

# Science Fantasy

**No. 51**  
**VOLUME 17**  
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*Novelettes*

**MICHAEL  
MOORCOCK**

**The Stealer of  
Souls**

**W. T. WEBB**

**The Legend**

*Short Stories*

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# Science Fantasy

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*In this third Elric story the forces of Wind and Fire meet on opposing sides in a cataclysmic battle to decide the fate of one particular sorcerer. The previous stories in this series were "The Dreaming City," (No. 47) and "While The Gods Laugh," (No. 49).*

# THE STEALER OF SOULS

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

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## o n e

In a City called Bakshaan, which was rich enough to make all other cities of the North East seem poor, in a tall-towered tavern one night, Elric, Lord of the smoking ruins of Melniboné, smiled like a shark and drily jested with four powerful merchant princes whom, in a day or so, he intended to pauperise.

Moonglum the Outlander, Elric's companion, viewed the tall albino with admiration and concern. For Elric to laugh and joke was rare—but that he should share his good humour with men of the merchant stamp, that was unprecedented. Moonglum congratulated himself that he was Elric's friend and wondered upon the outcome of the meeting. Elric had, as usual, elaborated little of his plan to Moonglum.

"We need your particular qualities as swordsman and sorcerer, Lord Elric, and will, of course, pay well for them."



Pilarmo, overdressed, intense and scrawny, was main spokesman for the four.

"And how shall you pay, gentlemen?" enquired Elric politely, still smiling.

Pilarmo's colleagues raised their eyebrows and even their spokesman was slightly taken aback. He waved his hand through the smokey air of the tavern-room which was occupied only by the six men.

"In gold—in gems," answered Pilarmo.

"In chains," said Elric, "We free travellers need no chains of that sort."

Moonglum bent forward out of the shadows where he sat, his expression showing that he strongly disapproved of Elric's statement.

Pilarmo and the other merchants were plainly astonished, too. "Then how shall we pay you?"

"I will decide that later," Elric smiled. "But why talk of such things until the time—what do you wish me to do?"

Pilarmo coughed and exchanged glances with his peers. They nodded. Pilarmo dropped his tone and spoke slowly :

"You are aware that trade is highly competitive in this city, Lord Elric. Many merchants vie with one another to secure the custom of the people. Bakshaan is a rich city and its populace is comfortably off, in the main."

"This is well-known," Elric agreed; he was privately likening the well-to-do citizens of Bakshaan to sheep and himself to the wolf who would rob the fold. Because of these thoughts, his scarlet eyes were full of a humour which Moon-glum knew to be malevolent and ironic.

"There is one merchant in this city who controls more warehouses and shops than any other," Pilarmo continued. "Because of the size and strength of his caravans, he can afford to import greater quantities of goods into Bakshaan and thus sell them for lower prices. He is virtually a thief—he will ruin us with his unfair methods." Pilarmo was genuinely hurt and aggrieved.

"You refer to Nikorn of Ilmar?" Moonglum spoke from behind Elric.

Pilarmo nodded mutely.

Elric frowned. "This man heads his own caravans—braves the dangers of the desert, forest and mountain. He has earned his position."



"That is hardly the point," snapped fat Tormiel, beringed and powdered, his flesh a-quiver.

"No, of course not." Smooth-tongued Kelos patted his colleague's arm consolingly. "But we all admire bravery, I hope." His friends nodded. Silent Deinstaf, the last of the four, also coughed and wagged his hairy head. He put his unhealthy fingers on the jewelled hilt of an ornate but virtually useless poignard and squared his shoulders. "But," Kelos went on, glancing at Deinstaf with approval, "Nikorn takes no risks selling his goods cheaply—he's killing us with his low prices."

"Nikorn is a thorn in our flesh," Pilarmo elaborated unnecessarily.

"And you gentlemen require myself and my companion to remove this thorn," Elric stated.

"In a nutshell, yes." Pilarmo was sweating. He seemed more than a trifle wary of the smiling albino. Legends referring to Elric and his dreadful, doom-filled exploits were many and elaborately detailed. It was only because of their desperation that they had sought his help in this matter. They needed one who could deal in the nigromantic arts as well as wield a useful blade. Elric's arrival in Bakshaan was potential salvation for them.

"We wish to destroy Nikorn's power," Pilarmo continued. "And if this means destroying Nikorn, then—" He shrugged and half-smiled, watching Elric's face.

"Common assassins are easily employed, particularly in Bakshaan," Elric pointed out softly.

"Uh—true," Pilarmo agreed. "But Nikorn employs a sorcerer—and a private army. The sorcerer protects him and his palace by means of magic. And a guard of desert-men serve to ensure that if magic fails, then natural methods can be used for the purpose. Assassins have attempted to eliminate the trader, but unfortunately, they were not lucky."

Elric laughed. "How disappointing, my friends. Still, assassins are the most dispensable members of the community—are they not? And their souls probably went to placate some demon who would otherwise have plagued more honest folk."

The merchants laughed half-heartedly and, at this, Moon-glum grinned, enjoying himself from his seat in the shadows.



Elric poured wine for the other five. It was of a vintage which the law in Bakshaan forbade the populace from drinking. Too much drove the imbibers mad, yet Elric had already quaffed great quantities and showed no ill effects. He raised a cup of the yellow wine to his lips and drained it, breathing deeply and with satisfaction as the stuff entered his system. The others sipped theirs cautiously. The merchants were already regretting their haste in contacting the albino. They had a feeling that not only were the legends true—but they did not do justice to the strange-eyed man they wished to employ.

Elric poured more yellow wine into his goblet and his hand trembled slightly and his dry tongue moved over his lips quickly. His breathing increased as he allowed the beverage to trickle down his throat. He had taken more than enough to make other men into mewling idiots, but those few signs were the only indication that the wine had any effect upon him at all.

This was a wine for those who wished to dream of different and less tangible worlds. Elric drank it in the hope that he would, for a night or so, cease to dream.

Now he asked : "And who is this mighty sorcerer, Master Pilarmo?"

"His name is Theleb K'aarna," Pilarmo answered nervously. Elric's scarlet eyes narrowed. "The sorcerer of Pan Tang?"

"Aye—he comes from that island."

Elric put his cup down upon the table and rose, fingering his blade of black iron, the runesword *Stormbringer*.

He said with conviction : "I will help you, gentlemen." He had made up his mind not to rob them, after all. A new and more important plan was forming in his brain.

"*Theleb K'aarna*," he thought, "*So you have made Bakshaan your bolt-hole, eh?*"

Theleb K'aarna tittered. It was an obscene sound, coming as it did from the throat of a sorcerer of no mean skill. It did not fit with his sombre, black-bearded countenance, his tall, scarlet-robed frame. It was not a sound suited to one of his extreme wisdom.

Theleb K'aarna tittered and stared with dreamy eyes at the woman who lolled on the couch beside him. He whispered clumsy words of endearment into her ear and she smiled indulgently, stroking his long, black hair as she would stroke the coat of a dog.



"You're a fool, for all your learning, Theleb K'aarna," she murmured, her hooded eyes staring beyond him at the bright green and orange tapestries which decorated the stone walls of her bed-chamber. She reflected lazily that a woman could not but help take advantage of any man who put himself so into her power.

"Yishana, you are a bitch," Theleb K'aarna breathed foolishly, "And all the learning in the world cannot combat love. I love you." He spoke simply, directly, not understanding the woman who lay beside him. He had seen into the black bowels of hell and had returned sane, he knew secrets which would turn any ordinary man's mind into quivering, jumbled jelly. But in certain arts he was as unversed as his youngest acolyte. The art of love was one of those. "I love you," he repeated, and wondered why she ignored him.

Yishana, Queen of Jharkor, pushed the sorcerer away from her and rose abruptly, swinging bare, well-formed legs off the divan. She was a handsome woman, with hair as black as her soul; though her youth was fading, she had a strange evil quality about her which both repelled and attracted men. She wore her multi-coloured silks well and they swirled about her as, with light grace, she strode to the barred window of the chamber and stared out into the dark and turbulent night. The sorcerer watched her through narrow, puzzled eyes, disappointed at this halt to their love-making.

"What's wrong?"

The Queen continued to stare at the night sky. Great banks of black cloud moved like predatory monsters, swiftly across the wind-torn sky. The night was raucous and angry about Bakshaan; full of ominous portent.

Theleb K'aarna repeated his question and again received no answer. He stood up angrily, then, and joined her at the window.

"Let us leave now, Yishana, before it is too late. If Elric learns of our presence in Bakshaan, we shall both suffer." She did not reply, but her breasts heaved beneath the flimsy fabric and her mouth tightened.

The sorcerer growled, gripping her arm. "Forget your renegade freebooter, Elric—you have me now, and I can do much more for you than any sword-swinging medicine-man from a broken and senile empire!"

Yishana laughed unpleasantly and turned on her lover. "You are a fool, Theleb K'aarna, and you're much less of a man than Elric. Three aching years have passed since he deserted me, skulking off into the night on your trail and leaving me to pine for him ! But I still remember his savage kisses and his wild love-making. Gods ! I wish he had an equal. Since he left, I've never found one to match him—though many have tried and proved better than you—until your spells drove them off or destroyed them." She sneered, mocking and taunting him. "You've been too long among your parchments to be much good to me !"

The sorcerer's face muscles tautened beneath his tanned skin and he scowled. "Then why do you let me remain ? I could make you my slave with a potion—you know that !"

"But you wouldn't—and are thus *my* slave, mighty wizard. Your calling once forbade you to use your arts against mankind—yet, when Elric threatened to displace you in my affections, you conjured a demon and Elric was forced to fight it. He won you'll remember—but in his pride refused to compromise. You fled into hiding and he went in search of you—leaving me ! That is what you did. You're in *love*, Theleb K'aarna . . ." she laughed in his face. "And your love won't let you use your arts against me—only my other lovers. I put up with you because you are often useful, but if Elric were to return . . ."

Theleb K'aarna turned away, pettishly picking at his long black beard. Yishana said : "I half hate Elric, aye ! But that is better than half-loving you !"

The sorcerer snarled : "Then why did you join me in Bakshaan ? Why did you leave your brother's son upon your throne as regent and come here ? I sent word and you came—you must have some affection for me to do that !"

Yishana laughed again. "I heard that a pale-faced sorcerer with scarlet eyes and a howling runesword was travelling in the North East. That is why I came, Theleb K'aarna."

Theleb K'aarna's face twisted with anger as he bent forward and gripped the woman's shoulder in his taloned hand.

"You'll remember that this same pale-faced sorcerer was responsible for your own brother's death," he spat. "You lay with a man who was a slayer of his kin and yours. He deserted the fleet, which he had led to pillage his own land, when the Dragon-Masters retaliated. Darmit, your brother, was aboard



one of those ships and he now lies scorched and rotting on the ocean bed.”\*

Yishana shook her head wearily. “You always mention this and hope to shame me. Yes, I entertained one who was virtually my brother’s murderer—but Elric had ghastlier crimes on his conscience and I still loved him, in spite or because of them. Your words do not have the effect you require, Theleb K’aarna. Now leave me, I wish to sleep alone.”

The sorcerer’s nails were still biting into Yishana’s cool flesh. He relaxed his grip. “I am sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. “Let me stay.”

“Go,” she said softly. And, tortured by his own weakness, Theleb K’aarna, sorcerer of Pan Tang, left. Elric of Melnibone was in Bakshaan—and three years before, Elric had sworn several oaths of vengeance upon Theleb K’aarna. In his heart, the black-bearded sorcerer knew who would win any duel which might take place.

*Science Fantasy No. 47—“The Dreaming City”*

## t w o

The four merchants had left swathed in dark cloaks. They had not deemed it wise for anyone to be aware of their association with Elric. Now, Elric brooded over a fresh cup of yellow wine. He knew that he would need help of a particular and powerful kind, if he were going to capture Nikorn’s castle. It was virtually unstormable and, with Theleb K’aarna’s nigromantic protection, a particularly potent sorcery would have to be used. He knew that he was Theleb K’aarna’s match and more when it came to wizardry, but if all his energy were expended on fighting the other magician, he would have none left to effect an entry past the crack guard of desert warriors employed by the merchant prince.

He needed help. In the forests which lay to the south of Bakshaan, he knew he would find men whose aid would be useful. But would they help him? He discussed the problem with Moonglum.

“I have heard that a band of my countrymen have recently come north from Vilmir where they have pillaged several large towns,” he informed the Eastlander. “Since the great battle

of Imrryr five years ago, the men of Melnibone have spread outwards from the Dragon Isle, becoming mercenaries and freebooters. It was because of me that Imrryr fell—and this they know, but if I offer then rich loot, they might aid me.”

Moonglum smiled wryly. “I would not count on it, Elric,” he said. “Such an act as yours can hardly be forgotten, if you’ll forgive my frankness. Your countrymen are now unwilling wanderers, citizens of a razed city—the oldest and greatest the world has known. When Imrryr the Beautiful fell, there must have been many who wished great suffering upon you.”

Elric emitted a short laugh. “Possibly,” he agreed, “But these *are* my people and I know them. We Melniboneans are an old and sophisticated race—we rarely allow emotions to interfere with our general well-being.”

Moonglum raised his eyebrows in an ironic grimace and Elric interpreted the expression rightly. “I was an exception for a short while,” he said. “But now Cymoril and my cousin lie in the ruins of Imrryr and my own torment will avenge any ill I have done. I think my countrymen will realise this.”

Moonglum sighed. “I hope you are right, Elric. Who leads this band?”

“An old friend,” Elric answered. “He was Dragon Master and led the attack upon the reaver ships after they had looted Imrryr. His name is Dyvin Tvar, once Lord of the Dragon Caves.”

“And what of his beasts, where are they?”

“Asleep in the caves, again. They can be roused only once every century or so—they need years to recuperate while their venom is re-distilled and their energy revitalised. If it were not for this, the Dragon Masters would rule the world.”

“Lucky for you that they don’t,” Moonglum commented.

Elric said slowly: “Who knows? With me to lead them, they might yet. At least, we could carve a new empire from this world, just as our forefathers did.”

Moonglum said nothing. He thought, privately, that the younger countries would not be so easily vanquished. Melnibone and her people were ancient, cruel and wise—but even their cruelty was tempered with the soft disease which comes with age. They lacked the vitality of the barbarian race who had been the ancestors of the builders of Imrryr and her long-forgotten sister cities. Vitality was often replaced by



tolerance—the tolerance of the aged, the ones who have known past glory but whose day is done.

“In the morning,” said Elric, “we will make contact with Dyvim Tvar and hope that what he did to the reaver fleet, coupled with the conscience-pangs which I have personally suffered, will serve to make his attitude a little less irate.”

“And now, sleep, I think,” Moonglum said. “I need it, anyway—and the wench who awaits me might be growing impatient.”

Elric shrugged. “As you will. I’ll drink a little more wine and seek my bed later.”

The black clouds which had huddled over Bakshaan on the previous night, were still there in the morning. The sun rose behind them, but the inhabitants were unaware of it. It rose unheralded, but in the fresh, rain-splashed dawn, Elric and Moonglum rode the narrow streets of the city, heading for the south gate and the forests beyond.

Elric had discarded his usual garb for a simple jerkin of green-dyed leather which bore the insignia of the royal line of Melnibone : a scarlet dragon, rampant on a gold field. On his finger was the Ring of Kings, a single rare Actorious stone set in a ring of rune-carved silver. This was the ring that Elric’s mighty forefathers had worn ; it was many centuries old. A short cloak hung from his shoulders and his hose was also blue, tucked into high black riding boots. At his side hung *Storm-bringer*, even more ancient than the ring, forged by giants before the world gave birth to human offspring. An evil and terrible sword. A doomed and dreadful symbiosis existed between man and sword—they needed each other. The man without the sword would become a cripple, lacking sight and energy—the sword without the man could not drink the blood and the souls it needed for its existence. They rode together, sword and man, and none could tell which was master.

Moonglum, more conscious of the inclement weather than his friend, hugged a high-collared cloak around him and cursed the elements occasionally.

It took them an hour’s hard riding to reach the outskirts of the forest. As yet, in Bakshaan, there were only rumours of the Imrryrian freebooters’ coming. Once or twice, a tall stranger had been seen in obscure taverns near the southern wall, and this had been remarked upon but the citizens of Bakshaan felt

secure in their wealth and power and had reasoned, with a certain truth in their conviction, that Bakshaan could withstand a raid far more ferocious than those raids which had taken weaker Vilmirian towns. Elric had no idea why his countrymen had driven Northwards to Bakshaan. Possibly they had come only to rest and turn their loot into food supplies in the bazaars.

The smoke of several large campfires told Elric and Moon-glum where the Melniboneans were entrenched. With a slackening of pace, they guided their horses in that direction while wet branches brushed their faces and the scents of the forest, released by the life-bringing rain, impinged sweetly upon their nostrils. It was with a feeling akin to relaxation that Elric met the outguard who suddenly appeared from the undergrowth to bar their way along the forest trail.

The Imrryrian guard was swathed in furs and steel. Beneath the visor of an intricately worked helmet he peered at Elric with wary eyes. His vision was slightly impaired by the visor and the rain which dripped from it so that he did not immediately recognise Elric.

"Halt. What do you in these parts?"

Elric said impatiently. "Let me pass—it is Elric, your lord and your king."

The guard gasped and lowered the long-bladed spear he carried. He pushed back his helmet and gazed at the man before him with a myriad of different emotions passing across his face. Among these were amazement, reverence and hate.

He bowed stiffly. "This is no place for you, my liege. You renounced and betrayed your people five years ago and while I acknowledge the blood of kings which flows in your veins, I cannot obey you or do you the homage which it would otherwise be your right to expect."

"Of course," said Elric proudly, sitting his horse straight-backed. "But let your leader—my boyhood friend Dyvim Tvar—be the judge of how to deal with me. Take me to him at once and remember that my companion has done you no ill, but treat him with respect as befits the chosen friend of a King of Melnibone."

The guard bowed again and took hold of the reins of Elric's mount. He led the pair down the trail and into a large clearing wherein were pitched the tents of the men of Imrryr. Cooking



fires flared in the centre of the great circle of pavilions and the fine-featured warriors of Melnibone sat talking softly around them. Even in the light of the gloomy day, the fabrics of the tents were bright and gay. The soft tones were wholly Melnibonean in texture. Deep, smoky greens, azure, ochre, gold, dark blue. The colours did not clash—they blended. Elric felt sad nostalgia for the sundered, multi-coloured towers of his home-city, Imrryr the Beautiful.

As the two companions and their guide drew nearer, men looked up in astonishment and a low muttering replaced the sounds of ordinary conversation.

"Please remain here," the guard said to Elric. "I will inform Lord Dyvim Tvar of your coming." Elric nodded his acquiescence and sat firmly in his saddle conscious of the gaze of the gathered warriors. None approached him and some, whom Elric had known personally in the old days, were openly embarrassed. They were the ones who did not stare but rather averted their eyes, tending to the cooking fires or taking a sudden interest in the polish of their finely-wrought longswords and dirks. A few growled angrily, but they were in a definite minority. Most of the men were simply shocked—and also inquisitive. Why had this man, their king and their betrayer, come to their camp?

The largest pavilion, of gold and scarlet, had at its peak a banner upon which was emblazoned a dormant dragon, blue upon white. This was the tent of Dyvim Tvar and from it the Dragon Master hurried, buckling on his sword-belt, his intelligent eyes puzzled and wary.

Dyvim Tvar was a man a little older than Elric and he bore the stamp of Melnibonean nobility. His mother had been a princess, a cousin to Elric's own mother. His cheek-bones were high and delicate, his eyes slightly slanting while his skull was narrow, tapering at the jaw. Like Elric, his ears were thin, near lobeless and coming almost to a point. His hands, the left one now folded around the hilt of his longsword, were long-fingered and, like the rest of his skin, pale, though not nearly so pale as the dead-white of the albino's own skin. He strode towards the mounted King of Melnibone and now his emotions were controlled. When he was five feet away from Elric, Dyvim Tvar bowed slowly, his head bent and his face hidden. When he looked up again, his eyes met those of Elric and remained fixed.

"Dyvim Tvar, Lord of the Dragon Caves, greets King Elric, Master of Melnibone, Exponent of her Secret Arts." The Dragon Master spoke gravely the age-old ritual greeting.

Elric was not as confident as he seemed as he replied : "Elric, Master of Melnibone, greets his loyal subject and demands that he give audience to Dyvim Tvar." It was not fitting, by ancient Melnibonean standards, that the king should *request* an audience with one of his subjects and the Dragon Master understood this. He now said :

"I would be honoured if my liege would allow me to accompany him to my pavilion."

Elric dismounted and led the way towards Dyvim Tvar's pavilion. Moonglum also dismounted and made to follow, but Elric waved him back. The Two Imrryrian noblemen entered the tent.

Inside, a small oil-lamp augmented the gloomy daylight which filtered through the colourful fabric. The tent was simply furnished, possessing only a soldier's hard bed, a table and several carved wooden stools. Dyvim Tvar bowed and silently indicated one of these stools. Elric sat down.

For several moments, the two men said nothing. Neither allowed emotion to register on their controlled features. They simply sat and stared at one another. Eventually Elric said :

"You know me for a betrayer, a thief, a murderer of my own kin and a slayer of my countrymen, Dragon Master."

Dyvim Tvar nodded. "With my liege's permission, I will agree with him."

"We were never so formal in the old days, when alone," Elric said. "Let us forget ritual and tradition—Melnibone is broken and her sons are wanderers. We meet, as we used to, as equals—only, now, this is wholly true. We *are* equals. The Ruby Throne crashed in the ashes of Imrryr and now no king may sit in state."

Dyvim Tvar sighed. "This is true, Elric—but why have you come here? We were content to forget you. Even while thoughts of vengeance were fresh, we made no move to seek you out. Have you come to mock?"

"You know I would never do that, Dyvim Tvar. I rarely sleep, in these days, and when I do I have such dreams that I would rather be awake. You know that Yyrkoon forced me to do what I did when he put his sister, whom I loved, into a sorcerous slumber. To aid that reaver fleet was my only hope



of forcing him to undo his evil work and release his sister Cymoril from the spell. I was moved by vengeance and it was *Stormbringer*, my sword, which slew Cymoril, not I."

"Of this, I am aware." Dyvim Tvar sighed again and rubbed one jewelled hand across his face. "But it does not explain why you came here. There should be no contact between you and your people. We are wary of you Elric, for even if we allowed you to lead us again—you would take your own doomed path and us with you. There is no future there for myself and my men."

"Agreed. But I need your help for just one time—then our ways can part again."

"We should kill you, Elric. But which would be the greater crime? Failure to do justice and slay our betrayer—or regicide? You have given me a problem at a time when there are too many problems already. Should I attempt to solve it?"

"I but played a part in history," Elric said earnestly. "Time would have done what I did, eventually. I but brought the day nearer—and brought it when you and our people were still resilient enough to combat it and turn to a new way of life."

Dyvim Tvar smiled ironically. "That is one point of view, Elric—and it has truth in it, I grant you. But tell it to the men who lost their kin and their homes because of you. Tell it to warriors who had to tend maimed comrades, to brothers, fathers and husbands whose wives, daughters and sisters were used to pleasure the reaver pillagers."

"Aye," Elric dropped his eyes. When he next spoke it was quietly. "I can do nothing to replace what our people have lost—would that I could, for I yearn for Imrryr often, and her women, and her wines and entertainments. But I can offer something different. Rich plunder. I can offer you the richest palace in Bakshaan. Forget the old wounds and follow me this once."

"Do you seek the riches of Bakshaan, Elric? You were never one for jewels and precious metal! Why, Elric?"

"Oh, Gods!" Elric twisted his hands and ran them through his white hair. His red eyes were troubled. "For vengeance, once again, Dyvim Tvar. I owe a debt to a sorcerer from Pan Tang—Theleb K'aarna. You may have heard of him—he is fairly powerful for one of a comparatively young race."

"Then we're joined in this, Elric," Dyvim Tvar spoke grimly. "You are not the only Melnibonean who owes Theleb K'aarna a debt! Because of that bitch-queen Yishana of Jharkor, one of our men was done to death a year ago in a most foul and horrible manner. Killed by Theleb K'aarna because he gave his embraces to Yishana. We can unite to avenge that blood, King Elric, and it will be a fitting excuse for those who would rather have your blood on their knives."

Elric was not glad. He had a sudden premonition that this fortuitous coincidence was to have grave and unpredictable outcomings. But he smiled.

### t h r e e

In a smoking pit of Hell, somewhere beyond the limitations of space and time, a creature stirred. All around it, shadows moved. They were the shadows of the souls of men and these shadows which moved through the bright darkness were the masters of the creature. It allowed them to master it—so long as they paid its price. In the speech of men, this creature had a name. It was called *Quaolnargn* and would answer to this name if called.

Now it stirred. It heard its name carrying over the barriers which normally blocked its way to the Earth. The calling of the name effected a temporary pathway through those intangible barriers. It stirred again as its name was called for the second time. It was unaware of why it was called or to what it was called. It was only muzzily conscious of one fact. When the pathway was opened to it, it could *feed*. It did not eat flesh and it did not drink blood. It fed on the minds and the souls of adult men and women. Occasionally, as an appetizer, it enjoyed the morsels, the sweetmeats as it were, of the innocent life-force which it sucked from children. It ignored animals since there was not enough *awareness* in an animal to savour. The creature was, for all its alien stupidity, a gourmet and a connoisseur.

Now its name was called for the third time. It stirred again and flowed forward. The time was approaching when it could, once again, *feed* . . .

Theleb K'aarna shuddered. He was, basically, a man of peace. It was not his fault that his avaricious love for Yishana



had turned him mad. It was not his fault that, because of her, he had become initiated in the darker side of his chosen profession and now controlled several powerful and malevolent demons who, in return for the slaves and enemies he fed them, protected the palace of Nikorn the merchant. He felt, very strongly, that none of it was his fault. It was circumstance which had damned him. He wished sadly that he had never met Yishana. He shuddered again as he stood within the pentacle and summoned *Quaolnargn*. His embryonic talent for precognition had shown him a little of the near-future and he knew that Elric was preparing to do battle with him. Theleb K'aarna was taking the opportunity of summoning all the aid he could control. *Quaolnargn* must be sent to destroy Elric, if it could, before the albino reached the castle. Theleb K'aarna congratulated himself that he still retained the lock of white hair which had enabled him, in the past, to send another, now deceased, demon against Elric.

*Quaolnargn* knew that it was reaching its master. It propelled itself sluggishly forward and felt a stinging pain as it entered the alien continuum. It knew that its master's soul hovered before it but, for some reason, was disappointingly unattainable. Something was dropped in front of it. *Quaolnargn* scented at it and knew what it must do. This was part of its new *feed*. It flowed gratefully away, intent on finding its prey before the pain which was endemic of a prolonged stay in the strange place grew too much.

Elric rode at the head of his countrymen. On his right was Dyvim Tvar, the Dragon Master, on his left, Moonglum of Elwher. Behind him rode two hundred fighting men and behind them the wagons containing their loot, their war-machines and their slaves.

The caravan was resplendent with proud banners and the gleaming, long-bladed lances of Imrryr. They were clad in steel, with tapering greaves, helmets and shoulder-pieces. Their breastplates were polished and glinted where their long fur jerkins were open. Over the jerkins were flung bright cloaks of Imrryrian fabrics, scintillating in the watery sunshine. The archers were immediately close to Elric and his companions. They carried unstrung bone bows of tremendous power, which only they could use. On their backs were quivers crammed with black-fletched arrows. Then came the lancers, with their shining lances at a tilt to avoid the low branches of the trees.

Behind these rode the main strength—the Imrryrian swordsmen carrying longswords and shorter stabbing weapons which were too short to be real swords and too long to be named as knives. They rode, skirting Bakshaan, for the palace of Nikorn which lay to the North of Bakshaan. They rode, these men, in silence. They could think of nothing to say while Elric, their liege, led them to battle for the first time in fifteen years.

*Stormbringer*, the black hellblade, tingled under Elric's hand, anticipating a new sword-quenching. Moonglum fidgetted in his saddle, nervous of the forthcoming fight which he knew would involve dark sorcery. Moonglum had no liking for the sorcerous arts, or for the creatures they spawned. To his mind, men should fight their own battles without help and he knew that Elric agreed with this, though the albino was aware that sorcery could only be combatted by sorcery. They rode on, nervous and tense.

*Stormbringer* shook against Elric's side. A faint moan emanated from the metal and the tone was one of warning. Danger of a demoniac kind was approaching. Elric raised a hand and the cavalcade reined to a halt.

"There is something coming near which only I can deal with," he informed the men. "I will ride on ahead."

He spurred his horse into a wary canter, keeping his eyes before him. *Stormbringer's* voice was louder, sharper—a muted shriek. The horse trembled and Elric's own nerves were tense. He had not expected any kind of trouble so soon and he prayed that whatever evil was lurking in the forest was not directed against him.

"Arioch, be with me," he breathed. "Aid me now, and I'll dedicate a score of desert warriors to you. Aid me, Arioch."

Arioch was one of the ancient demon-gods of Melniboné—a powerful supernatural who could not be mastered. His aid had to be paid for with blood, souls and fealty. Most of the time he refused that aid.

A foul odour now forced itself into Elric's nostrils. He coughed and covered his mouth with his hands, his eyes darting around him, seeking the source of the stink. The horse whinnied. Elric jumped from the saddle and slapped his mount on the rump, sending it back along the trail. He crouched warily, *Stormbringer* now in his grasp, the black metal quivering from point to pommel.



He sensed it with the witch-sight of his forefathers before he saw it with his eyes. And he recognised its shape. He, himself, was one of its masters. But this time he had no control over *Quaolnargn*—he was standing in no pentacle and his only protection was his blade and his wits. He knew, also, of the power of *Quaolnargn* and shuddered. Could he overcome such a horror singlehandedly?

“*Arioch ! Arioch ! Aid me !*” It was a scream, high and desperate.

“*Arioch !*”

There was no time to conjure a spell. *Quaolnargn* was before him, a great green toad-thing which hopped along the trail obscenely, moaning to itself in its Earth-fostered pain. It towered over Elric so that the albino was in its shadow before it was ten feet away from him. Elric breathed quickly and screamed once more : “*Arioch ! Blood and souls, if you aid me, now !*”

Suddenly, the toad-demon leapt.

Elric sprang to one side, but was caught by a long-nailed foot which sent him flying into the undergrowth. *Quaolnargn* turned clumsily and its filthy mouth opened hungrily, displaying a deep toothless cavity from which a foul odour poured.

“*Arioch !*”

In its evil and alien insensitivity, the toad-thing did not even recognise the name of so powerful a demon-god. It could not be frightened—it had to be fought.

And as it approached Elric for the second time, the clouds belched rain from their bowels and a downpour lashed the forest.

Half-blinded by the rain smashing against his face, Elric backed behind a tree, his runesword ready. In ordinary terms, *Quaolnargn* was blind. It could not see Elric or the forest. It could not feel the rain. It could only see and smell men’s souls—its *feed*. The toad-demon blundered past him and, as it did so, Elric leapt high, holding his blade with both hands, and plunged it to the hilt into the demon’s soft and quivering back. Flesh—or whatever Earth-bound stuff formed the demon’s body—squelched nauseatingly. Elric pulled at *Stormbringer’s* hilt as the sorcerous sword seared into the hellbeast’s back, cutting down where the spine should be but where no spine was. *Quaolnargn* piped its pain. Its voice was thin and reedy, even in such extreme agony. It retaliated.

Elric felt his mind go numb and then his head was filled with a pain which was not natural in any sense. He could not even shriek. His eyes widened in horror as he realised what was happening to him. His soul was being drawn from his body. He knew it. He felt no physical weakness, he was only aware of looking out into . . .

But even that awareness was fading. Everything was fading, even the pain, even the dreadful hell-spawned pain.

"Arioch !" he croaked.

Savagely, he summoned strength from somewhere. Not from himself, not even from *Stormbringer*—from somewhere. Something was aiding him at last, giving him strength—enough strength to do what he must.

He wrenched the blade from the demon's back. He stood over *Quaolnargn*. Above him. He was floating somewhere, not in the air of Earth. Just floating over the demon. With thoughtful deliberation he selected a spot on the demon's skull which he somehow knew to be the only spot on his body where *Stormbringer* might slay. Slowly and carefully, he lowered *Stormbringer* and twisted the runesword through *Quaolnargn's* skull.

The toad-thing whimpered, dropped—and vanished.

Elric lay sprawled in the undergrowth, trembling the length of his aching body. He picked himself up slowly. All his energy had been drained from him. *Stormbringer*, too, seemed to have lost its vitality, but that, Elric knew would return and, in returning, bring him new strength.

But then he felt his whole frame tugged rigid. He was astounded. What was happening ? His senses began to blank out. He had the feeling that he was staring down a long, black tunnel which stretched into nowhere. Everything was vague. He was aware of motion. He was travelling. How—or where, he could not tell.

For brief seconds he travelled, conscious only of an unearthly feeling of motion and the fact that *Stormbringer*, his life, was clutched in his right hand.

Then he felt hard stone beneath him and he opened his eyes—or was it, he wondered, that his vision returned ?—and looked up at the gloating face above him.

"Theleb K'aarna," he whispered hoarsely, "How did you effect this ?"



The sorcerer bent down and tugged *Stormbringer* out of Elric's enfeebled grasp. He sneered. "I followed your commendable battle with my messenger, Lord Elric. When it was obvious that somehow you had summoned aid—I quickly conjured another spell and brought you here. Now I have your sword and your strength. I know that without it you are nothing. You are in my power, Elric of Melniboné."

Elric gasped air into his lungs. Gasped it agonisingly, for his whole body was pain-racked. He tried to smile, but it was no good. It was not in his nature to smile when he was beaten. "Give me back my sword," he croaked. "Give it back."

"We'll have you begging for it yet," said Theleb K'aarna with a self-satisfied smirk. He chuckled. "Who talks of vengeance, now, Elric?"

"Give me my sword and you can have your paltry life, scum!" Elric tried to rise but he was too weak. His vision blurred until he could hardly see the gloating sorcerer.

"And what kind of bargain is that?" Theleb K'aarna asked. "You are not a well man, Lord Elric—and sick men do not bargain. They beg."

Elric trembled in impotent anger. He tightened his mouth. He would not beg—neither would he bargain. In silence, he glowered at the sorcerer.

"I think what we'll do first," Theleb K'aarna said smiling, "is to lock this away." He hefted *Stormbringer* in his hand and turned towards a cupboard behind him. From his robes he produced a key with which he unlocked the cupboard and placed the runesword inside, carefully locking the door again when he had done so. "Then, I think, we'll show our virile hero to his ex-mistress—the sister of the man he betrayed five years ago."

Elric was astonished. "Yishana—here, in Bakshaan? I did not know."

"Best that you didn't—best that you didn't." Theleb K'aarna's chuckle was close to a madman's cackle. "For the good of both of you, really. Now you shall see your light of love—and she shall see the 'man' she has been pining for these three years."

Elric said nothing.

"After that," Theleb K'aarna continued, "my employer Nikorn shall be shown the assassin who thought he could do what others failed to achieve." He smiled. "What a day," he chuckled. "What a day ! So full. So rich with pleasure."

Theleb K'aarna tittered and picked up a hand-bell. He rang it. A door behind Elric opened and two tall desert warriors strode in. They glanced at Elric and then at Theleb K'aarna. They were evidently amazed.

"No questions," Theleb K'aarna snapped. "Take this refuse to the chambers of Queen Yishana."

Elric fumed as he was hefted up between the two. The men were dark-skinned, bearded and their eyes were deep-set beneath shaggy brows. They wore the heavy wool-trimmed metal caps of their race, and their armour was not of iron but of thick, leather-covered wood. Down a long corridor they lugged Elric's weakened body and one of them rapped sharply on a door.

Elric recognised Yishana's voice bid them enter. Behind the desert-men and their burden came the tittering, fussing sorcerer. "A present for you, Yishana," he called, "and a nice surprise."

The desert men entered. Elric could not see Yishana but he heard her gasp. "On the couch," directed the sorcerer. Elric was deposited on yielding fabric. He lay, completely exhausted on the couch, staring up at a bright lewd mural which had been painted on the ceiling.

Yishana bent over him. Elric could smell her erotic perfume. He said hoarsely : "An unprecedented re-union, Queen." Yishana's eyes were, for a moment, concerned, then they hardened and she laughed cynically.

"Oh—my hero has returned to me at last. But I'd rather he'd come at his own volition, not dragged here by the back of his neck like a puppy. The wolf's teeth have all been drawn and there's no one to savage me at nights." She turned away, disgust on her painted face. "Take him away, now, Theleb K'aarna. You have proved your point."

The sorcerer nodded.

"And now," he said, "to visit Nikorn—I think he should be expecting us by this time . . ."



## four

Nikorn of Ilmar was not a young man. He was well past fifty but had preserved his youth. His face was that of a peasant, firm-boned but not fleshy. He had the kind of face which because of its solid bone-structure, does not age much. His eyes were keen and hard as he stared at Elric who had been mockingly propped in a chair.

"So you are Elric of Melnibone, the Wolf of the Sighing Sea, spoiler, reaver and woman-slayer. I think that you could hardly slay a child now. However, I will say that it discomforts me to see any man in a such a position—particularly one who has been so active as you. Is it true what the spell-maker says? Were you sent here by my enemies to assassinate me?"

Elric was worrying about his men. What would they do now? Wait—or go on. If they stormed the palace now, then they were doomed—and so was he.

"Is it true?" Nikorn said insistently.

"No," whispered Elric. "My quarrel was with Theleb K'aarna. I have an old score to settle with him."

"I am disinterested in old scores, my friend," Nikorn said, not unkindly. "I *am* interested in preserving my life. Who sent you here?"

"Theleb K'aarna speaks falsely if he told you I was sent," Elric lied. "I was interested only in paying my debt."

"It is not only the sorcerer who told me, I'm afraid," Nikorn said. "I have many spies in the city and two of them independently informed me of a plot by local merchants to employ you to kill me."

Elric smiled faintly. "Very well," he agreed, "It was true, but I had no intention of doing what they asked."

Nikorn said: "I might believe you, Elric of Melnibone. But now I do not know what to do with you. I would not turn anyone over to Theleb K'aarna's mercies. May I have your word that you will not make an attempt on my life again?"

"Are we bargaining, Master Nikorn?" Elric said faintly.

"We are."

"Then what do I give my word in return for, sir?"

"Your life and freedom, Lord Elric."

"And my sword?"

Nikorn shrugged regretfully. "I'm sorry—not your sword."

"Then take my life," said Elric brokenly.

"Come now—my bargain's good. Have your life and freedom and give your word that you will not plague me again."

Elric breathed deeply. "Very well."

Nikorn moved away. Theleb K'aarna who had been standing in the shadows put a hand on the merchant's arm. "You're going to release him?"

"Aye," Nikorn said. "He's no threat to either of us now."

Elric was aware of a certain feeling of friendship in Nikorn's attitude towards him. He, too, felt something of the same. Here was a man both courageous and clever. This was how he had risen to the top of his chosen trade. But—Elric fought madness—without *Stormbringer*, what could he do?

The two-hundred Imrryrian warriors lay hidden in the undergrowth as dusk gave way to night. They watched and wondered. What had happened to Elric? Was he now in the castle as Dyvim Tvar thought? The Dragon Master was versed in the art of divining, to some extent—as were all members of the royal line of Melnibone. From what small spells he had conjured, it seemed that Elric now lay within the castle walls.

But without Elric to battle the sorcerer's power, how could they take it?"

Nikorn's palace was also a fortress, bleak and unlovely. It was surrounded by a deep moat of dark, stagnant water. It stood high above the surrounding forest, built *into* rather than *on to* the rock. Much of it had been carved out of the living stone. It was sprawling and rambling and covered a large area, surrounded by natural buttresses. The rock was porous in places, and slimy water ran down the walls of the lower parts, spreading through dark moss. It was not a pleasant place, judging from the outside, but it was almost certainly impregnable. Two hundred men could not take it, without the aid of magic.

Some of the Melnibonean warriors were becoming impatient. There were a few who muttered that Elric had, once again, betrayed them. Dyvim Tvar and Moonglum did not believe this. They had seen the signs of conflict—and heard them—in the forest.

They waited. Hoping for a signal from the castle itself.

They watched the castle's great main gate—and their patience was at last proved to be of value. The huge wood and



metal gate swung inwards on chains and a white-faced man in the tattered regalia of Melnibone appeared between two desert warriors. They were supporting him, it seemed. They pushed him forward—he staggered a few yards along the causeway of slimy stone which bridged the moat.

Then he fell. He began to crawl wearily, painfully, forward.

Moonglum growled. "What have they done to him? I must help him." But Dyvim Tvar held him back.

"No—it would not do to betray our presence here. Let him reach the forest first, then we can help him."

Even those who had cursed Elric, now felt pity for the albino as, staggering and crawling alternately, he dragged his body slowly towards them. From the battlements of the fortress a tittering laugh was borne, like the cry of a seabird, down to the ears of those below. They also caught a few words.

"What now, wolf?" said the voice. "What now?"

Moonglum clenched his hands and trembled with rage, hating to see his proud friend so mocked in his weakness. "What's happened to him? What have they done?"

"Patience," Dyvim Tvar said. "We'll find out in a short while."

It was an agony to wait until Elric finally crawled on his knees into the undergrowth.

Moonglum went forward to aid his friend. He put a supporting arm around Elric's shoulders but the albino snarled and shook it off, his whole countenance aflame with terrible hate—made more terrible because it was impotent. Elric could do nothing to destroy that which he hated. Nothing.

Dyvim Tvar said urgently: "Elric, you must tell us what happened. If we're to help you—we must know what happened."

Elric breathed heavily and nodded his agreement. His face partially cleared of the emotion he felt and weakly he stuttered out the story.

"So," Moonglum growled, "our plans come to nothing—and you have lost your strength for ever."

Elric shook his head. "There must be a way," he gasped. "There must!"

"What? How? If you have a plan, Elric—let me hear it now."

Elric swallowed thickly and mumbled. "Very well, Moonglum, you shall hear it. But listen carefully, for I have not the strength to repeat it."

Moonglum was a lover of the night, but only when it was lit by the torches found in cities. He did not like the night when it came to open countryside and he was not fond of it when it surrounded a castle such as Nikorn's, but he pressed on and hoped for the best.

If Elric had been right in his interpretation, then the battle might yet be won and Nikorn's palace taken. But it still meant danger for Moonglum and he was not one to deliberately put himself into danger. Moonglum felt that his selfless actions were definite proof of his friendship for the albino.

As he viewed the stagnant waters of the moat with distaste he reflected that this was enough to test any friendship to the utmost. Philosophically, he lowered himself down into the water and began to swim across it.

The moss on the fortress offered a flimsy handhold, but it led to ivy which gave a better grip. Moonglum slowly clambered up the wall. He hoped that Elric had been right and that Theleb K'aarna would need to rest for a while before he could work more sorcery. That was why Elric had suggested he make haste. Moonglum clambered on, and eventually reached the small unbarred window he sought. A normal size man could not have entered, but Moonglum's small frame was proving useful.

He wriggled through the gap, shivering with cold, and landed on the hard stone of a narrow staircase which ran both up and down the interior wall of the fortress. Moonglum frowned, and then took the steps leading upwards. Elric had given him a rough idea of how to reach his destination.

Expecting the worst, he went soft-footed up the stone steps. He went towards the chambers of Yishana, Queen of Jharkor.

In an hour, Moonglum was back, shivering with cold and dripping with water. In his hands he carried *Stormbringer*. He carried the runesword with cautious care—nervous of its sentient evil. It was alive again ; alive with black, pulsating life.

"Thank the gods I was right," Elric murmured weakly from where he lay surrounded by two or three Imrryrians, including Dyvim Tvar who was staring at the albino with concern. "I prayed that I was correct in my assumption and Theleb K'aarna was resting after his earlier exertions on my behalf . . ."



He stirred, and Dyvim Tvar helped him to sit upright. Elric reached out a long white hand—reached like an addict of some terrible drug towards the sword. “Did you give her my message?” he asked as he gratefully seized the pommel.

“Aye,” Moonglum said shakily, “and she agreed. You were also right in your other interpretation, Elric. It did not take her long to inveigle the key out of a weary Theleb K’aarna. The sorcerer was tremendously tired and Nikorn was becoming nervous wondering if an attack of any kind would take place while Theleb K’aarna was incapable of action. She went herself to the cupboard and got me the blade.”

“Women can sometimes be useful,” said Dyvim Tvar dryly. “Though usually, in matters like these, they’re a hindrance.” It was possible to see that something other than immediate problems of taking the castle were worrying Dyvim Tvar, but no-one thought to ask him what it was that bothered him. It seemed a personal thing.

“I agree, Dragon Master,” Elric said, almost gaily. The gathered men were aware of the strength which poured swiftly back into the albino’s deficient veins, imbuing him with a new hellborn vitality. “It is time for our vengeance. But remember—no harm to Nikorn. I gave him my word.”

He folded his right hand firmly around *Stormbringer’s* hilt. “Now for a sword-quenching. Arioch, Demon God of Melnibone, is with us. He needs me, particularly, to pay what I owe him for his help in the last battle I had with Theleb K’aarna’s puny spawning. Now, we shall deal with Theleb K’aarna. I believe I can obtain the help of just the allies we need to keep the sorcerer occupied while we storm the castle. I’ll need no pentacle to summon my friends of the air!”

Moonglum licked his long lips. “So it’s sorcery again. In truth, Elric, this whole country is beginning to stink of wizardry and the minions of Hell.”

Elric murmured for his friend’s ears: “No Hell-beings these—but honest elementals, cleaner and more wholesome than the scum of Hell, but equally as powerful in many ways. Curb your belly-fear, Moonglum—a little more simple conjuring and Theleb K’aarna will have no desire to retaliate against me again.”

The albino frowned, remembering the secret pacts of his forefathers. He took a deep breath and closed his pain-filled scarlet eyes. He swayed, the runesword half-loose in his grip.

His chant was low, like the far-off moaning of the wind itself. His chest moved quickly up and down, and some of the younger warriors, those who had never been fully initiated into the ancient lore of Melnibone, stirred with discomfort. Elric's voice was not addressing human folk—his words were for the invisible, the intangible—the supernatural. An old and ancient rhyme began the casting of word-runes . . .

*"Hear the doomed one's dark decision,  
Let the Wind Giant's wail be heard,  
Graoll and Misha's mighty moaning  
Send my enemy like a bird.*

*"By the sultry scarlet stones,  
By the bane of my black blade,  
By the Lasshaar's lonely mewling,  
Let a mighty wind be made.*

*"Speed of sunbeams from their homeland,  
Swifter than the sundering storm,  
Speed of arrow deerwards shooting,  
Let the sorcerer so be borne."*

His voice broke and he called high and clear :

*"Misha ! Misha ! In the name of my fathers I summon thee,  
Lord of the Winds !"*

Almost at once, the trees of the forest suddenly bent as if some great hand had brushed them aside. A terrible souging voice swam from nowhere. And all but Elric, deep in his trance, shivered.

"ELRIC OF MELNIBONE," the voice roared like a distant storm, "I KNEW YOUR FATHERS. I KNOW THEE. THE DEBT WE OWE THE LINE OF ELRIC IS FORGOTTEN BY MORTALS BUT GRAOLL AND MISHA, KINGS OF THE WIND GIANTS, REMEMBER. HOW MAY THE LASSHAAR AID THEE ?"

The voice seemed almost friendly—but proud and aloof and awe-inspiring.

Elric, completely in a state of trance now, jerked his whole body in convulsions. His voice shrieked piercingly from his throat—and the words were alien, unhuman, violently disturbing to the ears and nerves of the human listeners. Elric spoke briefly and then the invisible Wind Giant's great voice roared and sighed :



"I WILL DO AS YOU DESIRE." Then the trees bent once more and the forest was still and muted.

Somewhere in the gathered ranks, a man sneezed sharply and this was a sign for others to start talking—speculating.

For many moments, Elric remained in his trance and then, quite suddenly, he opened his enigmatic eyes and looked gravely around him, puzzled for a second. Then he clasped *Stormbringer* more firmly and leaned forward, speaking to the men of Imrryr. "Soon Theleb K'aarna will be in our power, my friends, and so also will we possess the loot of Nikorn's palace!"

The men growled their bloodlust and even Moonglum became excited at the prospect of the mighty siege ahead of them.

But Dyvim Tvar shuddered then. "I'm not so given to the esoteric arts as you, Elric," he said quietly. "But in my soul I see three wolves leading a pack to slaughter and one of those wolves must die. My doom is near me, I think."

Elric said uncomfortably: "Worry not, Dragon Master. You'll live to mock the ravens and spend the spoils of Bakshaan." But his voice was not entirely convincing, even to his own ears.

## five

In his bed of silk and ermine, Theleb K'aarna stirred and awoke. He had a brooding inkling of coming trouble and he remembered that earlier in his tiredness he had given more to Yishana than had been wise. He could not remember what it was and now he had a presentment of danger—the closeness of which overshadowed thoughts of any past indiscretion. He arose hurriedly and pulled his robe over his head, shrugging into it as he walked towards a strangely-silvered mirror which was set on one wall of his chamber and reflected no image.

With bleary eyes and trembling hands he began preparations. From one of the many earthenware jars resting on a bench near the window, he poured a substance which seemed like dried blood mottled with the hardened blue venom of the black serpent whose homeland was in far Dorel which lay on the edge of the world. Over this, he muttered a swift incantation,

scooped the stuff into a crucible and hurled it at the mirror, one arm shielding his eyes. A crack sounded, hard and sharp to his ears, and bright green light erupted suddenly and was gone. The mirror flickered deep within itself, the silvering seemed to undulate and flicker and flash and then a picture began to form.

Theleb K'aarna knew that the sight he witnessed had taken place in the recent past. It showed him Elric's summoning of the Wind Giants.

Theleb K'aarna's dark features grinned with a terrible fear. His hands jerked as spasms shook him. Half-gibbering, he rushed back to his bench and, leaning his hands upon it, stared out of the window into the deep night. He knew what to expect.

A great and dreadful storm was blowing—and he was the object of the Lasshaar's attack. He *had* to retaliate, else his own soul would be wrenched from him by the Giants of the Wind and flung to the air spirits, to be borne for eternity on the winds of the world. Then his voice would moan like a banshee around the cold peaks of high ice-clothed mountains for ever—lost and lonely. His soul would be damned to travel with the four winds wherever their caprice might bear it, knowing no rest.

Theleb K'aarna had a respect born of fear for the powers of the aeromancer, the rare wizard who could control the wind elementals—and aeromancy was only one of the divining arts which Elric and his ancestors possessed. Then Theleb K'aarna realised what he was battling—ten thousand years and hundreds of generations of sorcerers who had gleaned knowledge from the Earth and beyond it and passed it down to the albino whom he, Theleb K'aarna, had sought to destroy. Then Theleb K'aarna fully regretted his actions. Then—it was too late.

The sorcerer had no control over the powerful Wind Giants as Elric had. His only hope was to combat one element with another. The fire-spirits must be summoned, and quickly. All of Theleb K'aarna's pyromantic powers would be required to hold off the ravening supernatural winds which were soon to shake the air and the earth. Even Hell would shake to the sound and the thunder of the Wind Giant's wrath.

Quickly, Theleb K'aarna marshalled his thoughts and, with trembling hands, began to make strange passes in the air and promise unhealthy pacts with whichever of the powerful fire



elementals would help him this once. He promised himself to eternal death for the sake of a few more years of life.

With the gathering of the Wind Giants came the thunder and the rain. The lightning flashed sporadically, but not lethally. It never touched the earth. Elric, Moonglum, and the men of Imrryr were aware of disturbing movements in the atmosphere, but only Elric with his witch sight could see a little of what was happening. The Lasshaar Giants were invisible to other eyes.

The war engines which the Imrryrians were even now constructing from pre-fashioned parts were puny things compared to the Wind Giant's might. But victory depended upon these engines since the Lasshaar's fight would be with the supernatural not the natural.

Battle-rams and siege ladders were slowly taking shape as the warriors worked with frantic speed. The hour of the storming came closer as the wind rose and thunder rattled. The moon was blanked out by huge billowings of black cloud, and the men worked by the light of torches. Surprise was no great asset in an attack of the kind planned.

Two hours before dawn, they were ready.

At last the men of Imrryr, Elric, Dyvim Tvar and Moonglum riding high at their head, moved towards the castle of Nikorn. As they did so, Elric raised his voice in an unholy shout—and thunder rumbled in answer to him. A great gout of lightning seared out of the sky towards the palace and the whole place shook and trembled as a ball of mauve and orange fire suddenly appeared over the castle and *absorbed* the lightning ! The battle between fire and air had begun.

The surrounding countryside was alive with a weird and malignant shrieking and moaning, deafening to the ears of the marching men. They sensed conflict all round them. and only a little was visible.

Over most of the castle an unearthly glow hung, waxing and waning, defending a gibbering wretch of a sorcerer who knew that he was doomed if once the Lords of the Flame gave way to the roaring Wind Giants.

Elric smiled without humour as he observed the war. On the supernatural plane, he now had little to fear. But there was still the castle and he had no extra supernatural aid to help him take that. Swordplay and skill in battle was the only hope against the ferocious desert warriors who now crowded the

battlements, preparing to destroy the two hundred men who came against them.

Up rose the Dragon Standards their cloth-of-gold fabric flashing in the eery glow. Spread out, walking slowly, the sons of Imrryr moved forward to do battle. Up, also, rose the siege ladders as captains directed warriors to begin the assault. The defender's faces were pale spots against the dark stone and thin shouts came from them ; but it was impossible to catch their words.

Two great battle-rams, fashioned the day before, were brought to the vanguard of the approaching warriors. The narrow causeway was a dangerous one to pass over, but it was the only means of crossing the moat at ground level. Twenty men carried each of the great iron-tipped rams and now they began to run forward while arrows hailed downwards. Their shields protecting them from most of the shafts, the warriors reached the causeway and rushed across it. Now the first ram connected with the gate. It seemed to Elric as he watched this operation that nothing of wood and iron could withstand the vicious impact of the ram, but the gates shivered almost imperceptibly—and held !

Like vampires, hungry for blood, the men howled and staggered aside crabwise to let pass the log held by their comrades. Again the gates shivered, more easily noticed this time, but they yet held.

Dyvim Tvar roared encouragement to those now scaling the siege ladders. These were brave, almost desperate men, for few of the first climbers would reach the top and even if they were successful, they would be hard-pressed to stay alive until their comrades arrived.

Boiling lead hissed from great cauldrons set on spindles so that they could be easily emptied and filled quickly. Many a brave Imrryrian warrior fell earthwards, dead from the searing metal before he reached the sharp rocks beneath. Large stones were released out of leather bags hanging from rotating pulleys which could swing out beyond the battlements and rain bone-crushing death on the besiegers. But still the invaders advanced, voicing half-a-hundred war-shouts and steadily scaling their long ladders, whilst their comrades, using a shield barrier still, to protect their heads, concentrated on breaking down the gates.



Elric and his two companions could do little to help the scalers or the rammers at that stage. All three were hand-to-hand fighters, leaving even the archery to their rear ranks of bowmen who stood in rows and shot their shafts high into the castle defenders.

The gates were beginning to give. Cracks and splits appeared in them, ever widening. Then, all at once, when hardly expected, the right gate creaked on tortured hinges and fell. A triumphant roar erupted from the throats of the invaders and, dropping their hold on the logs, they led their companions through the breach, axes and maces swinging like scythes and flails before them — and enemy heads springing from necks like wheat from the stalk.

“The castle is ours !” shouted Moonglum, running forward and upward towards the gap in the archway. “The castle’s taken.”

“Speak not too hastily of victory,” replied Dyvim Tvar, but he laughed as he spoke and ran as fast as the others to reach the castle.

“And where is your doom, now ?” Elric called to his fellow Melnibonean, then broke off sharply when Dyvim Tvar’s face clouded and his mouth set grimly. For a moment there was tension between them, even as they ran, then Dyvim Tvar laughed loud and made a joke of it. “It lies somewhere, Elric, it lies somewhere—but let us not worry about such things, for if my doom hangs over me, I cannot stop its descent when my hour arrives !” He slapped Elric’s shoulder, feeling for the albino’s uncharacteristic confusion.

Then they were under the mighty archway and in the courtyard of the castle where savage fighting had developed almost into single duels, enemy choosing enemy and fighting him to the death.

*Stormbringer* was the first of the three men’s blades to take blood and send a desertman’s soul to Hell. The song it sang as it was lashed through the air in strong strokes was an evil one —evil and triumphant.

The dark-faced desert warriors were famous for their courage and skill with swords. Their curved blades were reaping havoc in the Imyrryrian ranks for, at that stage, the desert men far outnumbered the Melnibonean force.

Somewhere above, the inspired scalers had got a firm foothold on the battlements and were closing with the men of

Nikorn, driving them back, forcing many over the unrailed edges of the parapets. A falling, still screaming warrior plummeted down, to land almost on Elric, knocking his shoulder and causing him to fall heavily to the blood- and rain-slick cobbles. A badly scarred desert man, quick to see his chance, moved forward with a gloating look on his travesty of a face. His scimitar moved up, poised to hack Elric's neck from his shoulders and then his helmet split open and his forehead spurted a sudden gout of blood.

Dyvim Tvar wrenched a captured axe from the skull of the slain warrior and grinned at Elric as the albino rose.

"We'll both live to see victory, yet," he shouted over the din of the warring elementals above them and the sound of clashing arms. "My doom, I will escape until—" He broke off, a look of surprise on his fine-boned face, and Elric's stomach twisted inside him as he saw a steel point appear in Dyvim Tvar's right side. Behind the Dragon Master, a maliciously smiling desert warrior pulled his blade from Dyvim Tvar's body. Elric cursed and rushed forward. The man put up his blade to defend himself, backing hurriedly away from the infuriated albino. *Stormbringer* swung up and then down, it howled a death-song and sheared right through the curved steel of Elric's opponent—and it kept on going, straight through the man's shoulder blade, splitting him half in two. Elric turned back to Dyvim Tvar who was still standing up, but was pale and strained. His blood dripped from his wound and seeped through his garments.

"How badly are you hurt?" Elric said anxiously, "Can you tell?"

"That trollspawn's sword passed through my ribs, I think—no vitals were harmed." Dyvim Tvar gasped and tried to smile. "I'm sure I'd know if he'd made more of the wound."

Then he fell. And when Elric turned him, he looked into a dead and staring face. The Dragon Master, Lord of the Dragon Caves, would never tend his beasts again.

Elric felt sick and weary as he got up, standing over the body of his kinsmen. Because of me, he thought, another fine man has died. But this was the only conscious thought he allowed himself for the meantime. He was forced to defend himself from the slashing swords of a couple of desert men who came at him in a rush.



The archers, their work done outside, come running through the breach in the gate and their arrows poured into the enemy ranks.

Elric shouted loudly : " My kinsmen Dyvim Tvar lies dead, stabbed in the back by a desert warrior—avenge him brethren. Avenge the Dragon Master of Imrryr !"

A low moaning came from the throats of the Melniboneans and their attack was even more ferocious than before. Elric called to a bunch of axe-men who ran down from the battlements, their victory assured.

" You men, follow me. We can avenge the blood that Theleb K'aarna took !" He had a good idea of the geography of the castle.

Moonglum shouted from somewhere. " One moment, Elric, and I'll join you !" A desert warrior fell, his back to Elric, and from behind him emerged a grinning Moonglum, his sword covered in blood from point to pommel.

Elric led the way to a small door, set into the main tower of the castle. He pointed at it and spoke to the axe-men. " Set to with your axes, lads, and hurry !"

Grimly, the axe-men began to hack at the tough timber. Impatiently, Elric watched as the wood chips began to fly.

The conflict was appalling. Theleb K'aarna sobbed in frustration. Kakatal, the Fire Lord, and his minions were having little effect on the Wind Giants. Their power appeared to be increasing if anything. The sorcerer gnawed his knuckles and quaked in his chamber while below him the human warriors fought, bled and died. Theleb K'aarna made himself concentrate on one thing only—total destruction of the Lasshaar forces. But he knew, somehow, even then, that sooner or later, in one way or another, he was doomed.

The axes drove deeper and deeper into the stout timber. At last it gave. " We're through, King Elric," one of the axe-men indicated the gaping hole they'd made.

Elric reached his arm through the gap and prised up the bar which secured the door. The bar moved upwards and then fell with a clatter to the stone flagging. Elric put his shoulder to the door and pushed.

Above them, now, two huge, almost-human figures had appeared in the sky, outlined against the night. One was golden and glowing like the sun and seemed to wield a great

sword of fire. The other was dark blue and silver, writhing, smoke-like, with a flickering spear of restless orange in his hand.

Misha and Kakatal clashed. The outcome of their mighty struggle might well decide Theleb K'aarna's fate.

"Quickly," Elric said. "Upwards!"

They ran up the stairs. The stairs which led to Theleb K'aarna's chamber.

Suddenly the men were forced to stop as they came to a door of jet-black, studded with crimson iron. It had no keyhole, no bolts, no bars, but it was quite secure. Elric directed the axemen to begin hewing at it. All six struck at the door in unison.

In unison, they screamed and vanished. Not even a wisp of smoke remained to mark where they had disappeared.

Moonglum staggered backward, eyes wide in fear. He was backing away from Elric who remained firmly by the door, *Stormbringer* throbbing in his hand. "Get out, Elric—this is a sorcery of terrible power. Let your friends of the air finish the wizard!"

Elric shouted half-hysterically: "Magic is best fought by magic!" He hurled his whole body behind the blow which he struck at the black door. *Stormbringer* whined into it, shrieked as if in victory and howled like a soul-hungry demon. There was a blinding flash, a roaring in Elric's ears, a sense of weightlessness; and then the door had crashed inwards. Moonglum witnessed this—he had remained against his will.

"*Stormbringer* has rarely failed me, Moonglum," cried Elric as he leapt through the aperture, "Come, we have reached Theleb K'aarna's den—" He broke off, staring at the gibbering thing on the floor. It had been a man. It had been Theleb K'aarna. Now it was hunched and twisted—sitting in the middle of a broken pentacle and tittering to itself.

Suddenly, intelligence came into its eyes. "Too late for vengeance, Lord Elric," it said. "I have won, you see—I have claimed your vengeance as my own."

Grim-faced and speechless, Elric stepped forward, lifted *Stormbringer* and brought the moaning runesword down into the sorcerer's skull. He left it there for several moments.

"Drink your fill, hell-blade," he murmured. "We have earned it, you and I."

Overhead, there was a sudden silence.



## s i x

"It's untrue ! You lie !" Screamed the frightened man. "We were not responsible." Pilarmo faced the group of leading citizens. Behind the overdressed merchant were his three colleagues—those who had earlier met Elric and Moon-glum in the tavern.

One of the accusing citizens pointed a chubby finger toward the North and Nikorn's palace.

"So—Nikorn was an enemy of all other traders in Bakshaan. That I accept. But now a horde of bloody-handed reavers attack his castle with the aid of demons—and Elric of Melni-bone leads them ! You know that you were responsible—the gossip's all over the city. You employed Elric—and this is what's happened !"

"But we didn't know he would go to such lengths to kill Nikorn !" Fat Tormiel wrung his hands, his face aggrieved and afraid. "You are wronging us. We only . . ."

"We're wronging *you* !" Faratt, spokesman for his fellow citizens was thick-lipped and florid. He waved his hands in angry exasperation. "When Elric and his jackals have done with Nikorn—they'll come to the city. Fool ! That is what the albino sorcerer planned to begin with. He was only mocking you—for you provided him with an excuse. Armed men we can fight—but not foul sorcery !"

"What shall we do ? What shall we do ? Bakshaan will be razed within the day !" Tormiel turned on Pilarmo. "This was your idea—you think of a plan !"

Pilarmo stuttered : "We could pay a ransom—bribe them—give them enough money to satisfy them."

"And who shall give this money ?" asked Faratt.

Again the argument began.

Elric looked with distaste at Theleb K'aarna's broken corpse. He turned away and faced a blanch-featured Moonglum who said hoarsely : "Let's away, now Elric. Yishana awaits you in Bakshaan as she promised. You must keep your end of the bargain I made for you."

Elric nodded wearily. "Aye—the Imrryrians seem to have taken the castle by the sound of it. We'll leave them to their spoiling and get out while we may. Will you allow me a few moments here, alone ?"

Moonglum sighed thankfully, incredulous though he was of Elric's uncharacteristic courtesy. "I'll join you in the courtyard within the quarter hour. I wish to claim some measure of the spoils." He left clattering cheerfully down the stairs while Elric remained standing over his enemy's body. He spread out his arms, the sword, dripping blood, still in his hand.

"Dyvim Tvar," he cried. "Dyvim Tvar. You and our countryman have been avenged. Let any evil one who holds the soul of Dyvim Tvar release it now and take instead the soul of Theleb K'aarna."

Within the room something invisible and intangible—but sensed all the same—flowed and hovered over the sprawled body of Theleb K'aarna. Elric looked out of the window and thought he heard the beating of dragon wings—smelled the acrid breath of dragons—saw a shape winging across the dawn sky bearing Dyvim Tvar the Dragon Master away to a land where dragons never slumbered and where a myriad dimensions blended under a never-setting sun.

Elric half-smiled. "The Gods of Melnibone protect thee wherever thou art," he said quietly and turned away from the carnage, leaving the room.

On the stairway, he met Nikorn of Ilmar.

The merchant's rugged face was full of anger. He trembled with rage. There was a big sword in his hand.

"So I've found you, wolf," he said. "I gave you your life—and you have done this to me!"

Elric said tiredly: "It was to be. But I gave my word that I would not take your life and, believe me, I would not, Nikorn, even had I not pledged my word."

Nikorn stood two steps from the door blocking the exit. "Then I'll take yours. Come—engage!" He moved out into the courtyard, half-stumbled over an Imrryrian corpse, righted himself and waited, glowering, for Elric to emerge. Elric did so, his runesword sheathed.

"No."

"Defend yourself, wolf!"

Automatically, the albino's right hand crossed to his sword hilt, but he still did not unsheath it. Nikorn cursed and aimed a well-timed blow which barely missed the white-faced sorcerer. He skipped back and now he tugged out *Stormbringer*, still reluctant, and stood poised and wary, waiting for the Bakshaanite's next move.



Elric intended simply to disarm Nikorn. He did not want to kill or maim this brave man who had spared him when he had been entirely at the other's mercy.

Nikorn swung another powerful stroke at Elric and the albino parried. *Stormbringer* was moaning softly, shuddering and pulsating. Metal clanged and then the fight was on in full earnest as Nikorn's rage turned to calm, possessed fury. Elric was forced to defend himself with all his skill and power. Though older than the albino, and a city merchant, Nikorn was a superb swordsman. His speed was fantastic and, at times, Elric was not on the defensive only because he desired it.

But something was happening to the runeblade. It was twisting in Elric's hand and forcing him to make a counter-attack. Nikorn backed away—a light akin to fear in his eyes as he realised the potency of Elric's hell-forged steel. The merchant fought grimly—and Elric did not fight at all. He felt entirely in the power of the whining sword which hacked and cut at Nikorn's guard.

*Stormbringer* suddenly shifted in Elric's hand. Nikorn screamed. The runesword left Elric's grasp and plunged on its own accord towards the heart of his opponent.

"No !" Elric tried to catch hold of his blade but could not. *Stormbringer* plunged into Nikorn's great heart and wailed in demoniac triumph. "No !" Elric got hold of the hilt and tried to pull it from Nikorn. The merchant shrieked in hell-brought agony. He should have been dead.

He still half-lived.

"It's taking me—the thrice-damned thing is taking me !" Nikorn gurgled horribly, clutching at the black steel with hands turned to claws. "Stop it, Elric—I beg you, stop it ! Please !"

Elric tried again to tug the blade from Nikorn's heart. He could not. It was rooted in flesh, sinew and vitals. It moaned greedily, drinking into it all that was the being of Nikorn of Ilmar. It sucked the life-force from the dying man and all the while its voice was soft and disgustingly sensuous. Still Elric struggled to pull the sword free. It was impossible. "Damn you !" he moaned. "This man was almost my friend—I gave him my word not to kill him." But *Stormbringer*, though sentient, could not hear its master.

Then Nikorn shrieked once more, the shriek dying to a low, lost whimper. And then his body died.

It died—and the soul-stuff of Nikorn joined the souls of the countless others, friends, kin and enemies who had gone to feed that which fed Elric of Malnibone.

Elric sobbed.

“Gods of Melnibone—why is this curse upon me? Why?”

He collapsed to the ground in the dirt and the blood.

Minutes later, Moonglum came upon his friend lying face downward. He grasped Elric by his shoulder and turned him. He shuddered when he saw the albino’s agony-racked face.

“What happened?”

Elric raised himself on one elbow and pointed to where Nikorn’s body lay a few feet away. “Another, Moonglum. I’ve done it once again. Oh, curse this blade!”

Moonglum said uncomfortably: “He would have killed you no doubt. Do not think about it. Many a word’s been broken through no fault of he who gave it. Come, my friend, Yishana awaits us in the Tavern of the Purple Dove. Come.”

Elric struggled upright and began to walk slowly towards the battered gates of the palace where horses awaited them.

As they rode for Bakshaan, not knowing what concern was troubling the people of that city, Elric tapped *Stormbringer* which hung, once more, at his side. His eyes were hard and moody, turned inwards on his own feelings.

“Be wary of this devil-blade, Moonglum. It kills the foe—but savours the blood of friends and kin-folk most.”

Moonglum shook his head quickly, as if to clear it, and looked away. He said nothing.

Elric made as if to speak again but then changed his mind. He needed to talk, then. He needed to—but there was nothing to say, at all.

Pilarmo scowled. He stared, hurt-faced, as his slaves struggled with his chests of treasure, lugging them out to pile them in the street beside his great house. In other parts of the city, Pilarmo’s three colleagues were also in various stages of heart-break. Their treasure, too, was being dealt with in a like manner. The burghers of Bakshaan had decided who was to pay any possible ransom.

And then a ragged citizen was shambling down the street, pointing behind him and shouting.

“The albino and his companion—at the North gate. They’re coming! Elric comes!”



The burghers who stood near to Pilarmo exchanged glances. Farratt swallowed.

He said : " Elric comes to bargain. Quick. Open the treasure chests and tell the city guard to admit him through the gate." One of the citizens scurried off.

Within a few minutes, while Farratt and the rest worked frantically to expose Pilarmo's treasure to the gaze of the approaching albino, Elric was galloping up the street, Moon-glum beside him. Both men were expressionless. They knew enough not to show their puzzlement.

" What's this ?" Elric said, casting a look at Pilarmo.

Faratt cringed. " Treasure," he whined. " Yours, Lord Elric—for you and your men. There's much more. There is no need to use sorcery. No need for your men to attack us. The treasure here is fabulous—its value is enormous. Will you take it and leave the city in peace ?"

Moonglum almost smiled, but he controlled his features.

Elric said coolly : " It will do. Very well, I accept—but make sure this and the rest is delivered to my men at Nikorn's castle or we'll be roasting you and your friends over open fires by the morrow."

Faratt coughed suddenly, trembling. " As you say, Lord Elric. It shall be delivered."

The two men wheeled their horses in the direction of the Tavern of the Purple Dove. When they were out of earshot Moonglum said : " From what I gathered, back there, it's Master Pilarmo and his friends who are paying that unasked for toll."

Elric was incapable of any real humour, but he half-chuckled. " Aye. I'd planned to rob them from the start—and now their own fellows have done it for us. On our way back, we shall take our pick of the spoils."

He rode on and reached the tavern. Yishana was waiting there, nervously, dressed for travelling.

When she saw Elric's face she sighed with satisfaction and smiled silkily. " So Theleb K'aarna is dead," she said. " Good—now we can resume our interrupted relationship, Elric."

The albino nodded. " That was my part of the bargain—you kept yours when you helped Moonglum to get my sword back for me." He was calm-faced—showing no emotion.

She embraced him, but he drew back. " Later," he murmured. " But that is one promise I shall not break, Yishana."

He helped the puzzled woman mount her waiting horse. They rode back towards Pilarmo's house.

She asked : " And what of Nikorn—is he safe ? I liked that man."

" He died," Elric's voice was strained.

" How ?" she asked.

"Because, like all merchants," Elric answered, "he bargained too hard."

There was an unnatural silence among the three as they made their horses speed faster towards the Gates of Bakshaan, and Elric did not stop when the others did, to take their pick of Pilarmo's riches. He rode on, unseeing, and the others had to spur their steeds hard in order to catch up with him, two miles beyond the city.

Over Bakshaan, no breeze stirred in the gardens of the rich. No winds came to blow cool on the sweating faces of the poor. Only the sun blazed in the heavens, round and red, and a shadow, shaped like a dragon, moved across it once, and then was gone.

—Michael Moorcock

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*There are innumerable legends extant in the world dealing with longevity—perhaps some of the known hauntings in old buildings could be traced to people who have lived far beyond their allotted span.*

# THE LEGEND

BY W. T. WEBB

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o n e

CROSS—In loving memory of our son Jack who died suddenly on June 7th in his 26th year.

*Parkville Evening News.*

The train conveyed Gregory Hammet the ninety miles to Parkville in under two hours ; but the fifteen miles from Parkville to Farfield took nearly four.

On a hillside near the sea, Farfield hung under its medieval castle like the tail of a kite. Seashore, green hill, and old buildings almost hidden among trees, made scenery that cried out for glorious technicolour. But after his tedious journey Gregory was in no mood to rave over it.

The station serving Farfield lay some distance from the village ; but luckily there was a taxi ; and Gregory was the only one to arrive.

"Bronlake School !" he told the taxi-driver who took his bag.

The man looked at him as though memorising his description but made no comment. Fifteen minutes later Gregory was at the school door, pulling the brass handle of an antiquated bell.

The school had recently been a private house ; and now it looked somewhat unsettled, as though it were neither a house nor a school, but something that might become either. The lawn was piled with daisies. The creeper blanketting the walls, seemed far too luxuriant.

Gregory wondered if he had done right to apply for Jack Cross's job so soon after poor Jack's death. This school was not quite his cup of tea. After all there was no shortage of employment for a graduate teacher specialising in English and Literature and with a flair for cricket ; and he could easily have got a job nearer home. But on seeing the advertisement he had written away immediately. He wanted to know how Jack had died. For he was far from satisfied with the inquest. Surely a healthy schoolmaster of five-and-twenty does not die of heart-failure—just like that !

For a few seconds he toyed with a vague notion that there was something odd about the school. Then it struck him. For the middle of term, everything was strangely quiet !

He was trying to think of a possible reason for this when the door opened. A dark-haired young woman stood smiling at him in the doorway. Her hair was short and neat. She wore a simple dress of blue linen with the confidence of a fashion-model.

"I take it you are Mr. Hammet, the new English master," she said with a faint country accent.

He nodded and she pulled the door wider.

"I'm Doris Noon, Mr. Dukely's secretary."

When she had shown him to his room and given him time to wash and brush-up, she took him down to the kitchen, where the cook had made a pot of tea and some sandwiches.

"What's happened to all the boys ? I've not seen hide nor hair of one since I stepped through the door."

Doris Noon, who sat with a cup of tea near the window, hesitated before replying. She glanced over at the elderly cook who was peeling potatoes at the sink.

For a moment Gregory studied the girl's face in half-profile. Her smooth skin was the sort that would go quite brown after a little sunbathing. Her throat looked childish and pathetically vulnerable under her fine-boned chin. Gregory could see she was worried about something. She looked back at him almost pleadingly.

"We'll go along and see Mr. Dukely in a minute. He'll explain about the boys not being here."



He nodded. The cook, a bleached-looking woman in a white overall, was concentrating on the potatoes with unnecessary intensity.

"And the other masters?"

"Mr. Dukely will explain about them, too," said the secretary. "As soon as you're ready, Mr. Hammet . . ."

"Gregory, please!"

Miss Noon forced a smile.

"Gregory, then," she said. And the cook dropped a potato into the bowl with a loud splash.

"Come in, please."

The secretary opened the door of the headmaster's study, and Gregory went up to the desk. Oswald Dukely, he thought, was a surprisingly subdued little man for the head of a boys' school. Small and slight, immaculately attired in a dark suit and a high stiff collar, he looked very much as a bank-clerk is expected to look and rarely does. His educated voice betrayed shyness and hesitancy.

"Since I—er—spoke with you on the telephone we've had some unfortunate—er—incidents at the school. In fact, as you've possibly observed, the place is now evacuated except for Miss Noon, here, the cook, and myself." He flexed his bony wrists in their big, starched cuffs, and carefully joined the tips of his pale fingers.

"When I acquaint you with the cause of our disturbance, no doubt, as a stranger, you will find it amusing. But I can assure you that we at Bronlake have not been amused."

He shot a worried glance at Miss Noon to include her in his commiseration. Gregory tried to look sympathetic.

Mr. Dukely took up a pen and examined it as though he had never seen it before. Then, without moving his small, neat head, he raised his eyes to Gregory.

"Mr. Hammet! Do you believe in the supernatural?"

Gregory hated himself for grinning.

"No sir! Why? Is there a ghost in the school?"

"No; Brown Robin is not a ghost. He appears to be solid enough; and if half the stories about him are true he's not the least bit spiritual. Brown Robin is a devil, a demon, a familiar—or whatever you'd like to call him. Local legend says he has been appearing in Farfield since the middle ages."

Gregory still grinned.

"And now he's visiting the school?"

Oswald Dukely nodded seriously.

"Yes ; Brown Robin, or someone impersonating him, has been up to all sorts of tricks in the school : staring through dormitory windows, stealing valuables, lighting fires, making unholy bumps in the night, giving everyone nightmares, and even firing a rifle at one of the masters . . ."

"Quite a busy devil ! What's his motive ?"

"So far as I can see there is no motive."

Gregory glanced at the pretty secretary, who was gazing at him with unsmiling dark eyes.

"But you don't seriously believe a devil has been doing these things !"

The head smiled wanly. "Personally I'm half convinced that one of the older boys is responsible. But the pranks have been too serious for the normal remedies. When two of the masters resigned discipline deteriorated. So on Friday I decided to close the school for a couple of weeks to see if the activities stopped when the boys were away."

"And what do you want me to do in the meantime ?"

Oswald Dukely filled his pipe.

"After the terribly unfortunate death of Mr. Cross I advertised for a new master and subsequently asked you to come along. But I must confess, this business of Brown Robin has rather pushed other matters from my mind. And until Miss Noon reminded me this morning that you were due today, I'd completely forgotten it."

"Uh-huh ! And now I suppose I must go home until the school opens ?"

Gregory tried to keep the displeasure out of his voice. But the prospect of a return journey so soon after the one he had just endured, was not attractive. Moreover, having met Miss Noon, he had a strong desire to develop her acquaintance.

While lighting his pipe, Mr. Dukely seemed to be striving to reach a decision. At length he said : "Perhaps if you'd care to stay here you might be able to help us clear up the mystery."

"I should have thought the police . . ."

"No, Mr. Hammet. I want the police kept out of this. Once they arrive there'll be reporters. And, as a new concern, the School cannot afford that sort of publicity."

"Well, sir, I'm no detective ; but I'm willing to help with an investigation."

Miss Noon smiled uncertainly.



Ten minutes later Gregory was unpacking his suitcase up in his room. While arranging the few books he had brought with him along the windowsill, he tried to work out what he had let himself in for. He had taken the job with a vague idea of learning more about the death of Jack Cross. Now he was saddled with an additional mystery : who had been impersonating the local devil, Brown Robin, and why ?

After the evening meal he went into the garden with Miss Noon. They dawdled down the path of crazy paving to the sundial. The June sun was still warm. Shadows solidified under the full-leafed trees. Rosebushes, brambles and bind-weed entwined in intricate patterns like illustrations in an old book. There was nothing of the twentieth century here ; and he thought of Swinburne's " Forsaken Garden."

*A girdle of brushwood and thorn encloses  
The steep square slope of the blossomless bed  
Where the weeds that grew green from the graves of  
its roses  
Now lie dead.*

In town it would have been impossible to think of Brown Robin without laughing. But here it was easy to bring about a suspension of disbelief. The neglected flowerbeds and tangled bushes could harbour a whole pantheon of naiads, fauns and satyrs.

" Have you ever seen this Brown Robin ?" he asked the girl beside him.

Womanlike, Doris Noon seemed a compound of several personalities. She had appeared smart and sophisticated when she opened the door to welcome him to Bronlake School. Later she had seemed worried and subdued. But now, amid the sunlight and shadows of the old world garden, she looked, for a moment, like a short-haired dryad, who might easily turn into a tree.

" I've never seen him. But I've heard him in the night ; and I saw the fire he caused outside the greenhouse."

" You sound as though you really believe in this local devil."

" I was born in the village here," she said as though that proved something.

" When did Brown Robin first make himself known here ?"

" About a month ago."

" I thought he'd been here ages."

"He *re-appeared* about a month ago. He always comes back every five years." . .

"Since the middle ages?"

"Yes. There's a parish history in the village museum near the castle. Tomorrow, if you wish, we'll go and look at it."

"That's a date."

"I think Brown Robin, or Robin de Bron as they used to call him, was first mentioned in 1320."

"That makes him a bit long in the tooth! But he gets around for his age. Maybe he's got a bicycle."

"It's no joking matter, I assure you."

"What is Brown Robin supposed to look like? Does he have horns and a tail?"

"If you stay here you may see for yourself."

Huffily she turned away from him and began to walk towards the house. He watched her slim, shapely back until she disappeared like an angry dryad among the lilacs that hid a bend in the path.

Up in his room Gregory felt tired after an unsettling day. He decided to go to bed early with a book; and when he had donned his pyjamas and turned the bedcovers down he went to his selection of books on the windowsill. There was the Penguin Odyssey, Diderot's *Thoughts on Art and Style*, a *Golden Treasury* a volume of stories by Margiad Evans, some essays by Lamb and Pater, and several paper-backed novels.

As he ran a finger along them, deciding what to read, something moved outside in the garden; and, looking down, he saw a wizened face leering up at him from the nearby bushes.

The face was toothless as tripe, and the grinning mouth and furrowed forehead combined to create an effect of evil sensuality with something close to imbecility. The rheumy eyes regarded him motionlessly for almost a minute. Then the face disappeared among the bushes.

As he scrambled into his dressing-gown it occurred to him that here was a simple explanation to the mystery of Brown Robin. It was almost certainly some crazy old yokel considered sufficiently harmless to remain outside the walls of the local asylum.

Downstairs.

The back door was bolted; and it was several minutes before he could let himself out into the garden and locate the approximate place where he had seen the man in the bushes. By that



time there were no signs of any intruder. A late thrush sang in one of the innumerable trees. The garden was as peaceful as a country churchyard.

Turning, he saw a white figure framed in the door by which he had just left the house. For a moment he was startled. Then he realised it was the cook, and he almost laughed at the indignant expression on her face.

"Were you wanting something, Mr. Hammet?"

He adjusted the front of his dressing-gown and tightened the cord.

"Someone was out here just now. Probably the man who's been impersonating Brown Robin."

He approached the doorway, expecting her to move aside. But she stood her ground, stiffly, in her white overall, with the cook's cap still on her grey head. Her face, with no make-up, no feminine softness, could have been a man's face. But her voice was unmistakably that of a nagging woman.

"If I was you I wouldn't get too int'ested in Brown Robin. He don't like strangers snooping around."

Her tone was hostile. He answered in the same vein.

"Perhaps not; but I intend to snoop around until I've found out all I want to."

The cook wagged her head slowly.

"A little while ago we had a master here by the name of Mr. Cross. He had dealings with Brown Robin; and do you know what happened to him?"

"Yes . . ."

"Well; take warning, Mr. Hammet!"

She turned, striding into the cool dusk of the old house.

Gregory hurried after her.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm saying no more, Mr. Hammet. A wink is as good as a nod to a blind donkey!"

She did not slacken her pace.

On returning to his room, Gregory got into bed without a book. It took him a long time to fall asleep.

*Ta-taca-ta-tac ! Ta-taca-ta-tac !*

*The journey seemed everlasting. Trees and fields glided monotonously past the window. The same slimegreen boggy fields; the same brooding malevolent trees with branches distorted into wings of ravening birds.*

*Now and then the train stopped at a station ; and each time the station was nameless. An empty platform where wind-fingers rattled the carriage doors.*

*At length the scenery changed. An old castle topped a hill and houses showed among the hillside trees.*

*Farfield !*

*When the train stopped he swung his case off the rack and tried to open the door. But outside a uniformed official held it shut.*

*He pushed frantically, with a claustrophobic urgency to get off the train, but the door would not open. As the train started once more he recognised the official as Mr. Dukely. He hammered on the window, but by now the station was behind them, and the train was moving very fast.*

*He screamed with the screaming whistle of the train as they dived into the black throat of a tunnel.*

## t w o

Soon after breakfast he found Miss Noon going towards Mr. Dukely's study sorting a batch of letters.

"Morning Doris."

"Good morning Mr. Hammet."

The cool formality of her greeting was softened by her impish smile.

"I didn't see you at breakfast," he said.

"I just had some coffee in my room."

He eyed her trim figure appraisingly.

"Don't tell me you're slimming !"

She essayed a snubbing look and went to walk away. But he stepped in front of her.

"I thought you and me had a date this morning ?"

Her look changed to one of mock disapproval.

"For an English master, Mr. Hammet, I must say your conversation is a trifle racy."

"English master hell ! I'm a detective now ; Hardboiled Hammet, the Campus Private Eye !"

She laughed pleasantly.

"Very well. Give me twenty minutes to go through this mail with Mr. Dukely, and I'll be with you."

Grinning, he gave a little bow. Then he stood aside and watched her walk into the head's study.



A wall enclosed the quite extensive grounds of Bronlake School. While waiting for Miss Noon to finish with the head's letters, Gregory walked beside it, trying to locate the spot where last night's intruder had entered. But the wall was a good ten feet high, and the top of it was toothed with broken glass. It was enough to deter an athletic schoolboy, let alone an aged yokel. At the end of the garden a spiked iron gate offered no better prospects to a would-be intruder.

Experimentally he tried to climb the gate. He got up on a crossbar and looked through the rails at the countryside beyond. First came some trees. Then the hill with the castle on top of it. Below the hill an unnatural-looking lake reflected the morning sunlight. That, he told himself, would be Bron Lake, from which the school took its name. Below the lake a short stretch of coast was visible between the trees. The yellow sand and blue water fringed with white foam gleamed invitingly.

Presently he heard a sound behind him. Turning, he saw Miss Noon watching with amusement in her dark eyes.

"It's best to use the front gate, Mr. Hammet ! You'll be less likely to tear your trousers that way."

Feeling foolish, he jumped down and brushed the dust from his hands and the front of his jacket.

"I was calculating the chances of breaking in."

"Are you planning a burglary?" Her face was demure but her eyes were sparkling mischievously.

"No, just working out how Brown Robin gets in."

"Goodness me ! It would take more than a wall and an iron gate to keep Brown Robin out !"

The girl spoke as though Brown Robin was something to be taken for granted, like the weather. Turning, she began to walk towards the gate ; and Gregory hurriedly joined her.

"I'm surprised this village hasn't been developed," he said as they climbed the single street. "By the look of it they've built no new houses since the Old Queen died."

"Mr. Brockspear does not encourage development."

"Who's he ? Lord of the Manor ?"

Shading her eyes she pointed up the street of cottages to a house partly hidden by trees and standing near the castle.

"James Brockspear lives up in Bron House and owns most of the land you can see from his top windows."

"Including Bronlake School ?"

"No, the school is one of the few places he doesn't own." She pointed to a cottage with a garland of red ramblers hiding its fence. "That's where I was born."

Gregory admired the cottage, and then turned to admire his companion. The skirt of her flower-patterned frock stirred in the breeze; and he realised how completely she belonged in this country setting.

"Are your people living there now?"

"Oh no. We moved to Oxford when I was twelve. And a couple of years ago, when Mr. Dukely started the school and advertised for a secretary I jumped at the chance of returning here. We've still got relations in the village." She pointed across the road to a cottage with a forest of red-hot-pokers in its garden. "My Auntie May lives over there."

Gregory found himself enjoying his morning walk with Doris. Her talk about herself and her family made him feel close to her. Normally he did not make friends easily; but he felt that the secretary and he were already firm friends.

"I'll show you Brown Robin now," she said, jerking his thoughts back to the questions that had puzzled him since his arrival. "So that you'll recognise him if you see him at the school."

"You mean you actually know where he's to be found?"

"You'll see in a minute," she said, keeping him guessing.

A few steps further up the hill brought them in sight of the church which had been previously hidden by trees. He followed her into the neglected churchyard, where grass and nettles grew high between the leaning gravestones. Yews of great age absorbed the sunlight with their motionless bottle-green branches and exhaled a sombre gloom.

Doris pointed to a stone effigy standing near the flint wall of the church.

"There he is!"

Gregory went closer and examined the effigy, which was depicted wearing the garb of a monk. In front of the effigy's breast a stone scroll bore some very old lettering. Much of it was obliterated, but he could just make out the words ROBIN DE BRON . . . ADSUM . . . IN PACE . . . and the date 1372.

It was the face, however, that astonished him; for although it was very old the features were clearly distinguishable. And



without doubt they were the very features he had seen last night on the face in the bushes.

"But it's incredible!" he said.

She smiled quizzically. "What is?"

He was about to tell her of the face he had seen; but he checked himself. There was no point in adding to her superstitious beliefs. The first shock of seeing the features of the effigy of Brown Robin had almost convinced him for a moment that such a supernatural being did exist. But then his rational mind found an explanation. Family likenesses produced identical features from time to time. And in an inbred little village like Farfield it would be logical to assume that features would be passed on from generation to generation. No doubt the old yokel he had seen last night was a direct descendant of the man who, centuries ago, had posed as a model for the effigy.

"What is incredible, Gregory?"

He laid a hand on the effigy's shoulder.

"This is the effigy of a man who probably lived in this village in the days of Chaucer . . ."

He stopped, lamely; for the expression in her dark eyes told him she knew he was not saying what he had intended to say.

"Shall we go and look at the Parish History in the Museum?" she said with an enigmatic smile.

The museum was really the Museum Tea Rooms. It was housed at the end of the street in an odd shaped building that had once been a bakery. Now it was run by a retired naval commander as a combined museum, teashop, and curio-shop.

The curios for sale were mostly glazed earthenware cups, plates, and jugs made locally and decorated with a picture of Farfield showing the hill, the castle, and a part of Bron Lake. There were several decorated maps of the district and some old prints of a vaguely Dickensian tone. The museum contained coins, fossils, and flint implements found locally, and a lot of cannon-balls which had presumably been provided for the defence of the nearby castle.

Despite the lack of selection, the exhibits in the low-beamed rooms gave a miniature glimpse of history. From the flint arrowheads to the amateurish glazed pottery how many centuries had passed?

The prize exhibit was a manuscript "History of Farfield, From the Reign of King John to the Reign of Queen Victoria," which stood open on a lectern in the middle of the main room.

Doris and Gregory went over to it, but after a brief examination the girl looked at Gregory with a flush of anger and disappointment on her face.

"Look at this—and this !" she said, pointing to places where pages had been torn away. "It seems . . ." She turned further pages. "It seems that all the pages referring to Brown Robin have been torn out."

"Well, I'll be . . ."

Gregory looked round as a tall, dark-bearded man entered the room.

"Commander Beale !" Doris said indignantly. "Some pages have been torn out of the History."

"Yes, I know about that," the commander snapped. He was obviously overwrought. His bearded face twitched nervously. "Now I must ask you to leave the premises. I'm afraid I've got to close the shop for a while."

They exchanged puzzled glances and then walked to the door with the commander following close behind them. The mystery was deepening, Gregory thought, as he stood back to let Doris go through the door. At that moment there came a crash behind him. Turning, startled, he saw that the commander had fallen to the floor.

Gregory knelt beside him.

"He's had a stroke by the look of it !" he said, groping under the man's beard to loosen his collar. "Get a doctor on the phone !"

"I'll run for Doctor Hartnell—just across the road."

"Right !"

Dr. Hartnell arrived ten minutes later. By that time Gregory knew that Commander Beale was dead.

Precisely two hours later, Doris, Gregory and Mr. Dukely met in the head's study and discussed the latest complications.

"There'll naturally be—er—a postmortem on Beale," Mr. Dukely said nervously. "Doctor Hartnell seems to think it's another case of heart-failure."

"Like Jack Cross !"

"Well—yes . . ."



"I had a word with your cook last night," Gregory said. "She seems to think that Jack Cross died because he was curious about Brown Robin."

"Whatever gave her that notion?"

Gregory shook his head.

"I could get no more out of her. She warned me not to investigate too closely in case the same should happen to me."

"This is dreadful!" said Mr. Dukely.

"Well, there have been other cases of heart-failure in the past," Doris said. "And the village folk have blamed them on Brown Robin. Which is probably why Mrs. Snell gave such a warning. In the village we've always thought it unlucky to pry into Brown Robin's affairs."

"But surely," Gregory protested, "you don't seriously believe there's a devil doing these things!"

Despairingly, the little headmaster looked from one to the other. "What can we do? I hate to bring the police in. For one thing we have no—er—tangible facts to give them..."

"There's a man who might help us," Gregory said. "He's a scientist and a psychical research expert. He's just back from a visit to North America where some friends of his have got him interested in faster-than-light spaceship design; but I think Brown Robin would interest him sufficiently to bring him down here at the double."

"Do you know this man personally?"

"We went to school together."

"Please ask him to come then. What is his name?"

"Texel. Thomas Edison Texel. You may have heard of him."

Dukely nodded. "Oh yes, he was on the television a few days ago, giving a talk on education. I must say he's got some unusual ideas! Would he expect a fee, do you think?"

"No; just expenses, and a room to sleep in and food for himself and his dog. He's a vegetarian, by the way; and so is his dog."

"Oh no!" said Mr. Dukely, raising a handkerchief to his worried brow. "Doris, you'd better warn Mrs. Snell. I only hope she can cook vegetarian meals."

"I don't think much cooking will be necessary," Gregory said. "He eats most of his food raw."

By the expression on the headmaster's face he seemed doubtful which would be likely to cause most disruption, Brown Robin or Thomas Edison Texel.

"I'll phone him right away," Gregory said hastily.

*When he entered the room he heard a clock ticking loudly. Commander Beale was leaning at a strange angle near the wall. Beside him was a sort of window, but the panes instead of being glass were of opaque yellow plastic.*

*As he watched, the bearded face of the commander fell away like a broken mask, to reveal the round face of a clock. Abruptly the loud clicking stopped.*

*Like a puppet lowered on a string, Commander Beale fell slowly to the floor ; and from outside the window came a sudden clanging of alarm bells.*

### t h r e e

At five to ten the following morning Doris Noon and Gregory Hammet stood in the hall waiting for the scientist to arrive.

"What is Mr. Texel like?" Doris asked quietly, with a glance into the hall mirror.

"If you can imagine George Bernard Shaw in his twenties, with a moustache, but no beard, you'll get a good idea of what Tom Texel looks like."

Doris glanced appealing at the ceiling. "I suppose that's the sort of reply one should expect from an English Literature master !"

"In a recent newspaper article someone called him a citizen of the future. Primarily he's a scientist who takes on lines of research which many scientists wouldn't touch with a bargepole. He's interested in faster-than-light spaceship design, time-travel, telepathy, and even voodoo and witchcraft ; and he believes in a future when the lion will literally lie down with the lamb."

"You mean he's religious?"

"Oh no ; he believes it will all come about by education."

"But surely most progressive people believe that education will work wonders."

"Granted ; but Tom believes in educating not only people, but also animals. You can take most of his theories with a pinch of salt ; I suspect he only propounds them to get into the news. But you can be sure he's the right man to get to the bottom of the Brown Robin mystery. And . . ."

The bell jangled. Doris opened the door. At first it seemed there was no one there. She turned and looked at



Gregory with wide eyes. He grinned and pointed to a small dog sitting just clear of the door.

"That's Amy," he told her. "The original shaggy dog."

Amy, a brown mongrel bitch with a coat of loose curls, pricked up a ragged ear at the sound of his voice, and then ran out towards the road, where Tom Texel was disembarking from a ramshackle car. He was a tall man with a moustache, and with a jutting forehead and prominent eyebrows similar to those of the late Bernard Shaw. He wore a shapeless grey sweater, baggy trousers, and a pair of unpolished army boots. Carrying a rucksack in one hand, he made long strides towards the door.

"Hello Greg ! Nice to see you again !"

As they shook hands Gregory grinned at his friend's bright blue eyes under their sandy brows. The moustache was like a spare eyebrow mounted above the humorous mouth.

"Hello Tom ! Nice to see you. It beats me how you can keep so fit on rabbit's food !"

Texel's exuberent personality immediately placed him in command of the little gathering. He sat in the leather-covered easy chair with the dog in his lap, and soon he had the others firing questions.

"Have you done a lot of psychical research, Mr. Texel ?" Doris asked. He grinned at her boyishly.

"I don't differentiate between psychical research and research in any other field. If anything looks like being interesting I'm prepared to look into it. A while back hypnosis might have been considered psychical research. Today it's recognised by any competent medical authority."

"I understand you have been studying faster-than-light spaceship design," Mr. Dukely put in. "Don't you think that in view of —er—the present standard of space-travel, such a study is—well, a waste of time ?"

"No serious research is a waste of time, Mr. Dukely, even if the direct enquiry leads you up a gum tree. There's always a chance of making side-line discoveries. The alchemists never discovered the Elixir Vitae, but in the search for it they founded modern chemistry. The more audacious the object of research, the more chance there is of making a discovery."

"Perhaps you consider faster-than-light travel an impossible —er—target, like the Elixir Vitae ?"

"I consider nothing beyond the power of the human brain. If man can avoid destroying himself and all the other lovely things on this earth, he will one day find the Elixir Vitae—and also be able to travel faster than light. A few thousand years ago men were living in holes in the ground ; now we can fly to the moon. Give us another thousand years and who will be bold enough to say what we will do ?"

The conversation was rocketting away from the subject they had met to discuss. With a little encouragement Texel would be galloping a runaway hobby-horse.

Gregory said firmly : "Have you ever before encountered anything like Brown Robin ?"

Tom Texel laughed and fished a bulky notebook from one of his pockets. "I don't think so ; but you'll have to tell me more about him before I can be sure. Suppose you start, Doris. Just tell me all you know about this *genus loci* of yours !"

The three men were silent while Doris said her piece. She gave the villagers' point of view of the demon. As far back as anyone could remember he had been appearing at five-year intervals, always within a mile of Bron Lake. He usually showed himself for a period of five years. During his active periods he was considered harmless, even benevolent, so long as no one got too curious about him. There were stories of his giving money to people and of warning of fires and other disasters. But with folk who got too curious he could be a real devil. He caused disturbing dreams, set fire to houses, abducted women, and struck men dead. He was also able to "possess" people and make them carry out his wishes. During his inactive periods he vanished completely, and popular opinion was that he spent the time in a cave underneath Bron Lake.

While Doris was speaking, Tom Texel made notes in his book, and when she had finished he nodded to Mr. Dukely, who, as a comparative newcomer to the village, knew nothing about Brown Robin until strange things started happening at the school.

"The boys wouldn't go to sleep at night, because the head and shoulders of an old man dressed as a monk kept appearing in the dormitory windows. Then we had a couple of fires which started apparently—er—spontaneously in the grounds. Then Mr. Hemcott, the maths master, was walking in the



woods one day when someone took a shot at him with a rifle. Finally there was the death of Mr. Cross ; but I—er—did not associate that with Brown Robin until Commander Beale died in a similar fashion.”

“Has anyone actually seen this Brown Robin?” Texel asked.

“I saw an old man in the bushes outside the house on Monday night,” Gregory said. “I saw only his face ; and the features were very similar to those of an effigy reputed to be that of Brown Robin outside the village church. My theory is . . .”

But Texel held up a hand.

“No theories at this stage, please ! Let’s stick to facts—such as they are !”

Gregory saw Doris’s eyes on him.

“The facts are,” he said, ticking them off on his fingers. “One : there is a legend of a reputed devil named Brown Robin haunting this village for a five year period every five years. Two : two apparently healthy men have died of heart-failure here in the past fortnight. Three : two nights ago I saw an intruder in the grounds. And Four : there have been certain incidents in Bronlake school serious enough for two masters to resign and for the head to have the school evacuated.”

“Thank you, Gregory !” Texel switched his gaze to the headmaster. “Mr. Dukely ; I’d like you to employ me as your new Science master, in case anyone should want to know why I’m here.”

“I understand,” Dukely said. Since Texel’s arrival a weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders.

Texel gave the dog a light tap on the head, whereupon she jumped from his lap and ran to the door.

Texel got to his feet.

“I’ll take Amy for a walk in the village ; and do a little discreet questioning.”

“Want me to come ?”

“No thanks, Greg ! Amy and I will be better alone. It’s surprising how many folk will stop and speak to a man with a dog.”

Gregory and Doris saw him to the door and watched him walk bouncily towards the village.

“What do you think of him?” Gregory asked when man and dog had passed from sight.

"My ! I think he's wonderful !" came the reply ; and Gregory felt a stab of jealousy.

"He'll be all right so long as we keep him on the mystery of Brown Robin," he said.

"Yes ; and you never told me you'd seen Brown Robin in the garden."

"I didn't say I'd seen Brown Robin ; I just saw an old man who had similar features to the effigy in the churchyard."

"You take a mighty lot of convincing, Gregory. Let's hope Brown Robin doesn't resent our curiosity !"

It was quite late in the evening when he heard a commotion downstairs indicating that Texel and his dog had returned.

He found Texel and Doris in the room which was normally used as a masters' commonroom. A green baize noticeboard carried a copy of the school curriculum and a list of names for the 1st cricket XI. Save for the table and half a dozen assorted chairs the room was bare. A film of dust lay over everything. Texel, who had the gift of making himself at home anywhere, sat in his untidy fashion, on a hard chair, with his elbows propped on the table, and his bulky notebook open in front of him. The dog lay at his feet.

"Dig up any information, Tom ?"

"Plenty. Enough to write a book on Brown Robin ; but unfortunately much is contradictory ; and none is backed by evidence. Some call Brown Robin a killer of men and an abductor of women ; some say he causes nightmares and horrid dreams ; others claim he can help you win on the football pools."

"You managed to get the villagers to talk, then ?"

"Sure ; the younger ones, anyway. The ones you might call the television generation. They treat Brown Robin as a sort of joke—a cross between a bogymen and Father Christmas. The kids even play a game called 'Robin-in-the-Middle.' But the older folk are reticent. They seem to be hiding guilty secrets."

"My Auntie May is like that," Doris said. "She's a chatterbox normally ; but if you mention Brown Robin she shuts up, as though you've said something not quite ladylike."

"Brown Robin," Texel said, "seems to be a sort of village scapegoat. He gets blamed for everything that goes wrong from a plague of greenfly to a busted television tube. He's even blamed when people lose their temper. I suppose it's handy to have a scapegoat ; and he fills a useful role."



Texel, leafing through his notes, fell silent for a while. Then he said : " Strangely enough no one seems to have seen Brown Robin or had any actual dealings with him. But lots of people know others who have. It would make a swell field study for an anthropologist. Some say he's scared their neighbour's children out of their wits, or they know someone who had a gift from him or some family who had a girl abducted. But they don't name any names. They all agree it's unlucky to get too curious about the guy ; and several of them tipped me off not to ask too many questions—or else . . . "

With a shrug expressing his uncertainty, he closed his book, and looked from one to the other with a frank, boyish grin.

" There's a laboratory at the back of the house," Doris put in, as though she had suddenly remembered about it. " It only contains school-stuff, bunsen-burners and the like. But Mr. Dukely has put it at your disposal if it's any use to you."

" Good show ! I'll probably find it very useful. I'll go along there presently and finish writing up my notes."

" And your bedroom is the one next to Gregory's . . . "

" Fine ! "

" It's the room Mr. Cross used. I hope you don't mind."

" Why should I ? "

After a minute's silence he said : " According to all reports Brown Robin seems to spend most of his time either in Bron Lake or in that old castle. So tomorrow morning I guess I'll look over the castle to see if there are any signs of him."

" I—I'll come with you," Doris said, her voice faltering a little. Texel looked at her sympathetically.

" Aren't you scared of getting too curious ? "

Doris shook her dark head.

" I'll come along too," said Gregory.

" Good show ! "

Amy looked up at her master and wagged her tail without rising from the floor.

*Through an arrow-slit he gazed into one of the castle rooms. Brown Robin stood at an altar with his arms stiffly raised. Two open coffins inclined in front of the altar. The body of Jack Cross lay in one and that of Commander Beale in the other. Presently an elderly woman in white entered the room and slowly knelt between the coffins.*

*A sudden vertigo attacked him and he clutched in terror to the slippery masonry of the castle wall.*

## f o u r

Morning mist spilled from the sky over the village churchyard, and shapeless drifts of it wandered like wraiths among the leaning stones. Somewhere beyond the pixy-hat steeple the sun climbed rapidly. The day would be hot once the mist had gone.

Tom Texel examined the effigy of Brown Robin while Amy sniffed at the long grass and nettles hiding the base of it. Doris and Gregory stood watching from the gravel path, clear of the grass which was almost white with misty dew.

"I should think it's a lifelike statue of one of the villagers." Gregory's voice had a strange echo in the churchyard mist. "He may have been the parish priest."

Texel made no comment. Gregory pulled a face at Doris, and she smiled at him. He looked at Texel again, who was now examining the feet of the effigy, holding back the long grass to do so. Scribbling a note as he walked, he joined them on the path.

"Find anything useful?" Gregory asked.

Texel grinned as he pushed the notebook into the pocket of the duffle-coat he wore over his sweater. Binoculars dangled from a strap round his neck.

"Too early to say yet ; but I must admit it's an interesting piece of sculpture."

"Would you say it was an actual portrait—a statue of a particular person?"

"Yes ; quite a detailed one, too. Whoever did it must have taken a close look at Brown Robin."

Gregory laughed. "Don't tell me you believe in Brown Robin now !"

"I try to keep an open mind."

They left the churchyard and continued up the hill. Presently the castle loomed above them brown and grey in the white mist. The donjon, with its crenalated parapet was suddenly clear of the mist, and in the sunlight it glowed brown except where willow-herbs and wild wallflowers grew in the arrow-slits and the crevices between the stones.

The path led to the huge gate which was locked and barred, and surmounted by a tangle of barbed-wire. Beside the gate a notice said : PRIVATE : KEEP OUT.



"Mr. Brockspear used to allow visitors once upon a time," Doris said. "But as you can see, he doesn't any more. Anyway there's a postern round the back which you can force open if you've a mind to."

"Isn't that Breaking and Entering?" Gregory said; but aware of Texel's anarchic attitude to the law he knew he was wasting breath.

"Don't come unless you want to," was Texel's reply. Gregory said no more.

They walked in the tall grass outside the castle wall in a silence broken only by the swishing of their feet. In several places the wall had been rebuilt recently with smoother, light-coloured stones; and scaffolding was still in place where workmen had been repairing one of the bastions.

"Brockspear's evidently spending money on the old place," Texel observed.

They rounded the corner and presently the dog ran on ahead and sniffed a rusty gate.

"That's the place," Doris said in a hushed voice.

The gate was bolted top and bottom, but the bolt-holes had been sufficiently enlarged to allow the gate to be forced with a little pressure.

Gregory held the gate open while the others entered the castle. Then he went in himself and allowed the gate to swing shut behind him.

The mist had lifted. They found themselves in a vast bailey enclosed by crumbling walls and overgrown with grass, brambles and elders. The towering donjon now rose to their right. It was entered by an arched doorway approached by a flight of worn steps.

A colony of jackdaws, apparently unaware of the visitors, flew and perched among the masonry. The birds seemed to belong to another order of existence, an order older than man's brief hegemony, and would have performed their flying ballet, there among the stones, if the last human had vanished from the earth.

Amy disappeared into the brambles and a few seconds later Gregory saw her running boldly up the steps towards the big, arched door, like some creature in a fable approaching the lair of a wicked giant. She stopped at the door and sat down, looking round at them.

"Amy's got the right idea," Texel said. "We'll see if we can get into the donjon."

But as they began to push through the undergrowth the dog suddenly got up and scampered back to them and rubbed herself against her master's legs.

"Look out !" Texel said. "Amy can hear someone coming !"

"She'd make a damn fine poacher's dog !" Gregory commented.

Almost as he spoke the door swung inwards and two men came out on to the top step. One of them, a stocky man with horn-rimmed glasses, stepped forward and shook a fist at them.

"Mr. Brockspear and his gamekeeper," Doris announced in a stage-whisper.

Brockspear was in a rage. The way his face twitched reminded Gregory of Commander Beale just before he died.

"Get out !" he screamed. "Or I'll have you thrown out !"

"We're not doing any harm Mr. Brockspear !" Texel said conversationally. "We just came to look round this historic building."

On this occasion the soft answer did not turn away wrath.

"Get out ! You're trespassing !" Brockspear almost fell down the steps in the violence of his rage ; and Doris, Texel and Gregory tried to make a dignified exit. When they stepped out through the postern again, Amy was waiting for them, vigorously wagging her feathery tail.

They walked back along the castle wall the way they had come.

Suddenly the dog squatted on its haunches and looked up at the parapet surmounting the donjon. The others looked up.

The morning sunlight shone on the figure of a man leaning over the parapet and looking down at them. The distance was too great for Gregory to see the face distinctly but he assumed from the shape and posture of the man that it was the same one he had seen in the shrubbery on his first evening at Bronlake.

Texel lifted his binoculars. "It's Brown Robin all right ! The features are very much like those of the effigy."

Gregory saw Doris was trembling. He put an arm round her and was gratified to feel her lean closer. When he looked up again Brown Robin had gone from sight.

"We're in a vulnerable position here," Texel said. "We'd better get away from this wall."

As they hurried away from the castle across the high grass and between the clumps of brambles, Gregory wondered how many times in the turbulent past would-be intruders had



scampered away as they were doing, wary of retaliation from the defenders of those walls. His musing ended abruptly as Amy gave a single high-pitched bark.

"Look out !" Texel said. "Take cover !"

As Gregory dived for shelter behind a tangled clump of brambles and traveller's joy he felt they were playing a childish game. Then a shot rang out, convincing him that at least one person was taking the game seriously.

Texel rose to his knees and peered at the castle through the bramble runners.

"I wonder what sort of devil can fire a rifle !"

He ducked as another shot was fired.

Doris, who lay beside Gregory in the grass, had stopped trembling ; but her face was very pale.

"We'll have to crawl away from here," Gregory said.

"Next time we come devil-hunting I'm bringing a gun with me ; and you, my lady, are staying behind."

Doris smiled feebly and gripped his hand. There was no more shooting.

"Scout around, Amy !" Texel said. And the dog, who had been crouching beside him, crawled away to come back in a few minutes wagging her tail.

"All clear for the moment," Texel announced. "We'd best make a run for those trees !"

They returned to the school by way of the woods.

"What do you know about Mr. Brockspear ?" Texel asked Doris when the three of them were in the laboratory, and Doris was pouring coffee from a jug into three good-sized cups.

"Not very much. We rarely see him in the village. He spends most of his time either in Bron House or the castle. He owns most of the land round here. Do you both take sugar ?"

They both did. When the coffee was handed round Texel resumed his questions.

"Did Mr. Brockspear inherit the castle and the land, or did he buy it ?"

Doris sipped her coffee thoughtfully. She had put on a pair of blue slacks, and, sitting on one of the high stools of the lab, she looked, with her short, dark hair, like a handsome, intelligent boy.

"I don't know. I believe the Brockspears are an old Farfield family ; but I understand they were once comparatively poor."

"Is Brockspear married ? Any family ?"

"He was married, and he has a grown-up daughter, Penelope. But first his wife, and then his daughter, went away—I don't know where."

"And since then has he lived alone in Bron House?"

"I think so, apart from the servants."

Suddenly, Amy, who had been dozing under the lab table, walked stiff-legged into the middle of the room and looked towards the door. The fur along the centre of her back had lost its shaggy softness and bulged in an angry ridge.

Without a word, Texel rose, tiptoed to the door, and jerked it open. Mrs. Snell, the cook, stood there like a statue, with an inscrutable expression on her sexless face.

"What do you want?" Texel demanded.

"I just come to see if you'd done with them coffee things, so's I can finish me washing-up."

"Not yet, Mrs. Snell. We'll bring the things along when we have."

After a glance round the room she turned to go, but Texel detained her. "Since you're here, Mrs. Snell, you might be able to help us. Would you like to step in for a minute?"

Like one suspecting a trap, the gaunt woman entered the laboratory.

"Perhaps you can tell us something about Brown Robin, Mrs. Snell," Texel said breezily. "I'm rather interested in your local demon."

If his manner had been calculated to put the cook at her ease it failed miserably. She looked at him frigidly, with an obvious unwillingness to co-operate.

"Brown Robin don't like folk getting too nosey, Mr. Texel. If you wants my advice you'll shove off home and forget him!"

"Why do you say that?"

"I has me reasons."

"Do you think Brown Robin had anything to do with the death of Mr. Cross?"

Gregory glancing from the tall, eager scientist to the white clad cook, wondered how Mr. Dukely had come to engage her. A woman as antisocial as that would poison the soup as soon as salt it.

"Mr. Cross died before his time. He had dealings with Brown Robin. A schoolmaster should know how to put two and two together and get four."



"How do you know Mr. Cross had dealings with Brown Robin?"

"If I told you you'd be as wise as me."

"Why didn't you mention it at the inquest?"

"I wasn't asked, for one thing."

"When you saw Mr. Cross and Brown Robin together what were they doing?"

"I'm not saying what they were doing!"

"You did see them together, then?"

"You're trying to trick me into saying what I don't want to say. I didn't come down in the last shower, you know!"

She turned suddenly and scuttled out of the lab as though she feared someone would detain her by force.

"I wonder if she does know anything," Gregory remarked when her footsteps had died. "Or if she was just acting mysterious."

"She knows something all right," Texel said. "She's seen Brown Robin and Jack Cross together. Perhaps I'll get her to talk later."

Texel, accompanied by his dog, made another excursion to the village that afternoon. And that evening they gathered again in the laboratory and discussed the latest developments.

"It's pretty obvious that Brockspear's in league with Brown Robin," Gregory said. "But what's the purpose of it all? What do they get out of it? *Cui bono*? as the Romans would say."

"Brown Robin is definitely connected with the castle," Doris said. "And Mr. Brockspear and he seem determined to keep people away from it—especially strangers—why?"

"And why should Robin kill Jack Cross?" Gregory asked. If he could answer that question, he felt, he would have the answer to the whole of the riddle.

"But does Brown Robin have to have a *reason*?" Doris argued. "We seem to be agreed that he's either a devil or a madman."

"We can assume," Texel said, "that Brown Robin *has* got a reason for the things he does. The same basic reason as we all have—survival."

"How did Jack Cross threaten his survival?"

"It's still too early to say. But perhaps merely by being here Jack was a threat to this creature. Perhaps Brown Robin wants to get rid of the whole school. This village has changed very little since the middle ages, and Brown Robin may prefer

it unchanged. Mr. Dukely started this school during a period when the devil was out of circulation. When he got back and found the school here he may have decided it was one school too many."

Gregory snorted.

"You imply that Brown Robin is something supernatural. We'll probably find out he's just a crazy old gaffer."

"Possibly; but the facts hardly support that theory."

"Did you uncover any new facts this afternoon?"

Texel consulted his notebook.

"I got a little information from the vicar; but not very much. The vicar, poor man, is very unsure of himself. He just won't admit that Brown Robin is anything more than a pagan legend. I suppose he's not quite sure what the orthodox attitude should be. He's concocted some fantastic theory that Brown Robin is a cross between the English Robin Goodfellow and the Greek Persophone who periodically retires into the Underworld. He suggests too, that from time to time a man takes on the role of Brown Robin in the same way as men once took on the role of Robin Hood. He finds a parallel instance in *The Golden Bough*. The conversation was interesting, but I don't think we unearthed any important new facts."

"I must have a chat with the vicar," Gregory said. "He sounds . . ."

At that moment there came the report of a firearm. One of the lab windows was pierced with a splintering hole. Gregory pulled Doris out of the line of fire. Texel looked cautiously round the windowframe.

"There he goes! Running like a deer!"

Gregory went to the window and saw Brown Robin, still carrying a rifle, skimming across the untended beds of the garden as though his feet were barely touching the ground.

"That disposes of the Old Man Theory," Texel said. "If an old man can do that speed I'm entering my old granddad for the four minute mile."

"But if it was a devil he wouldn't need to run at all," Gregory protested. "And why should a supernatural being need a rifle?"

"It won't be the first time the devil's used a gun," Texel said enigmatically.

Gregory went to bed that night more puzzled than ever.

*It was twilight. A faint moon floated in a sea of murky cloud . . .*



## five

At first Mr. Dukely was reluctant to allow Gregory Hammet to borrow his rifle.

"I'll only use it for our own protection, Mr. Dukely."

The little headmaster looked worried.

"Suppose Brown Robin, as you suggest, turns out to be a crazy old hermit. There'll be some—er—awkward questions, to say the least. I've been able to keep the police and the newspapers out of this up to now. But if you kill a man . . ."

"I promise not to shoot to kill, Mr. Dukely. I'm something of a marksman ; and I can assure you I abhor killing as much as you do. I certainly don't want a murder on my conscience. But Brown Robin has taken pot-shots at us, and I think it's only fair to give him a taste of his own jalap. When he finds we've got a gun and know how to use it he won't be so keen to go round firing his own."

"Very well, Mr. Hammet ! Take the rifle. But I implore you to be careful. All I want is to get back to normal."

"With a bit of luck we'll have this business straightened out in a day or so. Then you can recall the boys and I can get back to teaching."

Half an hour later, Gregory Hammet, Tom Texel, and the dog were moving up hill through the trees. This time they approached from the opposite side of the hill to the village and reached the vicinity of the castle without encountering anyone.

It was the morning after the incident in the laboratory. The sun was already blazing in an almost colourless sky. Wood pigeons cooed softly in the trees. A lark sang lustily.

"We'll separate here," Texel said. "You stay under the trees and I'll scout round the castle. If Brown Robin shows up with his gun and tries any monkey-business, fire a shot over his head to scare him. Apart from Brockspear's gamekeeper I don't suppose anyone will take any notice of gunfire in this neck of the woods. If our friend shows up and makes no attempt to use his gun, keep him covered and I'll try and communicate with him !"

"Righto Tom ! But watch yourself !"

Gregory tucked his rifle under his arm and lit a cigarette. He watched Texel and the dog move over the rough ground. Then the dog dived out of sight among the bracken. Apart from the jackdaws flying between the donjon and the outer wall of the castle there were no other signs of life.

Gregory wondered if they were making any progress with the problem. Texel, with his ability to gather facts and keep

an open mind seemed to be approaching an acceptance that Brown Robin was some kind of demon. Facts certainly seemed to point that way. Nevertheless, Gregory could not bring himself to believe in the supernatural. Suspension of disbelief for a brief period was one thing, but a permanent acceptance of the supernatural in any form was completely alien to his make-up.

As he stood smoking beneath the oaks at the fringe of the wood he recalled the dream of the previous night.

*It was twilight. A faint moon floated in a sea of murky cloud. He was walking in the churchyard with Doris, and as they passed the effigy of Brown Robin it slowly turned round and began to move towards the lych-gate. The gravestones gleamed in the strange, sick moonlight ; and nameless things scurried out of the splitting tombs to swell the shadows below the yews.*

But when the dream was over, in the nebulous interval between sleep and waking, he had the crazy conviction that he had solved the mystery puzzling them all. The stone statue of Robin de Bron, like the one made by King Pygmalion, had received the breath of life.

His musings ended abruptly when he saw that Tom Texel had changed his direction and was inclining downhill in the direction of Bron Lake. He was walking very cautiously with his eyes on something outside Gregory's line of vision. An occasional movement of the bracken indicated that Amy was a few yards in front.

Gregory stamped on his cigarette, and, raising his rifle, walked clear of the trees to see what Tom was approaching.

The ground was uneven. Clear of the tree-shadows the sun was very hot. Then he saw it. Brown Robin. Brown Robin, moving in a strange, paceless glide towards the lake. A long-barrelled rifle sloped under his arm.

To Gregory there seemed something dreamlike, unreal, something almost Arthurian about the lake with the monkish figure gliding towards it. He thought of Merlin and the sword Excalibur. The rifle under the creature's arm seemed almost sacriligiously anachronistic. He removed the safety-catch of his own rifle, and after a quick calculation, adjusted the sights. There was no wind to allow for ; so if necessary he should be able to get in a good shot. If necessary ! He fervently hoped it would not be.

Tom Texel was clear of the bracken now. With the dog close beside him he was making a fair pace over the heather



and grass dividing the bracken from the lake shore. Brown Robin, having reached the edge of the water, halted. He gazed across the shining surface of the little lake. With a hand shading his eyes from the sun glare, he swivelled his head from side to side as if aware of someone watching.

Crouched in the bracken, Gregory moved to one side, so that his line of aim would be well clear of Texel and the dog. The lark had stopped singing. A sunlit, expectant silence had settled over the trees, the lake and the crumbling castle walls.

Suddenly, as though prompted by some sixth sense, Brown Robin swung round, raised his rifle, and pointed it at Texel. Looking along the barrel of his own rifle, Gregory saw Texel smile and self-consciously raise his hands as though taking part in a game that was amusing and rather ridiculous. But despite Texel's demonstration of friendliness, Brown Robin inclined his head to take aim.

Gregory felt his own rifle kick as he fired over Brown Robin's head. But the creature ignored the shot and fired at Texel, who still had his hands raised.

Gregory saw Texel fall. He took careful aim and fired at Brown Robin's legs. He saw the fabric of the garment move slightly as the bullet found its mark ; but still Brown Robin did not stir.

Furiously, Gregory fired shot after shot into Brown Robin, until his magazine was empty ; but he might have been firing at a stone statue.

Suddenly he was scared stiff. He fully expected the devil, or whatever it was, to come after him. He wanted to run although he knew he stood no chance of escape. But to his surprise, the creature glided into the lake and vanished under the water with hardly a ripple.

Gregory's heart beat so strenuously that he wondered if it would survive the shock. Maybe Jack Cross had experienced something similar and not survived it. He dropped his rifle and tried to get his fingers steady enough to feel for a cigarette.

And then he received another shock ; for Tom Texel, looking quite unruffled, was striding towards him with the dog.

"Tom ! I thought he'd got you ! I did . . . I . . ."

Words failed him, he wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

"I dropped just in time ; a split second later and I'd have been carrying out my final psychical research !"

"Did you—did you see him go into the water ?"

"Sure : I was trying to figure out how it effects his rifle . . ."

Gregory clapped a hand to his head.

"Oh, my god ! You blasted scientists ! A bloke tries to kill you, and then walks into the water like Old Man Poseidon himself ; and all you worry about is the reaction of  $H_2O$  on the Fe of his rifle !"

He flung himself down among the pungent bracken and shook with almost hysterical laughter.

The sun was slowly setting, and swallows were swooping between the thatched roofs as Gregory and Doris walked up the village street.

Gregory had just finished recounting the morning's adventures ; and Doris looked worried.

"Take care, Gregory. You are tampering with forces you don't understand."

"Men have always tampered with forces they don't understand ; that's how we get progress."

"Progress ! Sometimes I wonder if it's worthwhile." She looked round at the old houses, tawny-gold in the fading light. The gardens were haunted with leaf-shades and the ghosts of butterflies and flowers. "There's been little progress here. But it's very lovely."

"Progress need not go hand in hand with ugliness. And the loveliness here harbours a killer."

"Brown Robin does no harm to people who leave him alone."

"No ? How about the school ? He's caused enough disturbance there to get it evacuated."

"That's no reason why you should risk your life."

"Tom was the one most in danger ; in fact I thought Brown Robin had got him."

"Mr. Texel's very clever ; yet in many ways he's just a boy who never grew up."

"Scientists are like that ; always sticking pins into things to see what happens. I think Tom will get to the bottom of this mystery—given time."

"That's the snag—there isn't a lot of time ; if Mr. Dukely can't get his school going again very soon he'll have to sell up and cut his losses. He's had a lot of set-backs since he first opened the school. He was getting nicely settled when Brown Robin came on the scene."

"Something's bound to give Tom an opening before long. Tomorrow we're making another attempt to search the castle. If necessary we'll climb the wall."



"You'll be arrested for trespassing if you're not . . ."

"I don't think so. Brockspear's up to no good ; and I can't see him sending for the police. In any case fear of the law won't deter an anarchist like Tom Texel."

As they approached the church the sun sank behind the castle walls, casting a cape of shadow over the shoulders of the hill. The old yews in the churchyard were masses of green darkness.

They entered through the lych-gate and walked slowly along the gravel path.

"What time are you going to the castle tomorrow ?" Doris asked in a low voice.

"After dark. This time we want no one to see us."

She stopped and faced him. In the evening light her face under its dark head of hair was ethereal.

"Gregory ! Must you go with him ?"

"Naturally !"

"Look after yourself, Gregory. I'm scared, really scared that something will happen. I had a dream . . ."

"What was it ?"

"Please, Gregory ! I don't want to talk about it."

Feeling for her hand, he pulled her gently towards him.

"Doris ; it's very nice of you to be concerned. But don't worry !"

She returned the pressure of his grip and then took her hand away and began to walk slowly towards the church. The gravestones leaned palely in the deep shadows of the yews. A tiny bat fluttered back and forth at high speed beside the church wall.

Suddenly Doris gripped Gregory's arm.

"Gregory, Look !"

"What is it ?"

"The statue of Brown Robin—it's gone !"

"Good God !"

Gregory glanced over his shoulder at the graves, half expecting some nameless horrors to be scurrying out of them. But the thickening dark held only vague images of trees and stones.

*He was swimming towards the middle of the lake where Doris Noon was drowning. Her nude body gleamed white and lovely in the clear water. Her dark eyes were wide with fear. Just as he was about to grasp her, stone hands gripped his legs and pulled him down down into the lung-bursting depths.*

## s i x

Gregory found Tom Texel in the dining-room eating a breakfast of cereal and fruit-juice. Amy slept with one eye open in a patch of light below the window.

"Morning Greg !"

"Morning Tom ! I've got news for you."

Amy opened both eyes and thumped the floor with her tail.

"And good morning to you, Amy !"

"Fact or theory ?" Texel asked.

"Really concrete fact ; and theory, too, if you like."

"Let's have the fact !"

"The statue of Brown Robin has gone from the churchyard".

Putting down his spoon, Texel reached for his notebook which lay open on the table.

"Are you sure about that ?"

"Perfectly. Doris and I went up there last night. And there it was—gone !"

"No idea who moved it, I suppose ?"

The cook opened the kitchen hatch. Gregory went over to it and came back with cornflakes, tomato-juice, and grilled bacon on a tray. He watched the hatch close. Then he said : "I'm beginning to suspect that Brown Robin is a statue that walks around. I pumped four rounds into him before he toddled into the lake yesterday, and he didn't turn a hair."

Texel took up his spoon again, filled his mouth, and began to masticate very deliberately as though he was counting the movements of his molars. The sandy eyebrows and moustache moved to the rhythm of the powerful jaw-muscles and the bright blue eyes watched Gregory with amusement.

"Don't look so bloody superior !" Gregory said. "People have gallstones, don't they. If the human organism can turn tissue in the bladder into stone why can't it do the same with the epidermis ? Anyway it's no more impossible for a statue to walk around than it is for a man to walk under water without an aqualung."

"It's not impossible ; just inconceivable !"

"It's not inconceivable either. In Thorne Smith's *Night Life of the Gods* people turn into statues and statues into people ; and then there's Pygmalion—and . . ."

"The trouble with you literary types is that you tend to confuse fiction with real life."



"And the trouble with you scientific types is that you think life holds nothing that can't be measured in a test tube."

Texel grinned. "That's more your outlook than mine, you confirmed sceptic!" He pointed his spoon-handle towards Gregory's plate. "That chunk of charred pig-flesh which human carnivores called grilled bacon, is getting cold."

Gregory tucked into his breakfast with ostentatious relish. Presently he said: "What are you doing this morning?"

"Driving into town to borrow a frogman's suit."

"Whatever for?"

"Tomorrow I'm going into the lake to see what our friend's got stowed away down there." -

"What time will you be back from town?"

"In plenty of time for our nocturnal sortie."

At ten-thirty, Texel set off in his car. Gregory watching him go, with Amy on the seat beside him, realised for the first time that there was a family likeness between the dog and its master. Both had bushy eyebrows and a bushy moustache, both peered through the windscreen with an eagerness which made them look myopic; and both looked as though they could do with a darn good grooming.

Doris was in Dukely's study handling the morning's mail. Gregory felt temporarily at a loose end. After an aimless stroll in the garden he left the house and walked towards the village street. The warm weather still held, and the village, with its thatched cottages and gardens ablaze with flowers, seemed peaceful and drowsy.

The "Red Lion," the only pub, was open. Entering the bar, he found it empty save for the boss. It was cool inside after the hot sunshine, and the smell of beer and spirits mingled with a smell he identified as that of raspberry jam in the making.

After sinking two pints of bitter he went outside again, and as he walked up the cobbled street, past apple-trees, beehives, henhouses, and picture-postcard cottages, he felt the drowsy, sundrunk country air acting upon him like a pleasant soporific.

Perhaps Doris was right in her dislike of progress. What had modern progress to offer that was more satisfying than this? Would you get tastier beer or nicer-smelling raspberry jam in any supermarket? Could all the hi-fi in the world produce better music than a brace of birds in a bush?

The sight of the village church emerging from the trees ahead recalled their quest. He entered the churchyard and looked at the spot where Brown Robin's effigy had stood. A circle of dark, bare earth gaped among the weeds, and two lines showed plainly in the grass where some kind of truck or barrow had been wheeled.

In the noonday heat the churchyard, too, seemed drowsy and peaceful. It was incredible that anything sinister could be afoot. The trouble at the school, the bullet through the lab window the shooting at the lake, they all seemed as unsubstantial as his dreams.

He looked into the green shadows under the yews and thought of Andrew Marvell's lines :—

*Annihilating all that's made*

*To a green thought in a green shade.*

His musings were interrupted by the sound of uncouth laughter, and turning, he saw four youths in jeans leaning against the wall of the church. They began passing loud remarks in sing-song country voices, and it suddenly occurred to Gregory that the remarks were at his expense. One of them, a tough-looking lout with a spotted face and long, greasy hair, said loudly : " Yeah, he's another of them nosy parkers from the sissy-school !"

He pulled a huge sheathknife from his belt and began cleaning his nails with it.

As Gregory walked away he heard them jeering at him, and when he stepped through the gate a clod of earth landed with a thud on the ground beside him.

A new moon glinted above the trees as Tom Texel and Gregory Hammet climbed the hill. The darkness was eerie. From time to time their progress disturbed birds, wood-pigeons Gregory thought, which flew, panic-stricken, through the black foliage on noisy wings. The night was haunted with owls, which kept hooting in a nerve-twanging minor key. Despite his ingrained materialism, Gregory was thankful he was not alone.

This time he had wisely left the rifle behind. He and Texel had a torch apiece, and Texel had brought along a rope and an armoury of housebreaking tools, which, if they had been found on him by the police, would have earned him a good six months without the option. Amy trotted silently at his feet.



The castle was in darkness. They tried the postern, but the bolt-holes had been repaired since their last visit.

"We should have cased the joint in daylight," Gregory said.

"Our best bet is the front gate," came Texel's disembodied whisper.

"Why?"

"All that barbed-wire indicates a weak spot."

"I won't go into the logic of that; but we'll give it a try."

The front gate was about thirty feet high. The vertical rods were unclimbable, but they were spaced widely enough for Amy to squeeze through. After several attempts Texel succeeded in throwing over the top of the gate a rubber ball to which was attached a length of twine.

When the ball was fielded by Amy he tied the rope to the twine, pulled the end of the rope over the top of the gate and secured it in two places with bowlines to the bottom crossbar.

By the faint moonlight he selected a pair of wire-cutters from the tool-wallet he wore like a waistcoat under his sweater.

"I'll go up first and cut the wire."

"Right, Tom."

Ten minutes later, Gregory began to climb the rope. He wondered if he were dreaming again. The sudden thought of the incongruity of a staid schoolmaster felonously climbing a rope by moonlight made him want to shout with laughter.

He was breathless when he reached the top crossbar, which was cold and rough to his touch. His hands felt as though they had been through a mangle. The top of the gate was level with his chin now; and the problem was to get his body up and over the other side. When he tried to lift his legs he thought he was wearing diver's boots.

No, it was no good. Five years ago he would have managed it with ease. But now he was beaten. He would have to go down and let Tom do the dirty-work alone.

Looking down he saw Texel grinning toothily at him in the moonlight. It was that grin that did it. Hell! He wouldn't be beaten by a lettuce-fed test-tube squinter! He grunted and tugged, sweated and heaved, until he was bodily over the gate.

"What kept you?" Texel whispered derisively. "I thought you were reading a book up there!"

"What's the hurry? Are you anxious to get back in bed?"

Texel began to untie the ends of the rope.

"Can't we leave that for the return journey?"

"No ; we may need it in the donjon. Anyway we can unbolt the postern gate from inside."

Warily they followed a paved path to the inner bailey. The smaller gate here was easier to climb, and another ten minutes saw them at the high door of the donjon.

Texel shone his torch on the lock, and used several tools on it before it clicked open. The door swung soundlessly. They entered, and Texel closed it softly behind them. A faint light glimmering inside the tower showed a large hall with steps rising from one corner. At first Gregory thought it was moonlight shining through an arrow-slit, but after a few blinks he saw a tiny lamp set in an alcove of the wall.

A similar lamp lit each landing as they climbed the steps. The dog silently preceded them up each flight and waited on the landings.

Amid the dark walls the silence was oppressive. The untrimmed oil-lamps, which added the smell of burning paraffin to the dank, cellar-like stench of the vast chambers, spoke of occupation. Gregory kept alert, peering into the shadow listening in to the silence ; but the place seemed as lifeless as a forgotten tomb.

"We must be near the top now," he grunted.

When they turned into the next landing Texel suddenly stopped. Gregory stopped, too, with his legs parted in mid-stride. For across the landing, the figure of Brown Robin, with the light behind it, showed up as a black silhouette which cast a giant shadow across the bare planks of the floor. Gregory wanted to turn and rush downstairs, but his feet seemed rooted to the planks.

As in a dream he watched the dog go up to the silhouette, sniff it, and then squat beside it, watching her master for instructions.

"It's that blasted statue !" Texel said, suddenly breathing heavily.

"Or else he turned into a statue just as we turned the corner," Gregory said wildly. He wanted to laugh with relief.

"Let's hope he stays that way till we've looked the place over !" Texel said.

The next landing brought another shock. A room opened off it. The door gaped. A light burned inside. And across the threshold a bulky man lay on his side with one arm stretched towards them.



Texel got to him first.

"Dead as a doornail!" he announced immediately. "Been dead some hours by the feel of him."

Gregory approached cautiously. It was a stocky man in his fifties. At first Gregory did not recognise him; and then, suddenly he did recognise him, and he remembered the angry encounter on the one other occasion he had seen him.

"It—it's Mr Brockspear!"

Stepping gingerly round the body, Gregory entered the room and dropped into the single chair, where he fumbled awkwardly for his cigarettes. He had hardly known of death before; it was just something he had read about; but recently, in quick succession, three men he knew had died.

"I suppose we'd better tell the police," he said, when eventually he got a cigarette alight.

Texel was examining the room, which appeared to be a study.

"We'll make an anonymous phone call. We don't want a lot of awkward questions at this stage."

Gregory looked up at Tom Texel and wondered how a responsible scientist could have such little regard for the law. He seemed quite indifferent to the stiffening body at the threshold of the room, and was casually examining the books in the shelves like someone on a normal visit to a friend.

"Brockspear seems to have been very interested in Satanism and black magic," he remarked. "And, goodness! Here are some books on astronomy!"

"Astrology?"

"No, astronomy. And here's a work on planetary exploration! Brockspear certainly had catholic tastes."

"He's dead now: I'm getting out of here."

"Wait a minute; what's this?"

Gregory looked over his shoulder and saw another book in Texel's hand. "What is it?"

"James Brockspear's diary. Seems to cover the period of the past ten years. Listen to the first entry!"

*"Sunday November 3. At last my experiments have brought success. Today I managed to contact Robin de Bron."*

I think I'll borrow this for a few days; it will be invaluable..."

"You'll be in trouble when it's missed."

"Who's going to miss it? Poor Brockspear won't need it any more; and I don't suppose anyone else knows it exists."

They left the room and descended the stairs of the donjon. Outside the new moon was still shining, and the stars were crystal cities dotted over the roadless map of space.

*He had murdered a man. Fear and guilt fermented within him, producing utter despair. Yet an evil cunning, hitherto repressed began to grow in his mind, as he walked with the constable among the wintry trees. Presently they came to a place where the rotting leaves had been disturbed. He tried to walk past it casually, but the constable gripped his arm and pointed to the ground where the leafmould did not quite conceal the body of his victim . . .*

### seven

Gregory rose just after nine the following morning. He got a sour look from the cook when she served his breakfast. There was no sign of the others ; and he was pleased to some extent that he had not encountered Doris. She would be bound to ask awkward questions about their visit to the castle ; and Texel had told him to say nothing about it for the time being. He would be glad when things got back to normal ; then, perhaps, he would be able to tell Doris of the way he felt about her.

After a quick glance through the morning papers he went out to the laboratory and tried to open the door ; but it was locked. He assumed the place was empty ; but as he walked away he heard the door open stealthily. Turning, he saw Texel looking round the door beckoning conspiratorially.

“What’s all this cloak and dagger routine ?”

Texel pulled him inside and locked the door again.

“I’ve started to read through poor Brockspear’s diary. My God ! It’s a revelation !”

“In what way ?”

“I think it will explain the whole mystery of Brown Robin ; but I haven’t had time to fully digest it.”

“Please don’t split infinitives !”

“Brown Robin apparently possessed Brockspear from time to time. Made him do exactly what he wanted ; and Brock-spear had no control over his own body. The poor fellow must have been possessed when he chased us out of the castle that day. Do you remember how his face was twitching ?”

“Yes ; and Commander Beale’s face was twitching in the same way when he asked Doris and me to leave the museum. I wonder if Brown Robin possessed Beale just before he died ?”



"Maybe you've got something there. Maybe Brown Robin can possess a man and cause him to die of heart-failure when he no longer needs him."

"It sounds likely."

"Listen to this !" Texel began to read from his notebook.

*"April 5. At times I am completely in his power. He takes over my body and uses it for his own purposes. I am compelled to carry out his wishes, and all the time I am aware of what I am doing, and loathing myself for doing it."*

"Is that an extract . . ."

"Yes ; Brockspear wrote up his diary during the periods when Brown Robin was not controlling him. Poor fellow ! He was like two men, one good and one evil ! He even gave his wife and daughter to that—devil."

"What ?"

"Yeah ; listen to this !

*June 14. He is so powerful, and yet so weak that he cannot stay out of the lake for more than a few hours at a time. And every five years he has to return to the lake for a five years rest period. Today he took Penelope, my only child, just three months after he took poor Maud. Where is all this going to end ?"*

"You should hand that diary to the police without delay."

"It would take a long time to convince the police ; and then there'd be all kinds of bull and red tape to contend with. We can settle Brown Robin ourselves much more efficiently. This morning I'm going into that lake. You can give me a hand with the apparatus."

Texel put on the frogman's suit, adjusted the mouthpiece and walked into the water. He paused momentarily when the water was level with his chest ; then he continued until he was gone from sight.

"Come here, Amy !" Gregory said to the dog, who wanted to follow. The dog came to him ; and he sat on the shore of the little lake, looking round warily in case Brown Robin should show up and wondering what would happen if he did.

The sun was hot on his head and shoulders and its reflection from the surface of the lake hurt his eyes. He had slept badly

last night, and, not being accustomed to breaking the law, he had half expected a visit from the police soon after waking. He wondered if the police had gone to the castle on receiving Texel's anonymous tip-off—and what steps they were taking.

Texel stayed under water such a long time that Gregory began to get worried. Suppose Brown Robin had been waiting! What was he doing down there? Give him another ten minutes. Then if he didn't surface he would go to the police and tell them all he knew. The dog was whining quietly now as if she could sense that her master was in trouble. Her obvious distress made Gregory believe the worst had happened.

Those dreams were getting him down. Brown Robin caused bad dreams . . . God! Was he going crazy!

Suddenly there came splashing at the other side of the lake, and the dog darted away from under Gregory's hand. He looked across the bright water and saw that Texel had surfaced. Gregory went over to him with the clothes and towel and watched him take off the frogman's suit and get his pants and sweater on again.

"Find anything?"

"He's definitely got something down there. There's a door with some kind of watertight fittings; but I couldn't get near enough to examine it properly for the barbed wire. Scared I'd rupture my tube."

When he was dressed, he calmly made a few notes in his book. Then he began to examine the lake and the hillside dividing it from the beach. He took soundings and measurements; and all the time Gregory was wondering what the police were doing; and likewise what Brown Robin was doing.

He followed Texel down to the beach and then back to the lab. Texel made some rapid calculations with a slide-rule. Presently he looked up, beaming under his bushy brows.

"We can do it, Greg!"

"Do what? I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about."

But instead of replying, Texel hurried to the garage and started his car.

"I'm driving into Parkville. Until I get back, keep calm, keep quiet, and don't answer any questions—from anybody. Above all keep clear of the police! Understand?"

"I *don't* understand! What's going on?"

"Explain when I get back. Meanwhile, mum's the word!"



When he had gone, Gregory went to his room and tried to read ; but the words were not able to get across the barrier of his anxiety. When a knock sounded at his door he was both alarmed and relieved. Whatever would he do if the police started questioning him ?

It was not a policeman at the door, but Mr. Dukely, who looked as anxious as Gregory felt.

" Mr. Hammet, is—er—Miss Noon with you ?"

Gregory closed his book with shaky fingers. Panic swelled within him. He tried to keep it out of his voice.

" Doris ? No, Mr. Dukely ; I thought she was with you."

The little headmaster looked dumbfounded.

" No—no, she—er—hasn't been with me all morning."

With a sick feeling in his stomach, Gregory joined him at the door.

" We'd better look for her ; have you tried her room ?"

Mr. Dukely had not. They tried it. She was not there. After searching the school from attic to basement, they went outside and looked in the greenhouse and the shed, but there was no sign of Doris.

They went into the kitchen and asked the cook, but the cook had not seen her since breakfast time when Doris came in for her coffee.

" She may have gone shopping," Gregory said hopefully.

" She'd hardly—er—go shopping at this time without telling me," said Mr. Dukely hesitantly.

" She went out shopping yesterday afternoon," said the gaunt faced cook with melancholy satisfaction. " Ol' Brown Robin's got her if you asks me. She won't be the first woman to disappear from this village. I warned you not to get too nosy ; but you wouldn't take no notice."

The cook had voiced Gregory's own fears, and he was furious with her for doing so. He had an unadmitted conviction that putting such a thing into words made it more likely to have taken place.

" Nonsense !" he snapped. " I'll go into the village and look for her."

" Use the bicycle in the shed," Mr. Dukely suggested.

The village had two shops ; a post-office-general-store, and a cake-shop which also sold teas and ices. Gregory entered each in turn ; and in each one the customers, mostly plump, rubicund women in wide hats and low heels, stopped their

gossip as he entered and resumed it as he left, giving him a vague feeling of hostility towards him. Doris was in neither shop.

He cycled up the street of thatched cottages, peering into gardens and windows in the hope of catching sight of her, and realising as he did so, the hopelessness of his task. At the church he dismounted and went into the churchyard ; but there was nothing there but the old yews and the leaning gravestones; and a newly-dug grave, possibly intended for the remains of Commander Beale.

Soon there would be another one for Mr. Brockspear, and he wondered how many more would be dug before Brown Robin was finally dealt with.

Leaving his bike near the church, he approached the castle on foot. And now he saw the big front gate open for the first time. A black police car was drawn up outside, and near it a uniformed constable was talking to an elderly man whom Gregory had not seen before.

Gregory decided not to get involved with any questioning. Retrieving his cycle he freewheeled slowly with his brakes partly on down the village street. Suddenly he remembered that Doris had an aunt in one of the cottages. He halted, trying to remember which one.

Vivid memories of Doris rushed unbidden into his mind. opening the door to him . . . standing beside the sundial in the neglected garden . . . walking with him in the leafy shadows . . .

With an effort he controlled himself.

The cottage with the red-hot-pokers in the garden !

After resting his cycle against the privet hedge, he walked up the path and knocked on the door. The only reply was a high-pitched bark from somewhere behind the house.

He knocked again, and presently a woman came to the door of the next cottage.

"If you're wanting Mrs. Hardwich she's gone to Parkville for the day ; she al'ys goes there of a Sat'day."

"Do you know if she took her niece ?"

"Doris ?"

Gregory nodded hopefully.

But the woman opened her mouth vacantly and shook her head.

"Not that I knows on."

"Oh—thank you."



Gregory mounted his cycle again and free-wheeled to the "Red Lion." Today it was crowded with local men. They all seemed boisterous, redfaced and sweaty. Some, who were playing cricket that afternoon, wore white flannels and cricket-shirts. Normally Gregory would have been sufficiently interested to enquire about the game and the possibilities of watching it ; but now he had other things on his mind, and he felt irritated by the proximity of so many guffawing bumpkins. He ordered a pint of bitter and listened to the talk as he drank.

"Ol' Paxton don't look so well lately—what can you expect, the way he do carry on? . . . They don't stand a chance against the Aussies ; now if I was selecting the team . . . You keep your hands to yourself, she said, and I said . . . Double tops was all I wanted but I couldn't get within a mile of it . . . Fancy Ol' Brockspear snuffing it like that ! Only fifty-two. Heart failure again. Proper epidemic. Strumbosis I shouldn't wonder . . . I blames them sputniks myself . . . Did you heard about the vicar and the choirboy? . . ."

All this was interspersed by guffawing laughter which sounded in Gregory's unsympathetic ears as false as the drilled cackle of a studio audience.

A sudden silence descended on the room, and Gregory, looking round to see the cause of it, saw that everyone was staring at him. He plainly discerned hostility in the sweating faces and realised that for some reason he was extremely unpopular, but there was no time now to discover that reason.

When he had returned the cycle to the shed he saw that Mr. Dukely was searching the garden, peering under the rhododendron bushes and pushing aside the goldenrod with a stick.

"Any sign of her in the village, Mr. Hammet?"

"I'm afraid not."

The little headmaster seemed on the point of nervous breakdown. "What shall we do? Do you think we should—er—call the police?"

His nervousness made Gregory feel worse ; and he wished he would go away and leave him alone. Perhaps if he was alone he would think of something.

"Not yet." Gregory tried to sound confident. "I suggest we wait for Mr. Texel to get back. Perhaps . . ."

"He's here now !" Dukely said as a car pulled into the drive.

They began to hurry towards it, Mr. Dukely stumbling time after time in his anxiety.

## e i g h t

Tom Texel made no attempt to garage the car, but leaned across the seat on which the dog was sitting and opened the door for Gregory.

"Jump in, Greg!"

"Not so fast, Tom! Doris is missing. No one's seen her since first thing. Maybe Brown . . ."

"Jump in, then! We've no time to waste."

Gregory got into the car and was effusively greeted by Amy, with whom he had to share a seat. As Texel engaged the gears and drove out into the road, Gregory glanced behind at Mr. Dukely who stood flabbergasted on the drive, looking like someone who had just missed a bus.

"We'd better search the castle again," he said to Texel. "That's where that monster's probably taken her."

Texel concentrated on his driving. At the first opening he turned off the road and drove carefully along the rough path towards the lake.

"Why are we coming here? Doris . . ."

"Steady on, gel!" Texel said, talking to the car. "We've got a load of dynamite on board."

"You've got what?"

Gregory looked over his shoulder at a box wedged between his seat and the back seat.

"Dynamite, old man! I'm going to blow a gap in the side of the lake in hopes of draining it. Then I've got a couple of guys coming along with a pump."

He drew up near the shore of the lake and jumped out of the car.

"How about Doris?" Gregory asked, standing in front of him to impede his progress and ensure his attention. "Don't you understand what's happened? That monster's got her! We don't know what he's doing to her!"

Texel gripped him by the shoulders.

"I do understand. You're the one who doesn't. Now stop being a bloody fool, Greg, and get a grip on yourself. I know what I'm doing. We haven't got a clue where Robin is; and if we had we couldn't stop him doing what he wants to. But we can get him by the tonsils, and incidently help Doris, by blowing up the bank of this lake. Now stop acting like a half-baked Galahad, and give me a hand to get this explosive in



position. There's a spade ! I'll show you where I want you to dig a hole."

Texel's apparent command of the situation, coupled with the activity of digging, helped Gregory to keep in check his rising concern over Doris. He realised now, that by lying in bed much later than usual he had deliberately avoided contact with her that morning. He had kept away to prevent her asking awkward questions about the visit to the castle. And now he felt partly to blame for her disappearance. Perhaps if he had gone to see her she would not be missing now.

While he dug the hole, Texel ran a flexible cable from the lakeside to a hollow overgrown with bushes some thirty yards away. The first six inches of ground under the turf was soft topsoil. Gregory dug it away easily. Then the thrust of the spade jarred his muscles as the spade struck chalk embedded with flints.

"Haven't you got a pickaxe?"

"No !" Texel called from the hollow. "But there's an iron digging bar under the back seat. Try getting the flints out with that !"

Gregory peeled off his jacket and attacked the ground with the pointed iron bar. By now he was sticky with sweat in the hot sun, and his hands, sore from last night's climbing, felt as if they had been flayed and salted. He would have weakened long ago but for the thought of Doris—and that devil. Each blow he struck into the ground was a blow at the heart of Brown Robin.

At length he had a deep, narrow hole in the side of the hill below the lake. He was looking into it and spitting on his hands when Texel gave him a chisel.

"Get your arm down there now and cut a tunnel on this side of the hole, while I rig up the detonator !"

"Too bad they abolished slavery. You'd have made a name for yourself !"

He lay full length on the turf with an arm down the hole and painfully chiselled a tunnel where Texel had indicated. Presently Texel came back with the explosives and the end of the flex.

"Go over to the hollow," Texel said, getting down on his knees beside the hole. "And keep a lookout ! If anyone comes in sight, yell to them to get to hell out of it !"

From the high ground above the hollow Gregory examined the terrain. The school chimneys showed just clear of the trees. More trees covered the hillside, and near the summit the top of the church spire showed up in clear-cut lines. Atop the hill, the castle with its high donjon and crenalated walls, had the rough, simple lines of a toy fort. Below the hill the sea sparkled peacefully, with here and there white sails as small and neat as toy yachts on a pond.

"All clear !" he shouted hoarsely.

He watched Texel finish fixing the explosive and get into the car with Amy and drive to a point behind the hollow. He heard the door slam and saw Texel and the dog running towards him.

"Take cover !" Texel snapped.

But before Gregory could make the hollow he saw another figure descending the hill at high speed. Brown Robin ! He watched fascinated as the monkish figure glided towards them. Although he knew he ought to get into the hollow, something compelled him to watch. Brown Robin stopped. Raised his rifle.

As the shot rang out, Texel pulled Gregory into the hollow and threw him down into the place below the bushes where the detonator waited. With the dog whimpering beside him, Gregory felt himself paralysed with fear. Burning with a strange hostility, he watched Texel reach for the detonator and turn the handle briskly.

The explosion shook the earth and the air. Fragments of turf, chalk and flint rained down like shrapnel. Something inside Gregory seemed to rise to a climax of fear and loathing and then vanish as though he had been momentarily in contact with a mind in torment. When the sound of the explosion died away his ears were ringing but all fear had left him, and his one desire was to find Doris.

Scrambling out of the hollow he saw water flash in the sun as it cascaded over the ruptured rim of the lake, and down the hillside towards the sea.

The dog growled with unwanted savagery ; and Gregory turned and saw Brown Robin hurtling towards them, but apparently out of control. A few yards short of the hollow Brown Robin stumbled and fell to the ground where for a second or two he lay twitching and sagging like a punctured bladder.

The dog howled eerily.



"Quiet Amy !" Texel rapped ; and she subsided to a low whimper.

Warily Gregory and Texel approached the creature on the ground. They halted and looked down on it. As they watched, the human hands and head of the thing shrivelled away to a sort of dry, colourless jelly.

Texel stopped and grabbed the garment by the hem and shook it as though it were a sack half full of filth. Gregory took one look at the jelly-like substance that came out of it and turned away feeling sick.

Presently Amy gave a warning bark, and they saw two men approaching the lake from the direction of the school. They were pushing a handcart with a motor-pump on it.

"Take the car, Greg, and go look for Doris," Texel said. "Take Amy with you. I'll get these men working on the pump."

Gregory noticed that Texel had a wound on the side of his head from which blood was flowing.

"You've hurt yourself, Tom. Did he graze you with that bullet ?"

"Eh ?" Texel put a hand to his head and brought it away printed with blood. "No ; it was a rock thrown up by the explosion. Nothing to worry about."

"You'd better get it dressed."

"I'll get these guys pumping first ; and then I want a specimen-jar."

Gregory walked to the car, and when he opened the door the dog jumped inside it. After switching on the ignition he glanced into the mirror and then looked ahead through the windscreen. The figure of a young woman had just appeared, dryad-like, among the nearest line of trees. Doris ! He jumped out of the car leaving the engine running ,and hurried over the grass.

"Doris, are you all right ?"

"Perfectly ; I . . ."

But the rest of the words remained unspoken until he had finished kissing her.

The hollow where the lake had been was empty save for a diminishing pool of muddy water. The pump had been working for an hour. Its throb disturbed the afternoon stillness. Some village children, attracted no doubt by the sound of the explosion, stood at the top of the hole, looking down

into the last of the water and watching the two men who stood by the pump with the uneasy latitude of hired workmen with no immediate need for activity.

"Let's go and have a cup of coffee," Gregory said to Texel.

"You can leave those fellows to watch the pump. There's still a lot of water to come out ; it's quite deep in the middle there."

"And you need a dressing on that cut, Mr. Texel," Doris reminded him.

"Maybe you're right," Texel said. "I could certainly use a cup of coffee." Snapping his fingers for Amy, he turned, a little reluctantly, from the lake. Doris and Gregory followed him towards the lab.

"Sure you're all right?" Gregory asked Doris when they were in the passage.

"Perfectly, Gregory. The gamekeeper was kind and sympathetic once he was out of Brown Robin's influence."

Inside, Gregory left Doris washing the blood from Texel's hair at the lab sink, while he went to ask cook for coffee. Dukely was in the lab when he got back. Gregory saw him staring at the specimen-jar in which Texel had placed a sample of the matter that had once been Brown Robin. Presently the cook brought in four cups of coffee and handed them round.

"Thank you Mrs. Snell," Dukely said as she made for the door. "Is there enough coffee left to give some to those two men working the pump?"

"I reckon so. I'll take some out to 'em in a minute."

When Texel's head was adequately bandaged, he went over to the table and consulted his notes. Presently Dukely approached him diffidently, slopping coffee into his saucer as he crossed the floor.

"Well, Texel ! You seem to have—er—disposed of Brown Robin most effectively." After another glance at the jar he smiled thinly and added. "Liquidated him in fact. The whole school is grateful to you and I think I can safely send for the boys during the coming week."

He sipped some coffee.

"Now perhaps you can tell us what he was and where he came from, and what he's been up to all these years."

Doris and Gregory drew closer to Texel, who was reading his notes with a look of boyish surprise on his face as though someone else had written them. Suddenly he put his notebook down and turned to face the others.



"First I must confess I don't actually *know* very much about Brown Robin."

"Stop lecturing, Tom !" Gregory said. "And give us your ideas !"

"But I have formed a rough, working theory, which I suggest we use until we find a better one."

"Please don't keep us in suspense, Mr. Texel !" Doris pleaded.

"I've studied old maps of the district and discovered that prior to sixty years ago Bron Lake did not exist. We can assume, then, that Brown Robin arrived here less than sixty years ago."

"But he was here in the middle ages !"

"No, Doris ; that was a legend concocted by Brown Robin himself."

"But the History . . ." Doris protested.

"And the effigy !" said Gregory.

Texel raised an earth-soiled hand.

"Brown Robin arrived here approximately sixty years ago from another planet. On crash-landing, his spaceship made a hole in the hill. Brown Robin pumped water into the hole to conceal his vessel. The alien knew he was stranded for life here. Unable to leave his spaceship for long periods, he was compelled to spend the rest of his days in the vicinity of Farfield.

"Of a high intelligence, he soon learned the culture-pattern of the local people and found he could perform a sort of hypnotism upon them and get them to carry out his commands. By this means he spread the Legend round the village.

"Brown Robin, the Legend ran, has been in Farfield for centuries. He is a sort of Robin Goodfellow who does good turns to those people who are not inquisitive about him. To those who are inquisitive he can be a terror.

"He got someone to write the History and someone to carve the effigy and fake it to look very old. And the Legend was accepted locally. Brown Robin's origins were never questioned.

"No doubt the alien used numerous human's to work his will ; but eventually he found in James Brockspear a man who, although superstitious, was more educated, and therefore more useful to him. Through Brockspear he kept the village primitive. He allowed no industries into the district, and no new buildings. He planned to keep the people uneducated and superstitious, so that he could rule here as a local god.

"From time to time he abducted a village woman with the idea of providing himself with an heir. But so far as we know, these breeding experiments were not successful.

"Owing to his particular alien metabolism he could not leave his spaceship for more than a few hours at a time ; and every five years he had to retire into it for a five year period. No doubt his spaceship—which we will see for ourselves as soon as the lake has been pumped dry—is filled with his own type of atmosphere ; and if he stayed out of it too long, he would dry up and disintegrate like a beached jellyfish.

"During his last hibernation, Mr. Dukely, you opened this school. The existing village school presented no danger to Brown Robin ; but a new school implied progress—an educated staff. The local yokels would be subjected to rational outside influences."

"They already had television," Gregory said.

Texel let the remark pass unanswered.

"When Brown Robin came out of his last hibernation he promptly decided to close the school. As his agent he chose Gregory's predecessor, Mr. Cross. But for some reason Jack Cross could not stand the pace. His ticker gave out.

"Jack Cross may have been superstitious ; and so Brown Robin was able to possess him. But the other masters were not superstitious ; and in order to scare them off he used a rifle."

"He was a rotten shot !" Gregory put in.

"Nevertheless he got what he wanted. Two masters resigned. The school was evacuated. But then Gregory Hammet came on the scene. And Gregory, although his mind harbours a hotchpotch of legend and fairy-tales, is an out and out sceptic."

"Please Tom !" Gregory protested, "you are talking in front of my employer."

Mr. Dukely laughed. It was the first time Gregory had heard him do so.

"When you turned up, Gregory," Texel went on, "the alien knew he'd have to do something desperate. He allowed you to see him through the window that first evening. But instead of showing signs of superstitious awe, and so opening your mind to him, you thought he was a crazy old hayseed."

"How about Commander Beale and the History ?" Gregory asked, mainly to direct the talk away from himself.

Texel drank a little coffee.



"Brown Robin feared that the references to himself in an otherwise authentic parish history would be spotted as phoney by a literary man. So he possessed Commander Beale and got him to tear out the offending pages. But Beale already had a weak heart, and he died soon after the experience. Then Robin got worried about the statue. Fearing that such a fake antique would not pass the scrutiny of a scientific investigator, he removed it to the castle donjon . . ."

"Where it gave a certain scientific investigator quite a shock!"

Texel ignored Gregory's remark.

"Eventually the alien decided to kidnap you, Doris, in order to distract our attention from the lake. He'd already stayed outside his spaceship beyond the safe time-limit; and he wanted us out of the way. So he possessed Brockspear's gamekeeper, who forced Doris to accompany him to his cottage."

"The gamekeeper was very nice about it afterwards," Doris said. "But to say I was scared is putting it mildly."

"When we persisted in remaining at the lakeside, Brown Robin made a final desperate attack with his rifle. But it was too late. When we had blown away the bank of the lake he just disintegrated."

Texel suddenly looked towards the door of the lab, where the cook stood listening to him.

"I'm glad you're here Mrs. Snell. You will realise now that there was nothing supernatural about Brown Robin. He was merely a visitor from another planet, like some of the people from the village here may soon be visitors to the moon, or Mars."

The cook gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Your explanation was clever, Mr. Texel; and you're entitled to your opinion same as I'm entitled to mine."

"Which is?"

"Brown Robin is a devil from down below there; and you'll never tell me different."

Dramatically she pointed into the middle of the laboratory. "I saw Mr. Cross draw a pentagram on the floor there with a piece of chalk; and that's how Brown Robin first came to Bronlake."

"Mr. Cross was misinformed. Brown Robin would have appeared to him quite as easily without a pentagram. But that doesn't matter now—because Brown Robin is dead."

"Where's his body, then?"

Texel glanced at the specimen-jar.

"There's not much of it left, I'm afraid . . ."

"No, there wouldn't be. Brown Robin's got away from you, like he always has in the past. But he'll be back, sir. He'll be back!"

She turned quickly and hurried away.

"Some folk," Texel said sadly, "you'll never convince."

"Would you—er—like to stay on here for a while?" Mr. Dukely said. "As science master."

Texel shook his head.

"No thank you, Mr. Dukely. I want to get back to my spaceship designing . . ."

At that moment one of the workmen appeared in the doorway.

"The lake bed's practically dry now, Mr. Texel. There's a submarine or something stuck in the rock at the bottom of it."

"Fine," Texel said.

"My mate's just trying to open the watertight door."

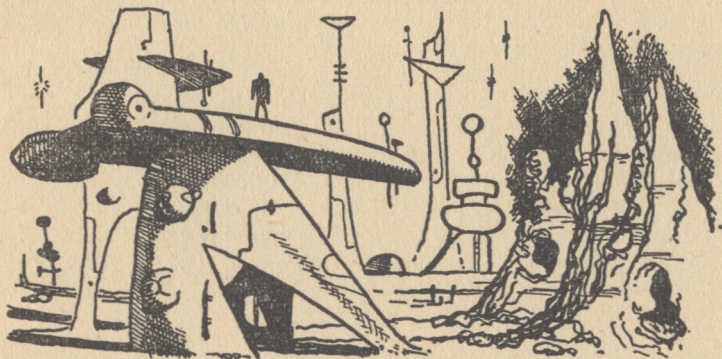
Texel leapt from the table as though his pants were on fire.

"Tell him to leave it alone!" he yelled. It was the first time Gregory had seen him furious.

Texel rushed to the bed of the lake yelling to the man to get to hell out of it. But it was too late. The door was open.

A sort of phosphorescent jelly oozed out of it and began to turn into purple vapour as it came into contact with the air. And the metal of the spaceship on which Brown Robin had bridged the starry void began to melt and disintegrate like icecream on a hot stove.

—W. T. Webb





*Just how large an orchestra of musicians would be needed before the musical notes became too great for the human ear? And what might this concentrated sound turn into when let loose on the world?*

# THE BIG SOUND

BY P. F. WOODS

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This is a story, not about Gadman, but about his orchestra.

Because in a way Gadman was only the tool of what he created. It was not Gadman that registered on the instruments of the Andromedan scientists, it was his transcendental music.

I think the idea he embarked upon in his fiftieth year had been developing, unknown to him, all his life. He always became immediately interested in anything massive. Ocean liners and skyscrapers fascinated him. I once saw him stare for half an hour at a blown-up photograph of the moon, trying to get some measure of its size.

"Big," he said. "Big."

"So is the Earth you walk on," I told him.

He looked at me in a sudden, startled way. I couldn't tell whether the point was new to him, or whether it reinforced some thought of his own. "It is," he agreed. "It is."

When he was thirty years of age he suddenly turned to me and demanded: "What's the loudest sound in the universe?"

I thought the question made little sense. "I suppose there's a limit to what the eardrums can take before they burst," I said, "and that's the limit."

I saw from his surprise that this hadn't occurred to him before. He cogitated for some time, troubled. Finally he shook his head in an unhappy way. "Wrong," he decided. "Must be wrong."

"But why?"

He gestured in agitation. Discussion always bothered him. "No air in space. Ears hear nothing."

"There's no sound in space."

This time he looked at me as though I had said something idiotic. "Uh? But music is sound!"

"There's no music in space."

"What? No music in the void? No melodies on the Moon?" He dismissed me with a flick of his hand. "There must be."

Gadman was no scientist. He was guided by his instincts.

It was the first occasion in the realm of philosophy that I have known instinct to be right.

Gadman's relations with human beings were perfunctory. Even as a young man he looked like an old one, and I never saw him look hungrily at a woman. He was the only man I knew who genuinely placed no value on company's sake. And yet he had nothing to compensate for this; for though he was a composer of near-genius he certainly didn't consider his work important enough to warrant great sacrifice. He was dedicated, in a sense, but whatever it was he was dedicated to hadn't turned up yet. Whether it ever would didn't matter to him: he was prepared to stick it out in any case.

And so he was a hollow barrel of a man, unimpressed by the best available in the world, and knowing of nothing better.

But he had a hobby: gigantism. Eventually, he specialised into musical gigantism.

His progress was slow. The first real evidence I had of it was a party he gave when I had already been his friend for twenty-five years. It was unlike him to give a party. There appeared to be no reason for it, and of course he made no attempt to mix with his guests. But he had provided an entertainment. In one room of the house, set apart from the others, a single 'cellist played Gadman's compositions into a powerful amplifier with a stepped-up volume.

It was in this room that I eventually found him. The noise was terrific, almost unbearable, the 'cello groaned continuously



on like Jonah's whale, swallowing everything. I felt like a drowning man.

I turned to Gadman and yelled something at him, though I couldn't distinguish the sound of my own voice. As I finished, the 'cello abruptly stopped.

"I don't know what you're shouting for," Gadman said into the sudden stillness, annoyed. "I could hear you perfectly."

Then I realised Gadman's super-human ability to discriminate between sounds, to select one small tone from a universe of boundless noise, and listen to it in complete calm. I believe he could distinguish between the pure tone and the harmonics of any note of any instrument. He could hear sounds so faint as scarcely to exist.

At the other end of the scale, he could hear sounds so loud as any other person would fail to receive.

He could hear sounds that weren't really sounds at all.

When the party was over we went for a walk through the streets of St. John's Wood, where he lived. The air was warm and quiet, except for the rustle of a breeze and the occasional hum of a distant engine. Gadman paused.

"Don't you hear it?" he said.

"Hear what?"

"London."

I listened, though not with any expectancy. London was asleep, otherwise there would only have been the drone of traffic. I didn't hear anything.

"It's in your imagination," I told him.

"What's the difference? In or out, it's all the same. London is a single, organised entity. It's a tune on too grand a scale for you to notice. But you only have to listen."

I had no answer to this. We continued walking for some time. Then he made a comment about the evening's cello playing.

"Just amplifying is no good," he said. "It doesn't do anything but amplify. You can't make big out of little. You have to start out big."

A few years after all this Gadman began his project.

The idea in itself did not at first seem new. Several composers have experimented with orchestras of massive size. Berlioz specified six hundred players as an ideal number. One of Mahler's scores calls for a full thousand performers, and

Wagner's music is generally too expensive to be produced in entirety. But none of this pleased Gadman.

"Poor stuff," he said. "Messy. Distraught. Not very successful." He always listened carefully, but he nearly always shook his head. I once heard him express some approval for the clean blast of a swing band engaged in what I believe is called 'piling on the decibels,' but that was an exception.

Gadman decided to create symphonies that went right over the top. He assembled an orchestra of six thousand men. Then he began to make preparations for his composition.

The first problem was one of precision. Such a large number of instruments resulted in an inchoate, badly defined mass of noise. This was stupendous in itself, but it was not Gadman's purpose ; correcting it took long patient work.

He trained each huge section to *attune within itself*, so that it sounded out like one giant instrument, clear and concise. This was no mere amplification : it was *super-sound*.

The orchestra rehearsed for five years before he deemed it ready for performance. One night he visited me.

"Come and hear my symphony," he said.

"All right. Where?"

"Salisbury Plain."

I laughed. "That's quite a distance off, isn't it?"

"I like it there. It's open. Expansive. I've built an open-air stadium there."

"How much do you charge?" I asked, intrigued.

"You can't get in. There's only room for the orchestra. But you'll hear all right from outside."

I never doubted that. "How have you financed all this?" I asked suspiciously. "I didn't know you were so rich."

He shrugged. "Money's no obstacle to an intent man."

And that was all I got out of him on that subject until the orchestra came to its fantastic conclusion, for Gadman certainly can't be made to speak against his will.

So I visited the orchestra site. I arrived only half an hour before the performance, so I stationed myself about half a mile from the stadium and settled down to observe through a pair of binoculars.

The orchestra was placed in the plain like a volcanic crater. The instrumentalists sat solemnly, in silence, the sunlight shining down on them as they waited to begin.



When I saw their grave, uniform manner, I thought they were simply well drilled. Later that day, I learned how much more there was to it.

Gadman didn't have a very big audience. In fact I was the only person he had invited. I saw three or four other cars dotted about, probably newspapermen who happened to have found out that this was the big day. I don't know what they made of it : the press comments which followed weren't very illuminating.

But Gadman's music was astonishing.

To begin with, it had the organic quality of a chamber ensemble. But more important, the sounds it produced were of such a capacity that they *exceeded the extant of normal music*. It was super-sound, super-music. Hearing that vast music was an utterly transcendental experience. It was loud beyond the ability of the ears to hear, only the mind apprehended it.

Within a few minutes I understood much more of Gadman than I ever had before. I knew now what he was getting at : for those meaningful sounds were of such proportions that they gained the status of the physical landscape. They were in the class of mountains, or oceans. They were something much, much more than a thunderstorm or a river ; they were much more solid.

Something new had been added to the geography of the Earth.

The music lasted for only half an hour. When it ended, it left a great gaping void in the landscape. I sat and watched the emptiness.

Then something unexpected happened. For a few moments I thought I had made a mistake in thinking that the symphony was over. Fainter music vibrated over the air above the stadium, like a resonance, like a ghost of what had been, but of a strange quality, and distinct for all that.

I lifted my binoculars and peered at the orchestra. The instrumentalists sat motionless, pale. No one that I could see touched his instrument.

Yet the music came, ephemeral but real, like a harmonic response to a giant sound. The instruments sounded of themselves.

Swivelling the binoculars, I watched Gadman, hoping for some clue. His heavy features were expressionless. His arms

were limp. Better try to read a brick wall than search for a reaction in Gadman.

After two or three minutes it was over. Some meaning had been imparted that was not Gadman's, and now stillness. The players kept to their places as before, but the cars that were in sight started up and drove off. I followed them.

That evening I joined Gadman in one of the bars used by the players. Gadman had built a whole prefabricated township to house his orchestra, an undertaking which must have cost a fortune. There were no strangers : apart from the supplies of food and drink which arrived daily, visitors were neither invited nor welcomed.

I was the exception. When I entered I found the mood of the bar subdued but rich. There was none of the babble of pubs, only an unresolved murmur of conversation. No one seemed quite sober, but neither did anyone seem lacking in acuteness. Something about the place struck me as abnormal.

For one thing the players had the look of people who work for long periods in security-guarded government research plants. Enclosed. They were people who had led a restricted life for years, dedicated to specialised work.

The resemblance went further : they looked like people who had access to powerful secrets.

Gadman was leaning against the bar. No one talked to him, in fact people seemed to avoid him. I wondered if they were afraid of him, or if perhaps they realised he regarded their society as worthless.

He summoned me to him the moment he set eyes on me, however, and gave me a drink. "Gadman," I said, "that last bit of music—the quiet part—was that in the score?"

"Even if it were in the score my men couldn't play it without moving a muscle," he answered.

"Then what was it?"

"What do you think?"

Before I could push the conversation further someone entered the room and caught my attention. I realised with a slight shock that she was the first woman I had seen since my arrival. She gazed about the bar, searching, then came up to us.

"Mr. Gadman?"

He nodded.



"I am a 'cellist. I want to join your orchestra."

He shook his head immediately. "This is man's work."

"But I'm a *good* 'cellist," she insisted, "as good as any man."

"You're still a woman," he told her. "It's not allowed."

I took a good look at her. She was about thirty, of medium height, and slim. She had a sharp glance. Her face was well-controlled. Even so, Gadman's adamant refusal seemed to make her a little desperate.

"I won't be able to work anywhere else after what I saw this afternoon," she said. "Did . . . what happened . . . mean what I think it did?"

"Depends what you think." Gadman's eyes were fixed on the other side of the room.

"I would say you had more success than you anticipated."

Suddenly he seemed to take a new interest in her. He studied her distantly. "Well, I can't allow you in the orchestra," he said at last. "It's been in training for five years, and besides you're a woman. But you can stay here if you like. Marry me if you want an excuse, or you'll never have any permanent connection with my work. I won't make a very good husband because I've got things on my mind."

She seemed to take it for granted that an arrangement had been made and seated herself on a bar-stool, letting Gadman order her a drink. She didn't speak for the rest of the night and I never saw her again.

"As for your question," Gadman said, turning to me, "the magnitude of my orchestra is such that it has taken on other properties. It has become a long-range transmitter, and its message has been heard a long way off. Evidently it also acts as a receiver, for this afternoon you heard it give out a reply almost at once."

"A reply? But from where?"

"Who knows? Some place—other than this. Some place where grand mentalities exist. Space is billions of light years in extent—it could be anywhere."

That was all he would say, except that another transmission would be made the following day. The bar closed at half past nine, and as no one dared leave before first appearing before Gadman to say goodnight, he was last to leave. I watched him disappear down the road with the woman on his arm.

The next afternoon I was allowed into the stadium itself. In order to direct the assembly more easily, Gadman had arranged

for his image to be thrown on to a huge television screen ; looking at that vast, gesturing two-dimensional figure, I began to understand why the players regarded him with such profound awe : he had the build of a true giant.

The orchestra was always given an hour to settle before being allowed to play a note, by the end of which time they were like statues. Then Gadman's arms lifted, and a few bars of the titanic reality of sound-above-sound flashed into the space above the stadium. Then the players became like statues again.

Almost immediately the response came, a definitive music relayed in the being of the instruments, which but for their great number would have been inaudible. For some moments it continued in clear intelligible chords, and just as definitely stopped.

"Bring me the maps !" Graham cried.

I ran over to him as he spread out charts and photographs of the heavens, studying them with an intent *listening* expression. Any attempt to speak he silenced with an upraised palm. His attention went to enlargements of spiral galaxies, star clusters and clouds of interstellar gas.

Finally he picked one up. It was a blazing swirl of a billion billion stars, Galaxy M31 in Andromeda.

"Here's where it came from."

"How do you know ?" I asked, bewildered.

"It's a sort of a guess. It has the right quality."

By this time reporters had forced their way in. "Do you mean that that music came from another galaxy ?" one of them asked.

"You weren't invited," he answered. "As far as you're concerned I don't mean anything."

The newspaperman grinned. "Well, perhaps you can explain how sound, travelling at only seven hundred miles an hour, can cross thousands of light years of empty space and arrive in an instant."

Gadman stared at the reporter for a few moments. He was a young man, bright, but deluded by journalism and obviously eager to be a success. I felt a little sorry for him to be facing Gadman.

"I don't have to explain anything," he was told. Then two impassive musicians dragged him bodily towards the exit.

"Just the same, he has a point," I said. "How can it ?"



"These musical communications transcend sound waves in air," Gadman told me. "That's what we need a receiver for. The right equipment can detect them anywhere in no time."

"So there's an orchestra like this somewhere else in the universe?"

He shrugged. "Here, it's my orchestra. In Andromeda, who knows, perhaps it's a science."

"I see . . . well, what are you going to do next?"

"Go to prison." He pointed towards the entrance. Two plain-clothes men were emerging from a police car.

Gadman laughed as they approached. "But not if I can help it."

The fanaticism of the musicians was such that when the police asked Gadman for an interview they were nearly given the same treatment as were the newspapermen. But Gadman restrained his disciples' fervour, dismissed the assembly and took the detectives to his home.

There was no arrest that day, for I drank with him again the same evening.

"What did those police want?" I asked.

He smiled. "Just some answers. But I eluded them."

He was just as elusive with me. Whatever the matter was, he clearly regarded it as mundane, and therefore not worth wasting breath or thought on. He told me that he would now be able to keep his orchestra in operation for a little longer, and hoped to make some experiments. As I watched him speak his precise, balanced sentences, I felt that I was being given a report just for the sake of old associations, from a region of space-time as much removed from my own as Andromeda itself. Gadman had travelled far since setting up his project five years ago.

"Bigness is not just size," he told me. "A big thing never has the same significance as a small one. Men never realise what can be done with intensity. Men's ambitions are altogether trivial."

I returned to London the next day, heard no more from Gadman until a month later, when he turned up at my flat one evening without warning. From the look of him he was in some trouble, but he treated it casually.

"I thought I would come to see you," he began. "The police don't know where I am, but I suppose they'll find me soon."

"But what for, old man!"

"Theft, embezzlement. Things connected with money. You asked me how I financed the orchestra. I wouldn't tell you. Well now you can read it in the papers!"

With him, there was not much point in tendering sympathies. Besides, he had undoubtedly known all along that this would happen. I kept silence.

"The orchestra is being disbanded, I'm afraid," he continued. "A pity in a way, but inevitable and perhaps proper. But look, I've brought you a present."

He took something from an inner pocket and handed it to, me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Solidified sound."

"I don't believe it!"

Gadman helped himself to a drink from the sideboard. "It's true," he said. "My orchestra made it. When a thing gets big enough it becomes something else. In this case it became solid, condensed out of our music."

He took a double shot of whisky in one gulp. "I've got a few more, so I suppose I could pay back some of the money I stole."

He paused, to give me a few moments of stupefaction.

Then he added: "I'll tell you something else, too. I'm stone deaf. Have been for years. Most members of the orchestra are: burst eardrums. But we hear with our minds."

I rolled his present, a crystal of pure sound, about my palm. It was beautiful, and the hardest of all substance. It was a jewel, a hard flashing diamond.

Gadman went to prison shortly afterwards. He came out a few years later, but I don't believe he ever interested himself in anything again.

If you think this story is more about Gadman than his orchestra, you're wrong. Gadman doesn't have much regard for his own worth, but his orchestra he regards as a god.

As for himself—well, Gadman is just a human being, who had only the honour of stealing for the sake of a deity. And remember, the music of the orchestra is vast beyond imagining but Gadman is only six feet tall.

—P. F. Woods



*It was just an old statue in a stonemason's yard  
—but it looked remarkably like an acquaint-  
tance of theirs who didn't merit remembering,  
not even in stone.*

# QUEF DU COQ

BY JOHN BRUNNER

---

It was towards the end of lunch, when conversation was flagging a bit, that Esmeralda said, "By the way, I saw a statue of your friend George George the other day."

I said—more or less automatically—"No friend of mine! I wish I'd never met him, the louse."

And then what she had said penetrated. I set down my cup of coffee and stared at her. "A statue?" I echoed. "What sort?"

"Oh, a big one. Life-size, in fact."

I shook my head determinedly. "No, surely not. You must have confused him with someone else. I mean, of all the people I ever met, George was the last person I can imagine anybody wanting to set up a statue to."

"Well, this one wasn't exactly *set up*," Esmeralda amended, biting her lip thoughtfully. "It was more sort of set down—in a yard full of weeds and urns near Chalk Farm. A monumental mason's place, I presume. But it was certainly

George. It was quite unmistakable. I didn't know he was dead, though."

"Nor did I. Not that I take any further interest in his whereabouts alive or dead."

"Do you have to be so bitchy about the poor man?" said Esmeralda. "He seemed rather nice when I met him."

"That's his great gift—seeming rather nice." I made it good and sarcastic. "You were one of the lucky ones, Es—I warned you off in time, and anyway you were all tied up with that psychology student, whatever his name was."

"Freddy. Lord, that was years ago! I hardly even think of him now." Esmeralda looked at nothing for a moment, as if considering her past, and then came back rather too briskly.

"No—uh—I thought you might know if George was dead. I certainly never heard anyone say a kind word about him and I wondered, seeing this statue set up in this kind of undertaker's yard, whether it might not have been his wife or someone who—"

I interrupted her with rather a rude sound that was meant to be a laugh and turned into a contemptuous snort. Esmeralda gave me a hurt look.

"What on earth gets into you when George is mentioned? I'm sure you told me he was married when you were warning me off, as you put it."

"Oh, George was married all right," I said. "But all I know about his wife is that she left him, and frankly that didn't surprise me a bit."

"Oh. I had my suspicions for a moment—thought that perhaps you'd invented George's wife on the spur of the moment to discourage me from getting interested in him."

"Oh, the marriage was genuine," I assured her. "I presume his wife was some girl who had more sense than to fall for his greasy charm without some guarantee of recompense if it fell through. Except that she probably never got it."

Esmeralda picked up her coffee cup in both hands and stared thoughtfully at the undissolved sugar in the bottom. Slowly she began to shake her head.

"I can't make it out," she said. "They say women can be catty, but I never heard anyone be so slanderous about an old friend. It can't just be jealousy, because of George's



success with women, since every other time I see you you have a new girl-friend hanging on your arm—" She broke off. "Or is it?"

I didn't want to tell her what it was due to. I never have told anybody, because I'm ashamed of not doing something about what happened. And the fact that I am ashamed of myself was what made me snap back at Esmeralda now.

"Oh, you're exaggerating! All I said was that George was the last person anyone would want to erect a statue to, and so it must have been a statue of someone else! Does that make me venomous with jealousy?"

She regarded me coolly. A speculative look came into her eye—a look I had seen before, and which I had come to recognise. It was the main reason why I had never attempted to be more than merely friendly towards Esmeralda, although there had been a time when she seemed to want me to go further. And I wouldn't have minded; she's lovely, with coal-black hair and bright green eyes. But that look, and what it implied . . .

I waited. I knew it was useless trying to contradict the ideas that were running through her mind. All I could hope for was that when it came her decision would be a lenient one.

Fortunately, it was. She pushed back her chair and crumpled up her napkin, dropping it on the table. "Very well," she said. "I'll take you and show you this statue. And then we can continue on a rational footing."

I raised half-hearted objections, saying that it seemed like a lot of trouble, especially because it was a chilly afternoon in mid-February, with a drift of drizzling icy rain. But Esmeralda had made her mind up, and—we went.

It was George all right. It gave me the most extraordinary feeling to see him standing up to his waist among the dingy grass of this vacant plot off the Chalk Farm Road, with his head lifted and his mouth half open, one hand outstretched, his pot belly running with dirty London rain. Usually, that well-tended belly was concealed by his slickly tailored suits, but this statue was nude.

Correction: naked. The idea of "nude" conveys a chaste, classical impression. There was nothing of the sort about this representation of George. It was practically a libel in

stone, and I wanted to shake the sculptor's hand for the brilliance with which he had caught everything that George normally managed to hide about his real personality.

I stood there on the cold pavement, drinking it in, until Esmeralda gave me an irritable prod in the ribs.

"Don't just stand there grinning like an idiot," she said "Is it George, or isn't it?"

I apologised meekly. I hadn't realised I was grinning, but when I thought about it I decided I couldn't help it—there was something so satisfying about the cruelty with which George had been captured in stone, that it in itself wiped clean the slate of the debts George owed to people. My only wish was that everyone who had suffered because of him could see it, instead of it being hidden away in this down-trodden district.

Beside me, I was aware that Esmeralda was shifting from one foot to another, as though her original determination to make me eat dirt was evaporating into the cold wet air. Maliciously I went on staring at George's statue. But the sight of it had cheered me up so much that my heart wasn't in the game of wearing down her endurance.

I turned away reluctantly and took her arm. "Thank you for bringing me!" I said. "Let's have a cup of coffee and warm up before we go back, shall we?"

"Thanks for bringing you?" she echoed, as though hardly able to trust her ears. "But I thought you hated the sight of George!"

"I do," I said fervently. "But the man who carved that statue hated him even more than I do, and as far as I'm concerned, the score is even. There's only one thing—I would dearly like to know who the sculptor was."

I looked round, belatedly wondering whether there was anyone who might know on the spot. But the patch of waste ground on which the statue stood lay between a single-story shop, brilliant with light and crowded with old gas fires, and a fish-and-chip shop which was closed until five o'clock. On the waste ground itself, there was no habitation—only a ramshackle wooden hut with its padlocked door bursting off the hinges and all its windows broken.

"Oh, no matter," I said. "Come along—there's quite a nice little restaurant up here a little way. As a matter of fact, I came here with George once."



The restaurant was there all right. It was called the *Gallic Cock*, and standing outside over the entrance was a figure of the French national bird, raised on tip-toe to crow. It had been gilded when it was new; now it was a dull yellow-grey.

It was cheap-modern inside, but clean and fairly comfortable, and after the miserable street outside it was very warm. We sat down at a table which was still damp from the tea-wet rag with which it had been wiped down after the last customer had used it, and I signalled the proprietor. He was a dark, saturnine man, who sat on a high stool behind his chromium-plated counter with one hand on the side of his espresso coffee machine.

"*Qui, monsieur?*" said the proprietor, raising one fine eyebrow.

"*Duex cafés,*" I said. "*Un au lait, un nature.*"

"*Bien, monsieur—tout de suite.*" He did something to the espresso machine, so that it started to hiss and groan, and set two saucers on the counter to receive our cups when they were full.

"Is he really French?" said Esmeralda, staring. She kept her voice low, and looked covertly across at the proprietor as she spoke. "I thought French restaurateurs were never found outside the West End."

I didn't answer her for a moment. Things were coming back to me, bit by bit. I had remembered while standing looking at the statue of George that I had been here once with him—to this very restaurant. It was only shortly after I met him, and I had not yet penetrated his superficial charm and discovered what sort of a swine he was underneath it all.

"No!" I said suddenly to Esmeralda. And I got up and fetched one of the menus which were piled alongside the espresso machine. As I sat down again, opening the plastic folder which protected the printed card inside from the tea that usually stains menus liberally in that kind of restaurant, I explained—more to myself than Esmeralda.

"George and I discussed exactly the same question when he brought me here," I said slowly. "And George, grinning all over his stupid pan, said he couldn't be really French, because his menu gave him away. Here it is! It hasn't been changed at all."

I put my finger on a line of the menu and held it for Esmeralda to read. The dishes listed were commonplace enough—a few French specialities, but nothing much, because Chalk Farm is a comparatively unprosperous area. But through vanity, the proprietor had had his menus printed in both French and English. In that area, many people eat breakfast in a café; the *Gallic Cock* served English breakfasts accordingly.

"*Oeuf du coq*," Esmeralda read, frowning. "That looks wrong to me."

"It is," I said, and shut the menu again. "It ought to be *oeuf à la coque*—boiled egg. *Oeuf du coq* means cock's egg."

At that moment the proprietor brought us our coffee and I indicated that the black should be given to Esmeralda. He was on the point of turning away again when I said to him, "I see you haven't changed your menus since I was last here."

He looked at me expressionlessly. I took his silence for lack of understanding, and went on, "It still says *oeuf du coq* instead of—"

And he interrupted me. "Zere is no mistake, monsieur."

I was going to say something more, but Esmeralda put her hand on my arm to forestall me. The proprietor looked at her, looked at me again, and went back to his stool behind the counter.

"He may not be as well educated as you," said Esmeralda in a voice of superb iciness. "Half the people in England can't write their own language without the odd spelling mistake."

She had a point there, so I let it pass. For a while we sat in silence, sipping our coffee and warming through. Then a thought struck me.

"I wonder if he knows about the statue of George," I said. "I think George used to come here pretty regularly at one time."

"Why?" said Esmeralda. "Did he live near here?"

"Of course not. Does one ever have to ask why George goes anywhere? The boss has a daughter, and she's rather pretty. George was laying siege to her. She used to be the waitress here, I seem to remember. That's right—I saw her when I came with George. I remember her quite clearly. Dark, very plump, with a nice smile."



"Well, if George was courting his daughter he probably remembers him well enough to have recognised that statue up the road. But by the same token he probably wouldn't care for you to mention that you know George. That's to say, if George treated his daughter the way he's supposed to have treated all these other girls."

For a moment the old bitterness blazed up inside me. "There's no 'supposed' about it!" I barked at Esmeralda, and she paused in the middle of taking a sip of coffee and stared at me.

"I'm sorry," she said at length. "I thought you were just jealous. What did he do to you?"

"Not to me personally," I said, "And I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

I looked across at the proprietor, who was watching us with meditative interest. "*Et mademoiselle votre fille,*" I said. "*Elle va bien?*"

The proprietor's face suddenly became hard, and his hand tensed where it rested on the espresso machine. "Monsieur is mistaken," he said harshly. "I have no daughter."

"But—surely!" I said. "I've seen her here—she used to be your waitress. Or was that not your daughter?"

He half-rose from his stool, and his eyes burned. "*S'il vous plaît, monsieur,*" he said thickly. "*Je n'ai plus de fille.*"

And that made it clear. *Je n'ai plus*—I no longer have a daughter . . .

The proprietor subsided slowly on to his stool again and looked away from us. I stirred my coffee and stared into nowhere. "Poor devil!" I said. "I wonder if that was George's doing, too."

"Explain," commanded Esmeralda sharply. I did.

"It sounds like the kind of thing George enjoys," I added at the end. "Seducing a girl, leaving her in the family way—that was a hobby of his. And half the time he managed to escape clean. Used false names, even. I don't suppose the boss here would feel that the score was settled by that statue, viciously cruel though it is."

"I felt that, too," said Esmeralda. "But—oh, honest as well. There's a sort of reality about it. It made me feel, when I looked at it this time, that you were probably right to warn me away from George."

She swallowed the last of her coffee and gathered her handbag. "All right, let's go," she suggested.

I nodded and went to pay. As he took my money, the proprietor studied me; when he gave back the change, he spoke.

"Did you—know my daughter, monsieur?"

I could see the effort the words cost him. His hand shook a little as he paid out coppers into my waiting palm. I wondered why he had changed his mind about denying his daughter's existence so suddenly.

"No," I told him. "I was here once before and saw her then—but I never knew her."

"She was a good girl," he said half-inaudibly.

"She was very pretty, and had a nice smile," I agreed.

"You—came here with a friend before?" the man pursued, and I felt a twinge of apprehension.

"Not a friend," I said cautiously. "With a man I knew—but he was not my friend."

He relaxed a little.

Emboldened, I went on gingerly. "It was—a Mr. George. I was going to ask you about him."

His face darkened at the mention of George's name. So my guess had probably been right—but then, one didn't have to guess where George was concerned.

I said lamely, "There is a statue of George near here. I wondered who had made it. Because whoever made it understood George very well."

His eyes remained fixed on my face. "I do not know," he said eventually. "I have not seen the man of whom you speak for a long time. There is the statue, that is all." And he finished after a pause, "I remembered you because he too always spoke about a mistake in my menus. Monsieur, there is no mistake."

And then it happened. I must have stood there shaking all over, staring at this dark, saturnine man behind his shiny, ugly counter, for minutes on end, until Esmeralda's tugging at my arm brought me back to reality.

But I didn't at once turn round to go out with her. I held out my hand to the proprietor. He looked at it for a moment, and then raised questioning eyes to my face.



"It was your—daughter," I said thickly. "I introduced him to my sister. And I could do nothing."

He didn't smile. But, gravely, he did shake my hand. And then at last I allowed Esmeralda to take me back into the street.

"What was all that about?" she demanded.

I didn't tell her, in spite of her pestering, and I stopped being able to believe it myself when I thought about it. But the last time I glanced back at the statue of George, as our bus carried us away, I was quite convinced. And if it wasn't true, why did the restaurant proprietor understand that I wanted to shake his hand?

What it amounts to is this: if there was really no mistake in the menu of the *Gallick Cock*, then I know what George was given when he last went there—what he was given for his last meal on earth. An *oeuf du coq*: a cock's egg.

And legend says that what hatches from a cock's egg is a cockatrice—a creature whose glance can strike a man to stone.

—John Brunner

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