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EDITORIAL

The price of this magazine and a subscription have been increased, not so much because my competitors WHISPERERS and ELDritch TALES recently did the same thing, but rather because I can no longer take the time to typeset this magazine and my books and Fantasy Mongers, fill orders, do direct mailings, ads, etc. Henceforth the typesetting will be done by THE WORDWRIGHT. (Still did 2/3 of this issue myself, but from now on 1 only do the finishing touches.) A portion of the price increase will go to pay them, while the rest will cover inflation and expanded advertising costs, since I need more subscribers if I am to publish oftener than twice a year.

To cushion the shock on new and renewing subscribers, I am preparing a list of "premiums" for you that will more than make up for the price increase. The list is not yet complete, as I write this, but it includes coupons for free sample copies of Fantasybook, Space & Time, Eldritch Tales #11, and Whispers #9 or 10.

After years of subsidizing foreign subscribers, I have decided to begin charging them for the additional postage. There isn’t much difference on back issue sales, but subscription copies go out bulk rate in the U.S. at much less than book-rate abroad. (Mailing a copy book rate 15 miles to Fort Erie, Ontario, is around four times as expensive as mailing bulk rate thousands of miles to Hawaii. Crazy!) Non-subscribers do not get my "new book" announcements that go out with the subscription mailing. So a brief commentary... you get full information by sending me a stamp for the catalog. First, Pulptime sold out in both editions, but has been reprinted. Brian Lumley’s House of Cthulhu and Other Tales of the Primal Land sold out in hardcover but paper cover copies are still available. Joseph Payne Brennan’s Sixty Selected Poems came out early this year and is available. Now in press is The New Devil’s Dictionary: Creepy Cliches and Sinister Synonyms, by J. N. Williamson, with many fine illustrations by J. H. Potter. Going to press a week or two later than this issue is Darrell Schweitzer’s Tom O’Bedlam’s Night Out and Other Strange Excursions, with about 20 drawings by Stephen E. Fabian. Going to press in perhaps a month is Lumley’s new novel, Hero of Dreams, with drawings by Jean Corbin. There will be signed, slipcased editions of these latter three books, very limited editions. If that interests you, please inquire at once, because pre-publication sales have been brisk. Scheduled for 1986 are two more novels by Lumley, Ship of Dreams and Mad Moon of Dreams, and The Compleat Crow, a collection of his short "Titus Crow" stories, including a new one never before published. The next Weirdbook will feature a very long "Terra Khash" tale by Lumley and an "Imaro" novelette by Charles Saunders.

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THE THRONE OF ACHAMOTH

by RICHARD L. TIERNEY and ROBERT M. PRICE

I

Simon of Gitta stood silently upon the balcony outside the window of his high room, gazing toward the full moon as it slowly rose above the city of Antioch. Strange emotions stirred deep within him. He leaned forward, hands on the balcony’s rail, staring straight at the moon’s orange disc, scarcely aware of the few stars that shared the sky with it at this hour of dusk, nor of the dimming sounds of the great city below. The moonlight made his youthful, high-cheekboned face seem strangely ageless—made black pits of his deep-set eyes, black shadows of the bangs that brushed his wide forehead.

"Luna—Selene—Helen," he muttered, the sound of his voice almost too soft to stir the air. "Where are you this night, my lost love—my only love...?"

"Gone from this world, Simon—but not from you."

The young man turned slowly and faced the dark-robed oldster who had joined him so abruptly and silently. "As always, Dosithue, you come with a sorcerer's practiced stealth."

The old man ignored the younger one’s slight tone of resentment. He was gazing upon the newly-risen moon, and in its rays his wrinkled face revealed some of the same rapt sadness Simon’s had shown.

"Aye—Luna, Selene," he murmured, stroking his white beard. "To mortals of this world it is a symbol of Her. How beautiful she is tonight!"

Simon shook his head abruptly as if toawan himself from an unwonted mood. His features were stern as he looked upon his old mentor.

"Are you ready?" he demanded. "Have the preparations been made?"

Dosithue nodded. "They have been. But, Simon, are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"I am. I must see Helen again."

The old mage sighed, strode two paces back into the room, then returned to the balcony, his dark, symbol-embazoned robes sweeping the tiles with a soft whisper. His face was pensive, even anxious.

"I have warned you, Simon: my powers, though great, may not be adequate to guide you back to this world once you have left it. I ask you one last time: Can you not accept Helen’s death—?"

"I must see her again, Dosithue."

The old man nodded. The determination in his pupil’s voice, the hardness in his moon-limned features, were not to be denied. For an instant Dosithue again felt the almost unique spiritual force that had caused him years ago to seek Simon out and rescue him from the brutal slavery of the arena.

"Follow me, then." He turned and led Simon into the lamplit room and pointed to a dark, symbol-embazoned tunic draped over a couch. "Don that, and nothing else. You must not wear bands, belts or garments that constrict."

Simon quickly doffed his own belt, sandals and tunic, then put on the other tunic with its planetary symbols over his athletic form. Instructed in magic as he was, he knew the reason for Dosithue’s directions: an astral voyage such as he planned could be sustained only by a healthy physical body—at least if he hoped to return to earth—and that body must not be encumbered by binding physical objects, lest the flow of spiritual energy be impeded.

"Now, old wizard—lead on."

Dosithue shook his head sadly. "Once more, Simon, I have to warn you: it is a perilous journey on which you embark. You will see things that may blast your soul!"

"Enough. I thought you’d had done with that. No more excuses. You told me once that you were aided upon just such a spiritual voyage as this by Daramos, greatest of the Persian mages—and I have heard it confirmed from Daramos’ own mouth during the years we were both under his tutelage."

"Yet there is a difference, Simon. Though you and I are both True Spirits, suffered from the Lord of Light and trapped in this world of matter by the mad demiurge Achamoth who created it, your being contains a greater portion of the fragmented God-Soul than does mine—perhaps more than any other man’s—and therefore the impetus of your spiritual destiny may carry you into dangerous realms where my knowledge cannot aid you. During my own journey, even with the aid of Daramos, I was able only to approach the Sphere of Saturn before my soul retreated in terror, and I feel that I was barely able to defy the Archons of the Primal Gods and return to my living body. What you seek, Simon, lies far beyond Saturn’s sphere."

For a moment the young man wavered as he sensed the genuine concern in his mentor’s eyes. Deliberately he hardened his feelings and said:

"Lead on, Dosithue—unless of course you are the charlatan I have often half-suspected you to be."

The old man’s eyes sparked with a momentary anger, and in that moment the mystical symbols on his robe seemed to glow slightly; but in the next moment the spark and the glow were gone, so quickly that Simon wondered if they had been an illusion.

"Simon, Simon," said Dosithue, his tone startling the younger man by its likeness to that of a mother toward a stubborn child. "Your anger, your bitterness, makes you say what you know is not true. You have seen with your own eyes that what Daramos and I can do is no charlatanry."

Simon shook his head. "Yet, we make a good living, you and I, by fooling the mob with magic illusions. Can you or can you not, Dosithue, enable me to see and speak with Helen, as you claim?"

An almost mystical light, tinged with anguish, replaced the anger in Dosithue’s eyes. "You know I can—though now you fight against the truth of it even more strenuously than you once fought your opponents in the arena. You must now make your peace with that truth, Simon—and with a truth about yourself—for that is your only hope of commanding the power that will enable you to return from the voyage upon which you demand I send you."

Simon’s features softened a trifle; he sensed his old mentor’s true concern. "A truth about myself...?"
"An earthly truth—one to supplement the cosmic truth I have often told you, that you and Helen are perhaps the two greatest fragments of the sundered God-Soul of the universe. Perhaps I have stressed that latter truth too much during the two years since the Romans caused your Helen to die if so, forgive me, for it was but to assuage your grief. But now the balance must be regained. Tell me, Simon: Who are we?"

"What do you mean? We are wandering magicians from Samaria—illusion-makers, garnering a good living from the gullible mob—"

"Aye. And so, we are human." Dositheus gestured to the wide balcony door beyond which the moon, now silvery and companioned by many brightening stars, was rising above the darkened streets and buildings of the great city. "Out there lie hundreds of thousands of other humans, preparing for sleep, or thiery, or lovemaking, or who knows what else—and beyond them in this wide, nighted world lie millions more. Only a small fraction of them are True Spirits such as we, Simon—yet, who is to judge which those few are? But tonight I ask you to identify yourself with those unsouled millions who wrangle and fight, breed and strive and die only for gain or that their progeny might live. Think of them, Simon, feel for them, make of them an anchor for your soul; otherwise, you might never return..."

Simon looked out over the city to the wide river that lay silvery under the moon, ships moored there in the shadows of buildings, to the angular walls and towers that cast those shadows. He seemed to sense the myriad human lives out there, clustered, festering.

"Why should I care for them? Have you not told me that they are devoid of the Spark, like animals? Have I not sensed that for myself? Do they not themselves constantly prove it to me, day by day?"

"Yet any of them might birth a True Spirit. Cling to this world, Simon, cling to it, lest you be unable to return. Remember that you are one human among millions, that you are in a world of time where multitudes have lived and died. Tell me, Simon: when are we living?"

Simon humored him. "We live in the autumn of the eighteenth year of the mad emperor Tiberius, Princeps of Rome."

"Cling to that, Simon. You are a human, in this world and in this time. And now, follow me."

* * *

He followed the wizard down the several stairways from their rented apartments to the cellars, which were also rented by Dositheus from the rich merchant who owned the building. On the stone floor of the largest room, which was furnished only with one low couch in the center and a small cabinet against one wall, a pentagram was outlined in bright blue chalk. It surrounded the couch, on either side of which coals glowed within the bowl of a bronze brazier, and at each of its five corners burned a white candle. Beneath the couch and partly hidden by it was a large symbol resembling a seven-headed hydra, also drawn in blue.

"Little enough preparation," Simon remarked, "for so momentous a voyage as you say this is to be."

"Aye, Simon. There is seldom any preparation for death, and it is the journey of death that you must undertake—death before its appointed time. Now, lie down on the couch, my son."

Simon did so—then suddenly realized that Dositheus had never before used that term of endearment while addressing him. He watched as the old man turned to the cabinet, unlocked it and took forth a bulky yellowed scroll. It was, Simon realized without surprise, the old thuriamurige's most prized possession—the original Persian rendition of the Sapientia Magorum that held the arcane secrets of the olden magus Ostanes.

"Simon, before I begin—"

"Spare me, Dositheus. I will not be dissuaded."

The old wizard nodded; the various torch-flames about the walls reflected from his balding pate. "I know. Yet I must instruct you. There is more between you and your lost Helen, Simon, than the love of man for woman—as I have often told you. She is your syzygy—your yoke-mate, your other self. If only you would curb this madness of yours!—for you and Helen will meet again on this material plane—as you must. But that time cannot be hastened."

Simon's eyes were hard. "Yet it was your magic that first brought Helen and me prematurely together. I will see her now. You cannot deny me this."

Dositheus nodded sadly, turned and paced slowly to the farthest side of the dimly lit chamber. Simon became aware of strange fumes being exuded by the two braziers flanking him. His mind felt like it was beginning to float. Then Dositheus turned and faced him.

"The fumes are affecting you," said Dositheus. "Do not fight them. Let them waft you where they will."

"Why—why do they not affect you...?" Simon asked dreamily.

Partly because I am outside the pentacle, partly because your True Spirit is greater than mine. I have told you that you are one of the High Ones, possessing perhaps a larger measure of the sundered soul of the Lord of Light than anyone on this earth. Thus your destiny is great, as is that of Her whom you knew as Helen. For you and she are mates beyond time and materiality, formed of the Ultimate Source. Now you must realize your destiny, Simon, and accept it."

Simon watched the old man, whose voice was inducing an hypnotic effect. His former impatience was now gone, stilled by the strange mixture of odors from the braziers—odors delightful and intoxicating, yet piquant and tinged even with a trace of foulness—and also by the tired yet firm conviction of his mentor's voice and somber air. Suddenly he wanted to reach out to this old mentor of his—this ecccentric old sorcerer he had never completely trusted—but found in that same moment that he could not move. The webs of sorcery he had requested were being woven about him.

Dositheus stepped forward with a small jar of blue paint he had taken from the cabinet and proceeded to daub Simon's forehead with a blue symbol. From the feel of it Simon guessed it must be a sunburst or spoked wheel design.

"This is the symbol of Narayana, the Seven-Headed Serpent—the same that I have drawn
upon the floor. It is older than Persia, older than India, older than mankind. The Nagas of primal Mu used it to designate the Seven Aspects of Creation, the Seven Minds of Being; it will aid you to penetrate the Seven Barriers you must pass." The old mage withdrew for a moment from Simon's view, then returned carrying the latter's straight, double-edged sword, which he placed in Simon's right hand. "You may need it—or, rather, its spirit-double—before your return."

So saying, Dositheus withdrew again from the pentagram and stood tall, the ancient scroll held up like a wand in his lean left hand. "There are other weapons, Simon, as you well know—words you will need to speak in order to pass the boundaries established by the Pain Lords. I have taught you only the earthly sounds of these words, but your soul already knows their higher vibrations. They will come to you complete at the proper times."

The old wizard then unrolled the scroll and began to read. His voice, which had already seemed to be fading into distance, now was as the merest whisper, yet Simon was able to understand him clearly. And as reality flickered, the Persian words—already familiar from past studies—seemed this time to take on new connotations never before apprehended: "O Atar, O Fire-Spirit, waft upward the sunned spirit of thy questing, homeward-returning Master! Awake, Simon of Gitta, awake! Sleep no longer, O Lord Mazda, the sleep of matter! Awake—"

Simon's vision whirled. The ceiling was becoming a dark pool, swirling, drawing him upward...

"Awake, O Lord Mazda, from the sleep of matter..."

II

He emerged from the darkness—not the darkness of sleep, but of non-being. Had he been there for a second, or an eternity...?

He was rising upward, through the walls and floors of the great building, passing through material barriers as if they did not exist. Though the rooms were in darkness he sensed clearly the arrangement of their furnishings, the presence of their drowsing occupants. Then he emerged from the rooftop and found himself wafted rapidly upward above the dark, sprawling city of Antioc—upward toward the stars and the full, gleaming face of the moon.

Luna—Selene—

The city receded beneath him, and as he rose he sensed the animal vitality of the hundreds of thousands who slept in its darkness or crept through its alleys on errands of stealth. For a moment the perception of that seething stew of life-force afflicted him with a feeling analogous to suffocation—but then, his ever-more-rapid ascent bore him out of it. Now he could see, amid that stew of uneasy dreams and red emotions, a few bright sparks, perhaps a score of them—True Spirits like himself, he intuitively realized. For an instant he yearned to swoop down and rescue them from this seething ocean of torment in which they were embedded like diamonds in a dung-heap—but realized he could not. He was being swept up by Destiny—and yet, somehow, by his own will—toward that ultimate region whence, he vaguely realized, all True Spirits had originally come.

And now the speed of his ascent was truly alarming. Antioc had become a vanishing blotch upon the darkness of the vast earth, the Oronetes River a vanishing silver thread. The world was expanding to horizons astonishingly vast—dark to the starry east, silvery to the west where the great sea sprawled to the sunset—the returning, brightening sunset...

Then the sun began to rise in the west, and Simon realized that it was due to the great speed of his ascent! Just before its returning light flooded his vision he glimpsed, upon the enormous curved expanse of the eastward earth, perhaps half a dozen brilliant gleams of light—the souls of High Ones, like himself...

Then they had vanished, lost amid the light of the western dawn into which he was rising. The earth's curvature was now apparent—and then the sky, despite the sun's brilliance, began to darken. The stars emerged once more, brighter and more numerous than ever, and Simon suddenly realized what had happened: he had emerged from the air, that medium that scattered and softened light!

A momentary terror gripped him. The air, which some philosophers felt pervaded all things, was but a thin blanket about the earth. Nature, far from abhorring a vacuum, appeared to be almost entirely one colossal vacuum extending to the ultimate boundary of space!

But, no, this vacuum was not quite empty, for now Simon saw what appeared to be dim, sickly-yellowish wisps or streaks of flame ascending upward from that atmosphere surrounding the earth. His astral vision, and the intuition that accompanied it, told him that these wisps were the life-forces of the myriad humans and animals that were suffering and perishing constantly upon the earth.

He turned uneasily from them and gazed upward—no, outward, for to his surprise he realized that for him there was no longer any up or down—and fastened his attention on the moon. It now seemed larger, brighter. To him it was a silvery beacon of promise. Surely here he would find the answers to his burning questions...

Luna—Selene—

Yet his course was not taking him directly toward the moon, as he had first thought, but a bit to one side of it. He tried to correct that deviation by force of will, but could not. He tried other maneuvers, found that he could turn in space and view his body—and was startled to see that it, the tunic he wore and the sword he clutched were expanded, tenuous, so that the bright stars shone dimly through them. He stole a glance behind—and recoiled in startled awe. The earth was but a receding sphere, marked on its thin sunlit crescent with shades of green and blue and streaked with beautiful swirls of white. Beyond it was the sun, whose light, though more intense than Simon had ever seen it, did not hurt his eyes in the slightest. Near it in the blackness gleamed red Antares and its companion stars of Scorpio, their luster undiminished. And then Simon perceived that the solar disc was less than perfect, despite the contentions of philosophers, for irregular blotches seemed to crawl slowly across its face; and again he felt the horror of new revelations contrary to his early learning...
A fresh surge of awe took him as he turned back to the moon, for it was now huge in his sight and he recognized it for what it was—one another world. No longer was it ful, but gibbous, and along the line of light and dark Simon saw the stark shadows of what were obviously awesome mountain peaks and monstrous craters. He realized, too, that his speed was increasing or his sense of time slowing down—perhaps both—else the moon's phase could not have changed so quickly.

And now, as the lunar orb grew visibly in size, he realized that it was a far different place from what he and his fellow mortals had thought it to be. No blanket of air surrounded it such as surrounded the benign earth, and its surface was cratered and shattered awesomely. In that moment Simon realized that here had taken place that supposedly legendary battle between the Titans and the Gods, and that he would not find upon this airless and shattered world the answer to his quest. A hopeful humanity had used this orb to symbolize its dream of the Eternal Feminine, but only the darkest of such spirits might aptly be so symbolized: Hecate, Lilith, perhaps even the Elamite abomination anciently called Shupnikurut....

But then he sensed that this blasted globe was not as lifeless as it had at first seemed. Deep within it, like worms and insects within a rotten fruit, teemed myriad of sentient entities beings so alien in form and thought and purpose that Simon was glad that his spiritual senses could detect them but dimly.

Now, as he began to pass the moon, so that its gleaming gibbous portion decreased toward the half-phase, Simon sensed something new—a pale nimbus of greenish-gray light, barely visible, that entirely surrounded it. At the same time he saw that the moon was turning more and more rapidly, with a motion that was more than the apparent one caused by his approach. Surely his own rate of time-perception was slowing down! And now the nimbus was definitely visible—not a cloud so much as a glowing blob of pallid, sickly greenish light, and it was taking on form. In another moment Simon was able to see that form clearly, even though the light of the distant stars shone unimpeded through it.

For an instant he felt horror. The thing was monstrous—a gigantic, pulsing, toadlike entity, eyeless, and snouted with a cluster of slowly-waving feelers like those of an anemone. Its non-material flesh appeared to Simon's senses as of a blotty, fungoid texture and color; the moon seemed to him to float at its center in lieu of a heart. He tensed, willed himself to flee—but in the next instant sensed that the monster was asleep, drowsily drifting, orbiting with the moon....

And now Simon noticed that a vast, thin membrane extended out from it in all directions, barely perceptible, curving through space like the concave surface of an unbelievably huge bubble. He glanced above, behind, below, but found no direction in which that bubble did not extend. It enclosed not only himself but all the space surrounding the earth he had left so far behind. Its diameter was equal to the orbit of the monster-enveloped moon as it circled the earth—which that orb seemed to do more and more rapidly as Simon's time-rate slowed down.

Abruptly Simon realized that this colossal being was an Archon—only the first of several which Dosithesus had warned him of and which he knew he must somehow pass.

He was approaching the vast concavity of the bubble, and now he saw that many of the sickly yellowish flame-streaks accompanying him through the void were plunging into it. Immediately it absorbed them, snuffed them out, stretched them like thin yellow strings in the direction of the monster. The thing absorbed them as it pulsed there, unconscious, corpulent and bloated. Simon shuddered to see it feeding thusly off the radiated life-forces of the myriad fearful, pained and dying organisms of the sublunar world of earth; its sleep seemed to him like the sated dozing of a beast of prey. He felt sickened—then realized that he, too, was fast approaching that soul-entangling membrane, was almost upon it—

"Malevanakhuth!"

He cried out the Name abruptly, almost without intention. It was not a vocal cry, but more—a mental peal that vibrated the blackness. And in that instant, during the cry's brief duration, he had passed through the membrane. The thinness of it surprised him. Had it been material not even the most sensitive thumb and forefinger could have detected it between them. For a tiny moment Simon had sensed the pain and fear of the countless lives caught in that bubble—and then he had burst through it, hurrying with incredible speed into the void beyond.

He glanced back and saw that the monstrous Moon-Archon had not awakened. The Name had protected him—and had protected also, evidently, quite a few hundreds of the yellowish wisps of life which were still accompanying him. These survivors, and the less numerous ones afar off, seemed like dim yellow sparks lost in the immensities, faltering, bewildered, yet pressing onward. Nearly all the other such sparks were now but yellow lines on the vast Sphere behind Simon, millions of them, being drawn toward the pulsing Archon as psychic energy to feed it; only the hardiest, or those lucky enough to be near him, had made it through.

Simon shuddered. Astrologers had long sensed the moon to be a source of emotional influence—and no wonder, considering the cosmic whirlpool of fear and pain of which it was the vortex!

But now Simon, gazing sidewise along the plane of the moon's orbit, sensed a filament of energy extending off into space from the vast bubble. Again his unearthly intuition told him what it must be: the excess psychic energy, not needed to nourish the moon-Archon and sustain its Sphere, was being sent outward into the void, toward the next Sphere, that of—

"Mars!" gasped Simon.

It was true. He was hurrying toward that baleful red planet at an incredible rate. It grew brighter even as he watched—became a disc in his vision—and soon he began to sense an even greater bubble-net extending from it, utterly dwarfing that which had extended from the moon around the earth.

In that instant Simon realized two incredible things: first, that the olden astronomer Aristarchus had been right in maintaining that the earth and the other planets orbited the sun; second that Eudoxus and Aristotle had been right in putting those planets—
at least in the astral plane—upon gigantic rotating Spheres. For now Simon could see with his psychic eye that the vast Sphere of Mars extended to include not only the earth and the moon, but the sun and inner planets as well!

The immensity of it overwhelmed him—so much so that he became aware barely in time of his rapid approach to the globe of Mars and the monstrous Archon that surrounded it, pulsing in sleep. He saw only briefly that red planet at the hideous being's heart—sensed its thin atmosphere, its mountains and plains blasted like the moon's, and the monstrous alien life that lurked and slept beneath its surface—that stirred, awakening at his approach....

And then he saw that the Archon was awakening also. This one seemed a bladdery, reddish-purple head, smooth like an octopus, featureless save for two great opening eyes and two writhing masses of more than a dozen tentacles. The eyes, Simon felt, were staring directly at him—the tentacles were reaching in his direction....

"Khamael!"

Again the Name he spoke was not really a word but a mind-cry, full of cosmic connotations extending far beyond the sound he had learned from Dosithheus upon the far-off earth. Again he plunged through the bubble of psychic force, felt the brief keening shrill of fear and pain from the beings trapped within it. Then he was through it, but the sound of that keening note continued to ring in his mind—and to harmonize strangely with the higher, more intense note that still reverberated in his soul from his earlier passage through the moon's Sphere.

"Harmonize...."

Suddenly he realized the significance of it. This was the Music of the Spheres that Pythagoras and other exceptionally psychic humans had long ago sensed—but, how naively optimistic had been their interpretation of it! Simon recalled the old tale of the king who roasted his enemies alive inside a hollow bronze bull whose nostrils were fashioned in such a way that the death-screams emerged as lovely, haunting harmonies....

He looked back, saw the Mars-Archon settling again into sated sleep—yet his horror was undiminished. Aye, Euclides and Aristole had been correct in their intuition of the planetary Spheres—yet how wrong they had been to suppose them the boundaries of uncorrupted realms of glory!

None of those flame-wisps accompanying Simon had escaped the Mars barrier; all were now food for the monstrous Archon. Once again he sensed the filament of excess energy being beamed out to the next Sphere. And now, as he hurtled soundlessly onward at ever greater speed, he grew aware of several scores of brightly-shining specks, far from himself and from one another, hurtling outward also and increasing in brightness as they did in velocity. Instantly his intuition told him that these were True Spirits who, like himself, had known in their souls the thought-words needed to pass the barriers of the moon and Mars. No longer obscured by the myriad streaks and wisps of mundane human and animal life-forces, they shone against the black void with a pulsing white glory that put the stars to shame. Simon glanced at his form, saw that his transparent flesh was glowing brightly also; his formerly dark tunic seemed now of the purest white, the planetary symbols upon it shining with a golden radiance, while his sword-blade blazed with a silvery sheen....

The space from the Sphere of Mars to that of Jupiter took far longer to cross despite Simon's increased speed and slowing time, for it was far vaster than the inner ones. He looked back, saw that Mars had already dwindled to a tiny disc, that the earth was no more than a bright gleam not far from the sun, which in turn seemed only a quarter of its normal size. He turned away, again feeling a spiritual shudder at the vast empty immensities through which he plunged. He could still see the far-off gleams of his fellow True Spirits, for though their mutual distances increased as they sped outward from the earth, their point of origin, their brightness seemed to increase also. Ahead Simon saw Jupiter shining, much brighter than he had ever known it.

Then he sensed, humming in the far distance, the next barrier Sphere—and watched uneasily as Jupiter, the planet that sustained it, began slowly to expand to a sinister, banded disc....

III

Simon gasped as that monstrous world swelled and grew in his vision, approaching ponderously yet visibly from his right as it pursued the arc of its vast orbit. It seemed to rotate once every few seconds, and as it advanced Simon could see four large moons and a few lesser ones swinging in slow orbits about it. Appalled to realize how much his time-rate had slowed down—had his untenanted body died during the weeks or months since he had left it?—he was yet more appalled by the aspect of this colossal, bloated, whirling thing he had once known of as the planet Jupiter.

It was huge beyond conception; he sensed that more than a thousand worlds like the earth could easily be swallowed by it. Its banded surface roiled and seethed as it rolled, and at each ponderous rotation he saw a great reddish eye-shaped splotch upon its equator, widening or narrowing as it swirled like a planet-devouring whirlpool. This time there was no nebulous Archon surrounding the globe, but Simon sensed that the seething world was itself infused with a monstrous life. Its many-colored bands seemed to pulse as upon the flesh of a spinning jellyfish, its reddish eye-splotch to wrinkle and writhe as if it glowered malevolently....

Then, incredibly quickly, half the looming planet was in shadow as Simon approached the barrier. He heard the membrane's deep note, a throbbing drone, harmonizing with those other Spheres he had left far behind. He needed the name! Dosithheus had told him the human syllables: Tzad... Tzadake...

"Tzadakkael!"

Again it had come to him barely in time. Again Simon felt the surge of power tugging at him, far more powerfully than had the barriers of the moon and Mars—heard the brief keening of what he knew to be True Spirits in agony—but then he was through, and the monstrous whirling planet was receding behind him as he sped ever more rapidly outward, the evil harmonies of the Spheres accompanying him....

Suddenly he suspected that he might be alone in
the void — the scores of True Spirits that had crossed the spaces with him seemed to be gone —

No, not all gone, for now Simon could see a handful of those pulsing white sparks still outward bound like himself, though at an incredible distance from him and one another. Only a half dozen were left out of those many scores! Evidently the forces of the monster-planet were set to capture True Spirits after the inner Spheres had weeded out the lowlier and more abundant life forces.

Now there remained only Saturn, ruler of the outermost Sphere. That puzzled Simon a bit, for the ancient wisdom held that there were seven Spheres — or seven sets of them — and he had crossed only three. Surely this was another confirmation of Aristarchus, who had maintained that the sun, Mercury, and Venus were inside the orbit of the earth!

So great was Simon's speed that by the time he had had these few thoughts he realized he was approaching the Sphere of Saturn. Uneasily he remembered that this was the barrier that had turned Dositheus back in terror. In the same instant he began to hear the deep, menacing thrum of the Sphere's vibration, harmonizing balefully with the tones of the inner Spheres, all of which now seemed, strangely, to emanate at higher pitches than before. Then he saw Saturn itself, swinging in from his right as the inner worlds had done, bringing with it the intense thin beam of spirit-energy projected from Jupiter, and he realized that his time-rate was slowing in a way that caused him to cross each Sphere not far ahead of its oncoming planet. And that must mean that he had been years, not months, upon this impossible voyage!

Saturn, he now saw, was like Jupiter in being immense, banded and surrounded by whirling moons. It, too, showed no visible Archer but seemed to be imbued with pulsing evil life. In addition it was surrounded with broad, spinning rings — rings which, Simon intuited, served to concentrate the energy of its soul-net more powerfully. The monstrous planet whirled so rapidly that it seemed to buzz; the note of its Sphere rose, and Simon felt his fear rising with it. He saw two of the distant soul-sparks waver and turn back — could barely hear their thin wails of terror and despair — and then the next mystic, Gate-opening Namne sprang from within him:

"Ziulquag-Manzah!"

He had begun to say the Name before he was abreast of the planet, had passed the whirling banded globe before finishing it. For an instant searing pain flooded Simon's being. He seemed to hear the shrieks of fellow beings perishing...

Then, as before, he was hurtling outward—but this time there was a difference. A great weariness was falling upon him. He realized that he had lost much energy passing the four barriers, especially the last. His form and sword-blade had lost their brilliance and now gave forth but a dim glow. Looking around him, he saw no sign of those few True Spirits who had accompanied him to the Sphere of Saturn. Had they all perished? Or were some still alive like himself, far off in space, weakened and dimmed?

Slowly his glow began to return, his weariness to fade. But no other spark like himself did he detect in all that vast void. He was alone, hurtling outward at an unknown speed into a cold, empty, star-strewn space, the evil humming of the Spheres fading away behind him. He had crossed the last barrier....

But then, ahead of him, he heard — incredibly, impossibly — another deep, menacing tone that harmonized with those behind.

He was approaching yet another Sphere.

* * *

A rising fear, almost a panic, gripped Simon as the evil hum from this unknown barrier increased. Was there to be an infinite series of them? And even if not, would his soul instinctively know the names of their Archons — names whose earthly equivalents his old mentor had never taught him? His fear turned to anger, to rage, took the form of a violent thought:

"Damn you, Dositheus! Damn your incompetence —"

You are wrong, Simon — you have heard the Names.

It was the voice of Dositheus within his mind — and now, dimly, Simon began to see the form of the robed old man, vague and transparent against the starry blackness.

"Baal! It can't be you. Many decades have passed—perhaps even centuries—"

Time is no more a barrier than is space to the possessor of Arcana. I sensed your urgency, Simon. But I cannot long maintain the trance that has made this contact possible. Remember the Names; there but are two more of them. Once I read them to you from the book of Ostanes the Mage, who in turn had them from the writings of a sorcerer of millennium-lost Hyperboria. You must remember—

But now Simon was approaching the Sphere. He saw its planet advancing rapidly, huge and ringed and banded like Saturn, though its bands were darker and greenish, and its rings smaller. It hummed menacingly as it spun, rolling insanely on its side along the path of its orbit, its several moons looping vertically about it like a swarm of wasps. Simon gripped his sword, held its glowing blade out before him as he hurled toward the near-invisible barrier of the nameless planet's Sphere.

Remember the name—

Memory and the voicing of it came simultaneously, barely in time:

"Z'styzlem-Ghali!"

Again the brief but searing pain — and with it, one far-distant yet clearly sensed cry of anguish and despair. One last unseen True Spirit had made it with him to even these remote regions, Simon realized — but only to perish. This time he was truly alone.

Aye, truly alone, for now not even the shadowy form of Dositheus was with him. The madly rolling planet was receding away to his left — but, strangely, it was slowing down, both in its spinning and in the progress it made along its orbit. For an instant Simon again knew terror. Was the thing going to stop, then return to pursue him?...

But, no—for now he realized that the velocity of his own outward plunge was decreasing also. Evidently his subjective sense of the time-rate was reversing. He noticed that the glow of his astral form had again diminished to practically nothing, and
this time it was returning very slowly. The weariness he felt was extreme; his very consciousness was dimmed. Apparently the last two barriers had drained all but the last reserves of his spiritual energy.

He seemed to hover there in the dark, colossal spaces for an eternity while sluggish, fearful thoughts drifted through his semi-conscious mind. How long must he drift thus? One century... two... or did it only seem that way? Was he still moving outward, or had he stopped completely, doomed now to drift eternally in these black voids...? 

No, for now he realized that his glow was again steadily brightening. And with the returning clarity of mind that accompanied it Simon sensed the deep, evil resonance of the final Sphere that marked the rim of planetary space.

* * *

The approach of the last planet, which resembled the previous one in its size and greenish banding, seemed slow and sedate, and Simon realized that his time-rate had indeed speeded up considerably. Again he sensed the malevolent life within its monstrous, world-dwarving globe....

Yet there was something different about this one, for there was another object out beyond it, looping in from the black spaces — a small, dark world whose enormous oblong orbit would soon cause it to cross the Sphere of the giant, Archon-imbued planet. No — actually two small worlds, revolving swiftly around each other....

A thrill of horror lanced through Simon at sight of this double world, for he remembered that Astanates had written of it also. The larger of the pair was doubtless lukkoth, the slightly smaller one Chag-hai — both described as the abodes of sinister inhuman beings, fungoid and crablike and demon-winged, servants of the monstrous Primal Gods who had formed the material worlds. Those twin dark orbs seemed to exude a menace greater than that of the Archon-planet itself, and Simon wondered if there was any Name that would enable him to pass them....

There is but one way. You must cross the Sphere of the last Archon, and utter its Name, at the same instant the double worlds cross it. Remember the final Name — and use your Will —

This time the voice of Dosithyes, more feeble than before, faded quickly, together with the dim visual image that accompanied it. And now Simon saw that the thin beam of spiritual energy, projected to the giant Archon-planet from the inner Spheres, was in turn beamed outward, only slightly diminished, to the dark planet lukkoth.

Simon extended his bright sword before him and concentrated, found that he could increase his speed but not his direction. His timing must be exact. Swiftly he approached the final Sphere, his outthrust blade gleaming ever more brightly, the eerie harmonies of the Six Spheres droning hypnotically in his soul. Those vibrations must not be allowed to lessen his concentration.... The sinister, black twin-planets were approaching the barrier also — were almost there....

The final Name sprang into Simon’s mind: "Ksaka-Kluth!"

Again the searing pain, brief but more intense than ever — and then he was through the barrier, barely conscious and floating in the black immensities beyond the outermost boundaries of the worlds.

* * *

Slowly, very slowly, consciousness returned. Simon sensed the eerily beautiful and sinister harmonies of the Spheres fading away behind him.

Turning, he beheld the intense filament of trapped vital and spiritual energies being beamed away from dark lukkoth into the vast starry space — straight toward that large red star of Orion’s shoulder known to Ostanes as K’lu-vho. And Simon shuddered at the realization, for K’lu-vho was reputed to be the home of those Primal Gods who ruled the universe and fed upon the pain and fear of all creatures within it.

Then he noticed something even more astounding — that the constellation of Orion, and all the other constellations, appeared to be no larger than they had been when seen from earth. Despite the unthinkably vast spaces he had already crossed, so great that the sun behind him was but a small bright gleam upon the blackness, the stars appeared no closer than before! A new terror, greater than all previous ones, gripped him in face of these cosmic immensities. His energies were gone, sapped to the dregs, his outward progress considerably slowed. This time he was indeed doomed to drift forever....

Simon... Simon, recall now the true Name of Her whom you seek!

Again it was the whispering voice of Dosithyes, still instructing him, as the reader of the Book of the Dead instructs the deceased at his bedside. The voice was dimmer than ever, and this time unaccompanied by any visual illusion, but it stirred new hope in Simon. The one he sought — Helen...

Yet before you speak Her true Name, remember that you must cling to your humanity, your worldly identity, if you would return. Know that your life on earth, your millions of fellow beings, the other worlds and even the Archons who rule over them, are part of your own material and mundane nature. Cling to that nature as you now make your ascent to the Pleroma of Light, which is an ascent to your own true and greater Self. Remember your material nature — for I can no longer accompany you. And now, Simon, speak the final Name — the Name that you were never taught, that you have always known.

He groped for it. Helen... no, that was her earthly name, even though it symbolized the Light. Instead, the name that suddenly burst from his being, vibrating the void with the last of his fading energy, was:

"Ennoia!"

Instantly it was as if pure light flooded his being, infusing his form and exalting his soul. With a velocity he could not have dreamed possible he streaked onward, outward, into the void.

The stars — the incredibly distant stars — were changing. Those ahead were growing brighter, more bluish, while those behind dimmed and reddened. And then, even as Simon watched, they began to change their patterns and perspectives also; the constellations were shifting, losing their familiar shapes, dissolving more and more rapidly into a gigantic swirl of glowing motes. Simon felt a burst
of exultation, of unparalleled liberation, of cosmic power and comprehension. His being, expanding like a burst of supernal light, outshone all the stars—which, he now saw, were grouped by countless billions into vast swirls without number across the boundless cosmos. For an instant he sensed centers of power, several within each star-swirl—abodes of the Primal Gods, Lords of the Archons—and also the frightened and pained souls of trillions of creatures being drawn into them, feeding them. Almost it seemed that one huge groan ascended from the material universe, and Simon felt his exultation fading, turning to horror.

But then, abruptly, as he felt his spirit approach the final barrier—the speed beyond which matter could not go, so that matter-bound beings were trapped within the realm of the Primal Gods—he saw the entire vast material universe simultaneously expand into infinite blackness and collapse into an infinitely small nothingness. Suddenly time and space were not—

And then there was Light—transcendent, blazing, all-pervading radiance—and Simon's mightily expanded soul exulted anew. He had won through the Seven Barriers to the Pleroma, the Fullness, the Realm of Light.

IV

He understood.

Understanding was not like finite knowing. He did not know when or where he was, nor did he need to, for all whens and wheres were gone in that stupendous expansion-implosion, gone into the not-yet and the yet-to-be, which were the same yet not the same and did not exist.

Time there was but of a higher order than what his tiny—human?—portion had known. Space there was, but of many more dimensions than that which the fleeting dream-human had lived in. What this human named—Simon of Gitta?—had known as time was but one of those lower dimensions, so that all he had known of past and future were as—now.

Now—the eternal, unchanging Realm of Radiance.

And his name was not Simon. It was Mazda, Lord of Light, the One Who Stands Alone, Who Comprises All.

He was All—and yet, strangely, there was the Other also, who shared his realm of light with him. She was the Ennoia, the Eternal Thought. They were not human, she and he, but many-dimensional spheres of the pure Light. They were syzygy, the Twin Aeons of the Fullness—twins, but mirrored; opposites, yet somehow One.

But these were strange musings. They came from his dream—his dream of the human he had been, or would be....

Then came to him the questioning thought of the Ennoia: "O Mazda, why do you think of us as 'she' and 'he'?"

"Because I dreamed I was a—man," said the Lord of Light. "His name was Simon. He was—thus." Ennoia was amused to see the white-and-golden form that stood alone at the center of Mazda's being, clad in radiant tunic, shining sword in hand.

"I see. And I was Helen, and appeared to you like this?"

The form that appeared at the heart of her radiance was the perfection of the feminine, human, yet more than human, garbed alluringly in shifting mists of pure whiteness. Though her limbs were fair beyond human fairness, her long hair golden rather than black, her eyes like the blue deeps of the empyrean rather than the depths of dark pools, Mazda yet felt his heart tremble. It was indeed she of whom he had dreamed.

Simon and Helen gazed upon each other while no time passed, while an eternity passed.

"You were All to me," he said with human lips.

"Of course!" She laughed a human laugh, tossed her glowing hair. "How could it be otherwise? But this is a strange dream. I will share it with you."

"No!" he said, a vague apprehension stirring within him.

"I will see you with human eyes as you have seen me. I will know and love you in human ways. We are very lovely. It will be an amusing dream, as are all of our dreams."

Suddenly there was Something Else—something
in addition to the All, to the Two who were One. To Simon's human eyes it appeared as a whirling splotch of darkness. It seemed distant, though he found that hard to judge, as there were no objects to use as reference points. Slowly it grew larger, advancing... "Look!" said Ennoia, laughing and pointing. "Our dream begins. I must go to it—see into it."

"No—we should not—"

But already her fair form was turning, advancing to meet the swirl of a murky pool, which was now flattening, spreading out upon the universal whiteness like the surface of a murky pool. He who was the Lord of Light hurried after her, his spirit stirred by forebodings.

She knelt beside the pool, peered into it, and its surface began to churn more violently as if the reflected light of her had stirred it.

"Oh, Mazda! I seem to have a thousand forms—all of them shifting and changing—"

"Ennoia—no!"

Suddenly with a pealing cry she fell forward and disappeared into the pool, falling or being drawn into her own scattered reflection—and then the light of her and that reflection were gone.

"Ennoia!"

The pool's dark surface began to grow calm, but Eternity had suddenly become—an emptiness.

Mazda—or Simon, for he still wore his human form—ran to the pool's edge. It was still now, but he sensed a greater turbulence than ever occurring far below the surface.

Suddenly everything beneath that surface appeared entirely different. In place of pure blackness there were now trillions upon trillions of infinitely tiny twinklings of light within darkness—the incipient particles of material worlds, flashing into being and out of it too briefly to be said to exist, lacking the energy for continuity of duration. Simon felt a strange horror, even a repugnance, at this minutely scintillating infinity of impending matter imbued with the potential of scattered and finite life. It came to his human portion like the disgusting sound of a swarm of loathsome insects under rocks or snakes in a nest, hideous in its vitality. It was somehow evil, pregnant and straining to give birth to itself in the form of materiality. Simon experienced this with an odd double reaction: on the one hand, as a human, he was actually relieved to see something, a space of sorts separate from himself, to remind him of the material reality to which he was accustomed; on the other hand, as the Lord Mazda, he was repelled, gripped with revulsion, at sight of that incipient material existence.

Then he heard, mentally, the voice of Helen—of the Ennoia—calling to him, though he could not pinpoint the source of that call. It seemed to come out of that almost-world of nonexistent particles. Deliberately, gripping the haft of his flame-bright sword more tightly, he plunged into that dark, seething turbulence to seek her out.

The twinkling darkness surrounded him on all sides. Though his form still glowed, his light no longer shone afar; the darkness of the swarming particle-void delineated him sharply. Pleroma, The Fullness, had taken on a new and dark meaning. He hefted his sword, stared for relief at his face mirrored in its shining blade—and was startled to behold the long-forgotten hydra-head sigil glowing in blue upon his forehead.

Then he saw something else reflected there also—creatures, swarming forth from the void, approaching him menacingly. Even as he whirled to meet them he sensed more springing into existence on all sides, forming out of the swarm of scintillating particles. They resembled in malevolence the Archons who had guarded the Spheres, but came in hundreds of revolving forms, tentacled and winged, eyed and eyeless, writhing like tangles of serpents, buzzing and hissing. Anger filled the Lord of Light as he realized that somewhere a mind other than his own was causing these abominations to form, to attack. With a ringing cry of outrage he hove up his blazing sword and charged at them.

They wavered, then broke and fled before him, unable to withstand his wrath. His blade snuffed them by scores and hundreds, causing them to dissolve back into the seething void. Others formed, but as quickly as they did the blazing sword slashed and scattered them also, dispersing them once more into nonexistence.

Then there were but a handful, fleeing before him on grotesque wings and tentacles and articulated appendages. Simon pursued them, smiting them down until there was but one left; then he held back, following the final fleeing monstrosity but not trying to overtake it. This foul thought, he determined grimly, should be allowed to lead him to its foul source....

Again he heard Helen calling to him but could not determine the direction of her voice. And then, as the fleeing proto-Archon led him on, he became aware of a slow, deep pulsing or drumming that filled all of space, and with it came thin weird pipings that reminded him earthy portion of something analogous to flutes....

The proto-Archon ceased to flee and faced Simon; its thought-voice boomed out menacingly:

"Stop! You approach the Throne of Achamoth—"

Simon rushed in and swung. His sword clove the monstrosity and sent it back to the void, bellowing as it dissolved. But now, straight before him, he sensed a pulsing mountain of blackness, blacker even than the scintillating void. Then a monstrous voice came out of it in words powerful and deep as rolling thunder, bubbling and viscous as a boiling sea of pitch:

"Who comes to the Throne of Achamoth?"

Simon's human portion recoiled in terror. He had read in Ostantes of Achamoth, the evil Demiurge who had created the material worlds. To the ancient Semites he had been Aziluth, Creator of Archetypes; to the Strygians he had been Azathoth, to the Persians Azdahak. The Chaldeans called him Tiamat; the Hebrews knew him as Rahab, Monster of Chaos, Lord of the Deeps....

But the Lord of Light knew no fear as he approached the pulsing blackness that was vaster than all the worlds, that bubbled obscenely as it began to create for itself new proto-Archons. Two lesser forms, equally black, flanked it like twin shadows, emitting the sounds of flutes which somehow aided those revolting creations into existence.

"I am Mazda, the One Who Stands. I endure forever. You must return the Ennoia to me."
The blackness boomed harshly, deeply—was it an evil laugh? "I am the First Dream of the Ennoia. I have taken her being and sundered it into an infinite fineness, and from it I shall create lesser beings who will serve me, and material worlds which they shall rule, and creatures upon whose energies they and I shall feed. You will not find her whom you seek, for she is now all this seething void, and the incipient substance of all the worlds and beings that shall come forth from it at my command."

Now Simon realized why he had never been able to pinpoint the source of Helen's calling to him—it had literally come from everywhere. A new, fiercer rage gripped him as he raised his sword of light and charged forward.

"Foulness, you shall not keep her!"

But now the pulsing mountain was shrinking, forming itself into a towering humanoid figure of pure blackness. The silhouette of its massive head seemed to Simon to resemble that of a lion, and he recalled the lion-headed symbol of the Demiurge under its name of Ialdabaoth. In its hand was a sword whose blade was as black as the substance of Achamoth himself.

"You cannot rescue her. The process cannot be reversed. Only by aiding me to precipitate the worlds from her substance, and by plunging into those worlds with her, can you hope to rejoin her."

Neither the Lord of Light nor his tiny human portion hesitated an instant.

"Helen!" Simon cried out as he—as Lord Mazda—rushed forward and swung the sword of light.

The black shape hove up its own sword and the twin blades of light and darkness met with a titanic clash of mighty energy—energy that instantly was absorbed by trillions of the nearest seething almost-particles, precipitating them into reality. Ennoia shrieked as those particles precipitated others into reality also, transforming her substance into the material that would form the worlds. Mazda, too, cried out in anger and amazement, for that flash of energy had for an instant illuminated the face beneath the lion's-head crown of Achamoth—and he knew that that youthful yet angular face, scowling with rage and determination, though dark-haired and dark-eyed, was yet the exact reflection of his own.

Then all the void, exploding into Being from the point where those sword-blades clashed, inflated colossally like a many-dimensioned bubble and poured forth as a torrent of enduring and inconceivably numerous particles. And with them went the sundered form of Lord Mazda, mingling with them as equally innumerable bits of light, while the dwindling laughter of black Achamoth seemed to thunder throughout all the worlds that soon would be....

EPILOG

He dreamed that the universe slowed in its expansion, that its swirling matter gathered and condensed to form the countless stars and circling worlds.

They were always together, he and the Ennoia, though sundered and scattered throughout material existence, and together they would always be. They met innumerable times during more than a thousand ages, upon more than a billion worlds, sometimes knowing one another consciously, more often sensing their complimentarity but dimly, always forced tragically to part. But during all that enormous time some of their sparks melded and increased to form larger and larger True Spirits, and eventually a few High Ones, growing ever more and more aware. And always on each world there came to be one of Himself and one of the Other—two Highest Ones—having more than usual awareness of who they were, meeting ever and again in new incarnations, life after life....

Simon awoke slowly from these dreams, returned little by little to bodily consciousness in Dositheus' cellar chamber. The old wizard was standing anxiously beside his couch, watching him closely, relief replacing concern in his wrinkled face. The candles and braziers were no longer lit; their pungent fumes had all but faded away.

"How long have I slept?" Simon asked, sitting up.

"All night, Simon. The dawn is breaking."

Simon rose to his feet gingerly, felt his body as if to assure himself that it did indeed exist, then left the room and began to ascend the dark stairway. Dositheus followed close behind him, saying nothing.

When they had gained their upper chambers and had stood silently for a time upon the balcony, breathing the clean cool air and watching the fading stars, Simon finally said:

"Did I dream it all? Or, is this the dream?" He swept his hand outward, indicating the dark buildings and lanes of the awakening city, the hills and the stars beyond. "Did I dream for but a night? Or have I dreamed for a cycle of eternity, returning after many ages to a world very like the one I left?"

"Did you see—Helen?" countered Dositheus.

"Aye. That is, if I did not but dream things inspired by the lore that you and Daramos have taught me."

"And was your longing satisfied?"

Simon shook his head. "If what I seemed to dream was true, then I have learned much. My most burning questions for knowledge have been answered. But, no—my longing for answers may be satisfied, but not my longing for Her. For Helen."

"You have seen her in the Fullness," said the old wizard, laying a hand on his pupil's shoulder, "and the time will come when you shall see her again in this life. When the time is right—the time of destiny and the stars—you will find her. I promise it."

Simon did not answer, but now he felt a small hope, an optimism, beginning to rise in his soul, dispersing his sadness even as the light of dawn was beginning to disperse the darkness beyond the eastern hills. Yet at the same time he realized beyond cavil that his new vision-born knowledge would forever deny him the normal happiness of ordinary and oblivious mortals.

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CASTLE OF SHADOWS
by JOE R. LANSDALE AND ARDATH MAYHAR

Thunder rumbled among the stones. High in a ruined tower, the polished onyx of a dais glimmered fitfully as lightning flashed beyond the lancet windows in the chamber wall. Deep inside the stone something stirred, feeling the approach of yet another warm-blooded intruder. Old hungers woke, only to be frustrated by the imprisoning stuff of the dais.

A raw wind rifled the leaves of the ancient book lying atop the slab. A sharp gust turned them all, revealing the outer cover of the tome. Had there been anyone to see, he might have recognized both binding and pages as what they were—the skin of human beings.

* * *

Kuff saw the tower first, a gnawed finger of stone rising from the rubble about it. The very tip had crumbled at some remote time, and only a half-spire remained, making the likeness to a finger very real, for it resembled a fingernail. Below stood a jumble of ruined walls and rooms, some still roofed.

Dismounting from her white gelding, Kuff took off her leather helmet and let her fair hair loose. Sweat had formed, even in the rawness of the evening, and the wind chilled on her neck as the last rays of the sun touched her face. Ahead, inside the tumbled walls, there seemed to be the edge of a storm, contrasting strangely with the bright sky westward. Yet storm or no, she would not scorn walls within which to spend the night. She had been riding forest trails for days, sleeping beneath chill boughs and coldly glimmering stars by night. A roof would be more than welcome.

Leaving the gelding, she rested one hand lightly on the pommel of her sword as she moved toward the tower. She emerged from the last of the trees to find that the line of the forest terminated evenly at a set distance from the ruins. As far as she could see, the vegetation kept its distance from the stones. Not a single vine or bush had persisted and won its way into the edges of the ruin.

Now the growling of thunder caught her attention. It would be well to get into the shelter of the tower. But as she drew near the horse snorted and reared against her pulling hand on the reins. His head tossed from side to side, and his eyes rolled wildly.

Kuff stepped back, holding him on a tight rein, and touched his white nose, his pink-veined ears. "Whoa. Whoa. There is nothing to fear, just shelter and a munch of grain from the saddle-bags. Come, lovely!"

Though the beast gentled beneath her firm touch, there was still fear in his eyes. His belly heaved with his rapid panting, but he followed her as she led him to stand before the ruin itself.

Holding by one rusted hinge, a large door hung against the side of the tower. The wind moved it on its single support, and it creaked dolefully. The wind was getting stronger by the moment, and Kuff pulled her cloak about her as she started for the opening.

A tongue of lightning streaked its jagged finger down to touch the tip of the tower. The gelding rose on his hind legs, whinnying with panic, pawing at the air.

Kuff hauled him down and petted him again, but he was now terrified. Not one step more would he take toward the gaping doorway.

"If you will not, then you can spend the night without shelter or grain!" she said crossly, leading him back the way they had come. The beast trotted placidly after her, ready for anything at all except the tower.

Exasperated, Kuff loosed the bit in his mouth and tied the reins on a low-hanging branch. "You can reach the grass now," she said. "I'll check out that terrible tower to see if all is well. And if it is, you come inside, like it or not."

The horse whickered after her as she started out once more. Once she was inside the outer gate, Kuff noted that the storm was suddenly much worse. The wind had slammed the tower door against the wall, whipped it shut, then slammed it back again. She wondered how that single rotten hinge could bear such strain. And there was something else... something she couldn't quite define....

Hand on hilt, she moved toward the entryway.

The wind slammed the door again, with the finality of a crash, Kuff unsheathed her blade and slid the tip gingerly between door and wall. It seemed firmly lodged, now, and she put no undue pressure on the blade. Besides being a fine and dependable weapon, it had been a gift from her stepfather. Dell the Red-Maned had made it especially for her shorter reach and lighter musculature. It had closed the mouths, finally and forever, of more than one male whose lust had outshone his good sense.

Prying carefully, she found the door moving out, grating against the stone beneath it. Inside the darkness was complete... more than complete. It almost seemed to ooze out into the stormy twilight. Nothing could be seen inside, but there was a strange, clloying odor about the place. The mustiness of long-closed places, yes, but mixed with something strange and undefinable.

The sky split with lightning, followed at once by a roll of thunder. Kuff turned to look toward the forest. Through the driving rain she could see, dimly, the gelding standing beneath the trees, seemingly undisturbed by the storm. Then she realized that there was no storm outside the ring of stones. The gelding was dry, his coat still dusty-looking. The trees were motionless. If any moisture fell out there she could not see it. Yet inside the walls a storm was rising to its height.

A chill went down her backbone. This is an accursed place, she thought, sheathing her blade and turning to leave. Better the forest than this weird spot.

She had taken only one step when a hand reached from the dark doorway and caught her fluttering cloak in a firm grip. Feeling the tug, she spun on the ball of one foot, at the same time drawing her sword. The other hand tugged free the tie binding her cloak across her throat. She whipped her arm beneath the billowing folds and tossed the cloak over
the head of her adversary. He went stumbling backward, into the black interior of the tower. She could see his hands pulling furiously at the cloth.

"Hold!" came a voice from the bundle of cloak. "I yield! I yield!"

Kuff snagged the cloth with the tip of her blade and lifted it to reveal the shape of an old man, his back bent with the years. As he looked up at her, she saw in the glare of a lightning-bolt that his eyes were those of a frightened rat, and his brown stubs of teeth were revealed in an ingratiating grin.

"You wouldn't hurt old Guntor, now would ye? A pretty lady like you wouldn't do such, eh?" The voice oozed counterfeit honey.

Kuff's smile was certainly not that of a lady. "Why not? I've no ears of that kind in my collection!" She touched the old man's left earlobe with the tip of her sword.

He cringed backward into a small heap. "I'm an old fellow... you'd not want to kill such as me..." he whined.

Kuff grimaced. "I've no use for snivelling... at any age!"

Guntor rose to his knees, his hands outstretched. "Now, my pretty..."

The blade-tip twitched. "Once more, and I'll carve out your tongue to accompany your ears," she growled.

He sank onto his haunches, his fingers moving toward the dagger at his belt.

Kuff grinned at him with real amusement. "Go ahead," she invited. "Then I'll have your entire withered head for a trophy."

He jerked the hand away as if the metal had burned him. "No, indeed. Old Guntor would never think... come with me, out of the rain, and we shall talk," He gestured toward the interior of the tower.

She motioned with her blade, and he led the way. Once inside he squatted in the darkness, and Kuff could hear him fumbling with something.

"What are you doing? Quick, or you'll feel my steel!!"

"It's only my torches. See? I'm getting out my flint and steel." A spark came upon the heels of his words. Another, and the spark caught in the oil-soaked cloth. In a moment three torches were burning.

"So you have some supplies," she said, looking about the chamber to see a couple of saddlebags lying against the wall.

"My horse went wild when we neared this place. He threw me, and the saddles broke. I clung onto the saddlebags as I went over his tail. There is food, too."

Kuff's eyes lighted. "Food?"

His colorless eyes studied her in the flickering light. "Help yourself. I've a notion that you'll do that, anyway."

The woman grinned. "True."

"Before you start, do pull the door shut. The wind is blowing out the torches!"

At last Kuff settled to eat, gnawing off bits of tough dried meat and chewing them with zest. "So your horse went mad—mine did the same, almost."

He ignored the remark, looking instead at the meat. "Would you spare me a bit of that?"

She grunted. "Why not? It's yours!" She cut a chunk for herself and passed it on to him.

Kuff watched carefully as he used his dagger to get the tough stuff into bits suitable for his rotten teeth. Once he had it into bits, he sucked it for a long time, softening it for mastication.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Not long. A short time before you came." He tried to smile around the edges of the meat he was sucking. "I seem to have... angered some people in the village."

"What village? I saw none."

"Down the track leading westward. Small villages, I learn, are not good places for a thief to ply his trade."

"Ah!"

He stood, meat still dangling from his teeth like a mouse from a cat's, and bowed. "Guntor, master-pickpocket and small-time thief at your service."

"So when your horse pitched you, you hid out here?"

He sighed. "Indeed. I made a small error in the village. He looked embarrassed. "I was caught with my hand in a pocket, in fact."

Kuff laughed aloud, and he looked hurt. "Everyone has bad days. Anyway they pursued me. I saddled entirely too quickly—that accounts for the fall, I daresay—and rode for my life. This way, unfortunately. So here I am."

"Why didn't they follow you here? They could have caught you easily, once you were afoot."

"They came to the edge of these grounds. Then... they gave it up and went away."

She looked at him, a chill tracking down her spine. "Just went away?"

Guntor sighed, swallowing the last of his meat. "It was then that I knew that I had stumbled into the ruins of Castle Tralok. You never heard of it?"

She shook her head.

"Nor would I, if I had not spent some time in that village. The old wives' tales are something to hear, particularly the ones concerning this place. I had intended to look about here, if there was a chance later. The chance came sooner, but fortune sometimes takes one in hand and runs away with him. But it proved to be a more frightening place than I thought. Now that you have come, I might just share..."

"Share?" she asked, her eyes bright in the torchlight.

"The treasure. If any. Would you like to hear the tale?"

Kuff nodded, settling herself into a comfortable position atop her bundled cloak.

The old man belched, blew his nose, and began. "This ruin hasn't been touched by the hand of man for centuries—not that those in the village know about, at least. But at its peak it was the house of Tralok, who was a middling-fair sorcerer. He hadn't a good reputation himself, but he got into deep water when he began trying to reach the undying spirit of Stylmus, the greatest of sorcerers."

Kuff glanced about her. That odd sensation she had had earlier had returned. The tower looked like a serpent, scaled with crusted stones that gleamed in the torchlight as if alive. The stone steps leading upward undulated like the back of a snake that was twisting up into the swallowing darkness. The woman shivered.
"Stylmus, you see, had made a pact with the Great Old Gods, being granted eternal life and power... of a sort... in return for the bodies of those he took from among the ranks of men. But a great hero rose against him and cast him into limbo. Since that time, many have called upon his name, tapping a bit of his power, but not one has been able to restore him to his old condition. A book was compiled by those who tried... a book spanning generations of sorcerers who hoped at last to return Stylmus to his place and to bask in his gratitude."

"Why not leave sleeping wizards lie?" asked Kuff, disgusted with such stupidity.

"Power," Guntor grunted. "Unlimited power."

"From the likes of Stylmus? And those idiots thought he'd be grateful?"

Guntor chuckled. "Nevertheless, many generations tried. And this is the last spot upon which trial was made. Tralok himself called upon him, using the book as his guide. But he, too, failed. And Stylmus, angered at being only partially free, brought down the house, the magician, and all his household."

"Except for the single survivor who told the tale," Kuff interrupted. "Right?"

"Intelligent as you are lovely," the thief leerred.

"So what about a treasure?" she asked.

"Ah, yes. We are alike in mind, I see. Tralok, you understand, was possessed of vast riches that were kept at the top of this tower. Though Stylmus had been returnee, as most supposed, to limbo, none was brave enough to try if that were true. So it must still be there. You see?"

She tapped her nails against the stone floor, thinking deeply.

Guntor said, "And now here you are with a horse, and here am I with my skills..."

"My horse!" cried Kuff, jumping to her feet. She went to the door and pushed back the heavy panel. The storm was thick, but she could see glimpses of the forest. "He's gone!" The branch to which he had been tied sagged limply. There was no sign of the white beast.

Kuff strode into the stormy night, wading ankle-deep across the courtyard. Beyond the ruin there was no storm at all, just the gentlest of misty rains and a slight breeze. Turning to look back at the tower, Kuff saw lightning-bolts darting across the sky, striking toward the fingernail top of the tower.

But when she approached the tree to which her mount had been tied she found a broken end on the limb to which she'd tied him. The beast had pulled free and gone into the forest, she felt sure, to get away from the lightning that he could see clearly from the spot where he stood. It was too dark to try tracking him, so she returned to the tower, exasperated.

Guntor was waiting eagerly. "Did you find the horse?"

"Not a sign."

"But the treasure—who will we carry it away?"

"Blast your treasure!" snapped Kuff. "The beast will return in the morning. He had no grain tonight, and he knows it is up to me to give it to him. He can't open his own saddlebags. He'll be back."

Guntor glanced up the gleaming stairway. "Then let's look for the treasure."

Kuff spread her cloak and sat on it before replying. Then she looked up at the scraggy wretch. "Perhaps. But not tonight."

She lay back and covered herself with the wide folds. Why do I not leave? she wondered. Then she admitted to herself the truth. I'm curious, she thought. And more than a bit greedy. That settled to her satisfaction, she closed her eyes.

"You're frightened of the dark," Gunter needled her.

"Practical," muttered Kuff, eyes still closed. Then she opened them. "Every inch of me is practical. Give me your dagger!"

"You'd leave me weaponless?"

"If you're frightened, scream and I'll rescue you."

She yawned as she took the dagger from his dirty hand.

Neither mentioned putting out all three torches. One was left to gutter in its bracket. That did not prevent Kuff's sinking into sleep at once. Gunter, however, did not, though he closed his eyes to seem so.

When Kuff seemed deeply sunk in dream, he rose and stood looking at her questioning. Should he try...? But no. She was a warrior. Every motion she made attested to that. And she slept lightly, as a warrior should. To try disarming her would be dangerous, for he was old, and she was stronger than he.

Lightly as she slept, his feet moved more lightly still. He took one of the torches from the floor and lit it from that which still flickered on the wall. Then he turned toward the stair and disappeared up it, mounting the treads silently.

His torch seemed useless, giving only a faint glow in the murky blackness of the stairwell. Gunter felt as if shadows were gathering about him, closer and closer. He shuddered, but he was a true thief. Cowardly by nature, he was driven by a greed so pure and consuming that it overcame his fear. He kept climbing.

He reached the top of the tower, a large stone landing. About its circle were doors—or openings where doors had been. Shreds of wood hung, here and there, to old hinges, but most had crumbled away entirely. Nothing but dusty habitations those chambers.

As he turned from the last doorway he found that what he had thought to be wall was, in truth, a door made of stone. Smooth black stone, polished to a silvery sheen. Holding the torch close, he ran his fingertips over it. His own reflection stared back at him from the surface... and behind his own shape he thought that there had been motion.

He turned quickly, glanced about. The tower was even darker than before... but empty. Except for himself and the shadows. Gunter turned back to the door and jerked with shock. There was a face there—not his face, but another. An evil face, smiling... he held the torch nearer, and there was only his own reflection there.

He shook himself. An illusion, he decided. He gripped the metal ring set into the door and pulled. It didn't budge. Harder. No movement. Exerting himself to the fullest, he heaved at the ring, and the door groaned, swinging out lethargically. The old man pulled it just wide enough for him to slip through the opening and squinted into the space beyond.
Darkness. Thick as his grandma's blood puddling, and him standing here without a spoon. Snuffling at the thought, he moved forward, holding the torch high. His knee struck something hard, and he lowered the light to examine it.

It was a dais, just above knee-height. About the length of a tall man and half as wide.

Something lay atop the stone, something that winked in the torchlight. It was a knobby crystal placed dead center of the dais, and next to it was something else, something the shadows had first hidden from him. A book. Thick, with something about the binding that made his skin crawl. Skin... skin? That was it. Human skin, he was certain.

The pages were thinner sheets, but they, too, were of that impossibly soft, smooth leather. The letters on the pages were a dark brown, and he thought that he could guess what sort of ink had formed them. A novelty, this. Valuable, too, in certain markets. It might bring...

"By all the gods!" Guntor suddenly swore. "The book! The book of the magicians who worked to raise Styilmus!"

His hand shook as he thought of the power that this volume might hold. For him! The world could be his...

He read the first page, but it seemed to be gibberish. Then he remembered that each succeeding wizard had come nearer to freeing the mage. Tralok had come nearest to success, and he had been the last of all. For some reason he did not remember Tralok's fate, his excitement sending him flipping through the pages to the last section. The word Styilmus was written at the head of the page. He skipped down through the preliminaries...

... the record of Tralok, culmination of long years of labor and generations of sorcerous study... proper incantation... the most important ingredient...

BLOOD! The blood of the living will bring forth the long-dead, and he shall again wield the power given him of old. Removal of the crystal is the first step... its power binds....

Ah. Guntor eyed the shiny knob, wrapped gnarled fingers around it and pulled, but it did not budge. It was fastened firmly. He gripped it with both hands and pulled with all his might. The crystal popped free with a snap like a cracking bone. Guntor held the object before him and examined it. He could see now that it served as a sort of hilt, and was attached to a long, dark spike. As he watched, the brilliant glow of the crystal faded and became colorless, turned cold in his hand. It was no longer beautiful, it looked as worthless as a knot of sand.

He turned and tossed it away from him. The crystal and spike landed at the top of a narrow stairway, rolled down two steps, rocked momentarily, then lay still.

Already Guntor had forgotten it. It was the next step in the freeing of Styilmus that commanded his attention. He turned a page of the book... out of blackness, darkness being his tenament, he will come... Know him by many names....

The list of names went on for a page. Guntor turned on hastily to the past page. It seemed made up of strange sounding words and phrases. More gibberish — or the incantation? He read it aloud, forming the syllables with care.

Gervat hainif; turacol decum Yeni. Lohaf iavu soniyad enyacoala Yoso. He read it to the end.

Nothing happened, though he stood waiting for a long moment.

"So much for sorcery," he muttered, and he was cooled as easily as he had been fired.

Suddenly he felt a pressure at his throat, lifting as it squeezed. His feet left the floor, and his eyes bulged. Unbelieving, he saw the thing that held him.

A black stone hand had come out of the dais, reaching through the stone as if from an oily pool. Rising beside it was the face of a man, the face that he had seen in the polished door. The hand closed about his throat. Blackness claimed him.

Kuff awoke suddenly, filled with terror. Rising on one arm, she caught her sword and rose to her feet. No spark remained on the torch, and the darkness was thick about her.

She fumbled about the floor to find one of the torches remaining. A moment with her own flint and steel, and it flickered to life. The third torch was gone — with Guntor, no doubt. She had no trouble guessing where he had gone.

Yet, that didn't concern her at the moment. Something was terribly amiss, and the aura of its coming had waked her. Something was loosed upon the world that should never have been freed.

She listened intently, but no sounds came to her ears except those made by the storm. She pushed back the door, but the courtyard was still full of water, almost up to the raised floorstones of the tower.

Now she turned, reluctantly, to look at the stair. It would have to be that way, no matter how she dreaded climbing into the darkness above. Taking a torch in hand, she held the blade 'in the other and began to climb. Looking down, she could see scuff marks in the age-old dust. Guntor's, she had no doubt.

It would be easy, she was thinking, to turn and leave this tower. Let old Guntor have his treasure and any evil, too. She owed him no allegiance. He would certainly not have come to her aid!

Yet she continued climbing, slowly, fighting the impulse of her feet to turn and run. Following the prints in the dust, she moved onward, the dying torch in one hand and her fine steel blade in the other.

* * *

Guntor felt himself spinning. Spinning... upside down? How could that be? He opened his eyes, then closed them again convulsively. Beneath him was the dais... and black stone feet. He was hanging upside down in the glow from his dropped torch.

He could feel shackles about his ankles — they must have been hanging from the ceiling by a chain, out of sight in the shadows. He twisted his head in order to see the owner of the feet. Then he groaned. The shape of a man stood on the dais, his head on a level with Guntor's. The stone face looked into his, black and polished eyeballs grating as they turned in their sockets.

Guntor remembered words from the book... out of blackness... darkness... His lips formed a word. "Styilmus!"

The stone mouth moved, stiff, grating. "Yes," said a voice as hollow as an echo in a tomb. "Bringer of blood, you will free me of the stone!"

"Spare me!" the old man whimpered. "I will serve
"You will serve me. But first you must know terror, and then you will know pain, and lastly you must know death. Your blood... your blood serves me. Then the Shadows will join with me, all those Shadows of past incarnations. I will be freed, more powerful than ever. You will be a Shadow to serve me, that I promise!"

The dark hand caught Guntor's hair, lifting his throat. "Blood!" the voice grated, as a long, black finger reached to slit his throat with a stony nail.

Guntor's scream became a gurgle.

The scream startled Kuff, halfway up the stair. "Guntor," she murmured. The horror in that cry made her neck-hair prickle. She ran up the rest of the way and stood upon the landing, listening.

She could hear a gurgle, the squeaking of chains. That was a sound she could always recognize, for she had spent her share of time in chains. Down the rank of doors, one stood ajar.

She stepped quietly nearer, ears straining. Yes. There. She moved to the opening and peered in... to see a thing that turned her cold and sick.

A swelling stone man, black as the dais beneath him, was standing beside a hanging body, its lips pressed to the bleeding neck. The slurring sound was the thing she had heard... it was drinking Guntor's blood.

The old man hung, arms loosely dangling above his head, eyeballs white in his shadowed face. He was obviously dead. And, Kuff noted with dismay, something was moving about the foot of the dais. Shadows... black as the stone of their master, swarmed there, pouncing upon any drop that escaped the great one's lips. A full score of the man-shapes squirmed about the stone.

Stylmus' head turned, creaking, from his bloody work. He stared at Kuff, and his teeth were coated, now, with red. The eyes blazed like coals.

"May all the gods aid me now," said Kuff, under her breath.

The stony shape stepped down from the dais, its joints creaking and grating. The shadows below it parted to make room, as he took two stiff steps toward Kuff.

"Hold, there, Friend," said Kuff.

In the silence that followed, Kuff could hear the crackle of the torch, the slow dripping of Guntor's blood onto the stone. Suddenly the stone shape threw back its head and laughed with the sound of rattling pebbles. "You think to stop me with a blade, Woman?" he chortled. "You will only supply more blood... living blood, to free me from the stone entirely!"

Kuff realized that she faced that legendary wizard, himself. She had thought the tale a thing of myth, fit for children. But it was more a thing of nightmare, for her and, she understood, for the world. She took a cautious step backward, toward the door.

"Come!" the stone wizard said, and all those shadowy things fled into his body and disappeared into the stone. The fires in those eyes gained in intensity, as he turned to stare at her.

"Now, Woman... the final incantation, requiring your blood. Freeing me from the stone forever! As his freed me from the dais, yours will bring forth my undying flesh from this casing."

Kuff was still backing toward the door... which slammed shut at a gesture from the creature's hand.

"The body cannot outdistance sorcery," he sneered. "The powers of the body seem great until faced with those..."

But Kuff wasn't listening. She knew herself to be without sorcerous potency. Her successes, along the paths of her life, had come as the result of surprise... she was a mistress of the unexpected. And so she acted, running straight toward Stylmus.

The big stone shape hesitated, nonplussed, but before he could cast any spell she was close enough to flip her torch into the shining face. It struck the chin and bounced away, leaving him undamaged but astonished.

Kuff sprang, feet first, knees bent. Kicking out, she caught Stylmus full in the chest, sending him toppling against the dais. Kuff landed on her back and rolled to her feet, sword still in hand. The torch she had thrown was a smoking stick, but her eyes were quick to adjust to darkness. She had noted a stair on the other side of the room, and now she darted toward it.

As she raced past the dais, she could see a dark shape upon it. Her hand went out, almost without volition, and caught it up. Without pausing, she bounded up the waiting steps.

There she found herself trapped between the stairhead, two walls, and a black stone door like that below. Behind, she could hear the clacking tread of Stylmus as he mounted the stair.

"You will feel fear, Woman. I am coming, and when I arrive, you will die horribly."

Kuff struggled with the stone door, but it didn't stir.

Stylmus creaked and clacked upward.

She put the book between her knees, slipped her blade into the crack between the door and the wall, and using both hands, attempted to pry it open. It would not give.

The harsh breath of Stylmus was very loud now. He was but a few steps away. "I've got you, wench!"

Kuff jerked the book from between her knees, raising it in her hands as she spun to face the wizard. He was six steps away.

"By all the gods, I'll face you head on!" she shouted, and flung the book with all her strength. It was a reckless gesture, full of bravado and hopelessness.

The volume struck Stylmus between the eyes, bouncing from his stony forehead. Amid fluttering pages it smacked against the steps and came to rest with a thud. The blow had knocked the wizard off-balance. Stiff in his stone body, he was top heavy, and he rocked precariously on the edge of the last step.

Kuff saw her tiny edge. She raised her sword and threw it as hard as she could. The tip sparked fire off the wizard's chest. It, too, bounced, to fall with a clatter on the floor below.

But Stylmus did not fall. He wobbled back into position easily, his eyes blazing brighter than ever.

Kuff, who had taken one deep step forward, so as to put more power into her toss, now drew her foot back... only to feel something slide and clatter beneath it. She had no interest in what the object
might be, only in that it might serve as a weapon. Certainly her doom was sealed, but she would not go to it like a lame, mindless lamb. She would fight to the end, even if it came to futile fist and feet against Stylmus' stone body. She picked up the thing without giving it so much as a glance.

She took refuge on the top step, back against the door. Stylmus' red eyes glowed above the top step. A heart beat and he stood before her.

Gritting her teeth, determined to give her life dearly, Kuff lunged forward, striking Stylmus' stone body with the object she had found—a spike with a hilt of dull crystal... dull until it struck Stylmus' body!

Even as the dark hands reached for Kuff's neck, the spike penetrated the stone chest like a knife going into hot cheese. Stylmus bellowed, tossed his stone head back and began to vibrate. His body trembled so violently the crystal was pulled from Kuff's hands. It throbbed with blue light for an instant, then turned silver-white, stood out on Stylmus' chest like a great orchid on black velvet.

Then there was an explosion so fierce it launched Kuff against the door, slammed the breath from her and dropped her to her knees. Addled as she was, she saw the wizard blow apart into a shower of dark fragments. And the fragments became like shadows and fled toward the ceiling of the tower with a sound like a million bat wings beating, and there they came together in a wispy, ebon shape that sprouted a great, red bow of a mouth that opened and screamed until the tower shook and the flooring rumbled. Out of the mouth, like a regurgitated, whole, pale fruit, spat the crystal, now the size of a man's head—

—and then there was nothing but the whiteness that the sight had burned across Kuff's eyes, a whiteness that took several heartbeats to go away.

Kuff leaned over and looked down. There in the center of the black dais was the crystal, ceasing to throb, but holding its white light. Stylmus was once again imprisoned by the magic crystal, put there by the never-say-die attitude of a warrior woman and the hand of fate.

Kuff made her way down the steps with great caution...

Nothing moved. The eerie feel of the room had evaporated, and it seemed lighter, less shadowed than before.

Outside, through one of the lancet windows, she could see that the lightning was dying away, and the sound of the rain was diminishing.

Kuff climbed warily onto the dais to unclamp the shackles from Guntor's ankles. She laid him on the floor and crossed his grimy hands on his chest. His face, as well as she could tell in the semi-darkness, seemed curiously at peace.

Then she looked for her blade and the book.

The point of her sword had snapped. It would take the work of a blacksmith to repair it somewhat, and that of an armorer to make it whole again. The book, however, had suffered no damage.

Kuff went to one knee and took out her flint and steel. Scraping tinder from the bag in her pouch, she struck a blaze. When it was going well, aided by some bits of cloth from Guntor's rags, she laid the book in the center of the flames. It burned with a sickening stench, but Kuff watched until it was completely consumed.

To her relief, the stone door opened to her touch. She went down to recover her cloak and to peer out into the courtyard.

It was a clear morning. In the edge of the forest she could see her gelding, waiting for his grain. Already, in the edges of the stones, small green things were beginning to sprout.

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HIS OR HER REFLECTION

The hour of the wolf is the time
When nightmares become flesh
Out there in the city streets
Crowded with DT's and shadow bars.
Poetry is heroin
For both require one's blood
And make living
A memory of a love that never existed.

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DANCER

The stage is broken,
the walls are crumbling,
and in the secret, silent corners
the heroes and vagabonds
hide with their mysteries.
But the dancer is still free,
wounded maybe,
a little weary,
a little wary,
with one blue eye on yesterday
and the other one growing blind.

Charming dancer somewhere ghosting,
out beyond the earthbound fog
and through the time of ice and frost.
Charming dancer,
slightly wrinkled in the firelight,
like somebody else's dream,
somebody else's nightmare
riding
gliding
all the empty astral realms;
prancing
dancing
all... the dying haunted streets.

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Tim and his sister Alice had always enjoyed travelling on trains, but when they came to that stop, they began to wish they'd never set foot on one.

"Are you sure this is where we're supposed to get off?" Tim asked the conductor.

"Oh, yes, I'm very sure." He was a strange conductor, not the one who had taken their tickets. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere just as the train had begun to slow down. As it pulled away, leaving them alone on the platform, he was smiling at them in a way Tim definitely didn't like.

Alice didn't care much for the station.

"I don't think this is our stop at all." She pointed down the rickety stairs. There was only a gray fog below.

"Well, we can't stay here.

So they went down into the fog and found a gravel path leading up a hill. After a few steps, Alice tugged on Tim's arm. They looked back. The station was a dim outline, looming in the fog.

"I'm scared," she said. "We'll never find our way back."

"Don't be chicken. Besides, we can't stay here."

They walked on. Soon the station had disappeared behind them, and they came to a forest of pale white trees, sickly-looking things like gigantic, drooping mushrooms, crowding the path. The overhanging branches were thick with dripping leaves that felt like rotten cheese when they brushed into Tim and Alice's faces. Among the trees, a little way off, flowers bloomed in the mist like eyes watching. The air was damp and cold. There was an odor of decay.

Tim wanted to admit that he was scared, but he knew that all the heroes he'd seen on TV would never be scared. No, he had to be able to boldly go where no one had gone before if the need arose, and it seemed it had. Besides, he didn't want to show fear in front of his sister. So he took her by the hand and led her on.

For a long time there was no sound except for their breathing, and their footfalls, and the thumping of their hearts. They couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction, and the path got narrower and narrower and filled in with weeds.

Then there was another sound. Someone was coming toward them on the path.

"At least we can ask where we are," said Tim. But secretly, he was afraid.

"I'm not so sure," Alice whispered.

A figure was coming out of the fog ahead of them. It looked like a child their own age.

"I'm not afraid," said Tim aloud, and he ran ahead to greet the newcomer. Even up close he couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl.

"Hello, hello," he said. "My sister and I are lost. Can you tell us?"

Then he shrieked, because he saw that the child had no face, just a blank oval of flesh. He ran back along the path, past Alice, without even slowing down.

"Wait! Where are you going?" she called after him.

A minute later she saw the faceless child, and she shrieked too, and ran after him. Down the hill they ran, out of the forest, and when at last the station loomed out of the fog again, it was a welcome sight. Tim got to the bottom of the stairs, then paused, panting, and looked back for his sister.

He saw her coming. The faceless creature was right behind her.

"Hurry! Run or it'll get you!" he shouted.

She made it. Together they went up onto the platform.

"What if it follows us?" Alice sobbed. "Then what?"

"I don't know. We can't do anything."

The creature, or the child, or whatever it was, came to the base of the stairs and stood there in the fog.

"Go away!" Tim shouted. "Please go away!"

"All right," the faceless child said, sounding lonely and sad. "I'll go if you want me to." The place where its mouth should have been bulged and shrank as it spoke.

"Yes! Yes! Go!" said Tim.

It turned to go.

Suddenly Alice spoke up. "No, wait."

It paused.

"Tell us who you are. What place is this?"

"I'm a boy. I think. I don't remember."

"What's your name?"

"I don't remember that either. After a while here, you forget everything. I got off the train like you did and wandered around in the fog. For a while, when everybody missed me and remembered me, I was all right, but when they began to forget me, I began to fade. We're all like that."

"All?"

"There are many of us. Look."

Coming out of the fog, gathering at the bottom of the stairs, were dozens of forgotten, faceless children. They reached out with what might have been hands once, but now had melted into lumps, like wax.

"What will happen to us?" Tim asked.

"You'll become like this eventually, when people forget about you."

"Go away! It's horrible!"

They turned to leave. Some were crying. Some had forgotten how.

"No, wait," said Alice. "What if I remember you. Tell me your names, and if you can't, I'll give you names. Tell me what games you played, what songs you sang. I'll remember it all, and have you all for my friends."
Slowly she walked down the stairs, until she was surrounded by them. Even more slowly, Tim followed.

After a while their faces came back, and they could count on their fingers.

Night fell, and all through the darkness the children laughed and sang and played games. In the morning the sun rose, driving away the fog, and all of them waited on the platform for the train.

The strange conductor was very surprised.

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LADIES FROM HADES

Less alive than dead
Dance a quadrille
Choreographed in hell
Within my head.

Copyright © 1985 by L. C. Fite

O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM

The riddle of the blood is this:
We are called to the rim of doom
And we respond with smiles of fear
And love of the skull-faced thief

Who steals our chances and loots
The holy house of blood and bone.
Our eyes are magnetized to carrion
Dreams and noon-bright nightmares.

The riddle of the blood is this:
The Lamia, the Lemmings, the Mad Song
Of Lucia, the Castle of Bluebeard,
The Revenant, the Mob, the Sword.

But what dances dart behind dead faces!
What Paradise takes root in the soil
of Hell!

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THANATOCENESIS

We crawled from the ocean
before we were born

Our first cry came
when the garden burned

We left at dawn
and crossed the sky

We don't remember
when we died.

Copyright © 1985
by Jon Post

DEATH COMES TO A PANTHEIST

"Rise with the wind
flow with the sea
fall with the leaves
homeward to me."

King on the mead
walking the green
brother to owls
wrapped in a seed.

out of my blood
full of delight
waters of time
hooded in night

come to my side
strike off my bonds
skate me away
into the sky.

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SEE THE DARK
by PAUL QUINN

As the months marched monotonously on the pain became less intense. It was still there, hidden behind a cobweb of Time, making its presence felt by a continuous dull ache which could be almost forgotten by its familiarity. Chavon was careful not to disturb that fragile cobweb, careful not to recall those moments leading up to when... No! Not to think of it; not to remember the screaming pain, the blinding white hot iron coming nearer and nearer and nearer... No! No! NO! Feel the coldness of the stone floor; smell the stink from the open sewerage gutter at the end of the cell; hear the drip of water from the walls, the soft hiss of the jailer's gas-lantern; taste the rock-hard bread and rotten-meat soup that was his daily diet. Forget that there had once been such a sense as sight.

Although his burnt-out eye sockets had healed, over the passing months, he still wore the dirty rag they'd given him around them. But he didn't need eyes to know that the cell was in darkness — the hiss of the jailer's lantern told him that. He didn't need eyes to tell him the dimensions of his cell — his other four senses were sufficient. He gradually learnt to live with his sightlessness, knowing that in this place of darkness his eyes would have been useless to him, had he possessed them. He spent his waking hours lying upon the verminous straw that was his bed, trying not to think about the white-hot iron and the pain that lay tucked away behind the cobwebs.

Ever since that day — how long ago was it? — that he'd been flung inside here, the great wooden door had remained closed. At intervals, which he assumed were days, a small hatch beside the door opened and his jailer pushed in a pitcher of water and a bowl of stinking soup with a piece of stale bread thrown into it. He'd never heard the jailer speak, only the shuffling footsteps, the wheeze of his breathing, and the hiss of his gas lantern. He'd learned from experience that he must leave his previous day's bowl and pitcher beside the hatch to have them replaced. At first, when he'd recovered from his injuries, he'd tried to make conversation with the jailer, but the only response was a shuffling of footsteps, a wheezing of breath, and a hiss from the lantern. Then, silence for another period.

For a long time Chavon fed himself upon hate, hate of Moronuza who had given the order for his eyes to be burnt out. The hate spread inside of him, cancer-like, building itself up and spreading throughout his whole body until he would leap up and pound the walls with his fists and scream his hatred into the blackness. Then he'd slump down onto the cold floor and the blood from his hands would mingle with the tears from his empty eye sockets. Gradually the hate would start rising again...

Then, one day/night/period he lay upon his straw and wondered what colour the pitcher was beside the hatch. Did it still have a colour when it was in darkness? Did it still have a colour, although it couldn't be seen? If it was light in my cell, he thought, and the old jailer didn't have to use his lantern, would there be a colour to that pitcher, even though I couldn't see it? The old man would see it, so there must be a colour to it. Therefore, although I can't see it, the colour is still there, even though it is in darkness. Chavon could still remember colours, and he tried to visualise what colour the pitcher would be in the darkness. And then he shot bolt upright on his bed of straw.

"I can see!" he shouted out loud. "Of course I can see! Why do I need eyes when I've got sight inside my head with my dreams and my memories?"

He turned towards where the pitcher stood in the darkness and visualised it standing there beside the bowl that had contained his soup. "What colour shall I have it?" he cried excitedly. "Shall it be blue? Shall it be brown? No, it's red. It's a red pitcher beside a brown soup bowl." Deep inside his head, from the place where dreams are made, he visualised the pitcher and the bowl standing together beside the unpainted wooden hatch. It was so plain to see, just as it was plain to see things in a dream. He focussed his attention upon the door and noticed that it was a darker colour than that of the hatch. The walls were grey — dark grey, light grey, blue grey... So many colours in the wall. The floor was almost black with dirt, and as he studied each inch of its surface he noticed dark stains on it beside the wall. He focussed on these and realised that they were bloodstains from when he'd battered those walls with his fists. His straw bed was a yellowy brown and black. The gutter along the far wall was... ugh!

For days Chavon revelled in his new-found sense. He even came to find a beauty in the green slime along the edge of the gutter and the stinking brown water that flowed slowly through a little hole in one wall and out through another hole in the opposite one. So, one day, when the jailer opened the hatch and took out his red pitcher and replaced it with a blue one, Chavon spoke to him.

"Old Man," he said, lying back on his straw and not even facing the hatch, "your grey hair is tangled about your ears and your beard has not been trimmed for ages. What would the Sergeant of the Guard say, could he see you with your tunic buttons undone and beer stains down the front of your vest? Old Man, even though I am a prisoner of Moronuza, even though he has had me tortured and blinded, am I not entitled to respect for when I was a Captain of the finest company the Army ever had? Before you come here tomorrow tidy yourself up and wear
your uniform proudly."

The jailer hissed with surprise and all but spoke back to the prisoner. "How do you know what I look like," he wanted to say, "when you have no eyes with which to see?" But he held his peace, contenting himself with pushing the gas lantern through the hatch and studying the prisoner, seeing him sitting there facing the wall, the bandage still around his eye sockets. The old man shuddered and withdrew his head, slamming the hatch shut. Chavon listened to his shuffling footsteps, his wheezing breath, and his hissing lantern recede along the passageway way, and he smiled to himself.

The next day when the jailer opened the hatch Chavon greeted him with, "That is a bit better. You have made an attempt to smarten yourself, I notice. Butters all secured, hair combed. But the beard needs trimming and there are still some stains on the tunic. See if you can do better tomorrow." Then he turned around in surprise and faced the jailer who found himself staring at the dirty bandage covering the no-eyes. "What is this?" cried Chavon. "Where is my red pitcher? Why have you brought me a green one? Today is the turn of the red one.

The old man was so frightened that he blurted out, "It broke last night. . . ." He bit his tongue as he realized he'd spoken, and slammed shut the hatch, hurrying along the passage as fast as his shuffling gait would take him. So Chavon was not surprised when, about half an hour later — as near as he could guess — he heard the thud of marching boots, the clank of swords, and the creak of leather harnesses coming towards his cell. So attuned was his hearing by now that he could also distinguish the shuffling gait and wheezing breath of his old friend the jailer along with his visitors. The hatch opened and the Sergeant of the Guard poked a lantern inside and followed it with his head. He stared at Chavon who turned his bandaged face towards him, smiling. The sergeant studied the prisoner for a few seconds, and then, "Remove that bandage!" he ordered. Slowly, Chavon lifted his hands and slipped the bandage off from over his head. The sergeant gasped as he stared into the two black pits and Chavon smiled back at him.

"Is it such a terrible sight, Sergeant?" he asked. "Why do you flinch when you look upon my face?" He took a pace forward and the sergeant swiftly removed his head from the hatchway and slammed shut the door. Chavon laughed out loud, and those outside shuddered as they hurried away from the sound.

He played no more tricks upon the old man, contenting himself with studying his cell, marveling at the colours which previously he'd never known existed. No longer did his hate grow in him for what they'd done to his eyes, because now, he realized, his sight was better than it had ever been. He still fretted over his confinement, but consoled himself with the fact that some day Moronuza would have him released. He tried not to think too much of that day, though, not knowing how long he'd have to wait for it. And the months passed.

It was a year to the day of his blindness that the marching footsteps came down the passageway again and halted outside his door. Keys jangled, bolts rattled, and heavy hinges squeaked in protest as the door opened for the first time in twelve months. Chavon mind-saw the guards waiting outside, and two of them entered and took him by each arm. Was this the day for which he'd been waiting? There was no air of friendliness about the guards as they escorted him out of his cell and along the passageway. Hissing lanterns threw distorted shadows upon the walls, floor and ceiling as they marched along. Up a flight of stone steps, through another door, along another passage. More steps, more doors, and then daylight flooding upon them. Fresh air blowing, grey clouds scudding across a leaden sky. High stone walls all around them. They were in a courtyard. He was led over against a wall and stood there on his own. The soldiers moved back.

"You stink, Chavon!" rasped the Sergeant of the Guard. "Take those filthy rags off your body!"

Chavon obediently removed his tattered clothes and shivered in the cold air. He mind-saw what was going to happen and braced himself for it. However, the first bucket of cold water thrown over him by one of the soldiers still came as a shock, and then the next one hit him. They soaked him thoroughly, and then gave him some harsh soap to wash himself with. More cold water thrown upon him to rinse off the lather, and eventually he was clean. Still naked, he was forced onto a chair and his hair and beard were clipped. The wind dried his body, and then he was handed some clean clothes to put on. A black bandage was fastened around his head to hide those awful empty pits. Chavon felt like a new man when he had dressed himself.

They escorted him back into the castle, along more corridors, through more doors, and up more steps. His guards marveled among themselves that a blind man could be so sure-footed, not once stumbling as they led him along. Chavon marched amidst them, head up and body erect; by now he felt sure that this was the day for which he had long waited. Today, he knew, he would meet Moronuza again, and Moronuza would grant him a pardon. No wonder there was a spring to his step as he strode along!

It came as no surprise to him when they entered through the wide double doors leading into the Grand Hall; it came as no surprise to see the multitude of people congregated there; and it seemed only natural that Moronuza should be sitting on his throne watching his entrance. Chavon was led up before the throne and his two guards — holding each arm — bent their heads in supplication. Chavon stood upright, facing his enemy; and a half-smile played on his lips.

"You look much thinner, Chavon," greeted Moronuza, "and pale, too."

"While you appear to have gained weight, my lord," replied Chavon.

Moronuza started, glanced down at his paunch,
and then stared suspiciously at the bandage around Chavon's head. And then he laughed.

"Already you are learning to use your other senses to compensate for loss of sight," he said. "Can your ears tell you how I have changed? Can you smell the roast chicken I had for my lunch? Or perhaps you can feel the vibrations of my breathing?" Chavon made no reply, but stood smiling before him.

"Do you know what day it is, Chavon?" asked Moronuza. "No, of course not. You have had no means of telling the passage of time where you have been, have you? Let me inform you that today is the first anniversary of your ill-fated uprising. Twelve months ago today you were betrayed and punished for attempting to usurp me. Do you remember that day, Chavon?"

"I prefer not to recall it, my lord."

Moronuza laughed. "Wise man," he said. "Because of your ordeal there have been others over the past twelve months who, although they might have dreamed your dreams of power have, nevertheless, hesitated to carry them out. You have been a shining example to everyone, Chavon."

"Then I am pleased my agony was not in vain, my lord."

"Remove the bandage from your head and show the people the result of your agony." Chavon lifted his hands and drew off the bandage. Moronuza studied the dark pits in the white face for a moment; then, satisfied, he ordered Chavon to turn around so that the multitude of guests could also see what had been done to him. A gasp went up from the crowd as they viewed his ravaged features.

"Let this be a lesson to all who try to thwart me," cried Moronuza. "Let no-one cast his eyes upon this throne that is mine without the knowledge that he will lose his eyes. Traitors shall be punished!"

Chavon turned back towards him as Moronuza continued. "Because of what befell you, this time last year, Chavon, many other rebellious dogs have hesitated to follow your example. For twelve months now we have had an uneasy peace here. But now the dogs grow restless once again, and the example of Chavon is being forgotten."

Snow-flakes of winter settled upon Chavon's spine and sent icy chills up and down his back. "The time has come for another example to be made so that those who have treacherous thoughts might think again."

Chavon no longer smiled. He didn't need his mind-sight to tell him that two men were staggering through the door with an iron bucket of hot, bubbling tar; the smell of it filled the large hall. The Chief Executioner followed them, his gleaming razor-sharp axe over his shoulder, and waited while two more men carried in an oak block which they placed in front of the throne. The guards tightened their grip upon Chavon's arms.

"The problem has been, Chavon," Moronuza said, conversationally, "fitting the punishment to the crime. Last year it was simple; you cast your eyes upon the throne, so they were removed. This year I have decided that the hand that raised the sword against me..."

"No!" The single syllable burst from Chavon's lips.

"... shall go, so that those who itch to draw their blades against the throne shall have second thoughts."

Chavon struggled and two more guards joined the other pair to help restrain him. "No! You can't do this!" he cried. "I've already been punished!"

"You are our example," replied Moronuza, watching as one guard forced Chavon's left arm up behind his back, another held his head, while two more extended his right arm towards the block. He was forced down onto his knees and his arm rested upon the wooden surface.

"Moronuza!" he screamed. "You can't do this to me. Have you no pity?"

But Moronuza ignored his pleas and nodded to the Chief Executioner who stepped forward. Chavon wished he couldn't mind-see the gleaming blade as it swung high up above the executioner's head. He screamed and screamed and screamed as the blade descended and thumped deep into the wooden block. He felt nothing as he watched the hand that had belonged to him leap from the other side of the blade onto the ground, and hot blood gush from the severed stump. Just numbness and disbelief that this could happen to him was all he could think about. And then the guards had swiftly lifted him up and pushed his handleless stump into the bucket of tar, and the pain hit him as the heat seared and blistered the flesh and skin, cauterized the wound, and stopped the bleeding. Before the waves of blackness engulfed him he faintly heard Moronuza say, "Until we meet again next year, Chavon."

"Then he lost consciousness."

How long he'd lain on the cold floor of his cell cocooned in waves of agony, he'd no idea. But eventually he awoke to realize that he was thirsty and the green pitcher of water was beside him. He was lying near the hatch and he forced himself to sit up and drink deeply, using his left hand to hold the pitcher. The thought of food turned his stomach, and he pushed the bowl of soup to one side. Then he crawled over to his straw bed and lay down again while the pain washed over him. After some little while he made the effort to mind-look at his arm and saw that it ended at the wrist in a large black knob of hardened tar, and he sobbed for what he had lost.

But Time is a great healer, they say, and Chavon had plenty of time. As the weeks and months drew on and the pain decreased, still he remained lying on his straw wreathed in self-pity. There was to be no free pardon for him, he realized; instead, next year, another example would be made. What would he lose this time? His other hand? An arm? A foot? Maybe his tongue wrenched out? How long would he last before all his limbs had been chopped off and there was nothing left of him except his vital
organs? Surely, Death was the only salvation he could expect. He sobbed to himself.

The hatch being opened brought him to his senses. He felt ashamed that he had allowed the jailer to open the hatch while he was crying, and he swung angrily round to the old man who was replacing his pitcher and bowl. "Letting yourself get slovenly again!" he shouted. "If you can't tidy yourself up then I'll demand they replace you with someone else. I shall report you to Moronuza next time I see him."

The old jailer opened his mouth to reply but hurriedly shut it again and slammed the hatch closed. Chavon felt a bit better for having shouted at him. At least, he thought, Moronuza has robbed me of my eyes but I can see better for it. Now he has robbed me of my hand, but what can I benefit from that? He began, softly and slowly, to curse Moronuza, using every vile word he could think of. His temper built up and he raised his voice. Soon he was screaming his hate again, and reaching out his right arm he picked up the bowl of soup and hurled it at the wall where it shattered into a thousand pieces and the soup ran down to the floor. . . .

Wait! He was lying on his bed of straw; the soup dish had been by the hatch — at least twelve feet away. He'd picked it up and thrown it with his right hand! But he had no right hand! Chavon sat upright and stared in blindness at where the soup still dripped down the wall. He could still feel the texture of the bowl, before he'd thrown it, against his fingers which weren't there. He squeezed his hand, feeling the non-existent fingers clenched themselves. How? How? So it was as it had been with his eyes, he reasoned. He could still mind-see, and now he could mind-hold, as well. For an experiment he reached out his arm towards the pitcher that stood by the hatch and extended his fingers, feeling them grasp the handle and lift the vessel towards him. With his mindsight he saw the pitcher move through the air of its own accord and stop in front of his face. It tilted, and he drank from it, putting it back from where he'd removed it.

Chavon laughed, tears of joy running down his face from his sightless eyes. He moved his hand all around the cell, feeling the walls, the ceiling, the floor, without moving from his bed. And when the old man came the next day and opened the hatch, Chavon was still sitting there experimenting with his new-found sense. Mad, thought the jailer, peering at the laughing prisoner. At last his confinement has driven him mad. He started to withdraw his head and something grasped him by the front of his tunic, holding him framed within the hatch.

"Wait!" called Chavon. "Would you leave me before I've inspected you? Ah, yes; uniform buttoned and fairly clean. Hair still untidy, though, and the beard needs trimming." Ghostly fingers ran across the jailer's face and up to his head. "See if you can improve yourself tomorrow," said Chavon. The ghostly grip released him and the old man slammed the hatch shut and rushed down the passageway as fast as he could go.

Chavon, laughing to himself, wondered whether his mind-touch would extend outside the cell, through the walls. He probed, his invisible fingers coming up against the wooden door. An increase of pressure, and it was like pushing through a bucket of thick oil. Then the fingers were outside, feeling the walls of the passageway. If the fingers could do it, then why not the sight? he asked, and focussed his dream vision where his ghost fingers were feeling. He could see the passageway, dark without the torches, but colourful in their darkness. Still lying on his straw he mind-wandered along the passageway outside, up the stairs, through the door at the top, and eventually into the room where the guards sat playing cards and drinking wine. He watched the old jailer talking to the Sergeant of the Guard, not able to hear what was being said, but certain that the old man was recounting his experiences downstairs. The sergeant laughed and pointed towards one of the flagons of wine standing on the table, and the old man shook his head vehemently. They think he's drunk, chortled Chavon, and then, impishly, he knocked the flagon onto its side, causing the wine to run out onto the table. The guards leapt up with astonishment to avoid the red flood pouring from the surface onto the floor, and Chavon dipped his fingers into it before returning to the cell. And, once inside again, he brought his ghost fingers to his lips and licked the wine from them, savoring the taste of the grape juice.

He found, by later experiments, that his sense of touch and sight extended for about one hundred yards. It was a pity that he couldn't reach the hall in which Moronuza reclined on his throne. But he was able to feel and see out into the courtyard, and spent many hours lying on his straw while watching the clouds drifting across the sky in the bright sunlight outside. Sometimes, when no one was watching, he'd sneak into the guard-room and steal a flagon of wine or a piece of fresh bread and cheese, or maybe a chunk of ham, and gorge himself down in his cell with these delicacies. He could tell that the guards were worried, looking over their shoulders as they sat in the room, believing the place to be haunted as their food and drink began vanishing. He would bring his trophies back along the passageway downstairs and unbolt the hatch from the outside, lift the food into his cell and then rebolt the hatch again. No one could prove that he was connected with the strange goings-on in the guard-room, although many a suspicion was cast his way.

Chavon grew fatter as the months moved on.

*  *  *

Another year, and once again the thud of marching feet, and the rattle of steel mingled with the creak of leather. Once again the key inserted into the lock and the screech of unoiled hinges as the heavy door was opened. Despite himself and all his plans, Chavon felt fear flicker about inside his body like moth
wings fluttering on a warm June night. But he squared his shoulders and marched out in the passageway with his escort, up the stairs, through doors, and out into the courtyard where the sun was shining. He felt the physical heat of it this time, and was ready when they threw the water over him and made him wash himself. Once again, barbered and cleanly dressed, he was led into the Great Hall and stood before Moronuza.

"Chavon!" greeted the figure on the throne. His eyes narrowed as he studied the prisoner. "You look in fine health despite your pallor. No doubt imprisonment suits you."

"While your health looks worse, my lord," replied Chavon, poking a ghostly finger into Moronuza's paunch. "Too much good living, it seems."

Moronuza belched as the finger prodged, and winced. He's right, he thought, I'm getting stomach pains. Out loud he said, "Your discourtesy will be overlooked this time. But when we meet again, take care to remember your manners. You know what today is, I take it?"

"I would guess it to be the second anniversary of my failure," replied Chavon, smiling.

"That is so." Moronuza was uncomfortable. The prisoner didn't seem worried by the thought of what he must know was going to happen to him. "Two years since you looked upon the throne and lost your eyes for it. Two years since you raised your sword against the throne and lost your hand for it. What is your punishment to be this year, Chavon? An ear, for having listened to seditious talk? The tongue, for having spoken rebellious words? Maybe a foot for having stepped out of your place? This had required a lot of thought on my part, you know."

Chavon mind-watched the assembly within the Great Hall. They had come to watch the wicked being punished, and he could see them looking amazed that he could accept it all so calmly, smiling back at Moronuza on his throne.

"You could have saved yourself the effort of thinking, Moronuza," replied Chavon. "Punishment for the wrong-doer will be given today — yes! But it is not I who will be punished, but you!" He shouted out the last word and pointed with his left hand at the throne. "Your day has come, Moronuza! Oppressor of the people — you will oppress no more! Murderer of innocents — you will murder no more! Unjust ruler — you will rule no more!"

"Silence!" shouted Moronuza who had shrunk back from that accusing finger. "You have made me decide your punishment. Your insolent tongue shall be torn from your mouth."

"He gestured, and the Chief Executioner stepped forward holding a long pair of iron tongs. "Not only that, but as you have dared to point your finger at me, then that finger shall also be removed with the tongs."

Once again four guards grasped Chavon, forcing him to his knees. Each one held his arms, one dragged back his head, holding him by the hair, while the last one wrenched open his mouth and attempted to grasp his tongue. The executioner advanced, extending the tongs toward Chavon's mouth, and a short dagger that had been held inside the belt of one of the guards leapt out and buried itself in the executioner's chest. He staggered back, gurgling in disbelief as he died, and the guards released Chavon as they stared in surprise. The guard to whom the dagger belonged looked down at his belt, now empty, and then at the weapon protruding from the chest of the fallen Chief Executioner. He turned to the guard next to him as though to say, "I didn't do it." But this second guard drew his sword with a try of, "Traitor!" and smote his comrade to the ground with one blow.

Chavon stood up. "Now, Moronuza, it is your turn!" he shouted, and the sword that was in the fallen guard's scabbard began creeping out of its own accord. They all watched it, hypnotised, and then began edging away from it as it cleared the scabbard and rose up into the air, pointing towards the throne.

"What devilment is this?" cried Moronuza, shrinking back into his throne, eyes fixed upon the blade as it slowly moved towards him. One of the guards, braver than the rest, lashed out with his own sword towards it, but the other blade parried the blow, deflected it, and then plunged into the man's chest before continuing its slow progress towards Moronuza.

"Stop it!" he shouted. "Keep it away from me!"

"As you kept the iron away from my eyes," asked Chavon. "As you kept the axe away from my hand? You are going to die, Moronuza... Now!"

The sword became a blur of light as the blade flashed. It sped forward and buried itself deep into Moronuza's chest — so deep that the point protruded through his back and pinned him to the rear of the throne. "So die all tyrants!" declared Chavon, turning to face the crowd gathered in the hall. Horrified, stunned silence was like a blanket smothering them all. Not a word was spoken, not a cry was made.

The tableau was broken by one of the guards beside Chavon who swung his sword above his head in readiness to cleave the prisoner in two. "Murderer!" he cried, and the blade began its fatal descent. Chavon's phantom hand grasped the other's wrist, deflecting the deadly blow, while, with his left hand, he reached across to snatch the dagger from the guard's belt and plunge it into his opponent's body. As the sword fell from the guard's lifeless hand Chavon caught it with his ghostly extremity and held it poised about four feet before him.

His mind-sight — giving him 180 degree vision — showed that another guard was behind him, about to pierce him from the rear. Chavon side-stepped and turned, and the blade sank into his thigh instead of his back, causing the blood to pour down his leg. Now, though, Chavon's sword, as if possessing a mind of its own, arced downwards and all but removed the guard's head from his shoulders. By now the rest of the Imperial Guard had recovered from the shock of seeing Moronuza assassinated, and they rushed
upon the dais to hurl themselves at Chavon. Snatching a sword from a stricken guard with his left hand, he weaved it in a flashing pattern of silver streaks that struck like lightning among his enemies, and thus cleared a space around him as he backed towards the throne. Then, with only the corpse of Moronuza behind him, transfixed to his throne like a butterfly in a case, he made his final stand.

Steel rang against steel. Men gasped and cried and panted. Chavon's right hand reached far out beyond the ring of men surrounding him, and the sword it held came at them from the rear, supplementing the one in his left hand which dealt out death to those it touched. But, however bravely and heroically the battle was fought, there could only be but one outcome. Chavon was hopelessly outnumbered, besieged on three sides, and with the corpse of Moronuza behind him. Blades were stabbing past his guard and he was bleeding from numerous wounds. He was weakening fast, and his enemies were pressing him sorely. A blade sliced down the side of his head, removing his left ear, and sinking deep into his shoulder. His arm dropped uselessly, and the sword fell to the ground ...

The assembled crowd was roaring. Why had he not heard their shouts before? He suddenly realised that he could hear every individual voice, plainly and distinctly. "Chavon! Look to your left!" "Take care, Chavon! Take care!" "Over to your right, now!" The people — his people, the people he'd suffered for — were all urging him on in his battle, and he could hear and understand what each and every one of them was saying. From outside the tall windows he could hear the crickets chirruping and birds singing up in the sky. Down in the kitchen the cooks were discussing the evening meal, while chambermaids chattered girlishly as they cleansed the room. All this, and many more things could Chavon hear in that brief moment before the guards rushed triumphantly at him.

He'd lost his eyes and gained his sight. He'd lost his hand and gained an extra reach. Now he'd lost an ear and gained his hearing. He'd also lost his other arm, and he realised that he now possessed another phantom hand because of this. And so, before the enemy could take advantage of his defencelessness, he snatched up the sword again with his new non-existent hand and gave a shout of triumph. Two ghostly swords guarded him, now, and they darted about in the air in front of him, stabbing and hacking at the soldiers who backed fearfully away from the bloodied figure who refused to be quelled.

For a moment the battle ceased, and Chavon sank back, breathlessly, onto the lap of the dead Moronuza. He was weak from his countless wounds and could feel his consciousness ebbing away from him. He listened to the whispered voices of the guards as they discussed tactics amongst themselves, unaware that he could hear them. "You take him from the left, and I'll go in from the right." "I'll keep one of those swords occupied, while you rush in underneath." He listened to the voices of the crowd, a woman weeping for him, and a man monotonously cursing the guards. He heard one of the chambermaids giggle as she recounted her adventures last night with a stable-lad, and an outburst from the cook as he kicked a dog that had stolen a leg of mutton. He listened to the birds, and wished that he could be up there in the blue sky alongside them. He revelled in his new-found sense.

The respite was brief. The Sergeant of the Guard rallied his men into a concerted rush at the blind man who sat before them, and from his seat on Moronuza's lap Chavon directed his defensive battle, his swords preventing the soldiers from reaching him. Then it was that the Sergeant of the Guard took a leaf from Chavon's book. Standing well back he hefted his sword; he hurled it like a spear at the figure sitting on the throne. It travelled straight and true, striking Chavon in the chest, continuing through his body, and piercing into the corpse upon whose lap he sat. Chavon gasped, and the ghoulsly hold upon his own weapons relaxed. They dropped to the ground as blood bubbled up into his throat. The soldiers rushed towards him ...

"Chavon! Chavon!" cried the horrified assembly. "No! No!" He could hear each and every one of the people gathered inside the Great Hall. He could see them all, and, at the same time, see with their eyes as well. He could see the soldiers rushing towards him and he could see his dying body sitting in the lap of Moronuza on the throne. He could see the castle from the eyes of the birds as they looked down from the sky, and the tables in the kitchens where the food was being prepared. He could see through the eyes of the chambermaids, the eyes of the sentries at the drawbridge, the eyes of the cur slinking away from the wrath of the cook. He could see the upraised swords as the soldiers reached him.

Hacking, stabbing, plunging, piercing. Piece by piece Chavon died, and in dying was reborn. Something inside him stirred, fully awakened by the death of his mortal body. The consciousness that had been Chavon expanded from within, swept out to envelop all those people who wept for him, loved him, cared for him. He became part of them; he became them. And they, in turn, became Chavon.

"Chavon! Chavon!" cried the people, and he was crying it with them, for he was them. "Chavon! Chavon!" he cried, and he/they turned as one — for they were now one — and looked upon the dais at the soldiers standing before the broken bleeding mortal remains of what had once been Chavon. And they/he became silent.

The soldiers — their killing-passion now satiated — became aware of the silence in the Great Hall. They turned, and saw the people staring at them. The people opened their mouths and the body of Chavon opened its mouth. "I am Chavon!" cried the people and the corpse. "I am the champion of the oppressed!" And the people advanced upon the dais.

It was not a battle this time. It was a slaughter. The people tore the soldiers limb from limb and scattered the pieces about the
Great Hall. They moved as one person, for they were one person. They were Chavon, and Chavon was them. And when the soldiers were disposed of the people moved out of the castle into the countryside beyond, and everywhere they went Chavon absorbed the people so that they became one with him and he was them. Faster and faster he expanded — from town to town, city to city, across the waters to other lands — until the whole world was one, and the whole world was Chavon.

The people of Earth looked up at the stars. "I am Chavon!" they declared, with one voice, and then they surged upwards and outwards to absorb the universe.

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IMMINENCE OF SNOW

The imminence of snow excites me,
calms me,
soothes me like love;
it presses in
with promises
the falling flakes
will not fulfill.
No matter.
For an hour,
or a few minutes,
I feel at peace
with my own flesh
in this pristine
purity of air.

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FOR MERVYN PEAKE

ivory bird
that semaphores the message of occidental wings
to a masked face
the chinese saints kiss a ring
of jackdaw lustre
temperate seconds until the valise falls out of the hands without sleeves
remember the gargoyles dream where he bit his tongue and
rankled conducting trees (electricity that flows back to the sea)

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THE HUNGERING LASS; A LITTLE LEGEND OF THE RHINE

by JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

When Christianity came to Germany, a young hermit took possession of a deserted cell upon a mountainside near Gernsback in sight of the Castle of Eberstein. As the old story tells us, he lived a contemplative life, going out upon occasion to preach the Gospel to the peasants of the land.

One evening a storm raged. The wind groaned and whistled through the tops of the oaks and the fir trees, sounding as skeletons might sound if, sprung to life, they felt nothing but pain. The rain poured as though the world had been a river, or the hermit's cave a hole beneath the heaving sea.

And the hermit heard a soft, supplicant voice outside, begging for shelter and protection. He looked out into the awful night and saw a beautiful young woman before his eyes.

The hermit bid her enter, offered her warmed wine with honey, and had her sit beside his fire. He knew her for a pagan by her white garment and long braids; and so commenced to tell her by what means she might save her darkened soul. When she appeared to attend his words and approached nearer to him; when her breath touched his cheek and she drew his hand to her bosom so that he might feel how greatly his words had reached her heart; then did his blood begin to run as molten copper in his veins; and the holy words grew faint upon his lips.

She beseeched him to continue, beseeched him with her eyes; but he thrust her to the ground and had with her shamelessly and roughly, not hearing her pleas for mercy. Afterward, feeling nothing but sin and shame, he became convinced the maiden was not a true woman but the Devil, so beautiful that even God was fooled by him. So the hermit killed the pagan lass to avenge God.

Then was his remorse trebled; for the lass did not disappear as a satanic spirit must when slain. Rather, her pitiful limp corpse lay in a twisted posture, motionless though he could not avoid her deathly stare no matter where he withdrew in the cavern. He was much troubled as to how to do away with the body and thus continue his ascetic life and preaching without being detected as the slayer of a girl.

He dragged the body through the storm to a cliff's edge and threw it in the river far below. Then he gave up all remembrance of his deed and lived peacefully for some while.

Upon an evening one year hence, there was a raging storm spitting into the hermit's cave. Lightning cracked the sky and thunder shook the mountain. And between the rumbling sounds, he heard the faint supplicant voice and went to the opening to see the soaking lass all in rags. And she said, "The night is cold and I as cold as a watery grave. Pray, let me come forth to your fire and dry my piteous thin body and take some gruel and broth."

The hermit paled and let the spirit enter. The fire would not dry her clothing, but she accepted broth, sipping it hungrily. The hermit built the fire a bit higher; still, the maiden could not be dried by any degree of warmth. The noise of the storm sounded far away. The eyes of the ragged girl were a misty, sad grey.

"Had you a sister," asked the hermit, "who lived on this mountain and worshipped the old gods?"

"I had many sisters once."

"But you are most familiar to me," the pale hermit insisted. "It is not possible, I suppose, that you remember me."

"It is not possible," said she. "Yet I recollect your voice, like the promise of a young God, persecuted even as my sisters were destroyed; and oh, I pitied him. What a lovely voice it is! What a lovely face! There is no reason to fear you, I am sure; and if ever you sinned in your life, I am certain that you have repented it and would not sin again."

"I would not," said the hermit, as his blood began to warm. He began to preach to her the Gospel and she sat nearer to him, and nearer. As she drew close, the wooden cross which hung heavily at his throat began to smoulder. It burnt his flesh and he began to howl. When he tried to get it off, it burnt his hands. When he shouted the name of his Lord, it was like a curse. The maiden, taking pity, threw herself upon him, quenching his fire with the poor wet rags and her soaking hair and body.

Thus was the hermit saved from more than a terrible scar; and in the next moment he sat up panting, to find he was alone, but that the floor was wet and in the air he could detect, as he forever would detect, a faint scent of fish, and silt, and putrefaction.

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MALKA

by LINDA MILLER ESLER

They said I tripped over my own big feet and hit my head on the barn floor. Papa said it was a good thing because I'd been in need of something to knock the dust off my brains. Mama said I was the same silly mooning heifer as always. Of course, they were both right!

Baila was jealous of me. She'd wanted Yankel for herself. At least with me out of the way she could marry anyone else she chose, for all the good it did her, poor pretty Baila.

Yankel still preferred my sister, of course. Sixty years wouldn't change that. Still, my dowry had paid for his sewing machine and we'd been able to live with Papa and Mama until we'd earned enough money for passage to America.

America! That was the key to the secret I could never tell anyone. Not even Yankel could know what I saw that day in the barn. He wouldn't have believed me, anyway, but how could I take a chance? How could I risk the little princesses?

* * *

I was helping Mama prepare supper. Baila was supposed to help, too, but she had, as usual, invented some errand to keep herself away until the work was done. Mama didn't mind. Her lovely Baila didn't have to roughen her white hands with scrubbing or chopping onions. My hands weren't important. No husband would be caught by my looks. I was the elder sister who had to be unloaded before Baila could marry. One of the shtetl wits made up a joke about us over a game of cards: the loser would have to take me so that the winner could get Baila. Even a pretty girl would have looked plain next to my sister. So what chance had I, big and clumsy, with "eyes like a cow in a head to match?"

We were peeling potatoes when Papa came in with Yankel. I dropped my knife.

"Feivel!" Mama gasped. "What has happened?"

"Calm down, Pesha. This is Yankel from Vilna. The Rabbi told me he had to leave home to stay out of the Army. He is going to board with us."

"Malhaleh, wash off your knife and make some more potatoes for our guest."

"This is my jewel of a daughter. Such a good girl! I'm going to have to give in to the marriage brokers and let them match her with a husband." (He'd been begging them for three years to find me someone, anyone.) "Now, come and sit down, my son. We'll learn a little Mishnah before supper."

I bent down, less to retrieve the knife than to hide my face. "My son!" So this was the reason why our house, already small with four people, needed a boarder! Yankel was very handsome. But poor enough to board with a family like us. Perhaps there was hope for me.

Then Baila strolled in. Blue eyes locked to brown and that was that! Papa's "jewel" went back to the potatoes.

That night, when Yankel had retired to the barn and Baila and I behind our curtain, Mama got down to business.

"What kind of a goyishe bridgroom did you bring home for your daughter, Feivel? When I saw that blond hair I thought you'd been arrested! Are you sure he's a Jew?"

"He talks like a Jew and he davenes like a Jew and I can tell he's looked into a Mishnah before. Don't worry, Pesha. I'll write to my brother, Shmuel in Vilna. You'll see: Yankel and Malka will give us beautiful grandchildren."

"Malca!" my mother snorted. "You'll have to get him to take his eyes off Baila, first!"

As usual, they were both right. Uncle Shmuel's mother-in-law had known Yankel's grandparents. The genteile coloring? Who can be sure of such things? Beyond three generations, it's best not to ask questions.

Yankel was a tailor. His present ambition was to save enough money to buy a sewing machine and, after that, for passage to America. So he told Baila.

"America!" my sister snorted. (She took after Mama's side of the family.) "Don't let Papa hear you say that. He says only the atheists go to America. The atheists and the criminals!"

"But it's also a place of opportunity, Baila. Wouldn't you like a chance at a better life?"

"Sure! I'd like diamond shoes and a silver gown, too. Can you buy me those in America?"

They were supposed to be feeding the chickens. And I was supposed to be... who can remember such things? I was crazy about Yankel and ready (not for the first time) to scratch out Baila's gorgeous brown eyes whenever she looked at him. But even if I had done that, I wouldn't have been able to keep Yankel from looking at her.

Finally, one day, everything boiled to the top of the pot. Yankel spoke to my father.

"Reb Feivel, I want to marry your daughter."

"Wonderful! Malka is a good girl, Yankel; she will make a fine wife. You'll..."

"Reb Feivel, excuse me. You're right, of course. Malka is a very nice person, but I want to marry Baila."

Baila and I pressed our ears closer to the wall of the house.

"Baila! Don't joke with an old man. Baila's still a child. And she may not marry before her elder sister. It would not be proper. Perhaps they do things differently, now, in the cities, but here we keep the old customs. Think again, my son. Malka is a very good cook." (When I didn't become so entranced by the patterns of steam that I let things burn.) "We've saved carefully since she was born and I think you'll be pleased to know that her dowry will cover the
cost of that sewing machine you want. And, of course, you may live here until you can afford to start out on your own. Now, Yankel, don't you find that a generous arrangement?"

"It's very generous, Reb Feivel, but I prefer Biala."

"Imbecile!" Papa roared.

The wall shook beneath our faces. Biala was trembling. I could feel myself growing cold as all the blood left my face and rushed to my heart.

"I have already told you that Biala is not yet marriageable! I will never give my permission to such a disgraceful union. I will give no dowry to a daughter who marries against my wishes and if she marries you, I will throw you both out of the house and let you starve!"

"But I love Biala," said Yankel, in a voice so reasonable that even Papa calmed down.

"So where is it written that a man must hate his in-laws? Be sensible, Yankel. Marry Malka. When you've been settled for awhile, you'll realize I was right."

"There was a long silence during which we waited, I, sick, Biala hopeful, for Yankel's refusal. It was a midsummer afternoon, so I should be able to recall the sounds and smells of chickens and apples and wagons in the road, but the only memory I have of those moments is that of the sun-warmed wall beneath my cold cheek.

"Well, Reb Feivel," Yankel said, at last. "I suppose you're right. I'll marry Malka."

"No!" screamed Biala.

Without even having to think about it, I smacked her.

"Keep your money-grubber! I wouldn't have him on a golden plate!"

Everyone heard us. Mama rushed outside and dragged us both into the house. Papa glowered. Yankel hung his head. Biala sniffled. I stood with my face like a peeled potato. Finally, Mama spoke.

"Maybe I should cover the mirrors and call the burial society? The way we're all standing here you'd think we had a funeral to look forward to instead of a wedding! Malka, you'll have to ask Cousin Dvora for the white dress; I think she had it last. Or was it Esther? Well, we'll find out soon enough. Now..."

Papa interrupted, beaming.

"Wait, Pesha. Before you fuss about dresses we must consult the Rabbi."

Yankel looked up and smiled, tentatively.

"Pardon me, Reb Feivel, but I must write and inform my parents."

"There's nothing to inform!" I yelled. In those days a girl did not interrupt her parents, but to Yankel I owed nothing. "I will not marry a man who has to be bribed."

"Malka, be quiet!" shouted Papa.

"If I'm worth as much as a sewing machine, I have a right to speak."

"Be still, foolish child," Mama hissed.

"If you have to buy someone to marry me, you can save your money. I'll be an old maid first."

"But I won't!" wailed Biala. "Papa, it isn't fair. Yankel wanted me, not her." Then, remembering, belatedly, what we had overheard, she turned on the chief offender.

"Traitor! You don't love anyone but yourself! You should grow like an onion with your head in the ground!" she yelled at Yankel, who looked willing to do it if it would get him away from all these crazy, screaming people.

Papa tried to take command.

"Silence! All of you! In my house, human beings do not act like animals."

"If this is how human beings act, I'd rather live with the animals," I replied, heading for the barn.

"Go stay where you belong, Cow-face!" jeered my little sister.

Outside the house, I heard a good resounding slap, followed by a wail from Biala. Then Papa's voice: "This is my reward for trying to do what is best for my children...."

I ran into the barn, weeping. I had wanted Yankel, but not like this. Never in my entire life had I behaved so shamefully. Tears blurred my vision and made me even clumsier than usual. I ran straight into the wooden milking stool. Over it went, with me on top. I could smell the barn floor and feel its dirty roughness against my face before it all spun away...

* * *

When I woke up, I was sitting in a strange place. Every part of my body ached. As big as our house, the room had a soft tile floor and painted walls. Through the doorway I glimpsed two other rooms. An old man sat in a chair near me. A woman of my mother's age stood near a table. Nearby was a younger one with blonde hair and blue eyes. I glanced at the man, who seemed oddly familiar. His rheumy blue eyes gave me a look full of ancient pain. All three women wore skirts above their knees. My eyes drifted back to the old man. Who did he remind me of?

"Yankel!"

The name was thrown out of my mouth like a piece of hot fish. He turned toward me with a sarcastic smile on the mouth that had once reminded me of a ripe plum, but now resembled a prune.

"So, old woman, you finally woke up. Evelyn brought the children to see how senile their great-grandmother is. They got so bored with watching you sleep, they went out to play."

The middle-aged woman frowned.

"Pa, please don't talk like that. She can't help it. It's all right, Mama; don't feel badly."

I looked around, even more bewildered. This old man was Yankel?! It seemed impossible that a handsome young man could grow so bent and withered. Had he been stricken with a terrible disease? And who were these women with their legs sticking out? I looked down at my own legs and nearly screamed. They were thick, bandage swathed, and painful. The knotted hands in my lap were as speckled as an old woman's.

Before I could think much about anything, two
children ran in, chattering in a strange tongue. They were carrying books. Was it Shabbos? I sniffed. No cholent in this house. No cover on the stove. Candlesticks showed through the glass door of a cabinet, but they were free of melted wax.

"Is it Yom Tov?"

"No, Mama," the woman said wearily. "It's only Tuesday, but the children have the afternoon off from school because of a teachers' meeting."

School! These girls went to school! Oh, I could read well enough in Yiddish and write my name and figure money in the market, because the Rebbe taught most of the girls when we were still too little to be much help at home, but it was not a real school. Only the boys who were of cheder and only the rich ones (or the fools who would rather learn than eat or feed their families) went beyond that. These girls were certainly old enough to mind a baby or sweep out a room. The big one was at least ten (poor gawky thing looked like me!) and the little one... oh my! the little one...

"Baila!"

"I'm here, Ma. Please don't yell," said the older woman.

"No, no, Baila, my little sister!"

I pointed at the pretty little girl who shrank back and began to whimper.

"Grandma, you're scaring Ginny," chided the young blonde woman, putting an elegant arm around her daughter.

"But she looks just like my sister, Baila, used to. If Yankel is an old man, then Baila can be a child," I babbed.

Yankel glared at me.

"Malka, even an old woman has no right to be so crazy. If you upset the children, Evelyn won't bring them anymore. Now, listen to me. You know perfectly well your sister died of childbed fever because that fool she married wouldn't send for a doctor."

"When?"

"Two weeks after we left for Riga. You wanted to stay until after the baby came, but we had the tickets already. We were on the boat when it happened so they had to send the letter on to New York. I don't understand why you're carrying on like this, now. You didn't get so upset the first time you heard the news."

I was weeping helplessly. How could I remember something that had never happened? My sister was alive and well enough to scream insults at me, but here was a grown woman named for her and a little girl with her face! — a little princess who went to school!

The older girl began to whine. Her mother spoke sharply to her in their language.

"What's the matter? Did I frighten this one, too?"

"It's nothing, Grandma. She's just being bratty. It won't kill her to take her nose out of her book and be sociable for a change."

"Let the child read," I said, marveling.

She must have translated my words because the big girl smiled at me and said something. (Poor plain thing! Well, at least with the dowry her family could provide, they'd have no trouble finding her a nice man.)

"Suzanne said 'thank you,' Mama," explained Baila (my daughter!).

Yankel began to yawn.

"All right, now, Baila, your mother is tired. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, Papa. Don't forget; the meat in the icebox hasn't been salted, yet. I'll do it tomorrow and make you a pot roast. Have the leftover corned beef tonight." (These wealthy people ate meat during the week!) "Goodbye, Mama."

They took the children and left. When I hugged the little one, she pulled away, wrinkling her nose.

Yankel stood up, painfully.

"Well, old woman, you've worn me out with your foolishness."

"It hasn't been so bad, has it, Yankel? Marrying me instead of my sister?"

He looked at me with a sixty-year-old grief clouding his eyes.

"Sometimes I think that if I had married Baila she'd be alive, now. But that's not your fault. And if I'd married Baila, she might have persuaded me to stay in that rotten little shtetl with your family and we probably would have died during one of the wars. There might have been no children, then. But who can know such things?"

I can, I thought.

The tired old man who was my husband yawned, again.

"All this thinking makes me weary. Come take a nap, Malka."

"Soon. I'd like to sit awhile, first. You go ahead."

He left me, then. I sat, watching all the strange shiny things in my kitchen until I fell asleep.

* * *

I woke, again, in the bed I shared with my sister. Baila stood at the foot of it, looking distinctly sour when I opened my eyes. Papa and Mama were weeping and oh! what a fuss they made when they knew I was alive and not injured. They had found me in the barn at supper-time, stretched out on the floor with a bump on my head. All efforts to rouse me failed. They were so alarmed that if I hadn't woken soon they would have sent for a doctor.

Yankel was so relieved that I wasn't dead on his account that he hardly looked at Baila through the betrothal and the wedding and the births of our first two children. It was decided that I had better be kept out of barns so Baila inherited the milking until her marriage. (No one understood why I protested so much or cried so hard at her wedding.) After that, we came to America.

The little princesses don't understand Yiddish. I'll probably never get a chance to tell them what happened. (And even if I did, they'd just think I was a crazy old woman.) Perhaps some day their grandmother will mention
the sewing machine that bought a husband for Reb Feivel's silly daughter. But I do not think that anywhere, even in all the wonderful books they read, will they learn about the power of a milking stool!

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THE FOG
A swirling maelstrom.
An amorphous being.
A writhing beast.
A cloud of death.
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"Live Girls." I still chuckled slightly at the antiquity of it.
"Don't laugh," the pale man said seriously, "until you've seen some of the dead ones."
I thought about laughing again, but didn't.
"Would you like to go inside?" I offered instead.
"Yes, I would like to see."
I nodded to round Jeff by the flap, and he waved us on in.

The nearly obscene ruby light was more intense, inside, and it blended nicely with a twisting smoke that permeated. I looked at the pale gaunt man expecting to see some sort of shock, but I got, well, maybe powerlessness instead. He looked much paler, leaner too, in the crimson glow.

We could see Sally and Bernice, between the trunks of men, mud wrestling.

They were well into it, and almost completely brown except for a few lighter spots, where some of the mud had dried. The men were screaming at them, what they were saying was unintelligible. The massed sound sounded like the barking of dogs.

Bernice, the smaller and cuter, was winning, as always. She was pulling Sally's long slippery hair.

"I saw Little Egypt once," the pale man said, "so I can't watch no more of this." He slowly walked out moving the tent flap aside as if it were a huge lapping tongue.

His sunken eyes lit up as Cindi stirred her arm in the static chamber, causing the pink cotton candy to take form on the red and white stick.

Cindi winked at me as she handed me the cotton candy, and I smiled at her.

I handed the candy on to the pale man.
"Tell me," I said, "you haven't told me your name yet."
"My name is John," the pale man said.
"Would you like to sit down for a while, John?"
"Sure," he replied, and we walked over and sat at one of our green benches.

We sat there and watched people shuffle past in infinite variety. John ate his cotton candy.

After a timeless time, a pregnant woman in a yellow sun dress walked in front of us, leading a little boy, a red balloon wobbling behind him.
"Are you enjoying the carnival?" My voice sounded strange, distant, as if it had come from the past.

The woman stopped.
"Yes, but we're getting a little tired," she said patting her swollen stomach.
"Here, sit down here a while," I said standing. John stood too.
Her body looked grateful.
She and the little boy walked over and sat down, and she carefully arranged her dress.
"Thank you."

John and I nodded.
"I was a small in the early days," John said, and we walked off down the blazing midway,
feeling warm.

John and I had completed the circuit, and were standing back at the head of the operation, soft balls clanging into heavy milk bottles behind us.

"I caused an accident once," John said.

"What kind of accident?" I asked, not really listening. I wanted to hear more about shills, and famous tent-raisers, and Little Egypt.

"I did not keep up a ride once, and a rusted pin broke, and the cars broke loose and smashed, people died."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I was too," John said, "you know, that mud wrestling isn't any good."

"I know," I said.

"It is time for me to go now, there are people waiting for me."

"Are you Cinderella?" I asked him.

"Possibly," he said, and he walked away moving between the realms of light and shadow among the glowing booths. Possibly he vanished, but more likely I just lost sight of him among the inhabitants of the midway.

The next day, I had all the pins checked; some of them were rusty.

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SPAGHETTI
by BRIAN LUMLEY

I

What struck me at once and most forcibly about
my friend’s proposition, put to me that evening
in 1977, in the steak house next door to the Old Horse
and Cart in North London, not two hundred yards
from the A-1, was that he actually seemed to have
some sort of fear of the old house. This is the first
insistent thought or memory which returns to me out
of the strangeness of it all every time I think back
on it: Andrew Carter’s fear of the place. His fear
of entering and working there alone. Of course
I understand it well enough now, but at that time...

Now, I have called Andrew my “friend,” but
perhaps “acquaintance” were the more accurate
description; for in fact we were very different and
had only got to know each other over several years
and countless toasts in the bar of the Old Horse and
Cart. Indeed it might be said that the one thing we
really had in common was the fact that we both
enjoyed a good brandy, and nowhere better than in
the comfort and congenial atmosphere of our
favourite North London pub. As for the rest of it—
as I have said, we were very different. Or perhaps
in the end not so different: you may judge for
yourself.

Andrew Carter was tall, saturnine, and (I suppose
in retrospect) he had always struck me as being
a little shy. His dress, a little too sharp, perhaps;
his manner, defensive, even somewhat furtive; his
talk from the corner of his mouth, and likewise his
glances, always out of the corner of his eye... yes, I
think shadily would fit him rather closely. But not
unlikeable, if you can understand that. A “bit of a
lad,” you might say; or a “Jack the Lad,” as they are
wont to have it in London.

Myself: I was ex-Army, retiring shortly after my
majority, and doing nicely, thank you, in property.
Not a runaway success, no, but by no means short of
the readies, as Andrew might have stated it. So
much for me.

And so much for that, except that property could
be said to be a second meeting point, of sorts.
Andrew Carter owned a house, or would become the
owner in just two weeks’ time. The house, yes—
the one I mentioned in my first paragraph.

Nothing odd about that in itself, you might rightly
think: lots of people are householders, millions of
them. Except that this piece of property had strings
attached, and that night in Greasy Fred’s steak
house, Andrew told me about them. It was a
peculiar story with not a little of mystery, and I
don’t suppose I would have heard it at all if Carter
hadn’t had more than his customary two or three
doubles.

"It was seven years ago," he told me. "I was in a
bit of bother at the time—— that is, certain people
wanted to speak to me who I didn’t much care to
speak to—— and so I’d come up here from the East

End to stay at my uncle’s place in Muswell Hill.
Lying low, sort of. Queer old stick, my Uncle
Arthur: his place was full of musty old books and
odds and ends; bits of brass and silver, bric-a-brac,
you know?"

"Objets d’art," I helped him out.
"Right. A regular antique shop, it was, and him
just as dry and dusty as the stuff he filled his house
with. Anyway, my Old Man had used to tell me:
‘Andy, son, if you’re ever in any trouble, just get on
over and see your Uncle Arthur; he’s a funny old lad
but he’s my brother and he’ll always help you out.’
That was just before the Old Man died."

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, in
that way of his, and ordered two more brandies.
And perhaps I’d better explain here that we weren’t
yet in Greasy Fred’s place but still propping up the
bar in the Old Horse and Cart where, as I’ve hinted,
we’d both had a few more than our staple diet
required.

"And son," the Old Man had used to tell me,"
Carter continued while we waited for our drinks,
"you treat your Uncle Arthur right. You and me are
the only family he’s got, see—not that he’s ever
been much on family—but that old lad’s got more
money salted away than you’d ever give him credit
for. What? He’s worth a bleeding fortune! And,
‘oh?’ I’d say to the Old Man: ‘you mean he has a
bob or two in the bank, eh?’ ‘Not in the bank, son,’
he’d say. ‘It’s all in gold, and he keeps it hidden
away in that old place in Muswell Hill.’"

This was the most valuable I’d ever seen Andrew
Carter, and his story as it unfolded had me
interested; but I was hungry, too. "Andrew," I said,
"I haven’t eaten yet. I was thinking of a pasta,
maybe, at La Ristorante di Napoli across the road.
Perhaps you’d care to join me and I can hear your
story out over a meal?"

His sallow face seemed to grow paler still.
"What? That spaghetti shop on the corner? Not for
me, David my old son. Spaghetti? Ugh!"

I was a little taken aback. Di Napoli wasn’t the
Ritz, no, but it wasn’t bad either. "They do a very
nice Vecchia Romagna," I told him.

"Vecky what?" he said, still looking a little queasy.
brackish, but very good!"

But I couldn’t tempt him. "No," he shook his
head; "I don’t think so. Spaghetti’s not my scene—
the very sight of it turns my stomach! Anyway, I
always drink a lager with my meals. But I’ll treat
you to a steak and chips at Fred’s next door, if you
like?"

"Greasy Fred’s?" I was forced to smile. "You’d
turn down thin-sliced Genovese liver and button
mushrooms for a dubious bit of old leather at Fred’s
place?"

"Yes I would!" he answered vehemently.
"Anything, mate, but not those long, pink, pasta
worms! No, I won’t go near a spaghetti shop.
Besides, he used to eat the damned stuff..."

"He?" I repeated him.

"My Uncle Arthur," he looked at me curiously.
"He had a sort of passion for it. I suppose because
it was cheap and easy to prepare. Oh, he had the
lolly, all right, but he was a bit tight for all that.
He’d eat bleeding spaghetti morning, noon, and night!"

It was no good arguing, so I shrugged. "So be it;"
I said. "Greasy Fred's it is!" And we paid up and left.

II

Over our meal (which wasn't at all bad, as I remember it), Carter continued his story:

"So there I was at my uncle's place, nearly seven years ago, holed up, as it were, for a couple of weeks. And because of the situation — or, these people wanting to speak to me, I mean, who I wasn't keen to speak to — I was sort of nervous and didn't go out much. I mean, I could have used a drink, see? But Uncle Arthur didn't have a drop in the place. And that was something else the Old Man had told me about him: he couldn't take his booze. Drove him off his head, sort of, and it was bad for his heart."

"You must have found it all a bit claustrophobic?" I said.

"'Eh? Oh, yes, shut in." He seemed absent-minded. "Yes, you're right. I never did much care for being shut in. You know, as a lad, I did a bit of time now and then; and I can't really say that it suits me much. And Uncle Arthur being a bit ricketty and all. And all that dust, and the old books stinking of damp and going mouldy. Junk and figurines and knick-knacks in every room." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "And the coins, the beautiful golden coins..."

"Gold coins?" My interest picked up again.

Carter, toying with his knife and fork, looked up sharply. "'Eh, what?" he said. But then his eyes took on a sharper focus and his eyebrows came down in a line of dark suspicion.

"You said gold coins," I reminded him.

"Slowly he nodded. "Yes, that's right. Four hundred of them!"

"The gold your father had told you about?" I guessed.

Again his nod. "I suppose so, yes."

"Oh? Then you didn't actually see it?"

He reached into his pocket and tossed a dull golden piece onto the table. I picked it up.

It was cold, that coin. Colder than it should be, since it had just come out of his pocket, and the weather still warm in a sort of Indian Summer. But — it certainly had the soft, heavy feel of gold, and there was that in its weight which made it... attractive, yes. And in that moment I felt rising in me that passion which men have killed for; the love of, the craving for, the lusting after gold.

I examined the — coin? Well, I couldn't be sure about that. Its rim wasn't milled; it bore little of ornamentation; it was too well-rubbed to discern anything other than a soft outline of what might have been a raised picture or pattern of sorts, with a central bulge and eight radiating spokes. Perhaps a kind of rising sun relief, or a wheel, or maybe an octopus? It was somehow reminiscent of designs I had seen in the Mediterranean. This could be Crusader gold: a medallion, perhaps, and not a coin at all.

But it was cold, certainly, with an almost unnatural chill, so that for all its lure I gave it back after only a moment or two. "Five hundred pieces —like this one?" I asked.

He nodded, answering: "But I've found only three of them."

I began to see something of a picture now. Bits of the puzzle began to fall into place. For one thing, Carter's fingernails where he toyed with his food.

Now, I have a thing about fingernails: on a man I like them clean, pink, and long enough that they reach but do not obscure the curve of the finger's end. And Carter's nails were therefore quite loathsome, in my eyes. They were dirty, broken and badly stained, and several of the cuticles had been pushed right back, exposing raw redness which, in places and at times, wept like wounds. His palms were calloused and rough, as from hard work, and over the three or four years I had known him there had been little or no improvement. Indeed, on the night in question his hands were a mess! And these hands of a man who hardly seemed the sort to even contemplate a hard day's work...

Another piece of the puzzle: Carter had never once spoken of his uncle in the present tense. Finally he was, or was about to become, the owner of a property other than his small flat. All of this — coupled with his statement about the coins or whatever they were: that he had only found three of them — caused me to jump to a conclusion. And as it happened, I was absolutely right.

"Your Uncle Arthur died some time ago, leaving you the house in Muswell Hill, since when you have searched — in the grounds and cellar, etc. — with little success, for his hoard!"

Carter sat up straighter and for the first time in his life looked straight in the eye, looked at me very searchingly indeed. "Sherlock bleeding Holmes, I presume?"

"Dr. Watson, more like," I retreated, looking away. "Sorry if I'm prying."

After staring at me hard for a few moments longer, slowly he shook his head. "No, not really. I was going to tell you anyway. No, you're dead right — about most of it, anyway." He saw me looking again at his hands and gave a sly, knowing grin. "So that's what gave me away, eh?"

I shrugged. "I put two and two together, and —"

"Yes, I see. Well then, let's cut a long story short and get it told." He put aside his plate and took up his lager. "When I was staying with him that time I did manage to get out once or twice, and on one occasion I took a bottle of five-star back with me. When he caught me having a nip on the sly he seemed a bit annoyed at first, sort of agitated, like — but after I'd offered him a tot, and him accepting it, why! — then he loosened up. And my Old Man had been dead right: it was plain that drink could very easily have done for my Uncle Arthur. He just couldn't handle the stuff, not even in the smallest doses.

"Anyway, it was then that he kind of warmed to me — the drink, of course — and produced the piece I've just shown you. Then, too, that he told me there were four hundred more of 'em hidden away. But he wouldn't say where. More to the point, after a good stiff belt at my brandy, he told me that since I was his only surviving kin, when he passed on he'd be leaving his house and everything in it to me!"

"And I'll bet that pinned your ears back!" I commented.

"Yes, it did," he admitted. "It really did.
Anyway, I watched where he put the coin when I gave it back to him—in a little tin box he kept on the mantelpiece in the downstairs front room—and first chance I got I sorted of borrowed it, slipped out and had it valued. Would you believe, eighty-eight quid?

"Ouch!" said I, and: "That being seven years ago... why, that would make it closer to two hundred and odd right now!"

"Two hundred and thirty-seven, right now," Carter corrected me.

I whistled low through my teeth. "But if there really are four hundred of them, that makes—er—"

"It makes nearly a hundred thousand quid, mate, that's what it makes!" he cut my calculations short. "And most of the coins in better condition than this one. In fact the three I've found so far are near perfect—er, 'min's,' as they say."

I nodded. "But you can't find the rest of them, right?"

"Got it in one," he said, glumly surveying his fingers.

"How long have you been looking for them?" I asked. "Certainly you've been hard at it all of the time I've known you. Say three, three and a half years?"

"Twice that, David my old son," he said. "I've been at it for all of seven years!"

III

Now it was my turn to stare hard at him. "You mean your uncle died while you were staying with him? You know, while you were keeping a low profile, as it were?"

"Ah! No," he said, "you've got it just a bit wrong. Maybe I should have corrected you before. Fact is, we don't know for sure that he is dead. No, not for sure."

I gave him a blank look. "Well what then, if not dead?"

Carter shrugged (a little uneasily, I thought) and answered: "Oh, I dunno. Gone away, like? Hopped it? Disappeared...?" But when I glanced at him suddenly, his eyes were cold and unblinking as those of a fish.

"Disappeared, you say?" I mused. "While you were there? And of course you reported it to the police?"

"What?" he cried. "Me? Report it to the filthy? Believe me, my old son, I report nothing to the filthy! God no—not me!"

"But a missing person—" I began to protest, perhaps too loudly.

Carter put a finger to his lips. "Shhh! Christ's sake, mate! I mean, let's not tell the whole bleeding world about it. Actually, I did tell 'em—but not until about six months later, when things were a bit cooler for me all around."

"I should think so," I nodded. "He was your uncle, after all!" And I frowned. "But just how did he disappear?"

"Ah," he said, going on the defensive again. "Well, perhaps not even that. Maybe it was just that he sort of, well, went into hiding. You know?"

"No, I don't know," I protested, starting to feel lost. "I thought it was you that was, er, on the lam? I mean, what on earth did your uncle have to hide from?"

Carter averted his eyes. "Dunno, rightly," he mumbled. "Maybe it was the booze he was scared of—scared he'd say too much, like, when he'd had a nip or two—or again, maybe it was me."

"Scared of you? But I thought you said he was going to leave you the house and everything?"

"So he was—so he did!" he answered. "God's truth! But, you know, once I knew the gold was there, well, I sort of kept prodding him a bit."

"Prodding him" I repeated, and perhaps I made a sour face.

"Hang on, now?" Carter was quick to add, when he saw my expression. "I mean, no threats or anything like that. God, no! I mean, I'd just leave the bottle lying around, you know? Loosen up his balmy old tongue a bit, see?"

"And you reckon that would make him want to go into hiding, eh?" I asked, maybe a little too suspiciously.

Carter's face hardened. "Now look here, David my lad. Are we mates or not?"

When a man puts it like that, what can one do? I half-nodded. "I suppose we are," I said.

"Then you'll take my word for it that there was no funny business?"

I was a bit reluctant, but: "If you say so."

"Good!"

"So?" I said, after a moment's silence. "What else?"

He looked at me curiously then and seemed to shrink down into himself a little. "Do I look like a pushover?" he asked, after a while. "I mean, do I look soft or something? You know, the kind of bloke who'd jump at the sound of a car backfiring, or a squeaky gate swinging in the wind?"

"Or things that go bump in the night," I added, on impulse. "No, I don't think so. On the contrary, I suppose there are those who'd say you're probably a bit hard." And I hastily added: "I mean, that you can well look after yourself."

"And indeed I can!" he growled at once. "And yet—"

"Yes?"

"It's just that that old house—"

"Yes?"

He got himself together. "A will was found," he said, "and sure enough old Arthur had left it all to me. But... there were a couple of kingly provisos."

"Such as?"

"In the event he went missing, I wasn't to get the house for seven years. Oh, I could have access twice a week for inspection—I could even carry out minor works where they were necessary to preserve the place or improve it, so long as there was no major building or reconstruction involved—but I couldn't actually live there. Not for seven years."

"And?"

"Eh?"

"You said 'provisos.' Up to now I've heard only one."

"Oh, yes," he said, nodding, again absent-minded, or far away. "The other one."

"The other proviso, yes?" I persisted.

He looked at me strangely. "It's a funny one," he said, after a moment, seeming to invite comments but I just waited. Carter shuffled about a bit. "Well, it's about a book: one of his misty, crumbling old
books. A thing called the Dhol Chants. Seven years
to the day after he disappeared — if he were to
disappear, you understand — I was to read the last
paragraph on page one hundred and eleven. I was to
read it out loud and in the presence of a witness..."

I waited, then shrugged. "Is that all?"

He nodded.

I had been thinking. "Metal detector!" I said,
changing the subject.

Carter took a deep breath, sat up straighter.
"Tried it," he said. "Even a model that discriminates
between nails and half-pennies buried thirty-six
inches deep, and shows you a picture of the object
on a small screen. Cost me a small fortune!
Nothing."

"How about the grounds?"

"Big gardens front and rear. I've cleared off the
shrubbery, burned it flat, and dug the whole place
over down to three or four feet. Two three-penny
bits, two old sixpences and an 1890 half crown.
You'd find such in any large garden. Other than that
—not a sausage."

"The cellar?"

He shuddered, gulped.

"Something wrong?"

"Look," said Carter, "I'll tell you. Frankly, I can't
stand the bloody place! It's not right, that old
house. And it's getting worse; and time is rapidly
running out."

IV

Ah! Now we appeared to be getting somewhere.
"Explain," I said. "What do you mean, 'time is
running out,' and what is it that's not right about the
place?" It was like trying to draw blood from a
stone.

But: "Right!" he finally said, determinedly. "I
will explain, and then perhaps you can suggest a
solution. See, first off, the old house is to come
down."

Well, I was in the business and I knew one or two
things about some of the planning in the Muswell Hill
area. "It's under a demolition order?"

"Right. It's to come down, to be demolished,
removed. Government planning: a new road is going
right through it. Oh, I'll be compensated — and
there's a lot of dry rot anyway — but that's hardly
the point, is it?"

"I see," I said.

"Do you?" he asked. "There's a hundred thousand
quid somewhere in that old place, and in just a week
or ten days' time it's to disappear just like my old
Uncle Arthur!"

I thought about it, and slowly nodded. "Doesn't
look like you've a lot of time left, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. But at least I've managed to get
hundred percent access — at last! In fact, for the
last fortnight I've been living there. Hah! — and
when I haven't been there I've been living here; or
rather, right next door, in the Old Horse and Cart."

"It's getting on your nerves, eh? All this
searching, I mean?"

He nodded. "Damn right! The searching, and the
house itself. See, a year ago — er, before things got
too funny, which I'll tell you about in a minute — I
had a couple of workmen in and made the place
liveable. I had a bath put in for one thing, and one
of the small rooms painted and a single bed put in
—not that I've used that much! But see, what with
all the digging I was doing, the searching, and pulling
up floorboards and what have you, I used to get
really dirty. Now, at least, I could have a bath when
I wanted one. Before that... well, it must have
looked a bit funny, mustn't it? Me going in there all
neat and tidy, so to speak, and coming out covered
in dust and muck twice a week! You know, people
would begin to notice. They'd think I was giving
the old place a right old going over."

"Which you were."

"Yes, of course, but I didn't want people to know
that, did I? See, there are certain circles where I
have a bit of a rep., my old son, and it wouldn't take
people long to figure out that if I was looking for
something, then that there was something there to
look for."

"I see. So after you'd done a stint of, er, work,
you'd take a bath and come out as neat and tidy as
when you went in..."

"Right."

"But didn't your uncle have a bathroom, then?"

"He had a loo, but no bath. And in his kitchen, if
you could call it a kitchen, no hot water. Cold
water, straight from the mains, but no hot. No, he
bathed at the local public baths — mean old bastard!"

"He did leave you everything," I reminded him.

"Er, yes — I suppose I have to credit him with
that, at least," Carter returned.

"It was just that he lived rather sparsely," I said.
"Like a bleeding hermit! I had to have an
immersion heater put in, and a tank upstairs in the
attic."

"But at least the place is comfortable now?" Carter
shrugged. "Bit of a mess, really. But what does it
matter if it's to come down, eh? I mean, I've taken
up most of the floorboards; been into a lot of the
ceilings; the chimneys; ripped out the backs of old
fitted cupboards and wardrobes; been down under
the floor of the cellar..."

"Frustrating," I contributed.

"You're bloody right, mate!"

"But I don't see how I can help, or what I can
suggest. And you still haven't told me about the
other things about the house not being right?"

He looked uncomfortable again, but after a
moment: "Do you believe in ghosts, David?"

I smiled, shook my head. "No, I'm afraid I don't.
When you're gone, you're gone, that's my belief. So
you think it's haunted, eh?"

"I didn't say that!" His voice at once took on a
sharper edge. "Do I look soft or something, believing
in the bogeyman?"

I tried to nod, shrug, and shake my head all at
the same time. "Well, do you or don't you?"

"I... dunno," he sullenly answered. "I mean, well
what the hell am I supposed to believe in?"

"There have been... occurrences?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Occurrences."

The whole thing — but especially his reluctance
— was annoying me now. "Well," I made as if to
go, "can't sit here all night."

"You busy then?" he caught at my elbow, not
wanting me to leave.

"Not particularly, but..."

"OK, I'll get on with it. Yes, there have been oc-
currences. Noises, smells, things that move by
"Yes, bloody spaghetti!"

I leaned away from him. Maybe my being here was a mistake. The story he had told me was, after all, more than a little—

"Sorry," he said, as if reading my mind. "Sorry, sorry! Sorry! But see, I'm like you. I don't believe in bloody spooks! The only things that frighten me are knives and guns and knuckledusters. And maybe the thought of buckets of quick-setting cement—with my feet in 'em! But not ghosts. Not me."

"Squatters!" I said, snapping my fingers.

"Eh?"

"Possible, isn't it, in an old, empty house like that? Squatters making a temporary stay there. Or maybe kids, playing in the place. Even the occasional tramp. And you said it yourself: spaghetti is a cheap food, easily prepared. Just the sort of stuff your gentleman of the road would be likely to—"

"No."

He shook his head in rejection of my theory. "I've been living there, remember? Part of the time, anyway. Kids, tramps, squatters? Forget it! Not in the last fortnight, anyway. But spaghetti, yes. And as recently as yesterday..."

We were almost there. I guessed that once we were inside the place he would clam up again and so pressed what small advantage I still had: "And what about the noises you mentioned? And the smells? And the things that move by themselves?"

"Smells." His voice shuddered as he remembered. "God, yes! Rotten smells. Worse than blocked drains, they are—worse than festering flesh!"

My mind cringed from the picture his words conjured. I didn't like the sound of it at all; not if I was going to be in there with him for any length of time. "What, all the time?"

"No, just now and then. But it's enough..."

"And noises?"

"Probably the old house settling," he tried to shrug it off and failed miserably. "I dunno. Creaks and groans—timber groans, that is. I think..."

"And things that move?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "The will," he said. "I mean, I searched that place from top to bottom after he... when he didn't show up. Not for the coins—not right then—but for a will. See, he said he would will it all to me. So I looked. Everywhere. But the will didn't come to light until around the time I told the police about him. Then, when I took them to the house—or rather, when they took me there—they found the damn thing sitting there right in the middle of the front room table!"

"So he must have been alive after his disappearance," I replied. "So maybe he still is alive."

"Yes," he nodded grimly. "That thought dawned on me, too—years ago. It also dawned on the filth. God, and didn't they put yours truly through the old third degree? Yes they bloody did! And as the years passed and the old house got funnier and funnier—well, for a long time I thought he was still in there—hiding, you know? Like a crazy man. I thought it was him that was doing it all. Except—"

"Yes?"

"Seven years, mate," he answered bitterly. "Seven long years. If he was there, believe me, I would..."
have found him. And if he wasn't dead when I did, he sure as hell would be now! Anyway, it was just about that time — the time they found the will, I mean — that I saw the spaghetti for the first time. It stank bad enough then, but since — And he stopped short.

We turned left around a tight bend, and left again between old gateposts and up a short drive... and whatever Carter had been about to say was left unsaid. There it was, the old house, silhouetted in the night like some darkly gabled, stony ghost, like a gaunt, crumbling mausoleum.

And I felt a little colder for all that the night was a mild one, and I could almost feel Carter sweating as he slowed the car to a halt in the shadow of the dark porch.

VI

We stood for a long time just looking at it, raven black against London's soft night glow. Carter's sweat must be cold on him by now and I was getting no hot warmer, but still we made no move. My heart was no longer in it, and I guessed that Carter must be feeling the same way. But —

— As if he sensed my indecision, now he took the initiative. Keys jangled as he opened up the porch door, put on a dim light, led the way over prised-up flags and between small heaps of rubble to the house door proper and turned a second key in the rusty lock. Then we were inside and in the next second Carter had the light on. We were in a sort of hall which, like the porch, showed all the ravaged signs of extensive, overt exploration. I looked at Carter where he stood nervously attentive, as if listening for something, and slowly he began to breathe. He had been holding his breath.

Well, the air was musty, yes, but in no way poisonous as he had described it. It was the smell of dust and age (and of debris, naturally, from his digging and delving) but that was all. No blocked drains that my nostrils could discover, and certainly no —

"It's OK!" Carter said, startling me. And more ominously: "For now, anyway." He led the way through a door on the right, once again switching on a light, and I followed him. And while he stood there peering about, a little less nervously now, I checked the room out:

It was a huge front room, and it was at least a century out of date, out of style, out of time. The wallpaper (what little of it Carter had not disturbed) was of a yellow-striped and primrose-patterned variety which must have decorated a million front rooms around the turn of the century; the fireplace was of dark marble columns with a marble lintel over a recessed iron grate; the high ceiling was centered by an ornate plaster "rose" from which once, doubtless a great many years ago, some tinkly chandelier had been suspended to lend the room a certain opulence. The skirting-boards were all of twelve inches high and an inch and a half thick, with a fancy molding along the top edge; likewise the massive cornice where it joined walls to ceiling — and where Carter had not yet torn it down! The great bay window was leaded, with tiny panes of a stained glass above and clear glass at the bottom over a curving window-ledge which looked to be formed of a single solid timber. Except it was no longer solid. No, for Serpula Lachrymans had a definite hold here; and when I probed, so the tip of my finger sank right in, emerging in a puff of powdered wood when I drew it back out. Dry rot: doubtless the place was riddled.

Carter brushed by me and drew ancient drapes across the grimy windows. "There," he said, unnecessarily. "Front room. I've had the floorboards up and been down to earth. That's where I found one of the coins. Picked it up with the detector. But I reckon it had simply fallen down there, between the boards. They're all warped, as you can see. Gaps all over the place. And nothing had been disturbed down there before me. So... I reckon my old Uncle Arthur simply lost the coin, probably while he was counting them or something."

He moved over to the mantelpiece. "Here, give us a hand, mate. Heavy, this is."

The marble lintel was loose; brute force had been used to lever it away from the chimney breast. We lifted it down, Carter on one end and me on the other. Behind was dust and plaster debris. "Found another there," he pointed. "Picked that one up with the detector, too. But see, there was a crack between the mantel shelf and the wall. So I reckon the coin got there by accident, like the first one
down a crack in the floorboards. Old Arthur probably had 'em stacked up there on the shelf at one time or another."

"He seems to have been remarkably careless with his gold!" I observed.

"Doddering old bugger!" snapped Carter. "But it was finding them that kept me coming back, else I might have given up long ago."

I wondered if there might be more in what he had just said than he suspected, but I said nothing. What reason, after all, would his uncle have had in luring him to the place?

We put the mantelpiece back and Carter dropped a flaring match on the makings of a fire he had prepared in advance of our visit. "What about the third coin?" I asked him. "Where was that one?"

"Eh?" He turned his eyes from the flickering flames where they burned the edges of crumpled newspapers and caught at the splintered ends of dry sticks. "Oh, that one was in his mattress. Another job for the old metal detector."

"His mattress?"

"Yes. He'd sewn pockets into the mouldy old thing. Quite a few pockets, but the coin had found a hole and ended up in the lining. When he shifted his loot, that one must have escaped him."

"Shifted it?" I repeated.

Carter sighed. "Well if the coins had been there — in his mattress — and weren't there now, then obviously he'd shifted 'em!"

"Shifted them when you started, er, prodding him, do you mean?" I asked.

Carter slit his eyes, then looked away. He was silent for a moment, then shrugged. "Possibly," he said.

The fire had caught now and its heat was eating into the coals where they shifted on top of their platform of kindling. Smoke blew back from the flue into the room, causing us to back away, coughing. "That'll clear in a minute," Carter informed me. "I've been up there, too, you see. Done a bit of damage, not much. A tight squeeze. Didn't much care for it." He shivered as the chimney began to draw and the smoke was sucked away.

"So where haven't you been?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "I've not finished with the cellar yet," he said. "I keep getting signals on the detector — bits of screws and nails, usually. I'm about half-way done."

"Then let's get to it," I suggested.

"Ah, no!" Carter said, holding up a restraining hand. "I'll get to it. That's not what you're here for. What, my mate David? Manual labour? Leave it out! No, you'll make coffee for us both — especially for me, 'cos it gets cold down there — and you'll give the old place the once-over, looking for likely hidey-holes I might of missed, and you'll just, you know, sort of be here."

That suited me fine (even though I suspected he preferred to work alone for a fairly obvious reason: probably to salt away a little of the gold as soon as it came to light, and thereby avoid paying me my ten percent on that portion). "Very well," I agreed anyway. "Show me the kitchen and the way to the cellar, and we'll take it from there. And one other thing: you said that the three coins you've already discovered were very nearly in mint condition. I'd like to see one — if only to get a clearer idea just what we're after, right?"

He raised his eyebrows, looked mildly surprised. But: "No problem" he said. "Why didn't you ask before?" Then he frowned. "Or maybe you were thinking I didn't really find 'em after all, eh? Like I only used that story as bait — to enlist your help in a doubtful venture, eh?"

He fished about at his neck where he wore a heavy silver chain, drawing into view a little leather pouch. It chinked heavily when he gave it a shake. Carter grinned, opened the neck, took out a coin and passed it to me. "There you go," he said.

VII

A medallion, as I had expected, the thing was cold and heavy in my hand as the first one had been; but its designs were as clearly visible as those on a fresh-minted ten-pence piece. There it was again, that raised figure with its eight radiating arms. But now I could see that it was in fact an octopus, and such a creature as I would never wish to meet in the flesh, as it were.

Now, I have called it an octopus, but "octopoid" might convey its design more accurately. And yet anthropomorphic — manlike — could equally well be employed. Not that there was anything really manlike about the figure on the golden disk, unless it were the sensation of a sort of abyssal intelligence which seemed inherent in the staring of those awful eyes. Oh, yes, whoever had designed these medallions, certainly he had worked to great effect on those eyes. The look they seemed physically to throw at me from the surface of the lifeless golden disk was one of utter malignancy — a hatred for the entire human race, for all living things!

As for the rest of the thing:

It had bat-wings, folded back behind the thrusting head. And from that head, face-tentacles radiated outward in the aforementioned sunburst; mercifully obscuring much of the rest of the body, which seemed bloated as that of some great ocean slug; and central at the roots of those tentacles, there I could see a part-open beak which seemed to me to issue mad laughter or a demented cry. Claws scrabbled at the edge of the stone throne upon which the beast was seated or perched, a throne carved with squids and krakens, crusted with aquatic fungi or corals, and draped with ropes of seaweed. Beneath the figure, at the medallion's rim, were these characters:

\[\text{YHLJ}\]

And on the reverse:

Faint-etched (possibly to create an effect of submersion beneath the sea, for certainly strange fishes swam in the foreground) were the outlines of a city colossal, a place of ziggurats and temples, of columns and turrets and windowless towers, whose architecture seemed conceived or depicted by some crazed cubist. The angles were all wrong; surfaces seemed at once concave and convex! I couldn't quite make out how I was supposed to view the scene, or from which aspect. And more of those odd characters, like this:

\[\text{L-LL-LL}\]

I handed the medallion back to Carter. "I don't
like it," I told him.

"What?" he was astonished. "Man, that's gold!"

"The currency or sigil of some weird cult, I'd say," I answered.

He frowned, obviously at a loss to understand my distaste. "You mean you don't like the designs? So what? Melt 'em down and you've got gold! What does it matter what they look like now?"

"Or what they were used for?" But it was plain that Carter didn't understand that either— and for that matter, I wasn't any too sure myself!

He put the medallion away, glanced at me a trifle wonderingly, said: "Right, I'm for the cellar. Kitchen's through there," he pointed toward a door which stood ajar, "and you'll find the cellar down the steps under the stairs." And off he went.

I went through into the kitchen—and saw at once what Carter had meant by his sneering. Atop a rickety table, an ancient electrical two-ring cooker stood stained and grimy. Beside the cooker, a fairly new electric kettle seemed to gleam by comparison. I guessed that the kettle was Carter's. There was also a square stone sink and fluted stone drainer, with a single tap for water. Sink and drainer showed the wear and stains of more than a hundred years.

I made a mental note that the tap was the terminal point of a single old lead water pipe that went up the wall and disappeared through the patchy
ceiling. And that, when I thought about it, was odd. Carter had told me his uncle had only cold water, direct from the mains — so why did the supply here come from above? Unless... of course! The WC must be up there, or maybe a hand-wash-basin. Whichever, the mains supply would have to serve that first. That must be it. But God — what an outdated way of life old Arthur Carter must have led...

I filled the kettle, plugged it into the kitchen's single socket, decided to take a quick look upstairs while the water boiled. Back I went into the front room, and from there to the hall. Beneath the stairs I found an open door, with stone steps leading down. From below came sounds of shovelling and Carter's grumbling and panting as he exerted himself. He must have donned overalls, for the clothes he had been wearing were now draped over the back of an old ladder-backed chair where it stood near the head of the steps.

"You OK?" I called down.

And after a moment: "Yes — where's the coffee?"

"Give me a chance!"

He grunted something unintelligible, following which the sounds of his labours continued.

As I came out from beneath the stairs into the hallway, I spied another small door across the hall. Behind it — the toilet. And this, too, was peculiar. If the loo was down here, why was there a water pipe going upstairs from the kitchen? Then I remembered what Carter had said about having had a bath put in, and so for the moment I put the matter out of my mind...

Very well, now I would see what the upstairs rooms looked like:

The stairs were something of a hazard in themselves: loose and rotten, they seemed to sag beneath my feet. I climbed the treads close to the wall, where there should be a maximum of support. It was dark, too, for the dim light from the hall hardly reached up here at all. But... on the landing I found a light bulb, and a naked dusty bulb on its cobwebbed flex issued sufficient light to show me a passageway with half a dozen doors leading off into as yet unknown rooms beyond.

The large, long room to the far right was Carter's recently converted bathroom; it had small windows which looked out on one side to the suburbs, and on the other gazed down from the hill on a sparkly near-distant London. The room was more or less intact (though I could see that Carter had had the floorboards up) and the old bath he had installed was clean and stood on its four claw feet against the end wall.

Above the bath, the stylish cylinder of a new, fast-action electric immersion heater gleamed in blue enamel and chrome where it was affixed to the wall. The heater was supplied through a small-gauge copper pipe whose other end had been welded or brazed into the old, heavy-gauge lead pipe I had seen in the kitchen, which here came up through the boards at the foot of the bath, climbed the wall and continued up out of sight into the attic...

Now surely this was an anomaly! I puzzled over the thing:

If the only water in the house came direct from the mains, why was it routed through the attic?

That would normally suggest a tank up there, but Carter's uncle would not have needed a tank, not in his circumstances. On the other hand, the tank could have been a standard fixture when the house was built more than a hundred years ago. So maybe it wasn't so strange after all.

In any case, I wasn't a plumber, far from it. But... it might be worth asking Carter about it.

Making to leave the room, I glanced into the bath, and —

A greyish-pink strand of what looked like ancient spaghetti lay in the enamel well of the bath, close to the vacant plughole, for all the world like some thin, inert worm of the sewers crawled up into the light to die of its own exertions...

VIII

Suddenly conscious of a rancid stench, I washed the strand away down the plughole and turned off the tap, then left the bathroom and had a quick peep into the other rooms. What I saw there was sufficient to tell me that it was as well the place was due for demolition. Carter already had the job well in hand; only the exterior brickwork was holding the place together; one tap with a bulldozer and it would come tumbling down! Well, perhaps not so severe, but bad enough. Oh, yes: he desperately wanted that gold!

But I could explore to my heart's content later; right now I must be satisfied that I had at least learned the general layout of the place. I went back downstairs to the kitchen, found instant coffee, sugar, long-life milk, made coffee. The taste was a little off — the water in old houses is always a bit peculiar, I think — but at least my concoction was hot and wet (NATO standard, we used to call it in the Army!), and Carter must be pretty thirsty by now. Then I took up both mugs and ventured to the cellar.

"About bloody time, mate!" he said as I came into view down the stone steps. "What have you been doing, then?"

"Oh, nosing about," I answered.

"See anything interesting?"

I deliberately refrained from mentioning my spaghetti encounter. "Wasn't really looking; I was just getting the feel of the place, that's all." And as I talked I looked around.

The cellar was quite spacious, maybe twenty-four by twenty-seven feet, with a high concrete ceiling supported by four concrete columns. The walls (what remained of them) had been of brick, but now at least a quarter of the cellar's floor was covered with broken brick debris and dark earth. The boards of the floor were up and Carter stood waist-deep in an earth hole, his upper body gleaming with sweat and dark with earth streaks. Overhead, a bright, solitary light bulb dangled from its flex; to one side of the hole a sheet of newspaper was covered by a litter of rusty bent nails, old screws and other metallic bits and pieces. And just beside me where I stood at the foot of the steps, there was Carter's metal-detector: a newish-looking "Super-Seeker 7."

Carter climbed out of his hole as I stepped forward. The top of his boilersuit was hanging round his waist. He shrugged into it, buttoned it up and took his coffee from me, drinking it down in a
couple of great gulps. Then he said: "That's it—I've had it down here for tonight."

"But you've only been working for half an hour!"

"Down here, my son, that's time enough!" he explained. "Christ! You start craving company after just ten minutes! Anyway, I've a feeling I'm flogging a dead horse—down here, anyway. Not a tinkle on the old detector. And besides, there's still plenty to be done upstairs."

"I've been up the stairs," I told him. "A quick glance, anyway. Queer plumbing."

"Oh? I don't know much about plumbing."

"I don't know a lot myself," I answered. "But there's something weird about it."

"Whole place is bloody weird!" he muttered darkly. "Come on, let's go back up. I could use some more coffee." He led the way.

Half-way up the steps, Carter paused at the light switch. He looked up and ahead, said: "You closed the door behind you up there. It was almost an accusation."

"So?"

He shrugged—but when he switched off the light I knew what he meant. The single bulb in the cellar had thrown its light right up the steps; now that it was out, and with the door closed, it was lightless as the tomb down here. Carter climbed the rest of the steps two at a time, breathing heavily, and I was right behind him. It was only a matter of seconds, but what a relief when the dim light filtered in as he opened the cellar door...

We went back to the front room and Carter carried straight on through into the kitchen, calling back to me: "I'll make more coffee. You have a look round the room. It might be as well if you give each room a good going over in its turn."

That sounded sensible. I gave the room my full attention:

The two walls standing at right angles to the great bay window were deeply recessed. One was an end wall; its recess contained a massive old oak table-cum-desk, half of which stuck out into the room. The opposing recess, in the interior wall, was lined with bookshelves; most of these were empty now but some still contained a fair number of dusty old volumes. I crossed to the bookshelves to have a closer look, calling out to Carter:

"Have you looked behind the bookshelves in the recess?"

"With the detector, yes," he answered. "Not a sausage."

I heard him, but not fully. The title of one of the books had distracted me. No, I'll say stronger than that: it was as if the dull gold lettering on the spine had jumped at me, or seemed suddenly to burn with an inner fire as my bulk threw the books into shadow:

Dhol Chants.

The book was on a shelf level with my eyes. I took it down. The thing was clammy in my hand, and moving it... it was as if I'd poked about in someone's grave! A rotten stench welled up with the dust which was something very much other than the somehow depressing smell of ancient paper. And dislodged from the shelf, a long strand of spaghetti plopped to the floor...

It was spaghetti, could only be. Carter had said that's what the stuff was, and he had had more experience of it than me. But it had the smell (if that's where the smell originated) of something very, very dead! I nudged it with the toe of my shoe where it lay on the bare floorboards. It broke into two lengths, maybe three or four inches each. It was yellowy-grey turning mouldy blue.

"Ah!" said Carter, coming back into the room. "The Dhol Chants: You've found the bloody thing!"

And he paused and sniffed suspiciously at the air.

Now, for the life of me I can't say why I did it, but something prompted me not to mention this second strand of spaghetti, just as it had prompted me to keep mum on the first. Maybe it was greed? If Carter got frightened off, bang would go my ten percent, after all. Anyway, standing with my back to him, I quickly used the toe of my shoe to grind the—whatever—into the dust and the grain of the floorboards.

Carter sniffed again. "You smell that?" he asked, sharply.

"Eh?" I pretended ignorance; for in fact the smell was quickly disappearing. "Smell what?"

His frown gradually lifted. "My imagination," he finally said. "God!—I hate this place."

I crossed to the oak table. Along the sides and back of its recess, a wooden bench, leather covered, had been fitted to the wall. I sat down on one of the short legs of the bench and opened the book. Carter came over, plumped my coffee down, said: "While you get yourself acquainted down here, I'm going to have a go at the panelling in the room on the far left upstairs. Anything you want to know, come to the foot of the stairs and give me a yell. OK?"

"Fine," I answered, and as he went about his business so I turned to page one hundred and eleven of the strange old book...

IX

Before I talk about that page, perhaps I'd best describe something of the book itself. Normally I wouldn't bother, but this book was something special. For like Carter's "coins" it literally reeked of age. It was... hoary! Like the pyramids are hoary, like the mienhirs of ancient burial grounds or the megaliths of Stonehenge.

Large, the volume was perhaps eleven inches by eight; and bulgy, it was almost four inches thick and weighed like a great brick in my hand. Whoever "Dhol!" was, he must do an awful lot of chanting! The book's covers were of wood—mahogany, I thought—but grotesquely carved and inlaid with ivory and silver. The hinges were also of silver, showing the blue blush of age and filigreed into weird designs which, while not quite pictorial, nevertheless struck chords in my subconscious mind—like scenes conjured in the flames of a hearth fire, or half-remembered from a dream, or visions and pseudo-memories from a previous plane of existence. Anyone who ever experienced deja-vu will know what I am trying to convey.

Between the covers: the paper was thick and crude, heavily stained in places and in others crumbling; the edges of the sheets were uncut and uneven, splitting and flaking away; the text and illustrations were hand-wrought, and their subject was...? Here I was at a loss.
Unlike the characters of the medallions, these were very nearly English letters (early Anglo-Saxon, at least) but strung together in such a way as to make no sense whatsoever. Or... it was a language previously outside my knowledge. Or... the thing was in a coded or cryptographic form. And on page one hundred and eleven—

This was going to be difficult! How on earth might one read this last paragraph out loud, as in Carter's uncle's proviso, or indeed read it any other way, if one could make neither head nor tail of the rhythm, the pronunciation, or even the message and purpose of the thing? Difficult, yes—and yet now I remember that paragraph character for character, "word" for "word." And knowing as I now do something of its power, I reproduce only this portion below:

"Gb'ha gn-ka a'hboa um, et-um
T'hn-hla puh-ghtagn bugg-ugg.
Gn-ka um Zg'h nuth-ah'n, et-um,
Elgz-a'hboa puh-atta u'll..."

Rubbish? No stranger, surely than the gibberish of any coded message before it is deciphered. And if it were not in cipher... then perhaps it represented the English approximation of how the chant would sound in the English (or human?) tongue.

For now indeed I felt that I handled a book in many ways removed from mundane knowledge; nor was this feeling of mine, that it was not entirely of Earth, so far-fetched as the reader might be tempted to believe. Alien?—certainly the language was alien: as unknowable as the Egyptian glyphs in the time before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Ancient?—of course, as I have previously explained; and, by virtue of its remote origin, that much more alien. But—

—Evil? Need I add... yes? At least, I sensed that it treated of evil things. Why else should its meaning be so obscured and deliberately hidden away?

Or was I allowing Carter's prattle to get to me? This was... a book! Nothing more. Very strange and very old, but just a book. I allowed myself to riffle the stiff, crumbling pages between thumb and forefinger.

The leaves at once fell open at an obviously well-used section, where I noted with renewed interest that someone had crowded a great deal of minute, spidery marginalia around the frame of the pages. The notes were modern, comparatively recent in the scale of years, and they were in English; written, I thought, with a fine ball point. Moreover there was a signature: I was pleased to note that it was that of Arthur Carter.

As for what the notes said: that was almost as hard to understand as the actual text of the book; not the crabbed writing itself, but whatever it signified or had signified to the writer:

Against one long paragraph:

"Not as the Necronomicon has it, nor to be found in Feery's Notes. Possibly a variation on the 8th Agga-ath line. Dangerous to try it without greatest possible precautions. Eliphas Levi's 'lost' liturgy might turn the trick..."

Or, on another page:

"The Blue Glow (p. 79-3) is a puzzle. I seem to see it, of course, but is it that the spell alters my eyes, or is it that the treasure itself is caused by the spell to emit this temporary radiation? Whichever, it is effective—as are all of these damnable invocations..."

Or, more baffling still:

"Dhols, according to Prinn, are not to be trusted under any circumstances, and the use of their devices or of those devices accorded to them should be where possible avoided. Their chants may be especially venomous. Prinn notes, however, that while their beneficial thaumaturgies are doubtful, their revenge sigils are particularly potent—though almost invariably posthumous. I have now translated all the harmful chants between 101 and 127, but—God!—who would wish such things on even his worst enemy?"

I shook my head to clear it of all sorts of peculiar images, then returned my eyes to the second such annotation. "The Blue Glow (p. 79-3) is a puzzle..."

Well, I had to agree with Carter's Uncle Arthur there—the whole thing was a puzzle!—but let's at least see what he was getting at.

And so I turned to page 79 and found the third paragraph.

The passage was immediately apparent: down the left-hand margin, opposite the third paragraph, Arthur Carter had drawn a thin line of biro. But again I was disappointed: the thing was coded, like the rest of the book. In fine script, however, in the narrow margin to the left of his locating line, Carter had also scribbled:

"See Prinn on the dangers of 'The Luring of Dhols,' and on 'Occult Discovery of Gold.'"

The occult discovery of gold...

And now I felt I was really getting somewhere! Obviously Carter's uncle had been an occultist—
a dabbler, anyway — and had employed certain so-called "arts" in seeking out hidden treasures. And maybe he hadn't been such a dabbler after all, for the evidence would seem to have it that he had known no mean measure of success.

"See Prinn on... The Occult Discovery of Gold."

Prinn...? Now surely that was a name I had seen on the spine of another book — yes, and one which also stood upon old Uncle Arthur's bookshelves, at that!

I was tempted to go to the shelves again, at once, but instead forced myself to look once more at the third paragraph. It seemed complete and utter gibberish, but something about the juxtaposition of vowels and gutturals kept me staring at it and trying to get my tongue around its oral convolutions. I found myself speaking the thing out loud, straining to force the alien sounds from the back of my throat and off the tip of my tongue —

The ground seemed to lurch beneath my feet!
The entire house trembled!

There came a groaning — of earth shifting, of straining timbers? — and Carter's cry of terror from upstairs...

X

Carter sounded like a platoon of SAS coming down those rotten stairs. He was white as a sheet under his dust and grime when he burst into the front room. The groanings and the tremors had stopped by then, as if the house had stirred in its sleep and now lay still again. I hadn't moved from where I was seated at the table.

Carter stood there for a moment just inside the door, then seemed almost to fly across the room towards me, his eyes wide in shock and terror.

"What the hell was that?" he cried.

The answer seemed fairly obvious to me. "The old place has started to give up the ghost," I said.

"Ghost?" his eyes went wider still. It had been a poor choice of words on my part.

But: "Ghost, yes," I said. "You've murdered the bloody place! You've ripped out the cellar walls, been into the support walls, torn up floorboards and what all. Little wonder it's starting to cave in on itself!"

"Subsidence?" He was shaking, but the colour was gradually returning to his face.

I shrugged. "What else? Of course it was subsidence. Why, the place is already half eaten away with dry rot! So... that explains away the noises you complained of. "Probably the old house settling,' you said, and you were right."

He came across and gripped my shoulder. "And the stink?"

How I could have missed it I don't know, but now that Carter mentioned it —

This was a smell different again from the rotten taint of decay which had accompanied my discovery of those vile strands of spaghetti. That had been the smell of — death? I wasn't sure — that sort of smell, anyway. But this smell was alive! The acrid smell of a beat, a power, a force; of something waiting with bated breath and bunched muscles; the stench of alien anticipation, the armpit of an ogre...

It seemed to well up from the gaps in the floorboards, outward from the tattered walls, out of the very air. It was everywhere, but growing fainter with each passing second.

I stood up — a little shakily, I admit.

We looked at each other.

The house brooded.

Something groaned, but distantly, receding...

"Out!" said Carter, trembling again. "Enough — for tonight, anyway. We'll come back in daylight. And from now on we'll only come back in daylight. Are you still in?"

Oh, yes, I was. For one thing, there was my ten percent to consider; and for another, I wanted to know more about the Occult Discovery of Gold. Carter — great lout that he was, and for all his digging and delving — hadn't even glanced at his uncle's books, of that I felt certain. But it seemed to me that the answer probably lay right there: on old Arthur Carter's bookshelves. We would see...

* * *

As Carter took me home in his car, I told him: "Tomorrow is Saturday. I'm busy in the morning but should be through by midday. "I'll meet you at the house between Twelve and One."

"OK," he said, his backbone beginning to stiffen a little now that we were well away from the place.

"If I work hard at it, I can probably finish off that room upstairs and strike it from my list."

"And what then?" I asked. "What about the attic?"

"Oh?" He glanced at me. "You can take a gander up there if you like, but it's a dead end. A couple of huge old wasps' nests in two corners where the roof comes down to the eaves, but the rest of it is empty as a blind beggar's tin."

* * *

In another ten minutes we were close to my place just off the Holloway Road. I lived at the bottom of a blind alley, pedestrians only, and so Carter dropped me off on the main road at a set of traffic lights where they had just turned red. It was close to midnight by now and what few people were about were mostly on their way to their homes. Traffic was very light — almost non-existent — and of course the pubs were long closed.

I walked to the corner of my alley, and as I watched Carter's big rude car pull away up the road and out of sight, so my thoughts went back to that third paragraph or chant on page 79 of the Dhol Chants, whose characters in their weird juxtapositions now seemed firmly fixed in my mind's eye. Turning the corner by a jeweller's shop, I found those queer "words" forming themselves on my tongue, so that I muttered — or chanted — in time with my pace as I began to speed my steps home.

It was just then that I noted the very strange display behind the squares of steel shuttering and the plate glass of the jeweler's window: the fact that by the use of some form of lighting under the display shelves, the individual pieces had been caused to emit a bluish radiance. Each piece of gold or silver jewelry seemed bathed in its own pool of blue fire.

The effect was so startling that I would have stopped and gone back, but already I was past the window and into the shadows of the alley; and by
then, too, there was something else to attract my attention. It could be, of course, that refuse had been put out for collection—except that I knew it wasn’t collected on Saturdays.

Also, it wasn’t the smell of refuse.

And I believe it was then that I started to feel something of Carter’s fear—my really feel it—as the ground trembled beneath my feet and there came a groaning of vast metal plates grinding together deep in the earth. That is what it felt and sounded like, but when I spun in my tracks and stared back toward the lights of the main road... a huge tractor-trailer was rumbling by, its hydraulic brakes growling as it slowed on its approach to the traffic lights. Exhaust fumes stank, causing me to choke as they billowed into the alley.

With my heart pounding and my skin clammy as clay, I found the doorway of my maisonette and went in out of the night.

And while I couldn’t have said why, still I kept my lights burning brightly—all of them—well into the small hours...

XI

Daylight drives away the fears of the night, and when those fears are hardly understood or ill-founded it works that much faster. By midday I had put aside all fantasies of the dark hours, all weird and grotesques. Money was something of a spur, too, for by now I had convinced myself that Carter was right, that indeed his uncle’s old place was seat to a fabulous hoard.

I was waiting in the grounds when Carter arrived in a crunch of tco-wide tires and a blast of a too-loud American horn. It seemed that he was in a good mood, that daylight had turned the trick for him too.

"No messing today," he said, letting us in. "I'm straight upstairs and to work; you can do whatever you like. In an hour or so we'll have a mug of coffee. Right?" And without waiting for an answer he left me standing in the front room, his footsteps thudding overhead as he climbed the shuddering stairs.

I waited until I could faintly hear him clattering about somewhere in the upper regions of the house, then went to the bookshelves in the recess and found Prinn’s book.

Except it wasn’t Prinn’s book at all but a translation or treatise on it. The leather spine—much worn except for the name Ludwig Prinn in half-inch letters of gold—said:

Mysteries of the Worm

by Ludwig Prinn

Rediscovered by:
C. Leggett

London

1821

As I took it from its corner position on that same shelf which had also provided the Dhool Chants, its thickish body sprang open and at least a dozen sheets of fine paper fluttered to the dusty floor. At first I thought they were actual pages from the book and that the thing was simply disintegrating in my hand; but upon collecting them up, I saw that the sheets were notes or inserts of sorts in old Arthur Carter’s hand, each leaf numbered to correspond with its position in the book proper. I took book and notes alike back to the table and sat down with them.

Of the notes: I could make little of them. They were cryptic as the annotations in the other, older book. There was one sheet, however, which was headed “Dhols—gold—discovery of—” and this I quickly scanned—only to be disappointed. The page consisted only of a list of references to other works (books with such near-fabulous sounding titles as the Necronomicon, du Nord’s Liber Ivonie, d'Erlette’s Cultes des Ghouls and the Phaenotic Manuscripts), none of which were evident in the old recluse’s rather limited library.

Limited, yes, and that was surely another anomaly. For Carter had told me that the house was full of old books, bric-a-brac, objets d’art, knick-knacks etc. Well, if so, then I had seen very little of it. I determined to ask him about it.

The sheet was numbered, however (p. 134), and so I turned to that page in the Leggett volume to see what I might see. And at last I was to be rewarded, however dubiously.

According to Leggett, Ludwig Prinn had written of Dhole's in his De Vermis Mysteriis:

"By their sounds shall ye know Them, & by Their stenches. In ye Vale of Pnoth They rustle & Their touch is as of great snails; but in Pnoth's darkness no man hath seen a Dhole, & that were as well!

"In ye waking world Dholes are singularly rare, though certes They may be called by one so foolhardy. Moreover, They ever attend unto ye Blue Glow, which lures Them irresistibly in its illumination of treasures. Yea, & ye chant of ye glow is of Their device, for by its use in ye Vale of Pnoth They search out ghoul-ravaged corpses; & there They collect up golden rings from skeleton fingers, & nuggets from fleshless jaws, tomb-loot for ye fashioning of Cthulhu's secret treasures.

"Aye, & Their stench is of ye pit, & Their fumbilings & rumblings & groanings vast; & They cause ye very earth to tremble & ye stenches of ye pit to rise up out of Pnoth...

Now, in retrospect it may seem astonishing that I made no connections—or at best few and indefinite connections—between what was written and what I and Carter had so far experienced in this old house. But consider: I knew and believed nothing of the occult; my past life in the mundane world had been one which kept both of my feet firmly planted on solid ground; and by all accounts old Arthur Carter had been the very queerest of birds, whose obvious interested in such matters could hardly be taken seriously. And could anyone’s interest in such things be taken seriously?

As for Dhols (or even Dholes), the reason why no man hath seen a Dhole" seemed very clear and simple to me: there were no such creatures! Yet... there was this mention of treasure, and certainly old man Carter would seem to have had his share of
that...

I put down the book and glanced again through the loose sheets, inserting them in their respective slots as I scanned them through. It was as I was doing this that I came across a sheet which had not fallen from the book but was loosely inserted between pages 88 and 89, and something about the style of the writing upon it — also the fact that unlike the others it was unnumbered — at once arrested my attention. It was Arthur Carter's handwriting, most definitely, and crabbed as ever; but there was a harshness, or furtiveness, to the strokes hinting of an unaccustomed speed and stealth employed in their writing.

Let me explain:

The handwriting of another has this peculiar effect with me: that I almost invariably picture the writer at work, pen in hand, in whichever attitude or mood the piece would seem to dictate. Thus in perusing the other notes, I had imagined Carter hunched over this very table, muttering to himself as he pursued whichever eldritch studies or copied from whichever "august" works as interested him, slowly but surely working toward his unguessable goal.

But with this sheet in my hand the feeling was entirely different. For here was the old man in a hurry, breathless, excited or afraid, and almost before I had read what was written I had guessed at the source of his excitement, his fear:

"It has come to this," [he wrote], "and I am at a loss. Greg's lad is a bad lot. Well, so was his father — though he at least had honour! But this one... He has found my weakness and constantly tempts me, and like a fool I have partaken and have said too much. He would get what there is anyway, all of it, but can't seem to wait; and I fear that in his greed and eagerness he might go too far. And after all these years I only now realize how alone I am here and how isolated. Of friends, I have none. A metropolis close by, and I am alone...

"At the moment he is out, however, and so I can get a little more done. This morning, while yet Andrew slept on, I was up and busy with the Cthulhu Aquadingen. I have difficulty reconciling Dhols to any allegiance with Cthulhu (even though I know that He is a master of dreams) and am given to wonder if they could be man's subconscious shoggoth-memory or awareness? Dreams are after all only a sub-level of man's entire sphere of existence as a whole. We 'exist' in dreams as surely as we dream them: 'I dream, therefore I am — in my dreams,' one might say. And Gerhard Schrach ponders much the same question. It is, though, a fearsome thought that our blackest nightmares may exist in reality, just around the corner, as it were, in the parallel lands of dream...

"But... really, I cannot concentrate. Andrew has frightened me (his demands, while sly and as yet not overtly hostile, may soon develop into full-fledged threats) and I am defenceless. I have come to realize how old I am — and how fragile. And Greg's boy little better than a common thug... If only he were not my brother's son; I would order him out of the house in a moment...

"Yesterday I searched Feery's Notes for his interpretation of Alzahred's meaning (in respect of a connection between the Dhols Chants and the Sathlattae), but found nothing. It would seem to me that the following: 'the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fates and instructs the very worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid life springs,' has a certain degree of bearing on the invocation bottom p. 111.

"... Enough for now; Andrew will be back soon. And he is company, at least. Possibly I have grown too reclusive and so misjudge him..."

And the rest of the sheet was empty.

XII

I decided, for better or for worse, not to make any accusations. Not for now, anyway. And in any case, what I had read had only served to confirm all that Carter had so far confided. So far...

I made coffee and went upstairs to where he had fairly reduced the room to the far left of the stair-well to so much rubble. Panting from his exertions, he was seated on a pile of debris when I entered the room. "Has it been an hour?" he asked. "Already?"

I shook my head. "No — but I have some questions for you."

"More questions?" He tilted his head onto one side and squinted at me through his grime. "About the house?"

"Yes, and about —"

"Carter waited, his squint growing more pronounced.

"— other things."

He nodded and, after a moment: "Ask away."

"About the plumbing: if the water supply is
direct from the mains, and if your uncle had no hot water, why does the pipe come from the attic?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. I'll tell you what I know of it. When I first started to come here, after the old miser went, there was water. But it tasted foul and pretty soon dried up to a trickle. I got in the plumbers and had 'em take a look. The old mains pipe went up a brick conduit in the end wall and so into the attic. There was water in the pipe, all right, and under mains pressure, too, but it wasn't getting through. The pipe was old and must be blocked or limed up where it climbed the wall. So they bypassed the blockage for me by sloping a pipe up the wall from the base of the mains pipe, and in through the bricks to a new tank which they installed centrally in the attic, close to the hatch."

"There was old tank?"
Carter looked puzzled, shook his head. "Is it important?"

"It's queer, that's all. I mean, if your uncle only ever intended to run a tap in the kitchen, why take the mains pipe up into the attic in the first place?"
He shrugged. "Maybe it was like that when he bought the place." Which, since it had also been my solution, had to satisfy me.

"But... if you were getting foul water through the blockage before, how do you know you're not still getting some of it now?"

"Look, is this really important?"
I wasn't sure if it was or wasn't. "It might be."
"Well, like I said, the water dried up completely. So... no foul water! In fact, no water at all until they put in the bypass. Anyway, I wanted them to drop a pipe to the bathroom heater, but there was no need. They were past the blockage now, so they simply re-routed the water from my tank back into the old mains pipe, which drops right through my bathroom. That's as much as I know. Oh, it's a rough job, I know, but hell—it's only temporary!"

"Done on the cheap," I nodded.

"Of course. I mean, the place is coming down, you know!"
I considered it. Then: "Where does the waste from the bath go?"

"To the WC. The old pipe was rotten so they put in another from the bath waste to the WC cistern."
"But doesn't it overflow?"
Carter grinned smugly. "Into the toilet basin," he said. "Self-flushing, so to speak."
I shook my head, half in amazement, half in disgust. "This house probably has the weirdest plumbing ever!" I finally said. "And I wouldn't be at all surprised if it's not the most unsanitary!"

"Temporary," he repeated, shrugging in that couldn't-care-less way of his. "So what?"

Something else was prodding away at the back of my mind, trying to break out but for the moment it eluded me. I changed the subject.

"Where are all the knick-knacks you told me about? The bric-a-brac? The books, brass, objets d'art, etc?"
Carter surveyed the room's rubble, picked up his metal detector, led me out into the corridor and back to the landing. He took a swig at his coffee, swallowed, said: "Gone, most of it. Flogged. I mean, it was going to be mine anyway, wasn't it?"

"But..."

"And once I'd given up my, er, regular gainful employment, so to speak, in order to give over more of my time to this place—"

"But..."

"But nothing, mate! A bloke has to eat! And some of that old junk was bloody good stuff!"

"Valuable?" I asked, following him downstairs.

"God! You wouldn't believe. I mean, the British Museum took half of it—through a go-between, you understand—especially the books! Amazing! Bloody moldy old things!"

"So you've had a bit of money out of the place already," I pressed.

"I'm not skint," he answered, "—but I'll say no more than that."

At the bottom of the stairs we heard the rattle of the letter-box flap in the front door. Rates bills and... a letter from Haringey Council. I had had dealings with them and recognized the envelope, the franking, the lettering of the printed return address. Carter ignored the bills but ripped this envelope open. He read the contents of the letter, then waved letter and envelope angrily in the air. "That's torn it!" he snarled.

We went through into the front room.

"What has?" I asked.

"They've brought the demolition date forward," he said.

"Oh?"

"Bloody Tuesday!" Carter groaned. "Tuesday! Why, that's just—"

"—Three more days," I finished it for him. "We have what's left of today, Sunday and Monday, and that's your lot..."

He slumped down onto a leg of the bench in the recess with the table, slammed his hand down hard and flat on the old oak surface. "Shit!" he snarled.

Dust jumped up in little clouds from cracks in the tabletops; something squeaked; there came a stench.

Carter jerked to his feet, gazed in purest horror and loathing at the palm of his hand. A smear of something vile adhered to his hand and a blob of the same nameless stuff dangled from his twitching fingers. Twin strands of spaghetti, their ends splattered, lay in the dust atop the table, previously unnoticed. But old Arthur Carter's book, the Mysteries of the Worm, was no longer there. I was sure I had left it there, lying open on the table, but now it was—

I glanced across the room.

—Back on its bookshelf!

And the Dhol Chants! Come to think of it, I had left that book on the table last night, when we left in such a funk of a hurry. Yet now... it too was back on its shelf.

And dangling from that shelf, a third strand of spaghetti.

Well, that answered another question I had intended to try on Carter: the one about things that move by themselves...

XIII

After that there would have been no keeping Carter in the place—not even in broad daylight, of that I am quite sure—if not for the fact that the house was to be demolished in the very near future. But because his chances of discovering his uncle's loot seemed now much narrowed down, he at least
swallowed sufficient of his revulsion to accompany me as I went about the place, until at last I had fixed a broad picture of it in my mind.

Briefly, in addition to what I have already told of its dilapidated and much ravaged condition, this is my description of the property as it was then:

It had a rectangular base some thirty feet wide by sixty feet long, stood two stories high under a low, grey, slate-tiled roof. Twin stacks stuck up in grime, worn yellow brick above the fairly shallow gable ends; upper windows were small, those on the ground floor were large, mainly bays; a small door to the rear of the property (facing away from the city) had been boarded up. Not in the least picturesque or "pretty," architecturally dull, the place looked gaunt and seemed to form an angular blot of a silhouette even in daylight.

Internally:

On the ground floor there were, as previously described, a porch, hall, stairs to the upper reaches, steps to the cellar, a WC, large front room and kitchen. But on the side of the stairs and hall opposite the front door was an even larger (or longer) room whose access was from the boarded-up rear door, and also through a locked door in the kitchen. Carter showed me this room—at one time a study-cum-conservatory, I guessed—but such was the mass of rubble he had accumulated there that it was literally impossible to enter. It had been, Carter told me, the major repository for those aforementioned, now "flogged" items whose collection must have occupied a major part of old Arthur Carter's lifetime.

So much for downstairs. Above:

There was a passageway which split the house lengthwise, terminating at both ends in two large rooms which took up the width of the house. Between these end rooms: on each side of the passageway were two doors entering into smaller rooms, making six upstairs rooms in all. The large end room to the right was Carter's converted bathroom; its completely demolished counterpart to the left had been his temporary bedroom (little used, as he had explained). What the other rooms had been used for I could not rightly say; storerooms, I suspected, but now in such an abused state of damage and disarray that their actual use must remain forever hidden; though one of them did contain an old, rusty iron bed and an ancient mattress which, upon inspection, I discovered to have hidden pockets just as Carter had described them.

And finally the attic, and another anomaly...

Now, during the above tour of inspection (the first proper look I had taken at the place, for my previous visit had been at night), Carter's unnatural revulsion had quietened down somewhat and he had regained something of control over himself; so that when I suggested we look into the attic he agreed, however reluctant he might actually have been. It seemed to me as good a time as any, however, while there was still plenty of light, for I sensed there would be little more of work that day. Not on Carter's part, that is. Indeed, I am certain that if I had so much as mentioned the matter of the books— their restlessness, so to speak—he would have left the house there and then and that would have been that.

As it was I did not mention it (it could be that I was mistaken, that in fact I myself had replaced them on their shelves and had simply forgotten doing so) and after a while and another mug of strong coffee, he led the way back upstairs to the landing. There, producing stepladders from one of the small rooms, Carter climbed to the ceiling and lowered a trapdoor, disappearing through the gap and into the attic. I followed him.

The first thing that struck me was purely academic: I was after all "in the trade." The attic was not insulated. There was no lagging between the joists, nor had floorboards been laid upon them. Moreover, the slate tiles were visible through the rafters; there was no internal covering to prevent the escape of warmth. Worse still, there were many small chinks which possibly let in the rain, and Carter's "plumbers"—what a gang of odd-jobbers they must have been!—had left a gaping, drafty hole in the wall where they had breached it to obtain access for the bypass pipe. And there was Carter's tank, a small, galvanized iron affair, bolted none too securely to two of the joists; and there to the far left, the wasps' nests he had mentioned in the very corners of the gables over the eaves.

The ridge was low, causing us to stoop a little; the light was feeble, coming as it did through gaps in the tiles; the entire place was dusty, were between the joists masses of ancient cobwebs were layered inches thick; the going precarious, since one might not step in the spaces between the joists for fear of crashing through the ceiling. And nowhere (or at least nowhere visible) that a man might hope to conceal a hoard of gold.

But I have mentioned an anomaly, and it was this:

From the grounds I had seen two identical chimneys, one atop each gable. Here inside, there was only one chimney breast: a brick structure situated centrally in the gap between the wasps' nests and going up to the ridge where it disappeared from view. To the far right, however...

Just a plain, blank brick wall.

I said nothing, but silently calculated the length of this triangular-sectioned gallery beneath the roof, which I judged to be a little less than fifty feet.

And that was very odd indeed, for the house itself was all of sixty!

In the dusky silence, with only a thin moan of wind where it came in under the tiles, Carter and I stood spread-legged upon two of the joists and faced each other. "Well?" he said, after a moment.

"You've had the metal detector up here?" I asked, because it seemed that at least this much was expected of me.

"Saw no point," he answered. "There are no floorboards, and nothing but thin air on the other side of the tiles."

"Hmm! Well, that appears to be that."

We climbed down again to the landing, Carter leading, but when I stepped down beside him I found him backed up again and clutching at the wall. Beneath the stepladder, where certainly they had not been before, were now haphazardly strewn five or six strands of that same sticky substance which Carter insisted was spaghetti. And that, as might well be expected, formed for him the last straw; it finished the day for him.

On our way out of the house I collected the two books, Primm's *Mysteries of the Worm* and the *Dhol*
Chants, then waited in front of the porch in the suddenly chilly air of the afternoon while he locked up. Still white-faced, finally he turned to face me. "And now perhaps you'll still insist there's nothing wrong with the place?" he challenged.

And like a petulant fool I was needed into the provision of a solution, however dubious: "The timbers are... are so rotten," I stumbled over the words, "so full of moisture and rot, that they exude strands of this foul fungoid paste. It's a fungus excretion, nothing more. The pressure of our feet on the boards—our very weight—squeezes it out of the cracks like pus from a boil!"

He looked at me a moment longer, then turned back to stare at the brooding house. "A boil, yes!" he said then, nodding. "A bloody great malignant growth! The place is poisoned!"

As we went to our cars I said: "Will you give me the keys?"

"What?"

"The keys," I repeated. "I may come back for some more books."

"Today, you mean?" his voice was incredulous.

"Today, perhaps. Perhaps tonight."

Now his jaw dropped. "You'd come back here, alone, tonight?"

"I might, if I think it's necessary. We have only two more days, remember?"

For a moment he was suspicious, but then he simply growled and shrugged and gave me the keys....

XIV

I got very little from the books.

According to Charles Leggett, Prinn had been a Flemish sorcerer, alchemist and necromancer, whose travels in strange lands and studies of dark, forbidden matters had made him brilliantly, dangerously learned in all the occult sciences. So dangerous in fact that in the end he had been burned at the stake!

In Prinn's cosmology, there were three clear states or spheres of reality/existence. These were: the waking world, in which Man rules, however ineffectually; the lands of Man's dreams, which have been shaped by him since first he had strength and intelligence to dream; and finally a dimension parallel to both of these realities, neither recognizing Man nor even considering him as remotely important in the cosmic cycle.

But while the cosmos itself was blind and impersonal, there existed in that universe parallel to Man's domains Beings who would use Man, if only as a means to an end. Here Prinn had drawn on the works of wizards immemorial and texts of incredible antiquity — shards and fragments which pre-dated Man himself — to compound a pantheon which might only be described as fabulous. This was the Cycle of the Mythology of Cthulhu, encompassing such awesome-sounding entities or "gods" (demons?) as Azrorth, Shub-Niggurath, Yibb-Sartle, Zathogdya, Yott-Sottot and others. In pre-dawn times these Beings had been found wanting. Themselves black magicians (indeed, the very foundation of all EVIL), they had warred against the forces of DIVINITY. Crushed, cursed, chained and thrown "outside," they now occupied various adjuncts of that dimension parallel to the twin states of Man, the merest newcomer in the vast cosmic cycle. Even now, in their imprisonment, still these Beings strove to influence Man — primarily through his darkest dreams, into which Cthulhu had had access — in the hope that one day through his own evil Man would bring about their release, their return from extra-dimensional exile.

This was all very interesting stuff, but it wasn't really what I was looking for. There was, however, a detailed description of the Loathly Lord Cthulhu (\textit{Y\text{-}I\text{-}V\text{-}H\text{-}J}), who is locked in his submarine city of R'lyeh (L\textit{L}-\textit{Y}-\textit{H}-\textit{J}), who could only be that same monstrous cephalopod whose representation I had already had contact with in the shape of Carter's "coins." Which would seem to place those pieces firmly in that category "Cthulhu's secret treasures..."

I went on through the book as quickly as I could, simultaneously attempting to tie in the text with Arthur Carter's marginia. Prinn had seemed to take an inordinate interest in the "inhabitants of the Dreamlands" — specifically of such places as the Abyss of Nurn, the Peaks of Throk, the Vale of Pnoth, the Caverns of Tuth-Ahn, Kadath in the Cold Waste, Leng etc. — giving them such names as Zoogs, Gugs, Ghouls, Ghasts and Night-gaunts (not to mention Dholes) and stating that ghouls in particular are wont to impinge, on occasion, upon the waking world, whose "debris" of mortality forms for them the uttermost delicia. Of the precious metals they take from corpses, and transform, and tally to Cthulhu's coffers, he said very little other than to reiterate his statements regarding the Blue Glow; also to repeat, over and over again, his warnings in connection with Dholes, their chants, spells, conjurations, etc...

So much for \textit{De Vermis Mysteriis}.

As to why I had taken the other book home with me, the Dhol Chants: perhaps I had hoped to find some clue to its deciphering in Prinn. If so, then I was once more disappointed; I could make nothing at all of it. Indeed, all I knew of it was that it consisted of "spells" ascribed to Dholes, and that the passages between pages 101 and and 127 (which included the chant at the bottom of p. 111) were harmful. But that was all.

By 6:30 it was dark outside and my eyes were rapidly growing tired in the electric glare of my maisonette's lights. Since by that time it seemed that I would get no more out of the books, I put them down, made myself a light meal, sat thinking the thing over while I sipped hot coffee. After a little while, this was how I finally had the puzzle fixed in my mind:

Arthur Carter had long interested himself in the occult. His studies in the main had been in vain: pointless metaphysical exercises, doomed to failure as all such must be: there is no supernatural. But he had come across a "device" (though doubtless one with a perfectly sound and completely scientific explanation) by use of which the discovery of certain sorts of treasure trove was made practical. Using this "device" or method, he had accumulated an amount of gold. Naturally so remarkable a success had strengthened and added substance to his occult resolve, his belief in the "magic" to which his studies were dedicated.

As for the "device" or method he employed: that
as yet remained a mystery (even though, again in retrospect, the answer lay right there under my very nose), but it was possible that further clues existed in the remaining books still in the old house, and in certain volumes now missing or "frogged," for which unforgivable stupidity I thoroughly cursed Arthur Carter's loutish nephew. Overwhelmingly curious now, and restless to the point of obsession, I further cursed myself that I had not thought to bring home all of the books with me; and then, because I knew I would not sleep, I determined to go back there and then and fetch them at once.

Minutes after that I was seated at the wheel of my car, headed north for Muswell Hill...

As I drove carefully through light evening traffic, my mind dwelled almost of its own accord upon that pair of cryptic and possibly coded passages from the Dhol Chants: the one beginning: "Gb'ha gn-ka a'hboa um, et-um," and the other in respect of the Blue Glow, whose queer arrangement of sounds had so fascinated me that I had retained an almost perfect picture of them in my mind's eye.

Oddly, the more I toyed with the memory of those weird paragraphs (chants, yes), the more familiar they seemed to be, like meaningless but fascinating jingle from some child's book of nursery rhymes; moreover, I began to feel that I was getting the pronunciation very nearly right. The thought disturbed me a little — that I should now be proficient in these queerly alien lines, whose meanings and purposes were utterly conjectural — so that I frowned as I drove my car into the grounds of the old Carter house and parked it before the porch. But then I uttered a forced laugh. Ridiculous! that I should even consider the discovery of anything of substance in so much sheer gibberish.

Climbing from my car into the sharp darkness of evening, which seemed almost to have a taste of its own, I allowed something of that sing-song of unearthly sounds — that dark liturgy — to flute and gurgle once more from my lips, its discordant echoes swelling and vibrating in the shadowy niches of cold brickwork.

But —

I approached the house no further.

The ground had commenced to tremble beneath my feet and there came a smell as of sulphur... or of something else. Dark cracks appeared in the cold, hard earth, from which puffs of rank vapour sprang out like vented steam; and a rumbling, deep in the earth — a rumbling and a distant groaning, as of tortured metal plates — instantly clove my careless tongue to the roof of my mouth.

As the rumbling and groaning subsided I stared at the house, stared harder still at its high, bleak silhouette against the starry skies. Then I got back into my car and drove away. Tomorrow would be time enough.

In my rearview as I turned the car back down the drive, I could still see the brick column of the chimney poking up into the night — where within, no chimney breast was visible — and all about it the tiles, end gable and eaves were alflame with a cold blue St. Elmo's fire of their own...

XV

The next morning I was at the house a little after first light, at least two hours in advance of Carter, valuable time which I spent in the front room studying the few remaining books. Despite the presence of several likely-sounding titles, however — books such as the archaic Liber Miraculumen and de Metz' Image du Mond — I was unable to find anything else in connection with the "occult discovery of gold," and nothing at all concerning dhois, ghoul, Cthulhu and the like. Thanks to Carter's avarice, all of the more important works were now doubtless firmly ensconced in the musty archives of the British Museum.

As to why I searched: it was not so much that further information was imperative, but if I were now to admit the feasibility of certain occult or paranormal devices, then I must also accept their attendant dangers. The discoverers of mordant acids have seldom burned iron without first burning their fingers...

What, exactly, the Blue Glow was and how a simple "spell" might draw it forth were still mysteries; but for a fact the thing itself was demonstrably real, and I no longer doubted but that it served its alleged purpose. And thinking on this I wondered: had there then been a "philosopher's stone" after all? But more to the point... were dhois, too, real? And if they were, hadn't Prinn (and old man Carter) warned against any sort of truck with them?

But in any case the chant had served its purpose, and I was relieved to note that its position did not fall between pages 101 and 127 of the Chants, which must mean that it was not intrinsically harmful. And by now... but by God! — how easy it was to fall in with all of this stuff, to become involved, to begin to believe...!

... I did not go up into the attic.

Now, I would like to believe that this was because (a) I didn't quite fancy going up there on my own, or (b) that I believed in any case that Carter should accompany me, since the gold was rightly his, or (c) that I would have enjoyed explaining step by step the work of detection I had performed on Carter's behalf. But now (once again in retrospect) I find myself confessing a degree of shame in respect of my real motives. Quite simply: men are greedy, and I was no exception.

(a) I did not want Carter to find me up there when he arrived, which might have been to give the show away; and (b) I no longer cared to share with him either gold or the device by which I had re-discovered it; and (c) I considered him a brutish untutored lout who doubtless deserved whatever misfortunes had been arranged for him. Which was why, when he arrived, I was waiting for him in the front room, fore-armed with certain very pointed questions.

Whether I really would have breached what was on my mind, or held back in the face of his suspect humour, his hard bulk and possibly violent reaction, was a question which did not arise. For from the moment he joined me it was plain that he had been up most of the night, and equally obvious was the fact that he was drunk or very nearly so. And this at only 9:30 in the morning. What's more, he had brought a bottle with him, pouring liberal splashes into two glasses before grinning and stating:

"If we're to be here all the live long day, and we
are, and if I'm to work like a bloody nigger to get done, which is what I intend, then it strikes me that the best way to go about it is—"

"Is to anesthetize yourself?" I snorted. "I have been up," he suddenly stated, waving his arms expansively, "most of the night. Some of it with a lady—tart, if you prefer—the rest with a bloody bottle."

"The one to soothe away your aches and draw off your excess physical energy," I answered, "and the other to deaden your nerves, eh? Dutch courage!"

But Carter failed to notice, or perhaps chose to ignore, the sneer in my voice. "Correct!" he slurried, clapping me on the back. "And now—to the final wrecking!"

"One moment!" I felt emboldened by his condition. "Sit down. Here's coffee fresh made. I have more questions—just two, I promise—before you begin."

He peered at me baggy-eyed and for a second seemed inclined to argue, then perched himself swaying on top of his uncle's table. "Shoot!" he said, carelessly slurping coffee. "What was it you said to him—what was it that you finally did—to make your uncle so fear you that he ran off and left this old place? What threat, Carter, so unnerved him that he took to his heels and left it all to you?"

And still he failed to notice, or perhaps continued to ignore, the edge of contempt, the malice in my voice. "I told him," he answered at once, only pausing to belch brandy in my face, "that if he didn't tell me where it was, I'd creep upstairs when he was asleep and put a pillow over his face."

I was unable to stop myself from drawing a sharp breath. "You... threatened his life?" (This was exactly what the old man had feared would happen—or had he feared the act as opposed to the mere threat?)

But now Carter clazely shook his head and gulped more purposefully at his coffee. "What?" he blurted, beginning to frown, his features darkening over as his mouth grew tight. "What?"

"You said you'd kill him?" I repeated, drawing back a fraction.

But Carter only looked puzzled, relaxed a little, and then finally grinned like an ass. "I don't! Did I say that? No, no—that's not what I meant. What I meant was this: at any time he could be burgled, that a couple of young buggers could break in here and do him in without even trying! Not me, no—I meant anybody! I was warning him, do you see?" He broke into drunken laughter.

Oh, yes, I saw.

I shrugged, laughed with him, said: "Finally, one last question. When exactly, by your reckoning, anyway, do we take care of the second proviso: that is to say, your reading aloud of the passage at the bottom of page one hundred and eleven of the Dhoul Chants."

"What?" He was sobering by the moment. "You think I really will?"

I was cautious: "But what's to stop you?"

"Nothing at all! But why should I? It's rubbish!"

"But surely you must. It's a provision of the will, and—"

"—And you are my witness!"

"You'd have me perjure myself? Remember, even if we don't find the gold—"

"But we will, we must!"

"—But if we don't, still the compensation will be yours. After the demolition, I mean. If the conditions of the will have been met, that is."

"You want me to read it? I'm not even sure I can pronounce the damn thing! Oh, I looked at it once, certainly—but once was enough. Double-Dutch! Gibberish! I don't know if I could do it."

"And I am not sure that I could swear it on oath if you hadn't at least tried. You took me on for my honesty, remember?"

"Bloody honesty!" he said, looking surly again. But then he put aside his coffee, grinned, once more took up the bottle. "It's today!" he said. "Seven years today, as I judge it, since the scurrying, frightened little bag of bones ran off and hid himself away. And a good job he did, for by God I would have done it!"

I nodded, watching him drink. "Then you shall read the prescribed paragraph tonight, and I shall be your witness. What's more, I'll help you with it."

"OK, if that's what it takes to satisfy you." He stood up, however unsteadily.

"I'm not the one to satisfy," I told him. "You satisfy the will, that's all."

He gazed at me murkily, the corners of his bloodshot eyes twitching. "Queer bastard!" he said, swaying a little. "You know that? You're a queer bastard!"

"It takes all sorts," I said, and shrugged again. "Here, have another drink..."

XVI

By noon he had wrecked beyond recognition all the upstairs rooms, with the exception of the bathroom, with which he had long since satisfied himself. The ceilings were down, the floors up, the walls out; but throughout, his metal detector had showed never a blip, and Carter was very grimy and almost sober. But by then, too, I had nipped out to purchase salty fish and chip lunches, plus plenty of lager to wash them down, and as a special favour to Carter another bottle of the best—and headiest—five-star brandy.

An hour later he was reeling, from fatigue as much as from his replenished alcoholic content, but could not be stayed from venturing down into the cellar one last time to make a final assault upon the remaining walls; not that I tried too hard to dissuade him. And all the while, as time slipped by, I wandered through the house and tried not to look too often at the ceiling, and forced myself to put from my mind and tongue the insistent chant I felt sprouting there with every slightest relaxation of my will. And I admit that I was excited.

But it was also important that I kept Carter topped up, which I did until the combination of drink and sheer hard work had just about finished him; and when at last he finally staggered up from the cellar I could see that he was done for. Caked with sweat and soil and dust, he was a sorry sight indeed: his hands bleeding and his eyes hollow as doughnuts in a pasty, dirt-streaked face. And so he collapsed into a rickety chair and said: "Shit!"

I'm not much for curse words, but: "I agree," I
told him where he sprawled; for I had had my share of the brandy and beer, and it had made me frivolous. "Let's call it a day."

"Damn right!" he said. "I can definitely call it a day for I have worked my balls off! But you—"

"—I've done as you wished!" I protested. "I've been company for you; I've fetched, and paid for, our lunch; I've even treated you to an ample supply of drink. And all, it would appear, a dead loss. All you've come up with is—what was it? Shit?—and there's not much in ten percent of that!"


I passed him the last of the liquor and glanced out of the bay windows. 4:30, and already the sky was darkening, with huge black clouds scudding low.

"And what will you do now?" I asked. "For the rest of today, I mean?"

"Today's finished. I'm for a long, hot soak."

"I'll switch on the immersion heater," I said, heading for the hall and the stairs to the bathroom. "You finish your brandy while the water gets hot."

Going upstairs I counted seven strands of spaghetti, and on the landing there was more of the stuff. I quickly scuffed it all away, ignoring the stench; but in the bath was a little more, which I despatched to the loo with a jet of cold water.

On my way back down to Carter I could feel it building—something. But... no reason why it should feel ill-disposed toward me...

"Weird, you are!" he told me as I entered the front room. He sprawled there in his chair where I had left him, glowering at me. "You'd think I was your bloody wife, the way you've run about after me today."

"You've been working against time," I told him. "You needed encouragement. There's a can of lager left; would you like some?" I poured half for him, half for myself. Carter gulped his down.

"Bath!" he said, starting to rise.

"Not hot yet," I said. "Anyway, there's still that passage to be read." I handed him the Dhol Chants.

He lurched to his feet. "What the hell is it with you and this bloody book?" He tossed it down on the table and it fell open at page one hundred and eleven.

"The will," I said.

He grimaced, took up the book, slowly began. "G'haha... gn-ka... a'hboa—shut!"

"You're doing fine," I said, willing him to continue. And oddly enough—or perhaps not so oddly—as he read so he seemed to grow more fluent!

"... Um... et-um, Th'n-hla—bloody thing!—puh-ghtagn bugg-ugg. Gn-ka um zg'h—why, it's easy!"

"Fine, fine!" I said.

"Nuth-ah'n, et-um," and so on to the end. And then he once more tossed the book down, staggered from the front room and tramped wearily upstairs.

"Now are you satisfied?" he called back down to me.

I made no answer but quietly followed him, waiting until he'd locked the bathroom door and was running his water, then getting out the stepladders and climbing into the attic. Maybe it was the brandy, or maybe it was just impatience. Whichever, it was certainly greed. But even with that feeling growing all around me, even sensing that Carter had started—well, something—still I had to know for sure about his uncle's gold, had to test just one more time the efficacy of the Blue Glow. I had kept it back all day, but now it could wait no longer.

And there in the attic, stepping as carefully as I could between the joists, I approached the blank end wall which should have but did not have a chimney breast, and under my breath I mumbled that other chant which was now so familiar to me.

From beneath the central section of the wall, directly under the ridge beam, a neonlike blue light at once shone out. Accompanying it came the low, distant rumble of unearthly engines and the merest whiff of that nameless dhol stench. Ignoring these side-effects I shoved at the glowing section of bricks, three brick-lengths wide and eight thicknesses high—and the wall moved!

It pivoted, jammed for a moment, finally stood open.

I got down on my hands and knees, crawled through. In my pocket was a torch, but I didn't need it. I could see all I wanted to see in the light of the Blue Glow.

Behind the false wall was old Arthur Carter's hiding place, his priest's hole, his wizard's den. Oh, yes, for that much at least I knew about occultists: that they all have their secret places, their retreats, the inner sanctums where they pore over their runebooks and practice their magicks! And this was Arthur Carter's.

The hitherto secret section of the attic which now lay before me was entirely different from the empty space behind. Old Carter had put down floorboards here, and there was even a light switch with a naked bulb dangling from a cobwebbed flex. I tried the switch but the bulb was dead. Over my head, the rafters were lined with far-paper to keep out drafts; central stood a small table with a chair; books deep in dust and cobwebs were heaped on the floor and under the table; and upon the table itself—

The entire "room" was bathed in the Blue Glow, but the table, and what lay upon it, was the true source. Quite simply, it was Arthur Carter's gold, and no amount of dust and cobwebs and desiccated spider debris could disguise it! So much for the "young" Carter's metal detector: the table was nearly thirty inches high, the boards a good inch, the joists about a foot, and under all of that the good old fashioned lath and plaster ceiling. It might have been different if the old boy had stacked his money on the floor, but he hadn't.

In my excitement the alcohol was rapidly burning itself out of my system, and as the process continued so my senses became more acute. The Blue Glow was fading now and I wasn't inclined to use the chant again, not just yet. God alone could say what things had been stirred already that night, and I questioned the wisdom of further experimentation.

It was then that I fancied the dhol odour grew suddenly that much stronger, and then too that the eerie occult illumination faded entirely and I was left in the dark. Which was when—as the last nimbus of phosphorescence shinnered away into pitch darkness—at last I recognized or remembered the recent upsurge of fetor for what it really was:

Not, in fact, dhol-smell at all—but more properly the vile stink of rot which invariably accompanied
manifestations of Carter's "spaghetti!" And I knew that this—whatever manifestation this was—was not in response to my utterance of the Chant of the Blue Glow, but rather in response to Carter's recent reading of the malignant spell at the foot of page 111 of the Dhol Chants.

Whatever that spell had put in motion, it was even now abroad and full of intent in the body of this old and ill-omened house...

XVII

Petrified for a second or two, I simply stood trembling, my hair on end. Then I fumbled out the pencil torch from my pocket to send its bright but narrow beam all about me in that secret attic room. And by its light, suddenly I saw or became aware of several mundane items gone unnoticed in the extramundane radiance of the Blue Glow.

There by the chimney breast was a metal-framed folding bed and a tumbled of mouldering blankets; and on a crude wooden shelf affixed between the rafters several cans of beans, empty now, their labels peeling from rusty cans. To one side but raised high from the floor on a frame of stout timbers was a bulky old-fashioned tank or cistern— the one I had suspected should be here—with the mains pipe entering its body high on one side, and the now familiar lead pipe leaving it low down on the other. Each pipe had a stopcock close to the tank, but the one which controlled access from tank to house had been turned to the "off" position, which explained away the blockage. But as I began to regain control of my nerves—

— Oh, God! — something moved in the body of the tank!

Something heaved itself in there, and with the movement came such an overpowering stench that I actually reeled, almost dropping my torch. I steadied the beam as best I might and aimed it again at the tank, at the pipes. And then I began to understand, and in my mind's eye I saw it all:

Old Carter, fleeing up here to this secret place, trembling in terror here and waiting for his brute of a nephew to go away. And the other Carter not leaving but ransacking the house in his greed for gold. And days passing with the old man hardly daring to move a limb lest Carter hear him; growing weaker on his meager diet of beans, until they ran out; until all there was left for him was water in the tank to drink, a miserable cot to sleep on, and black hatred growing in his heart.

Perhaps that was when the idea had occurred to him and he had put the thing in motion. Oh he had once questioned how any man might wish or visit this sort of thing upon even his worst enemy, but now in his extremity he had seen that all things are possible. His nephew had threatened him and might yet carry out that threat. Very well; but if he did, there would be a price to pay. Posthumous revenge, indeed!

Perhaps those "coins" the young Carter had found had lodged themselves accidentally in their places on concealment, and perhaps not. What if the old man had put them there deliberately, bait for the trap he intended to spring on the ingrate son of his brother? I could see it clearly: old Arthur waiting patiently until Carter left the house, perhaps to purchase food or drink, then creeping down from here to slip a piece of gold down the crack behind the mantelpiece, and another through the floorboards, and a third into the lining of his old mattress; then sneaking back to his attic den weaker than ever. For of course, even if there had been food, old Carter dare not touch it; for that would be to let his nephew know that he was still here.

And desperate, finally he had turned off the stopcock, denying water to his nephew while retaining his own supply; and still Carter had held him in siege, while his age and infirmities and weakness all seemed conspiring to kill him.

Then it was, I supposed, that the old man had set the seal on his occult scheme—his revenge—and then too that the accident must have occurred. If it was an accident. It might well have been suicide, there was no way I could know for sure. But certainly the old man had drowned—and in this very tank which my torch beam now illuminated for me!

I pictured him climbing up there to drink, balanced on the platform of timbers, then slipping, falling headfirst into the tank, struggling and becoming fixed between rim and rafters and so expiring. Perhaps the final straw had been the sudden shock of immersion, the bitter cold of the water, I don't know. But as a direct result of his nephew's greed and threats, die there he did, definitely— for he was there even now!

As I have said: in the tank something seethed and bubbled, more energetically now, giving off wave after wave of poisonous fumes. And over the rim and down the pipe to the stopcock crept a loathsome revenant of what had once been a hand and wrist, a thing of bones and rotted tissue now, leaving a hideous trail of gelatinous ooze behind it; and under those disintegrating fingers the stopcock turned with a squeal, and turned again; and even as I fell to my knees, lowered my head and thrust myself screaming through the gap in the false wall, so there came a thick, glutinous gurgling which told of movement in the old pipe.

Then—

Tripping and tumbling over the naked joists I aimed myself at the rectangle of light from the trapdoor, and with the ceiling sagging and threatening to give way under my feet I made it to that blessed opening, somehow managing to get back down the stepladder without breaking a leg. And it was then that I heard Carter's first screams.

... In my mind— even above his shrieking— I could still hear the squeal of the stopcock turning beneath that awful corpse-hand and wrist. Once the old man had denied Carter water, and now?

"The soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay... till out of corruption horrid life springs!"

Few men, knowing what I knew, would have done what I did then. But while by nature I am a cautious man, I was never a coward. And so—if only to know, to be sure—I ran or stumbled to the converted bathroom and jerked at the doorknob, then threw my shoulder against the door again and again until it finally gave as the lock was wrenched from the rotten frame. And as the door sprang open so I saw—

Carter—or a screaming, nightmare-transformed caricature of Carter!
He sat there in the bath, beneath the shower, clawing at himself and screaming that shrewd animal scream. The scream of a trapped rabbit — or stricken rat. The sight of him and of what afflicted him rooted me to the spot, a paralysis I was unable to break until at last his cries were choked off and he jerked spasmodically to his feet, then collapsed naked — or not naked — out of the bath and face down upon the floor.

Impelled by the horror and the stench both, I turned, staggered and finally fled full tilt; nor did I pause until I was out in the grounds, when a sudden sharp wrenching of the earth knocked my feet from under me and threw me down.

From deep down below I heard that awful, subterranean groaning, and when it stopped turned my head to look back. As in that fabled scene from Poe's masterpiece, the Carter house was crumbling into itself, saving those who would demolish it the effort. Down it went in dust and rubble and ruin, and Carter with it, and all that was left of his uncle; and I would be a liar if I said that I was anything less than glad...

XVIII

But... that was almost seven years ago, and since then much has happened. For one thing I've grown rich, and for another I've explored a good many occult possibilities. But what was there, really, to explore? Whoever heard of a wizard or occult dabbler coming to any good end? No, for there is always a price to pay.

Nor can I complain. There were warnings enough along the way, and it seems these things even themselves out in seven year cycles. So be it — as long as I don't go like Carter. But... dare I take that chance?

At any rate I have my pistol, which I carry loaded at all times, and that alone should ensure that I do not share his fate, or any other of a like sort.

As to that fate itself: I think that already I have said enough, but if you are still curious then let us return once more to the scene as I burst open that door and entered Carter's makeshift bathroom:

Carter shrieking there under the shower — which did not issue water alone but a writhing, coiling, continuous stream of rotten, stinking ribbons of flesh or what had once been flesh. A monstrous flood of corruption which, imbued with a life of its own, covered him and clung to him and filled his eyes, his ears, his nose and his mouth with its seething mass, until at last it shut off his screams and his air both and pitched him dead on the floor at my feet!

And so much for Carter's "spaghetti"...

My gold I leave to whoever may find it. In the end it belongs to Cthulhu, anyway....

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... THEY WILL LIE IN STATE AMIDST THEIR HOARDS OF GEMS AND METALS—THINGS THE DRAGONS LOVED BETTER THAN FREE FLIGHT IN THE CLEAR AIR OF EARTH.

When dragons die at epoch's end will mourners sigh, will gods descend, will death-drums sound beneath the ground in caverns deep with age and sleep?

For dragons dead no song will spread, no dirge will pass the stark crevasse beneath the crust in alien dust their forms will rest on a golden nest in silver gowns and jewelled crowns with none to see Eternity.

A. Arthur Griffin