidation, I did. Within were the armor and arms of a great person, richly decorated but not of Roman design, and very ancient. Scattered about the bottom, a quantity of blue-grey dust.

"Look, my son, on the remains of your namesake."

"What? I... don't...."

"You don't understand?" Now his voice had become a conspiratorial whisper. Before he said

more, he locked the door with a heavy wooden bar. "There is only this to understand, my Alexander: before you lies the other one of your name, Alexander the Great, King of Macedon, who conquered the whole world. Only a few have seen him outside of visions since he died. It is said that the divine Augustus caused his tomb to be opened, and gazed upon the withered face for an hour, and for the first time knew fear—"

"— and that Caligula stole his armor and paraded in it, proclaiming himself a conquerer before that wasn't good enough and he made himself a god. Oh Father... Father, tell me... **are you as mad as he?**"

"No, no. Do not be afraid of that. You shall see. Soon. Will you have faith in me until you have seen?"

"Y-yes."

I glanced at the barred door.

"Good." Then he went on, telling me of his grand design, until I lost all sense of time and place. It was as if I were born again, a new son beholding his father for the first time. Yet again, my father was entirely new, entirely strange to me, a revelation from on high. My fear fell away like a heavy cloak from my shoulders. He told me of his travels, how he visited buried cities in Arabia and took things from crypts there, how he studied under the greatest magicians in the world, in the hidden school in the Vale of Hadoth, near the thunderous fountain which is the source of the Nile. He learned the secrets of life and death. He did many terrible things, but for a greater prize. He was like some character out of fable, a master of darkest sorceries, a consort of Isis and Cybele and Anubis, and divinities far older and without names. All these years he had labored over books not found in the libraries of our race, until at last he pieced together the thing he sought out of allusions in a language no tongue had uttered since the fall of Troy. Then, by magic, a week previously, on a night that had seemed like any other to me, he had flown through the air to Egypt, borne by a wind he had summoned. He returned within that single hour, in the darkest part of the night, with the stolen Alexander in the box, again carried by the wind he had tamed. The master of the world would walk the world again. That was his plan. Once raised up he would see the dangers facing the empire. He would become more than a Greek or a Roman, bringing all men under his rule. His ensigns, Roman eagles of the legions, would stand in the farthest East one day, beyond the edge of India, where the land ends and the sea races on to the rim of the world. Then civilization would be truly born. Then the golden age would begin, as the Sibyl had prophesied.

"The future is very bright. This is an exciting time," Father said. "But first we must work."

I was filled with a frenzy. I wanted to be a part of this, to aid him in it, to share his greatness. I could barely stand still as I watched him make preparations for the ritual.

First, with a special chalk, he drew a circle on the floor entirely around the coffin, pushing books, bottles, and instruments aside. Then, at the four cardinal points on the circle, he placed burners filled with incense. By the door, away from the box, he drew another circle, marking the edges with numbers



and strange signs. Together we extinguished all but a single lamp, which he placed carefully on the floor between the two circles.

"Hand me that jar," he said, pointing to an earthen jug. I took the lid off, and the stench nearly made me vomit. I felt even worse when I realized what it was.

"Yes, blood," he said. "The blood of some useless wretch whose sole purpose for being born was to provide it. Now act like a man, and do what I say."

His words robbed me of all will. I didn't care that he had murdered someone to obtain this blood. I was numb.

My part was simple. I stood in the circle by the door, and when he signaled with his hand, I was to shout certain letters, spelling out a name which no man may utter complete and live. I must not, he commanded, under any circumstances leave the circle, or say anything other than those letters, one by one.

I spoke the first.

He poured the blood into the coffin, and began to pray over it, making motions with his hands, as if he were modelling something out of soft clay.

I spoke the second.

In the dim light I could see little, but there seemed to be a mist gathering over the dust and armor. Father poured one bottle after another of foul-smelling fluids into the box.

I spoke the third letter.

Now there was a definite change. The mist over the coffin was glowing brighter than the lamp. It swirled and formed itself into a column of pale light.

I spoke the fourth letter.

Suddenly I could see everything in the room. But, strangely, the whole back wall was gone, as if we were no longer in a closed vault, but at the mouth of a vast cavern, stretching, perhaps, to some nameless, sunless sea at the bottom of the world. A chill, damp draft rose from those depths. The lamp and the incense burners all flickered and went out.

Within the coffin, the armor rustled.

I spoke the last letter.

At the same time Father shouted all five, very close together, **almost** pronouncing the dread name.

And the name was echoed from the depths of the cavern.

And answered with a thunderclap from beneath the ground, and a blinding flash.

"Live!"

The earth shook. Books, bottles, and parchments fell all around us. The wind roared up from the uttermost depths, and Alexander the Great lived. The whole coffin was ablaze. My eyes were dazzled, still from the lightning, and from this also. I covered my face. When I could see again, the thing in the coffin was standing up.

"Quick!" cried Father. "His body stands, but his soul is not yet in it. We must call him from the river yet, defy the boatman. Listen for his footsteps when they are **on our side of the river**. At once! Repeat the word."

I shouted the letters, one by one, as fast as I could. My body ran with sweat. I seemed to be burning.

"Again! The word is the secret name of life itself. It is mightier than the gods!"

I believed him. I didn't doubt any of it. I shouted the word.

"Live! Live! Great One, come to us!"

The wind was still. Slowly, faintly at first, the sound of footsteps came from within the cavern, as the soul of Alexander struggled up the long hillside by the shore of the river, into life. His heavy, steady tread came nearer, nearer. All the while the sounds of the river were unmistakable, the lapping of the waves, perhaps even the creaking of oarlocks. The air was intensely cold suddenly. I clenched my jaw hard to prevent my teeth from clattering, fearful that such a thing would spoil the magic.

There was a sudden clapping as he stepped out onto the stone floor of the room. A second figure was visible behind the glowing one that stood in the coffin, a pale, barely discernible ghost. The two of them came together, Father backing away from the coffin as they did. The two became one, and were transfigured.

Standing in the rough box, clad in the gorgeous armor, was an immaculate youth whose face shone brightly, like the moon when it is full.

* * *

If all of this seems sheer fantasy, impossible to believe, I urge you to **believe**, and read on to the truly incredible part:

We fell to our knees before the conquerer. I wanted to hide my face, but curiosity overcame piety and even awe.

Father grovelled at the feet of this other Alexander like a base slave—but then are we not

all base slaves before the divine?—and, addressing him in faltering Greek, begged him to come into the world, to travel to Rome and take the throne of the Caesars.

The youth listened, and remained still for a long time. In this silence my heart all but burst. I could not see my father's face, but I can imagine his agonized expectation.

Then Alexander the Great **laughed**. It was not a haughty laugh, but a gentle one, with compassion in it, the laugh of a patient schoolmaster to which a child has proudly announced something that is supposed to be profound, but is only ridiculous.

"Little fools," was all he said, and he took Father by the hand and led him away.

I think I fainted, for the next thing I knew they were gone. In the darkness a tiny light flickered, diminishing, like a lantern being carried away from me.

It went out. The room was totally dark, colder than winter ice. I sat down and shivered in the chalk circle, not daring to move, and the sounds of the river came to me, the waves, the rushing water, and what was unquestionably the creak of oarlocks. That too diminished. And voices came to me out of the sightless depths, moaning, whispering, laughing with vacuous madness—the voices of all who have ever died, or ever will die. Beyond the river there is no time. This much I learned.

I could bear it no longer. I disobeyed and leapt up from the circle, screaming, "Father! Come back! How shall Rome live if you don't?" I knew where he was going, and that no one ever returned from that farther shore. No, not even the great Alexander, but for a minute.

Had it really been Alexander, or one of Pluto's messengers, dressed in his shape?

Even as I left the circle the air seemed less cold. Again the earth shook. Again came the thunder and the blinding light, and when it was dark again the air was thick with smoke. I fumbled for the lamp. My hands found the base of one of the burners, and I groped to the top, and blew on the ashes until a little flame grew. Barely able to steady my hands long enough to hold the wick into the fire, I lit the lamp and surveyed the room, coughing from the smoke.

All four walls were solid stone. There was no cavern. The books were there, and the bottles, and the now empty coffin. The armor was gone.

Father lay by the far wall. I knelt over him, and at first thought him dead, but as I held his head in my hands, his eyes opened, and in them, even in the dim light, I could see a look of such terror and hopelessness as may only by had by one who has looked beyond the river, as he had.

"What did you see?"

At first he only babbled syllables, and I was afraid he had come back an idiot, his reason blasted away, but then there were words, disjointed, with long pauses, like those of a man gasping his last, but making some sense.

"Dark, dark, dark the river is... dark the cold water... dark the... vanity, vanity; all is vanity saith a Jewish author I read once... I have learned much beyond the river. How vain it is for us to think that the world will end, just for our sake... No, it goes

on and on, its dying agonies without end, dying, but never to die... Even Rome shall not die yet, not yet, until she is so transformed that no Roman would recognize her. The great Alexander will not aid us, my lesser Alexander. No, it is all very much the same to him, beyond the river... the past and future like a continuous stream... like the dark river... You hold your hand into the water but it flows around you. Its course doesn't change. Imagine... imagine... a thousand thousand corpses floating in the dark waters, as far as you can see, an unending mass of them. You and I are like corks bobbing in that current. We can't move against it, against the treachery of time, the blind faith, the wickedness, the vanity and valor and foresight and selfishness of your ancestors—the sheer **weight** of history... dark the river is... dark... when my death comes... yours... cast up on the other shore... far... not even the gods remain... This much has been prophesied to me. **Great Lord! I Hear you! I am coming!**"

He was silent. I wept. I knew that the lord he now addressed was Pluto, into whose service he had entered.

But, incomprehensibly, he got up after a while, unlocked the door, and went out into the bright sunlight of the garden. It was morning. He turned to me and saw how filthy and dishevelled I had become—as had he—in that wild night.

"My boy, you look like the wreck of Pompeii. Come with me into the bath."

But I could not. I took one step beyond the top of the stairs, onto the soft ground of the garden, and collapsed out of terrified exhaustion. The last I saw my father, his face was blank, his eyes distracted. His last words were a senile mumble, "Oh, I'm coming. Coming. Coming. I'll be right there."

* * *

A dream came to me: I was drowning in blood, choking, my mouth full of it. I swam, struggling for air, and I broke the surface. I was in the garden. The house was burning, ashes and cinders drifting down. Blood poured out of all the windows overlooking the garden.

A woman came toward me, walking on the surface of it, her face and clothing entirely black, until she seemed almost two-dimensional, a void cut out of the air.

She opened her eyes, and the fires pulsed within.

I splashed and tried to swim away from her.

She pointed, and spoke in my mother's voice.

"Go to your father! Go!"

I awoke screaming, face down in the mud of the garden.

It was late afternoon. No one came to me. I got up and wandered through the house. Most of the slaves were gone, run away at last.

I came to the bath. Father was there, and Great-Grandmother, and our free stewards, and even some of our slaves. They must have known from the look on Father's face that all was lost. They joined him in death, their throats and wrists slashed, their bodies floating with him in the pink water. Father's hand still held a razor by the blade, handle outward, as if he were offering it to me.

* * *

Everything is confused... I think I ran screaming from the bath. I think Nikon found me in the atrium before the shrine of the household gods. I had tried to embrace all the statues at once, and I knocked most of them over and broke them.

He calmed me, restoring a trace of sanity, and told me to make ready, for we would have to leave soon. So I went and threw a few things in a bag: extra tunics, a cloak, travel shoes, even a couple books. Vanity, vanity. Does the written word really matter at this point?

I sit in my loft for the last time. Now I write because I must, to remove a great weight from my mind. I am afraid I have delayed too long. The eunuch is calling my name. I come... friend.

* * *

Later: so all of this isn't to be written in my secret hideaway after all.

... Nikon led me from the loft, even as I led the ancient Valeria Paulina from her litter. Downstairs a few of the remaining slaves were waiting in anxious silence. With a wave of my hand I told them to go wherever they would. They were free. And Nikon too. I was the master of the house for that brief instant. Now, as equals in adversity, we squat in a cave Nikon led us to.

I am sitting under the stars now, writing with the help of a candle. Far away, down the hillside and across the plain, there is a soft light. No sound comes to us through the night's darkness. I know what the light is. The barbarians are burning the estate. I feel nothing. I am as empty and as mad as Father...

I have his sword with me. I'll fall on it if we are discovered. If not, I shall go on, as we must, not out of courage or daring or determination, but simply in accordance with the nature of things, drifting with the river.

I don't know if anything will—

[Here the manuscript ends. The last pages are scorched and brittle. Some of the text cannot be recovered.]

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WITH A BAT

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Eventually, as Patrick knew was inevitable, his flashlight dimmed to a useless pinpoint of borrowed sun. Then, even that was gone. He had been as sparing as possible with the batteries, but the supreme darkness which reigned within the sealed cave was overwhelming. Every time he heard that blasted bat flutter overhead, fear prompted Pat to scan the walls with the light until he discovered which new place the animal lurked. Now, the flashlight was excess baggage. The squeaking of the bat gathered an ominous quality of impending victory.

He knew enough about the wildlife of tropical Central America to be familiar with the minuscule, unattractive blood-letting vampire bat. They were a threat to local livestock although they rarely fed on men. A feast of human blood was by no means unheard of, however; and the present bat couldn't be too finicky about its choice of entree. Both the man and the bat had been sealed in the chamber when the cavern walls collapsed.

Patrick listened to the infernal squeaking and tried to guess where the fiend clung. Its every sound echoed through the chamber, rendering Pat uncertain if it were hanging on the ceiling, climbing on the walls, or creeping along the floor between his very feet. On that thought, he jumped aside, then felt silly.

The bat took to flight. Its fluttering wings fanned Patrick's face. He threw the useless flashlight where he presumed it had landed, but missed. He imagined the bat's resultant chittering to be laughter.

Time lost its meaning in the black, stone room. How long had it been since the walls crumbled around him and his unwelcome companion? It might have been a few hours, or more than twenty. He was extraordinarily tired, but that might not indicate a lengthy interment. His sleepiness might be due to the darkness, the monotony, and the result of his futile, wearing, and ultimately abandoned effort to scratch his way out.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt like lying down to rest. Sleep was out of the question, however. If he was not cautious, the tiny demon would sink its razored maw into a vein. If he didn't bleed to death, he'd probably get some disease from the thing. So Patrick paced the floor more quickly, knowing he was using precious air but knowing equally that he had to keep alert. How long could a man go without sleep? Three days? Perhaps. If his life depended on it...

To occupy his mind and to keep from thinking about the frightful squeaking which might otherwise drive him mad, Patrick dredged up everything he could recollect about vampire bats. What little he knew was not good for putting one's thoughts at ease; but it did help keep his eyes open. He remembered reading about the vampire's horrid ability to detect blood veins by crawling over a victim delicately as a fly, its sensitive fingers

feeling for the throb of blood beneath the skin. Then yellow incisors performed their task as slick as a surgical blade. The victims felt nothing. The bats didn't actually suck the blood. They **lapped** it with pink tongues as it flowed from the wound.

Patrick shivered at the thought.

His mind wandered. He found his tiring brain conjuring a vivid image of Bela Lugosi wringing his hands and grinning with pointed teeth. **God**, thought Pat, shaking the vision from his mind. He must have been trapped longer than he thought. Hallucinating might be caused by lack of sleep, lack of air, or ordinary insanity. Perhaps he had a pinch of each.

The historic Count Dracula, he recalled, was a fiendish ruler in Medieval Europe. The tyrant gloried in wholesale slaughter and put half his country's citizens to slow, gruelling deaths. It was a curiosity that the human monster of one continent became associated with a mammal native of another. It made Pat wonder. Dracula meant dragon, not bat. If he survived this mess, perhaps he'd do a bit of research to uncover how Vlad the Impaler came to be considered kin to a Central American bat.

Patrick stopped pacing, leaned heavily on the wall, and realized his attempt at intellectualizing his plight was actually so much gibberish. He was losing touch! He felt he simply had to sit down, relax, think things through more clearly, rest. He made himself promise not to fall asleep, then sat down. The posture, however, made sleep all the more irresistible.

"I'll never go into another cave," a wee voice inside him vowed. The same voice quipped a response more boldly: "You'll never get out of this one."

He'd been an amateur explorer in New Mexico and knew better than to go into a cave alone. But his partner had come down with a bad case of drinking the water and Patrick didn't relish wasting the whole day waiting for the milk of magnesia to take effect. After all, it was a limited vacation.

"It was a limited life."

"Shut up."

The bat seemed restless, squealing erratically for a couple of moments. It was waiting for Patrick to drift into slumber. Then it would come down from its perch, pierce the human flesh, and taste the fresh, warm ruby nectar of Patrick's veins.

Patrick cringed at the sound of the morbid beast. He heard the flapping wings of its primitive body as it moved about the cavern, chittering like a small, mad monkey. Fear of a creature only three inches in length and weighing scarcely an ounce might be amusing in another circumstance; but as it stood, the remarkably tiny size of the creature made it seem the more sinister.

He dropped backward, flat on his back, so that the bat could not swoop upon him so easily. His maneuver was foolish, for his new posture meant he had to wrestle even harder with the urge to remain prone and go to sleep. The darkness, the timelessness, the bad air, the desire to escape reality... it all added up to an overpowering desire to sleep forever.

Another crazy thought flashed through his mind. The thought took on profound importance, adding to the insanity of the idea. He thought how lucky he



was to be wearing boots. A native had informed him and his partner, in passing conversation, that vampire bats were fondest of the big toe of a sleeping man. With leather boots, Patrick reasoned, his toes at least were safe.

This train of thought led him into another vivid vision. He raised his head so that he could look and be certain his boots were on tight. Despite the fact that it was too dark to see, he was horrified by the clear image of his bare feet. He had no boots after all! There he lay upon his back, unable to move as in the grip of a nightmare, and a hideous elfin bat with no hair on its bright pink wings was crouching on his big toe.

Patrick shouted and kicked his foot frantically. In a moment he realized he must have slept for a second and dreamed. In the absolute darkness, it was possible to sleep without bothering to close one's eyes.

There was silence in the cavern after his fit. He held his breath. He heard nothing. The bat was capable of running straight down the wall as quick

and silent as a spider. Utter silence was one of the bat's additional virtues which Patrick found distressing.

In a moment he felt the lightest brush of fur scamper up his arm. He sat up abruptly, hooting and slapping himself in various places as if to crush an unseen mosquito which had passed an ear. The bat flapped upward to escape the flailing arms, protesting indignantly about the denied meal.

"Gotta keep awake. Gotta keep awake. Gotta keep awake."

For lack of anything better to do, Pat felt around in his knapsack until he found a certain bag. He scrounged a few stray crumbs of the lunch he'd packed lord knows how long ago. Crumpling the bag, he heaved it at the ceiling, hoping to hit the bat so that it would feel some torment too.

He chewed and sucked and savored the crumbs of stale bread until it vanished from his mouth without it having seemed that he had swallowed. The stark bit of nourishment served mainly to tease his hunger and multiply his thirst.

As though his body were trying to inflict further misery upon him, the sores on his hands and knuckles began to sting. He had an infection. The pain reminded him of his earlier attempt at scrabbling his way through dirt, rock and sandstone, until his hands were raw. He considered going back to work on the blocked passage, but knew there was too little air to sustain his strength, and that he should conserve what air remained. His partner would already have realized something was wrong. Pat's single chance lay in keeping himself alive until help arrived to dig him out.

All he could do was wait.

The bat waited, too.

It was strange how the mind found humor in times of stress, or appreciated irony even in morbid conditions. Rubbing his aching, festered hands, he thought what a twist it would be if the bat—after winning this bout—ultimately died from feasting on gangrene-poisoned blood.

Though it was cold, Patrick sweated in the stale air. His slow, deep breaths rang through the sealed chamber. He fought for every gasp of air. There was a rhythmic pounding in his temple. These sounds intertwined with the incessant chattering of that confounded bat. Minute after minute, hour by hour... days? It became hypnotic... hypnotic... hypnotic....

The walls were crumbling!

Pat whipped back to consciousness, taking a moment to realize he'd drifted to sleep again. In that second of slumber, the bat had sought to take advantage, had swept near enough to cast a rank breeze on Pat's face. Only the nightmare recollection of the crumbling cave saved the man and cheated the starving bat.

The bat clung to the wall. It scurried to a safe height where it squeaked angrily. "No!" he gave it to understand. "I will not go to sleep!" Or would he? He was incredibly tired. The lack of good air was catching up to him. He fought; but his will power was losing hold. His eyes closed to narrow slits.

Mustn't sleep.

Keep awake.

The boogey bat'll get you if you Don't Watch Out.

Fight — sleep — can't — sleep — don't — sleep—sleep—sleep.

At last his eyes were closed. Once sealed, there seemed to be no strength in the cosmos great enough to lift their slight weight. Sleep seemed like an invitation to paradise: safe, relaxing, refreshing, revitalizing sleep; a cure for aching bones, reeling mind, and melancholia. Patrick found himself standing among a group of cowboys watching Doctor Sagebrush's Travelling Medicine Show. The benevolent doctor was hawking bottles of One Hundred Percent Guaranteed Absolute Sleep. Dr. Sagebrush smiled, and his teeth were pointed. The bottle was labelled, "Oil of Bat."

Somewhere, very far away, a bat chirped with excitement. The sound was a musical lullaby to Patrick's labored mind.

Deep, comatose, eternal sleep...

... then....

... a noise....

... the sound of shovels digging from outside.

Patrick still could not open his eyes. Sleep remained more important than salvation. His consciousness was nearly gone, although he fully comprehended that the vampire would be at his throat the instant he was motionless. He simply couldn't fight it any longer. His race against time had almost ended. The only thing he wanted to do was drop out of the race and let his rescuers finish. Who would get him first? Help or the bat?

He listened intently but with detachment to the sound of shovels, his eyes tightly closed, his muscles relaxed. He thought he heard a voice shout his name. Perhaps he only imagined the voice of his partner. It did seem real, however; even more real than the medicine show, or the bat on his toe, or the crumbling wall (the second time), or the specter of Dracula's most famous portrayer. Yet each one of those things seemed real when they occurred in his imagination, and were only foolish after.

He expected the sounds of digging to fade away with his revelation; but the sounds persisted. Two short coughs burst from Patrick's lungs. He was choking on the lack of oxygen. His head was swimming. With a final surge of power, he rolled over and raised himself on hands and knees to shout to the diggers: "This way! Hurry!" Then he collapsed flat upon his face, his last hallucination being a scene of graverobbers instead of rescuers. He had finally succumbed to the hours and the lack of oxygen.

The shovelling stopped, perhaps so that whoever was outside could rest, or possibly because they thought they heard a shout from another direction than they were digging. Then the digging resumed more frantically.

The tiny bat hung from the rocky ceiling, arching its back, twisting its head this way and that. Its hunger was as overpowering as had been Pat's urge to sleep. It had waited for this moment, however impatiently. Had the moment come in time? Could it sink its rabid fangs into the man and feast upon his blood before the rescuers broke through the wall to resuscitate him? With primitive, mammalian reasoning, the bat decided the answer: yes.

It loosed its grip on the ceiling and plummeted to the cavern floor with a light thump. It was a little amazed by its own clumsiness, but felt certain a good meal would rectify the trouble. It quavered on its toothpick-thin legs while struggling against some force it didn't understand. It fought each step of the way, staggering through darkness, inching closer to the quiescent, blood-fragrant human.

The minuscule monster reached out with its leathery-winged arms and touched the man's neck, groping gently for a vein. It opened its razored mouth and leaned toward the long awaited dinner.

It stopped for a moment, as in a film snagged in the projector, jerking. Then the bat collapsed into a tiny heap, like a withered, fallen leaf. It could breathe the foul air no better than a man.



MRS. FINLAY'S CIRCLE

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"They'll be here in a sec luv, so give us your cup an' go and get ready. And by-the-by you sure you've got it all straight?" Mrs. Finlay stood up, giving Mrs. Anderson a sharp sideways look while taking the teacup from her.

Mrs. Anderson smiled. "Don't you worry, you'll be proud of me. You just wait. I'll make a fine ghost."

Mrs. Finlay — tall, thin, and all in black — fixed her eye more firmly on her new assistant. "Just see you don't go overdoin' it; they're a gullible lot but — The doorbell rang. "Twenty past, that'll be them! Come on, quick, take the tea stuff out to the back kitchen and stay there out of sight." And Mrs. Anderson bustled to obey, rushing from the parlor like an excited schoolgirl.

But Mrs. Finlay only walked slowly to answer the front door of her large, Victorian house, giving, on the way, a quick greedy glance at the collection-box that stood on the little hall table; a box she'd ensure was full of 'Voluntary' contributions before the night was out. After all, a couple of quid wasn't bad for an evening's entertainment nowadays, and she rather looked on herself as a Good Samaritan for taking their money — it would only get spent on something else if she didn't. She was providing a valuable service. She was like, a sort of psychiatrist; an outlet; a comfort for the lonely and the depressed. Besides, the silly buggers deserved to be conned.

She paused for a second to look at herself in the hall mirror (always best to keep 'em waiting a while) and put on her most awesome 'Solemn Medium' face, which wasn't too difficult because she had a death-like pallor and deep green eyes to help her. At thirty-five, she couldn't help thinking, she was still a good-looker.

At last she was satisfied and turned away from the mirror to open the door to the chill night air.

"Hello, Mrs. Finlay! It's us!"

The greeting came from Mrs. Brown. Behind her stout bulk, Mrs. Finlay could see Mr. Harris and the tiny Mr. Hodd, two other members of her Circle. With the usual sombre "Hello, and welcome," she bid them enter, and was just about to close the big solid-oak door on the misty darkness, when she heard a loud cough and spotted a stranger coming through her front gate. She frowned, instead of following the others inside, waiting at the doorstep.

"Good evening, Mrs. Finlay? I'm a friend of Mrs. Roberts, one of your former members. The name's Eggdon. Mrs. Roberts was kind enough to tell me how you can help people and, well frankly, I need some help." The stranger gave her a gentle smile.

Without thinking she returned it, but was quick to reassume her cold, aloof, all-knowing Medium Face. "Oh yes, I believe Mrs. Roberts did mention your name once, Mr. Eggdon. But I think she said you were — ahem — a disbeliever."

"Not anymore, Mrs. Finlay; not since my father died."

He looked pained and she nodded comfortingly. "I know, Mr. Eggdon — I know. Please come in and give me a few details." She opened the door wider and he entered, bringing a little of the mist in with him. She led the way to the parlor where the others were waiting, and when introductions had been made all round, left to get the tea things.

"We always have a little tea and a chat first," Mrs. Brown explained to the newcomer.

"It all sounds very nice," he said, as Mrs. Finlay returned once again this time with a tray of cups.

"I certainly enjoy it," agreed Mr. Hodd shyly.

Mrs. Finlay placed her tray on the coffee-table in front of the fire. "Rather a sparse attendance tonight, Mr. Eggdon. Please don't judge us by this."

She sat down to spend some moments secretly studying the stranger. A woman who lived off her wits, as she did, had to have an eye for detail; it could all help later on. She placed his age at around the forties mark; a handsome man with a well-built body and a definite hint of humor in his face, something she was wary of. A twitching smile, laughter-lines or twinkling eyes were all signs that made her uneasy. She didn't like jokers; especially where a seance was concerned. So after a while — though she usually sat and listened quietly to the idle chatter that went on at this time — she went over to sit next to him, gesturing at the teacups. "Do help yourself, Mr. Eggdon."

"No thanks, I'm not too keen on tea."

"By-the-way how is Mrs. Roberts these days?"

"Why, she went off to Australia a month ago, that's why she can't come to the meetings of the Circle anymore. Didn't you know? I'd have thought she'd have told you."

"Well yes, she —"

"Oh, I see! You're testing me to see if I really know her."

She looked at him sharply. That had been a bit too quick for her liking. But he only returned her stare with innocent clear blue eyes.

"We have to be careful, especially with new people; we don't usually take them into the Circle unless they come with established members."

His face fell. "Oh dear! But I know Mrs. Roberts, isn't that enough?"

"I really don't know. After all, Mrs. Roberts is no longer with us —"

"What a shame," gasped Mrs. Brown, "and she looked so well when she was last here."

"... Not with us since she left for Australia," Mrs. Finlay continued, with a glare at the eaves-dropping interloper. "And anyway as I said before, Mr. Eggdon, as far as I can remember, Mrs. Roberts painted you as a total unbeliever." And Mrs. Roberts had said something else about this Eggdon character, but Mrs. Finlay, for the life of her, couldn't recall what it had been.

"But since then my poor father has passed over. It's different now! I know he's trying to contact me. I can feel his presence around me all the time. He wants to tell me something, and I'm sure it's important. You must help me to talk to him — please, Mrs. Finlay."

The pleading in his voice was so sincere that it

touched even Mrs. Finlay's hard heart. "We'll see," she conceded.

Mrs. Brown, sitting with a plump try at grace on the edge of a chintzy sofa, still listening in, suddenly smiled over at him. "So it's your father?"

"Yes, he went a week ago today."

"How very sad."

Mrs. Finlay saw her chance to get the newcomer back on a second visit without having to commit herself to action that night. "Well, Mr. Eggdon, that makes it difficult—" What she really meant was, it made it perfect! Now she could find out all she wanted about this 'Mr. Eggdon' and his father, by the time of the next meeting.

Mrs. Brown, understanding the surface meaning of what Mrs. Finlay had said, was quick to explain. "You see, it takes a little time for a loved one to settle down in the spirit-world. Your father may be confused. It could be dangerous to contact him so early."

"Then what can we do?"

"We can but wait, Mr. Eggdon," Mrs. Finlay stated. There was something about this man. If only she would remember what Mrs. Roberts had said. It was something important. But it had been such a long time ago!

"Does this mean I can't talk to my father tonight?"

"Impossible, I'm afraid. But if the others are willing we may still include you in tonight's Circle and you can see others receiving messages from beyond the veil."

Mrs. Brown's eyes shone. "Yes, yes, you **must** meet my Humphrey."

"Can't say I've any objections," agreed a laughing Mr. Harris. (He was one of those people who can never seem to stop laughing — a most unnerving type.)

"I'll go along with that," added Mr. Hodd, polishing thick spectacles in a jittery manner.

"Good," said Mr. Finlay standing up, "I'll just clear the tea things then."

As soon as she was out of the room, Eggdon turned to Mrs. Brown. "I take it Humphrey was your husband?"

"Yes. A lovely man. Not much of a success in **this** life—but he's getting on fine in the next. It's almost three years since he left me. I only wish he could have made something of himself while he was here. Gods knows I tried to help him—he was the sort that needed to be pushed—but it didn't make much difference."

Mr. Eggdon's attention focused on the man sitting next to her. "What about you, Mr. Hodd?"

"Eh? Oh! Er, well, I'd a brother called Mark, you see. He died six years ago last summer." Hodd tried to smile. "He always looked after me, until his death. He was the eldest of our family. I miss him very much. I have to manage on my own now—but he still gives me instructions about what to do, here at our meetings every week."

"Mrs. Finlay seems to be helping you tremendously. How about you, Mr. Harris? Who do you contact?"

"Ah, the old girl, the wife don't y'know. A wonderful woman she was, but I must say I treated her somewhat dreadful. That's why I come here—

to ask her to forgive me. Never appreciated the little lady till it was too late. We ran her family business together, y'know. I didn't realise how hard she was working at it — and — and well, I didn't really keep up my end. She worried and worked herself into an early grave." For a few seconds he was sober and serious, then like a mask his grin returned. "Never mind, though, she's happy now."

Mrs. Finlay re-entered. "Right! I think we can start," and she indicated the large round table that stood in the middle of the room. They were soon in position, sitting in the highbacked chairs that surrounded it.

"Five-to-twelve," Mrs. Finlay said, with a glance at the clock. "Good. Now we're ready. Please don't be frightened by anything that happens, Mr. Eggdon, we're quite safe as long as the Circle is unbroken. But whatever you do, don't stand up or move around, as this may injure or even kill me."

"I understand, Mrs. Finlay."

"Very well. Now—the lights, Mr. Hodd." And Hodd scurried over to the switch to obey, plunging the room into blackness. Hurrying back to the table he almost broke his neck in the dark.

"Careful, Mr. Hodd," advised Mrs. Finlay rather belatedly, while Hodd resumed his seat, rubbing his ankle. Then she took a deep breath and began to intone her instructions"

"Will you all place your hands on the table?" There was a slight shuffling as they complied. "Good, now—concentrate, concentrate. Empty your minds... Think of emptiness... emptiness... your mind blank... and empty."

There was silence in the large old-fashioned room. The thick green Victorian wallpaper seemed to muffle all sound, only the loud, steady ticking of the clock over the mantelpiece remaining distinct; the coals in the hearth the only dull, ruddy light source.

"Would you close your eyes please."

They complied.

It was now that Mrs. Finlay gave her small prayer that all would go well, hoping Mrs. Anderson had safely entered the parlor's hidden niche and would do what she'd been told, and no more (Mrs. Finlay had been forced to reprimand new assistants for going over the top before now). "Anyway," she thought, "here goes!" And out loud: "Is there anybody there? Is there anybody—" And then to her horror, she heard:

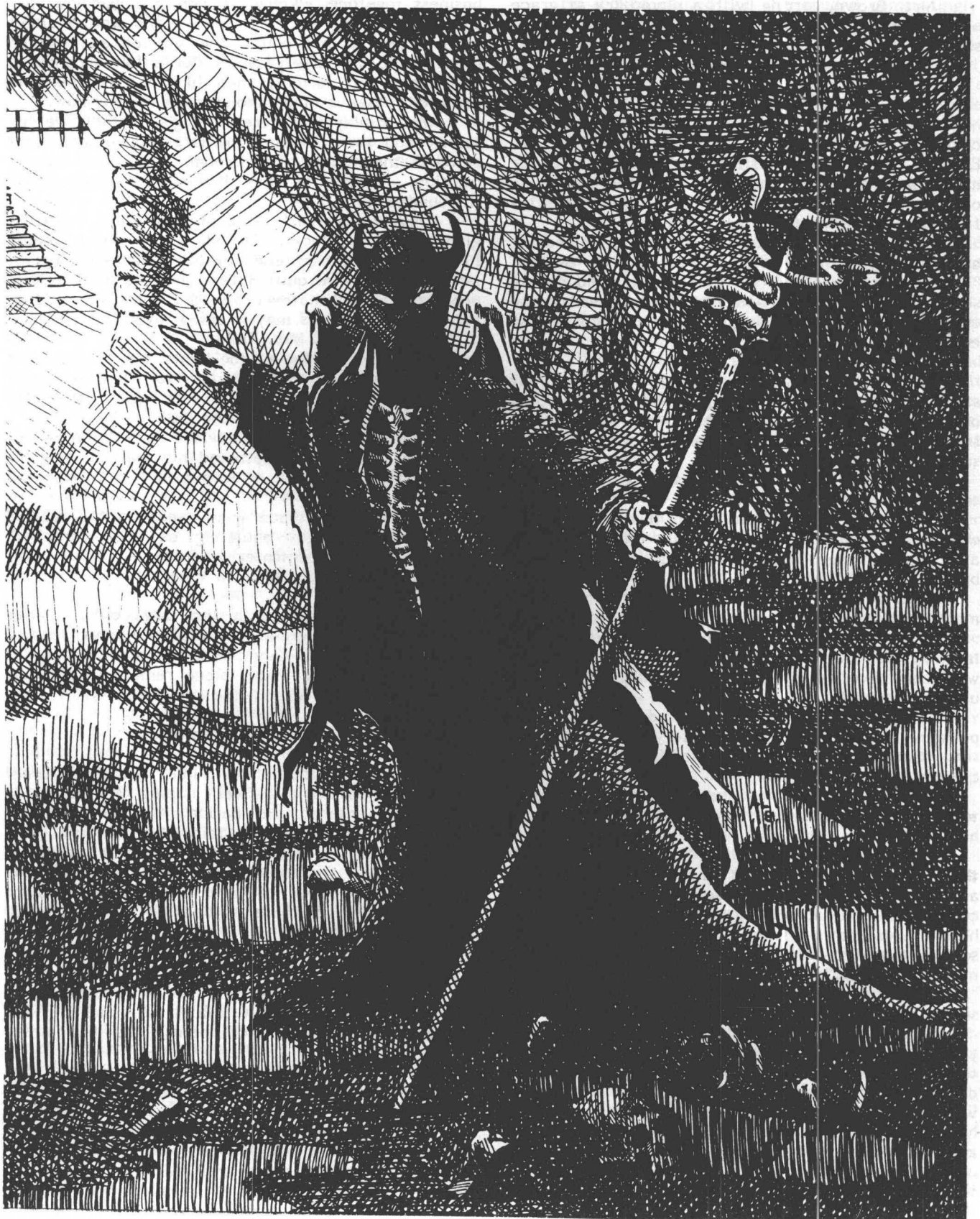
"Yes," in a man's voice she didn't recognise, seeming to come from nowhere!

The atmosphere was electric! An audible voice! Not from the medium but totally disembodied! The Circle was full of excitement; this had never happened before.

Mrs. Finlay was near fainting with dismay. Was this Mrs. Anderson, sitting in the secret alcove in the corner? If so, what was the fool playing at? She wasn't supposed to **say** anything, she was just meant to tap on the wooden wall panel. She'd started much too early as well, Mrs. Finlay had told her to wait until the clock struck midnight.

"Well? Aren't you going to ask me something?" The voice was slightly annoyed. "I haven't all day."

"That—that's Mark!" croaked Mr. Hodd. "It's



Mark! It's my brother!"

"Of course it's me. What d'you want, Cecil?"

"What?—I—um?"

"Oh bloody hell! Stop trembling will you? You've always been a bloody jelly-fish. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry Mark. It's just that—well you've never spoken out loud before. I mean, you usually tap."

"Tap? Tap? What the hell do you mean, tap?"

Cecil spluttered. The others held their breath and listened. Mrs. Finlay listened herself in a horrified daze, fascinated. Anderson was going to ruin her! But how had she made her voice so clear from the other side of a wall, and so masculine?

"Look, you fool," said the voice (and it was quite an ordinary everyday voice as well), "if I ever want to speak to an idiot, there's plenty on **this** side; I don't have to bloody tap to **that** side."

"But, your instructions—"

"Never gave you any. Not since I died. That Finlay woman's been having you on. Having you **all** on, in fact. I've only come to expose her for what she is, as a favor for a friend."

There was a stirring and a slight muttering that made Mrs. Finlay peer anxiously into the darkness.

"Look, Cecil," the voice was friendlier, "For the past few years since my death, you've been virtually looking after yourself. You don't need this Finlay woman—you don't need anyone. Now for God's sake man, buck-up! Stop dithering! Take a hold of yourself!"

"I—I—"

"What?"

"I mean yes! Yes Mark, I will."

"Good! Now promise me you won't waste anymore of your hard-earned money on this place."

"Oh, I won't."

"And by the way, if I were you I'd marry that secretary of yours."

"Eh? Good Lord!"

"Don't worry, old chap, she's pining away for you. Don't leave it too long. Well—cheerio. There's quite a queue here so I'll hand over to the next in line."

Mr. Finlay at last reclaimed her speech. "It's evil! It's evil spirits. Take no notice of them," she shouted. "They're playing tricks on us."

Mr. Hodd's voice came back through the darkness. "Well that sounded like Mark to me," and this said with a new confidence that impressed his fellow-spiritualists. "Why not give 'em a chance?" asked the man who was usually so quiet.

"You'll be sorry," wailed Mrs. Finlay. "I warn you. You—"

"For goodness sake, stop that!"

The voice had changed. It was still male but now it had become weak and tinny, with a sort of whine to it.

"That's my Humphrey!" shouted Mrs. Brown. "I'd know him anywhere."

"My God! Is that you, Priscilla?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Right!" said the new voice in a cocky tone. "Well listen here, you old cow!"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"That's never Humphrey! He never spoke to me like that!" she told the rest of the Circle.

"No, 'cause I never dared to while I was alive."

"But—"

"You just listen to me for once; let me have a say for a change. Just let me tell you somethin' my woman, you nagged me right into the grave, and ever since you've been tryin' to nag me right out of it again! Blowed if you haven't! Did you think I was comin' here every week just so's you could tell me what a failure I was in life? A fat chance! That Finlay's taken you for the over-bearing, pompous old witch you are!" The voice seemed excited but distinctly happy.

"Oh Humphrey—I—"

"You just keep quiet," interrupted the voice. "The one reason I've turned up here tonight is to oblige a mate of mine who wants to teach that old charlatan a lesson."

"It's all lies! Evil lies!" screams poor Mrs. Finlay.

"Oh shut up," commanded Humphrey. "Seeing as I'm here, Priscilla, I might as well tell you that you'd better mend your ways, my gal. There's a certain place for the likes of you. Mind, it's not too late to change, and if change you do—then I'll be waiting for you on this side. You were a lovely girl when I first met you. Just try and regain a bit of that lovely nature you lost after our second wedding anniversary."

"But Humphrey, I only wanted you to be a success," said a weepy Priscilla.

"Wanted **you** to be a success, you mean. A more ambitious woman I've yet to meet! You gave me an inferiority complex a mile high!"

"I'm sorry, Humphrey—so sorry."

"Yeah, well..." the voice trailed off into embarrassed silence. When it spoke again it was softer. "There's a lot of good in you, old gal, you just have to let it out."

At this moment the clock started to strike the midnight chimes and the voice stopped.

Mrs. Finlay sat in her chair clutching her head and trying to stop its spinning. She was ruined! Ruined! But how? She thought and thought, but nothing came to answer that question. If Mrs. Anderson was playing tricks on her, she couldn't think how, or why. But wait—what about that man Eggdon? Hadn't Mrs. Roberts said something about him liking a good laugh?

The chimes ended. A silence descended. The slow comfortable ticks of the timepiece on the mantle wall kept up their monotonous rhythm. No one spoke. They hardly dared breathe! Was the show over?

Suddenly there was a tap. Yes, a tap from the hidden alcove in the corner of the room, where Mrs. Anderson was sitting behind the panelling and thick felt curtain. Hope sprang anew for Mrs. Finlay. "Ah!" she shouted, making them all jump violently. "The evil has gone! The good spirits have driven those demons away."

"Look here, er, I—I," stuttered Mr. Harris. "I mean, I'd rather not—er, well—you know, go on. Couldn't we stop now?" And he swallowed loudly.

"What is it, murderer?"

For the first time the voice was female, a strange voice that held a hollow menace and seemed to echo slightly. The sound of it stopped the tapping *immediately, for Mrs. Anderson, like everyone else, had heard the dreadful accusation.*

"Yes, murderer, I'm here! I, your wife; the woman whose wealth you've drunk away in your guilt. The one you slowly poisoned. The one you've begged to forgive you at all these farcial seances every week for years. I don't have long to wait though. Not long."

"What—what d'you mean?" Mr. Harris by now spoke in a high-pitched squeal. "What are you talking about? You're not my wife, she's dead! No, you're not her! Go away, you're not!"

"Yes! I am, and you'll be with me soon. **With me soon!"**

The voice was positively fiendish!

"Stop! Stop it! It's a trick!" He struggled to rise.

"Wait, murderer, I'll tell you your fate—your punishment."

But now Mrs. Finlay had solved it at last! She'd been doing some hard thinking and now she had it! She knew what was going on!

"Take no notice of that voice, Mr. Harris, we all know it's lying. Don't we, Mr. Eggdon?" She was triumphant. She'd just remembered something Mrs. Roberts had said in passing conversation almost a year before:

'... Eggdon... on the stage... Says anything you can do, he can do better....'

And suddenly it all fell into place!

"Turn on the lights, Mr. Harris," she ordered. And Mr. Harris needed no second bidding, he was across the room in a flash.

"I can wait," said the voice from the void.

"But I won't have long to wait. You'll be with me soon, Charles Harris."

Then the lights came on, revealing that both Mr. Hodd and Mrs. Brown had jumped to their feet. They stared at the cowering Mr. Harris, a similar look of horror on their faces. Mr. Eggdon merely studied his fingernails.

"It's all a trick! I never killed her! I didn't, I didn't!"

Mrs. Finlay glared at Mr. Eggdon. "We know that, don't we?"

The others were puzzled.

"Why, what do you mean, Mrs. Finlay?" Hodd asked, adjusting his glasses.

"Just this: it's all been a trick, as Mr. Harris says. Mr. Eggdon here has played a joke on us all."

They all gathered around Mr. Eggdon, waiting for a reply, even Harris coming over to stare.

"Me?" asked the only still seated man, smiling up at the ring of hostility innocently.

"Yes, you! You're a stage ventriloquist or something, aren't you?" Mrs. Finlay fairly spat the words.

"Well, I was, but I was forced to give up that profession some time ago."

Rage and indignation were rife. Mr. Harris' face was a mask of savage hate. He'd gone quite purple. "You—you tried to—to—" Speechless, he strode forward and swung a vicious blow at Mr. Eggdon's head, only to find that his arm passed right through the dapper figure, striking the chair behind it. Mr. Eggdon then disappeared, still smiling.

Mr. Hodd gasped...

Mrs. Brown fainted (into a chair)...

Mrs. Finlay screamed and ran from the room...

And as for poor Mr. Harris... well, he just fell down on the spot... stone dead.

THE PATH

On a tree-crowded slope above the town
where secret birds call out alarms
and secret worshippers mutter charms
a worn path crests and then leads down

to darkling valleys on the other side
where snorting horses kick and prance
and mad nymphs laugh and whirl and dance
and breathless mount and spur to ride

and sing a giggling song of death
where fires leap high against the night
and shadows challenge flickering light
till nymphs and horses abandon breath.

Climb the path with me and top the crest.
After laughing and dancing we'll decide which is best.

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LEITMOTIF

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When the children in the rundown neighborhood surrounding the massive apartment complex began disappearing, Mr. Herman W. Willow was at once horrified and relieved. Immensely relieved. He did not especially care for children but, as a responsible citizen he agonized with the others of the Vienna Woods over the whereabouts of the missing youngsters. Some said they'd been kidnaped by molesters. Mr. Willow held quietly firm to his theory that a cult mesmerized and lured them away.

The relief Mr. Willow experienced arose from his secure feeling about residing at Vienna Woods. He'd brought his son Roddy to the self-contained complex shortly after his wife died and congratulated himself now for accepting the realtor's claim: "There's absolutely no need to go outside. There's even a clinic and mortuary here, if it comes to that. Whatever you'll find on the outside, sir," the realtor's eyes had twinkled persuasively, "you'll find here."

It was all perfectly true. Sprawling for acres from the central hub of a giant modern mall, the complex appeared to offer every kind of service, every kind of store. Mr. Willow took a pleasant position as a salesclerk in one of the latter establishments, content because Roddy attended school mere yards away. To Mr. Willow, they dwelled in a fortress of sorts, armed guards stationed at every entrance to keep ordinary folk away; or perhaps they were on a charming island in the center of a chaotically churning sea. Nothing, he felt reasonably sure, could happen to them at Vienna Woods.

Still, there was the matter of Roddy's leisure activity. He claimed only one friend, a brighteyed, independent and unsupervised soul named William Cohn, and Mr. Willow knew Roddy was easily led. After all, the boy **was** frail. Besides that, there was no longer a mother in his life to watch his every move.

On an autumn evening when crickets were beginning to wail their goodbye melodies, Herman confided his concern to the widow, Regina Callow, who lived in the apartment to his north: "If only Roddy could get **involved** in something, rather than running up and down the mall after school, I'd feel so much better about him. He needs something in- to which he can hurl his body and soul."

"What about the new musical service offered by Vienna Woods?" she asked, pouring the steaming tea she'd prepared. "They've engaged a retired foreign conductor, I've heard. A Professor Franz Halsang. As I understand it, he will choose talented children from the complex to form a young folks' symphony, then teach music three afternoons a week. Why, he has even scheduled a performance in our auditorium during Christmas week."

Regina's suggestion made Mr. Willow flush with enthusiasm. That was precisely the sort of disciplined activity he'd sought for Roddy! Consequently, the following Monday morning he

paraded his son to the new practice room, introducing the two of them to Professor Halsang.

Halsang impressed Willow at once. Getting-on in age, he nonetheless possessed a marvelously commanding air. He had flashing brown eyes and an artistic mane of white hair which he continually brushed from his forehead. Although the professor was only of medium height, Halsang exuded a dazzling dynamism — **yes**, that was the word! — which added magically to his stature. Studiedly, he inspected Roddy's hands, muttered "piano fingers," and marched the thin boy to a bench facing a huge upright.

"Make an octave," he ordered, showing Roddy how. Done, he whipped his lean body round to snap at Herman Willow, "Acceptable. He shall be at my studio each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning before school. Missing a lesson or rehearsal for any reason shall be considered cause for instant dismissal. Understood?"

Mr. Willow was delighted. He knew his own paternal limitations and Professor Halsang would serve handsomely as a figure of authority. Under the old fellow's tutelage, there was no telling how far Roddy might go! Roddy was doubtless talented. Mr. Willow himself had played the clarinet as a boy, giving it up only for more practical concerns. Until this moment he hadn't grasped how much he missed playing an instrument, and rummaged in his closet until he spied his old clarinet. In the ensuing weeks, Mr. Willow found periods of aloneness and played ecstatically by himself.

Subtle change was immediate in his son! Within days, Roddy's pallid, placid attitude gave way to signs of confidence. Roddy asked William, his friend, to join the child symphony with him, and, when William shrugged, he positively insisted. In no time the two boys — Roddy at the piano, William on a new clarinet — were spending every available second in practice. Mr. Willow felt a tingling urge to join them in play, but resisted the temptation. After another week, he was able to tell Regina Callow what amazing progress Roddy was demonstrating.

But by month's end, certain subtle alternations were displayed by Roddy. He began answering queries in a peremptory, almost curt manner which Mr. Willow found off-putting. At dinner he actually **asked** for seconds on green beans and, when his father tendered a heaping bowl of french fries, briefly declined. He began practicing chords on the family piano after dinner instead of watching TV. And Mr. Willow assured himself, with greater firmness than he'd have thought necessary, what exemplary changes were taking place in his frail, undisciplined son.

One afternoon Roddy had trouble playing a certain chord, even wincing as his small fingers stretched, and his father went to him in concern. To his chagrin, he noticed that Roddy's lefthand knuckles were black with bruises! Where could he have acquired them? With William, fighting? Roddy refused to answer, glancing at him with red-rimmed eyes, and then resuming his energetic work at the upright. Soon the bruises were gone and, following a two-week period, Roddy played for his father the first little composition he'd mastered. It was powerful but romantic and Mr. Willow tapped his

fingers in time with the sonorous chords. Just then, he was thrilled by the lad's progress, sure of how wise his judgment had been.

When Roddy was bathing, however, Mr. Willow chanced to drop into the room, and he was staggered by the violent marks on Roddy's back. Angry, crimson welts rose the length of the small back, and he found himself snatching the lad by his shoulders, virtually shaking him. "Who did this awful thing to you?" he demanded. "I'll have him before a judge!"

But outraged interrogation was to no avail. Staring mutely at small waves created by his outflung feet, Roddy would not name his malefactor. Later, in the middle of the night, Herman W. Willow was awakened by the plaintive strains of *Lohengrin* drifting awkwardly from Roddy's piano. Many of the notes were jangling, peculiarly jarring in the darkness. He considered ordering Roddy to bed but, uncertain he would obey, Mr. Willow stayed where he was, staring out the window at a sallow moon, thinking how lonely parenting could be.

Mr. Willow continued privately tooting on his boyish clarinet, striving to master the music Roddy played. Once that week he paused with the unnerving impression that he was **watched**. Quickly, he replaced the instrument in its black-pebbled case and buried his face in a book.

When Roddy's scholastic studies suffered, presumably as a result of his singleminded devotion to music, Willow was more concerned than ever. Perhaps Professor Halsang's influence wasn't entirely salubrious, after all. He discussed the question with Regina who reassured him of "how different children were these days." With the wise look of an owl, she shook her finger scoldingly. "You should be delighted Roddy doesn't go beyond the complex. Just yesterday, another child vanished."

"Of course, you're right," he agreed, glad for her hot tea.

"I am." Regina beamed, then told him in conspiratorial tones that she'd learned the Vienna Woods' child's symphony would be playing Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for their Christmas debut. "An abbreviated rendition, I'm sure," she added, "but it's just **full** of meaningful themes centering round a single, major individual or event. That's called a *leitmotif*."

Christmas was coming and Willow labored hard at the complex's stationers, establishing a record for gift-wrapping sold during the holidays; yet he also kept a wary eye on Roddy. The lad was seeing less and less of William, his friend, spending ever-growing hours of practice as the orchestra began group rehearsals in earnest. There were no more bruises or welts; but something darkly **private**, something hugely earnest and obsessive, showed when Roddy wasn't practicing. Nothing but the orchestra mattered to him anymore including the artificial Christmas tree his father lugged home from the complex mall.

Ten days before the initial performance of the symphony orchestra, Mr. Willow was surprised by a late-night rapping at his apartment door. He'd been watching *A Christmas Carol* on TV, the scene where Jacob Marley appears and drags his corrupt chains behind him.

Professor Franz Halsang was at the door,

militarily-erect and commanding, the chill of many winters clinging to his impeccable clothes. Halsang didn't stand on ceremony; he brushed past Mr. Willow, sharply pivoted, then looked his host squarely in the eye. "I understand you were once competent in playing the clarinet."

"In a youthful, amateur fashion," Mr. Willow confessed, wondering how Halsang could know. "Why do you ask, Professor?"

The old man's gaze swept the apartment, returned to Mr. Willow's face. "William Cohn will not perform. I regret that he seems to have... disappeared."

The announcement made Willow gasp. "Like the boys outside the complex?" The old man nodded. "When did it happen? When did they miss poor William?"

Halsang shrugged almost irritably. "A few days ago; I'm not certain." Impossibly he became more erect. "I have come to ask you to replace William at clarinet for our Christmas performance. I regret the lateness of my request, sir, but there's a passage in *Der Ring* which specifically demands a clarinet. Will you join us?"

A more friendly panic fluttered inside Herman W. Willow. This was absurd, of course, considering playing again after — **how** many years? Thirty? And with **children**, at that! On the other hand, he had never played with anyone more talented than children! How sweetly challenging it was; how nice that brilliant Professor Halsang had thought of him!

"I'd like that very much," he confessed. A fantasy-image — his son and he one day entertaining together — passed his inner eye. "I'll do it."

"You must rehearse, Mr. Willow. Rehearse hard."

"Of course, yes." He felt flustered. "Once or twice, perhaps. To banish the rust."

"Tomorrow night, then?" said the old man, turning to leave. "Our rehearsal is at eight o'clock. Sharp!"

The thrill of it captivated Mr. Willow all of Wednesday until, by nightfall, he was drained and nervous. Walking through the mall to the auditorium, elbowed by other residents of the complex, he scarcely knew they were there. They were people of pedestrian interests; superficial, mundane interests!

Yet going onstage, he stumbled in the wings against a trunk on which the legend MUSIC STANDS was stamped. Gripping his injured toe, his glance took in the two-dozen stands already erected on the stage. But the trunk was heavy. Shrugging, he blinked against the auditorium lights and found his way to his own music stand.

Sectioned rows of shining young faces, attentively gazing at Professor Franz Halsang, surprised him. No one was saying so much as a word. Half the children he recognized, by face; the others were unfamiliar. He looked at his son, seated at the piano, yet Roddy gave no sign of surprise at his father's presence. Perspiration crept from Mr. Willow's forehead as he tried to concentrate on Halsang's baton. "If you do well, gentlemen," the old man said briskly, "perhaps there'll be a small surprise later."

His baton plunged.

Instantly, Mr. Willow was stunned by how well

these children played. Not a one could be older than fourteen, he thought, risking a look away from the music on his stand, and several were under ten. When he looked back at his music, he'd lost his place. His clarinet chirped: the baton cracked sharply.

"The **notes**, Mr. Willow," called Halsang, eyes flashing. "You must follow the small black spots on the paper before you. **Ja?**"

"Of course," he replied. Stares settled on him. "Sorry."

They began anew. The children were incredibly good; out of his league. He stayed with them for a page, fingers frantically flying in his instrument. Then his gaze wandered toward the trunk in the wings. **MUSIC STANDS.** How could it be so heavy when all the stands were in use?

— The baton rapped again and an audible sound of disgust rose from the old man facing them, as well as from his orchestra members. Halsang shook his white head. Eyes were pressing in on Mr. Willow, **hot** eyes. He knew Roddy's face was turned resentfully to him. He saw the conductor straighten. "Not only did you lose your place, Herr Willow, but you are flat. It is my duty, my obligation to the people of my organization, to tell you that, sir. You are egregiously, discordantly **flat**."

"I'll get it," he promised. Rapidly, he blinked his eyes. "I will!"

"That would be best, Herr Willow. It really would."

They returned to that other world, of music, intricately involved with one another every microsecond. It was, Mr. Willow thought with growing fascination, like an orchestrated orgy in a way. There was passion, yes, commitment, a vastly greater expenditure of energy than outsiders realized, a joining **together** of one's senses, one's souls, for a common ecstatic purpose. It was wonderful, being part of this again, bringing to life a century-old composition. And that was even strange, when you thought of it; the way music twisted time. They strove to play these notes exactly the way they'd been played decades ago by musicians long-since dead and buried. Could there be a more self-involved, tightly-knit group of people anywhere on earth than an orchestra? Such **unison** of purpose, why, it would achieve anything! Nothing else mattered now, no one else mattered, so long as—

Again, the baton. Rapping! Mr. Willow glanced up, horrified; but Professor Halsang wasn't looking his way. Instead, the old man was rubbing his upper lip thoughtfully and gesturing to a burly aide. The fellow soon wheeled out a rack of clothing, and the children around Mr. Willow buzzed with delight.

"Orchestral uniforms, gentlemen; for **you**." Franz Halsang swept one from the rack and displayed it with obvious pride. "At my own expense, as a gift of the season, **ja?** I ordered them a month ago and they just arrived."

Mr. Willow found that he hungered. Brown, narrow at the waist, trimly-cut with a dark, wide belt attached, the uniforms were splendid. Applause rang out, Mr. Willow joining in. Halsang's aide began passing them out, one by one, until the rack was empty.

Then Halsang turned his fiery eyes on Herman

W. Willow. "You must work for what you get here, Herr Willow; you must be part of the gathering expertise—through discipline. Taking orders. Work and work, and work again, **ja?** Perhaps at the performance, should you spend many hours in private practice." He touched Mr. Willow's shoulder. It was galvanizing, inspiring. "You do not wish to be the only member of the orchestra without a uniform, do you?"

"Of course not. No." He felt shamed and, dropping his embarrassed gaze, ambled sadly toward the piano. It was ridiculous, he knew, but he felt like weeping. But when he looked at Roddy for empathy, the boy turned his head away.

A pushcart with dozens of crystal cups was wheeled out. Mr. Willow accepted one with trembling fingers. Ginger, perhaps. The drink didn't really intrigue him. He was eager to begin playing again, to strive to get it right and earn Halsang's approval. He looked admiringly at the old man, then toward the wings, and the music-stand trunk.

A new idea caused Mr. Willow to place his cup on the piano top, blink his eyes several times, and become weak in the legs.

You must work for what you get here, Herr Willow. But Roddy's chum William Cohn never worked hard at anything. Independent, careless about life, he'd joined the orchestra only because Roddy insisted. And now, he was... gone.

Professor Halsang said he'd ordered the orchestral uniforms "over a month ago." Yet the rack on which the uniforms had been hung was empty now. William was missing a short while. **So where was William's uniform if they had just arrived?**

And where was William?

Mr. Willow sagged against the piano. Roddy was watching him. It must have been Roddy who told Halsang he played the clarinet: that meant the boy had spied on him. The shining, earnest faces. How could there be so many children here whom he'd never seen at Vienna Woods before? Why were their clothes damp with snow when they arrived, since one entered the auditorium from the enclosed mall? How could **any** group of small boys play so well, so quickly? **Rehearse hard. You must take orders.** To what, he asked himself, ultimate end?

His hands were cold. He turned his head slowly to peer at the heavy music stand trunk in the wings. It was just about the size of a small coffin...

Mr. Willow fixed a tight smile on his lips, cleared his throat, and took a deliberate step away from the piano. Behind him, his son struck a heavy, low, bass chord on the keys of the instrument and called to him.

"Leaving, Dad?"

"Just for the restroom," Mr. Willow replied seeing Roddy's face. How **mature** he looked: "I have to pee."

"You don't have to pee," Roddy said.

"Yes. Yes, I do. I'm absolutely **sure** I have to pee."

Roddy shook his head. He looked for support to the other members of the orchestra, who were also turning their heads and bodies. "He doesn't have to go anywhere, does he?" Roddy inquired.

All the children put down their punch and began walking slowly toward the father and the talented

son at the piano. Mr. Willow screamed.

The Vienna Woods auditorium was jammed with apartment dwellers eager to celebrate their seclusion, their safety, from the outside world. Regina Callow perched in the third row of the seats, enthralled. She could scarcely believe such fine, stately music was played by ordinary children. It was so — so **adult**, really, and sonorous, even hypnotic. Suddenly she shifted uneasily in her chair and stared at the foreign conductor. Such command, he had, such uncanny poise. The way his children raptly followed Professor Halsang's conducting was surely a lesson in good, old-fashioned discipline. It showed what children could do if an adult—even a stranger, perhaps **any** adult — took firm charge of

their lives.

She looked admiringly at young Roddy Willow. Courageous, that was the word. He played so perfectly even with another of his little friends missing since Christmas Eve. Especially valiant considering the way his own father had disappeared, leaving not so much as a note to tell Roddy where he was going.

Regina watched the last-minute replacement on clarinet rise for his solo passage, saw how nervously he stared at the professor to be sure he got it right. If only adults learned to **care**, the way these boys did, if only her friend Mr. Willow hadn't been so lax and undisciplined about his own life, Regina mused, the next generation could be **everything** people thought it would be.

GOLDEN BOUGH, GOLDEN SICKLE

The lofty oaks are cloaked in flaming motley —
Proud Fools!
The mocking North Wind howls! Bonfires gorged on
Summer's Dreams,
Roaring drunk on the musty vintage.
The Wild Moon Rules!
The night owl's screech! Echoes die... Again the
night owl screams!
Birch trees; silver spectres naked limbed, in
crystal pools of ice
are glimpsed, or seen bedecked with embered
moonbeams.
This is the Autumn Masque—the Samhain!
The Wild Moon rules!
Reap the sacred golden bough—the golden sickle
gleams.

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A FAVOR

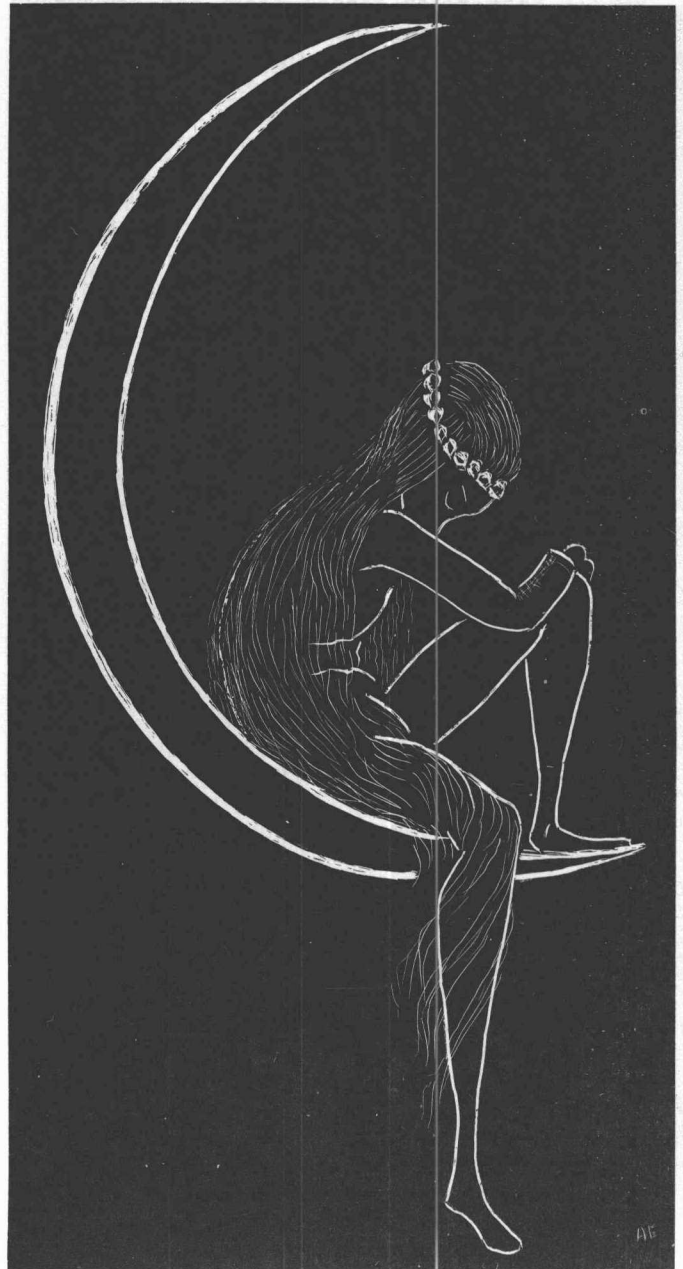
when i feel the stars like pin pricks on my skin
and something plucks at me to loosen bonds of flesh
i will need your strength to moor me to this plane
if you will be my anchor then
i will return the favor when
you have your own personal reasons to scream and
float away
and scream again

© 1984 by Dora Siemel

SOME WHERE

The end of the rainbow
is a cozy hiding place.
Gold from the pot is long gone.
Simply crawl inside.
Curl up hugging knees and squeeze;
hardly fitting in at all.
Then body heat warms the smooth metal walls.
Then you just know, no matter how long you stay,
No one will ever find you.

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THE DRAGONS OF MONS FRACTUS

© 1984 by RICHARD L. TIERNEY

I

Some have seen corpses long interr'd
Escape from hallowing control,
Pale charnel forms—nay ev'n have heard
The shrilling of a troubled soul,
That wanders till the dawn hath cross'd
The dolorous dark....

—Robert Bridges

"Consuming fire!" cried the dark-robed magician, standing tall and extending his arms aloft. "Can a man of flesh and blood withstand such fire? Watch closely, and see!"

Even as he spoke, a trap-door opened in the center of the stage and the head and neck of what appeared to be a tremendous dragon emerged, its golden scales glittering in the light of many torches, smoke drifting upward from the corners of its fanged mouth as it glowered down at the man. The thousands of spectators massed in the great, semi-circular theatre leaned forward as one, hushed and fascinated.

"Fire!" the magician cried again.

The dragon's enormous mouth gaped wide and a torrent of roaring flame rushed forth, enveloping the gesturing figure. The crowd yelled in shocked surprise. For an instant the man seemed a blazing statue, the occult symbols on his robe glaring like bits of white-hot iron. Then the flames increased with an almost thunderous roar, and the magician was lost to view in their fierce intensity.

Abruptly the flames vanished, and the dragon's roar ceased. On the floor of the stage, exactly where the man had stood, there now remained only an irregular, dark patch that smoked and steamed. The crowd gasped—a vast, uneasy whisper of astonishment and disbelief. Slowly the huge dragon-head closed its fanged mouth, then withdrew into the dark aperture from which it had emerged. The crowd sat in shocked silence for a moment, then began to rustle and murmur.

"He's dead!" yelled a man suddenly. "Something's gone wrong—"

"They've killed him for sport!" a woman shrieked.

"That fire was real—I felt the heat of the dragon's breath—"

But then, even as the crowd stirred as if on the verge of an uproar, something moved within the dragon-pit—something that rose slowly into view. It was the magician, his arms raised high as before, his robes and flesh showing not the least signs of scorching. In a moment he stood upon the wide stage once more, the section of floor beneath him appearing as normal as the rest.

The crowd burst into thundrous applause; the magician, after many gracious bows and many polite refusals for encores, strode away and vanished behind the curtains at the back of the theatre.

* * *

"You were magnificent, Simon of Gitta," said a thin, gray-haired man who was helping the magician out of his symbol-emblazoned robe. "Surely this has been the greatest display of magic that the city of Vienne has ever seen—or all the province of Gaul, for that matter. Sometimes even I had to remind myself that you were not using true sorcery."

"I use no sorcery, Nicephorus," he said. "It is all stage-illusion—as you, who have aided me so well, should know beyond question."

"Yet you are a master at what you do, Simon, and surely there is a sort of true magic in that. I have learned much while aiding you, as I am sure the rest of my master's household have also."

The magician turned away, brushing the dark bangs back from his forehead nervously. He seemed younger now than when on stage—a man in his early thirties with a lean, athletic build that suggested that he might have seen fighting. Nicephorus wondered about the hint of nervousness in the man's movements, in the glint of his deep-set dark eyes. Could it be that this magician, so able to command the fascinated attention of an audience of thousands, felt awkward about accepting in private a compliment from one of his assistants? Or, were there other things on the man's mind to account for his distant and diffident manner?

"You are right," said Simon abruptly. "It was a grand spectacle. I have kept my part of the bargain, and I am sure your master will profit well from the money taken in this night. Now, he must fulfill his promise. Take me to him."

"I must supervise the closing-down of the theatre. Your stage-assistant will conduct you to the house of Coponius. *Gratia*—come here!"

A shapely, azure-eyed blonde woman, clad only in a short white tunic and high-strapped sandals, appeared from behind a curtain and nodded slightly to Nicephorus. Simon noticed again that, unlike most slaves, there was no subservience in her bearing; he even seemed to detect a touch of proud defiance.

"Please, Nicephorus, not that name again," said the woman. "I am Gretchen."

"Spare me, girl—you should know by now that I can't learn to pronounce such an outlandish sound. I presume you are now recovered from being hewn in half by this master of sorcery who stands beside me; if so, convey him at once to the villa of our master."

The girl nodded again; then, beckoning briefly to Simon, she led him out a back door of the theatre into the night. The stars shone hazily in the air of the still summer twilight; crickets shrilled in soft, insistent monotony.

"Wait here, magician. Nicephorus will send a litter around."

"My name is Simon, and I'd rather walk. Come on."

He set out at a brisk pace, and the girl hurried along beside him. "You know the way?"

"I should. I found the house of your master all by myself, when I first came to Vienne."

"And why did you come here, Samaritan wizard?"

The man stopped and scowled at her. "Gretchen, I said my name is Simon. And I am no true wizard, as you well know."

She stared coolly at him. He seemed different

now, clad only in his dark tunic, with no symbol-embazoned cloak and mitre—younger, more human.

"You can pronounce my name," she said, laughing. "And that was clever, the way you appeared to cut me in half for that crowd's entertainment. I was almost touched, the way they called you a murderer—never have so many cared about my fate! I promise I'll never tell anyone how you did it."

Simon shrugged. "It matters not. Tomorrow we'll be gone from Vienne, to perform in Lugdunum—if your master keeps his promise and tells me what I wish to know."

The girl stared at him levelly. "You're a dark one, Simon of Gitta—I can tell. I'd like to ask you what a Samaritan wizard is doing here in Gaul, working for another dark one like the Roman Coponius, who calls himself my master. But I won't, because I know you wouldn't answer. Come."

"You're a dark one yourself," thought Simon, striding alongside the girl in the dusk. **Dark, in spite of your fairness...**

Then his thoughts turned in another direction as they approached the northern edge of town and the villa that loomed black against the starry sky.

* * *

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Marcus Coponius as he brandished his wine-goblet. "Marvellous! You held them all spellbound, Simon of Gitta."

"How do you know? You weren't even there—"

"But my little Gratia was, and she has just told me all about the crowd's reaction." Coponius took a long swig, then called out: "Gratia! Come fill our goblets."

The blonde slave-girl entered the peristyle where Simon and his host were lounging on couches beneath the stars. Carefully she poured wine from a long-necked amphora, while light from the many torches played upon her bare limbs and golden hair. As she withdrew, Simon sensed a sullen resentment in her blue eyes, though his host seemed not to notice it.

"A beauty, is she not?" Coponius enthused. "And proud, too. I captured her during a trip into the remote Alps three years ago. She's the daughter of a chief—took some taming, I can tell you, but she knows her place now."

Simon nodded curtly. "We have business to discuss, Coponius."

"Right you are," agreed the Roman genially. "You have made me a reasonably affluent man again, Simon. I therefore drink to Hermes, god of magic—for he, through you, has once again made my retirement here tolerable. Caligula paid me well to stay here and mind certain of his—affairs. But since Claudius came to power several months ago, I've been neglected—"

"Let's not mince words, Coponius." Simon leaned forward, setting aside his goblet. "By retirement, you mean exile. And I think your stay here in Vienne has not always been pleasant, if the gossip hereabouts is accurate."

The Roman sighed, swirled the wine in his goblet. "Aye—not at first. But you are here to see that our bargain is kept. You have not changed

your mind, have you, Simon?"

"No. You need not fear. You may keep nine-tenths of the money my performances bring in. I ask in return only that you tell me where to find the former owner of this house—"

Marcus Coponius stared about him, suddenly nervous, then gulped down his wine. "Gratia!" he called out. "Another!"

The shapely blonde girl entered once more, poured, then left again. This time Simon kept his eyes off her long enough to study the Roman narrowly, wondering about his obvious nervousness, the haunted look that had come into his eyes, the trembling of his hands. Obviously the man drank wine too deeply and too often.

"Tell me," said Simon. "No more delays. Where do I find the man who once owned this villa?"

Coponius nodded, drank again. "Pilatus—Pontius Pilatus, former procurator of Judea. He was the owner of this house after Caligula exiled him here. You want to know about him?"

"Aye."

Coponius looked into the Samaritan's dark, gleaming eyes. "And you want to know where he is so you can find him. And you want to find him so that you can enact revenge upon him. Don't deny it—I can tell."

"What's that to you?" growled Simon. "We have a bargain."

"Aye, and I'll stick to it." Coponius laughed and swilled more wine. "But it's not hard to figure out why you're out for revenge. You're a Samaritan, and Pilatus had several hundred of your people butchered for insurrection just before he was recalled to Rome four years ago."

Simon nodded, scowling darkly. "My mentor, Dositheus, was slain in that butchery. He was leading a crowd of my countrymen up to the summit of the holy mountain of Gerizim, in a ceremony of peaceful worship. The people were unarmed—there was no insurrection—"

"And so you have sworn vengeance," said Coponius, waving his goblet drunkenly. "Well, ask me your questions."

Simon drew a deep breath. "I understand this was the house of Pilatus, but that he left here some three years ago and no man knows why nor where. Can you tell me where he has gone, and how to find him?"

"Aye," mumbled the Roman. "Alas, I can. I must tell you—I must keep our bargain, and tell you things I cannot bear even to think of—things I have told no one. **Gratia—!**"

"No!" said Simon firmly, crossing to Coponius' couch and grabbing him by his wrist. "If you drink any more wine, you won't be able to tell me. Start talking. Tell me all you know..."

* * *

The Roman set aside his wine cup; he seemed pale in spite of his over-indulgence.

"I was there," he muttered. "I was in the Emperor Caligula's magic-room when he performed his monstrous deed of sorcery."

"Sorcery—?"

Coponius nodded. "Old Tiberius had ordered Pilatus back from Judea to face charges—officially

for slaying the Samaritans you mentioned, but actually, I think, for crucifying a Nazorean wizard who claimed to have the secret of eternal life. Well, Tiberius died before Pilatus got to Rome, and when the procurator arrived at last he was thrown into a dungeon-cell for a few months to await trial."

"So much I've heard. Go on, Coponius."

The Roman drained his wine cup. "Caligula heard about the affair, and was as disappointed as Tiberius about the slaying of the Nazorean. Like Tiberius, he had a mania about wanting to live forever. So he had Pilatus dragged out of his dungeon and asked him if he'd like a nice, plush retirement in Gaul in exchange for—for... Simon of Gitta, can you imagine anyone crazy enough to want to live forever in a world such as this?"

"Go on, damn it!"

The Roman nodded heavily. "Of course. You're a stage magician—you've never seen *real* sorcery. But I have! I was there the night crazy Caligula forced Pilatus and his wife, Claudia Procla, to participate in the ceremony. He berated Pilatus about killing the Nazorean—said that because of that blunder, the procurator was now obligated to atone by aiding in a ritual that might yet gain eternal life for Rome's emperor. And then he began to read spells from some old books he had inherited from Tiberius, and to draw symbols on the walls and floor. The two other guards and myself—well, we were terrified, because the walls in that underground room were roaring as if it were under a waterfall. I can read Greek and Latin, and recognize a lot of other tongues when I hear them, but I never before or since heard any language remotely like what crazy Caligula was reading from those old scrolls. He was bobbing and screaming and sweating, while the rest of us were holding candles in different locations about the room, Pilatus in the very center, all of us scared half silly—

"All of a sudden there was a flash of dark light—if that makes any sense to you. Pilatus shrieked and fell down as if he'd been struck by lightning. But in a moment he got up again, and his face was like nothing I ever saw before—rigid and fish-eyed—dead. And then his eyes started to glow. His wife, Claudia, just fell over dead at the sight—never got up again. Caligula was screaming in terror.

"My two men jumped Pilatus, but he grabbed them by the neck, one in each hand, and squeezed—and that was it. I heard their bones snap, and then he flung them to the ground. I stabbed at him—and I swear the sword just slipped through the man as if he were made of fog! Pilatus came after me, then, and if I hadn't been near the emperor I'd have been done for; because even though Caligula was scared out of his wits and screaming insanely, he'd had the sense to haul out a little charm and hold it up—and damned if it didn't make that demon-possessed lich back off!"

Simon felt his spine tingling. "What kind of charm?" he demanded.

"Here." Coponius fumbled at a cord around his neck and drew from beneath his tunic a small statuette of green jade—an ugly, female figure, sinister and grimacing. Simon recognized it as a representation of Hecate, the Witch-goddess.



"Caligula once bragged to me that it had belonged to his father, Germanicus, and that he had stolen it from him, thereby allowing Germanicus to be slain by the evil magic of his enemies."

"And how do *you* come to have it?"

"The mad emperor gave it to me when he ordered me to—to escort the exiled Pilatus here to Vienne, and it has been my sole protection ever since. I will tell you all, Samaritan, but before I can go on I *must* have more wine."

Simon agreed grudgingly, and at the Roman's call Gretchen appeared so readily with the amphora that Simon suspected she had been listening to them from within the curtained doorway.

"Leave the jug here, girl," said Coponius. Then, when she had left: "Simon, there is sorcery of a sort you have never performed on any stage—sorcery born of Hades. That was the sort I saw that night in Caligula's magic-room.

"Somehow we subdued the thing called Pilatus, with the green image to keep it at bay and with spells which Caligula recited from one of his ancient scrolls. Then we sealed it in a stone coffin and, with the aid of several soldiers of the emperor's German bodyguard, buried it on an island in the Tiber. For the undead cannot cross running water,

or so Caligula assured me.

"Then the emperor fell ill as a result of his fearful shock, and for many days he lay raving in a delirium of fever. When at last he recovered, his mind was left in a state of even more extreme madness than before. His terror began to increase as stories circulated in the city of people who had died crossing the trans-Tiber bridge at night, or whose boats had run ashore on the island in dense fog—people whose bloodless bodies were found next day with puncture-wounds in the throat, or with their spines snapped as by a giant gladiator. Also, storms seemed to increase in frequency over Rome, and Caligula got into such a state of terror over all this that he would hide beneath his bed on nights when lightning blazed and thunder shook the skies.

"Finally the emperor could stand it no more, and bade me dig up Pilatus' body and convey it far from Rome, into the heart of Gaul. He gave me much gold and many trusty servants, and also that green jade amulet that had protected him—for by now he had secretly hired sorcerers to devise even more powerful protections for him.

"So I conveyed the—procurator—here to the city of Vienne. On the way a sailor was lost overboard each night, and on one occasion Pilatus came to me on deck and talked to me under the moon. Do not ask me to describe that!

"We buried the thing again, this time on an island in the Rhone, and once again there were storms more frequently than was natural, and ships driven ashore, and many people dying in the night. That was a dark and terrible winter for Vienne. So you see, Samaritan, Pilatus never did live in this villa, even though it was registered in his name to support the rumors bruited about in Rome that he was an exile in Gaul. And soon, to further avert suspicion, I gave out that Pilatus had died, and even had a conspicuous tomb built to his memory.

"But the following spring I felt compelled to move the lich once more, for the citizens of Vienne were suspicious of me in their terror, remembering that the dark happenings had begun just after my arrival. This time I had it conveyed far up the Rhone, even to Geneva, and buried there on a small island where the river flows out of the great lake of Lemannus; but again the thing brought fogs and storms, and wrought much havoc.

"At last, with great toil and expense, I had it conveyed to a wild, remote region far to the northeast, near the border of Rhaetia, and there caused it to be sunk in a tarn near the top of a high and uninhabited mountain."

The Roman paused to gulp more wine, then wiped his perspiring forehead with a sleeve of his tunic. Simon did not know whether he should consider the man's story seriously or take it as the ravings of a drunken lunatic.

"What happened then? More—disturbances?"

"I do not know." Coponius shook his head violently, as if to clear it of dark visions. "We sank the thing before midday, and by evening we were many leagues away. That was over three years ago. I have never travelled in that direction since."

"A map," said Simon. "You must have a map drawn up for me."

The Roman laughed shrilly, drunkenly. "You're

crazy, Samaritan—crazy as Caligula himself. Yet, a bargain's a bargain. I'll give you a map... in the morning—ha! ha!"

Then, abruptly, he slid from his couch to sprawl in an unconscious, drunken stupor upon the marble floor.



II

... the terrible chasm
Yawning beneath us, black and deep,
As if, in some convulsive spasm,
The summits of the hills had cracked,
And made a road for the cateract
That raves and rages down the steep!

Longfellow: The Golden Legend

Simon gazed down from the brink of the cliff into the narrow canyon, listening to the rushing of the water far below, then raised his eyes to the many-spired mountain that loomed far-off and

sinister to the northeast, high and white against the deepening blue of the twilight. Mons Fractus—the jagged mountain—that was what his nervous Allobrogian guide had called it before he had demanded his final pay and hurriedly slipped away westward into the forest, back towards Aventicum...

Aventicum. That was the last place he had seen Gretchen....

Simon sighed. He looked up to where the full moon was just rising over the pines of the eastward ridge beyond the canyon.

Luna... Selene... Helen... How long since the Romans caused you to die, my only love....?

He shook his head. That had been years ago...

Quickly he swung the packsack from his horse. This was a good place to camp. He was on a mission of vengeance, nothing less; he would not be distracted by painful memories.

But after he had cooked and eaten his solitary supper, he sat up for some hours, unable to sleep, staring into the fire while the moon rose. And he could not help but think of Gretchen. She had accompanied him these last several weeks, north-eastward into the farther reaches of Gaul, performing as his stage-assistant in Lugdunum, in Geneva and finally in Aventicum—always under the eagle-eye of old Nicephorus, Coponius' trusted freedman. And Simon, to his annoyance, had found himself desiring her. It had been a long time since he had had a woman.

Gretchen...

He shook his head, trying to brush away the thought that even now she would be returning to Vienne with the other slaves and old Nicephorus—back to the arms of her drunken Roman master, with most of the money Simon's showmanship had drawn in. That had been the bargain: wealth for Coponius, information for Simon—information that would lead him to vengeance...

Simon rose and began to gather more firewood. Vengeance—he had dedicated his mind and feelings to it; yet, what an abstract concept it seemed this night in the midst of this wild moonlit forest, as he sat near the brink of a narrow canyon where dark waters rushed and roared like muted thunder far below. Again he glanced at the thin spires of Mons Fractus glowing faintly in the light of the full moon.

"Are you truly there, Pilatus?" he muttered. "Or, has that drunken Coponius misled me for your protection? Well, I'll soon know—and if he's lied, I'll be back to Vienne to wring the truth out of him!"

He was feeling more and more that he had been made a fool of. Surely Coponius had merely concocted that tale of supernatural terror. Yet, why? To frighten Simon off? No, for if that were the Roman's purpose—to protect Pilatus—why had he not simply lied about his whereabouts? Why invent a tale of an undead thing that walked the night...?

Suddenly, he heard a horse whicker in the distance.

* * *

Simon started to his feet, drawing his keen-bladed *sica*. His own horse stood tethered at the edge of the forest, browsing upon the sparse grasses. Quickly the Samaritan darted into the

trees, moving cautiously, mind working furiously. Someone had followed him here—had been following him for the last few days. It had not been his impression alone, but that of his Allobrogian guide as well. Neither had been completely sure, but now...

Still, no one had appeared, and at length Simon wondered whether he had been prey to his imagination. Slowly he relaxed, sheathing his blade—

And then, a movement in the shadows caused him to start, drawing his knife once more. Someone was coming down the forest path, slowly and silently, on foot—a cloaked and cowed figure.

Simon's hackles rose. He forced himself to silence and motionlessness, crouching in the shrubbery till the shadowy form had passed him by—

Then, leaping forth, he threw an arm about the neck of the intruder and hissed: "Don't struggle—I can gut you in a second. Why are you following me—?"

"Let—let me go—Simon of Gitta..."

A woman's voice. Startled Simon released her and she turned to face him.

"Gretchen—!"

"Yes, I followed you," she said, laughing. "I thought you might need a guide after that dull Allobrogian refused to go farther into the land of my own people. I knew he'd turn back. And I didn't want him carrying tales about me back to Aventicum, so I stayed out of sight."

"But—why sneak up to my campsite like this...?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Baal! Do you know how close I came to—"

She laughed again, throwing back the hood of her cloak and tossing her blonde hair. "I feared no harm from you, Simon. You knew me instantly, even in the night. I knew you would. Now, let me bring up my horse, which is tethered nearby."

* * *

They prepared some warm broth, then sat close to one another by the fire while they supped, their cloaks wrapped closely about them. The air had grown chill.

"What of old Nicephorus?" asked Simon. "How did you escape from him? Will he not send soldiers to follow you?"

Gretchen smiled. "I paid him gold, to the amount of all I stole from his master over the last three years. Coponius will not object. He desired me at first, but now all he desires is gold and his wine-cup."

Simon nodded appreciatively. "And what did you mean, Gretchen, when you said you could be my guide? Do you know this region?"

"Very well. I lived here till three years ago, when Marcus Coponius and his soldiers came and stole me from my people. I am a daughter of a chief of the Allemani; at an early age I was betrothed to Brennus, a chief's son of the Helvetii, and sent to live with them. I grew up near here; my village is on the shore of a great lake, just beyond the southern flank of that mountain."

Simon stared gloomily at the ghostly, moonlit spires toward which the girl pointed. "That mountain

is my destination."

"Do you really think your enemy is there, Simon?"

He looked at her. "Gretchen, did you hear the story that Coponius told me?"

"I heard all. I was hiding just beyond the curtain."

"And—do you think he told me the truth?"

The girl shuddered slightly. "I do not know. My people have legends of such things, though—of the demon-possessed, who cannot die but who do not truly live, and who crave human blood..."

Simon, too, felt an uneasiness. He had heard legends of this sort during his travels in far lands, and even in his homeland of Samaria—and now, a girl who had grown up among the remote Helvetii was telling him the same sort of thing. Moreover, there was another disquieting fact: Coponius had not lied about being in this region some three years ago.

"What do you know about the Roman called Pilatus?"

"No more than what Coponius told you," said Gretchen. "If they left the man's body upon the mountain as he said, it must have been just before his soldiers captured me. Yet I think he spoke the truth, for I know the very tarn he mentioned; it lies nearly between those two jagged summits."

Simon nodded, looking to where she pointed. "What else do you know about Mons Fractus?"

"That is what the Romans call it, but my people know it as the **Drakamund**—the mount of dragons—for it is said that dragons live within it, and fly between it and the mountains of Zug across the lake to the northeast. The folk of my village shun the place because of these old tales, but I know there are no dragons because I have explored the mountain thoroughly."

"You have courage, Gretchen. Did not the old tales frighten you even a little?"

The girl laughed. "A little, perhaps, at first. But I had not heard the tales from infancy, as my adopted people had. In the beginning I persuaded Brennus to explore the mountain with me; later, I often went alone. Maybe I'm crazy, Simon, but I always thought that even if the dragons did exist, they'd be friendly toward me—lucky for me. I was so disappointed that I never found any of them!" She suddenly grew subdued, even sombre. "The only monsters I ever encountered there were Romans—the last time I stole away from the village to explore. They captured me, and—and slew Brennus, who followed them when he heard of my capture."

She was silent for a space, the laughter utterly gone from her like the sun behind a dark cloud.

"Since then, I have been a slave in Vienne—I, who was born the daughter of one chief and betrothed to the son of another! Do you know what it means to be a slave, Simon of Gitta?"

Simon took her hand.

"Yes," he said evenly. "I was sold to a gladiator school by Roman tax-gatherers who slew my parents. I fought in the arenas for two years before I regained my freedom. But my fight against Rome did not end then, and it never shall."

Gretchen returned the pressure of his hand, and for a time they were silent.



"Now I know why you are so fierce in your pursuit of revenge," she said presently. "This mentor of yours—you must have loved and respected him greatly."

Simon studied the backs of his hands. "Aye. It was he who freed me from the arena. We had our differences, and there were times when I even thought I hated him—when he delved into dangerous sorcery in order to fight Rome. But even in those dark moments, I knew he was driven to his actions by hatred for the cruel power that crushes and enslaves all nations."

"And who is this Pilatus, who slew him and so many others of your countrymen?"

"A cruel, rapacious—!" Simon choked briefly on his emotion; then, a cold fire glowed in his deep-set, shadowed eyes. "In short, a Roman of the same sort who killed my parents. For ten years my country suffered under his hand, but now mayhap I have tracked him to his last refuge—and soon he shall pay for all his foul deeds."

"Simon!" There was compassion, and also a touch of fear, in the girl's eyes. "I know that mountain well. It is desolate of human life. Only the most devoted ascetic could live there, or—"

She stopped speaking, and Simon felt his spine tingling.

Suddenly the girl laughed again. "No, such things cannot be! Coponius has fooled you, Simon of Gitta, and you have come here for nothing. How sad! I should make it up to you..."

Her manner had become light, vibrant, provocative. Simon found himself smiling at her, his black mood lifting; he suddenly wanted to believe that she was right and that he had come to this place on a fool's errand.

"If you're so sad for me, Gretchen, why are you laughing?"

"But you're laughing too, now, Simon. How nice! I **knew** you could laugh—"

Suddenly, spontaneously, they were in one another's arms and Simon's blood was aflame as their lips met and he clutched her to him in an almost crushing embrace.

But after a moment he felt a hardness against his chest. Gretchen whimpered slightly; he released her, and she turned and settled back against him, nestled in his arms, trembling slightly. Simon gently touched her bosom, felt the hard object beneath the fabric of her white tunic.

"Ah, that." Gretchen pulled forth a small amulet that dangled from a cord about her neck. "I stole it for you, thinking you might need it if—if Coponius' tale were true..."

Simon examined the thing, recognized it as the jade statuette of Hecate the Roman had shown him.

"How did you—?"

"I took it from Coponius in Lugdunum, the last night he was with us. He was too drunk to know. As on most nights, he wanted me to share his bed but passed out before he could do aught. I don't know which disgusted me more about him, his lust or his drunkenness. But, no more of him! He is no longer my captor, nor ever shall be again. Here, Simon—" She slipped the cord over her head and handed him the ornament. "It is yours."

"Why have you done all this for me, Gretchen?"

For a moment the girl looked pensive. "Perhaps it was that first night, in Vienne, when you performed the trick of dragon-magic. The priests of my people are the Dragon Druids, and the dragon is our totem. Or perhaps—I don't know. At any rate, you gave me the opportunity to escape at last. Here, Simon, take the amulet."

He took it and started to put it on, then tied it to his belt instead.

"I thank you, Gretchen, and I'll treasure it as a gift, but I won't let it come between us again!"

They both laughed, and he crushed her to him once more with an almost frantic passion. She returned his embrace and kisses with an equal ardor, and there were no more memories of Romans and vengeance and dark things, only the moon and stars, the fragrant pines and the campfire, the whispering wind and the mutter of rushing water far below in the gorge...

* * *

There was a ringing in Simon's ears, high and keen. He knew he was dreaming—no, surely that was impossible—when you're dreaming, you think you're awake...

That keening, like painful music, impossibly high-pitched. If needles were sounds, they would be like that. And there was a feeling of lethargy, and horror—

He forced his eyes open. The fire had burned low. Gretchen lay beside him, wrapped in her cloak,

eyes closed, face flushed, lips moving as if she were trying to speak in a fever-dream. And beyond her, at the edge of the forest—

Pilatus!

No, surely it was a dream—for how, in waking life, could one man recognize another who stood many yards away, amid the shadows of trees, illuminated only by the dim light of a dying fire? Besides, it was not quite the Pilatus that Simon had seen on occasion in Judea, pronouncing sentences from the portico of the Antonian fortress or parading through the streets with his legions to intimidate a subjugated populace. True, this figure by the forest's edge wore the same crimson cloak of authority, and scowled arrogantly with the same Roman features—only now, the formerly dark eyes glowed with a faint yellow light. No, this had to be a dream...

There was a subtle shifting of perspective. Now Pilatus was standing directly over Gretchen—bending over her. Her eyes had opened and she was staring up at the figure with innocent, raptured fascination.

The face of Pilatus was a mask of unholy lust. The glow in his eyes intensified till it seemed to highlight the girl's upturned face, causing her lashes and cheekbones to cast shadows. His mouth opened, revealing white fangs; his head descended, his mouth caressed the white neck; his teeth...

Gretchen whimpered.

With a surge of horror Simon broke the spell that held him and leaped up, drawing his sica. It was no dream! The thing was indeed crouching over Gretchen—and now, it was rising to face him, snarling like a beast, yellow eyes glaring, a trace of blood on its lips—

Simon yelled and leaped, slashing—but the blow had no effect. The knife that had slain gladiators in the arena passed through the body of Pilatus as easily as through mist!

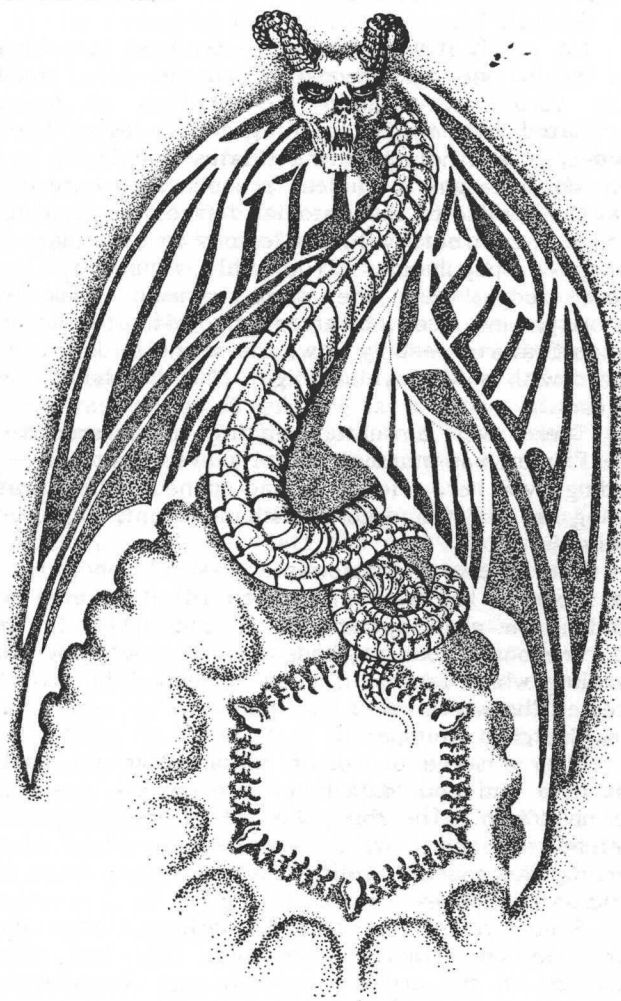
But there was nothing insubstantial about the thing, as Simon realized in the next instant when one iron hand locked about his wrist and the other about his throat. Frantically he struggled, but could do nothing against the strength of his foe. His knife fell from his numbed fingers and clattered to the ground; he could not draw a breath as he was pushed back inexorably to his knees. The face of Pilatus grimaced demoniacally before him.

His left hand, groping wildly for any weapon, closed about the jade figurine dangling from his belt. He tore it loose and smashed his fist into the glaring face. There was a wild, hellish scream. Simon felt his enemy's grip relax. He tore himself away, rolled and came to his feet in a combat-stance.

Pilatus was backing away across the clearing, his yellow-eyed face a mask of snarling fury as he stared at the figurine clutched in Simon's hand. Then, abruptly, he turned and ran, red cloak streaming out behind him—and dove from the cliff's edge into the blackness of the canyon. In the next instant a great bat flapped up from the gorge, wheeled against the moonlight sky, and flew off above the dark pines.

Simon ran to Gretchen. She was awake now, and crying out in fear and horror. There was blood on her neck.

He gathered her up in his arms and she sobbed violently against his breast, her face buried in her clenched hands.



III

"Oh whaten a mountain is yon," she said,
 "All so dreary wi frost and snow?"
 "O yon is the mountain of hell," he cried.
 "Where you and I will go."

Anonymous: **The Demon Lover**

The village by the lake appeared to be deserted. It had been a fishing village, Simon guessed. From the look of it, it had not been lived in for years.

Slowly the two of them dismounted and led their horses between the crumbling huts to the lake shore. Simon stole a glance at the girl; her face was serious, her eyes sad.

"They're gone," she said. "All gone!"

They walked slowly down to the shore, where gray waves were splashing against the rocks. The skies were clouded over, and there was a chill in the wind.

"Where did they go, Simon?" There was a note of desperation in Gretchen's voice. "Why did they go?"

Simon glanced to the northwest, where the sinister spires of Mons Fractus were half-lost in the drifting clouds, then put an arm around the girl.

"Perhaps they fled from—what we saw last night..."

She shuddered, and Simon knew she was recalling how they had kept their campfire ablaze for the remainder of the night, how relieved they had been at sunrise. Then she had guided him around the south flank of the mountain to the wide lake where her village was—had been—

"Gone!" Gretchen buried her face in her hands. "Simon, they're all gone!"

He held her close, not knowing what to say. There was such a change in the girl since the previous night; the laughter, the exhilaration over her newly-regained freedom had been replaced by sadness and apprehension. Simon felt a hot anger. She had already suffered far too much these last three years.

And that wound on her throat—small, but inflamed.

Suddenly he tensed as he spied two men on horseback riding toward them from the south, along the lakeside path. One appeared to be a warrior, the other a white-bearded old man. They were approaching at a walk, the wind whipping the folds of their cloaks. Gretchen, feeling Simon's tension, turned to face the newcomers.

They stopped a few paces off; the younger man dismounted, helped the old one dismount also, and then both came on, leading their horses. Simon fingered the haft of his knife. Yes, the young one definitely was a Helvetian warrior, possibly one of some rank judging by the quality of his scale-mail and longsword. His bearing seemed noble but not menacing; his eyes were gray and level, his features framed by hair and beard of a light reddish bronze. The wind whipped his locks, as it did the long hair and beard of the old man.

"Karanoch, the Dragon-Druid!" muttered Gretchen, wonder in her voice. "And—Brennus...?"

"You know them?"

"Brennus!" The girl suddenly tore herself away from Simon, hurried forward and flung herself into the young warrior's arms. "Oh, Brennus!"

For a few moments the young man and Gretchen clung to one another, then began to speak excitedly in what seemed to Simon a Celtic dialect. The old man joined them in conversation, displaying similar excitement. Simon suddenly realized, with some chagrin, that the man called Brennus must be the one Gretchen had spoken of as her betrothed. Tired of being ignored, he strode forward.

The old man faced him, suspicion in his eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked in Latin. "A Roman?"

Simon scowled. "I'll consider that insult unintentional. I am Simon of Gitta, a Samaritan, and I have come to this land seeking revenge upon a Roman official."

"Revenge, you say?" The old man grinned slightly, a glint of good humor in his dark eyes, though his manner was still wary. "Are you an enemy of Rome, then?"

"Aye, Druid—even as you must be. The Romans have not been at all kind to your order, from what I hear."

Suddenly Gretchen ran to Simon and gripped him by the arm; her face was white, her eyes wide.

"Oh, Simon—it's truly Brennus! He's alive—my beloved, my betrothed! Coponius lied—told me

he was slain—!"

Abruptly her eyes closed; her lips parted and she went limp. Simon was barely able to catch her before she hit the ground.

* * *

The moon was just rising above the eastern ridgetops when Simon woke and remembered where he was: in the new village of Gretchen's people, a few miles south of the abandoned one, on the shore of a smaller lake. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then threw a few more sticks on the dying fire, causing it to blaze up. The clouds were gone, and the positions of the glittering stars told him that he had slept some four hours.

It had been an easy ride up the long valley. Gretchen, having quickly recovered from the shock of seeing Brennus alive against all expectations, had ridden beside the young warrior all the way, constantly and excitedly conversing with him in their Celtic dialect. The old Druid had interjected a comment or question now and then, but presently had fallen back and left the young pair to themselves. Only once had he spoken to Simon during that journey:

"I must thank you once again, Simon of Gitta, for having saved the lady betrothed to our chief's son. All our village will thank you also, and welcome you."

Not Brennus, thought Simon. Then, seeing the old man's eyes on him, he had answered brusquely: "She saved herself. She offered me more aid than I her, I'm afraid. But, tell me: Why were you and Brennus in the abandoned village when Gretchen and I came there?"

"I had a dream last night—and when I talked to Brennus, I found he had had the same dream. I have prayed long to the Dragons, and now I think they are awakening. Are you their answer to my prayers, Simon of Gitta?"

Simon found his spine tingling. "That dream of yours—a strange thing indeed. But I know of no dragons, and I repeat that I did not rescue your chief's daughter-in-law. She did that herself, through her own courage and intelligence."

"I heard her tell Brennus you saved her life."

Simon shook his head somberly, feeling a reluctance to talk about what had happened the previous night. He felt a certain guilt—and not about his amorous feelings towards Gretchen. Had she not given him the jade statuette out of a desire to help him, she might not have undergone the attack of Pilatus...

They had ridden the rest of the way in silence.

The villagers, as old Karanoch had predicted, received Gretchen's return with joy and thanked Simon profusely. Even the grizzled old chief, Brennus' father, had warmly shaken his hand. Then there had been a feast, such as a modest fishing-village could ill afford to give every day, and Simon had enjoyed a better meal than he had had since leaving Aventicum.

Now, as he sat by the cooking-fire he had just rekindled, he suddenly saw the old Druid standing motionless not far away, staring at him, white beard seeming to glow in the firelight. Simon rose quickly.

"Karanoch—"

"Sit down, Simon." The old man advanced and seated himself upon a log-section. "I have just come from the chief's hut, where Gretchen lies ill. We must talk."

"Gretchen? Ill?"

"It happened just after sundown. She told me all, Simon. You did indeed save her life last night. Now, show me the jade amulet she gave you."

Simon did so, and as the old druid fingered it he sat back and drew his cloak around him. The air was becoming chilly.

"Hecate," said Karanoch, returning the object. "Other images will serve as well, so long as they symbolize that which commands the awe and worship of many, and are consecrated by ritual. We of the Dragon Druids used to fashion many such things. Alas, so much knowledge has been lost to us in recent years!"

Simon nodded, remembering that the mad emperors Tiberius and Caligula had persecuted the druids. "You've doubtless heard that Caligula was assassinated last January. Perhaps Claudius will be milder. But—what of Gretchen?"

"She was bitten by the devil of the Drakamund, and soon she must die and become like him—unless he can first be slain."

"Die!" Simon leaped up again. "From so slight a wound—"

"Many of our women died of such wounds three years ago, when the Romans first brought that demon to the mountain and stole our prince's betrothed from us. Gretchen tells me you know much of this matter; you must tell me all you can, Simon, even as she has."

Simon drew a deep breath, stifling his impatience to ask more questions, then proceeded to tell the old druid all that the Roman Coponius had told him. The moon was more than halfway to the zenith when he finished; the village was hushed and still under its rays, as if the very huts were huddled together in fear.

"Evidently the Romans know not the secret of how to slay the dead-who-walk," said the druid when Simon had ceased speaking. "Tell me, what is the name of this undead Roman the emperor was so anxious to be rid of?"

"Pontius Pilatus, formerly procurator of Judea."

"Aye," muttered Karanoch. "His name is familiar to me; even in these remote outlands he has become known for the enormous cruelties he perpetrated in your homeland. No wonder the demons possessed him so readily, seeing that he was a vessel self-prepared for them!"

"And what of Gretchen?" Simon demanded again. "Must she die like those women you spoke of—"

"They did not die as humans die. They had to be slain at the last by stake and steel and cleansing ritual, lest they should live forever in thrall to the thing the Romans brought to the Drakamund."

Simon felt a chill that was not in the air. He could not speak.

"That was three years ago," continued Karanoch inexorably. "At that time many of our young men, including Brennus, went upon the mountain and sought the thing in order to destroy it by stake or steel. Always they failed to find it, save perhaps for

some who never returned at all. In the end, we left our village and re-established it here on the northern shore of this smaller lake, where the fishing is not so good but where our women may sleep without the fear of fangs in the night."

Simon recalled the several streams they had forded during the day. "Coponius said it cannot cross running water."

"Such is the druid-lore also. We can defend against the thing by such means as water, fire and talismans, yet we cannot slay it unless its lair can be found. You say Coponius gave you a map—"

"Damn you, old wizard!" snarled Simon. "Are you saying I'll have to kill Pilatus or Gretchen will become like him?"

The druid nodded, then regarded Simon steadily. "Now it's more than just vengeance, eh, Samaritan? I was right—surely the dragons have sent you to aid us in our need."

"What do you mean—"

"I am full of years and magic, and I sense that you are no common man, Simon of Gitta. You are a man of high destiny, a fragment of the very God-soul that existed before it was trapped in this material universe created by the monstrous Elder Gods. And once, at least, you met and lost a woman who was such a divine fragment also—your counterpart. Is it not so?"

Simon shuddered, glancing up at the rising moon once more. **Luna... Selene... Helen...**

"You are a sorcerer, Karanoch—even as was my mentor, Dositheus."

"Your mentor was a True Spirit—even as are you and Brennus. And Gretchen is your counterpart, even as was the woman you lost to the change we call death. Your mentor must have told you that that change is but the act of two Persons who continually put on and take off an unending series of costumes. You and Brennus are the same, Simon, even as are Gretchen and the one you lost. That is why you love Gretchen so much."

Simon felt his head swimming; it was exactly like what he had used to hear from Dositheus. Such dark things—such mad things...

"It's true, wizard—I do love Gretchen, and somehow it **is** the same as my love for Helen. They don't even look alike, and yet they **are** alike, somehow. It's in their eyes, I think... yet, no—for Helen's were dark, and Gretchen's are blue..."

"Blue sky, dark sky," said the Druid. "The earth turns and we see first one aspect of the universe, then the other. You must not resent Brennus, Simon; you and he are as light and darkness, and the one cannot be without the other. Gretchen is the True Spirit that matches his on this small turn of the Cosmic Cycle, even as your Helen matches you."

"Helen is **gone**!" cried Simon, unable longer to hide the anguish in his soul. "The Romans took her from me. Must I spend the rest of my earthly term in living death, like that thing on Mons Fractus? Must I die and be born again before I may be reunited with Her? Is this the fate the Elder Gods have prepared for all mortals—to be tortured with the promise of fulfillment, then denied it?"

Karanoch shook his head. "Not all mortals—very few, in fact. Most humans are only animals

with a heightened cunning; they cannot understand nor share in the joys and anguish of those few who are True Spirits—fragments of the primal God-soul, enmeshed in this world of which they are not a part."

"Does that justify the anguish of we few?"

"Things are not justified; things simply **are**. We must do what we can about the possible; beyond that, we can do no more. Tell me, Simon—will you face the wrath of the demon Pilatus in order that Gretchen may be delivered from his power and fully restored to Brennus, her counterpart?"

Simon shook his head violently, as if to break the spell of Karanoch's words.

"I came to slay a Roman fiend, and I shall—that has not changed. You are seeking my aid. Have you any to offer me?"

"Aye." The druid reached within his robe and drew forth an oval stone, dark gray in color and a little larger than an eagle's egg. "This is a dragon-stone—a talisman handed down by my great-grandfather, who claimed to have talked with the very dragons who dwell within Mons Fractus. It is the most powerful talisman this village possesses. Take it with you tomorrow as you go forth upon the mountain."

"But—but what can it do—"

Karanoch shrugged. "Alas, so much knowledge has been lost! Take the stone, Simon; I know it can aid you, but you must discover how. Perhaps the Dragons will make it known to you."

Simon hefted the object. It was weighty and glinted with a dull sheen, like rich iron ore. There appeared to be a brief inscription carved upon it; Simon recognized the characters as runes, but could not read them.

"The meaning has been lost," said Karanoch in answer to his unspoken question. "The words are: **satha sithra, satha ixcatl**. They are in the ancient Dragon-tongue, or so my grandfather told me. Now, you must come to my hut and sleep, Simon, for your journey tomorrow will be an arduous one."

* * *

He woke suddenly in the darkness before dawn. There was no transition; his sleep had been profound, his wakefulness was equally absolute. And in his mind still hovered the memory of words just spoken by a woman's voice:

Rise, Simon—you must help me. Hurry.

Helen's voice.

He sat up, hurriedly donned his tunic, belt, sandals and cloak in the darkness, then stole out of the hut, careful not to wake the sleeping Karanoch. The moon had dipped behind the western ridge and the stars twinkled brightly. The air was chill, the village fires dead but for glowing coals.

That voice. Had he dreamed it...?

Quickly he saddled his horse, mounted and rode out of the village, down the dark valley northward. The forest path was barely visible under the stars.

Yes, it was better to leave this way, without farewells...

He had ridden less than a mile when suddenly he saw a white figure in the trail ahead of him. The horse whickered, came to a halt. Simon dismounted, said a few soothing words to the beast, then hurried forward. The figure was moving away from him,

slowly walking down the trail—not a ghost, as he had half suspected in his first shock, but a slender woman whose light tunic, limbs and hair glowed weakly under the first faint light of dawn.

"Gretchen!"

He caught up with her easily, gripped her by the shoulders and gazed into her eyes—eyes that seemed to glow softly with a faint, yellow light.

"Simon, let me go—he is calling me..."

"Gretchen! You're sleepwalking! **Wake up!**"

The girl started. She blinked and shuddered. The yellow glow was gone from her eyes. Recognition dawned in her face.

"Oh, Simon—where am I...?"

He saw again the dark blot of the wound on her throat, and held her close with a tender anguish.

"Helen—!"

"Brennus —!" she murmured, returning his embrace.

Then, realizing what they had said, they drew apart. The gray light of dawn increased above the eastward pines.

"You loved your Helen very much, Simon—"

He nodded. "As you love Brennus."

They stared wordlessly into one another's eyes, saw the stars of the universe reflected there, and the light of the impending dawn. And in that moment Simon knew again the truth he had learned years ago from his mentor Dositheus, and from Helen...

Gretchen murmured, her eyes wide and wondering: "Who are we, Simon?"

"A man and a woman," he answered. "Nothing more. And yet, somehow I know that you are the reason for all this Creation—for these hills, these stars, this entire universe which the mad gods have unfolded for their pleasure and our torment—aye, and even for those mad gods themselves—"

"And, somehow—you create and sustain it all, for me—"

"For you—else it would have no meaning."

She shuddered, drew close to him again. "Oh, Simon—Brennus—how can we rid the world of the evil that pervades it? How can we bring to all of it the knowledge of power and beauty that we now know—"

Suddenly, as if exhausted, she collapsed in Simon's arms. Gently he laid her down on the grass beside the path. The dawn was now a dim, gray light. Simon looked again to the wound on the girl's throat.

"The dawn comes," Gretchen murmured. "The spell Pilatus holds over me is gone—but I fear it will come upon me again at nightfall. Oh, Simon—"

"True Spirit," he muttered gently, "the Roman shall not have you. Come, get up; I shall return you to your people."

Suddenly they heard hoofbeats, and looked up the trail. In the gray light they saw Karanoch and Brennus approaching. In a moment they had dismounted and were kneeling beside Gretchen.

"She slipped away without warning," said the druid. "The vile Roman lich has a hold on her soul. Here, you two, help her up. I will take her back to the village."

Simon and Brennus obeyed, and in a moment the girl and the old druid were gone. The two men

faced one another.

"Karanoch tells me you must go up the Drakamund," said Brennus uneasily, "in order to save Gretchen's soul."

Simon approvingly regarded the tall young warrior who stood before him in the dawn-light.

"Aye—that is my understanding."

"I would go with you."

Simon, staring into the man's level gray eyes, suddenly felt as if he were looking into a glass that mirrored his own soul.

"You can't, Brennus," he said, an involuntary sadness in his voice. "Your place is with Her. Surely Karanoch has told you—"

"Aye." The young Helvetian nodded briefly. "But, go knowing that we are brothers, Simon of Gitta. Nay, more than brothers—we are somehow one and the same. I know, for there is sorcery in the air this night, and I have had dreams."

Again Simon felt his spine tingling.

"You will take good care of Gretchen."

"Aye—you know it. But you, Simon, must free her soul. Do not fail; all hangs on it."

They clasped hands—and in that moment Simon felt that they were as two gods upon whose actions the fate of the universe somehow depended. Gray eyes and dark, mirroring one another—red hair and black, wafting in the breeze of dawn—and the very reason for the world's existence in some strange way in their hands...

Then, mounting his horse once more, Simon turned and galloped away down the valley, again feeling perilously human and knowing that all depended upon his speed and the dragon-talisman Karanoch had given him.



IV

"I readily believe that in the universe are more invisible beings than visible. But who will expound to us the nature of them...? What is it they perform? What regions do they inhabit?"

— Coleridge

A chill wind was blowing down from the sinister peaks of Mons Fractus. Simon drew his cloak more closely about him, then sought the partial shelter of a rock outcropping and shrugged out of the rope-loops of his pack, letting it fall to the ground. He had been climbing for over three hours, and in spite of his impatience he knew he must rest a bit and eat.

While he lunched on the bread and dried fish the druid had given him, he contemplated the landscape. He had seen mountains perhaps as high in Parthia, but none more impressive. South and east rose enormous snow-capped ranges, dim with distance. Thousands of feet below sprawled the lake, far larger than he had suspected; the abandoned village lay at the end of what was only its southwestern arm. He had left his horse there, untethered; the beast would find its way back to the inhabited village, in case he did not return...

No—he must not allow himself such thoughts.

When he had done eating, he took out the dragon-stone and contemplated its enigmatic runes once more. "**Satha, sithra, satha ixcatl**," he muttered aloud. "What can it mean? And what power might lie in this lifeless stone...?"

It might make a weapon, at least, being so heavy for its size. Carefully he began to knot a leather thong about it, until it was firmly enmeshed in a net of rawhide; in the loose end he fashioned a noose, to loop about his wrist, so that the stone swung on perhaps a foot of thong. Not much of a weapon against conventional foes, but if it had the supernatural forces Karanoch claimed it had, it might subdue Simon's enemy long enough to allow him to plunge home his steel.

Stake or steel through the heart. For that, the druid had told him, was the only way to slay the thing that Pilatus had become...

Simon shook his head. He must not think too much. He must press on. Once more he studied the parchment map that Coponius had had old Nicephorus draw up, then shouldered his pack and resumed his climb. The wind was growing colder, and though the sky was blue to the far horizon there was a cap of gray cloud forming over the jagged peaks of the mountain. Those peaks were not far off now; soon he would be passing through the notch between the nearest two. They looked foreboding enough, Simon thought, to actually be the abode of the dragons the villagers believed in... Involuntarily he glanced to the northeast where, far across the lake, the dark mountains of Zug arose—the mountains where more dragons were said to dwell...

Suddenly he halted in astonishment. Directly before him, standing in the notch atop the rise, were two people—a man and a woman. And both, despite the cold wind, were dressed only in white tunics.

He hurried upward, and in a few more moments stood before them. His astonishment increased. The man seemed a young Adonis for handsomeness, and the woman was one of the most beautiful Simon had ever seen. Both had skin of an alabaster whiteness and long hair that blew in the wind—the woman's raven-black, the man's golden as the locks of Helios. Each wore golden sandals, and about the waist a golden ceinture resembling a serpent clasping its tail in its mouth.

"What are you people doing here?" Simon yelled. "This is a very dangerous place—you must go back down!"

"We appreciate your concern," said the man, "yet we are in no danger. We walk here often. It is a place of great beauty and wonder."

"But—you must be freezing! Believe me, you've got to get down from this mountain before dark; if you start now, you can make it. A demon dwells here."

"We fear no demons," said the woman. "Sithra and Ixcatl protect their servitors from all evil. We heard their names spoken on the mountainside, and so we came."

Simon decided the two were as crazy as their presence and garb implied. Impatiently he strode past them, calling back: "Get off the mountain as fast as you can—I mean it!"

He was almost through the notch when a thought struck him—a connection in his mind—

Satha, sithra, satha, ixcatl...

He spun about and looked back the way he had come. The pair he had encountered were nowhere in sight. Either they had hurried down the mountain as Simon had advised, or—

"Sithra... Ixcatl..."

* * *

He shook his head violently. Doubtless those people believed in the same legends as old Karanoch, and came to this mountain to worship. Obviously they knew the words carved on the dragon-stone, and no doubt there were other such stones carved with the same runic words.

And now Simon knew that two of those words were the names of deities—deities of which he had never heard.

Yet, he still had a job to do. The view from the notch afforded him new vistas westward, almost as breathtaking as the eastward ones. He consulted his map once more, then struck off down the rugged slope at as rapid a pace as he could manage. The terrain here was rocky, and made more difficult here and there by large patches of snow evidently left over from an early autumn blizzard. The wind was less strong on this side of the mountain, but the dark gray clouds seemed to hover closer.

Once his progress was impeded by a deep crevasse full of snow, and he had to make a long detour around it. It was just after this that he spied his destination, right where old Nicephorus had marked an "x" on the parchment—a small tarn, nestled in a hollow of the mountain.

Drawing a deep breath, Simon strode down the slope. The water of the tarn seemed almost as black as ink under the lowering clouds.

Carefully he loosened from his belt the thong



that held the dragon-stone and looped it around his left wrist, feeling somewhat foolish even as he did so. What was he going to do? Dive into the icy pool and search for the coffin of Pilatus? If so, he might well freeze to death long before he could find it, somehow pry it open and drive the blade of his sica into the undead Roman's evil heart.

The wind rose, and Simon felt a touch of fear. Until now, his desire for vengeance and his concern for Gretchen had sustained him. But in this moment he suddenly realized how **unprepared** he was, and the realization was unnerving. For an instant he felt an impulse to turn and run—to flee the mountain and its environs before darkness should fall.

"Sithra — Ixcatl..." The names fell spontaneously from his lips—almost like a prayer.

And in that instant he started with surprise. There was a patch of red about halfway between him and the tarn, vivid upon the dark slope. Why had he not seen it sooner...? Then he saw that it was the figure of a man wrapped in a cloak and seated upon a boulder, motionless.

A scarlet cloak—the cloak of a high Roman official.

Simon breathed deeply, drew his sica and advanced. The figure rose from its seat and faced him. As he drew closer to the thing, Simon's skin crawled. It wore the robe and toga of a Roman procurator, and its features were indeed those of Pilatus—except for the eyes. The yellow, burning eyes...

He stopped a few paces away from the thing, unable to still the crawling of his flesh. Then, in a voice too deep to be human, it said:

"Fool, your desire for vengeance has led you to doom!"

Simon gasped. "How did you know—?"

Pilatus laughed, and Simon saw white fangs gleaming within his gaping black mouth.

"Fear and hate—these things I know and sense from afar. I devoted my life to knowing them, and ever since my mortal life ended I have been able to sense the source of such emotions, like the glowings of dark stars. For many months I have sensed you, Simon of Gitta, crawling ever closer to me, like a black spider in the dark."

"You slew my mentor," said Simon. "You slew many hundreds of his unarmed followers for no more crime than assembling in public, and many thousands of others for the same offense. And when leaders of the people rose up to cry out against you, you scourged them, crucified them, burned their bodies —"

Pilatus laughed again—dark, unholy laughter, inhumanly vibrant. He strode a pace closer to Simon.

"These were small things, Samaritan—things that merely prepared my soul for the great Destiny that awaited it. The dark gods work strangely. Caligula craved eternal life; he died, but by his actions he gave eternal life to me!"

Suddenly, with unhuman swiftness, Pilatus darted forward, clawed hands extended. Only the reflexive quickness of Simon's gladiator-training saved him; he dodged, fainted at Pilatus' face, then lunged for the heart. The animated lich avoided the blow, again with a quickness no human could have achieved, then darted a few paces away and

crouched like a snarling wolf, eyes blazing.

Simon advanced slowly, knife ready, a ferocity equal to that of Pilatus gleaming in his dark eyes. "You shall die, Roman. You have come abroad by day, without your full powers, and now you shall **truly** die for your crimes!"

"Fool! I command storm and thunder! I have the strength of more than a score of warriors—even during the daylight!"

So saying, Pilatus stooped and lifted a stone that must have weighed as much as a man, then hurled it. Simon barely avoided it, heard it crunch into the slope behind him. Pilatus rushed forward, fanged mouth gaping. Frantically Simon swung the dragon-stone at the Roman's face; the procurator brushed it aside with a contemptuous laugh, lunged for Simon's throat with groping talons—then leaped back barely in time to avoid the sica once more. And Simon realized with a sinking feeling that Karanoch's dragon-stone had far less power than the jade talisman he wore around his neck.

Slowly he backed up the slope. The vampire crept after him, hissing venomously. Suddenly it raised its arms and cried out:

"Storm—thunder—aid me!"

Lightning flashed in the clouds between the rocky peaks of Mons Fractus. The wind howled, and icy flakes began to fall, stinging Simon's face. Fear gripped him as he continued to retreat up the slope.

Pilatus snatched up another huge boulder and hurled it, then another. Simon, retreating and frantically dodging, knew he could not last much longer in the face of such monstrous sorcery. He was lost—Gretchen was lost. He must steel himself to make one last charge—to give his life if only he could plunge his sica into the heart of the hateful Roman demon—

Suddenly his retreating foot encountered empty space, and he screamed wildly as he fell backwards into the snow-filled chasm he had forgotten about until now—until too late. Then he felt himself falling and crashing through a brittle snow-crust—and knew no more.

* * *

Simon woke in darkness, feeling numbed and chilled. His body ached. Then memory galvanized him with fear and he forced himself up on his hands and knees. He sensed that he had been stunned for only a few moments; surely his enemy was close upon him...

His foot struck an object that clattered—his heavy-bladed sica. He snatched it up. The dragon-stone, he realized, was still tied to his left wrist. Slowly, carefully, he crawled away from the debris of snow and pebbles in which he had been lying, wondering why he could not see. Was he blind? A chill swept over him at the thought—

Yet, no—the darkness was not complete; a faint, yellow glow was filtering into his eyes. He concentrated on it, and slowly realized that it was coming from the end of a long tunnel. He had fallen into a cavern of some sort.

Hurriedly he crawled toward the light, then rose shakily to his feet and hastened on, thankful to know that he had evidently broken no bones in his fall. The corridor became more and more distinct,

and Simon saw that it was definitely artificial, carved with uncanny precision from the solid rock.

He rounded a right-angle bend — and gasped. A huge room, lit with pale golden light, gaped before him — a room whose walls were lined with metallic surfaces that hummed and blinked with scintillating lights, whose interior was filled with tables laden with glass vessels filled with many-colored liquids, some of which bubbled through intricate transparent coils and tubes...

Stupified, Simon pressed his hands to his temples. What he saw here was like nothing he had ever seen before. There was nothing he could relate to, nothing he could describe in words. He felt terror growing in him, like a dark worm gnawing its way up his spine.

And then, the crowning horror — two mottled, reptilian shapes, walking upright like men — walking toward him...

"No!" he gasped, gripping his knife more tightly. "No! Stay back —!"

But they came on, staring at him with large green eyes with vertical pupils. They were nearly as tall as himself, and their smooth-scaled bodies gleamed with iridescent shades of green and blue under the golden light that streamed from circular discs set into the ceiling. They were crowned with spines connected by turquoise membranes veined with streaks of scarlet.

Peace, human — we mean you no harm.

Simon relaxed a bit. The voice that had sprung up in his mind was soothing; more, it was familiar. A woman's voice, surely... And now, the reptilian forms before him seemed less terrifying — began to seem beautiful, in fact, rather than merely alien....

Then those forms began to shimmer, to transform —

"Baal!" Simon gasped, wonder and fear vying within him.

Two humans were standing before him — the same two he had met earlier upon the mountain. A man and a woman, divinely beautiful, clad in white tunics with gold serpent-belts.

"Fear not," said the man. "We should have assumed these forms sooner, knowing as we do that you humans are disturbed by our true aspect. I repeat, we mean you no harm."

Simon's fear vanished completely. He suddenly felt ashamed at his instinctive reaction.

"Your true forms are beautiful, but —"

"But alien to you, and therefore unsettling," said the woman. "You are the first human in more than a hundred years to come to this mountain with the names of Sithra and Ixcatl on your lips; therefore, we greet you with happiness, and as friends."

"Sithra? Ixcatl? I don't understand —"

"Sithra is the Mother of Wisdom, Ixcatl the Dispenser of it; they handed it down to all mortal beings upon this planet. Your race received from ours the knowledge that enabled you to begin the climb upward from the ape-stage."

Simon's skin prickled. "You mean — you're —"

"I am Luria," said the woman, "and this is Issuris. We are the last of the Serpent-people to dwell within this mountain."

"You!" gasped Simon. "Your race preceded

mine upon this planet — your ancestors gave to Eve the fruit that led to the curse of our awakening —?"

"Yours was always a poetic species," said Issuris.

"And a clever one," Luria added. "But for the flaw in your nature that makes you subject to cruel and violent passions, you would by now have voyaged to the stars."

Simon's brain was whirling. He had read in ancient books of the Serpent-people of Valusia, who had inhabited this region long before even the fabled ancient lands of Acheron and the Hyborians. Yet, he had never believed those accounts to be more than myths.

"By all the gods!" he gasped. "Then, you're the dragons — the beings venerated by the old druid Karanoch!"

"Alas, Karanoch was never bold enough to visit us," said Issuris, "though we tried often enough to answer his prayers. Human minds are still somewhat unresponsive, I fear, despite our race's past attempt to infuse them with perception. Besides, in the last century we have sensed an evil growing up from the south — an evil greater than any since the sorcerers of Acheron rose to crush and enslave the minds of mankind."

"Aye," muttered Simon, understanding. "Rome..."

"Yet not all humans are evil," said Luria. "We know that you are a true seeker of knowledge, Simon of Gitta."

"You know my name —?"

"Yes. And we see that you carry an object tied to your left wrist. Did not the druid, Karanoch, give it to you?"

Simon nodded. "He claimed that it had power, but it did not."

Luria moved forward and took the stone from Simon, unlooping the thong from his wrist and deftly untying the mesh of cord. "How strange, to see this object again," she murmured. "It was centuries ago that we gave it to the Druids of Sarnen; then, over a hundred years ago, Karanoch's great-grandfather carried it with him when he visited us. Now its power has nearly vanished. Wait here, Simon."

She strode across the wide room and laid the stone upon a strange crystalline structure that Simon thought vaguely resembled an altar. Then, advancing to one of the blinking metallic panels that formed part of the wall, she flicked a small lever. Immediately the stone was bathed in a brilliant blue light, while a strange humming sound shrilled within the room.

Then the glow vanished and the humming ceased. Luria retrieved the dragon-stone and returned it to Simon. It appeared to be unchanged.

"A present from the dragons," she said. "It will aid you now."

Simon shook his head. "You are not dragons, Luria — Issuris. Karanoch's tribe may worship you as such, but the Parthians have told me that true dragons are enormous monsters that fly on scaly wings and breathe fire —"

Luria smiled. "Some of those beings you describe do indeed live in deep caverns within this very mountain, and within the mountains of Zug as well. But you would not care to meet them, Simon

of Gitta—their intellect is as deficient as that of most humans, and their passions nearly as unruly."

Simon examined the heavy dragon-stone in his hand. "Can this truly help me now? And, how have **you** escaped the undead lich that has prowled upon this mountain for the last three years?"

Issuris laughed, tossing his blond hair. "We've hardly noticed him. He craves human blood, not serpent blood. But now, since he seeks to destroy a friend of ours, he must go."

"Friend...?"

"Aye, Simon. How many humans would have conversed with us for so long, or found beauty in our true shapes? How many would have found fascination rather than horror in our nature? You hunger for knowledge, and we hope you will stay with us for a space and let us assuage that hunger. Snow is falling upon this mountain you think of as Mons Fractus; it would be dangerous for you to descend. Stay with us until spring, and we will teach you much."

Simon, his spine tingling more than ever, remained silent for a space. Then:

"I must slay Pilatus; I have sworn that I shall. A woman of Karanoch's people lies under his curse. Help me, and I will dwell with you as long as you wish."

Luria smiled. "No, Simon, as long as **you** wish. We do not force others to be unwilling guests. But you will learn much if you stay, I promise you—secrets concerning the nature of the universe, such as you have never dreamed of. Please let us, the last of the folk who first taught your race, now teach you."

Simon nodded. He sensed a sincerity from these strange beings that he had seldom known from his own kind. "I will stay. Yet, what of the undead Roman who still prowls this mountain—?"

Luria smiled again. "I do not sense his thoughts. He sleeps again in his pool, doubtless believing he slew you."

Simon gripped the haft of his knife. "How, then, can I come at him to work my vengeance—?"

"Vengeance?" Luria laughed openly. "No, Simon, you will be doing the vampire a favor by slaying him. Though he lusts for eternal life, his is a pointless existence. He knows nothing of beauty or the delights of the mind, only the blood-thirst that burns forever. You would punish him most by letting him live on. But I see that concern for your friends is uppermost in your thoughts. Therefore I will tell you what to do with the dragon-stone. Listen carefully..."

* * *

Simon stood again upon the windy slope above the tarn, his mind still in a whirl. Could he believe what he had just been told? Were the two people he had just talked to what they seemed to be?

Yes, they were. They had touched levels of his mind that were too profound to be discounted. And, incredibly, they had offered him hospitality and friendship.

But there was another being upon this mountain who was the friend of no man, nor ever could be.

Slowly Simon strode down toward the black tarn, until finally he stood upon a limestone ledge at

its brink. A tension brooded in the air. Above, dark clouds moved slowly between the sinister spires of the mountain, emitting sparse snowflakes; mist boiled in the air, like dark spirits stirring...

The sun was setting, large and orange in the west beyond the cloud-capped peaks. Simon knew he must act quickly. With firm determination he strode down to the edge of the tarn and detached the dragon-stone from his belt.

"Baal," he muttered, "help me now against my dark enemy!"

He hurled the dragon-stone. It arched up, then down—splashed into the surface of the pond—

Lightning crashed between the clouded peaks of Mons Fractus. Thunder rolled, and a tremendous wind blew up. Simon started in sudden fear. Before his eyes the waters of the pond began to roil with what seemed a supernatural intensity—almost to boil...

And then, something crawled out of the pool—a human shape, wrapped in a great cloak, snarling and whining as if in pain. Slowly it crept forward, like a crippled insect, then collapsed upon the rock ledge, twitching and hissing. Simon advanced, sica in hand, and glared down upon the thing that looked up at him with vindictive yellow eyes—the thing that writhed before him hissing in fury, like a broken scorpion upon the rocks...

He raised the gladiatorial knife. The vampire snarled at him, hate and terror in its glowing eyes. The glow brightened as the sun's lower edge touched the horizon.

"I had almost thought to give this blow in mercy," muttered Simon, "but such is not in my heart. I give it in vengeance. **Perite Pilatus!**"

The blade plunged down into the Roman's heart. Pilatus screamed hideously; his clawed hand shot out and locked on Simon's throat—but fell away before the vampire could exert his supernatural strength. The glow faded from the eyes; the body writhed a final time, then twitched and lay still.

Simon drew back, knife held ready for another blow if need be. The corpse did not stir. Above, the clouds of Mons Fractus began to disperse. Simon gaped in wonderment—for now the body of the procurator was collapsing, deteriorating rapidly into a state of putrefaction. Hastily he stepped forward and nudged it with his toe—

Slowly the corpse turned over and fell from the ledge into the tarn, then sank from sight. A few foul bubbles rose up from it...

Then, turning away from the pool whose waters were now unruffled by aught but the dying wind, Simon walked slowly back up the slope, knowing that he would accept the strange new offer of friendship that had come his way, and also that he would never divulge to the world the secrets he knew of the Dragons of Mons Fractus.

