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THE PAINTER

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EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

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Why have some people more personal magnetism than others? And how compelling can it become as a force for good or evil? John Brunner's novelette develops this intriguing theme along totally unexpected lines.

ALL THE DEVILS IN HELL

by JOHN BRUNNER

o n e

There were nightmares.

I fought myself into turning over and dragging my gritty eyelids upwards over eyeballs that felt like balls of fire. I woke up.

And the nightmare continued.

You can't explain that sensation. You have to feel it—all the way down inside you, to the smallest fibrils of nerves in your finger-tips, your toes, everywhere. And within the body, too—in the guts.

For me, it was like sharing my body with another person—a person of illimitable hunger, suffering hunger, famine-like hunger, and of thirst beyond description. It was a *need*, a blind insensate yearning towards something more vital than food or drink or warmth. But not a need that I myself, the "I" in my brain experienced. That's why I say it was like sharing my body with another person.

It had the quality of pain without being pain. A pain cannot be ignored; sometimes, after it has gone on for long

enough, you can think clearly in spite of it, but if you get to that stage, then you have to think *hard*, deliberately, verbalising the thoughts with a precision that is in itself almost painful. Look: sometimes you seize on a fragment of poetry, or a name, or a meaningless phrase manufactured for the occasion, and you go over it and over it until it dominates your mind and the renewed uprush of the pain triggers a sort of insane chant of repetition, echoing and re-echoing this quotation, or name, or phrase.

But the pain is still there. You can't will it out of existence. You can mask it from yourself. But you always know what the mask hides.

The sensation, then, had this quality that pain has. And it wasn't pain.

Again: we don't know what it is to be hungry—*really* hungry, hungry to the point at which if food were put before us we'd choke ourselves to death with it, stuffing it down so fast we could barely swallow before we had to swallow again, and all for fear that one moment from now we might lose the food. The hunger which comes after the fat has gone from under the skin, after the muscles of the less essential limbs have withered to provide energy, when the very organs of the body begin to diminish. Starvation hunger. We don't know, most of us, what that's like.

The sensation was like that.

And we don't know what it's like to be thirsty, most of us. So thirsty that if we come upon water, stinking perhaps and stagnant, thick with mud or polluted with drowned carcasses, we bloat our bellies with it, uncaring. That thirst abolishes all conscious knowledge of contamination and disease. To someone gripped by that thirst, it seems that *nothing* could be worse or as bad—not all the suffering of dysentery or cholera or typhus. Rendered insane by dehydration, he kills himself.

The sensation was like that, too. But it wasn't thirst.

Lastly—and this was the point at which I began to make conscious contact with it; I said it was like sharing my body with another person, who was the one to experience this horror, and not I—lastly it shared one quality with passion.

They recognise, in most codes of law, a state in which the conscious mind disconnects, and the personality dissolves like salt in water, leaving no visible trace of its presence. In France

they are said to admit to the extenuating circumstance of the *crime passionnelle*, committed without voluntary control owing to the intolerable overloading of the mental circuits by a discharge of emotion like lightning. Blowing the fuses of the mind, to draw a clumsy analogy. It has always been known in the heat of battle—the Norse would say “berserk,” but it was not unique to them. Among the Nguni of Africa, the legend went in the nineteenth century that you didn’t only have to kill a Zulu warrior ; you also had to push the corpse over to make it lie down. Same thing.

So now they talk of “diminished responsibility” as a degree on the path towards complete insanity, and that is taken in a court of law as mitigating in cases of murder. But before that, the Common Law recognised circumstances in which murderers must not be punished. A man, for example, who had killed another whom he found violating his wife or child was admitted to have acted not out of conscious desire to kill, but in this state of—disconnection.

The other person sharing my body was in this state. Cut off from reality. Its—his—eyes of reason had been put out by the hot iron of suffering.

In the first few seconds after awakening and finding that the nightmare would not stop, I discovered the quality which the sensation shared with overpowering passion. That gave me a bridge of reason to the other self within me. Across the bridge a flow began. The other self and I blended, like two raindrops on a sheet of glass—moved, drew together and were a single drop.

And then I knew (I can’t say I made up my mind, because my mind was not there any longer, except as an object ; I had lost my power to think and indeed every faculty of conscious volition, lost it in the tumultuous torrent of hate and suffering into which I had been drawn)—then I *knew*, as certainly as I knew I was I and lived in a body of flesh and blood, that I was going to kill.

My name is Patrick Kahn. I am twenty-eight years old. I am single. I am five feet ten inches tall, lean, brown-haired and brown-eyed. I have a scar over my right eyebrow where I was accidentally kicked by another boy when I was five years old ; the scar will be with me until I die. By profession I am a publisher’s editor, earning nine hundred and fifty pounds a

year. My health—both mental and physical—has always been unusually good. Until recently, that is.

And I am—or was—a very happy man.

With the acceptance of that central crucial fact, there came a measure of calm. Almost, of relief. But it was the same relief which is had from the auto-hypnotic repetition of some word or phrase to mask pain. The suffering continued ; yielding to the inevitable merely put it into context.

The world of solid things began to take shape about me. I felt my aching-tired body tangled and constricted in the bed-clothes ; little by little, I worked myself free, having to fight now against another urge—the urge to discharge my anger on inanimate things. I freed myself and sat on the edge of the bed. The window was bright with early sunlight ; it was summer. It was Saturday. The time was a quarter past seven. These facts came together in my mind like bricks, providing me after a while with a basis for action solid enough to set my feet on.

Now I could stand up, shaking, feeling the muscles tremble at the back of my thighs, feeling my stomach contracted and full of hollow agony. I could move my eyes without the lids seeming to rasp them like sandpaper. I went to the table on which I had left my cigarettes, took one and lit it. I got my clothes on.

The yearning, aching torment was not dulled by the tobacco smoke. But now I was beginning to identify it. Identifying it was no help, of course ; you can know that your leg is broken, that your tooth is rotten, that your appendix has perforated—and the pain endures.

I wanted.

I was reduced to a helpless condition of begging ; all my nerves had acquired open-palmed hands like beggars, whining inaudible voices, threatening clubs upraised. Blackmail by my own body. Blackmail. A need. A wish, a hunger. Words came to me and I dismissed them as inadequate.

Dressed—because it was essential—I went from my bedroom to the kitchenette of the flat. From the row of matched knives in their hardwood case I selected a five inch cook's knife which I scarcely ever used, down the edge of which the light glinted like fire. I put the knife inside the sleeve of my jacket, inside the left sleeve, and moved my watch on its expanding bracelet two inches up from its normal position to a point at which it

held the knife firmly out of sight. If I bent my arm too far, I felt its keen point prick the inside of my elbow, very slightly.

I ate a handful of lump sugar out of the sugar can. I put my comb through my hair a couple of times. I went out of the building, into the warm summer morning.

At first I walked, at a normal pace. Then the tedium of simple walking began to chafe the sore edges of the agony I went with, and the pace briskened. Not my pace. I had nothing to do with it except to permit it, now. And I could do nothing else but permit it.

My steps quickened. I had not far to go. But seconds were coming to feel like slow-dripping individual eternities. I went faster; at last I started to run, and not merely to run—to flee, as though all the devils in hell were after me. My feet slammed viciously on the hard pavement, hurting. My lungs strained to fill and refill with air, hurting. My legs wearied, cramped against the insistent order to drive me forward. My head dizzied, and nausea seeped out of the pit of my stomach till my brain soured and my ears began to ring. With the pumping of my arms, the point of the knife gnawed unheeded at the skin inside my elbow. Eventually I felt a drip trickle across my wrist and palm, and glanced down to find that a dozen red spots of blood had splattered out of my sleeve.

I could not care. If the knife had severed a vein and let me fall fainting with exhaustion and bleed to death in the road, I would have been glad.

My own body now seemed to have become a car in which the brakes had failed. I was an avalanche, a landslip, a tidal wave. *I was*. I myself was carrying myself along, helpless, beyond control, beyond hope.

Somewhere within my mind part of me wanted to break, to let go and retreat into gibbering insanity—and could not.

Not questioning whether what I was doing was of any help or to any purpose, I found myself at the house, I hammered on the door, and left one bloody finger-mark when I had to lean against it to relieve myself of the task of standing up. I hardly saw the door. Then I managed to regain my balance, and put my right hand just inside the end of my left sleeve. The handle of the knife was slippery. I loosened it from under the watch bracelet.

The door gave clicking sounds. The lock was being unfastened from inside.

t w o

But that was the end. The beginning was different. She first saw me in the "White" Bear, below Piccadilly Circus, one evening a few weeks earlier. I was with Fiona Bright, and I was taking her to the Criterion, and we were there early and had time for a drink before the performance.

It was Monday ; for some reason, the " White Bear " was far less full than usual. I remember these things with peculiar vividness, because they were all chance things, and together they wove a net, or maybe her long graceful fingers wove them—but that I can scarcely believe. Chance or not, then, this was the way it went.

I was with Fiona, and this in itself was not strange, because I liked Fiona very much the first time I ever met her, four years ago, and the habit of going with her to the theatre, rather than with any other girl I knew, had grown on me. To look at, she was nothing special ; a little plump, rather short, perhaps only an inch away from being dumpy ; her hair fair but not blonde, her face not quite square and dusted with freckles and crossed with green-framed glasses. Nor did she dress very well—she could not afford to, because of two children and a husband who had abandoned her and a not very well paid job. That evening she was wearing her office suit—maroon, about two or three years old and subtly out of style, with which her brown handbag and brown shoes clashed just noticeably and in different ways. They also clashed with each other.

I describe her thus, with precision, for a reason.

But as I said, I had always liked her, and I went with her to theatres because that made the evening—how shall I say it ? Savoury ? Yes, perhaps. Fiona could do to an evening at the theatre (in particular, and sometimes to other things too) what a drop of Worcester sauce does to a glass of tomato juice. If the play was disappointing, she would be caustically amusing afterwards, dissecting its failings without rancour but with surgical exactitude. If it was good, her enjoyment would heighten mine. That's as clearly as I can describe her personality and the way it affected me.

I could add that we were friends, half-close, half-casual, and not more. Not much more. Once I asked her to marry me, and she shook her head and somehow the subject got mislaid in further conversation, ingeniously ; we had spent two weekends together in the West Country. And aside from that, we went

to the theatre together, and sometimes to parties.

It seemed that Fiona was built into my life, not as a lover, always as a friend.

We came into the "White Bear," spent a few moments debating what to drink, ordered, got the drinks, sipped them, and so far it was as usual. The clientele had dropped into the slot in my mind where they belonged; I knew they were there, I saw there were fewer of them than usual, I even knew approximately what sort of people they were—business men taking an after-office drink together, husbands and wives or men and girls beginning an evening out, like Fiona and myself, and a few others by themselves. But I hadn't paid them much attention; there was no point.

We sipped our drinks; I gave Fiona a cigarette and lit one for myself, and she looked around. She said, "That's a very lovely girl over there, staring at you, Pat. Someone you know?"

I glanced around. There was no doubt about the girl Fiona was referring to. She sat by herself, with one vacant place on either side of her, behind a table on the other side of the room from us. There was a martini on the table, untouched. I thought—and said—"Tigress!"

Because that was what she was like. A blonde tigress. She was slim and electric. She wore black velvet—a cocktail dress—with pearls and rubies. She had very long legs in stockings so sheer they almost glistened, and her eyes were green. I remember distinctly knowing that her eyes were green, although she was too far away from me to see them. It was as though they *had* to be green, as though their greenness was implied by everything else about her, as though she would not have been perfect otherwise. And perfect she knew she was. She exuded knowledge of her own perfection.

She was looking straight at me. Her mouth was open just a hint, as though drawing a deep breath of surprised interest. Perhaps it was the glint of her teeth between her very red lips that made me think—and say—she was a tigress. Or it may have been her taut relaxation, like a tiger's. I don't remember. But I know that was what I said.

I saw that every man in the place, and most of the women, were shooting covert sidelong glances at her, the women out of pure envy, the men out of mingled astonishment at her being

alone and calculation as to whether they could put that right. She was certainly worth looking at, even dispassionately—if it were possible—because she was simply a masterpiece. She was an achievement. She was a living work of art, of the art of making a woman desirable. And she was also, presumably, the artist.

“Do you suppose I’ll look like that when I’m thirty-five?” said Fiona thoughtfully. There was no malice or jealousy in her tone—just an amused recognition of her own disadvantages in this sort of competition. She was twenty-five, as I knew.

“Thirty-five?” I said.

“About that, I imagine.”

I nodded, and didn’t question the accuracy of Fiona’s assessment. I said, “No, I don’t know her. I wonder why she’s staring at me like that.”

“She’s sizing you up,” said Fiona, and a smile twitched the corners of her mouth. “Dear Pat, you do seem to be incredibly naive sometimes.”

I wasn’t looking at the blonde tigress any more; I’d turned my head back to face Fiona. “You can’t be serious,” I said.

“I’m quite serious. I wish you luck if she decides in favour. But she looks like a luxury model. Positively a Cadillac among women!”

I intended a sarcastic laugh. It came out strangely nervous, with a shake on the end of it. I said, “She probably has at least a dozen millionaires after her. Honestly, Fiona, be reasonable!”

“Ye-es.” Fiona dropped the ash from her cigarette and took her glass in her hand, cradling it and rocking it gently. “I doubt if she’s found a millionaire she likes, though. But she knows enough to stop them from realising, of course. I think I was right, Pat. If it was just your handsome face that interested her so much, she wouldn’t now be staring at me with that speculative expression.”

I glanced around again. Fiona went on, hardly moving her lips, keeping her head tilted a trifle forward so that the glasses disguised the direction in which her eyes were fixed. “I can almost read her thoughts, Pat. She’s satisfying herself that I’m no kind of competition. And to outward appearance, she’s got every reason to assume that. Stout and dowdy against slim and elegant never stood a chance.”

So astonished I could hardly form my words, I said, "Fiona darling! What on earth's come over you? I've never known you like this before. Look, drink up and have another, and stop talking nonsense."

She shook her head; she did drink up, but set the glass down hard on the table. She said, "I'm not talking nonsense, Pat. I *know*. I saw this once before, though not so—so nakedly. That was Carlotta, of course."

Carlotta was the woman for whom Fiona's husband had left her; she almost never spoke about that, even to her closest friends. I had only managed to piece together what had happened from snippets of conversation and by inquiring of people who had known Fiona before I met her. I didn't know what to say.

There was a pause.

Eventually she began to speak again in a low voice. She said "Pat, be careful. It sometimes makes me—well—makes me ashamed of being a woman, to know that there are women like that. They don't feel, except for themselves. Their lives have to serve the purpose of a mirror in which they can see the reflection of their own desirability by its effect on other people. That's all they want from life. They're capable of almost anything in pursuit of that, you know. Only it—blinds people. Blinds their men, I mean. Lacerates them. They like to create suffering. Pat, I wouldn't like you to go the way Sandy went."

Sandy was her husband. I knew vaguely that in her turn Carlotta had abandoned him; it was said that the effect on him had not been pleasant.

Fiona was speaking rapidly and quietly now, giving the impression that she was trying to hold back the words and failing, and failing, preferred to utter them quickly and get them over. It was like watching the sea breach a wall to watch Fiona's natural—apparently natural—amused flippancy crack open to show the emotion behind. Not many people knew that her flippancy was an armour; once, I'd got behind it, and I respected her very much more for what I found there.

Suddenly she picked up her bag and rose to her feet, giving me a wan smile. "Excuse me a moment, Pat," she said. "It's almost time for the play, and I must spend a penny first."

She went—no one noticing, except me. The clientele had turned over a little since we entered. Everyone was still looking at the blonde tigress. Not continuously. But often.

Now she awoke, as it were, from her poised-taut relaxation. She looked at me again. She didn't smile, but she gave the impressions of smiling, and yet not exactly smiling, but bestowing a favour, like a queen. She picked up her martini in ringless, long-nailed fingers, and drank it unhurriedly. She gathered up gloves, handbag, evening coat ; rose to her feet.

Coat over arm, she went towards the door. She walked with a kind of savage magnificence, as though she were seven feet tall and crowned with gold. It was the most alluring walk I have ever seen—with not a hint of anything so crude as a wiggle of hips, simply a powerful smooth motion like the tigress's to which I had automatically compared her.

I was watching her, fascinated against my will. As she went by where I was sitting, her eyes twitched to look at me, and I saw I had been right in assuming they were green. They were like emeralds under her long fair lashes. The glance was a glance as it might have been out of curiosity, but it told me things. It explained, almost telepathically, that I was to leave my drink, leave my seat, follow her. And that it would be worthwhile.

A sensation of excitement bordering on panic made my nape prickle and my heart suddenly beat faster. I did nothing. I stayed where I was.

The door closed behind the tigress, and there was something close to a sigh as everyone present acknowledged the fact of her departure. It suddenly became obvious that the buzz of conversation had been hushed below its normal level, because it now began to climb back up the scale of decibels towards average. I found I wanted another cigarette ; my first was a stub close to burning my fingers.

Two minutes passed, in the course of which the electric tingling left my nape and the beating of my heart returned to normal. I was reminded—seeing my hand shake slightly as I lit my cigarette—of the most erotic thing I had ever seen : a shot from a worthlessly bad French film called *J'Irai Cracher sur vos Tombes*, in which a girl passed her tongue across her lips and conveyed in that one act the essential meaning of all carnal appetites. I felt weakened by the impact of that short glance. More : I felt somehow ashamed of not having done what was intended.

But that passed the instant I looked up and saw that Fiona had come back and was standing before me with an expression

in which relief and puzzlement combined. I glanced at my watch, emptied my glass and stood up.

"Let's go," I said.

She took my arm. "I must have been wrong," she said in a thoughtful tone. "About one thing or the other. I didn't expect to find you here when I got back, Pat. But I'm glad you stayed."

I said, "How did you know?" It was almost eerie that Fiona should have understood what must have happened in her absence.

She shrugged. "One just knows," she said. "Then I wasn't wrong."

"No you weren't wrong. At least," I corrected myself doubtfully, "I don't think you were."

Behind the green-framed glasses, her eyes studied my face. She said, "I wish I could believe you stayed for my sake, and not because I'd warned you and you wanted to save yourself."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I wasn't sure myself what my real reason had been. I muttered something, and we went over the road to the theatre, and for the rest of the evening we said nothing further about the matter.

And that was the first occasion on which I saw Deirdre Slade.

t h r e e

I learned the name two days later. By that time the impact had faded; it had been brief but jolting, disturbing the foundations of my mind. They had settled together again, though, after a fashion. The second day I hardly thought about the blonde tigress at all, and I expected not to think of her at all the third day.

I didn't reach the third day. On the Wednesday evening I was supposed to go to a cocktail party—one of the assorted semi-professional semi-obligatory affairs that are stepping-stones in my kind of career—in Park Lane. The evening was fine and warm, and many people were crowding the pavements as I hurried along.

A taxi pulled in to the side of the road. A group of four people who had been signalling in vain ahead of me hurried up to it, to secure it when it discharged its passenger. Somehow they obstructed my path as the taxi's door swung open, and I almost had to leap sideways to avoid them. So doing, I in my

turn obstructed the path of the taxi's passenger as she got out.

There was a shaking, frightening instant in which I felt that a personal thunderstorm had broken over my head, and thunder was rolling about my skull, trapped. That was while the blaze of anger burned in the green eyes.

Tonight she was wearing lemon : a straight short dress of an acidity that almost pained the eyes, shouting its costliness and yet failing to distract attention from her herself. Nothing could distract attention from her. The driver had scrambled out and was holding back the door for her. Some seconds crackled by, like icebergs breaking up and drifting free.

The anger subsided ; she was again at rest, deep and inscrutable like the sea itself. She unsheathed a smile, as a cat unsheathes claws, and spoke to me in a voice that was as dynamic as the rest of her.

"So it's you again."

Until she said that, I had hardly been able consciously to equate this impact with the first impact. Somewhere at the back of my mind I noted that she must have the power to hit a man as hard the thousandth time as the first time he saw her. How? How could utter perfection not grow tiresome? I stammered my apologies. Meantime she had paid the driver, the driver had taken the group of four passengers, and the taxi was pulling away across the road again.

I calmed by degrees. Having put her purse away, she now raised her eyes to me speculatively. She said, "I wondered if I'd see you again. I was fairly sure I would."

I said, "I'm flattered that you remember me."

"You remember me."

"I should imagine anyone who sees you remembers you. Very clearly."

"You're flattering." I felt like an antelope being circled by a lion closing for a kill ; oddly, this was not upsetting, because this indeed was practically an honour. She said, "I don't see why you shouldn't buy me a drink."

"Nor do I."

And indeed, in that instant I didn't. I might have been on an errand to save a life, but if that voice as rich as tapestry had said to me, "I don't see why you shouldn't buy me a drink," I would have forgotten. They toss off the phrase "personal magnetism" and mean nothing. But she had it. I was suddenly reduced to the status of an iron filing, and she contrived to make it appear a reason for pride—because it was

she, and none other, who had conferred this dignity-in-reverse on *me*, thus singling me out from all the millions of other men on whom she had not allowed her ennobling fancy to settle.

We went into the Dorchester. Or—better—I *went* into the Dorchester. She put the Dorchester on. How can I make that clear? Like this, perhaps: I hope I can't be regarded as mean, but setting that aside, the fact remains that whether out of close-handedness or genuine choice I prefer in general to spend my money in other ways than in truly expensive establishments, or not to spend it at all. For drinking, to take an example: a pub where you can be friendly with the landlord, not a club where the service is immaculate and nonetheless seems to me servile. Thus going into the Dorchester I was going into the Dorchester, into an atmosphere a little alien to me, a little distasteful through not being accustomed to it.

She, on the other hand, was simply changing the setting in which she existed. By the magnificence without arrogance of her bearing, manner and appearance she made the environment and everything and everyone in it a frame for herself. And in doing so, she did more. Again, she made it seem an honour. I found myself thinking that she could make the whole earth, if she tried, depend for its purpose in existing on her own existence. I was suddenly seized by admiring delight, and at the same time by dismay and alarm that I might in some way fall short of the fabulously exacting standards she set by simply *being*.

It's incredibly hard to convey my state of mind during the evening. I can scarcely understand it myself. Thinking back, I find that at that time I seem to have been a different person altogether. Possibly I was experiencing subjectively the effect I could see her working on her other surroundings—I was reduced to part of the frame around her, deprived of most of my individuality, and then relieved to find that what I had been deprived of was what might have marred the total effect. I found myself suddenly relaxed into absolute smoothness.

Waiters held chairs for us. As usual—I guessed: as always—people looked round. There were many beautiful and exquisitely dressed women present. They suddenly looked like clothes-horses. Their carefully modulated voices suddenly became like the shrill chatter of schoolgirls, or worse, like macaws. I asked her with my eyes what she would drink; she informed me, again with her eyes, that I knew. We had

martinis. They were brought with extraordinary swiftness. She lifted hers as I paid.

"Here's to you—" she began, and broke off. There was a speculative glint in the green eyes. "Here's to you—" she said again, and the look of speculation faded. She gave a nod of approval. "Yes, I think so. Patrick, probably."

I was startled altogether out of the comfortable condition I had been lulled into. I said, "How on earth—?"

"Is your name Patrick?"

"Yes—Patrick Kahn." Again: "How on earth—?"

A wicked hint of a smile; the tip of her tongue showed at the corner of her mouth. "Oh, there's a sort of air of being Patrick about you. Here's fun."

We drank.

I did most of the talking, eased along—not prompted—by her questions, for the first part of the evening. All I had learned in return was that her name was Deirdre Slade, but she had acquired a complete autobiography from me: my work, my income, my outside interests, my background.

A few exchanges stand out from the general mist of well-being and undefined pleasure. We had got on to the question of the Monday evening when we first saw each other. I know I had wanted to refer to that burning glance she gave me as she went out, but I never managed to do so. It was as though, the glance having failed in its intended effect, she was making me avoid reference to it by denying that she had ever given it or, if she had, that it meant what it actually did mean. From that I might have deduced already that to have failed—to have anything in her memory or in her environment which was not a tribute to her perfection and universal ability—was to her intolerable. But even if I had, it would scarcely have helped.

I was explaining, finding myself on the defensive, why I liked Fiona so much. I had previously explained why I was in the job I was in, why I lived where I did on the fringe of Kentish Town, and other things, and each of them had given me a sense of falling short. So I was driven to justify my preferences, feeling that I was indulging in special pleading to conceal a lack of—of something.

It was the same when I talked about Fiona. I was ashamed when I thought back over what I said, afterwards, because I had told this stranger things which Fiona had not parted with to me. I spoke also of her struggle with two children and a

poorly-paid job ; of the husband whom I hadn't known who had abandoned her.

" I think you have no ambition," she said at the end of my account—abruptly, brooking no question. " No spine, perhaps. You might, I suppose, have been rich by now. And this Fiona, the one who was with you the other evening : these exceptional qualities can hardly be said to show."

The world seemed to snap back into focus. I felt a chill spread through me like a cool wind. I said without rancour, " They can be seen by people who know where to look."

Deirdre's lips curled back a little from her sharp white teeth. She would have said, " Implying by that that I don't ?" Only to have said that would have been admitting that I had dared to suggest her perfection was flawed, and I myself was suddenly awestruck with the temerity of what I had said. I clutched back the shreds into which my mist of well-being had tattered itself, and by inspired words re-directed the talk into safer channels.

I think I said something about my lack of ambition being no lack, since I could not have tried deliberately to get her into my company, and that mollified her and gave her back the mirror for her perfection which she craved. Next I distracted her to think of dinner, and so we took a taxi to the Colony and ate and danced and talked again a little. But by now her manner towards me personally was becoming more distant, more abstracted ; she heard what I said but with only half her mind, and I was reduced again, below the status of the favoured iron filing in the field of her magnet, below the status of the items in her environment, to the eventual level of a chance object in attendance on her, partnering her on the dance-floor—badly, for her fluid grace was astonishing—paying the bill.

It became late. As the hands of clocks ticked round, my agitation became hard to control, because in lowering my condition as she did she conveyed that it was because of what I was not, and I kept casting around in my mind to know what fault or shortcoming in particular I might rectify, or prove to her she was mistaken about. But the last possibility was so dim and remote I could not grasp it confidently.

Finally she said, " Call a taxi and take me home."

Like that. Perforce I had to extract the crumb of consolation that lay in the words "*take me home,*" but it was a meagre crumb.

The address she gave the driver was not far from where I lived myself, on the eastern side of Hampstead, in a street I knew. There was no talk between us in the taxi ; she discouraged it by an attitude of reflection and deep thought.

We came finally to her house ; small, very new, most expensive, in a kind of Canadian-Scandinavian style. I leapt out and held the door for her ; I walked, apparently as unnoticed as a shadow, beside her to the house. Fourteen paces. The sound of the taxi's engine thrummed in the background.

With what little remained of my conscious mind I was appalled at the way I had been turned to simple clay in this woman's beautiful hands. But I was mainly aware of having succumbed to an evening of insane, mindless devotion, like a dog's.

Yet—

There was moonlight the colour of her hair. In a pool of it at the door of her house she stopped, turned and spoke to me as though she had this instant come to a conclusion she had been pondering all the way. She said, " Perhaps your lack of ambition has been due to having nothing you recognise as worth climbing towards."

She cocked her head a little. I said inanely, " Yes, perhaps."

" And so—" she said, and seized me. Like a hawk. I have read about kisses turning the bones to water, leaving people faint and giddy, and I have thought, " Oh, romantic exaggeration ! Lending-library fantasy !"

This did. The kiss was a short one, I suppose ; I know I could not have endured one much longer. It was halfway to being eaten. It was savage and yet not uncontrolled. It was like being transfixed by lightning. It was not the first thing this woman had done to me which I could not describe.

When she released me, after twenty eternal seconds—at a guess—I was sweating. I was literally sweating. I felt my knees threaten to give. To save my life I could not have said anything or done anything as she opened her door and went inside into darkness.

I could hardly walk to the taxi. And that night I dreamed of her.

four

I was so frightened it was almost ecstasy. I could imagine the same sensation being experienced by a man who for years has been haunted by the wish to commit a crime ; who at last yields to the intolerable strain and commits it. Murder, say. And then gives himself up to the mixed delight and agony of waiting until he is discovered.

But why ? It was not until late the following day that I managed to achieve enough self-possession to secure a hold or anchor for my drifting mind, and discover that the reason lay in the way my personality had been made into a toy by Deirdre Slade. If not a toy, then a simple subject for experiment.

In my office—which fortunately I had to myself, and where fortunately I had only a manuscript to prepare for the printers today—I alternated, twitching, between remembering the virtual bliss of last evening and the dismay of self-despise. It was no consolation to think that perhaps there was no man living to whom Deirdre Slade could not have done the same. It did not help to remember the greed that showed in the eyes of men who looked at her. Would it console someone dying of the plague to know that all human beings are vulnerable to disease ?

It was half past four in the afternoon when the phone rang and I rose from my phase of depression like a wallowing animal heaving itself free with sucking sounds from a muddy bank. The voice was Fiona's.

“ Pat ? ”

I said yes, and hello.

“ Pat, do you like ham ? ”

There was no logic there. I said I did, and waited without expectancy to hear the reason for the strange question.

“ Well, my aunt has sent me the most beautiful York ham, and Max and Morag have practically eaten it between them, but some of it's left, and I'd love to be able to have you to dinner. How about this evening ? ”

I said the idea was marvellous, and I suddenly found myself meaning it. I had been turning over in my mind the memory of how Deirdre had correctly guessed my name, until it seemed to smack of the supernatural ; Fiona's voice in the phone reminded me that she too had guessed correctly, and in Fiona's stable, gentle personality there was no room for the supernatural. I clutched at the chance to re-establish contact

with ordinary things ; I said yes, fixed the time, promised wine. There was a pause.

"Pat, is something wrong?" said Fiona at last. "You sound upset."

I almost launched out on explanations. Then I remembered that she would be calling from her office in the temporary absence of her boss, who discouraged the use of the company's phones for private calls. I said, "I'll tell you this evening."

The dinner was like a tranquiliser. Together we sat around the table in half of the two-roomed ground-floor flat in St. John's Wood where Fiona had lived since the divorce. The alimony paid a little more than the rent, but not much. I'd heard that indirectly ; Fiona had never mentioned it to me, so I'd never mentioned it to her. There were she, and I, and the children. Fiona was married at seventeen ; Max arrived four months after that, Morag fifteen months after that, and Sandy—her husband—departed shortly after that. Again, Fiona seldom mentioned the fact.

I always found the children wonderful ; tonight more than ever, because they seemed like a link with something human and precious. It would be impossible, I felt, to imagine Deirdre Slade committing herself to a child. Children are noisy, imperfect, sometimes dirty, almost always unpredictable. They would have no place in a world of Deirdre's.

That's to say, most children are all those things. Fiona's had somehow bypassed the worst of that. Max at eight years old was thoughtful, interested in everything, a voracious reader, an interesting conversationalist—unique among children of that age, that I've met—and affectionate. But Morag at nearly seven was already stamped as another Fiona : grave, sweet, placid, possessed of an intuitive response to people. She was almost certain to be more attractive than Fiona, too. Her hair was auburn, and she had large, liquid eyes.

But I was still partly adrift from reality. I know, because I remember only two things from the time occupied by the actual meal. The first is the taste of the ham, which was delicious. The second is the solemnity of the children's expressions as they sampled their half-glasses of wine-and-water, permitted to them when Max had inquired what wine was like. Morag's face was still quite solemn when she pronounced her verdict, saying, "I suppose this is another of the things grown-ups like. Can I have some orange-juice, Fiona?"

So they had orange-juice, and were put to bed in the adjacent room, and Fiona made and brought us coffee and sat down on the old rug in front of the fire. It had turned cool this evening, and there had been some rain.

"What's wrong, Pat honey?" she said when she had put my cup of coffee on the arm of the chair in which I sat. And the words rived my world open again.

I said, "I ran into the blonde tigress yesterday evening."

She nodded. She waited.

I said, "You *were* right. I think. At least, I'm afraid you were."

She sat up on the rug, crossed her ankles, clasped her arms around her knees, and rested her chin on the reversed fingers of one hand. "Tell me what happened," she said.

It took me nearly an hour to explain. I had to keep going back and elucidating, giving further analogies to make sure that Fiona understood my state of mind. It had all been so far away from my usual experience that I had no phrases ready-made, of the kind that adequately cover the small change of daily life. For this I felt I might have to forge a new language if Fiona could not close the gap between my fumbling words and my emotional disorganisation by intuition.

But she did. She said in the end, "And that's all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"Do you know why you're afraid?"

"Because of what she did to me, of course. Because of the power she has over me—and presumably over men in general. I know I couldn't trust myself to have such power and not abuse it; I've got no grounds for assuming she can be trusted."

"Yes, but—" Uncharacteristically, Fiona was impatient. "Yes, but why does she have this effect on you anyway? I mean, why were you not simply flattered at being the subject of her attention, proud to be escorting such a superbly beautiful woman for the evening, looking forward to another date?"

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said.

"I'd say it's because you recognise, now, what you might not have been able to recognise last night." Fiona had half-turned her head and was staring at the low flames of the gas-fire. "She accused you of lack of ambition, you said."

"Yes."

"And tried, after her fashion, to give you some. Herself. Yes. I think my warning was justified, Pat—on Monday, I

mean. Don't accept that offer of an ambition. Don't accept that—carrot. I think you realise without knowing that what she would do would be to build you, shape you, around your nice new ambition, amuse herself with you, let you go when she was tired. And what would you be afterwards? Hollow, Pat. With an empty space at the core of your personality the shape of *her* and never any chance of filling it again."

I said, "Fiona, how can you speak so positively about her? I—all right, I feel you must be right in what you say, because it does match my reaction. But can you explain why you saw this so clearly in such a short time? You had nothing to go on except one minute's looking!"

She was so silent after I had spoken that I found myself glancing down at her to see if she was still there. She was. She had not moved an eyelid. She hardly seemed to be breathing.

At very long last, she did move. She turned her legs to one side so that her weight rested on her thighs and her right hand spread out, palm down, on the rug to support her. She said, not looking up, in a scarcely audible voice, "I suppose maybe being in love with someone sort of makes your sixth sense sharper where they're concerned."

I said, "What?" But the word drawled out into a long sigh of amazement.

She nodded. "I'm afraid I am, Pat. I didn't realise it—or I did, but I was managing to keep it under control—until this happened. These past few days I've been afraid for you, Pat. More afraid than I could possibly be for myself. I've been worrying about you, wondering whether it had come off the second time, if there had been a second time, if I ought to ring you up and ask you—" She broke off and looked up at me suddenly. "Pat, do you think I'm just jealous?"

"I can't imagine you knowing what jealousy is," I said, and made my voice reflect the sincerity of the thought. She put her small hand on my knee and squeezed it in an expression of acceptance and thanks which conveyed more than words.

I caught that hand in my own before she could withdraw it, and leaned forward. I said, "Fiona honey, do you remember I once asked you to marry me?"

I saw as she moved her head in a suggestion of a nod that the light glinted on a trace of wetness on her cheek. I said, halfway to tears myself, "Well, I'm saying it again."

She tugged her hand away and began to pick at the rug, her eyes downcast. She said, "Oh, Pat—! Yes, I've admitted I'm in love with you, but—Look, whatever else I may not be, I *know* I'm selfish. I'm miserly with happiness. I won't stake a small happiness against a chance of a greater one, only against a certainty. We're happy when we're together, aren't we? Would it be better to keep it that way?"

I knew she wanted to be told it wouldn't be better. I told her. She went on picking at the rug.

"Are you afraid Max and Morag would mind?" I said when another pause had stretched to breaking. She shook her head, and laughed with a little catch in the sound.

"I don't think so," she said. "Morag said—when I was putting her to bed just now—she said she liked you very much. I trust her judgment almost more than my own, Pat. I—I remember how she used to cry when Carlotta visited Sandy, before he left me."

I said, "I think the reason you're miserly with happiness, as you call it, is that maybe you've never had anything but small kinds of happiness, so you don't believe in greater ones. I don't know that I could promise you greater ones; I can swear to do all in my power to try and get you them. Is that good enough odds for you to make your stake?"

She didn't answer. She stirred and looked up, not at me but at the arm of my chair. She said, "Your coffee will be cold. Drink it and have some more—I made plenty."

She got up. Obediently I drank my coffee, because it was a rational sort of thing to do. I almost expected myself to be having second thoughts, because the repetition of my proposal had come to my tongue without premeditation, as if it had been simply waiting, perhaps for months or years, to be uttered.

Only there weren't any. It was as though bit by bit I'd discounted the other possibilities, and long ago come to the conclusion that I wanted Fiona and was content to wait until I got her. Maybe I'd still have to go on waiting. I'd got accustomed to that.

She took a very long time over pouring the second cup of coffee. In the end, she left the cups steaming on the table and took up the wine-glasses instead. The bottle still held about one glass. She divided it between us. I waited. She picked up the glasses and came over.

"I think wine would be more appropriate," she said. "Well, Pat—here's to a gamble. But they always said marriage was a lottery, didn't they?" She was nearly laughing and still her eyes were full of tears.

And that was the way I set up my happiness, like skittles, to be struck down all together, or like a china doll in a fairground rifle-range, to be smashed to bits and laughed at.

five

What they say about health applies to happiness too. You can be not-ill without being truly well, and most people accept a state of not-illness because they are too lazy or too unlucky or simply too ignorant to understand what positive health is like. (I have been in the lucky category most of my life, having a digestion like an ostrich's and a sense of physical well-being with it.)

So you can be not-miserable and mistake that for being happy. I have occasionally been depressed over things, not for very long, but most of my life I would say has been quite a happy one.

The next week or so after Fiona said yes, I found that the *quite* in that last sentence was the important word. It was a qualified happiness that I'd known up till now. This was different. This was buoyancy. This was armour against anything.

I believed.

We didn't hurry over anything; we didn't make a big fuss over the engagement. There was no need. Some people, I think, have to hurry over matters like this in order to convince themselves that it's all true; some people similarly have to make a fuss with announcements in the papers and engagement parties and rushing around looking at places to live and buying things to create a sort of aura of glamour and a sense of doing things. We weren't compelled to do any of that. So we told one or two of our friends, and knew the word would get around; we wrote to my parents on the Riviera where they live; we went up at the weekend to see Fiona's aunt and guardian—the one who had sent her the ham.

Max and Morag were delighted. That meant a lot to us.

And aside from that we just talked about things, made plans, made love.

Things began naturally to fall into place. We went to look at some flats ; we looked critically, thinking in terms of a long stay, and decided we could look at some more before we made our choice. There were quite a few to consider. I would be able to ask for a rise in pay, or change my job, and I had no need to worry if it was stretching my present resources.

We had been to look at another flat—the third—on the evening of the Friday when our engagement was eight days old. It was in Hampstead, not far from the Heath, and it was ridiculously expensive for what it was. After we turned it down, we went up to the Heath because the evening was warm and calm and it seemed like a suitable thing to do. We walked hand-in-hand over the grass, not saying anything much, but sometimes exchanging a squeeze.

I suddenly felt a particularly hard squeeze, indicating something more than companionship, and I glanced at Fiona. I said, "Is something—?" And then I saw what she had already seen.

Lounging on a bench ahead of us, as though to prove that she could turn Hampstead Heath into a setting for herself alone as readily as an international hotel or a night-club, was Deirdre Slade. She was wearing rust-coloured taper pants, espadrilles, a man-tailored shirt of the same green as her eyes, and with all that huge incongruous clanging ear-rings of hand-beaten copper. She looked like a suddenly intruding miracle.

I felt a dart of apprehension strike through me. I said, "Do you want to turn aside?"

"Not if you prefer not to."

I hesitated. It was impossible to tell whether she had noticed us ; her head was half-turned towards us, but she wore dark glasses and might not have been looking our way.

The dart of apprehension had torn a hole in my happiness—something I would have called impossible two minutes before. I came to a decision. I wanted to plug that hole. Now.

I said, "I think I'd like to introduce you to her."

In a low voice, Fiona said, "I understand. I'm —terribly proud, Pat. I have to admit I don't like the idea much."

"Then we'll go down the hill and avoid her."

She shook her head. "I've got a feeling that it's bound to have to be gone through with some time. And I'd rather have to do it personally than with a memory of her in the back of your mind."

I began to say, "There's no risk of that." But I checked myself. Not because I recognised there was any truth in what Fiona had said, but because she was almost always right when she made such comments, and I was prepared to yield to her judgment. I said, "Okay, then." I took her hand more tightly.

We had come to within perhaps twenty yards of the bench on which Deirdre was lounging before she gave sign that she had noticed us coming up the path. I couldn't explain what the sign was. Like all her ways of conveying such information, it might have been a shift of attitude not noticeable to the conscious mind but recognised subconsciously.

I felt Fiona's hand close convulsively on my fingers. I knew she had perceived that we were—recognised.

We came up to the bench and I said, "Good evening, Deirdre."

She nodded. Her superbly cared-for right hand rose to her glasses and took them off. Revealed, her green eyes were like chips of stone: hard, cold. They were fixed on Fiona, not on me.

I said, keeping my voice steady to exclude both inexplicable nervousness and any hint that I realised I was in some way triumphing over her, "Fiona, this is Deirdre Slade—you remember seeing her at the "White Bear" that evening. This is my fiancée, Deirdre."

Her composure was absolute, like marble. But—possibly because she was so used to conveying subtleties by changes of attitude and expression too small to be defined—I knew that my words hit her like a hammer. The marble of her composure was suddenly networked with hair-fine cracks, and I sensed it and—what to Deirdre was most infinitely humiliating—so did Fiona.

"Congratulations," she said at last in a seemingly casual voice. "This is new, isn't it?"

"Since a week ago, only," said Fiona, and smiled.

There was a consuming interlude of silence. At length Deirdre stretched, cat-like, and stood up. She gave a last look at Fiona, and then one at me. She said, "I told you that you had no ambition. I'm sure you'll be very happy."

She smiled at Fiona—a natural-looking smile—and put her dark glasses back to hide the fact that it did not reach her eyes. Then she walked away down the path. A few yards gone, she began to whistle, and thrust her hands into her pockets.

Fiona let go of my hand and sat down on the bench, by touch alone, for her eyes were staring after Deirdre. She said, "I didn't think she could be touched, Pat."

I lowered myself to the bench beside her. "I know what you mean," I said. "But God in heaven! What kind of a woman can she be, if that simple statement from someone who's almost a total stranger hurts her like a personal insult?"

Fiona didn't answer at once. She tapped the back of my hand in the movement which had become our personal code for asking for a cigarette. I gave her one and lit myself one.

Blowing out the first smoke, Fiona leaned back on the bench and crossed her legs. "I don't like to say things like this," she said eventually. "But the answer to your question, Pat, is—an evil woman. I think she is evil. I think it's only to be expected that she considers our engagement a personal insult. I think she considers the fact that anyone at all could settle for another woman than her is a permanent insult to her on the part of the whole world."

"You're right," I said. "I know you're right. But I can't conceive what the mind of such a woman would be like!"

"That's because you're pleasantly naive, Pat. I've told you so before." Fiona drew on her cigarette again, nervously. "Carlotta could have been like that if she'd tried harder. But she hadn't stripped her mind of all unselfishness. She didn't pay any attention to her unselfish impulses, but they were still there. And she was probably disappointed when Sandy turned out not to be such a prize as she thought he was. She"—she nodded towards the point where Deirdre had disappeared—"wouldn't conceive of a man-as-a-person being a prize. The number of adorers is probably her gauge of success, and the more of them she can keep hanging on without giving anything in return, the happier she is. After her fashion."

"She couldn't be happy," I said positively.

Fiona contradicted me with a nod. "She could. But it's not a happiness that can be shared. Sharing it diminishes it. Sharing our kind of happiness makes it bigger."

I felt her shiver suddenly, and put my arm around her. I said, "Are you all right?"

A wan smile was my answer.

Something came back to mind. I said, frowning, "Fiona honey, you said you'd prefer to get it over personally rather than—something about a memory of her in my mind. What id you mean?"

She dropped ash on the ground, shrugging. "A sort of—oh, premonition. Feminine intuition, they call it. I don't really believe in it, but—I had the feeling that no matter how unpleasant it might be to have to confront her, it would be better than to allow a picture of her superficial perfection to brew in the back of your mind. You never know. If I hadn't gone through with it ; if we hadn't seen her composure shatter in that horrible way, the time might have come when you were getting bored, and thought again about the matter, and drew unflattering comparisons—"

I said, "You're sometimes alarmingly cautious, Fiona."

"I know. I'm glad you didn't say I was being ridiculous. These things happen. And I've paid a sort of insurance premium against it now." She suddenly leaned towards me and gave me a light kiss on the cheek. "Pat, I do love you," she said inconsequentially. "I was trying to think today whether there had ever been a time when we were together and I was unhappy. I don't think there has."

"I feel quite sure there won't be," I said.

"She would have killed me, you know," Fiona went on in a bright tone.

"What?" I exclaimed.

Fiona nodded. "Oh yes. She would quite cheerfully have killed me. Probably the only thing that held her back was knowing that you would have torn her slowly to pieces."

"Fiona!" I said, and sounded as horrified as I felt.

"I'm sorry." She dropped her cigarette and trod it out. "I didn't mean to say that. I meant it, because I felt it was true. But I suppose I must have said it because—oh, perhaps because some of Deirdre rubbed off on me. Perhaps she left an aura of herself on this bench. She was sitting just here, wasn't she? Just where I am?"

"Stop talking like that, honey! It's not like you!"

"I know it's not. I hope it's not. But Pat, how often do you meet someone who's pure like that? I don't mean pure, I mean unalloyed—unalloyed goodness, unalloyed evil? I think she is! I think she's more of a force than a person, a sort of—you know—an extreme pole. If people vary between good and evil, sort of clustering about an average, I suppose there must always be one person in the world who's *worse* than anyone else: more selfish, more cruel, more despotic. Does that account for her, Pat? Does that explain her?"

I was growing frightened by this time. Fiona spoke with terrible intensity, almost desperation, and her teeth chattered. The air had turned cold suddenly. I was trying to settle on the right thing to cancel this state of nerves, when something struck my face with a sharp tingling like a needle. More followed. Rain. Sudden rain.

Gasping, we leapt from the bench and ran towards the nearest tree large enough to shelter us. Other people had already begun to hurry towards it. We heard them saying commonplace things as we gathered together with them.

“English summers! *Look* at it, will you!”

“Bloody cloudburst, this, and no mistake!”

“It won’t last long, then, so that’s a comfort.”

“Hope it’s only a shower.”

Temporary comradeship. Shelter. Any port in a storm. One of the others had included us by a glance in his remark, giving us the opening to join the grumble of conversation. That was why at the time my mind was full of the English weather and other meaningless things, instead of being full of Fiona. Later, I wept about that, because I thought it was significant.

I didn’t see the lightning. One doesn’t. One feels it. Like the bomb that actually drops on *you*. Afterwards, I saw the shattered tree. It was forty years old, tough and strong, and the lightning cut it down the middle like a stroke from a gigantic axe. It hurled us, all of us who had gathered in the shelter of it, into oblivion.

And Fiona it hurled furthest of all. Not into the clean black finality of death. That would have been too merciful. But into the twilight of a grey half-world in which the body lived and the mind did not.

s i x

The doctors were incredibly kind and compassionate; they ripped open the regulations and found holes for me to go through where none should have been. They cut the melted gold of the engagement ring off her finger and gave it to me. They allowed me to pass hours together at the side of her bed—just sitting, just aching.

They explained that what seemed to have happened was that the main force of the lightning bolt had freakishly short-circuited from the tree-bole itself through Fiona’s body. And

as the current between the electrodes in shock treatment wipes the slate of memory clean of recent events, so the lightning had wiped Fiona's brain. They were honest, to save me from false hope, and told me bluntly that they had never had such a case before and could not expect any kind of cure. Fiona as I had known her was no longer in existence.

What was left—was something like Morag as she had been when I first met her four years before. Sweet, but a child. Interested in certain bright things, in flowers, in pretty pictures. She could speak a little, but the effort was tiring, and she soon lost interest. She liked to have her hand held, and I held it. But she did not know who I was, and the bright smile she used to greet me with was the same that greeted anyone and everyone who took an interest in her.

They were kind to me at the firm, too. They gave me the time which might have been my honeymoon with Fiona and I used it to do—emptily—what little I could. Fiona's guardian aunt came down from Yorkshire and cried with me at the bedside; she stayed a little while, as long as she could, and went back with the children, wondering how they could ever be told. They knew their mother was ill; I'd told them, and done the service of a parent to them for the first and perhaps last time. My life had dispersed like sea-foam. I had disintegrated.

A week passed, black, like winter fog.

The doctors at the hospital informed me gently that it was no use to keep Fiona there any longer; she had recovered completely from the physical effects of the lightning—the small burns on head and finger and foot, the loss of half her hair that was already starting to grow back under the bandages. The mental blackness remained, and seemed unlikely to change.

I demanded whether she might grow again: might unlearn her childishness as though she were truly a child. They told me it was just possible. They said if that minor miracle did take place, it would be a year or more before it was certain. Until then, they said, she would be best cared for at a place they named in the country near Oxford. I think the doctor in charge—his name was Gower—had pulled strings for me. At any rate, when I went there I found it was as he had said. It was not—as I had feared despite his assurance—a mental hospital, with demented patients whose screams might shatter the tenuous rebuilding mind of my Fiona, but an experimental colony of mongoloid children, their intelligence insignificant but their dispositions like sunlight and their joy of living infectious.

Gower took me there himself, in his fast silent Rover, because he went down once a week professionally. He was on the board of governors, or something. He let me find my way about while he was busy ; two hours passed.

In the week since it happened, I had put my disintegrated self back together again after a fashion. The readiness I had sensed in myself to wait for Fiona as long as was necessary, the same readiness I had sensed while waiting for her to accept or reject my proposal, was still there below the surface. Now I was leaning on it ; it gave, it creaked, but it was a support better than no support. Instead of railing at fate as I had done when they told me, demanding to know why I had escaped with shock and bruises and one slight burn while Fiona was—gone—oh, it still hurt, but I could now at least say to Gower when he came to find me at the end of two hours, "I could almost imagine that you knew Fiona before—before the accident."

He gave me a curious look. "How so?" he said.

I made a vague gesture. I said, "There's something like her in these children—I can't say how it's like precisely. Something sweet and painstaking."

"You were very much in love with her, weren't you? I mean, you *are*."

I nodded. "Even now," I said, and had to swallow before finishing the sentence, "even now there's something of her old self showing."

"I gathered that," Gower said abruptly. "This is a very exceptional case, you know. I find myself rather wishing that I had known your fiancee, Mr. Kahn. I also hope very much that—if she does recover—she will so-to-speak come back as she was."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"In detail, no. At least, as far as we can tell, no. We can't rule out the chance that her memory may have been battered into abeyance by the shock. But it seems much more likely that it has really been physically wiped out. Which means that the—*new* personality, so to speak—would be a product of this environment here, and not of her own past."

"How badly was her brain damaged?" The question slipped out ; I had been framing it often in the past week, and had never plucked up the courage to utter it in full.

"Not badly." He hesitated, and then repeated with emphasis, "Not badly, Mr. Kahn."

He talked about other things as he drove me back to London; the history of this experimental colony, in which he was very greatly interested because, as he said, the mongoloid children possessed something just as human and perhaps even more valuable than intelligence; the function of psychology in modern society; the many ways in which a personality could be defective.

I remembered then what Fiona had said—speaking so wildly and so uncharacteristically—about Deirdre Slade. I put the point to him: was it reasonable to think that as people varied about an average, there were people at the extremes of goodness and evil, which were virtually personified in them?

He said thoughtfully, "A scale for measuring that would be even more artificial than the IQ scale, for instance. I suppose it's true to say, by definition, that there must be a *most* intelligent person in the world at any moment. But we have no usable means of identifying him or her."

He hesitated. Into the hesitation I put the rest of what Fiona had said—about Deirdre being more of a force than a person.

"I have had patients," Gower said slowly, "who have made it clear why medieval superstition could ascribe insanity to possession by devils. But at that extreme, it seems incredible that a personality could hold together and pass as superficially sane."

"You say superficially," I noted. "Would you say such a person was insane, then?"

"A person whose grip on his or her adjustment is so precarious that to see other people happy is destructive to his or her own happiness?" He caught my nod with a sidelong glance. "Yes! That sounds like a jealousy of near-psychotic proportions."

I remembered Fiona asking me if I thought she was jealous of Deirdre. The stab of pain was so sharp I felt tears in my eyes.

That evening I went up again to the Heath, and saw the tree where it has happened. Workmen had sawn at it and trimmed it to a split trunk; it would presumably soon be cleared away altogether, before any blights could harbour in it. I went round and round it, wishing that I could eradicate the hurt from my mind as easily as the tree could be removed from the Heath.

Then I went to the bench where we had sat talking before the rain. I sat down and lit a cigarette. I passed into a state of not-thinking ; it was a kind of analgesic for my suffering.

The slightly mocking voice was the first thing that penetrated my mind. It said, " Good evening, Patrick."

At first I thought it was born of my imagination. I moved my head slowly, to see along the bench, and there she was. I said nothing.

The note of mockery increased. " I was sorry to hear about your—fiancee," she said.

" Where did you hear ?" My voice grated like a heavy load being dragged over stones.

" It was in the local paper today. ' Lightning strikes tree on Heath : Mother of two seriously injured '."

I said harshly, " You're lying."

The blunt accusation disturbed her. Her eyes studied my face warily. She said, " Look in the paper yourself if you like. It's on page one." But there were the cracks in the marble ; they were still there. I thought that some of them were beginning to weather around the edges, and widen.

" I didn't mean about that," I said. " I meant when you said you were sorry. You're incapable of being sorry for anyone except yourself. You would cheerfully have killed Fiona when I told you we were engaged, if you hadn't been certain that I would have broken you into very small pieces." I let Fiona speak for me out of memory. " You are certainly the most evil person I have ever met," I said.

" You are badly upset, of course," she said. But there was worry audible in the honey-rich voice now—audible, not just detectable by implication. The green eyes searched my face now, instead of simply studying it. I felt a rising sense of triumph, and hammered on my words as though on a wedge. In marble quarries, they do that to split off the blocks of marble.

I said, " You are so evil you are like a walking personification of evil. You are so jealous you can't be regarded as sane. You're a wild animal. You degrade other people to the status of a mere adjunct to your own existence. You hate happiness because you insanely think all the happiness in the world is stolen from you personally. You have only one desire : to have all the world envy you and struggle for your attentions, to have men kill one another for the privilege of having you single them out to spit upon. You cannot give anything except

the illusion that to be noticed by you, even contemptuously, is an honour. It's an illusion. I've seen through it. Knowing that, I could hardly even hate you. I can only regard you as the carrier of a kind of disease, and I think you should be disinfected out of existence."

She laughed. The laughter was tinny and rang like a counterfeit coin : falsely. I said, "You can't hide your nature from yourself forever, you know."

"You never reached that unpleasant conclusion by yourself Patrick," she said lightly.

"No. It was Fiona who showed me—she knew, within minutes of your noticing me in the "White Bear." But since she can't any longer speak for herself, I speak for her."

"In other words, you attempt to protect yourself against me by echoing the jealous lies of a dowdy frump who hated me for what I am and what I can do to men."

It was my turn to laugh, and my amusement was genuine although veering towards hysteria. When I mastered myself, I gasped, "You know, to have driven you to take refuge in personal insults against someone who can't answer back must be some kind of a record !"

She leapt to her feet, her mouth working with unuttered words, and slapped my face with a violence that later brought blue bruising out all over the side of my jaw. My head rocked with the blow. I controlled the reflex desire to hit her back, and even the desire to touch the cheek she had struck, because I needed to deny her the vanity-feeding knowledge that she had broken my resistance even for an instant.

"What you can't possess, you break so that no one else can possess it," I said. "Your selfishness and jealousy are quite incredible." My jaw was already stiffening as I finished speaking. But I compelled myself to add the last biting insult.

"You've destroyed something in yourself which was what made you human. Perhaps it's your soul. Something like that. But you've destroyed it."

Her face froze into a mask of naked amazement and terror. She tried to say something ; she failed. She turned and *ran* from me, ran in panic, ran as though all the devils in hell were after her.

seven

It was a victory of a sort ; it gave me grim satisfaction. But it was pyrrhic, because I felt somehow that I had descended to the use of my enemy's weapons, and was soiled and degraded thereby.

Moreover, if I had not yielded to the urge to break open wider those hair-fine cracks in her marble personality, then—if, if, if ! I did ! Past speculation, therefore. Let it be.

The persecutions began next day.

How do these things work ? In the mind ? In my mind ? Does it make very much difference whether they are in the mind or whether they have objective existence outside it ? A subject who has been hypnotised gets drunk off a glass of water if he is instructed to ; it's water nonetheless, but to him it is beer or whisky or whatever he believes.

So, in or out of my mind, there was persecution.

I awoke in pain the following morning. My head was splitting till I could hardly see ; the pain was somewhere near the scar over my eyebrow. My stomach was slashed each time I moved by jagged-edged blasts of agony. It was as much as I could do to get the phone off its cradle and call my doctor ; I swallowed aspirin and crawled back into bed.

The room turned slowly about me, ten degrees that way, ten degrees back. Beyond the window the sky darkened and lightened in turn, but the change was in my eyes and not in the summer sun. The wallpaper—which has a twined pattern of dark red stripes on a light grey ground—started to flow, writhing, up and down the wall. With a vast effort I could fix it into stillness by concentrating my gaze on one stripe ; even then the stripes at the limits of my field of vision continued to flow and waver.

The doctor came when I had suffered more than three hours' torment. He gave me a complete examination, head to toe, and finished up frowning.

"There's nothing obviously wrong with you," he said. "But I can see you're in acute pain. We'd better get you over to the hospital and have a complete check-up. It might have something to do with the delayed shock of your lightning strike, perhaps."

Mistily, there was the visit of an ambulance ; then hospital corridors, X-raying, urinalysis, a blood test, a bed in a ward where one old man with terrible bronchitis cried, moaned,

coughed and vomited all night and slept all day. I was in the ward for two nights and got no sleep worth mentioning, not because of the pains—they passed before the end of the first day—but because of the unceasing complaints from the next bed but one, where the old man was dying.

On the morning after the second night I got up, put on the clothes a friend had fetched for me, and went home. I fell into bed and slept until eight that evening. Before passing out, I looked in the mirror and saw a haggard stranger stare back, with deep-set eyes and a sour, twisted mouth.

That was bad, but it passed. I put it down—as my doctor had suggested—to after-effects of the lightning strike, and perhaps the psychosomatic working of the sickness in my mind : the sorrow for Fiona, the blasting of my life.

But other things continued, daily. As I have said, most of my life I have enjoyed exceptional health. Now that fell apart. Irking aches and pains began to pester my limbs ; my arms cramped in my sleep and put me through torture on waking, as the blood crept through arteries and capillaries and brought the numb nerves back to life ; my legs stabbed me with cramp if I walked half a mile ; my eyes blurred unexpectedly and reading made my head ache, so that I went to an oculist—but there was nothing wrong with my eyesight.

Food began to revolt me unexpectedly. Twice good meals in restaurants came back, weakening me, making me shake with exhaustion.

Then I found myself forgetting things. I would put something down, intending to come back to it—perhaps the book I was currently reading, perhaps a pen or pencil. Then when I looked for it again I would fail to find it, as though my mind was deliberately blinding me to the place where it actually was. I forgot appointments for business and pleasure. I forgot names, or interchanged them ridiculously. That built up over the next ten days.

Still nothing was detectably wrong with me, except the effects of lack of sleep—from worry—and too little food.

At last I could bear it no longer. I spoke to Gower, who had been so kind to Fiona, and told him my trouble. He heard me out thoughtfully.

Eventually he said, “ It seems to me that perhaps you are—without knowing it—trying to maim yourself mentally, to put

yourself in your fiancée's place. You are probably bearing a load of imaginary guilt because she suffered worse than you."

I tried to look at the problem rationally, with what small knowledge of psychology I possessed. I said I saw the possibility; what could I do about it?

"There are various things that could be tried," said Gower. "I'll let you know what can be arranged."

I persisted. He said, "If this is the case, then what's required is an abreaction to discharge the emotional load. That's a technical term—what it amounts to is a chance to relive the key experience, to make it freshly available to the conscious mind, to get a chance of analysing it rationally and seeing that there is no rational cause for feeling guilt."

"How?" I said.

"By hypnosis; by drugs like lysergic acid; by analysis. I think you're a rather well-adjusted person in most respects; analysis is the least likely."

It didn't get that far. It never got that far. What broke the chain was the telephone call that evening.

We build our own destruction—those of us human beings who are doomed to be destroyed—out of seeds in our own natures. Sometimes it takes contact with another, particular, individual to make the seeds sprout and grow.

But the telephone call . . . It came at a few minutes before seven. I hurried to answer the ringing; I was seizing on such opportunities to breach the circle of my discontent as might be offered by a friend's intrusion.

The voice was not a friend's. It was rich and smooth and would have been beautiful as usual but for the iron bar of tensions stiffening it. It said, "Patrick?"

I put the receiver down slowly, and heard the click of the connection breaking. But I did not go away, resolved to ignore it if it rang again. The sound of Deirdre's voice had re-awakened in my memory the sense of small triumph that had followed my Pyrrhic victory over her—the victory which ended in her running from me in panic. By then, of course, I could have seen the truth, but I could not have used it if I had seen it which renders speculation again useless.

The phone rang a second time. I picked it up at once and gave my name.

There was a silky chuckle, sounding forced. "I didn't think you'd be able to ignore me a second time," Deirdre said.

“ You’ve been ill lately, haven’t you ?”

I said, “ What makes you so interested in me ?”

“ What makes you ill ?” she countered. There was a pause, at the end of which she chuckled again.

“ Did you call me to tell me you were sorry to hear about it ?” I demanded harshly.

“ I’d hardly do that, would I ?” she said. “ Not after you told me I was incapable of feeling sorry for anyone except myself. Do you enjoy being ill, Patrick ?”

I didn’t answer.

“ Very well, then,” she said. “ Let it go on. Doctors won’t help. Drugs won’t help. There’s only one thing that will. Sooner or later you’ll turn to it. I look forward to that.”

Bewildered, I felt impossibilities come together in my mind.

“ Did you go to hospital with the stomach pains and the migraine ?” she said.

Guardedly, I answered that I had.

“ And you saw an oculist when your eyes began to fail ?”

I repeated affirmation.

“ And perhaps now you have seen a psychiatrist about the breakdown of your memory.” The silky chuckle again.

“ Wear yourself out, Patrick. I’m patient. None of them have been able to find out anything objectively wrong with you, have they ?”

The impossibilities had multiplied. Somehow they were turning to certainties, and my mind revolted against them. I had to score—somehow—against this pricking attack, with its hateful precision and accuracy. I resorted to the gibe which had made her flee from me. I said, “ You are soulless and evil.”

There was the sound of heavy, quick breathing in my ear. There was the sound of a word dying in utterance. There was a click and the phone went dead.

I sat down in my room with a glass of whisky at my side ; I had been drinking rather a lot lately, not for oblivion but for the comforting internal warmth of it, that seemed to supply a fire to my frigid self, thawing parts of my mind which Fiona’s loss had frozen. I stared at the wall unseeing.

Eventually I began to say aloud, very quietly, what was falling together in my mind. I said, “ There are only two points at which I have found her vulnerable. The first is by way of her jealousy—by showing her that other people are

happy, that she is not the uniquely desirable woman she holds herself to be. And the second, which is still open to me now that my happiness has been destroyed, is this apparently meaningless but terribly effective insult ; that she is soulless.

"Does that mean anything?" I asked myself. I sipped my drink, began to speak again, because using words was like combing my tangled thoughts, imposing order and sequence on them, reducing them to shapes and sizes I could grasp and visualise clearly.

"What would a soul be? Perhaps a kind of essential ingredient of a human being, neither to be weighed nor measured. Not part of consciousness, necessarily. Possibly affecting consciousness. But capable of existing independently. The mongoloid children that I saw out—*there* where Fiona has gone : they're not soulless, they can hardly think, they can scarcely be aware of personal identity, they struggle to learn the simplest tasks a child can do. But they are so glad to be alive ! They are so pleased when they do master some task after a thousand false starts ! They can be so proud of that ! They possess the power to be happy the *right* way. Fiona said *she* could only be happy in a way that meant the happiness of others was a theft from her. It's a cruel happiness that deprives others. A petty, miserable, evil happiness !"

I was getting somewhere. In the back of my mind, I could sense a sort of subconscious direction-finding signal, like the "getting warm !" cry in a game of Hunt the Slipper. I was consciously frightened of the direction in which that signal was encouraging me, but I was far more frightened and repelled by the idea of not obeying it. I went on talking to myself.

"To be afraid and jealous—to want all the happiness in the world for oneself—that must be terrible. The inside of Deirdre's mind must be like a desert : bleached and scarred and barren. Not human."

The signal within my mind was reaching a pitch of fevered intensity. I felt shivers down my back. The hand with which I clutched my glass was sweating, and I had to clench my fingers to stop the glass slipping like wet soap. I said in a dismayed, bewildered, wondering voice, "Is that what selling one's soul means?"

The signal reached a booming climax like a vast gong, and stopped. I had arrived. I had come to the end of the mental track I had been following, and I was possessed by a sense of certainty which I could not explain. I could not even rationally

believe in that certainty. It was beyond conscious logic. It simply *was*, with the self-evident rightness of the axioms of Greek philosophy as they must have appeared to the Greeks who formulated them. *This* not to be questioned. It would be insane to question this. This is the basic nature of the universe. Dogma. Believe this and you shall be saved.

I said, "No!" I drank what was left in my glass and got to my feet. To be saved by believing nonsense and acting on nonsense? That was revolting!

And yet—if there were not powers of evil, what accounted for Deirdre's magnetic ability to make men into iron filings? What enabled her to know with that devastating accuracy the sufferings I had undergone? What told her my name—the name of a stranger?

To trade the human ability to be compassionate for the power to mould men like clay—

But I could not get beyond that point. And that was the point I had reached by the morning when I found myself, not having willed or directed it, outside the door of Deirdre's house with a bloody knife wet-handled in my hand.

e i g h t

The door opened. The dissociation in my mind ended. There she was, eyes closed, lips parted, swaying a little. Her feet were bare. She wore pyjamas of black net shot with gold threads; her hair was a little ruffled, and she wore no make-up—having come from bed. I could see that her skin was imperfect now. I could see that the lids of her eyes were a trifle puffy. I could see sleep in the corners of those eyes. I could see the ridged imprint of a fold in the pillow-case stamped into her cheek, slashing across the network of very fine lines marring the skin. It was as though vision had suddenly been bestowed on me after I was blind.

"You came, Patrick," she crooned, her eyes still closed. "You came to me. You had to come to me. Come inside, Patrick, come inside."

Hands like spiders came up and stroked my cheek, closed on my shoulders, drew me inside. The door closed. Crooning still, repeating over and over the same phrases, but now opening her eyes, she drew me forward unresisting. The house was on the open plan; we came directly from the door into the

living area, which was suffused with yellowish light that seeped between the slats of half-closed Venetian blinds. This was a house like a design exhibit : extreme and daring, with bright colours and raw brick and natural wood, its furniture individual and stark. Like an exhibit, it gave no hint that it was occupied or used. There was no untidiness, there were no books, the pictures were on the walls because they completed the design and not because they were to the taste of a person.

She was drawing me towards a dark red couch, low like a divan—not drawing me, caressing me forward, stroking my face and shoulder with hands that seemed dry, rough, inhuman. Moments passed while I tried to reassert control over myself ; the reversion to consciousness from the disconnected state in which I had come here had taken me by surprise, and it was long before I could decide what to do and act upon it. My fingers closed around the handle of the knife hidden in my sleeve. I drew it out slowly, in case the blood that wetted the handle combined with the sweat in my palm to lose me my grasp on it.

Then I showed it to her, point first.

She froze as though denying that this was real, as if she could suspend her thinking and let the single moment containing this illusion pass by her. I felt the muscles of my face stiffen, drawing up my jaw so that my teeth clamped together ; I knew that my expression was like a carving in granite.

She began to move again, drawing back fractionally. Her eyes flickered between the blade of the knife and my face. I met her eyes. She could not meet and hold mine. The blade drew her gaze back by a kind of terrible magnetism. Her face started to collapse. Her mouth sagged open ; her jaw dropped ; the dropping of the jaw dragged down her cheeks and stretched them hollowly. Her tongue moved in the cavern of her mouth, independently, and her breath sighed out and in as though she was trying to shape words, but because her jaw had fallen she could not combine tongue and lips and vocal cords to make recognisable sounds.

She took a whole pace back from me, and screamed *aaahh-h!* into a gusty horrible breathy noise that seemed to have been emptied of everything personal and human, as she had emptied herself long before.

A string of saliva trickled down from the corner of her lax mouth. She folded like a doll, forward on to her knees,

stretched out her hands towards me with palms foremost as if to ward off the attack I had not yet offered. And she remained so, trying to gibber and not even capable of that.

Uncontrollable nausea filled me. I thought I had destroyed this evil, and that would give me satisfaction, even pleasure, because in all human beings there is some urge to enjoy destruction—as one clusters to watch fire eat up a burning building. But this was not a building. It was—it had been—a human being itself.

I said harshly, trying to snatch some compensating pleasure out of this, needing to, wanting desperately to, "What shall I do with you? Shall I cut the beauty from your face?"

She moaned and might have meant, "No!" She toppled forward and began to claw at the rug on the floor in front of her, gathering it up like a scrabbling animal.

The rug slid easily on the polished wooden floor. Where it was withdrawn, something showed. White lines. A pattern. A simple pattern, roughly drawn in paint. The tugging away of the rug had smeared something brownish and sticky across the lines. They formed a star with five points.

And this sight—the sight of the brown smears crossing and marring the white lines—did what perhaps nothing else could have done: slashed through the mask of terror over Deirdre's mind and drove her to action, oblivious of me and of the knife she feared so much. She hurled the rug aside frantically and began to rub at the smears with her fingers, in a terror more consuming even than that which had brought her drooling to her knees. Her bare fingers were not enough to remove the smears; she licked them, rubbed again with saliva to moisten them, succeeded only in making the smears broader. She ripped the jacket of her pyjamas from her, not unfastening the gold buttons but breaking them from the threads that held them, and bundled the fabric up and scrubbed with that.

I did not move. I was standing with one foot a little advanced of the other, my right hand reaching forward from my waist and holding the point of the knife towards her, my left arm slack by my side with the fingers of that hand curled and cupped. I could still feel the blood trickling down from the prick inside my elbow, filling the cupped fingers and oozing between them. Where the blood had already dried, the skin tingled unpleasantly. I could not drag my eyes from her frantic movements. I saw the muscles knotted in her arms, her

mouth utter meaningless gasps ; I saw her bared breasts shake and quiver, hanging from her forward-bent torso. I thought : this is the end of her. After this she will remember that she has been witnessed in this ultimate humiliation. This alone forms her downfall.

I was wrong. That was not the end of it.

At first I took it for illusion, or for the passage of a cloud across the sun outside. But the room was becoming darker. The darker it became, the more wild and vigorous Deirdre's ridiculous scrubbing at the lines of the pentacle. She made one of the breached lines clean and whole again, leapt like a frog in a squatting position to another place, scrubbed at that. The darkness increased further. It was a long time before I realised that it was not ordinary darkness. The suffusion of light from the windows had not diminished ; the clear even shadowless illumination was unchanged. It was a *sense* of darkness that was growing in the room—the dark night of the soul, the blackness of *accidie*, that suicidal depression in which sunlight itself seems dark. With it came cold of similar nature, not a cold that raised gooseflesh on the skin but a cold that made the mind shake and shiver.

Deirdre, scrubbing, rubbing at the blood-smears that had broken the pentacle, began to mumble at first and then to cry aloud. I heard words in that cry, and listening to them I tried to explain to my dazed self, not speaking aloud, only sub-vocalising what I was beginning to understand.

“*In nominibus*—” I caught from out of Deirdre's spew of words. “In the names of—” But the names were unknown to me ; they rang like gongs.

What instinct below the surface of rationality had led me last night to the truth ? And what kind of truth was it I had arrived at ? I didn't know. All I could know was that it was a truth in which Deirdre believed, and it was her belief that was destroying her. It must be a truth in the real sense, I found myself arguing. How could she have known what I had been suffering ? How could she have caused that suffering, was the counter-question put by rationality. I avoided trying to answer. This went beyond rationality, through the logic of civilised thought, to powers existing within men but opposed to them, to something primitive and cruel and loathsome.

The darkness grew still more. And now it was possible—not precisely to *see* in the ordinary sense, but to be aware of a force

in the centre of the pentacle. Not a force. A power. As though I was recognising something I had always been aware of and never admitted to knowing, I put a name to it : *power of darkness*.

I stepped back. I had a sense of being present at an event whose nature was elemental, symbolic, axiomatic.

"*Pater Noster qui es in—*" cried Deirdre, and the words ended in a shriek. She *fell* back from the pentacle, fell horizontally away from it, leaving it still breached at one single point by a smear of pasty nearly dried blood. Casting aside the cloth she held, she threw herself around and past the pentacle, clutched my knees, weeping, moaning, saying in between snatches of garbled prayer and phrases in languages I did not know, "Help me ! Help me ! Help me !"

I said, "You are beyond help." I *knew*. I was very frightened, but—like the lightning—this terror was not for me.

"You *must* help me !" she screamed, and drawing back one arm she began to beat at my thigh with a hard, vicious fist. I slapped her wrist with my left hand; it left a smear of fresh blood, and she gazed at it helplessly for a moment before desisting from her punching of my leg.

I said, "Did you—sell your soul, Deirdre Slade ?"

She broke off for a moment, turned her ravaged face up to me mouth working, but did not speak an answer.

I said, "Did you exchange your human virtues for the power to make men desire you ?"

Again, her answer was in her face, especially in her haunted eyes. When I looked away, I looked towards the pentacle. The power there was still growing, and now the darkness and the cold were arctic in their completeness and intensity.

The power seemed to be following the blood over the rim of the pentacle. I was bleeding. I didn't follow that thought to its conclusion. I spoke fiercely, "Did you make me fall ill ?"

She gasped, "How—could I have ?"

"Did you tell *that* to make me fall ill ?"

"Oh, God ! Yesssss !" The sob hissed after the word. "I had to drive you to me, I had to make you want me ! Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me !"

"Did you tell it to call down lightning and destroy Fiona's mind ?"

"No, no, I swear ! It happened because I was jealous of her, I couldn't help it—it was part of the bargain that what I

hated would be destroyed, but I couldn't control it. You made me hate her because she had what I had lost ! I couldn't help it or stop it—it simply happened because it had to !”

I spoke after that as much to myself and to the power in the pentacle as to Deirdre. “So you sold your soul, and the bargain went like this : that in return for what made you human you would have power, and things would happen unpleasantly to those on whom your jealousy turned. I think your power is exhausted, Deirdre Slade. I think you have squandered what you were given. I think you are becoming a bad bargain. Now you have used up your credit of power, and you must settle the reckoning.”

It fitted the facts, but because of the nature of the facts it was at right angles to ordinary logic. I was disbelieving what I was compelled to accept as true even before I had finished speaking, and I knew I would never be able to convince myself again.

“Yes,” I said. “I would forgive you. But *that, there*, will not forgive you anything.”

Then Deirdre stiffened, as though an electric shock had gone through her. She let go her clasp on my knees. She got to her feet like a puppet, clumsily. I saw that her eyes were closed once more. She turned around awkwardly and stood as it were to attention. Then she fell forward in one piece, not trying to break her fall with her hands. The shock of striking the floor snapped her head around to the side. She lay still. I saw a trickle of blood come from one nostril ; her exquisite nose had been crushed in the fall. The trickle of blood crossed the line of the pentacle on the floor.

And the power of darkness claimed Deirdre Slade.

n i n e

It was a long time before I accepted the fact that it was over. The room became light and summer-warm again. Deirdre did not move. I felt no inclination to touch her body. I was sure she was either dead or reduced to insanity.

Then reaction set in, and I began to be claimed by the fear that even now Deirdre's evilness might reach out and smite me by trapping me here, with her thus, with this knife in my hand and the trace of strange rituals on the floor. I took deep breaths, considering what might be best to do.

I had touched nothing since entering, to leave a trace, except the wrist I had slapped and left bearing a smear of my blood. There was also one bloody mark on the door. I must carefully clean myself, and that, and the knife. The blood in my left sleeve had not soaked through my jacket, and I could roll up my shirt-sleeve. Anyway, the bleeding had now stopped.

With a strange cold clarity of mind, as though impersonal forces were working with me instead of against me now, I attended to what was necessary. No one saw me even when I was cleaning the blood off the hard bright smooth paint of the door. Dispassionately, finding my repugnance insulated by knowledge of what was necessary, I removed my blood from Deirdre's limp wrist with my own handkerchief. I washed the knife in the bright stainless-steel sink of the kitchen, not having to touch anything but the tap, which I could wipe. If anyone had heard Deirdre's screams, they would have investigated by now, so I reasoned, and no one yet had.

I should perhaps have felt like a murderer leaving the scene of his crime. I did not. I felt like a surgeon who has completed a necessary operation.

Under the sink in the kitchen I saw that there were feathers poking out from the top of the garbage chute. I found, when I looked, that there was a headless cockerel there.

I went away calmly and quietly and walked home through nearly deserted streets. Perhaps people who had seen me go running to Deirdre an hour ago—an hour? An age ago!—might remember me and speak of the fact. I thought not. I *felt* not.

I came home, exhausted and not weakened, and heard the telephone ringing as I entered. I picked up the receiver.

"Patrick Kahn," I said.

"Gower here," the doctor's voice informed me. "Mr. Kahn, I don't want to raise your hopes too high unnecessarily, but I've had good news this morning about your fiancée. I had a phone call a few minutes ago, as a matter of fact. Apparently there's been a radical improvement in her condition overnight. This morning she seemed to remember her name suddenly, and she's been asking for you."

Gower went on, bolstering me against false hope and warning of the unpredictable chance of a relapse. But I was thinking: yes, that completes the logic of the pattern. In

essence, Fiona's mind was at the mercy of Deirdre Slade, and now that *she* is gone, the hold on her is broken.

I said, "I'll go down there right away. Don't worry about a relapse, Dr. Gower."

A surprised pause. Then : "I was just telling you that you ought to worry about it," he said doubtfully.

"No, there won't be one," I said. "It's very kind of you to have let me know so promptly."

Owing to legal problems and the fact that I was not a relative of Fiona's yet, it was evening before I managed to get her away. And it was not until we were in the train back to London that we managed to talk alone. But I knew as soon as I set eyes on her that I had my Fiona back—almost unharmed, only betraying a sort of puzzled dismay at having been hurt at all, and a disturbed wonder at finding herself where she was.

With my arm tight around her in the corner of the compartment, I said, "What do you remember, darling?"

"The crash," she said. "They explained to me that it was lightning. And I remember being in hospital and then being taken down there—but I remember that as though it happened to someone else, and I was just a passenger in my body, watching out of interest what was going on."

"Was it very bad?"

She shook her head. Her hair had grown again where the lightning had burned it, and the rest had been cropped short to match it up. It was strange to see her with short hair.

"No, it wasn't very bad, because everyone was kind to me. The only bad part was when I wanted to let you know I knew you, and I couldn't. But you were there, and I knew you inside, so it wasn't completely terrible."

I said, "Do you know why it happened?"

"I think so. I sort of feel that it wasn't pure chance. I think it was done out of malice. But how could that happen by anyone wishing it?"

"I'm going to try and explain," I said. So I told her.

When I finished, I realised suddenly that Fiona was crying. Alarmed, I put my other arm around her as well and begged her not to, and said I wouldn't go on because she was crying.

"It's not that," she said. "Can't you—can't you see how terrible it must have been for her? To be so arid inside! To be blank and soulless the way she was!"

I said, "I love you because that's the kind of thing that makes you cry."

A brief smile lit her face and passed away. She tapped the back of my hand in the code signal that requested a cigarette. I had my own Fiona back, all of her. I gave her the cigarette and took one myself.

When she had lit it, she said thoughtfully, "Pat, just how really real was all this that you've told me? I mean—would you say there are really devils and she really sold her soul by this kind of magical mumbo-jumbo? Because if it's true, then this is an awful kind of world! And what can we do against it?"

"I remember that I really believed it while it was going on," I said slowly. "I can't say that I really believe it all now—not in the same way. I mean, I know for sure that when I went there there was a pentacle on the floor and smears of blood and the cockerel without a head in the rubbish chute—and I'm sure that that's what they'll find when someone goes looking for her, if someone does, and all the papers will be full of headlines about black magic murders and ritual sacrifices and probably the *Pic* will run another scare series on the subject. . ."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

"All right, I'm dodging the issue. But I can't say, darling, I can't say. All I can say is that Deirdre Slade was as you would expect someone who had sold their soul to be—inhuman devoid of conscience or pity, capable of everything we call evil. She may just simply have been as you described her the afternoon of the lightning—remember?"

"The most evil person," nodded Fiona. "The pole. The extreme."

"Right. It may have been a delusion to her. The stress on her mind might have been such that in some—some weird way I could feel and sense and experience the process of her dissolution by simply being near her. On the other hand—"

"On the other hand, what?" prompted Fiona when I broke off suddenly.

"On the other hand: she did correctly guess my name. She did describe accurately to me over the phone things that had been wrong with me which I hadn't told anyone about except the doctors I saw. Perhaps she could have found them out from the hospital, by exercising her magnetism on one of the staff. I know she extracted facts from me about you that I was ashamed to have blurted out to a stranger—"

"What facts? Why?" said Fiona sharply.

"The sweet things about you that you're too modest to admit you possess."

She looked at me blankly for a moment. Then she began to laugh. I joined in, and when we finished laughing, I kissed her.

"So in fact we just don't know," said Fiona when we were ready to go on talking.

"Don't know what?"

"Whether she literally sold her soul."

I said again, "She was as you would expect such a person to be! Does it matter whether she actually literally physically conjured up a devil inside a pentacle and offered her soul in exchange for irresistible personal magnetism and incredible beauty? I mean, I suppose she did. But how can we tell whether it was truly a devil that answered her, or whether it was simply her own tormented and vicious mind that provided her with the terms of her bargain? I can conceive of her being in the end so unalloyedly evil—that's what you said about her, isn't it?—that she was a *focus* for these things that happened. Like the lightning, or my illness. She said she didn't plan it or control it. It may have been a by-product of her viciousness."

"We don't believe that," said Fiona acutely.

"We don't believe any of it," I acknowledged. "It's not part of our world any more, to believe in powers of darkness and forces of evil. It's probably much better that way, isn't it?"

She said doubtfully, "But when one comes up against someone like Deirdre Slade—"

"How often? Even Carlotta . . ."

"Even Carlotta . . ." she echoed. "Yes, I suppose so. Would you say that kind of evil was self-destructive, Pat?"

"Obviously. In the end, it must grow jealous of itself."

We were silent for a while. At length I roused myself and looked out of the window. The train was approaching London. I said brightly, "Well, tonight you'll stay with me, and then tomorrow we can see about getting Max and Morag back to London, and we'll find that new place, and we'll pick up where we left off. Only better."

"Pat," she said inconsequently, not looking up at me, "I do love you very much."

—John Brunner

Unlike the theme in John Brunner's lead story in this issue—the psychological approach to black magic—John Rackhams' novelette conjures up all the forces of Evil along orthodox lines, plus murder !

THE BLACK CAT'S PAW

BY JOHN RACKHAM

It was unsufferable. A hob-nailed battalion dancing a fiendish jig overhead would have made less noise. And this was the peaceful, the quiet little office where I had been so happy these past eight weeks. And there it was again, that barrage of feet and the rumbling voices. I laid down my pencil in disgust. I had been trying to twist the tail of a lacy little sonnet into a lover's knot, with my head full of metre and rhyme. Now it had all gone, even the mood. With a cigarette, and unaccountably depressed, I went to my one little window, and there came again the charge of tramping feet.

It was too much. I paused, then went to the door. I had crossed the tiny inner office, debating ways of combining a complaint with an offer to help move the furniture, when my teeth went on edge from a squeal as something heavy objected to being shifted. I began to feel anger, though I am not an aggressive man. I marched across the even tinier outer office, and had my hand on the doorknob, when there came the hurried tread of heavy feet on the outside stair, on the way

down, growing louder, to stop outside. Then a brisk double-rap.

For a moment, time halted in its course, and I was gripped by the most abject and senseless fear I have known in a long time. While every sense grew needle-sharp, and the blood hammered in my ears, I could feel my stomach churn, and my back go wet with sudden sweat. As suddenly as it had come, the terror went, leaving me breathless and shaken. I opened the door. A young constable, large and solid, confronted me.

"Mr. Jones? Mr. Chapman Jones?"

"At your service," I said, wonderingly. "Is something wrong?"

"Shall have to ask you to come upstairs, sir. The Chief Inspector wants a word with you. This way, please." Happy the man who can receive such a sentence without a qualm or two. I had many as I followed the constable upstairs. A right-hand turn brought us out on a landing fronting a door the twin of my own, bearing in faded gilt the legend 'Madame Tara. Your Destiny in the Stars'. We went in. Limp on the floor by a desk lay the girl I knew by sight as Madame Tara's secretary. Another young constable crouched by her, red-faced and rubbing her wrist. My guide wormed past me, to the inner door.

"Mr. Jones, from downstairs, sir," he announced, waving me on into a room as small as my own. Where mine was bare, this was a cluttered mess. Of three filing-cabinets by the right-hand wall, one had been struck out of the place hard enough to spring a drawer half-open, and scattered white paper snowed the dark carpet. By a desk, a man straightened up from something which lay, there, on the floor, and turned to face me. He was tall, and lean, and dour, and he seemed to bristle. His eyebrows, his sparse sandy hair, even his clipped moustache, all stood out, aggressively. Yet his voice was quiet, and routinely polite.

"I'm Chief Inspector Ferguson," he said, briefly. "Unpleasant business, Mr. Jones. Verra unpleasant. But I'd like you to take a look if you would. For identification, you know. I take it you know Madame Tara, by sight?"

I hesitated. That sick fear had come back, in force, and I had no wish to look at what I guessed lay on the floor.

"I've seen the elderly lady who uses this office. On the stairs. And the younger one, out there. Her secretary, I've always assumed. If that is good enough . . .?"

"You're verra cautious, Mr. Jones." The Inspector's voice had cooled quite a bit. "You'll have your reasons, no doubt. Still, that'll do for us. Will you look now?" and he stood aside from the thing on the carpet.

She had been, I imagine, in her fifties. A small, mild-mannered old dear, with nothing between her and a thousand of her sisters you'd meet any day in the North End Road. Her grey hair, amateurishly blued, had been neat, always. Now it was spread, pitifully thin, against the dark pile. Her caked make-up had cracked in the agony of her last moments, showing the purple discolouration beneath. Her bloated, protruding tongue had knocked her false teeth awry in the travesty of a leer. Her eyes were open, staring into nowhere. So much for her 'stars' I thought, as my stomach began to protest again. I have seen dead ones, as have all those who shivered through the recent war. But I never learned to like the sight.

It was Madame Tara, right enough. I moved my gaze, my eyes following the line of one outflung arm.

"That's the lady I know, Inspector," I mumbled. "Isn't that a paper in her hand, there?" It was foolish and futile, but it was something to say, to drag my thoughts away from that dreadful sight.

"All in due course." Ferguson's voice was crisp, now. "We'll get to that. There's going to be a lot of paper work here, I'm thinking. Place is full of it. Now, sir, what can you tell us?"

"Me? I don't know anything about it!"

"Now, now. Just routine, you understand. Been on the premises all day?"

"Oh! Yes, since about nine, anyway."

"All right. It's just on eleven, now. I'd guess this pair body has been dead an hour, maybe a mite more. The surgeon will put it nearer than that, when he gets here, but it's about that. Now, you must have heard something. A call. A scream, maybe. Bumps . . . a quarrel, voices . . . anything . . ." A brisk step pulled us both to turn and see a small man in a long, black, ancient overcoat, taking off an equally ancient trilby to reveal a shiny bald head. A doctor's bag in his hand. Ferguson said,

"Hello, Skelby. Over here. You'll wait, Jones. Be with you in a moment." Dismissed, I moved into the room further. Still stunned by the suddenness of it all, I tried to interest

myself in the clutter. Anything rather than dwell on that horrid sight. Books. The wall was full of them. The titles were of a kind. Mysticism, clairvoyance, the astral world, power of the mind, the life beyond the grave . . . many I had read . . . some I had only heard of. Madame Tara was nothing if not thorough.

I wondered, idly, if she had known anything of the real power which lies just beyond all these popular simplifications, the power which is as different from them as a penny banger from an atom bomb. I know a little of it, but not from books like these. Then I saw a title I had long wanted to read, and put out a hand. Ferguson's voice stopped me.

"Don't touch anything, Mr. Jones. Best keep your hands in your pockets until the print boys have been over the place. Ah, that'll be them, now. You must excuse me, again." There were many more tramping feet, and loud, casual, tactless voices I turned away, still not caring to look where death lay. Now I faced a dark nook, where the shelves ended. I saw a most peculiar thing.

A wine-glass floated in mid-air, upside down. About a foot clear of the dark wall, and six or seven inches clear of a small shelf, it hung, quite still. As I stooped to it there was the ghost of movement on the wall, and I started back. Then, foolishly, I saw that it was a mirror, and the movement was my own face, in reflection. I bent again, and saw myself, white-faced and strained, my hair, which is mousy and never kempt, even at the best of times, now erected in tufts, as if I had just scrambled from my bed. I dabbed at it with futile fingers, and peered again at the wall-altar, for that was what I knew it to be.

The darkly polished shelf bore an inlaid five-pointed star. To right and left were shapeless blobs of wax. Candles, but the wax was black. And as I stood, I caught the faint tang of a scent I knew. Incense, and not the common kind that you can buy from any sacramental dealer, but the genuine Kabalic kind, hand-made and unforgettable.

"Now then, Mr. Jones." It was the Inspector again, breaking in on my dark musings. "Shall we go down to your office, and you can give me a statement?"

"Just as you like, Inspector . . . but, look here, would you?" He came closer, to peer and frown. Then he put out an exploratory hand, over the glass, and it jerked and swung, with a faint chime as his fingers touched the black thread.

"Parlour magic," he grunted.

"Possibly. But I doubt it. Not with a blank pentacle, and black candles, and that incense. Can you smell it?"

"Ay!" he sniffed, violently, in the mistaken belief common to many that this enhances the sense of smell. "It's a stink, right enough. But what of it? It's all part and parcel with the rest of the puir woman's delusions."

"I don't agree," I said, stubbornly. "I'm not an expert, but I do know a little. It doesn't fit. The rest is futile superstition. This, I'm afraid, is genuine demonology."

"Hah!" he stepped back, rubbing his bristling lip. "Ah well. It can do no harm to be careful. Smithy . . ." he called over his shoulder to a dark-haired, chubby man, in a rain-coat. "You'll keep an eye on things. Be sure they dinna disturb yon. I'll ask for somebody from the Special Branch to take a look at it. I wonder if they have any experts in black magic? Now, Mr. Jones . . ." and he took my arm in a gentle but firm grip.

In the outer office, the secretary sat slumped in a chair while the burly constable set about righting the desk. By the marks on the carpet, it had not been moved in years. As we were passing, it went back into place with a squeal.

"Officer," I said, remembering. "Did you move that desk, originally?"

"That's right, sir. Had to, to make room to lay the lady down, when she fainted." We went out, on to the landing.

"Why did you ask that?" Ferguson demanded, as we went down.

"Just a thought. I had heard that noise, before, but it must have been made by the constable, so it doesn't help."

Ferguson annexed my chair, and desk, leaving me to stand, for there was nothing else in my room but a sausage-shaped canvas bundle in one corner, and a battered green suitcase in the other. Those, and a shelf by the wash-basin, with a mug, sugar-packet, electric kettle, bottle of milk and a tin of instant coffee, made up the whole of my fittings. I guessed that Ferguson had taken it all in, but he made no comment, except to produce the inevitable note-book and pencil.

"Now," he said. "Mr. Chapman Jones, Agent. Agent for what?"

"Nothing," I said, helplessly. "That sign on the door is just camouflage."

"Indeed," he twirled his pencil. "You'll have to explain that."

"It's simple enough. It may not sound quite normal, but I can't help that. You see, about six months ago I came into a legacy. An elderly aunt I hardly knew. Nothing stupendous, but enough to bring in about £900 a year. At least, that's the way the lawyers advised me to arrange it. So I did. Up until then I'd been living from hand to mouth, as they say."

"Ay!" he scribbled industriously. "You came into money, and decided to set up a business . . ."

"No I didn't." I began to pace the little office, uneasily. "There is no business, I tell you. Check it up, if you like. I just decided to rent this little office, have my name painted on the door to make it look right, just to have somewhere to live in peace and quiet, that's all."

"To live?"

"Why not? Look, that thing there is a hammock. There are the hooks, in the walls. My change of clothes, and my small gear, is all in the suitcase. I make coffee when I'm thirsty. I go out to the nearest cafe when I'm hungry. And that's all!" His face showed his struggle to accept this.

"But, man alive, why an office?"

"I'll say it again. Why not? Can you think of a better way of being sure of peace and quiet? In the heart of London? I have no neighbours, no clatter, no noise, no screaming kids, no tradesmen, no hawkers, no radio or T.V. blaring away to all hours. Nothing comes but the postman, and he seldom comes to my door. All I ever hear is the quiet buzz of the typewriter, upstairs. Until today, that is."

"Ay well," he poked his pencil through his sandy hair. "That's far and away the unlikeliest yarn I've heard in many a day. And what do ye do with a' the peace and quiet, when you've got it, may I ask?" This was the question I had been dreading. As calmly as I could, I said,

"I try to write poetry, Inspector!"

Now why 'poetry' should be trigger-word, I shall never know, but it is, and I was not surprised by his reactions. I've seen them before. He sighed, slapped down his pencil, and drew a deep breath.

"Noo see here, Jones," his Scots ancestry coming through in his irritation. "I'm no' playing games this day. There's been a murder, and there's a shocking mess of paper muck to be got

through, and all that twaddle about clairvoyance, and fortune-telling, and the like. Of the only two folk who can tell anything, one's so shocked she's no' fit to stand, much less talk, and the ither sits down here, in a fake office, hiding . . . and ye tell me ye're writing poetry?" He glared at me from under shaggy, bristling brows, and took up his pencil again. "Now. We'll have some straight answers, if you please. You've been in here since nine, you said. Back from your cafe breakfast, no doubt. Verra well. Did you hear anything, any unusual sounds, after that?"

"Only the row your policeman made. Look, I was well-away, wrestling with a closing couplet, in the Miltonic form, deaf to the world. And it died on me. I know the feeling. The mood flew out of the window. And then came the noise, the tramping, the heavy voices, the scream of the desk. All in the five minutes or so before your constable showed up."

"Nothing before that?"

"Not that I heard. But that doesn't mean anything. When I get well into an idea, I'm lost. You could pull down the building, and I'd not hear you. I wouldn't have heard what I did, if I hadn't lost the inspiration beforehand." He leaned back with a sigh, and shook his head.

"We got a wee word from the girl," he mused aloud. "She went out, about nine-thirty, to stamp and post some horoscopes. Got back at ten-fifteen. The morning's post had come. She took the letters from that wire-basket thing on the door, walked across to give them to Madame . . . and found her the way you saw her. She managed to make a 999 call, and was in shivering hysterics when we got here. So . . ." he focussed his eyes on me again ". . . somebody got at that old woman, when she was all alone, between nine-thirty and ten. And you say you didn't hear a thing?"

"I'm sorry," I said, grimly, "but that's the way it is. I heard nothing, and I'm not such a fool as to try to invent anything, either."

"You're in a nasty situation, Mr. Jones," he said, slowly. A sharp rap on my door broke what was becoming an uneasy silence. It was Skelby.

"Quite recent, Inspector," he said. "Between nine-thirty and ten, I'd say. A man. A big and powerful man, too. Got her from behind, over a high-backed chair. Strangled *and* neck broken. Either would have done it. It's just an odd point,

but, from the marks on her neck, it looks as if the chap who did it is minus the top joint, third finger, left hand. Possible. Not certain."

"Right. Thanks, Skelby. You'll see to the body?"

"I will. The van's here now. I'm taking the girl, too. She's in bad shape. Needs to be put to bed and watched. Neurotic, by the sound of her, and on a slimming diet, too. Bloody fool. Why do they do it?"

"Lord knows. All right . . . Stevens, go along with the doctor, stay close to that girl. Get more information, as soon as she's able to talk. You know the kind of thing." He turned and came back into my outer office. "Your phone work?" he asked, eyeing the layer of dust on it.

"It should. I pay for it, although I've never used it yet."

"I'm going to need more men on this," he muttered, picking up the receiver. It did work. I listened to him giving crisp and detailed instructions. The whole of Ragnar Road was to be combed for reports of any person seen going into, or coming out of, our front door. I hoped, for my sake, that they would find a few. The chubby man in the raincoat appeared in the doorway. Ferguson looked.

"Get anything, Smithy?"

"Too blasted much, if you ask me. We'll need a van to take that lot away for checking. But there was this, snagged on the corner of that filing cabinet," and he produced a clear envelope, containing a tiny shred of something dark. Ferguson took tweezers from his top pocket and a magnifying glass from an inside pocket, all in one movement.

"Blue serge," he said, after a careful study. Smith nodded.

"That's what I made it, too, sir. And there was this, for what it's worth." He stowed the shred, and took out another packet, produced an envelope, opened it to show a fold of paper. "That's what she had in her hand," he said, "and this is the envelope it came in. Under the body, it was. Been marked with a heavy pencil, see? And you can see the impression on the paper that was inside. Fits exactly." Ferguson took it, curiously.

"Any prints, sergeant?"

"Smudges only, on the envelope. One or two on the paper, but they check with the body."

"Somebody was awfu' careful, eh? All right, I'll keep this awhile. You see to that van, and get all the stuff out. Turn that bit of cloth over to the lab boys. It might be something

special, but I have my doubts. Blue serge is common enough." Sergeant Smith left us. Ferguson followed me as I wandered back into my office.

"Well?" he asked, quietly.

"Well what?" I swung on him. "I'm big and strong, yes. But I have all my fingers, see? And nothing in blue serge, positively. I was twelve years in the Royal Navy. I saw enough of the stuff to put me right off it."

"I was a Gunner, mysel'," he murmured. "But this envelope, now. Posted in France, somewhere, but the mark's too blurred to tell the time or place. And it was franked by the G.P.O. late yesterday. So it was delivered this morning. But yon lassie said the envelopes were still in the basket when she came back. So somebody took *this* envelope, marked with a star, from the basket, in to the Madame, gave it to her, and then throttled the life out of her. Now who would do a thing like that, Jones? Who would know just when she would be alone?"

"Don't look at me," I said, violently, backing away from him. "I can't blame you for your suspicions. But it wasn't me. I've never even been up those stairs before, until today. Look, why don't you open that envelope? It might be a clue . . . give you something else to think about."

He squeezed the thing, so that it gaped, and poked his fingers inside. I saw his face go blank, then grim.

"Doesna mean a thing to me," he said, "but it might, to you," and he held it out. As I took it, I felt that cold shiver of dread again, and when I looked at the square of paper I knew that this time, there was a valid reason for my fear.

"I know what it is," I mumbled. "And I swear to you that I didn't draw it, send it, or deliver it. If you hadn't put it in my hand, I wouldn't even touch such a thing," and I dropped it on the desk, quickly, to get out my handkerchief and scrub my fingers.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"'Devil' is the right word. I've seen things like that before, Inspector. I don't suppose you'll like this one bit, but that's a seal. You could say it's the call-sign for a demon, if you like, for that's what it is. Black Magic. I don't like it, at all."

"Bosh!" Ferguson said, angrily. "You and your talk of demons. That puir woman was throttled to death with this in her hand, but she wasna choked by any demon, Mr. Jones. It

was a flesh-and-blood man, who knew about a' this jingo to be able to bluff his way into her room, a man who kened fine she was all alone, a man who took this fake office six weeks or so ago, as a blind, just for the purpose. Come now, Mr. Jones, you're a good hand at telling the tale about this black magic, but it'll no' wash with me . . ."

"I'm no expert," I denied, hastily. "I don't even know which demon this seal is for. But I know someone who is," because my wits had begun to spin, to seek rescue. I was in a dreadful mess. I needed help. And a name had come to my mind. "Someone who would confirm, in a minute, all I've said, and who would probably know everything that lies behind all this . . . and the pentacle, the candles, the talking-glass, the black candles . . . all of it."

"Ay. Well. I'm listening !"

"Have you ever heard of a Doctor K. N. Wilson? He's something of an authority on Ancient Egypt, among other things. And on abnormal psychology, too. Do you know of him?" As I watched, apprehensively, Ferguson rubbed his chin.

"The same chap who gave those talks about witchcraft, on the Third, about six months ago? My wife listened," he added in explanation. "She likes that kind of thing. Reckoned he had a wonderful voice. Women! I don't suppose she understood a word. That the chap?"

"The same. And he has a wonderful voice. She's right, there. I have his phone number. I know he's in Egypt, most of the time, but I believe he's here in London at the moment. May I call him?"

"What good would that do?"

"Lord knows, but he might be able to help . . . and I certainly need all the help I can get, right now. May I?"

"All right," he nodded. My hand shook as I lifted the phone, and began to dial. Would he be home; interested; free; willing to help? So many things to go wrong. I heard the selectors clicking.

"How comes it that you're so well in with a chap like yon?" Ferguson demanded, obviously impressed.

"In the service together," I mumbled, listening for the call-sign. It sounded twice, and then there came a huge, muted, rolling bass voice.

"Doctor Wilson's residence. Who speaks?" Whoever owned that voice was not English, that I knew. Nor had I ever heard it before. My heart sank a little.

"Could I speak to Dr. Wilson, please? It's urgent. Tell him it's . . . it's Chappie Jones." There was a silence, a click, and then that soft, gentle, unforgettable voice, like steel in a velvet wrapper.

"Chappie, old friend. What can I do for you?"

"Pepper! Thank the lord. I feel better just for hearing you. Look, this is a liberty on my part, I know, but I'm up to my ears in the very worst kind of trouble, and you're just about the only one who can help me."

"Go on."

"There has been a particularly nasty murder, in the office above mine. A Madame Tara, dabbling in clairvoyance, fortune-telling and the like. The law is here, and they are pointing a finger at me. There isn't anywhere else for them to point, at the moment."

"How can I help?" he asked, and it warmed me. Not a word as to whether I was innocent or guilty. No doubting. Just 'How can I help.'

"Well, the astrology and stuff is harmless naturally. I've seen the room. But, in one corner, there's a wall-altar, with a pentacle, black candles and a talking-glass, and the remains of incense . . . the genuine kind."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Yes. On the body was found a Solomonic seal."

"Ah! You don't know which one, I suppose? No? Never mind. Where are you, now?" I told him the rest of it adding that Ferguson was watching, and listening, which he was avidly.

"Can you come round to me?" that gentle voice asked.

"And bring the seal, would you? I would rather not enter that atmosphere, just now. Bring the Inspector, if he won't let you come alone. Tell him you're both invited to lunch, if it will help."

It was a shrewd guess, and it did help. Ferguson was grudging, but obviously intrigued by the idea of lunching with the famous Dr. Wilson. To tell the truth, so was I. As I explained to the Inspector, I had known K. N. Wilson quite a long time. We were shipmates together, once, he as medical officer, a surgeon lieutenant, and myself as a junior engineer.

We had kept in touch, at intervals, but all our meetings had been at his club. He was as keen on the private life as I was, and, though I knew his home well, and had passed it often enough, I had never presumed to call.

It took the Inspector a minute or two to pass on his instructions to his sergeant, then we walked Ragnar Road to the end, caught a bus, and rode in silence to the request-stop, half-way up Putney Hill. There we crossed the road. It was an old, weatherbeaten, retiring house. The outside could have done with a coat of paint, and the shrubbery needed shearing. But that was forgotten when the door opened to reveal a giant of a man, fully six feet six, in a long, yellow-brown, cotton robe which reached to his ankles.

"Mr. Jones?" he asked, in that rich rolling voice I had heard on the phone.

"Yes," I said, "and this is Chief Inspector Ferguson." He bowed, slightly, with the whitest, most urbane smile imaginable. Only faintly tinged with bronze, his face was as smooth and calm as a carving. An Egyptian, beyond doubt, and too high-class to be a servant in any ordinary sense of the word.

"This way, please," he said, and we followed his soft, sandal-footed stride, through a tiled hall into a huge room, bright with long windows, and gay with sprays of willow, arranged in low bronze pots. The green carpet was thick, the heavy, leather-bound chairs inviting, the settee a massive piece, glowing with the patina of loving care. It was a lived-in, friendly welcoming room, for all the size of it. I felt at home, and I saw by Ferguson's face that he felt the warmth, too. Then the far door opened, and K. N. Wilson came in.

In words, that was all he did, yet somehow the room was at once full of his presence. He came forward, with a quiet smile.

"Thank you, Uncle Hassim," he said, in that oddly gentle voice, as if he was speaking to someone close by, yet which made every word quite clear. "And Chappie, old friend. Good to see you again."

"Good of you to have me," I replied. "I'm only sorry that I bring a load of trouble with me. Not meaning Chief Inspector Ferguson, of course. Inspector, this is Dr. K. N. Wilson."

"Heard of you," Ferguson said, putting out his hand. Wilson, still smiling, made an odd gesture, and evaded the touch.

"Inspector, I love you. Please forgive that odd greeting, and the seeming discourtesy. I will explain, in due course. I'd rather not touch you. Not just yet." He indicated the door by which he had just entered. "Won't you come through? Lunch is waiting."

Such was the quiet assurance of his manner that, within moments, we were seated at a long table in this smaller and quite functional room, helping ourselves from a great salad bowl in the centre as if we were old friends. Wilson took the head of the table, putting the Inspector on his right, me on his left, and Hassim to the left of me. There was one more place set, and I wondered, for a moment, who was yet to come. Then Wilson said, with a faint chuckle.

"Some people object to talking 'shop,' especially at meal-times. I hope you're not one, Inspector, because I'd like to hear your version of this business, now. I'll hear Chappie later. Would you mind?" Ferguson was willing, but very cautious. He recited the bare bones of the case. I took the opportunity to study my old friend.

In the many months since I had last seen him, he had changed not at all. I applied myself, again, to the fascinating but hopeless task of trying to pinpoint just what it was about him that gave him such a presence. Item by item, there was nothing remarkable about him. His thick shock of jet black hair seemed always on the point of falling across his eyes . . . eyes of a curiously pale blue, with a trick of seeming to see right through you. His lean face was as pale as ever, with a dusting of freckles. His nose too thin, and sharp, with sensitive, flaring nostrils. His mouth, chin and jaw too strong for real balance. One had the sense of implacable purpose, there.

And he was immensely strong. This I knew from experience, because there was nothing bulky about him. His dark grey suit showed a generous breadth of shoulder, but that was all. Nor was he tall. As he sat, now listening, his hands were his only remarkable feature. Long, supple, with a seeming life of their own, they were surgeon's hands. Yet there was that indefinable something, greater than the sum of the parts, which caught at you. Perhaps it was the cool calm, the air of sure confidence. I don't know. When Ferguson had done, Wilson sat quite still, his eyes on his plate.

"I'm no detective," he said, at last, "but it strikes me that anyone could have done this. There is nothing to tie it in with Chappie, except that he was there, in the building." He raised his to me. "Tell me, again, about the pentacle, and the glass, and the incense." I told him, blessing the fate that had given me a first-class memory.

"No incscription on the pentacle?"

"Nothing at all. It was quite plain."

"That was unwise," rumbled Hassim, from my side. "An open sign is as bad as an open cage. The woman was foolish."

"And she died," Wilson said, softly. "Yes. May I see the seal, now?"

"You're not asking me to take all this twaddle seriously, are you?" The Inspector groped in his pocket as he spoke, and produced the envelope. "Yon old woman was no' throttled by a spirit, that I'll gamble. Still, here it is," and he held it out. To his astonishment, and mine, Wilson took a pair of tweezers from his pocket, and probed with them into the envelope, as Ferguson held it. The Inspector stared at him.

"You won't spoil any marks, if that's what you're feared of," he remarked, touchily. "We've thought of that, already."

Wilson took no notice of him, at all. With great care he spread the paper on the table cloth. I saw his face go cold and grim. Then he nipped the edge, and held it up so that we could see.

"Hassim," he said, softly. "I think you'll recognise this chap?"

"Belial!" that big voice was hushed. "A powerful one!"

"Yes. Not nice, at all. The person playing with this might not know the full significance . . . and yet, I doubt it. It's too well drawn."

"See here!" Ferguson was irritated. "This mumbo-jumbo is getting us nowhere. Can you tell me who might have sent it? That's what I want to know."

"Would you touch a naked wire to see if there was a voltage on it? And supposing you did, and survived, would that tell you where it was being generated?"

"Och! The devil wi' all this fine talk. I've handled it. I'm still here to testify."

"I handled it, too," I put in, quickly, "and it gave me a turn, I can tell you." Wilson looked at me, and smiled, sympathetically.

"Yes, of course it would," he said. "You're a sensitive, in your own way, you know. I'm sorry, Inspector. There are about six, possibly seven, black adepts known to me. Any one of them might be responsible for this. Or it might be some reckless amateur. I don't know. With a lot of trouble, I might be able to detect the mind behind this, but I must refuse. I do not wish to become involved." This was a stunner, for me. In a dazed silence I watched him fold the piece of paper again, with his tweezers. I got to my feet, clumsily.

"Pepper . . . I've known you a long time . . ." I fumbled for words ". . . long enough to know that you always have a reason for what you do. I can't argue. But I was counting on you. If you can't do anything . . . well . . . I don't know . . ." He sat quite still, yet I could sense the struggle that was going on within him. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ferguson toss the empty envelope on to the cloth, and lean back. I think Wilson saw it, too, and it couldn't have helped him any. But the hand holding the tweezers never as much as trembled.

"I'm sorry, Chappie, but you really don't know how much you're asking. And not just of me. Others are involved. I am not alone. I am not a professional in magic. I know . . . more than most, perhaps. Enough to know the danger. He who calls Belial must pay the cost." He moved, suddenly and with finality, to take up the envelope. And he dropped it again, hurriedly. I think we all saw the shock he had felt. He shut his eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. Then he sat back, and smiled, faintly.

"Sit down again, Chappie," he said, softly. "Your prayers have been answered. In part, at least."

"I was praying," I admitted, sagging back into my seat. "But how . . .?"

"You have powers you don't appreciate, my friend. Inspector, you want to know who murdered the old lady, don't you?"

"I do . . . and I'd like to know who sent you that, too." He was bristling, again. "I'm thinking they're no' the same."

"Yes. You're very shrewd. Still, a compromise, if you will allow. The man who delivered this envelope, who killed Madame Tara, was tall, and strong, and dark-skinned, a West-Indian I'd say . . . and he wore a uniform, of coarse, dark material . . ."

"By jings!" the crockery danced as Ferguson thumped the table. "The postman! I'm a fool not to have seen that for myself. Can I use your phone? I'll have that checked, right away." He went out, almost running, with Hassim, and my feelings were a wild disorder of excitement and relief at the sudden change in my fortunes. I turned to thank Wilson, and saw that the fifth member of the little lunch party had arrived.

She stood by the door leading from the garden. Beyond her I could see a cool gleam of greenery, bright with blooms. In her plump, smooth arms was a bunch of hyacinth, their vivid blue startling against the silver-grey of her dress. That blue was put to shame by the hue of her steady eyes, looking at me. And there all coherent words deserted me. I groped with impressions of slimness that was all soft curves, of sheathing silver-grey that looked simple, yet must have been the result of great skill and craft, of skin like satin with a touch of gold, of rosy lips, and hair like a black mist shot with blue, and the deep, deep blue of her steady eyes . . . and I was on my feet, clumsily, staring like a fool.

"Yalna, my dear," Wilson had risen, too. "We did not wait for you. May I introduce Chappie Jones. You've heard me speak of him. Chappie, my niece, Yalna." I went forward to take the hand she offered, mumbling something. Her fingers were cool and firm, and her cheeks glowed, slightly, at my ill-mannered stare.

"Kenneth has told me of you, Mr. Jones," she said, and a dimple came and went, by her lovely mouth, completing my ruination. "He says you are a poet."

"It is a claim I shall never be able to make again," I sighed. "The sight of you would evoke rhapsodies from a stone . . . yet I am well-nigh speechless."

"I don't know," she laughed. "That wasn't such a bad effort. Won't you please carry on. I'll just put these in water, while they're fresh." I groped back to my seat, watching her. She got as far as the door, and stopped.

"There's something foul in this room," she said. "Something evil."

"That's right," Wilson said, gently. "Chappie brought it with him."

"It's nothing to do with him, Ken. He's clean. I touched him." Then she was gone, leaving me wondering. Wilson saw my look, and smiled.

"Yalna is our pure vessel," he said, and Ferguson came back before I could ask him what that meant. Then Yalna returned, to sit opposite me. Introductions were made. Ferguson was puzzled about something.

"See here," he burst out, at last. "Am I supposed to believe that you could see all that about a postman just by touching yon letter?"

"I wouldn't ask you to believe anything. If you wish, I can *show* you?" There was a challenge in that soft voice. Ferguson got it, and he was uneasy.

"Put up, or shut up, eh? All right, you show me, then!"

"Very well, but there's no hurry. Finish your coffee. It is worthy of respect, I think. Hassim is very good with such things." It was an understatement, if anything. Yet it nagged at my mind that Hassim, who was responsible for the meal, was obviously not a servant, but on equal terms with us all. The Inspector obviously thought along the same lines, and asked the obvious questions.

"We work together," Wilson explained, "on those borderlands of knowledge where others do not care to go, where orthodox science hangs back, where there are no guide books, and much danger. We may seem a strange association, but the explanation is a simple one. My elder brother, Ronald, married a very high-born Egyptian lady. If the old traditions still held I suppose you could have called her a Princess . . . or a priestess. Alas, Ronald and Feriza are no longer with us. Yalna, their only child, is my ward. Hassim, here, is Feriza's brother, and my brother, and as much entitled to the address 'Doctor' as I am . . ."

"Spare my humble face, brother," Hassim boomed. "Say no more of titles. There can be but one master in this house."

"And there you are," Wilson smiled. "I have to live up to that. It is not always easy, but I try."

"And why does Jones, here, call you 'Pepper'?"

"Oh, that!" Wilson laughed. "A relic of service days. Some wit saw the possibilities in my initials. My names are Kenneth Night, you see, and Cayenne is a kind of pepper. It stuck, I'm afraid."

"Cayenne is also 'hot stuff'" I put in, firmly. "That's why it stuck. You were pretty much of a legend, as I recall it, with anyone who had ever known you."

"You're very kind," he shrugged. "Come, Inspector, for the showing." We went after him, upstairs and into a long low-ceilinged room that was divided into thirds. By the door where we came in it was carpeted in black, and there was a low table, chairs and bookshelves on three walls. The middle third was given over to two low and massive benches, and a collection of apparatus that would have brought a glow to the eyes of an electronics engineer. The far third was starkly white, on walls, ceiling and floor, and walled off by a series of thick, yet clear panels, of heavy plastic. Ferguson gaped. It didn't make very much sense to me, either.

"Hassim, the Lemegeton, I think," Wilson said, briskly, and while the big Egyptian drew a huge volume from the shelf, he got out a pair of surgical gloves, wriggled them on, took the envelope from Ferguson, and laid the offending diagram against the one in the book.

"It's the same, sure enough," the Inspector commented, craning over his shoulder. He began to read the crabbed script in the book. "Belial, the sixty-eighth spirit, is a mighty King, next after Lucifer . . ." and I could see his lips moving as he went on in silence. Then he looked up. "I suppose there are still people who believe this stuff?"

"But not you, eh, Ferguson?"

"Nay, I didna' say that. I'm a Scot. I've seen people who were 'fey.' But I'm a policeman, forbye. I catch people, not spirits."

"A very sane attitude. Now, please observe, carefully." Wilson laid a device on the table. It was, quite simply, a box, black and oblong. On its surface, at one end, was a white square of plastic. In the middle, a red bulb lit up as he connected a cord and moved a switch. At the other end, matching the plastic, was a sheet of metal, shiny gleaming.

"I take the envelope, so, and lay it on the plastic." He did that, with gloved fingers. "Not the seal, though. I shall put that in a safe place, for the moment. Now, I must explain that this device is nothing more than an amplifier. Because I have trained myself to be sensitive to such things, I was able to detect what I can only call an impressed pattern of thought-impulses, on that envelope. With this machine I hope to be able to amplify them to the degree that you, too, will be able to sense them. I must ask you to place your hand on this plate."

Ferguson hesitated, possibly from a fear of appearing foolish. For my part I was unashamedly scared of the whole thing. Yet I felt an obligation to show confidence in my friend. With a great pretence of calmness, I laid my hand on the plate. And nothing happened. I felt foolish. I heard the Inspector give a grunt, and then his hand went alongside mine, on the other side of the table.

"It will help if you close your eyes," Wilson said, quietly. "I am beginning the amplification, now!"

With my eyes shut, I could feel that dread again. How much of it was sheer suggestion, I don't know, but it was real enough, to me. Then it gave way to a purposeful, growing intent. Darkness. Tension. A repeated, rhythmic, see-saw motion. I climbed stairs, with a grim sense of purpose. It swelled and grew in me. There was a fire in my finger-tips, and the cords of my arms were knotting, eagerly, preparing . . . and I could see . . . dimly . . .

Suddenly it was all gone. I opened my eyes, to find that Hassim had taken hold of my coat-cleeve, to pull my fingers away from the plate. I think I would have fallen had it not been for Hassim's strong arm. Wilson glanced at me, shook his head when I would have spoken, and returned his attention to Ferguson. The inspector was white as death, his face convulsed in a silent snarl of effort, his sandy hair literally on end.

"Awa' wi' ye!" he said, suddenly, in a high, strangled voice, and snatched his hand from the plate. He went back two paces and stood, gasping for breath, staring at us. "Man . . ." he said, at last. "That's a devil of a toy ye have there. Ay, but . . ." and he looked at me, now. "How can I tell that maybe that influence, whatever it was, didna come from him? His hand was by mine, on the plate."

"Not so, Inspector," Hassim rumbled. "Mr. Jones broke the contact long before you did, sir. Whatever you felt came from the paper."

"Ay!" Ferguson sighed, "I reckon it did, at that. I wouldn't claim to understand just how, but I'll gamble I'll know yon man, if ever I meet him. I could 'feel' him. And I could feel something else, too!"

"Yes," Wilson said, almost sadly. "You are, as you've reminded us, an officer of the law. You must be guided by your duty. Come, let us go downstairs. We've done enough, here."

Back in the lounge again, Hassim took one chair, Ferguson the other, and Yalna sat by me, on the settee. Wilson set himself in the centre, with his back to the cold fireplace.

"Now, Inspector," he said. "I think I know what is on your mind, but let's have it, in your own words."

"Verra well. It's a simple enough thing. That man, the killer, was no' responsible. Och, he did it, sure enough, and we'll catch him, and he'll answer for it. That's the law. But he was only the instrument of some other body. Did *you* feel that, Jones?"

"I did, yes. The sense of being directed was very strong. I felt like a puppet, or a slave, as you might say."

"That's it. A slave. Now, I couldna bring that into a court . . ."

"Nor could any of us support you, if you tried," Wilson interrupted, firmly. Ferguson looked grim, but that firm, yet soft voice would not be shaken. "Allow me to explain what you would be asking of me, of us. You have used the word 'twaddle.' You have spoken with complete contempt as to what 'people will believe.' That is your privilege. I think you may be not quite so sure, now, that it is 'twaddle' but I am quite sure that you do not know what it is, for all that. I can tell you. I can tell you what I know to be fact." He closed those strange, penetrating eyes of his for a moment, in thought. I was reminded, irresistibly, of a dynamo that seems quite still, yet quivers with energy.

"The powers we are meddling with are blind. A thought-pattern can channel them, yet they are not 'thought,' nor do they think. Electricity, or gravity . . . they do not respect wishes, or hopes, or piety. Gravity will pull down a weight, or crack a skull. Electricity will light a lamp, or burn a man to death. It is the arrangement, the pattern, which matters. I love you, Inspector, as I love all people. Because I must. Because . . ." he hesitated, and smiled. "It is difficult, believe me, to compress years of hard-won knowledge into a few words. Look, if I threw a spear at you, it would wound. But you, if you were skilled, could catch it and throw it back. So, instead, I throw you a blessing. If you throw it back, then am I doubly blessed, for those who live by the sword shall perish by the same. A violent thought lays its originator open to a retaliation . . ."

"But you would defend yourself against an attack, surely?"

"That is legitimate, yes, for I would only be using the evil against its own source. My mind would be clean."

"I think I take your point," Ferguson muttered. "I'll not say I agree with it, mind. But I have my own side to think of. Murder has been done. The real one responsible will get away with it. He might do it again, forbye. And you will not tell me his name?"

"No! At this moment, in fact, I do not know it, nor can I know it, not without becoming involved. That I must not do. You must not ask it."

"Look, Pepper!" I was on my feet again, awkwardly. "I have a lot to be grateful for, and no cause at all to butt in, but there is such a thing as justice. I was in a very sticky situation. But for you, I'd still be in it. I may not be quite clear of it yet, in fact. And this could happen again. I could never face my conscience if I thought some other poor devil was going to be trapped the way I was . . . and I hadn't done anything to help. Surely we've got to do *something*?"

"You, too?" he frowned. "You have a greater call on me than anyone. I owe you my life . . ."

"You can forget that," I told him, quickly. "That was chance good luck, and my natural strength. It could have been anyone else. But this isn't like that, at all. This is something only you can do."

"Such faith is touching. But I am only a beginner. This adept, by my feelings, is a great one. I am not being falsely modest, Chappie. I know enough to realise that I dare not interfere. I dare not!" As his quiet voice died, there was a distant ring, and Hassim went to answer it. Back in a moment, he called to Ferguson, and the Inspector hurried out. I sat down again, feeling somehow ashamed that I had prodded Wilson into that reminder that I had saved his life, once. The silence grew, and thickened. Ferguson came back, stoney-faced.

"Well!" he said. "We found the postman, but we were too late. It seems he went straight home to his lodgings and cut his own throat. Him, all right. There was a rip in his jacket to match the piece of stuff we found."

"And the girl . . . the secretary?" Wilson was suddenly intent.

"You might well ask. She's dead, too. Strangled herself with the bedsheet, whiles the nurse's back was turned. I'll ha'

words wi' Stephens over that. I warned him to stick to her. But what made you ask about the girl?"

"Logic. Evil, but logic. This changes things a bit." Wilson was frowning, now, his eyes hooded in thought. "Our black enemy is cleaning up his traces, wiping out anything which may link up with him. Anything, or anyone. And you are a link, Chappie. You were there!" He said it quietly enough, but it sent a chill down my backbone, and I am not ashamed to admit it. He snapped his fingers, suddenly. "Inspector, I am going to take a chance, only because I hope to avert a blow at Chappie, here. I will work with you, if you will work with me."

"And what may that mean?"

"I cannot undertake to destroy this evil man, nor to bring him to your courts of justice. But, with your help, I can break his web . . . his power. At any rate, I can try."

"Just tell me his name, can't you?"

"That I cannot do. If I am successful, you will know it in due course. If I fail, then it will not matter, to you or anyone else. I need your understanding on that. Quickly, man. We have little time!"

I had heard that note in Wilson's voice only once before, when we were split seconds away from a screaming dive-bomb attack, on a wintry night in the Channel. That same knotted feeling inside came back, adding to my chills. I hung on Ferguson's words, anxiously. He twisted his face horribly, then shrugged.

"What do you want from me, then?"

"Access to Madame Tara's files, as quickly as possible." He took Ferguson's assent for granted, and spun on Hassim. "The seal is safe. You know where. You will stay here, with Yalna and prepare. You know what to do. I will take Chappie with me. I dare not let him out of my sight, now. The car . . ." and he hesitated, then, "Inspector, can you handle a Rolls?"

"Never had that experience. Sorry."

"Hmm! And you don't drive, either, do you, Chappie?" he mused. This much he knew, of old. I have a constitutional dislike for making spur-of-the-moment decisions on anything though other people have been known to call it 'slow on the uptake.' He bit his lip. "Very well. I shall drive, but I warn you, Inspector, I like to go fast . . . and the devil is at my heels

this time, with a vengeance. Come, I'll explain in the car." He took a quick step, and stopped, with another snap of his fingers. "No, not yet. I'm rushing this, and getting careless, and that would be fatal. You two . . ." he shot a blazing look at Ferguson and myself. ". . . you have seen that seal. The pattern, with all its potency, is in your minds. I can do something about that, at least. Come, through here . . ." and we followed him into that dining room again, where he took a glass, filled it with water from a carafe, clasped his hands round it, and gazed, fixedly, at it, for several strained seconds. Then he handed it to me.

"Drink," he said. "It will clear you." I took the glass. Mumbo-jumbo, if you like, but I drank, willingly. It was cold, and just water, but it tingled as it went down, and I felt a glow, as if my dread had rolled away. If that was just my imagination, then I must say that it worked also on Ferguson. I could tell by his reluctant face, and his startled look, afterwards

"Now then," Wilson said, and we were off. Up until that moment, like the Inspector, I had never had the privilege of riding in a Rolls. I read it, somewhere, that 'a Rolls is a Rolls; all the others are cars.' I know, now, what was meant. Not that I had much inclination to appreciate the smooth surge of it, or the relentless way it seemed to beetle through the traffic. Fortunately, it was a slack time, and the Embankment was reasonably clear, for Wilson pushed it along as if the devil was literally on his tail. And he talked, in quick bursts.

"Many kinds of power," he said. "Some seek dominion over matter. Others, more vile, control men, and minds, because it is simpler. Publicity men and advertisers, politicians and entertainers . . . they know something of the art. In their hands, it is grey. Unsavoury, but so common as to be ignored. But this . . . enemy of ours, is a different status of person altogether . . . his control is malignant, and, as you have seen, in some cases, absolute. And people are his power. I imagine he was using Madame Tara as a front, as a means of making contact with the bigger fish . . . with business men, financiers, speculators . . ."

"Och, come now," Ferguson protested. "Business men, and magic?"

"Why not? Money is the greatest magnet in the world, even for a magician. If he can contact those who manipulate

the markets . . . say a dozen influential men . . . he could make or break financial empires . . .”

“Wi’ Madame Tara? That pair fool body?”

“She need not have known anything about it. In fact, you might well consider that she had become suspicious, or made her own superstitious modifications to some of his explicit instructions. Accuracy is vital, you know. She did something wrong, at any rate, and he eliminated her, using a tool. That is what I am counting on . . . that his power is all in his minions. Give me a list of those, and I can smash his web. Cut down his influence. That is all I can do, but I must do it quickly, before his ‘cleaning-up’ campaign reaches Chappie, here.”

“You think he’ll go for me, then?”

“Not you, as a person, no. But he will strike, through the seal, at anyone sensitive enough to have detected its real purpose. Not you, Inspector, I hope. But I cleansed you, just in case.”

“Thanks!” Ferguson said, shortly. “Ah, we’re just about home. You’ll let me handle this, now. Just follow me.”

“Of course!” Wilson shut off the engine. “But quickly, quickly!” So brisk was our walk that all I saw of the inside of Scotland Yard may be summed in the phrase . . . corridors, doors and voices, all busy. Then I saw a familiar face, over a raincoat. Apparently it was Sergeant Smith’s constant shield and protection. He was manfully ploughing his way through a mountain of letters, of all sizes and colours of notepaper, and looked up in relief as we came in on him. Within moments we had found the late Madame’s files, and Wilson, with a grimace, set to work.

“I dread this,” he confessed, softly, “but this is what I have trained myself to do. I shall not need to read any of them; a touch will tell me.” I saw him put out a hand to the stack of file cards, hesitate, and then begin to go through them rapidly. I saw Sergeant Smith’s raised eyebrows directed at Ferguson, and the Inspector’s non-committal shrug. There was nothing I could do to help, so I stood back, to look round the stringently bare room. Then, for what reason I do not know, I found my attention coming back to the sergeant. Ferguson had gone out, silently, and Smith hitched his hip onto the edge of the long table, so that he was almost looking over Wilson’s shoulder.

I wondered whether it might not be an idea to attract him away in case he might be disturbing some concentration, and was about to step up and nudge him, when I saw him take up a long, slim paper-knife. It had been half-hidden among the scatter of correspondence. The handle went into his hand as if it belonged there, as if his hands were moving of themselves. I snatched a glance at his face, and it was dead white, set into a rigid stillness, with staring, glassy eyes . . . and I went for him. There was no question in my mind that he was going to use that slim blade on my friend, and I grabbed at him with that intent, to stop him. And I almost muffed it, for, quick as a flash, he had twisted his wrist, clasped one hand in the other, and was plunging the steel straight at his own chest. He had me on the wrong foot and at a bad angle, but I got a wrist in either hand, and was just able to hold him. I am a powerful man, physically but he had the determination of the insane.

It had all happened in a matter of moments, and in utter silence. Now he was gasping, strained back across the table, his eyes still on that blade, tugging and jerking, desperately trying to stab himself. Even as I shuffled, to get my balance, so that I could get a knee on his chest, and some leverage to break his grip, I found time to wonder at the dread power that could drive a man to end himself, could master him beyond his own senses. Then I got my knee where I wanted it, and could squeeze and pull back at the same time. I could feel the bones grate in his wrists, but I dared not let go, now. Smith began to groan, deep back in his throat, like an animal, and flecks of foam showed at the corners of his grinning mouth. Dimly, out on the fringe of my attention, I heard a door click, and a quick step, and then an outraged voice.

"What the blazes are ye doing, the pair o' ye?" That was Ferguson, but I couldn't spare the breath to answer his silly question, for Smith had begun to heave and jerk.

"Stop it, you fool," I muttered. "You'll break your back . . ." and a slim hand came over my wrists, to take the paper-knife, and flip it away. Then I heard Wilson's voice, close to my ear, and it crackled out a string of syllables that were gibberish to me. Gibberish or no, they shocked Smith, or whatever foul thing it was that had taken possession of him. He gave one great wrenching spasm, and then was limp, his eyes turned up and his face flaccid.

"Ferguson, get a doctor in here, quickly. Chappie, lay him out on the floor," Wilson went down on his knees as I laid

Smith out, and let go his wrists. I could see the red weals on his skin where I'd gripped him, and my own forearms ached as I flexed my fingers. I stood up. Suddenly, the room was full of people. A man with a red face and a harrassed manner went down on his knees alongside Wilson, felt quickly here and there, and tutted. Ferguson took my arm.

"Tried to do himself in," I said, in response to his look. "With the paper-knife. I was just in time to stop him."

"Smithy . . . a suicide? Man, that wants some believing!"

"True, nevertheless," Wilson looked up, shook his head, meaningly, at the Inspector, and got to his feet. "Call it a brainstorm . . . temporary derangement . . . something like that . . ."

"Oh! Ay . . . I see what you mean." Ferguson caught the hint. But the red-faced man didn't. When he straightened up again, his face was redder than ever.

"Brainstorm? Rubbish!" he snorted. "A layman's term. Meaningless nonsense. The man's been attacked and stunned." Wilson turned away, suddenly, and Ferguson moved forward. He made placating noises at the doctor, tinging them with a strong hint for privacy. Two uniformed men who were hovering gave a hand to move the sergeant out of the room.

"Noo!" Ferguson snapped, as soon as we were decently alone again. "I'll have an explanation of you, if you don't mind."

"Thank you for preserving my name and reputation, Inspector," Wilson said, softly. "But I couldn't have told him the truth. He would have liked that even less. Sergeant Smith saw the seal . . . handled it . . .?"

"That's right. Took it off the body and brought it to me."

"Yes. I had not known that. I had assumed that only you and Chappie had handled it. Still, we were in time, thanks to Chappie's speed and strength. You can move quickly, when you've a mind to . . ."

"It wasn't that, Pepper. For some reason, I was watching him all the time. It was obvious he was . . . queer in the head, as soon as he touched the knife."

"Are you trying to tell me that Smithy was got at, made to suicide himself, just because he had handled yon slip of paper?"

"Just that. Chappie, will you explain. You remember what I told you, once about the triangle? I must get all these

records, and we haven't much time. Especially now. If our enemy is half as adept as I think, the failure with Smith will warn him that he's up against opposition. I dare not be caught unprepared." He went back to the file box, leaving me to explain the mechanics of mental geometry to a sceptical and hard-headed Scot. Fortunately, as I have said, I was given a first-class memory. I felt in my pocket, got out three pennies.

"Please watch, Inspector," I said. "I'm not much good at explaining, but may be able to show you," and I tossed the three pennies at random on the grey carpet. "There," I said. "What do you see?"

"Threepence," he said, coldly. "Three pennies."

"And what else . . . anything else strike you?"

"A triangular shape. A triangle. I heard *him* say that."

"I know you did. But where is the triangle?"

"Och, man . . . it's there . . ." and he began to point, and caught himself.

"Where?" I prompted, and he grunted and shifted his feet. Before he could argue, I seized the advantage. "There isn't any triangle, anywhere, except in your thoughts, is there? It sounds trivial, but it's true. You recognise a shape, a pattern, even when it's not actually there, because that pattern is a part of your thought processes, a part of you that you're hardly conscious of. A blind adult, suddenly able to see, cannot 'see' shapes like that, because the recognition patterns haven't been acquired. In other words, you actually have a basic triangle 'shape' and 'value,' in your thoughts. It's there, for reference when you need it. And you don't need to 'think' about it, consciously."

"All right," he said, testily. "But what are you getting at?"

"Just this," Wilson came across, now, with a bundle of file-cards in his hands. "You have seen that seal. Under hypnosis you could be made to recall it, exactly. It is there, in what we call your 'mind,' for want of a better word. And just as a triangle is rigid, because of its shape, because that is the way it is; so that seal pattern has certain powers, because of the way it is . . . and those powers can be used, by someone else, if that person knows how . . . just as the TV programme will find your receiver, infallibly, although the broadcaster may not know the set exists. But please accept it, Inspector. Never mind whether you believe it or not. That, unhappily, makes little difference to its working. Come, we have very little time . . ."

The drive-back, furious and corner-cutting, went in silence. I could see by Ferguson's face that he was unconvinced. He had my sympathy. I have had some slight encounters with the powers of the mind, but even I was shocked to know that a man could be made to take his own life. Yet, when I came to think it out, the idea is inherent in our legal system, which prefers to believe that a man will kill himself only 'when the balance of his mind is disturbed.' And who is to say what it was which disturbed it? Indoors, Wilson became a dynamo of energy.

"We leave any meals until afterwards," he said. "Hassim, Yalna . . . we must prepare for extremes. I shall set up my shielding apparatus. It was never meant for this, God knows, but it will have to serve. We are too weak to despise any aids. You know what to do. Now . . ." and he swung on us ". . . you two will remain here, in the lounge, until we are ready . . ."

"Just a minute, Pepper," I muttered. "I don't care for this. I mean, not if Miss Yalna is to be involved. Can't you leave her out?" He smiled at me, and then at her. She had paused at the foot of the stairs. Her blue eyes shone.

"You're very kind," she said, "but this is for you, as much as anyone."

"I know that, hang it. That's why I feel guilty. I couldn't face my soul if anything happened to you, on my account. Anything, rather than that."

"Thank you," she said, softly, and then she turned and went upstairs. I looked appealingly at Wilson. He shook his head.

"We're all in this, Chappie. That's the way we are. Now, as I was saying, you stay here. You see this lamp, on the stair. I usually light it to let anyone know that I'm in my lab, and not to be disturbed. I'll use it as a signal. When you see it light up, you can come upstairs. Both of you. And please do not be surprised at anything you may see, up there."

I went back to the settee, unhappily. The business with Smith had shaken me considerably. I had no stomach for getting that lovely girl mixed up in anything quite so foul. As I groped for a cigarette, Ferguson planted himself by me.

"A queer business, this, altogether," he said. "I'll no' be able to put any of it into a report. It would cost me my job." He grunted something I couldn't catch, then went on. "What was all that about Wilson owing his life to you?"

"Nothing much," I told him. "Back in war-time. Must have happened to a thousand people, but Pepper chooses to count it as important. We were sloshing about the North Sea, on convoy. Middle of February and cold as sin. Just on dusk, the German's favourite striking time. One of the convoy caught a packet. Just in front of us, luckily, so we were right on the spot to fish the survivors out of the water. Pepper and I were both on deck, giving a hand. It was everybody in, under those circumstances, because we couldn't stay stopped in one place very long. A sub, it was, that had got the merchantman, and the sea was full of oil and icy-cold lascars. We'd just got the last possible one up over the side, when a damn great Heinkel roared down out of the dark and passed a stick of bombs right across us. We weren't hit, but the splash knocked Pepper over the side, and I heard the crack as his head hit the boom.

"I didn't stop to think . . . one of the few times I've ever done anything like that . . . I just knew that he'd be unconscious, so I went straight over, after him. Honestly, if I had stopped, knowing how blasted cold that water was, I doubt if I'd have gone. Luckily, fate has given me a little more than the usual in muscle and health. I was able to collar him, and catch on to the ladder. And that's all. But I shall never forget that water. I hope I'm never as cold as that, again," and I shivered, at the memory. Ferguson shivered, too.

"It might be just my imagination," he said, "but I seem to feel a draught," and he got up, to begin wandering idly round the big room. And it was not his imagination, or mine. It was cold, and getting colder. As I sat, I could feel it creep up my legs, like an icy flood. I got up, shivering.

"Ferguson!" I was shocked at the way my voice seemed to lose itself. "Ferguson! Something's happening . . ." I saw him turn, and all at once he seemed remote . . . miles away. He stepped forward, like a mannikin.

"Jones . . ." and his voice was a shrill piping, faint and far off, "what's happening? I can hardly see you . . ." and the room was growing dark, not as by a failing light, but as if it was filling with a swirling grey fog. I was shivering so violently now that I could scarcely stand. All I could see was dim haze, and then the shifting, wavering outlines of a great dark something.

I tried to be calm, to dig back into memory, to recall something from the weird and fascinating conversations Pepper and I used to have, years ago, in the tiny, antiseptic-smelling sick-bay of that little ship, wallowing in the grasp of the North Sea. Long ago, yet a word did come back. One word.

"Adonai!" I said, choking for breath, and again "Adonai!" and the grey mist rolled back a little. Just a little. More grudging fragments came back. I drew a mental picture of a triangle on the floor at my feet. I commanded it to glow electric blue. I swathed myself in a cloak of blazing blue, and the effort made me giddy . . . but the haze rolled back. The room came back into dim sight. I could see Ferguson, still distant, his face contorted with effort, struggling.

"Jones! What the devil's happening? I canna move!" I could spare no breath to tell him, even had I known. It was all I could do to keep that mental blue shield alive . . . and the mist grew again, closing in. I tried to recall more, but nothing would come. Then suddenly, a slim white goblin danced in front of me, radiant in crackling fire, and a great voice rolled out the words of power.

"ELOHIM . . . GEBURAH . . . TETRAGRAMMATON . . . TETRAGRAMMATON . . .!"

I awoke, with a splitting head, to look up into Pepper's face, his blue eyes blazing. Beyond him I could see the walls of the laboratory.

"Thank Heaven I was in time," he said. "A snap attack, and a small win for us. But he will strike again, and in full cry, now that he knows there is a real opposition. I need your help, Chappie. How do you feel?"

"A rotten head." I sat up, "But I'll live, I think. How's the Inspector?" Wilson glanced over his shoulder, and I saw Ferguson stretched out on a couch, and breathing like a man newly returned from drowning.

"It will pass," he said. "Come. I am sorry to press you, Chappie, but we have so little time. I dare not be caught unguarded again." I got up and followed him, noticing that he was naked but for a perfectly white loin-cloth. He led me to a bench, and a panel of instruments.

"We are but amateurs," he said, urgently. "And we are against a person of power. You have felt it. I needn't stress that. This apparatus was designed to augment our feeble

strengths. It will have to serve now, for something much more. Now . . ." he moved a switch and a fat green spark filled a tube three inches long. "That indicates that the field is there, helping us. It *must* be kept unbroken. It will be our shield and strength. As we call on it, it will thin down. You will augment it with these controls. This ten-fold, this one-hundred-fold, this one a thousand times. Use them in that order, as needed. You understand?"

I sat myself before the dials, and repeated his instructions back to him, carefully.

"Good man," he said. "Just one more thing. Keep the spark strong, but do not let it overload, or the circuit may burn out. Now, give me a moment to get inside the panels, and then switch on, and Chappie . . . you have our lives in your hands. That power must not fail!" With that he was away, a grey shape in the gloom, through the litter, to those clear plastic walls, and inside. I moved the switch, the green spark glowed, and I heard, faintly, a drone of power.

But that bright-lit arena drew my eyes like the fascination of a snake. There, under the cruel glare of a single centre light, was a spindly tripod of silver, knee-high, topped by a plate of glass bearing a pile of documents. On the top of the pile, the dreadful seal. I could see its black scrawl from where I was. Beyond the tripod, facing me, was Yalna . . . but a Yalna transformed. Jewels blazed in her hair and the strange head-dress she wore. On her forehead a gold spot, and gilded her eyelids. A long sash of cloth of gold, circling her slim neck, fell to cover her bosom, and was gathered into a single down-hanging pillar by the golden snake which girdled her waist. Gold bands at her wrists and ankles were set with glittering green emeralds. Her skin, like ivory, glowed in the light. She stood absolutely still.

On her right, Hassim. On her left, now, Wilson. The three points of the triangle, around the tripod. Hassim, like Wilson, wore only a loin-cloth, but of golden cloth to match the bronze of his herculean frame. By him, Wilson looked a stripling, yet, even here, power radiated from him. Then I recalled my task, and looked at the spark. It had grown thin. Anxiously, I wound the first dial, and it grew fat again. I snatched a glance. They were quite still, like images.

The spark began to stretch out again. I wound the dial. I heard that power-drone grow louder, and creep up a half-tone.

"Noo what the hell?" It was Ferguson, at my shoulder.

"Am I mad, or is that real? Man, look at that lassie in there? What are they doing?"

"Don't know, but I wouldn't swap 'em."

"Dressed like that," he muttered, "if you can call a wee bit o' cloth a dress, hanging down in front . . . like a priestess. I was in Egypt, in the war. I've seen the like, on carvings and such."

"She's half-Egyptian," I mumbled, keeping my eye on the spark. "You heard Pepper say so." It grew thin again and I advanced the dial more. The drone grew to a boom, and the floor began to tremble. "I think she's . . . wonderful."

"Ay. That's as may be. But she's 'fey' I'd no' care to have her in my house, I'm thinking!" I wound the first dial as far as it would go, and still the green line was thin.

"I'd love to have her share mine, if I had a house," I muttered, as I slid my fingers to the next dial. "And if I had the nerve to ask her." I wound the dial, and the spark fattened. I risked a look at the silent drama before us.

As I watched, I saw Yalna move, to lift her long arms high, her head back, the jewels at her wrists throwing off a cascade of green fire. And there was a lambent green mist forming around her, shifting and writhing like some effluvium from the Pit. I heard Ferguson groan, and suck in his breath, and my eyes went to the spark. To my horror it was stretched to a thread. I twisted the second dial, the power-noise grew to a howl, but the thread fattened. I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face. I dashed it away with a shaking hand, and the spark began to fade again. I wound the dial, steadily. The howl rose to a scream, shaking the floor violently. The scream climbed higher and hung on the ragged edge of audibility, torturing the ears, but the spark fattened, and was sturdy.

I snatched a glance at the enclosure. The whole space now was thick with oily coils of green mist, squirming and loathsome. Here and there I could catch faint stabs of red fire. Hassim and Wilson were shadowy, unreal shapes. I could not see Yalna at all, only the solidly green column of evil that wrapped her round.

"The puir lassie," Ferguson groaned. "It's no' right that she should be mixed up in this damnable business. She is no' but a child!" Even as I dropped my eyes to that all-important spark, his words had triggered off something in my mind. I advanced that second dial as far as it would go, and had my hand on the third, but another part of my mind cursed the evil

luck that was mine. I was in love . . . and who could blame me? With Yalna. It must have been so from that first glance. But now I knew that it was forbidden. The spark dwindled down to a hair, and I advanced the third dial. The power-sound went out of audible range with a scream, the floor shuddered with a force that gave everything fuzzy edges. And the spark was still feeble. I wound up more, and sighed as it grew strong.

Again I snatched a glance, to see the girl who could never be anything to me, about whom I shouldn't even think in terms of 'love,' for my thoughts might be a corruption, might be dangerous. She was the 'pure vessel,' the virgin channel through whom power can be directed safely. Even a novice like myself knew of that rigid tradition. That fearsome space was an inferno, now, of twisting, writhing force, shot with flame. Of red and black and vivid blue, and the acrid stench of the fiend's game.

The spark shrank, and my hand shook, as I twisted on the dial. It flared up thick; I wound down, quick. This was obviously a trial. Thin, and thick, and thin once more . . . that potent howling shook the floor, grating on the edge of hearing. Tense I juggled, sweating, fearing. Chase the spark, protect it, nurse it. Keep it steady, watch it, curse it. This was evidence, this I knew, of the war of titans, and it grew. Beside me Ferguson groaned and gasped, but my eyes were all for that precious green thread of light. The only thought that I could spare was for that beautiful girl in there, daring and defying Heaven only knew what evil, for my sake. It was a load on my conscience that I would gladly have shed.

Then, as I glared at it, the spark dwindled, and I advanced the power, and it still shrank. More and more I twisted, until it came up hard against its limits. And the spark was still a mere thread, a hair-line. I twisted, stupidly, but there was no more. In the glare-lit arena, the picture had changed. The vile green mist was clotted into a heaving mass over the tripod, like some foul slug-life. The strange three were staring down at it, tensely, rigidly. I could feel the incredible effort that was going into the task of holding it there, the power that was beating down on that monstrosity.

There was a dull sheen of sweat on Hassim's hide, and Wilson's white skin. Yalna, too, although her arms hung limp, was shivering with effort. Her breast rose and fell, and the hanging gold cloth swayed between her feet. There was an

impending sense of stretching, that something must snap . . . any moment now. I shot a despairing glance at the spark and it was almost invisible.

"Oh Yalna . . ." I breathed, ". . . not this. Not you. Take me, instead . . . take me . . ." I was in utter despair, and heedless of what I said. I would have done anything . . . anything . . . to have taken her place.

And even as I surrendered to despair, the green 'thing' shrivelled and fell in on itself, became brown, then black . . . then burst, with a bright, soundless flare of fiery red. In that same split second, Wilson threw his arms high, and in a terrible voice, rolled out the same incomprehensible syllables he had thrown at sergeant Smith . . . and now they curdled my blood just to hear them. And then it was gone and there was nothing but a little pile of charred ash, and a thin thread of smoke, where those documents had been. My hand shook unsteadily on the dials as I wound them back, and back, until the first one was barely off the minimum, until the spark had shrunk to normal.

"Hell!" said Ferguson, in a rag of a voice. "That was awfu'. D'ye think it's a' over, now?"

"I hope so," I whispered, watching the three. They still stood, but relaxed, now, gasping for breath. At last I saw Wilson raise his head, to turn and nod to me, wearily. I switched off the shield, and then I went stumbling to the panel. Yalna came first, slowly, dragging her feet. She looked at me, blankly, as a sleep-walker, and then her eyes lit up.

"You!" she said. "It was you . . ." and she would have fallen had I not held her and gathered her into my arms like a baby. For all her loveliness, she was no sylph, and weighed solidly in my arms, but I cared nothing for that. I felt Wilson at my shoulder, saw his hand on her brow.

"A faint," he said, quietly. "Bring her downstairs, Chappie. She'll be all right in a minute or two."

We were a subdued group, in the lounge. Hassim silently, had put a match to the fire, had conjured up a tray with glasses and a decanter. I laid Yalna on the settee, with a cushion to her head, and I sat by her, anxiously, where the fire's warm light could play on her. Ferguson had slumped into a chair. Wilson stood looking into the flames, his face an enigma.

"I wish I knew," he said, at last, wonderingly. "Up to a point, all was well. We gathered the strands of his power. We cut them from him. We had them, there, concentrated. The

next step was to turn them, direct them back whence they came. But he was too strong for us. He had been warned, you see, by the repulse to the blind attack he made on you, Chappie, and Ferguson. He was ready for us. We just could not turn him."

"You mean . . . you've failed?" I asked, and felt heavy with guilt.

"We failed . . . yes. I tell you, we were held. Powerless. I was expecting the screen to go at any minute . . ."

"But someone came to our aid," Hassim's great voice rumbled out. He put down a tray of coffee things, and his dark eyes flashed. "From somewhere, a great White one came to our aid!"

"Possibly," Wilson shrugged. "But I'd prefer a simpler answer." He turned from the fire, suddenly. "You know as well as I do that the great White ones do not interfere, unless on a direct personal appeal!"

"Mmmm!" Yalna sighed, opened her eyes, and sat up, tucking the cushion into her back. She smiled, and stretched her long legs, luxuriously.

"There's a simple answer that you're all overlooking." She chuckled at the bewilderment on their faces . . . on all our faces. "You'll think of it, in a while," she said. Wilson smiled down at her quizzically.

"You speak in riddles, dear. You make me feel I have overlooked the most obvious thing."

"Riddles to me, too," Ferguson growled. "What I want to know is, have you smashed him?" He sat up, grimly. Wilson turned thoughtfully.

"The man himself still lives, I think," he said, slowly. "At least, I hope so. I want no man's death on my soul. But his power is broken, completely."

"Can you prove it?"

"Proof!" Wilson shrugged. "That you will have soon. In a day, say. The things we have done cannot pass without exciting some comment in the news."

"The news!" Yalna snapped her fingers. "How about TV? What's the time, now?" I looked at the clock on the wall, and couldn't believe that it was close to ten. So much to have happened in such a short time. But the clock was in agreement with my watch. Hassim got up, smoothly, and went to bring forward a trolley, with a television set standing on it.

"You're not expecting there'll be anything on there, already, are ye?" Ferguson growled.

"Why not? It's half an hour ago, now. News-time in a few minutes, and they are usually very quick."

"Oh!" said Yalna, with a smile, as the announcer came on. "It's that one with wavy hair. I like him. He has such a nice smile." I looked at her in amazement, and something more . . . and met a scorching gaze from her deep blue eyes. I went red—it felt as if it was all over me—and turned away.

"We have a report from the Charlton Hotel of a mysterious illness which has struck down all twenty-six members of the recently formed Spencer Trust. With their distinguished chairman, Sir Owen Spencer, they were gathered for an informal conference and dinner, this evening, when they were all taken suddenly ill. Doctors have been summoned, and we understand that although the whole party have been taken to hospital, it is not expected that any of them will suffer more than a temporary inconvenience. Food poisoning is suspected. Here is our industrial commentator who will give you his opinion on the repercussions . . ."

"By jings!" Ferguson gasped, "Was that what you expected?"

"Something of that kind. Those who play with fire must expect a burn or two. But it is only temporary, a shock at the withdrawal of power . . ."

The news went on, in varied detail, about new walkathons current hopes for disarmament, a brief glance at the threatened new Spring Collection from Paris, which made Yalna giggle, and then,

"Here is an item which has just come in. Observers from shore, on the Isle of Levant, report seeing flames and a great cloud of smoke, out at sea. It is feared that the fire may be aboard the yacht of Mr. Kristo Kropoulis, which was last seen in that area. Naval and air units are rushing parties to the scene, but no further information is available at present . . ."

"So that is why he was so strong," Hassim rumbled. "At sea. Completely isolated. If we had known . . ."

"Quite!" Wilson pushed fingers through black hair. "But we didn't know. We were rushed. That fire and smoke would have been right here, had we failed."

"Kristo Kropoulis!" Ferguson mumbled. "Man, but he's well-known to our Royal house. Who'd ha' thought it?" He was still mumbling as he took his leave. Wilson laughed, after he had gone.

"There goes a badly shaken man," he said. "The miracle of television he takes for granted, but the power of the human

mind brings him out in goose-pimples. It wasn't Mr. Kropoulis, anyway, but someone on his staff. Ah well . . . but we have a mystery of our own to solve, haven't we?" and he frowned at Yalna. Then all at once, he laughed. "But, of course. I am stupid not to have seen it."

"I think it's about time I went, too," I got up, awkwardly. "I owe you a lot Pepper, more than I can ever pay . . ."

"Go?" he said, staring. "You're not going anywhere. You haven't anywhere to go, man. You're one of us, now. You don't owe us anything, quite the reverse. You must stay. I wouldn't hear of anything less." I hesitated, and then I dared to look at Yalna. And she nodded, just once. She got up.

"You'll have to tell him, Uncle Ken," she said, and her cheeks glowed, "but wait until I'm out of hearing, please." I watched her walk away, and it was a picture of motion. From the back, she seemed to be wearing nothing but a gold band about her waist, yet there was no hint of anything but simple loveliness—and I recalled that phrase 'the pure vessel.' Wilson chuckled at the look on my face.

"I have always tended to underestimate you, Chappie," he murmured. "But you have power. That you have demonstrated, again and again. Uncontrolled and untrained, yet a tower of strength for others to draw on."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You saved us. You turned the tide. You . . . what *did* you do, exactly, at that crucial moment. Try to remember, exactly." I hated doing it, but under the quiet insistence of Wilson, and Hassim's inscrutable gaze, I reconstructed that grim moment when the spark almost failed. Wilson nodded, understandingly.

"The unquestioning sacrifice," he said, softly. "From love, with no thought of personal reward. There is no stronger force known. I should have guessed. You see, now, why you must join with us? You are one of us, already."

After that, I couldn't argue, but I did see why Yalna had left the room. And I didn't really need much persuading to stay. Thus it was that I was present when the letter came, two days later. The same blurred French postmark, the same dread when I touched it. The single sheet inside, which said 'WE SHALL MEET AGAIN' And no signature. Not that any was needed. But Wilson was genuinely relieved.

"I'm glad not to have a man's life on my soul," he said. "Even his!"

Mr. Swann's first story in our pages was "The Dryad-Tree" in No. 42, a light fantasy in a modern setting. With this second story he takes us back to the heyday of the great Flemish painters and a fascinating exploit of one of the commercial artists of that era involved with a "fish in the sky."

THE PAINTER

BY THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

They called him the merry painter. With his oils and ink, his canvasses and panels, Hieronymus Bosch was quicker to sketch a bacchanalian frolic than a Last Judgment. They liked him, he realized, as one likes clever, engaging pets; because he performed for them. But at twenty-three, he had no wish to imitate his six older brothers and become a substantial burgher of Hertogensbosch. His parents were dead; his oldest brothers tolerated him in the family home because his drawings contributed to household expenses. At weddings, for example, he could sketch the bride and groom with amazing likeness, though afterwards he sometimes passed out from the wine, muttering that he, at least, would never entangle himself with a wife. It was one thing to paint a groom, another to marry and forego his freedom. After he met the devils, of course, he changed his mind about many things; after that night in the barn when the great blue fish disgorged its appalling company.

To the wedding of the Vandermeers he had brought his younger brother, Jan, who worshipped him. While Jan watched admiringly over his shoulder, he had sketched the

bride, a pallid dove of a girl with hair shaved high up her forehead, a tall headdress, and a veil fastened by one of those fashionable new pins shaped like butterflies.

Heironymus slapped Jan on the back. "A few more years, and I'll be painting *your bride*."

Jan replied with a shrug: "Brides are for merchants. I am going to be an artist like you." A slender boy of fifteen, almost ethereal with his amber hair, he scarcely resembled the red-maned brother he adored. Unaccustomed to wine in large quantity, but unwilling to fall behind Heironymus, he swayed tipsily.

Hieronymus, a trifle unsure on his own feet, led his brother towards a circle of guests engaged in animated conversation. The house which was merriest, the room which was liveliest, the group which was noisiest attracted him as an apple attracts a bee. People called him merry for his person as well as his manner. He refused to hide his hair in the tall black hats of a burgher, but combed it loose to his shoulders, like a young Florentine painted by Botticelli (whose grave goddesses and sensual madonnas were delighting Europe).

Farmer Terburg was describing a fish he had seen, of enormous size, and, of all places, in the sky.

"I tell you I saw him," he said, disdaining an offer of wine as if to disavow its influence. "A fish as big as this house, with blue scales, and a smoking tail."

"A fish in the sky!" protested Hieronymus, who disliked for anyone to tell taller tales than his own. "And a fishing pole, I expect. The angels are having sport."

Farmer Terburg adjusted his blue spectacles. They had come from Brussels, and he was very proud of them. "*Your stories*," he said, "begin in a bottle. My fish does not."

Quick to defend his brother, Jan cried: "Hieronymus can hold his wine. Can you, Farmer Terburg?"

The farmer, absurdly overdressed in a black courtier's cape, glared at his accuser and opened his mouth to speak. But Hieronymus forestalled him:

"With fish about the sky, we should all get drunk. Then they will not distress us."

The group laughed and dispersed, flushed with wine and unresponsive to further fantasies. The hour was late, and town lay two miles away. Some had ridden in carts, others like Hieronymus and Jan had walked.

"One more glass apiece," said Hieronymus, "and home we go." But the one glass became four, and the brothers found themselves the last guests, forsaken even by their host, who, Hieronymus surmised, expected them to collapse on the red and cream tiles of the floor and sleep until morning. He stared at the cypress cabinet against the far wall, with its slender blue vases from the new Italian glass centre in Flanders. He watched the light of a dying fire flicker along the encaustic tiles. The room was comfortable, the floor warm in front of the fire. He resented, however, his host's desertion. Pompous old farmer! He lifted the rectangular wicker basket which held his drawing tools—ink, reed pen, and a white panel like the one he had used for the bride and groom—and fastened it to his shoulders. Steering his brother through the door and into the fields, he tried gallantly to keep his balance—and Jan's.

Their route took them through an orchard whose apples glistened like Venetian goblets, twisting their fine-blown spheres to capture the moonlight. But Hieronymus, far from sobered by the brisk night air, felt increasingly sleepy, and Jan lurched against him, half asleep himself, and sighed:

"Is it much further?"

For at least a mile the fields lay unbroken by houses—orchards mingling with open pastures and dewberry brambles—but an old barn, a storeplace for apples which belonged to the bride's father, loomed invitingly ahead of them and offered the respite of a nap. Otherwise, Hieronymus feared that they would fall in the fields and grow chilled. He directed his brother into the barn, a rounded structure like a stemless mushroom, with a tower at the back and a cluster of gorse and juniper. The earthen floor overflowed with apples.

Hieronymus removed his basket and scooped out a nest in the rear of the barn. Their backs against the earth, they drew apples over their bodies for warmth. The place was redolent of fruit, and the apples, in spite of their lumpiness, felt not unwelcome to Hieronymus' wine-drugged body. A few thoughts flickered through his mind: the sketch he had made of the pretty, insipid bride (God spare him from such a spouse!); Farmer Terburg's tale of the fish in the sky, which he wished he had invented himself; and finally, the pleasurable nearness of his brother, whom he loved above all people. Jan's thin shoulder pressed against his own, and

Hieronymus felt warm, strong, protective, with the fire of his hair and the ruddiness of his skin a shield between the vulnerable boy and the cold night.

He awoke with the feeling of having heard—or dreamed—a noise like a great object coming to rest, first a kind of whoosh, then a settling. When a light flickered through the wooden and wattle walls of the barn, he knew that he had not dreamed. The thought of Farmer Terburg's fish returned to him. If an enormous fish were to land outside the barn, it would have made such a sound. His first impulse was to rise and investigate. But his brain had cleared of wine, and a second impulse told him to remain where he was, far back in the apples and out of sight with Jan. A fish as big as Farmer Terburg's might go fishing for men.

Soon he had company. At first he took them for men of wildly differing sizes—some like the midgets who entertained in the great castles, some like the giants of the perilous East. There were six of them, and the first carried a round object which cast a green luminescence over the interior of the barn. Then he saw that they were not men. They reminded him of the devils above the door of the Autun cathedral, those inspired diableries of the sculptor Giselbertus. But they surpassed the horror of the sculptor's nightmares. Though they walked upright, their faces were bestial and twisted as if by leprosy. His first thought was to run for the door. But how could he waken Jan without discovery? Better to stay where he was and hope that Jan did not wake abruptly and betray them.

The creatures began to chatter in harsh, metallic tones. They seemed to be members of three races, banded together for devilish purposes; gods of three pagan lands, perhaps, reduced to the common denominator of devils. Two were tall, thin, rufous-bodied, with skinny tails; they wore cloth hoods on their heads but nothing on their bodies except belts which held unrecognizable implements of blue metal. They were snakes with limbs. A third, also nude, had the blue moist head of a rat. And the last three bulged enormous stomachs with prickly pears, walked on webbed green feet, and peered with sunken eyes through a tangle of hair like bleached seaweed; old men, they seemed, turned to beasts through lechery.

Jan's breathing was normal and even, but to Hieronymus' fear-sensitized ears it roared with the gush of wind along the dikes. Surely, he thought, the devils would hear the boy. He lay very still and regretted his sins—the girls he had kissed in the orchards with never a word of marriage, the wine he had drunk, the wicked unseriousness of his life. Had the devils been sent to punish him? Hardly, he decided, since they endangered his innocent brother as well. Doubtless they had come on their own, in spite of Christ and Our Lady, not because of them; everyone knew that devils liked to climb out of the earth and see what they were missing. To be sure, these seemed to have come down, not up. Maybe they had been deformed and cast out of heaven like Lucifer. Or maybe they had simply been exploring the sky in their fish.

One of the devils pointed toward the apples. He gesticulated and the others laughed (at least Hieronymus so interpreted their metallic raspings). Angrily he stooped—or rather, hunched, for this was a fat one—to the ground and thrust a large apple in his larger mouth. Rising, he smacked his lips noisily and struck a pose of self-satisfied contentment. Vanity seemed a characteristic of the creatures. But the green skin of his cheeks crinkled, the coarse white hair bobbed over his eyes, and bits of apple exploded from his mouth. The others roared in unison, and with great relief Hieronymus saw that they were preparing to leave. Their apparent leader, the rat, advanced toward the door.

Then Jan woke up and called out Hieronymus' name. The creatures stopped, turned, and stared at them with ghoulish curiosity. The rat motioned with his claw: they were to come forward. Hieronymus stepped in front of Jan.

"This is not your barn," he said stoutly. "It belongs to Farmer Valk."

The rat peered at him as if trying to understand his words. He spoke very slowly, in a metallic tone like the scraping of a horseshoe on stone, but unmistakably in Flemish. He had a curious way of substituting "n" for "m" at the start of a word:

"You question *ny* right to be here, ruddy one?" The others howled with laughter.

"Not if you leave us now," said Hieronymus, his hand restraining Jan, who tried to push beside him. He whis-

pered a prayer to the Virgin. Enrolled last year in the Fraternity of Our Lady, he had always felt that she tolerated his vagaries much more than did her son. The prayer completed, he wondered how the devils had learned Flemish. In Hell there were perhaps Dutchmen to teach it to them. Or perhaps, cruising about in their fish, they had found ways to overhear conversations on earth, learn the language, and thus direct their machinations for Satan.

The rat lifted a small elongated instrument from his belt. He aimed it at the corner of the wall. A thin red line spat across the barn and bit a hole in the wall as large as a man's head. Jan's arms, behind Hieronymus, tightened around his waist. It was not a time for bravado. With such a weapon, the devils had nothing to fear.

"Then let us go. We mean you no harm."

"You could do us none if you wished. But . . . we have made a long journey. We have grown fatigued and hungry." A red tongue thrust through his lips, poised in the air, withdrew into the dark cavern of his mouth.

"You didn't care for the apples?" Hieronymus asked, at a loss for less obvious words and with no intention of irony.

"We are not fond of fruits. We are fond of *neat*."

"Perhaps we could get you chickens at the farmhouse beyond the orchard."

"Perhaps," said the rat with a meaningful look at his friends. "But there is *neat* close at hand."

Like water invading a swimmer, horror flooded his body. Meat close at hand: Jan dismembered, his pale, thin limbs stripped of flesh by these creatures from Hell. I would kill him first myself, he thought. I would choke him with my bare hands. Our Lady would forgive me. She has known what it means for a child to be threatened.

Silent, he waited. The boy stood beside him now, his body shaken but staunch. Hieronymus pressed his shoulder.

The rat pointed toward Jan. "He is quiet. Has he nothing to say for himself?"

Hieronymus tried to speak, but Jan anticipated him. "This, you rat-faced devil. Go to Hell!" Then, as if amazed at his own temerity, he stood open-mouthed. The others laughed, the rat scowled. None of them could tolerate a blow to his vanity. He turned to the snake and spoke orders in his alien tongue. The snake's hand whipped out like a noose and circled the boy's throat. Jan gave a quick, muffled sob. The same instant, Hieronymus struck the snake in the

face with the full strength of his large, knotted fist. A substance like flesh and gristle, quite boneless, crunched sickeningly under the blow. The snake howled and fell to the floor, clutching his ruined face. Hieronymus awaited retaliation. When the rat did not disintegrate them with the beam, he knelt beside his fallen brother and took the nearly garroted boy in his arms. He left Jan's body quiver beneath his touch, and he wanted urgently to preserve him from these monsters. He looked up, wondering what delayed their destruction.

The devils were gazing at their wounded comrade, and they were laughing, silently at first, then with growing merriment, until the barn shuddered with laughter, and little particles of dust careened in the light of the green lamp. Truly they were devils, Hieronymus thought. They enjoyed the pain of their friends.

The rat turned to him at last. "You are droll," he said. "Laughter rests us from the journey. It is almost as good as food. Almost." He peered at the unconscious Jan, and the red tongue flickered from his mouth. A bead of thick saliva fell to the dirt and hissed like water in an oven.

"What can I give you to let him go?" Hieronymus said hopelessly. If, in the face of the beam, he hurled his body at the rat, would enough remain to injure or at least unbalance the creature? But Jan, still unconscious, could not seize the chance to escape.

"What have you to give me?" the rat sneered.

"What I am wearing."

The rat indicated a lapis lazuli ring, imported from Italy, on his left hand. He removed it only to have it struck from his fingers. The rat pointed to his turquoise cape, which met the same scornful treatment. Then his pointed wooden shoes. Then his trousers with vertical red and black stripes. Each time the response was identical. Soon Hieronymus stood nude and shivering in the cold night air. He is toying with me, the painter thought. He knew from the start that nothing I have could please him; if it could, he would take without asking. A brave man with clothes can face anything. How much of his courage ebbs with his clothes! Naked, a man is made Adam and burdened by original sin—and original fear.

The creatures could not restrain themselves. They pointed at his bare reddish skin, and he guessed that they were comparing it to disadvantage with their own blue, green, or

russet hides. To a man, a rat's skin looks grey and loathsome; a snake's far worse. To the devils, Hieronymus' skin was clearly no more to be envied. One of the round creatures, eyeing the rat's weapon to make sure that he was well covered, thrust a finger in Hieronymus' side as if to investigate the ribs which faintly outlined his well-muscled chest. Apparently the creatures were little more than backbones augmented by cartilage and Hieronymus' bone structure astonished them. When the first thrust elicited no reaction, the creature jabbed again, much harder, but the rat forestalled him from further experiments. The prisoner was his to torment; he had not yet finished.

"What else have you to give me?"

Hieronymus shrugged wearily. "I have nothing."

The rat pointed to his wicker case, forgotten among the apples. The painter retrieved it and displayed the contents — a white panel, a red glass vial of ink, a reed pen—the tools of his profession which he had carried to the wedding.

Casually the rat examined them. He was growing bored. "Useless," he said, and prepared to throw them after the clothes. Hieronymus stayed his hand. The rat brandished his beam.

"Wait," Hieronymus said. He had remembered the creatures' vanity. "They are not useless. Let me draw you."

"With this?" sneered the rat, holding up the pen. "Where are your brushes? Where are your canvasses?"

"I don't need them."

The rat looked at his companions. Expressionless, they awaited his decision. The wounded snake, neglected, had recovered himself to slouch by the door.

"Draw me," said the rat. "But quickly."

Hieronymus sank to his knees, dipped his reed in the ink, and began to draw, careful to allot space for six portraits. The dim light gave an eeriness to the panel, and the figure which began to materialize seemed born of that light. Never had Hieronymus painted so quickly or with such assurance. Fear for Jan gave power and certainty to his arm. Gone were the revellers, the lovers, the children at play who had once frolicked through his drawings. Line after line swiftly incised itself into the portrait (for the hideousness of the rat seemed to burn through his arm). The very features which made him shudder, he guessed, were those most precious to his model. He bared them in all their ugliness; indeed,

exaggerated them. A horror leered from the panel, a mouth like a fish's, a damp slimy skin, a knotted tail. A nightmare which was true. The rat watched with growing excitement. Angrily he motioned the others to allow the artist more room.

Hieronymus laid aside his pen. "It is finished," he said. The rat seized the panel in his paws and carried it under the lamp. His walk was the preening stride of someone who feels himself superbly complimented.

"Us, us," the others clamored, speaking Flemish for the first time, but without the ease of their friend. "Time for us."

Hieronymus pointed to Jan, conscious at last and crouching beyond the circle of watchers. "First you must let him go. Then I will paint you. If my brother comes back with friends, he knows you will kill me. Besides, your weapon is deadly. You have nothing to fear."

The rat shook his head, but the others scurried around him and shook their fists, shouting, no doubt, that now it was their turn. He raised his beam, but they knocked it from his hand and returned with the panel to entreat the painter.

Heironymus, ignoring them, helped Jan to his feet. "Can you walk, Brother?"

"Yes," the boy gasped with evident pain. "But I won't leave you."

Heironymus embraced him with urgent tenderness. "You must," he said. "And don't come back until the fish is gone. I'll follow you when I can."

"No," Jan cried desperately. "I want to stay here." But Heironymus guided him past the creatures, who made no move, and through the door. Jan, accustomed to obedience, obeyed him now. Only when the boy had vanished into the orchards did Heironymus turn to face his captors. He felt a curious buoyancy as he realized that Jan had escaped. Nothing they did could frighten him now. Still, he wanted very much to live and rejoin his brother.

"Now I will paint the rest of you," he said. The rat stood apart, sulking; unwilling to share the panel. First, the snake, while the others waited, impatient. Then, one by one, the others, until the panel crawled with horror, with twisted shapes and reptile tails, lidless eyes and slimy skins, the loathesomest attributes of despicable animals. The models watched with pride at the truth of themselves in ink. When the panel bristled like a page from a bestiary, they wrested it from him

and fought to hold it and trace their features. He turned, gathered up his tools and clothes (he dared not linger to dress), and realized that his limbs had grown numb from cold and exertion. When he steeled himself to move, he thought that they would stop him; that before he left the barn they would send a lethal red shaft into his back. But the panel held their attention; captivated them. It was not that they were grateful enough to let him go. He had simply given them a toy more pleasureable than torture. Soon they would tire of it. For the moment it served. Their minds were quick. They had built, at least they flew, the great blue fish which rested, Olympian, in the kindling dawnlight. But they had no hearts. That was why they were devils, not because they were ugly . . .

In the coming years, when Heironymus (married to a plump French girl) had ceased to paint his weddings and his revellers, and begun to paint grotesqueries not of this earth, and won a fame which extended even to the court of Spain, people would ask him where he had learned such horrors. Heironymus would smile and say nothing. The people would turn then to Jan, and Jan, catching his brother's eye, would answer:

"In Hell, where else?"

—Thomas Burnett Swann

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STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

This month, by a happy coincidence, Sam Moskowitz' feature article is concerned with that great master of the macabre, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, although as the writer points out, Lovecraft had a great influence on latter-day writers of science fiction.

9. H. P. Lovecraft

A Study In Horror

"The present commentator does not believe that the idea of space-travel and other worlds is inherently unsuited to literary use. It is rather, his opinion that the omnipresent cheapening and misuse of that idea is the result of a widespread misconception; a misconception which extends to other departments of weird and science fiction as well. This fallacy is the notion that any account of impossible, improbable or inconceivable phenomena can be successfully presented as a commonplace narrative of objective acts and conventional emotions in the ordinary tone and manner of popular romance," H. P. Lovecraft wrote in his essay *Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction* which appeared in the Winter, 1935 number of the amateur magazine *The Californian*.

The erroneous notion has long been prevalent that H. P. Lovecraft belongs primarily to the field of the weird and supernatural. The truth is that his contribution to science fiction has not only been substantial, it has been *pivotal* in its considerable influence.

A literary pied piper, H. P. Lovecraft established himself as an outstanding master of weird fiction and then as an admired and widely imitated figure, led some of the brightest young stars of the macabre into the field of science fiction.

The result was twofold. First, Lovecraft and his acolytes popularized the elements of horror and supernatural-like mystery in science fiction. Secondly, since the creation of successful tales of horror depends upon the careful building of a special effect, they placed emphasis upon the development of a *mood* rather than dependence upon romantic adventure or a unique plot twist.

Certainly, Lovecraft was not the first to inject such components into science fiction. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* is nothing if it is not scientifically-based horror and few if any "mood" science fiction tales surpass in excellence Edgar Allan Poe's *Ms. Found in a Bottle*. In more recent times, William Hope Hodgson has masterfully combined both elements in *The Night Land* and *Voice in the Night*. However, these aspects had been largely ignored as first the scientific romance and then the heavy science tale took turns at popularity. Lovecraft restored horror to magazine science fiction.

Considering Lovecraft's early interests, it is strange that he ever took his gloomy tack in fiction at all. Born August 20, 1890, the major parental influence was his mother, since his father, Winfield Lovecraft, made his living as a travelling salesman. The father was confined to a mental institution for the last five years of his life and died in 1898 of paresis. Young Howard Lovecraft, though a sickly child, was a bright one. He was able to read at the age of four and his grandfather encouraged him to make extensive use of the large library in his Benefit Street residence.

According to Lovecraft's own notes, he became seriously interested in the sciences at the age of eight and enjoyed his own small chemical laboratory. "Finally astronomy dawned on me," he said, "and the lure of other worlds and inconceivable cosmic gulfs eclipsed all other interests for a long period after my twelfth birthday."

He published a small hektographed paper called *The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy* and later wrote newspaper columns on astronomy for *The Providence Evening Journal*, and *The Asheville, N. C. Gazette-News*.

This strong, active and almost professional interest in the physical sciences of chemistry and astronomy, while unusual in one so young, bore no direct relation to the outer inclination his early fiction was to take. Neither did his somewhat later preference in reading matter, for the authors he championed in his early twenties stressed the romantic, scientific or more positive aspects of science fiction.

A letter published in the March 7, 1914 issue of that early stronghold of the scientific romance *The All-Story Magazine*, sheds a revealing light on his preferences at the time. "In the present age of vulgar taste and sordid realism it is a relief to peruse a publication such as *The All-Story*, which has ever been and still remains under the influence of the imaginative school of Poe and Verne. At the head of your list of writers Edgar Rice Burroughs undoubtedly stands. I have read very few recent novels by others wherein is displayed an equal ingenuity in plot, and verisimilitude in treatment. His only fault seems to be a tendency toward scientific inaccuracy and slight inconsistencies. I hardly need mention the author of *A Columbus of Space* further than to say I have read every published work of Garrett P. Serviss, own most of them, and await his future writings with eagerness."

When *The All-Story Magazine* combined with another great adventure periodical which featured science fiction, H. P. Lovecraft wrote again enthusiastically: "The greatest benefit derived from the amalgamation undoubtedly will be the return to *The All-Story* of George Allan England, who, to my mind, ranks with Edgar Rice Burroughs and Albert Payson Terhune as one of the three supreme literary artists of the house of Munsey. Mr. England's *Darkness and Dawn* trilogy is on a par with the *Tarzan stories*, and fortunate indeed is that magazine which can secure as contributors the authors of both."

That letter appeared in the readers columns of the August 15, 1914 issue of *All-Story Cavalier* when Lovecraft was twenty-four years of age. For a man of his proven precociousness these preferences cannot be dismissed as juvenile fancies.

Lovecraft did a variety of writing for the two leading amateur press publications of the time—the *United Amateur* and *The National Amateur*—but the earliest work of his that can be considered of professional calibre was written in 1917. There is evidence here that Lovecraft was ready at that early

date to follow a natural inclination into science fiction, if we properly evaluate his short story *Dagon*, which did not see publication until the November 1919 issue of *The Vagrant*.

This story is beyond question a work of science fiction. A packet is sunk by a German submarine during the first World War and one of its crew is set adrift in a lifeboat. His craft becomes mired in the mud of a new island which rises mysteriously from the floor of the sea. On this island he discovers an ancient monolith upon which is chiseled the forms of gigantic froglike men, engaged in various marine endeavours. When a tremendous man-like scaled thing rises above the waters, a nearly insane fear inspires the castaway with the strength to launch his craft and escape from the island. The story ends as the protagonist realizes that the monstrous creatures who resembles the fish god Dagon, of the ancient Philistines, has searched him out in San Francisco.

Lovecraft has claimed that he received inspiration for his Cthulhu mythos from his reading of Lord Dunsany in 1919. Careful reading of *Dagon* strongly suggests that the famous mythology was already in formation and the only thing Dunsany taught Lovecraft was not to attach legendary names to his horrors but to invent new ones.

The literary love affair that transpired for several years after Lovecraft encountered Dunsany's work effectively side-tracked him from moving directly into science fiction. What entranced Lovecraft was the "crystalline singing prose" of Lord Dunsany. Form eclipsed subject matter in his mind and led him to other stylists of the supernatural such as Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lafcadio Hearn, M. P. Shiel and other greats and near greats of the literature of darkness.

After Dunsany, Lovecraft took turns imitating the others but first impressions remained the strongest and the clear, harp-like chords of the Irish lord echoed periodically through Lovecraft's entire lifetime of writing. Most beautifully and true does it sound in *The Silver Key*, *The Strange High House in the Mist*, *The Quest of Iranon* and *Celephais*.

While Lovecraft was saturating himself with the essence of Dunsany, he did not completely desert the writing of science fiction.

Beyond the Wall of Sleep, the title story of one of his collections, later published by Arkham House was written originally in 1919 and deals with an interne who electronically receives the mental impulses of an intelligence from a distant star system. The later flaring of a nova star near Algol, the Demon Star, as predicted by the alien from far outer space, confirms the authenticity of the contact.

The following year Lovecraft wrote *From Beyond*, in which a machine utilizing the ultra-violet principle makes it possible to see creatures normally invisible to human sight with disastrous results.

Both of these stories, despite stretches of excellent writing, are minor excursions in the genre. But the same cannot be said of *The Temple*, written the same year and published in *Weird Tales* for September, 1925. This tale, in writing and plotting, is a science fiction masterpiece.

A German submarine in World War I is trapped on the ocean's floor and only one of its crewmen, a Prussian officer, remains alive. He discovers he is near the ruins of an under-sea city which may be the legendary Atlantis. Lovecraft brilliantly delineates the slow disintegration of the German's military reserve as his supplies of power, food and water slowly give out. The desperately trapped Prussian explores parts of the ruins in a diving suit. Finally, with lights burned out, and air almost exhausted, he leaves the submarine a final time to investigate what he thinks is a glowing radiance in a temple-like structure in the distance.

The Temple has not received the attention it deserves as one of Lovecraft's most successful and forthright presentations.

The first professional opportunity Lovecraft obtained was with an evanescent periodical of the early twenties titled *Home Brew*. He wrote for the editor and publisher, George Houtain, a strange series of six short stories in 1921 and 1922, built around the scientific attempts of Herbert West, a brilliant young medical student, to bring the dead back to life. The intent was to horrify through utilisation of the time-worn theme of restoring the dead, but the experiments were not in any way supernatural, qualifying the series as true science fiction.

Home Brew also bought a novelet entitled *The Lurking Fear*, which it ran as a four-part serial beginning in the January, 1923, number. This extremely rococo tale is built around the degenerate descendants of a once-proud family, who live in underground tunnels and venture forth every now and then to cannibalistically devour some hapless surfaceman. The story seems to have derived its essence from portions of H. G. Well's *Time Machine*.

Previous to the publication of this story, Lovecraft's mother, Sarah Susan, had passed her last years in a Providence hospital, dying early in 1919. The knowledge that both of his parents had died from maladies that left them mentally disturbed at the end is advanced by David H. Keller, M.D., in his remarkable essay *Shadows Over Lovecraft*, as a possible reason for Lovecraft's preoccupation with a tragic hereditary morbidity in many of his stories.

Dagon, *Far Beyond* and *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* come well within the scope of present-day science fiction but, beginning with Herbert West and continuing with *The Lurking Fear*, we find the science attenuated almost to the diminishing point. The extreme is reached in *The Unnamable*, published in *Weird Tales* for July, 1925. The theme of *The Unnamable*, clearly derived from Fitz-James O'Brien's *What Was It?* deals in graveyard investigations which end when a near-invisible monster streams from a pit, knocking everyone down, and disappearing into the night. The story is slight in plot and fails to communicate the desired mood.

The advent of *Weird Tales* magazine, particularly the elevation of Farnsworth Wright to the editorial seat, was the most important development in a literary sense, in Lovecraft's writing career. Since 1917 he had been writing and donating to amateur periodicals, a great many weird stories. Most of these now readily sold to *Weird Tales*.

Beginning with *Dagon*, which appeared in its October, 1923, issue, *Weird Tales* published in quick succession *The Picture in the House*, *The Hound*, *The Rats in the Walls*, *The White Ape*, *Hypnos*, *The Festival*, *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, *The Music of Erich Zann*, *The Unnamable*, *The Temple*, *The Tomb*, *The Cats of Ulthar*, *The Outsider*,

The Lurking Fear, The Moon-Bog, The Terrible Old Man, He, The Horror at Red Hook and The White Ship.

After the appearance of *The Rats in the Walls* in the March, 1924, *Weird Tales*, the readers were unrestrained in their enthusiasm. *The Rats in the Walls* certainly ranks as one of the most chilling imaginative epics of horror ever conceived by an American writer. The atmosphere is charged with almost supernatural horror heightened by the scientific plausibility of the background.

The narrative deals with the discovery of a fallen underground realm, beneath an old English castle, where as recently as 1600 A.D. a decadent British family raised herds of beastmen to eat. The influence of the surroundings revives the dormant urge in one of the family's present-day descendants, bringing *The Rats in the Walls* to a close on a note of almost unendurable terror.

The Outsider has frequently been referred to as Lovecraft's outstanding horror tale, probably because it was used as the title story in the first major posthumous collection of his works. Unfortunately the closeness with which Lovecraft copies Poe (he begins by virtually paraphrasing *Berenice*) and the breaks in the buildup of horror caused by the interpolation of stretches of fantasy considerably reduce the impact of the story for a good many readers. But its power can hardly be denied, despite its strongly derivative aspects.

Tales like *The Rats in the Walls* and *The Outsider*; tales of horror, terror and atmospheric beauty with undertones of scientific credibility created Lovecraft's first reputation in the period beginning 1923. Typical of readers' reaction was the letter of internationally famous science fiction author Ray Cummings, which appeared in *The Eyrie of Weird Tales* for June, 1926.

"Who in blazes is H. P. Lovecraft?" he demanded. "I never heard the name before. If he is a present-day writer—which I cannot imagine him to be—he deserves to be world-famous. I read *The Outsider* and *The Tomb*. No need of telling you they are masterful stories. Quite beside their atmosphere—all those fictional elements which go to make up a real story—I felt and still feel, looking backward upon reading of them—somehow *ennobled*, as though my mind had profited (which indeed it had) by the reading. Never have I

encountered any purer, more beautiful diction. They sing; the true poetry of prose."

Who was Lovecraft, indeed. Certainly one of the strangest figures to arise in American letters. There has almost been as much printed about him as by him.

Following the death of his mother he had somewhat emerged from his chrysalis, travelled a bit and seen more of the world. When *The Outsider* was published in *Weird Tales* for April, 1926, he was married to an attractive, strong-willed and extremely successful business woman, Sonia H. Greene, who resided in Brooklyn, near Prospect Park.

Nothing in his background prepared him for the role of husband and provider. During almost the entire period of their marriage, his wife was the breadwinner, while Lovecraft, away from familiar surroundings and obsessed by a detestation of anything foreign, could scarcely tolerate contact with "alien hordes" that surrounded him in New York City. Although his wife was gracious, sympathetic and understanding, there must have been times when her undoubted love for him was put to a severe test.

Finally, suggesting that they continue their marriage by correspondence, Lovecraft packed his bags, left his wife, and returned to his aunts in his beloved Providence.

A small weekly income of ten to fifteen dollars from a family interest in a sadly declining stone quarry, provided his main source of livelihood. This small sum was supplemented by occasional checks from editors, which became fewer and further apart as the years progressed.

He reverted to the living pattern of an earlier period. He worked by night and slept by day, keeping his shutters closed and the shades down. Perhaps due to the aftermath of a kidney ailment he had no tolerance for cold and scarcely moved out of a super-heated frame house during the winter months.

Ghost writing and literary assistance to would-be writers provided another meagre source of revenue. However, Lovecraft's method of revision usually consisted of discarding the client's draft completely and then rewriting the story from beginning to end. The majority of his so-called "collaborations" are almost entirely his own work and established a number of embryo reputations.

Lovecraft's most famous ghost-written story was based on an idea dictated by the famous Magician, Harry Houdini, who was a stockholder in *Weird Tales*. The finished story, *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*, was featured on the cover of the May-June-July, 1924, first-anniversary issue of the magazine.

Lovecraft maintained a correspondence with as many as 100 friends and acquaintances simultaneously, frequently penning letters that ran from 30 to 40 pages. The warmth, brilliance and erudition of his letters created fierce friendships with individuals who were never to meet him, and provided inspiration for dozens of men and women destined later to achieve literary importance. Correspondence apparently served as a substitute for the lack of human companionship in Lovecraft's life and made it possible for him to retain his stability particularly during his final years when he became a virtual recluse. At the same time, the extraordinary volume of it prevented him from writing works of fiction that might have substantially increased his income.

Despite this, the period 1923 to 1926 was the high-point of Lovecraft's life. *Weird Tales* published nineteen of his tales during those years, tales written between 1917 and 1921. Already Lovecraft was outgrowing the influences of Dunsany, Machen, Blackwood and a half dozen other writers whose work he profoundly admired. But he would never outgrow Poe.

What was developing was something creatively original—something that in presentation and method was distinctly Lovecraft's own. But that very difference was to presage tragic and unnecessary literary problems.

The first inkling of trouble came with the writing of *The Shunned House* in 1924. Lovecraft had travelled and seen more of the world and part of his sense of outsidership had vanished. The early scientific interests began to reassert themselves.

This was inevitable, since Lovecraft countenanced no form of mysticism whatsoever, embraced no religion nor believed in the existence of a deity. He was contemptuous of the concept of the supernatural. He could not ever pretend that the strange horrors he wrote about transcended natural law.

Strange lines, for a writer of supernatural fiction, appeared in *The Shunned House*: "Such a thing was surely not a physical or biochemical impossibility in the light of a newer science which includes the theories of relativity and intratomic action."

The Shunned House is in truth a horror science fiction story in which the ending is the discovery and destruction of a mammoth creature buried beneath a building. Though related with documentary preciseness it did not preclude passages of truly poetic beauty. But—Farnsworth Wright rejected it!

Scarcely knowing what to do with the story, Lovecraft sent it to his old friend, W. Paul Cook, who had previously published, in his amateur periodical, *The Vagrant*, three earlier Lovecraft tales, *Dagon*, *The Tomb*, and *The Statement of Randolph Carter* and had set in type but never run off *The Outsider* and *The Rats in the Wall*. In 1927 Cook had issued his legendary one-shot publication, *The Recluse*, which contained Lovecraft's brilliant article, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. A second issue with 40 pages in proofs contained *The Strange High House in the Mist*, but was never finished.

Cook printed *The Shunned House* as a 59-page book in 1928 with an introduction by Lovecraft's close friend Frank Belknap Long. The book was never bound and only six copies were generally circulated out of an edition that could not have exceeded 100. After the death of a youthful friend of Lovecraft's, R. H. Barlow, additional copies were discovered which were procured and sold by August W. Derleth.

Cool Air, a fictional account of a scientist who succeeds in sustaining mental awareness and movement in his body after it had died (slowing down physical deterioration by living in a refrigerated apartment), was written by Lovecraft in 1926 and graphically illustrates his growing unwillingness to explain the strange and bizarre by other than scientific means. Wright also rejected this story but Lovecraft succeeded in selling it to *Tales of Magic and Mystery*, a short-lived competitor of *Weird Tales*, where it appeared in the March, 1928, issue.

Pickman's Model, a real shudder provoker published in the October, 1927, *Weird Tales*, deals with a masterful artist of the fantastic and evil whose bizarre subject matter is dis-

covered to have been copied from real life. This is technically a tale of science fiction aimed at creating a mood of horror. One sentence in the story served as the inspiration of Ralph Barbour Johnson's masterful science fiction horror story, *Far Below*, which elicited such a strongly favourable response when *Weird Tales* published it in its issue for June-July, 1939. That sentence reads: "There was a study called *Subway Accident*, in which a flock of vile things were clambering up from some unknown catacomb through a crack in the Boyleston Street subway and attacking a crowd of people on the platform."

Lovecraft's entire new attitude burst into the open with the writing of *The Call of Cthulhu*, written in 1926 and published in *Weird Tales* for February, 1928. In that story, an accident causes the undersea tomb of a legendary creature, Cthulhu, one of a group that "had come from the stars and brought their images with them," to rise to the surface. This story was a major presentation of the Cthulhu mythology couched in terms of science fiction instead of supernatural, incorporating references to R'lyeh, great stone city under the sea and the *Necronomicon*, horrendous tome penned by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, with its famous lines: *That is not dead which can eternal lie, And with strange aeons even death may die.*

Following *The Call of Cthulhu*, Lovecraft wrote what he believed to be his supreme masterpiece, *The Colour Out of Space*. This pure, unadulterated science fiction tale is unquestionably a great story and if not the very finest single thing composed by Lovecraft, certainly a candidate to be included among his best three.

The story seizes the reader's interest immediately and builds magnificently, without flagging, to its tremendous conclusion. The characterization is excellent and the dialogue possibly the best ever done by Lovecraft, who generally adhered to straight narrative. His observations on the radio-activity of the entities from space is science of a high order, considering the year in which the story was written.

So full of high hope for this story, Lovecraft was stunned when it was rejected by *Weird Tales*. In a letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft stormed at the shortsightedness of

Farnsworth Wright. Though *Weird Tales* printed numerous science fiction stories, Wright preferred the romantic adventure so popular in *Argosy*, or even straight action stories. Lovecraft submitted the story to *Argosy*, where it was also rejected as being a bit too "strong" for their readership, but the gimlet-eyed Hugo Gernsback did not let it get by him when it came his turn.

Blurbing the windfall in the September, 1927 *Amazing Stories*, Gernsback enthused: "Here is a totally different story that we can highly recommend. We could wax rhapsodical in our praise, as the story is one of the finest pieces of literature it has been our good fortune to read. The theme is original and yet fantastic enough to make it rise head and shoulders above many contemporary scientifiction stories. You will not regret having read this marvellous tale."

This should have been the tip off to Lovecraft that he no longer belonged in *Weird Tales*, especially after *The Colour Out of Space* received honourable mention in Edward J. O'Brien's *Best American Short Stories for 1928*, a distinction only two other Lovecraft stories, *The Outsider* and *Pickman's Model*, had previously received.

The chronically tight economic straits of *Weird Tales* also conspired against Lovecraft. According to W. Paul Cook, Farnsworth Wright paid Lovecraft a higher word rate than most of his other authors. Lovecraft's stories of that period tended to get longer and longer and Wright simply could not afford to pay a premium for novelettes and short novel lengths.

The Dunwich Horror, written in 1928 and published in *Weird Tales* for April, 1929, indicates by its sheer brilliance, following so closely after *The Colour Out of Space*, that Lovecraft was now at the very peak of his artistry. These stories were the beginning of something completely original on the American scene and a major contribution to science fiction. With the excision of a few incantations, *The Dunwich Horror*, which fundamentally deals with the problems of the adjustment of Wilbur Whately, offspring of a creature from outer space who has mated with an idiot human girl, becomes science fiction.

Three years were to pass before Lovecraft would see another story published and yet some of his finest work was being produced during this period. The weird-fantasy novel,

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, a precisely turned masterpiece composed in 1927-28, languished in manuscript until 1941 before it was published posthumously in *Weird Tales*. The major reason for the delay was that Lovecraft was too discouraged to even prepare it for submission.

Wright wanted for his magazine, particularly from Lovecraft, weird-horror tales that were short. Lovecraft gave him only science fiction stories that were long. Finally, Wright did take *The Whisperer in Darkness*, a novelette of 28,000 words, constructed with the most fastidious detail around the angle of a colony of aliens from out of space, attempting to recruit renegades for their ill-defined purposes.

The readers went wild! The popularity of *The Whisperer In the Darkness*, at the time of its publication, transcended anything he had ever done.

Lovecraft followed with a 45,000 word novel, *At the Mountains of Madness*, in 1931, actually a modernized sequel to Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, which, in the most detailed, scholarly fashion conceivable, outlined the history, habits, technology and civilization of the creatures of his Cthulhu Mythos. As a bible of that mythology it is indispensable to the Lovecraft fan, but as a story, its length should have been trimmed in half as Wright suggested upon its rejection. Most of the padding is in the first half, after that it picks up momentum and includes some of Lovecraft's best writing.

The orderly build-up of background in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, the next story from Lovecraft's pen, written in 1932, is unsurpassed by any of his other works. Nevertheless, the story suffers from an ending of dream-like fantasy that does not fit the projected mood. Here we find echoes of *Dagon* as the genetically altered inhabitants of Innsmouth gradually assume the shapes of civilized creatures from antiquity, still dwelling in and beckoning from marvellous cities beneath the sea.

The Shadow Out of Time, written by Lovecraft in 1934, is a 30,000 word novelette, which, despite its length, retains all the fabulous imaginative qualities of good science fiction possessed by *At the Mountains of Madness*, without that novel's tediousness.



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The nature and scope of the multitude of ideas in *Shadow Out of Time* reflect the unmistakable influence of the soaring imagination of that cosmic philosopher, Olaf Stapledon, as expressed in *Last and First Men*. The plot of the story, wherein the dreams of a modern man about a civilization of the prehuman intelligences, 155 million years past are found to be probably true, is brought home to the reader with stunning impact and consummate artistry.

None of the remarkable science fiction excursions, *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Shadow Out of Time*, together with the magnificent science-fantasy *Shadow Over Innsmouth*, could find a home in *Weird Tales*.

A collaboration with E. Hoffman Price, *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*, was published in *Weird Tales* for July, 1934. A hybrid tale which begins as a weird story, continues as a sheer fantasy and ends as science fiction, it revolves around an overwhelmingly powerful situation involving a human ego taking over an alien's will on a distant world, then returning to earth in his outré guise. The human drama inherent in the idea was not properly exploited, but it is nonetheless memorable.

One by one, the acolytes influenced by Lovecraft followed as he lead the way to science fiction. As they did they began to sell to *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories* and *Amazing Stories*, markets that specialized in such material. Such renowned names as Clark Ashton Smith, Donald Wandrei, Howard Wandrei, Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, C. L. Moore, Frank Belknap Long, Carl Jacobi, and Hazel Heald (whose work he revised) were selling easily and readily, but the near-genius Lovecraft was pathetically grateful when William Crawford, who published the semi-professional magazine *Marvel Tales*, offered to print without royalties, a 200-copy edition, in hard covers, of *Shadow Over Innsmouth*. This project eventually materialized in 1936 as a crude little volume, selling for only one dollar and not too well at that.

Meanwhile, Lovecraft tightened his food budget to thirty cents a day and neglected his stomach to obtain postage-money for his ever-growing mass of correspondents, which had now become his method of escape from harsh reality.

Finally his friends could stand it no longer. Without his knowledge, Donald Wandrei (famed for *The Red Brain* in

Weird Tales and *Colossus* in *Astounding Stories*) secured the manuscripts of *At the Mountains of Madness* and *Shadow Out of Time* and sent them to F. Orlin Tremaine, editor of *Astounding Stories*. Tremaine bought them both and Lovecraft received the two largest checks of his entire writing career.

Four years earlier, Hugo Gernsback had bought a Lovecraft revision of *The Man of Stone* from Hazel Heald for *Wonder Stories*. It seemed that in every instance where Lovecraft material was sent where it belonged, it was purchased. Yet, blinded by his outspoken disdain for the literary quality of the science fiction magazines, he had ignored these markets to his own detriment.

For its third anniversary issue, September, 1935, *Fantasy Magazine* wanted something truly unusual. So its editor, Julius Schwartz, commissioned two round-robin stories to be written—one of science fiction and one of weird fiction. For the weird fiction story he had segments assigned to C. L. Moore, A. Merritt, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard and Frank Belknap Long. All went well until the story reached H. P. Lovecraft, then the science fiction syndrome switched on and the High Priest of Cthulhu converted the story into an intergalactic tale of super science splendour. Even more unique, if excerpted, the Lovecraft portion became a complete story in itself. *Fantasy Magazine* ended up printing two science fiction tales instead of one science fiction and one weird.

One of the last things Lovecraft did in science fiction was a collaboration with Kenneth Sterling titled *In the Walls of Eryx*, concerning a transparent maze on the planet Venus which traps unwary explorers.

When H. P. Lovecraft died the morning of March 15, 1937, only 47 years old, wasted to a pitiful shadow from the effects of Bright's disease and intestinal cancer, his greatest fame was yet to come but his influence on the body of science fiction was already felt.

One of the first to properly understand and interpret his contribution was Fritz Leiber, Jr., writing in the Fall, 1944, issue of *The Acolyte*, who observed: "Perhaps Lovecraft's most important single contribution was the adoption of science-fiction material to the purpose of supernatural terror. The decline of at least naive belief in Christian theology,

resulting in an immense loss of prestige for Satan and his hosts, left the emotion of supernatural fear swinging around loose, without any well-recognized object. Lovecraft took up this loose end and tied it to the unknown but possible denizens of other planets and regions beyond the space-time continuum."

For that purpose, Lovecraft had propounded his theories on the writing of science fiction, the validity of which have been tested by time.

"The characters, though they must be natural, should be subordinated to the central marvel around which they are grouped," Lovecraft wrote. "The true hero of a marvel tale is not any human being, but simply a *set of phenomena* . . . All that a marvel story can ever be, in a serious way, is a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood. Since marvel tales cannot be true to the events of life, they must shift their emphasis toward something to which they can be true; namely, certain wistful or restless moods of the human spirit, wherein it seeks to weave gossamer ladders of escape from the galling tyranny of time, space and natural laws."

That was his literary credo and it made him famous.

—Sam Moskowitz

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